

Long Live Hitch

God is Not Great/Hitch-22/Arguably

Christopher Hitchens

2012

Contents

Front Matter	8
Publisher Details	8
God Is Not Great; How Religion Poisons Everything	9
Front Matter	10
Dedication	10
Contents	10
Chapter One. Putting It Mildly	12
Chapter Two. Religion Kills	20
Chapter Three. A Short Digression on the Pig; or, Why Heaven Hates Ham	34
Chapter Four. A Note on Health, to Which Religion Can Be Hazardous	37
Chapter Five. The Metaphysical Claims of Religion Are False	49
Chapter Six. Arguments from Design	55
Chapter Seven. Revelation: The Nightmare of the “Old” Testament	70
Chapter Eight. The “New” Testament Exceeds the Evil of the “Old” One	77
Chapter Nine. The Koran Is Borrowed from Both Jewish and Christian Myths	86
Chapter Ten. The Tawdriness of the Miraculous and the Decline of Hell	96
Chapter Eleven. “The Lowly Stamp of Their Origin”: Religion’s Corrupt Beginnings	106
Chapter Twelve. A Coda: How Religions End	115

Chapter Thirteen. Does Religion Make People Behave Better?	118
Chapter Fourteen. There Is No “Eastern” Solution	131
Chapter Fifteen. Religion as an Original Sin	137
Chapter Sixteen. Is Religion Child Abuse?	144
Chapter Seventeen. An Objection Anticipated: The Last-Ditch “Case” Against Secularism	152
Chapter Eighteen. A Finer Tradition: The Resistance of the Rational	167
Chapter Nineteen. In Conclusion: The Need for a New Enlightenment	182
Acknowledgments	187
REFERENCES	189
Chapter TWO. RELIGION KILLS	189
 ARGUABLY	 194
Front Matter	195
ALSO BY CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS	195
Contents	196
 Introduction	 201
 ALL AMERICAN	 205
Gods of Our Fathers: The United States of Enlightenment	205
The Private Jefferson	208
Jefferson Versus the Muslim Pirates	210
Benjamin Franklin: Free and Easy	217
John Brown: The Man Who Ended Slavery	221
Abraham Lincoln: Misery’s Child	225
Mark Twain: American radical	229
Upton Sinclair: A Capitalist Primer	233
JFK: In Sickness and by Stealth	238
Saul Bellow: The Great Assimilator	243
Vladimir Nabokov: Hurricane Lolita	249
John Updike, Part One: No Way	253
John Updike, Part Two: Mr. Geniality	258

Vidal Loco	260
America the Banana Republic	263
An Anglosphere Future	267
Political Animals	273
Old Enough to Die	279
In Defense of Foxhole Atheists	284
In Search of the Washington Novel	289
ECLECTIC AFFINITIES	293
Isaac Newton: Flaws of Gravity	293
The Men Who Made England: Hilary Mantel's Wolf Hall	297
Edmund Burke: Reactionary Prophet	301
Samuel Johnson: Demons and Dictionaries	310
Gustave Flaubert: I'm with Stupide	314
The Dark Side of Dickens	316
Marx's Journalism: The Grub Street Years	320
Rebecca West: Things Worth Fighting For	327
Ezra Pound: A Revolutionary Simpleton	349
Historical Background	353
The Story of Publication	355
Jessica Mitford's Poison Pen	358
W. Somerset Maugham: Poor Old Willie	361
Evelyn Waugh: The Permanent Adolescent	367
P. G. Wodehouse: The Honorable Schoolboy	377
Anthony Powell: An Omnivorous Curiosity	384
John Buchan: Spy Thriller's Father	393
Graham Greene: I'll Be Damned	398
Death from a Salesman: Graham Greene's Bottled Ontology	406
Loving Philip Larkin	415
Stephen Spender: A Nice Bloody Fool	422
Edward Upward: The Captive Mind	427
C. L. R. James: Mid Off, Not Right On	431
J. G. Ballard: The Catastrophist	434
Fraser's Flashman: Scoundrel Time	438
Fleet Street's Finest: From Waugh to Frayn	442
Saki: Where the Wild Things Are	448
Harry Potter: The Boy Who Lived	452
AMUSEMENTS, ANNOYANCES, AND DISAPPOINTMENTS	456
Why Women Aren't Funny	456
Stieg Larsson: The Author Who Played with Fire	461
As American as Apple Pie	465

So Many Men’s Rooms, So Little Time	470
The New Commandments	472
I and II	473
III	473
IV	473
V	474
VI	474
VII	475
VIII	475
IX	475
X	475
In Your Face	478
Wine Drinkers of the World, Unite	480
Charles, Prince of Piffle	481
OFFSHORE ACCOUNTS	484
Afghanistan’s Dangerous Bet	484
First, Silence the Whistle-Blower	491
Believe Me, It’s Torture	493
Iran’s Waiting Game	498
Long Live Democratic Seismology	506
Benazir Bhutto: Daughter of Destiny	508
From Abbottabad to Worse	510
The Perils of Partition	514
Algeria: A French Quarrel	522
The Case of Orientalism	526
Edward Said: Where the Twain Should Have Met	529
The Swastika and the Cedar	535
Holiday in Iraq	539
Tunisia: At the Desert’s Edge	543
What Happened to the Suicide bombers of Jerusalem?	547
Childhood’s End: An African Nightmare	549
The Vietnam Syndrome	553
Once Upon a Time in Germany	558
North Korea: A Nation of Racist Dwarves	563
The Eighteenth Brumaire of the Castro Dynasty	565
Hugo Boss	567
Is the Euro Doomed?	569
Overstating Jewish Power	571
The Case for Humanitarian Intervention	573
The Rights of Men	575
Sovereign Sovereignties	576

Regarding the Pain of Others	578
Taking a Stand	579
LEGACIES OF TOTALITARIANISM	580
Victor Serge: Pictures from an Inquisition	580
André Malraux: One Man's Fate	586
Arthur Koestler: The Zealot	591
Isabel Allende: Chile Redux	594
The Persian Version	600
Martin Amis: Lightness at Midnight	606
Imagining Hitler	616
Victor Klemperer: Survivor	624
A War Worth Fighting	630
Just Give Peace a Chance?	635
W. G. Sebald: Requiem for Germany	638
WORDS' WORTH	646
When the King Saved God	646
Let Them Eat Pork Rinds	653
Stand Up for Denmark!	657
Eschew the Taboo	660
She's No Fundamentalist	662
Burned Out	664
Easter Charade	666
Don't Mince Words	667
History and Mystery	669
Words Matter	672
This Was Not Looting	674
The Other L-Word	676
The You Decade	678
Suck It Up	679
A Very, Very Dirty Word	681
Prisoner of Shelves	683
Acknowledgments	684
About the Author	686
HITCH-22	687
Contents	690
Foreword	692

Prologue with Premonitions	695
Yvonne	700
The Commander	718
Fragments from an Education	730
Cambridge	742
The Sixties: Revolution in the Revolution (and Brideshead Regurgitated)	757
Chris or Christopher?	765
Havana versus Prague	778
The Fenton Factor	791
Martin	812
Portugal to Poland	831
A Second Identity: On Becoming an (Anglo) American	850
Changing Places	876
Salman	893
Mesopotamia from Both Sides	908
Something of Myself	944
Thinking Thrice about the Jewish Question . . .	962
Landscapes of Memory	966
Edward Said in Light and Shade (and Saul)	986
Decline, Mutation, or Metamorphosis?	999
Acknowledgments	1015

Front Matter

Publisher Details

All titles in this collection were first published by Twelve, an imprint of Grand Central Publishing, a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc. *God is Not Great* was first published in 2007, *Hitch-22* was first published in 2010 and *Arguably* was first published in 2011.

All titles first published in Great Britain by Atlantic Books, an imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd. *God is Not Great* was first published in 2007, *Hitch-22* was first published in 2010 and *Arguably* was first published in 2011.

This e-book omnibus edition published in Great Britain in 2012 by Atlantic Books. Christopher Hitchens, 2007, 2010, 2011

The 'Postscript' in *Hitch-22* first appeared in *Vanity Fair*, November 2007.

The extract taken from 'Death's Echo' in *Hitch-22* is from *Collected Poems* © The Estate of W. H. Auden and reprinted by permission of Faber and Faber Ltd.

Essays in *Arguably* originally appeared, sometimes in slightly different form, in the following publications: *Atlantic Monthly*, *City Journal*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *Guardian*, *Newsweek*, *New Statesman*, *New York Times Book Review*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Weekly Standard*, *Wilson Quarterly*, *Times Literary Supplement*, and *Vanity Fair*.

Every effort has been made to trace or contact all copyright holders. The publishers will be pleased to make good any omissions or rectify any mistakes brought to their attention at the earliest opportunity.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

E-book ISBN: 978 1 78239 141 8

Printed in Great Britain

Atlantic Books

An Imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd

Ormond House

26–27 Boswell Street

London

WC1N 3JZ

www.atlantic-books.co.uk

**God Is Not Great; How Religion
Poisons Everything**

Front Matter

Dedication

For Ian McEwan
In serene recollection of
La Refulgencia

Contents

- One - Putting It Mildly
- Two - Religion Kills
- Three - A Short Digression on the Pig; or, Why Heaven Hates Ham
- Four - A Note on Health, to Which Religion Can Be Hazardous
- Five - The Metaphysical Claims of Religion Are False
- Six - Arguments from Design
- Seven - Revelation: The Nightmare of the “Old” Testament
- Eight - The “New” Testament Exceeds the Evil of the “Old” One
- Nine - The Koran Is Borrowed from Both Jewish and Christian Myths
- Ten - The Tawdriness of the Miraculous and the Decline of Hell
- Eleven - “The Lowly Stamp of Their Origin”: Religion’s Corrupt Beginnings
- Twelve - A Coda: How Religions End
- Thirteen - Does Religion Make People Behave Better?
- Fourteen - There Is No “Eastern” Solution
- Fifteen - Religion as an Original Sin
- Sixteen - Is Religion Child Abuse?

- Seventeen - An Objection Anticipated: The Last-Ditch “Case” Against Secularism
- Eighteen - A Finer Tradition: The Resistance of the Rational
- Nineteen - In Conclusion: The Need for a New Enlightenment
- Acknowledgments
- References
- Index

GOD IS NOT GREAT

Oh, wearisome condition of humanity,
 Born under one law, to another bound;
 Vainly begot, and yet forbidden vanity,
 Created sick, commanded to be sound.

—FULKE GREVILLE, Mustapha

And do you think that unto such as you
 A maggot-minded, starved, fanatic crew
 God gave a secret, and denied it me?
 Well, well—what matters it? Believe that, too!

—THE RUBAIYAT OF OMAR KHAYYAM
 RICHARD LE GALLIENNE TRANSLATION)

Peacefully they will die, peacefully they will expire in your name, and beyond the
 grave they will find only death. But we will keep the secret, and for their own happiness
 we will entice them with a heavenly and eternal reward.

—THE GRAND INQUISITOR TO HIS “SAVIOR”in
 THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV

Chapter One. Putting It Mildly

If the intended reader of this book should want to go beyond disagreement with its author and try to identify the sins and deformities that animated him to write it (and I have certainly noticed that those who publicly affirm charity and compassion and forgiveness are often inclined to take this course), then he or she will not just be quarreling with the unknowable and ineffable creator who—presumably—opted to make me this way. They will be defiling the memory of a good, sincere, simple woman, of stable and decent faith, named Mrs. Jean Watts.

It was Mrs. Watts's task, when I was a boy of about nine and attending a school on the edge of Dartmoor, in southwestern England, to instruct me in lessons about nature, and also about scripture. She would take me and my fellows on walks, in an especially lovely part of my beautiful country of birth, and teach us to tell the different birds, trees, and plants from one another. The amazing variety to be found in a hedgerow; the wonder of a clutch of eggs found in an intricate nest; the way that if the nettles stung your legs (we had to wear shorts) there would be a soothing dock leaf planted near to hand: all this has stayed in my mind, just like the "gamekeeper's museum," where the local peasantry would display the corpses of rats, weasels, and other vermin and predators, presumably supplied by some less kindly deity. If you read John Clare's imperishable rural poems you will catch the music of what I mean to convey.

At later lessons we would be given a printed slip of paper entitled "Search the Scriptures," which was sent to the school by whatever national authority supervised the teaching of religion. (This, along with daily prayer services, was compulsory and enforced by the state.) The slip would contain a single verse from the Old or New Testament, and the assignment was to look up the verse and then to tell the class or the teacher, orally or in writing, what the story and the moral was. I used to love this exercise, and even to excel at it so that (like Bertie Wooster) I frequently passed "top" in scripture class. It was my first introduction to practical and textual criticism. I would read all the chapters that led up to the verse, and all the ones that followed it, to be sure that I had got the "point" of the original clue. I can still do this, greatly to the annoyance of some of my enemies, and still have respect for those whose style is sometimes dismissed as "merely" Talmudic, or Koranic, or "fundamentalist." This is good and necessary mental and literary training.

However, there came a day when poor, dear Mrs. Watts overreached herself. Seeking ambitiously to fuse her two roles as nature instructor and Bible teacher, she said, "So you see, children, how powerful and generous God is. He has made all the trees and

grass to be green, which is exactly the color that is most restful to our eyes. Imagine if instead, the vegetation was all purple, or orange, how awful that would be.”

And now behold what this pious old trout hath wrought. I liked Mrs. Watts: she was an affectionate and childless widow who had a friendly old sheepdog who really was named Rover, and she would invite us for sweets and treats after hours to her slightly ramshackle old house near the railway line. If Satan chose her to tempt me into error he was much more inventive than the subtle serpent in the Garden of Eden. She never raised her voice or offered violence—which couldn’t besaid for all my teachers—and in general was one of those people, of the sort whose memorial is in Middlemarch, of whom it may be said that if “things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been,” this is “half-owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”

However, I was frankly appalled by what she said. My little ankle- strap sandals curled with embarrassment for her. At the age of nine I had not even a conception of the argument from design, or of Darwinian evolution as its rival, or of the relationship between photosynthesis and chlorophyll. The secrets of the genome were as hidden from me as they were, at that time, to everyone else. I had not then visited scenes of nature where almost everything was hideously indifferent or hostile to human life, if not life itself. I simply knew, almost as if I had privileged access to a higher authority, that my teacher had managed to get everything wrong in just two sentences. The eyes were adjusted to nature, and not the other way about.

I must not pretend to remember everything perfectly, or in order, after this epiphany, but in a fairly short time I had also begun to notice other oddities. Why, if god was the creator of all things, were we supposed to “praise” him so incessantly for doing what came to him naturally? This seemed servile, apart from anything else. If Jesus could heal a blind person he happened to meet, then why not heal blindness? What was so wonderful about his casting out devils, so that the devils would enter a herd of pigs instead? That seemed sinister: more like black magic. With all this continual prayer, why no result? Why did I have to keep saying, in public, that I was a miserable sinner? Why was the subject of sex considered so toxic? These faltering and childish objections are, I have since discovered, extremely commonplace, partly because no religion can meet them with any satisfactory answer. But another, larger one also presented itself. (I say “presented itself” rather than “occurred to me” because these objections are, as well as insuperable, inescapable.) The headmaster, who led the daily services and prayers and held the Book, and was a bit of a sadist and a closeted homosexual (and whom I have long since forgiven because he ignited my interest in history and lent me my first copy of P. G. Wodehouse), was giving a no-nonsense talk to some of us one evening. “You may not see the point of all this faith now,” he said. “But you will one day, when you start to lose loved ones.”

Again, I experienced a stab of sheer indignation as well as disbelief. Why, that would be as much as saying that religion might not be true, but never mind that, since it can be relied upon for comfort. How contemptible. I was then nearing thirteen, and

becoming quite the insufferable little intellectual. I had never heard of Sigmund Freud—though he would have been very useful to me in understanding the headmaster—but I had just been given a glimpse of his essay *The Future of an Illusion*.

I am inflicting all this upon you because I am not one of those whose chance at a wholesome belief was destroyed by child abuse or brutish indoctrination. I know that millions of human beings have had to endure these things, and I do not think that religions can or should be absolved from imposing such miseries. (In the very recent past, we have seen the Church of Rome befouled by its complicity with the unpardonable sin of child rape, or, as it might be phrased in Latin form, “no child’s behind left.”) But other nonreligious organizations have committed similar crimes, or even worse ones.

There still remain four irreducible objections to religious faith: that it wholly misrepresents the origins of man and the cosmos, that because of this original error it manages to combine the maximum of servility with the maximum of solipsism, that it is both the result and the cause of dangerous sexual repression, and that it is ultimately grounded on wish-thinking.

I do not think it is arrogant of me to claim that I had already discovered these four objections (as well as noticed the more vulgar and obvious fact that religion is used by those in temporal charge to invest themselves with authority) before my boyish voice had broken. I am morally certain that millions of other people came to very similar conclusions in very much the same way, and I have since met such people in hundreds of places, and in dozens of different countries. Many of them never believed, and many of them abandoned faith after a difficult struggle. Some of them had blinding moments of un-conviction that were every bit as instantaneous, though perhaps less epileptic and apocalyptic (and later more rationally and more morally justified) than Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus road. And here is the point, about myself and my co-thinkers. Our belief is not a belief. Our principles are not a faith. We do not rely solely upon science and reason, because these are necessary rather than sufficient factors, but we distrust anything that contradicts science or outrages reason. We may differ on many things, but what we respect is free inquiry, openmindedness, and the pursuit of ideas for their own sake. We do not hold our convictions dogmatically: the disagreement between Professor Stephen Jay Gould and Professor Richard Dawkins, concerning “punctuated evolution” and the unfilled gaps in post-Darwinian theory, is quite wide as well as quite deep, but we shall resolve it by evidence and reasoning and not by mutual excommunication. (My own annoyance at Professor Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, for their cringe-making proposal that atheists should conceitedly nominate themselves to be called “brights,” is a part of a continuous argument.) We are not immune to the lure of wonder and mystery and awe: we have music and art and literature, and find that the serious ethical dilemmas are better handled by Shakespeare and Tolstoy and Schiller and Dostoyevsky and George Eliot than in the mythical morality tales of the holy books. Literature, not scripture, sustains the mind and—since there is no other metaphor—also the soul. We do not believe in heaven or hell, yet no statistic

will ever find that without these blandishments and threats we commit more crimes of greed or violence than the faithful. (In fact, if a proper statistical inquiry could ever be made, I am sure the evidence would be the other way.) We are reconciled to living only once, except through our children, for whom we are perfectly happy to notice that we must make way, and room. We speculate that it is at least possible that, once people accepted the fact of their short and struggling lives, they might behave better toward each other and not worse. We believe with certainty that an ethical life can be lived without religion. And we know for a fact that the corollary holds true—that religion has caused innumerable people not just to conduct themselves no better than others, but to award themselves permission to behave in ways that would make a brothel-keeper or an ethnic cleanser raise an eyebrow.

Most important of all, perhaps, we infidels do not need any machinery of reinforcement. We are those who Blaise Pascal took into account when he wrote to the one who says, “I am so made that I cannot believe.” In the village of Montaignou, during one of the great medieval persecutions, a woman was asked by the Inquisitors to tell them from whom she had acquired her heretical doubts about hell and resurrection. She must have known that she stood in terrible danger of a lingering death administered by the pious, but she responded that she took them from nobody and had evolved them all by herself. (Often, you hear the believers praise the simplicity of their flock, but not in the case of this unforced and conscientious sanity and lucidity, which has been stamped out and burned out in the cases of more humans than we shall ever be able to name.)

There is no need for us to gather every day, or every seven days, or on any high and auspicious day, to proclaim our rectitude or to grovel and wallow in our unworthiness. We atheists do not require any priests, or any hierarchy above them, to police our doctrine. Sacrifices and ceremonies are abhorrent to us, as are relics and the worship of any images or objects (even including objects in the form of one of man’s most useful innovations: the bound book). To us no spot on earth is or could be “holier” than another: to the ostentatious absurdity of the pilgrimage, or the plain horror of killing civilians in the name of some sacred wall or cave or shrine or rock, we can counterpose a leisurely or urgent walk from one side of the library or the gallery to another, or to lunch with an agreeable friend, in pursuit of truth or beauty. Some of these excursions to the bookshelf or the lunch or the gallery will obviously, if they are serious, bring us into contact with belief and believers, from the great devotional painters and composers to the works of Augustine, Aquinas, Maimonides, and Newman. These mighty scholars may have written many evil things or many foolish things, and been laughably ignorant of the germ theory of disease or the place of the terrestrial globe in the solar system, let alone the universe, and this is the plain reason why there are no more of them today, and why there will be no more of them tomorrow. Religion spoke its last intelligible or noble or inspiring words a long time ago: either that or it mutated into an admirable but nebulous humanism, as did, say, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a brave Lutheran pastor hanged by the Nazis for his refusal to collude with them.

We shall have no more prophets or sages from the ancient quarter, which is why the devotions of today are only the echoing repetitions of yesterday, sometimes ratcheted up to screaming point so as to ward off the terrible emptiness.

While some religious apology is magnificent in its limited way— one might cite Pascal—and some of it is dreary and absurd—here one cannot avoid naming C. S. Lewis—both styles have something in common, namely the appalling load of strain that they have to bear. How much effort it takes to affirm the incredible! The Aztecs had to tear open a human chest cavity every day just to make sure that the sun would rise. Monotheists are supposed to pester their deity more times than that, perhaps, lest he be deaf. How much vanity must be concealed—not too effectively at that—in order to pretend that one is the personal object of a divine plan? How much self-respect must be sacrificed in order that one may squirm continually in an awareness of one’s own sin? How many needless assumptions must be made, and how much contortion is required, to receive every new insight of science and manipulate it so as to “fit” with the revealed words of ancient man-made deities? How many saints and miracles and councils and conclaves are required in order first to be able to establish a dogma and then—after infinite pain and loss and absurdity and ~~cruelty~~—to be forced to rescind one of those dogmas? God did not create man in his own image. Evidently, it was the other way about, which is the painless explanation for the profusion of gods and religions, and the fratricide both between and among faiths, that we see all about us and that has so retarded the development of civilization.

Past and present religious atrocities have occurred not because we are evil, but because it is a fact of nature that the human species is, biologically, only partly rational. Evolution has meant that our prefrontal lobes are too small, our adrenal glands are too big, and our reproductive organs apparently designed by committee; a recipe which, alone or in combination, is very certain to lead to some unhappiness and disorder. But still, what a difference when one lays aside the strenuous believers and takes up the no less arduous work of a Darwin, say, or a Hawking or a Crick. These men are more enlightening when they are wrong, or when they display their inevitable biases, than any falsely modest person of faith who is vainly trying to square the circle and to explain how he, a mere creature of the Creator, can possibly know what that Creator intends. Not all can be agreed on matters of aesthetics, but we secular humanists and atheists and agnostics do not wish to deprive humanity of its wonders or consolations. Not in the least. If you will devote a little time to studying the staggering photographs taken by the Hubble telescope, you will be scrutinizing things that are far more awesome and mysterious and beautiful—and more chaotic and overwhelming and forbidding—than any creation or “end of days” story. If you read Hawking on the “event horizon,” that theoretical lip of the “black hole” over which one could in theory plunge and see the past and the future (except that one would, regrettably and by definition, not have enough “time”), I shall be surprised if you can still go on gaping at Moses and his unimpressive “burning bush.” If you examine the beauty and symmetry of the double helix, and then go on to have your own genome sequence fully analyzed,

you will be at once impressed that such a near-perfect phenomenon is at the core of your being, and reassured (I hope) that you have so much in common with other tribes of the human species—“race” having gone, along with “creation” into the ashcan—and further fascinated to learn how much you are a part of the animal kingdom as well. Now at last you can be properly humble in the face of your maker, which turns out not to be a “who,” but a process of mutation with rather more random elements than our vanity might wish. This is more than enough mystery and marvel for any mammal to be getting along with: the most educated person in the world now has to admit—I shall not say confess—that he or she knows less and less but at least knows less and less about more and more.

As for consolation, since religious people so often insist that faith answers this supposed need, I shall simply say that those who offer false consolation are false friends. In any case, the critics of religion do not simply deny that it has a painkilling effect. Instead, they warn against the placebo and the bottle of colored water. Probably the most popular misquotation of modern times—certainly the most popular in this argument—is the assertion that Marx dismissed religion as “the opium of the people.” On the contrary, this son of a rabbinical line took belief very seriously and wrote, in his *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, as follows:

Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people.

The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusions about its condition is the demand to give up a condition that needs illusions. The criticism of religion is therefore in embryo the criticism of the vale of woe, the halo of which is religion. Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers from the chain, not so that man will wear the chain without any fantasy or consolation but so that he will shake off the chain and cull the living flower.

So the famous misquotation is not so much a “misquotation” but rather a very crude attempt to misrepresent the philosophical case against religion. Those who have believed what the priests and rabbis and imams tell them about what the unbelievers think and about how they think, will find further such surprises as we go along. They will perhaps come to distrust what they are told—or not to take it “on faith,” which is the problem to begin with.

Marx and Freud, it has to be conceded, were not doctors or exact scientists. It is better to think of them as great and fallible imaginative essayists. When the intellectual universe alters, in other words, I don’t feel arrogant enough to exempt myself from self-criticism. And I am content to think that some contradictions will remain contradictory, some problems will never be resolved by the mammalian equipment of the human cerebral cortex, and some things are indefinitely unknowable. If the universe was found to be finite or infinite, either discovery would be equally stupefying and impenetrable

to me. And though I have met many people much wiser and more clever than myself, I know of nobody who could be wise or intelligent enough to say differently.

Thus the mildest criticism of religion is also the most radical and the most devastating one. Religion is man-made. Even the men who made it cannot agree on what their prophets or redeemers or gurus actually said or did. Still less can they hope to tell us the “meaning” of later discoveries and developments which were, when they began, either obstructed by their religions or denounced by them. And yet—the believers still claim to know! Not just to know, but to know everything. Not just to know that god exists, and that he created and supervised the whole enterprise, but also to know what “he” demands of us—from our diet to our observances to our sexual morality. In other words, in a vast and complicated discussion where we know more and more about less and less, yet can still hope for some enlightenment as we proceed, one faction—itsself composed of mutually warring factions—has the sheer arrogance to tell us that we already have all the essential information we need. Such stupidity, combined with such pride, should be enough on its own to exclude “belief” from the debate. The person who is certain, and who claims divine warrant for his certainty, belongs now to the infancy of our species. It may be a long farewell, but it has begun and, like all farewells, should not be protracted.

I trust that if you met me, you would not necessarily know that this was my view. I have probably sat up later, and longer, with religious friends than with any other kind. These friends often irritate me by saying that I am a “seeker,” which I am not, or not in the way they think. If I went back to Devon, where Mrs. Watts has her unvisited tomb, I would surely find myself sitting quietly at the back of some old Celtic or Saxon church. (Philip Larkin’s lovely poem “Churchgoing” is the perfect capture of my own attitude.) I once wrote a book about George Orwell, who might have been my hero if I had heroes, and was upset by his callousness about the burning of churches in Catalonia in 1936. Sophocles showed, well before the rise of monotheism, that Antigone spoke for humanity in her revulsion against desecration. I leave it to the faithful to burn each other’s churches and mosques and synagogues, which they can always be relied upon to do. When I go to the mosque, I take off my shoes. When I go to the synagogue, I cover my head. I once even observed the etiquette of an ashram in India, though this was a trial to me. My parents did not try to impose any religion: I was probably fortunate in having a father who had not especially loved his strict Baptist/Calvinist upbringing, and a mother who preferred assimilation—partly for my sake—to the Judaism of her forebears. I now know enough about all religions to know that I would always be an infidel at all times and in all places, but my particular atheism is a Protestant atheism. It is with the splendid liturgy of the King James Bible and the Cranmer prayerbook—liturgy that the fatuous Church of England has cheaply discarded—that I first disagreed. When my father died and was buried in a chapel overlooking Portsmouth—the same chapel in which General Eisenhower had prayed for success the night before D-Day in 1944—I gave the address from the pulpit and

selected as my text a verse from the epistle of Saul of Tarsus, later to be claimed as “Saint Paul,” to the Philippians (chapter 4, verse 8):

Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report: if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

I chose this because of its haunting and elusive character, which will be with me at the last hour, and for its essentially secular injunction, and because it shone out from the wasteland of rant and complaint and nonsense and bullying which surrounds it.

The argument with faith is the foundation and origin of all arguments, because it is the beginning—but not the end—of all arguments about philosophy, science, history, and human nature. It is also the beginning—but by no means the end—of all disputes about the good life and the just city. Religious faith is, precisely because we are still-evolving creatures, ineradicable. It will never die out, or at least not until we get over our fear of death, and of the dark, and of the unknown, and of each other. For this reason, I would not prohibit it even if I thought I could. Very generous of me, you may say. But will the religious grant me the same indulgence? I ask because there is a real and serious difference between me and my religious friends, and the real and serious friends are sufficiently honest to admit it. I would be quite content to go to their children’s bar mitzvahs, to marvel at their Gothic cathedrals, to “respect” their belief that the Koran was dictated, though exclusively in Arabic, to an illiterate merchant, or to interest myself in Wicca and Hindu and Jain consolations. And as it happens, I will continue to do this without insisting on the polite reciprocal condition—which is that they in turn leave me alone. But this, religion is ultimately incapable of doing. As I write these words, and as you read them, people of faith are in their different ways planning your and my destruction, and the destruction of all the hard-won human attainments that I have touched upon. Religion poisons everything.

Chapter Two. Religion Kills

His aversion to religion, in the sense usually attached to the term, was of the same kind with that of Lucretius: he regarded it with the feelings due not to a mere mental delusion, but to a great moral evil. He looked upon it as the greatest enemy of morality: first, by setting up factitious excellencies—belief in creeds, devotional feelings, and ceremonies, not connected with the good of human kind—and causing these to be accepted as substitutes for genuine virtue: but above all, by radically vitiating the standard of morals; making it consist in doing the will of a being, on whom it lavishes indeed all the phrases of adulation, but whom in sober truth it depicts as eminently hateful.

—John Stuart Mill on his father, in the *Autobiography*

Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum.

(To such heights of evil are men driven by religion.)

—Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*

Imagine that you can perform a feat of which I am incapable. Imagine, in other words, that you can picture an infinitely benign and all-powerful creator, who conceived of you, then made and shaped you, brought you into the world he had made for you, and now supervises and cares for you even while you sleep. Imagine, further, that if you obey the rules and commandments that he has lovingly prescribed, you will qualify for an eternity of bliss and repose. I do not say that I envy you this belief (because to me it seems like the wish for a horrible form of benevolent and unalterable dictatorship), but I do have a sincere question. Why does such a belief not make its adherents happy? It must seem to them that they have come into possession of a marvelous secret, of the sort that they could cling to in moments of even the most extreme adversity.

Superficially, it does sometimes seem as if this is the case. I have been to evangelical services, in black and in white communities, where the whole event was one long whoop of exaltation at being saved, loved, and so forth. Many services, in all denominations and among almost all pagans, are exactly designed to evoke celebration and communal fiesta, which is precisely why I suspect them. There are more restrained and sober and elegant moments, also. When I was a member of the Greek Orthodox Church, I could feel, even if I could not believe, the joyous words that are exchanged between believers on Easter morning: “Christos anesti!” (Christ is risen!) “Alethos anesti!” (He is risen indeed!) I was a member of the Greek Orthodox Church, I might add, for a reason that explains why very many people profess an outward allegiance. I joined it to please my Greek parents-in-law. The archbishop who received me into his communion on the same day that he officiated at my wedding, thereby trousering two fees instead of

the usual one, later became an enthusiastic cheerleader and fund-raiser for his fellow Orthodox Serbian mass murderers Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic, who filled countless mass graves all over Bosnia. The next time I got married, which was by a Reform Jewish rabbi with an Einsteinian and Shakespearean bent, I had something a little more in common with the officiating person. But even he was aware that his lifelong homosexuality was, in principle, condemned as a capital offense, punishable by the founders of his religion by stoning. As to the Anglican Church into which I was originally baptized, it may look like a pathetic bleating sheep today, but as the descendant of a church that has always enjoyed a state subsidy and an intimate relationship with hereditary monarchy, it has a **historic** responsibility for the Crusades, for persecution of Catholics, Jews, and Dissenters, and for combat against science and reason.

The level of intensity fluctuates according to time and place, but it can be stated as a truth that religion does not, and in the long run cannot, be content with its own marvelous claims and sublime assurances. It must seek to interfere with the lives of nonbelievers, or heretics, or adherents of other faiths. It may speak about the bliss of the next world, but it wants power in this one. This is only to be expected. It is, after all, wholly man-made. And it does not have the confidence in its own various preachings even to allow coexistence between different faiths.

Take a single example, from one of the most revered figures that modern religion has produced. In 1996, the Irish Republic held a referendum on one question: whether its state constitution should still prohibit divorce. Most of the political parties, in an increasingly secular country, urged voters to approve of a change in the law. They did so for two excellent reasons. It was no longer thought right that the Roman Catholic Church should legislate its morality for all citizens, and it was obviously impossible even to hope for eventual Irish reunification if the large Protestant minority in the North was continually repelled by the possibility of clerical rule. Mother Teresa flew all the way from Calcutta to help campaign, along with the church and its hard-liners, for a “no” vote. In other words, an Irish woman married to a wife-beating and incestuous drunk should never expect anything better, and might endanger her soul if she begged for a fresh start, while as for the Protestants, they could either choose the blessings of Rome or stay out altogether. There was not even the suggestion that Catholics could follow their own church’s commandments while not imposing them on all other citizens. And this in the British Isles, in the last decade of the twentieth century. The referendum eventually amended the constitution, though by the narrowest of majorities. (Mother Teresa in the same year gave an interview saying that she hoped her friend Princess Diana would be happier after she had **escaped** from what was an obviously miserable marriage, but it’s less of a surprise to find the church applying sterner laws to the poor, or offering indulgences to the rich.)

A week before the events of September 11, 2001, I was on a panel with Dennis Prager, who is one of America’s better-known religious broadcasters. He challenged me in public to answer what he called a “straight yes /no question,” and I happily

agreed. Very well, he said. I was to imagine myself in a strange city as the evening was coming on. Toward me I was to imagine that I saw a large group of men approaching. Now—would I feel safer, or less safe, if I was to learn that they were just coming from a prayer meeting? As the reader will see, this is not a question to which a yes /no answer can be given. But I was able to answer it as if it were not hypothetical. “Just to stay within the letter ‘B,’ I have actually had that experience in Belfast, Beirut, Bombay, Belgrade, Bethlehem, and Baghdad. In each case I can say absolutely, and can give my reasons, why I would feel immediately threatened if I thought that the group of men approaching me in the dusk were coming from a religious observance.”

Here, then, is a very brief summary of the religiously inspired cruelty I witnessed in these six places. In Belfast, I have seen whole streets burned out by sectarian warfare between different sects of Christianity, and interviewed people whose relatives and friends have been kidnapped and killed or tortured by rival religious death squads, often for no other reason than membership of another confession. There is an old Belfast joke about the man stopped at a roadblock and asked his religion. When he replies that he is an atheist he is asked, “Protestant or Catholic atheist?” I think this shows how the obsession has rotted even the legendary local sense of humor. In any case, this did actually happen to a friend of mine and the experience was decidedly not an amusing one. The ostensible pretext for this mayhem is rival nationalisms, but the street language used by opposing rival tribes consists of terms insulting to the other confession (“Prods” and “Teagues”). For many years, the Protestant establishment wanted Catholics to be both **segregated** and suppressed. Indeed, in the days when the Ulster state was founded, its slogan was: “A Protestant Parliament for a Protestant People.” Sectarianism is conveniently self-generating and can always be counted upon to evoke a reciprocal sectarianism. On the main point, the Catholic leadership was in agreement. It desired clerical- dominated schools and segregated neighborhoods, the better to exert its control. So, in the name of god, the old hatreds were drilled into new generations of schoolchildren, and are still being drilled. (Even the word “drill” makes me queasy: a power tool of that kind was often used to destroy the kneecaps of those who fell foul of the religious gangs.)

When I first saw Beirut, in the summer of 1975, it was still recognizable as “the Paris of the Orient.” Yet this apparent Eden was infested with a wide selection of serpents. It suffered from a positive surplus of religions, all of them “accommodated” by a sectarian state constitution. The president by law had to be a Christian, usually a Maronite Catholic, the speaker of the parliament a Muslim, and so on. This never worked well, because it institutionalized differences of belief as well as of caste and ethnicity (the Shia Muslims were at the bottom of the social scale, the Kurds were disenfranchised altogether).

The main Christian party was actually a Catholic militia called the Phalange, or “Phalanx,” and had been founded by a Maronite Lebanese named Pierre Gemayel who had been very impressed by his visit to Hitler’s Berlin Olympics in 1936. It was later to achieve international notoriety by conducting the massacre of Palestinians at the Sabra

and Chatila refugee camps in 1982, while acting under the orders of General Sharon. That a Jewish general should collaborate with a fascist party may seem grotesque enough, but they had a common Muslim enemy and that was enough. Israel's irruption into Lebanon that year also gave an impetus to the birth of Hezbollah, the modestly named "Party of God," which mobilized the Shia underclass and gradually placed it under the leadership of the theocratic dictatorship in Iran that had come to power three years previously. It was in lovely Lebanon, too, having learned to share the kidnapping business with the ranks of organized crime, that the faithful moved on to introduce us to the beauties of suicide bombing. I can still see that severed head in the road outside the near-shattered French embassy. On the whole, I tended to cross the street when the prayer meetings broke up.

Bombay also used to be considered a pearl of the Orient, with its necklace of lights along the corniche and its magnificent British Raj architecture. It was one of India's most diverse and plural cities, and its many layers of texture have been cleverly explored by Salman Rushdie—especially in *The Moor's Last Sigh*—and in the films of Mira Nair. It is true that there had been intercommunal fighting there, during the time in 1947–48 when the grand historic movement for Indian self-government was being ruined by Muslim demands for a separate state and by the fact that the Congress Party was led by a pious Hindu. But probably as many people took refuge in Bombay during that moment of religious bloodlust as were driven or fled from it. A form of cultural coexistence resumed, as often happens when cities are exposed to the sea and to influences from outside. Parsis—former Zoroastrians who had been persecuted in Persia—were a prominent minority, and the city was also host to a historically significant community of Jews. But this was not enough to content Mr. Bal Thackeray and his Shiv Sena Hindu nationalist movement, who in the 1990s decided that Bombay should be run by and for his coreligionists, and who loosed a tide of goons and thugs onto the streets. Just to show he could do it, he ordered the city renamed as "Mumbai," which is partly why I include it in this list under its traditional title.

Belgrade had until the 1980s been the capital of Yugoslavia, or the land of the southern Slavs, which meant by definition that it was the capital of a multiethnic and multiconfessional state. But a secular Croatian intellectual once gave me a warning that, as in Belfast, took the form of a sour joke. "If I tell people that I am an atheist and a Croat," he said, "people ask me how I can prove I am not a Serb." To be Croatian, in other words, is to be Roman Catholic. To be a Serb is to be Christian Orthodox. In the 1940s, this meant a Nazi puppet state, set up in Croatia and enjoying the patronage of the Vatican, which naturally sought to exterminate all the Jews in the region but also undertook a campaign of forcible conversion directed at the other Christian community. Tens of thousands of Orthodox Christians were either slaughtered or deported in consequence, and a vast concentration camp was set up near the town of Jasenovacs. So disgusting was the regime of General Ante Pavelic and his Ustashe party that even many German officers protested at having to be associated with it.

By the time I visited the site of the Jasenovacs camp in 1992, the jackboot was somewhat on the other foot. The Croatian cities of Vukovar and Dubrovnik had been brutally shelled by the armed forces of Serbia, now under the control of Slobodan Milosevic. The mainly Muslim city of Sarajevo had been encircled and was being bombarded around the clock. Elsewhere in Bosnia-Herzegovina, especially along the river Drina, whole towns were pillaged and massacred in what the Serbs themselves termed “ethnic cleansing.” In point of fact, “religious cleansing” would have been nearer the mark. Milosevic was an ex-Communist bureaucrat who had mutated into a xenophobic nationalist, and his anti-Muslim crusade, which was a cover for the annexation of Bosnia to a “Greater Serbia,” was to a large extent carried out by unofficial militias operating under his “deniable” control. These gangs were made up of religious bigots, often blessed by Orthodox priests and bishops, and sometimes augmented by fellow Orthodox “volunteers” from Greece and Russia. They made a special attempt to destroy all evidence of Ottoman civilization, as in the specially atrocious case of the dynamiting of several historic minarets in Banja Luka, which was done during a cease-fire and not as the result of any battle.

The same was true, as is often forgotten, of their Catholic counterparts. The Ustashe formations were revived in Croatia and made a vicious attempt to take over Herzegovina, as they had during the Second World War. The beautiful city of Mostar was also shelled and besieged, and the world-famous Stari Most, or “Old Bridge,” dating from Turkish times and listed by UNESCO as a cultural site of world importance, was bombarded until it fell into the river below. In effect, the extremist Catholic and Orthodox forces were colluding in a bloody partition and cleansing of Bosnia-Herzegovina. They were, and still are, largely spared the public shame of this, because the world’s media preferred the simplification of “Croat” and “Serb,” and only mentioned religion when discussing “the Muslims.” But the triad of terms “Croat,” “Serb,” and “Muslim” is unequal and misleading, in that it equates two nationalities and one religion. (The same blunder is made in a different way in coverage of Iraq, with the “Sunni-Shia-Kurd” trilateral.) There were at least ten thousand Serbs in Sarajevo throughout the siege, and one of the leading commanders of its defense, an officer and gentleman named General Jovan Divjak, whose hand I was proud to shake under fire, was a Serb also. The city’s Jewish population, which dated from 1492, also identified itself for the most part with the government and the cause of Bosnia. It would have been far more accurate if the press and television had reported that “today the Orthodox Christian forces resumed their bombardment of Sarajevo,” or “yesterday the Catholic militia succeeded in collapsing the Stari Most.” But confessional terminology was reserved only for “Muslims,” even as their murderers went to all the trouble of distinguishing themselves by wearing large Orthodox crosses over their bandoliers, or by taping portraits of the Virgin Mary to their rifle butts. Thus, once again, religion poisons everything, including our own faculties of discernment.

As for Bethlehem, I suppose I would be willing to concede to Mr. Prager that on a good day, I would feel safe enough standing around outside the Church of the Nativity

as evening came on. It is in Bethlehem, not far from Jerusalem, that many believe that, with the cooperation of an immaculately conceived virgin, god was delivered of a son.

“Now the birth of Jesus Christ was in this wise. When his mother, Mary, was espoused to Joseph, before they came together she was found with child of the Holy Ghost.” Yes, and the Greek demigod Perseus was born when the god Jupiter visited the virgin Danaë as a shower of gold and got her with child. The god Buddha was born through an opening in his mother’s flank. Catlicus the serpent-skirted caught a little ball of feathers from the sky and hid it in her bosom, and the Aztec god Huitzilopochtli was thus conceived. The virgin Nana took a pomegranate from the tree watered by the blood of the slain Agdestris, and laid it in her bosom, and gave birth to the god Attis. The virgin daughter of a Mongol king awoke one night and found herself bathed in a great light, which caused her to give birth to Genghis Khan. Krishna was born of the virgin Devaka. Horus was born of the virgin Isis. Mercury was born of the virgin Maia. Romulus was born of the virgin Rhea Sylvia. For some reason, many religions force themselves to think of the birth canal as a one-way street, and even the Koran treats the Virgin Mary with reverence. However, this made no difference during the Crusades, when a papal army set out to recapture Bethlehem and Jerusalem from the Muslims, incidentally destroying many Jewish communities and sacking heretical Christian Byzantium along the way, and inflicted a massacre in the narrow streets of Jerusalem, where, according to the hysterical and gleeful chroniclers, the spilled blood reached up to the bridles of the horses.

Some of these tempests of hatred and bigotry and bloodlust have passed away, though new ones are always impending in this area, but meanwhile a person can feel relatively unmolested in and around “Manger Square,” which is the center, as its name suggests, of a tourist trap of such unrelieved tawdriness as to put Lourdes itself to shame. When I first visited this pitiful town, it was under the nominal control of a largely Christian Palestinian municipality, linked to one particular political dynasty identified with the Freij family. When I have seen it since, it has generally been under a brutal curfew imposed by the Israeli military authorities—whose presence on the West Bank is itself not unconnected with belief in certain ancient scriptural prophecies, though this time with a different promise made by a different god to a different people. Now comes the turn of still another religion. The forces of Hamas, who claim the whole of Palestine as an Islamic waqf or holy dispensation sacred to Islam, have begun to elbow aside the Christians of Bethlehem. Their leader, Mahmoud al-Zahar, has announced that all inhabitants of the Islamic state of Palestine will be expected to conform to Muslim law. In Bethlehem, it is now proposed that non-Muslims be subjected to the al-Jeziya tax, the historic levy imposed on dhimmis or unbelievers under the old Ottoman Empire. Female employees of the municipality are forbidden to greet male visitors with a handshake. In Gaza, a young woman named Yusra al-Azami was shot dead in April 2005, for the crime of sitting unchaperoned in a car with her fiancé. The young man escaped with only a vicious beating. The leaders of the

Hamas “vice and virtue” squad justified this casual murder and torture by saying that there had been “suspicion of immoral behavior.” In once secular Palestine, mobs of sexually repressed young men are conscripted to snoop around parked cars, and given permission to do what they like.

I once heard the late Abba Eban, one of Israel’s more polished and thoughtful diplomats and statesmen, give a talk in New York. The first thing to strike the eye about the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, he said, was the ease of its solubility. From this arresting start he went on to say, with the authority of a former foreign minister and UN representative, that the essential point was a simple one. Two peoples of roughly equivalent size had a claim to the same land. The solution was, obviously, to create two states side by side. Surely something so self-evident was within the wit of man to encompass? And so it would have been, decades ago, if the messianic rabbis and mullahs and priests could have been kept out of it. But the exclusive claims to god-given authority, made by hysterical clerics on both sides and further stoked by Armageddon-minded Christians who hope to bring on the Apocalypse (preceded by the death or conversion of all Jews), have made the situation insufferable, and put the whole of humanity in the position of hostage to a quarrel that now features the threat of nuclear war. Religion poisons everything. As well as a menace to civilization, it has become a threat to human survival.

To come last to Baghdad. This is one of the greatest centers of learning and culture in history. It was here that some of the lost works of Aristotle and other Greeks (“lost” because the Christian authorities had burned some, suppressed others, and closed the schools of philosophy, on the grounds that there could have been no useful reflections on morality before the preaching of Jesus) were preserved, retranslated, and transmitted via Andalusia back to the ignorant “Christian” West. Baghdad’s libraries and poets and architects were renowned. Many of these attainments took place under Muslim caliphs, who sometimes permitted and as often repressed their expression, but Baghdad also bears the traces of ancient Chaldean and Nestorian Christianity, and was one of the many centers of the Jewish diaspora. Until the late 1940s, it was home to as many Jews as were living in Jerusalem.

I am not here going to elaborate a position on the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in April 2003. I shall simply say that those who regarded his regime as a “secular” one are deluding themselves. It is true that the Ba’ath Party was founded by a man named Michel Aflaq, a sinister Christian with a sympathy for fascism, and it is also true that membership of that party was open to all religions (though its Jewish membership was, I have every reason to think, limited). However, at least since his calamitous invasion of Iran in 1979, which led to furious accusations from the Iranian theocracy that he was an “infidel,” Saddam Hussein had decked out his whole rule—which was based in any case on a tribal minority of the Sunni minority—as one of piety and jihad. (The Syrian Ba’ath Party, also based on a confessional fragment of society aligned with the Alawite minority, has likewise enjoyed a long and hypocritical relationship with the Iranian mullahs.) Saddam had inscribed the words “Allahuh Akhbar”—“God Is Great”—on

the Iraqi flag. He had sponsored a huge international conference of holy warriors and mullahs, and maintained very warm relations with their other chief state sponsor in the region, namely the genocidal government of Sudan. He had built the largest mosque in the region, and named it the “Mother of All Battles” mosque, complete with a Koran written in blood that he claimed to be his own. When launching his own genocidal campaign against the (mainly Sunni) people of Kurdistan—a campaign that involved the thoroughgoing use of chemical atrocity weapons and the murder and deportation of hundreds of thousands of people—he had called it “Operation Anfal,” borrowing by this term a Koranic justification—“The Spoils” of sura 8—for the despoilment and destruction of nonbelievers. When the Coalition forces crossed the Iraqi border, they found Saddam’s army dissolving like a sugar lump in hot tea, but met with some quite tenacious resistance from a paramilitary group, stiffened with foreign jihadists, called the Fedayeen Saddam. One of the jobs of this group was to execute anybody who publicly welcomed the Western intervention, and some revolting public hangings and mutilations were soon captured on video for all to see.

At a minimum, it can be agreed by all that the Iraqi people had endured much in the preceding thirty-five years of war and dictatorship, that the Saddam regime could not have gone on forever as an outlaw system within international law, and therefore that—whatever objections there might be to the actual means of “regime change”—the whole society deserved a breathing space in which to consider reconstruction and reconciliation. Not one single minute of breathing space was allowed.

Everybody knows the sequel. The supporters of al-Qaeda, led by a Jordanian jailbird named Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, launched a frenzied campaign of murder and sabotage. They not only slew unveiled women and secular journalists and teachers. They not only set off bombs in Christian churches (Iraq’s population is perhaps 2 percent Christian) and shot or maimed Christians who made and sold alcohol. They not only made a video of the mass shooting and throat-cutting of a contingent of Nepalese guest workers, who were assumed to be Hindu and thus beyond all consideration. These atrocities might be counted as more or less routine. They directed the most toxic part of their campaign of terror at fellow Muslims. The mosques and funeral processions of the long-oppressed Shiite majority were blown up. Pilgrims coming long distances to the newly accessible shrines at Karbala and Najaf did so at the risk of their lives. In a letter to his leader Osama bin Laden, Zar qawi gave the two main reasons for this extraordinarily evil policy. In the first place, as he wrote, the Shiites were heretics who did not take the correct Salafist path of purity. They were thus a fit prey for the truly holy. In the second place, if a religious war could be induced within Iraqi society, the plans of the “crusader” West could be set at naught. The obvious hope was to ignite a counterresponse from the Shia themselves, which would drive Sunni Arabs into the arms of their bin Ladenist “protectors.” And, despite some noble appeals for restraint from the Shiite grand ayatollah Sistani, it did not prove very difficult to elicit such a response. Before long, Shia death squads, often garbed in police uniforms, were killing and torturing random members of the Sunni Arab faith. The surreptitious influence of

the neighboring “Islamic Republic” of Iran was not difficult to detect, and in some Shia areas also it became dangerous to be an unveiled woman or a secular person. Iraq boasts quite a long history of intermarriage and intercommunal cooperation. But a few years of this hateful dialectic soon succeeded in creating an atmosphere of misery, distrust, hostility, and sect-based politics. Once again, religion had poisoned everything.

In all the cases I have mentioned, there were those who protested in the name of religion and who tried to stand athwart the rising tide of fanaticism and the cult of death. I can think of a handful of priests and bishops and rabbis and imams who have put humanity ahead of their own sect or creed. History gives us many other such examples, which I am going to discuss later on. But this is a compliment to humanism, not to religion. If it comes to that, these crises have also caused me, and many other atheists, to protest on behalf of Catholics suffering discrimination in Ireland, of Bosnian Muslims facing extermination in the Christian Balkans, of Shia Afghans and Iraqis being put to the sword by Sunni jihadists, and vice versa, and numberless other such cases. To adopt such a stand is the elementary duty of a self-respecting human. But the general reluctance of clerical authorities to issue unambiguous condemnation, whether it is the Vatican in the case of Croatia or the Saudi or Iranian leaderships in the case of their respective confessions, is uniformly disgusting. And so is the willingness of each “flock” to revert to atavistic behavior under the least provocation.

No, Mr. Prager, I have not found it a prudent rule to seek help as the prayer meeting breaks up. And this, as I told you, is only the letter “B.” In all these cases, anyone concerned with human safety or dignity would have to hope fervently for a mass outbreak of democratic and republican secularism.

I did not have to travel to all these exotic places in order to see the poison doing its work. Long before the critical day of September 11, 2001, I could sense that religion was beginning to reassert its challenge to civil society. When I am not operating as a tentative and amateur foreign correspondent, I lead a rather tranquil and orderly life: writing books and essays, teaching my students to love English literature, attending agreeable conferences of literary types, taking part in the transient arguments that arise in publishing and the academy. But even this rather sheltered existence has been subject to outrageous invasions and insults and challenges. On February 14, 1989, my friend Salman Rushdie was hit by a simultaneous death sentence and life sentence, for the crime of writing a work of fiction. To be more precise, the theocratic head of a foreign state—the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran—publicly offered money, in his own name, to suborn the murder of a novelist who was a citizen of another country. Those who were encouraged to carry out this bribed assassination scheme, which extended to “all those involved in the publication” of *The Satanic Verses*, were offered not just the cold cash but also a free ticket to paradise. It is impossible to imagine a greater affront to every value of free expression. The ayatollah had not read, and probably could not read, and in any case forbade everyone else to read, the novel. But he succeeded in igniting ugly demonstrations, among Muslims in Britain as well as across the world,

where crowds burned the book and screamed for the author to be fed to the flames as well.

This episode—part horrifying and part grotesque—of course had its origins in the material or “real” world. The ayatollah, having flung away hundreds of thousands of young Iranian lives in an attempt to prolong the war which Saddam Hussein had started, and thereby to turn it into a victory for his own reactionary theology, had recently been forced to acknowledge reality and to agree to the United Nations cease-fire resolution that he had sworn he would drink poison before signing. He was in need, in other words, of an “issue.” A group of reactionary Muslims in South Africa, who sat in the puppet parliament of the apartheid regime, had announced that if Mr. Rushdie attended a book fair in their country he would be killed. A fundamentalist group in Pakistan had shed blood on the streets. Khomeini had to prove that he could not be outdone by anybody.

As it happens, there are some statements allegedly made by the Prophet Muhammad, which are difficult to reconcile with Muslim teaching. Koranic scholars had attempted to square this circle by suggesting that, in these instances, the Prophet was accidentally taking dictation from Satan instead of from God. This ruse—which would not have disgraced the most sinuous school of medieval Christian apologetics—provided an excellent opportunity for a novelist to explore the relationship between holy writ and literature. But the literal mind does not understand the ironic mind, and sees it always as a source of danger. Moreover, Rushdie had been brought up as a Muslim and had an understanding of the Koran, which meant in effect that he was an apostate. And “apostasy,” according to the hadith, is punishable only by death. There is no right to change religion, and all religious states have always insisted on harsh penalties for those who try it.

A number of serious attempts were made to kill Rushdie by religious death squads supported from Iranian embassies. His Italian and Japanese translators were criminally assaulted, apparently in one case in the absurd belief that the translator might know his whereabouts, and one of them was savagely mutilated as he lay dying. His Norwegian publisher was shot in the back several times with a high-velocity rifle and left for dead in the snow, but astonishingly survived. One might have thought that such arrogant state-sponsored homicide, directed at a lonely and peaceful individual who pursued a life devoted to language, would have called forth a general condemnation. But such was not the case. In considered statements, the Vatican, the archbishop of Canterbury, and the chief Sephardic rabbi of Israel all took a stand in sympathy with—the ayatollah. So did the cardinal archbishop of New York and many other lesser religious figures. While they usually managed a few words in which to deplore the resort to violence, all these men stated that the main problem raised by the publication of *The Satanic Verses* was not murder by mercenaries, but blasphemy. Some public figures not in holy orders, such as the Marxist writer John Berger, the Tory historian Hugh Trevor-Roper, and the doyen of espionage authors John Le Carré, also pronounced that Rushdie was the author of his own troubles, and had brought them on himself by “offending” a great

monotheistic religion. There seemed nothing fantastic, to these people, in the British police having to defend an Indian-born ex-Muslim citizen from a concerted campaign to take his life in the name of god.

Sheltered as my own life normally is, I had a taste of this surreal situation when Mr. Rushdie came to Washington over the Thanksgiving weekend of 1993, in order to keep an appointment with President Clinton, and stayed for a night or two in my apartment. An enormous and forbidding security operation was necessary to bring this about, and when the visit was over I was asked to pay a visit to the Department of State. There I was informed by a senior official that believable “chatter” had been intercepted expressing the intention of **revenge** on me and on my family. I was advised to change my address and my telephone number, which seemed an unlikely way of avoiding reprisal. However, it did put me on notice of what I already knew. It is not possible for me to say, Well, you pursue your Shiite dream of a hidden imam and I pursue my study of Thomas Paine and George Orwell, and the world is big enough for both of us. The true believer cannot rest until the whole world bows the knee. Is it not obvious to all, say the pious, that religious authority is paramount, and that those who decline to recognize it have forfeited their right to exist?

It was, as it happens, the murderers of the Shia who forced this point upon the world’s attention a few years later. So ghastly had been the regime of the Taliban in Afghanistan, which slaughtered the Shiite Hazara population, that Iran itself had considered invading the country in 1999. And so great was the Taliban’s addiction to profanity that it had methodically shelled and destroyed one of the world’s greatest cultural artifacts—the twin Buddha statues at Bamiyan, which in their magnificence showed the fusion of Hellenic and other styles in the Afghan past. But, pre-Islamic as they undoubtedly were, the statues were a standing insult to the Taliban and their al-Qaeda guests, and the reduction of Bamiyan to shards and rubble foreshadowed the incineration of two other twin structures, as well as almost three thousand human beings, in downtown Manhattan in the fall of 2001.

Everybody has their own 9/11 story: I shall skip over mine except to say that someone I slightly knew was flown into the wall of the Pentagon having managed to call her husband and give a description of her murderers and their tactics (and having learned from him that it was not a hijack and that she was going to die). From the roof of my building in Washington, I could see the smoke rising from the other side of the river, and I have never since passed the Capitol or the White House without thinking of what might have happened were it not for the courage and resourcefulness of the passengers on the fourth plane, who managed to bring it down in a Pennsylvania field only twenty minutes’ flying time from its destination.

Well, I was able to write in a further reply to Dennis Prager, now you have your answer. The nineteen suicide murderers of New York and Washington and Pennsylvania were beyond any doubt the most sincere believers on those planes. Perhaps we can hear a little less about how “people of faith” possess moral advantages that others can only envy. And what is to be learned from the jubilation and the ecstatic propaganda with

which this great feat of fidelity has been greeted in the Islamic world? At the time, the United States had an attorney general named John Ashcroft, who had stated that America had “no king but Jesus” (a claim that was exactly two words too long). It had a president who wanted to hand over the care of the poor to “faith- based” institutions. Might this not be a moment where the light of reason, and the defense of a society that separated church and state and valued free expression and free inquiry, be granted a point or two?

The disappointment was, and to me remains, acute. Within hours, the “reverends” Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell had announced that the immolation of their fellow creatures was a divine judgment on a secular society that tolerated homosexuality and abortion. At the solemn memorial service for the victims, held in the beautiful National Cathedral in Washington, an address was permitted from Billy Graham, a man whose record of opportunism and anti-Semitism is in itself a minor national disgrace. His absurd sermon made the claim that all the dead were now in paradise and would not return to us even if they could. I say absurd because it is impossible even in the most lenient terms to believe that a good number of sinful citizens had not been murdered by al-Qaeda that day. And there is no reason to believe that Billy Graham knew the current whereabouts of their souls, let alone their posthumous desires. But there was also something sinister in hearing detailed claims to knowledge of paradise, of the sort that bin Laden himself was making on behalf of the assassins.

Matters continued to deteriorate in the interval between the removal of the Taliban and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. A senior military official named General William Boykin announced that he had been vouchsafed a vision while serving earlier during the fiasco in Somalia. Apparently the face of Satan himself had been detected by some aerial photography of Mogadishu, but this had only increased the confidence of the general that his god was stronger than the evil deity of the opposition. At the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, it was revealed that Jewish and agnostic cadets were being viciously bullied by a group of unpunished “born again” cadres, who insisted that only those accepting Jesus as a personal savior were qualified to serve. The deputy commander of the academy sent out e-mails proselytizing for a national day of (Christian) prayer. A chaplain named MeLinda Morton, who complained about this hysteria and intimidation, was abruptly transferred to a faraway base in Japan. Meanwhile, empty-headed multiculturalism also contributed its portion, by among other means ensuring the distribution of cheap and mass-produced Saudi editions of the Koran, for use in America’s prison system. These Wahhabi texts went even further than the original in recommending holy war against all Christians and Jews and secularists. To observe all this was to witness a kind of cultural suicide: an “assisted suicide” at which believers and unbelievers were both prepared to officiate.

It ought to have been pointed out at once that this sort of thing, as well as being unethical and unprofessional, was also flat-out unconstitutional and anti-American. James Madison, the author of the First Amendment to the Constitution, prohibiting any law respecting an establishment of religion, was also an author of Article VI, which

states unambiguously that “no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust.” His later Detached Memoranda make it very plain that he opposed the government appointment of chaplains in the first place, either in the armed forces or at the opening ceremonies of Congress. “The establishment of the chaplainship to Congress is a palpable violation of equal rights, as well as of Constitutional principles.” As to clerical presence in the armed forces, Madison wrote, “The object of this establishment is seducing; the motive to it is laudable. But is it not safer to adhere to a right principle, and trust to its consequences, than confide in the reasoning however specious in favor of a wrong one? Look thro’ the armies and navies of the world, and say whether in the appointment of their ministers of religion, the spiritual interest of the flocks or the temporal interest of the Shepherd be most in view?” Anyone citing Madison today would very likely be thought either subversive or insane, and yet without him and Thomas Jefferson, coauthors of the Virginia Statute on Religious Freedom, the United States would have gone on as it was—with Jews prohibited from holding office in some states, Catholics in others, and Protestants in Maryland: the latter a state where “profane words concerning the Holy Trinity” were punishable by torture, branding, and, at the third offense, “death without benefit of clergy.” Georgia might have persisted in maintaining that its official state faith was “Protestantism”—whichever one of Luther’s many hybrids that might have turned out to be.

As the debate over intervention in Iraq became more heated, positive torrents of nonsense poured from the pulpits. Most churches opposed the effort to remove Saddam Hussein, and the pope disgraced himself utterly by issuing a personal invitation to the wanted war criminal Ta riq Aziz, a man responsible for the state murder of children. Not only was Aziz welcomed at the Vatican as the senior Catholic member of a ruling fascist party (not the first time that such an indulgence had been granted), he was then taken to Assisi for a personal session of prayer at the shrine of Saint Francis, who apparently used to lecture to birds. This, he must have thought, was altogether too easy. On the other side of the confessional span, some but not all American evangelicals thundered joyously about the prospect of winning the Muslim world for Jesus. (I say “some but not all” because one fundamentalist splinter group has since taken to picketing the funerals of American soldiers killed in Iraq, claiming that their murders are god’s punishment for American homosexuality. One especially tasteful sign, waved in the faces of the mourners, is “Thank God for IEDs,” the roadside bombs placed by equally anti-gay Muslim fascists. It is not my problem to decide which theology is the correct one here: I would say the chances of either being right are approximately the same.) Charles Stanley, whose weekly sermons from the First Baptist Church in Atlanta are watched by millions, could have been any demagogic imam as he said, “We should offer to serve the war effort in any way possible. God battles with people who oppose him, who fight against him and his followers.” His organization’s Baptist Press news service printed an article from a missionary exulting that “American foreign policy, and military might, have opened an opportunity for the gospel in the land of Abraham,

Isaac and Jacob.” Never to be outdone, Tim LaHaye decided to go even further. Best-known as the coauthor of the best-selling Left Behind pulp novel series, which readies the average American for the “rapture” and then for Armageddon, he spoke of Iraq as “a focal point of end-time events.” Other biblical enthusiasts tried to link Saddam Hussein with the wicked King Nebuchadnezzar of ancient Babylon, a comparison that the dictator himself would probably have approved, given his rebuilding of the old walls at Babylon with bricks that had his name inscribed on every one of them. Thus, instead of a rational discussion about the best way to contain and defeat religious fanaticism, one had the mutual reinforcement of two forms of that mania: the jihadist assault reconjured the bloodstained specter of the Crusaders.

In this respect, religion is not unlike racism. One version of it inspires and provokes the other. I was once asked another trick question, slightly more searching than Dennis Prager’s, that was designed to uncover my level of latent prejudice. You are on a subway platform in New York, late at night, in a deserted station. Suddenly a group of a dozen black men appears. Do you stay where you are or move to the exit? I was able again to reply that I had had this exact experience. Waiting alone for a train, well after midnight, I had been suddenly joined by a crew of repairmen exiting the tunnel with their tools and workgloves. All of them were black. I felt instantly safer, and moved toward them. I have no idea what their religious affiliation was. But in every other case that I have cited, religion has been an enormous multiplier of tribal suspicion and hatred, with members of each group talking of the other in precisely the tones of the bigot. The Christians eat defiled pig meat and they and Jews swill poisonous alcohol. Buddhist and Muslim Sri Lankans blamed the wine-oriented Christmas celebrations of 2004 for the immediately following tsunami. Catholics are dirty and have too many children. Muslims breed like rabbits and wipe their bottoms with the wrong hand. Jews have lice in their beards and seek the blood of Christian children to add flavor and zest to their Passover matzos. And so it goes on.

Chapter Three. A Short Digression on the Pig; or, Why Heaven Hates Ham

All religions have a tendency to feature some dietary injunction or prohibition, whether it is the now lapsed Catholic injunction to eat fish on Fridays, or the adoration by Hindus of the cow as a consecrated and invulnerable animal (the government of India even offered to import and protect all the cattle facing slaughter as a result of the bovine encephalitic, or “mad cow,” plague that swept Europe in the 1990s), or the refusal by some other Eastern cults to consume any animal flesh, or to injure any other creature be it rat or flea. But the oldest and most tenacious of all fetishes is the hatred and even fear of the pig. It emerged in primitive Judaea, and was for centuries one of the ways—the other being circumcision—by which Jews could be distinguished.

Even though sura 5.60 of the Koran condemns particularly Jews but also other unbelievers as having been turned into pigs and monkeys—a very intense theme in recent Salafist Muslim preaching—and the Koran describes the flesh of swine as unclean or even “abominable,” Muslims appear to see nothing ironic in the adoption of this uniquely Jewish taboo. Real horror of the porcine is manifest all over the Islamic world. One good instance would be the continued prohibition of George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, one of the most charming and useful fables of modern times, of the reading of which Muslim schoolchildren are deprived. I have perused some of the solemn prohibition orders written by Arab education ministries, which are so stupid that they fail to notice the evil and dictatorial role played by the pigs in the story itself.

Orwell actually did dislike pigs, as a consequence of his failure as a small farmer, and this revulsion is shared by many adults who have had to work with these difficult animals in agricultural conditions. Crammed together in sties, pigs tend to act swinishly, as it were, and to have noisy and nasty fights. It is not unknown for them to eat their own young and even their own excrement, while their tendency to random and loose gallantry is often painful to the more fastidious eye. But it has often been noticed that pigs left to their own devices, and granted sufficient space, will keep themselves very clean, arrange little bowers, bring up families, and engage in social interaction with other pigs. The creatures also display many signs of intelligence, and it has been calculated that the crucial ratio—between brain weight and body weight—is almost as high with them as it is in dolphins. There is great adaptability between the pig and its

environment, as witness wild boars and “feral pigs” as opposed to the placid porkers and frisky piglets of our more immediate experience. But the cloven hoof, or trotter, became a sign of diabolism to the fearful, and I daresay that it is easy to surmise which came first—the devil or the pig. It would be merely boring and idiotic to wonder how the designer of all things conceived such a versatile creature and then commanded his higher-mammal creation to avoid it altogether or risk his eternal displeasure. But many otherwise intelligent mammals affect the belief that heaven hates ham.

I hope that you have guessed by now what we know in any case— that this fine beast is one of our fairly close cousins. It shares a great deal of our DNA, and there have lately been welcome transplants of skin, heart valves, and kidneys from pigs to humans. If—which I heartily trust does not happen—a new Dr. Moreau could corrupt recent advances in cloning and create a hybrid, a “pig-man” is widely feared as the most probable outcome. Meanwhile, almost everything about the pig is useful, from its nutritious and delicious meat to its tanned hide for leather and its bristles for brushes. In Upton Sinclair’s graphic novel of the Chicago slaughterhouse, *The Jungle*, it is agonizing to read about the way that pigs are borne aloft on hooks, screaming as their throats are cut. Even the strongest nerves of the most hardened workers are shaken by the experience. There is something about that shriek . . .

To press this a little further, one may note that children if left unmolested by rabbis and imams are very drawn to pigs, especially to baby ones, and that firefighters in general do not like to eat roast pork or crackling. The barbaric vernacular word for roasted human in New Guinea and elsewhere was “long pig”: I have never had the relevant degustative experience myself, but it seems that we do, if eaten, taste very much like pigs.

This helps to make nonsense of the usual “secular” explanations of the original Jewish prohibition. It is argued that the ban was initially rational, since pig meat in hot climates can become rank and develop the worms of trichinosis. This objection—which perhaps does apply in the case of non-kosher shellfish—is absurd when applied to the actual conditions. First, trichinosis is found in all climates, and in fact occurs more in cold than in hot ones. Second, ancient Jewish settlements in the land of Canaan can easily be distinguished by archaeologists by the absence of pig bones in their rubbish tips, as opposed to the presence of such bones in the middens of other communities. The non-Jews did not sicken and die from eating pork, in other words. (Quite apart from anything else, if they had died for this reason there would have been no need for the god of Moses to urge their slaughter by non-pig-eaters.)

There must therefore be another answer to the conundrum. I claim my own solution as original, though without the help of Sir James Frazer and the great Ibn Warraq I might not have hit upon it. According to many ancient authorities, the attitude of early Semites to swine was one of reverence as much as disgust. The eating of pig flesh was considered as something special, even privileged and ritualistic. (This mad confusion between the sacred and the profane is found in all faiths at all times.) The simultaneous attraction and repulsion derived from an anthropomorphic root: the look of the pig, and

the taste of the pig, and the dying yells of the pig, and the evident intelligence of the pig, were too uncomfortably reminiscent of the human. Porcophobia—and porcophilia—thus probably originate in a nighttime of human sacrifice and even cannibalism at which the “holy” texts often do more than hint. Nothing optional—from homosexuality to adultery—is ever made punishable unless those who do the prohibiting (and exact the fierce punishments) have a repressed desire to participate. As Shakespeare put it in *King Lear*, the policeman who lashes the whore has a hot need to use her for the very offense for which he plies the lash.

Porcophilia can also be used for oppressive and repressive purposes. In medieval Spain, where Jews and Muslims were compelled on pain of death and torture to convert to Christianity, the religious authorities quite rightly suspected that many of the conversions were not sincere. Indeed, the Inquisition arose partly from the holy dread that secret infidels were attending Mass—where of course, and even more disgustingly, they were pretending to eat human flesh and drink human blood, in the person of Christ himself. Among the customs that arose in consequence was the offering, at most events formal and informal, of a plate of charcuterie. Those who have been fortunate enough to visit Spain, or any good Spanish restaurant, will be familiar with the gesture of hospitality: literally dozens of pieces of differently cured, differently sliced pig. But the grim origin of this lies in a constant effort to sniff out heresy, and to be unsmilingly watchful for giveaway expressions of distaste. In the hands of eager Christian fanatics, even the toothsome jamón Ibérico could be pressed into service as a form of torture.

Today, ancient stupidity is upon us again. Muslim zealots in Europe are demanding that the Three Little Pigs, and Miss Piggy, Winnie-the-Pooh’s Piglet, and other traditional pets and characters be removed from the innocent gaze of their children. The mirthless cretins of jihad have probably not read enough to know of the Empress of Blandings, and of the Earl of Emsworth’s infinitely renewable delight in the splendid pages of the incomparable author Mr. Whiffle, *The Care of the Pig*, but there will be trouble when they get that far. An old statue of a wild boar, in an arboretum in Middle England, has already been threatened with mindless Islamic vandalism.

In microcosm, this apparently trivial fetish shows how religion and faith and superstition distort our whole picture of the world. The pig is so close to us, and has been so handy to us in so many respects, that a strong case is now made by humanists that it should not be factory-farmed, confined, separated from its young, and forced to live in its own ordure. All other considerations to one side, the resulting pink and spongy meat is somewhat rebarbative. But this is a decision that we can make in the plain light of reason and compassion, as extended to fellow creatures and relatives, and not as a result of incantations from Iron Age campfires where much worse offenses were celebrated in the name of god. “Pig’s head on a stick,” says the nervous but stouthearted Simon in the face of the buzzing, suppurating idol (first killed and then worshipped) that has been set up by cruel, frightened schoolboys in *Lord of the Flies*. “Pig’s head on a stick.” And he was more right than he could have known, and much wiser than his elders as well as his delinquent juniors.

Chapter Four. A Note on Health, to Which Religion Can Be Hazardous

In dark ages people are best guided by religion, as in a pitch-black night a blind man is the best guide; he knows the roads and paths better than a man who can see. When daylight comes, however, it is foolish to use blind old men as guides.

—Heinrich Heine, *Gedanken und Einfalle*

In the fall of 2001 I was in Calcutta with the magnificent photographer Sebastião Salgado, a Brazilian genius whose studies with the camera have made vivid the lives of migrants, war victims, and those workers who toil to extract primary products from mines and quarries and forests. On this occasion, he was acting as an envoy of UNICEF and promoting his cause as a crusader—in the positive sense of that term—against the scourge of polio. Thanks to the work of inspired and enlightened scientists like Jonas Salk, it is now possible to immunize children against this ghastly malady for a negligible cost: the few cents or pennies that it takes to administer two drops of oral vaccine to the mouth of an infant. Advances in medicine had managed to put the fear of smallpox behind us, and it was confidently expected that another year would do the same for polio. Humanity itself had *seemingly* united on this proposition. In several countries, including El Salvador, warring combatants had proclaimed cease-fires in order to allow the inoculation teams to move freely. Extremely poor and backward countries had mustered the resources to get the good news to every village: no more children need be killed, or made useless and miserable, by this hideous disease. Back home in Washington, where that year many people were still fearfully staying indoors after the trauma of 9/11, my youngest daughter was going dauntlessly door to door on Halloween, piping “Trick or Treat for UNICEF” and healing or saving, with every fistful of small change, children she would never meet. One had that rare sense of participating in an entirely positive enterprise.

The people of Bengal, and particularly the women, were enthusiastic and inventive. I remember one committee meeting, where staunch Calcutta hostesses planned without embarrassment to team up with the city’s prostitutes to spread the word into the farthest corners of society. Bring your children, no questions asked, and let them swallow the two drops of fluid. Someone knew of an elephant a few miles out of town that might be hired to lead a publicity parade. Everything was going well: in one of the

poorest cities and states of the world there was to be a new start. And then we began to hear of a rumor. In some outlying places, Muslim die-hards were spreading the story that the droplets were a plot. If you took this sinister Western medicine, you would be stricken by impotence and diarrhea (a forbidding and depressing combination).

This was a problem, because the drops have to be administered twice—the second time as a booster and confirmation of immunity— and because it takes only a few uninoculated people to allow the disease to survive and revive, and to spread back through contact and the water supply. As with smallpox, eradication must be utter and complete. I wondered as I left Calcutta if West Bengal would manage to meet the deadline and declare itself polio-free by the end of the next year. That would leave only pockets of Afghanistan and one or two other inaccessible regions, already devastated by religious fervor, before we could say that another ancient tyranny of illness had been decisively overthrown.

In 2005 I learned of one outcome. In northern Nigeria—a country that had previously checked in as provisionally polio-free—a group of Islamic religious figures issued a ruling, or fatwa, that declared the polio vaccine to be a conspiracy by the United States (and, amazingly, the United Nations) against the Muslim faith. The drops were designed, said these mullahs, to sterilize the true believers. Their intention and effect was genocidal. Nobody was to swallow them, or administer them to infants. Within months, polio was back, and not just in northern Nigeria. Nigerian travelers and pilgrims had already taken it as far as Mecca, and spread it back to several other polio-free countries, including three African ones and also faraway Yemen. The entire boulder would have to be rolled back right up to the top of the mountain.

You may say that this is an “isolated” case, which would be a grimly apt way of putting it. But you would be mistaken. Would you care to see my video of the advice given by Cardinal Alfonso Lopez de Trujillo, the vatican’s president of the Pontifical Council for the Family, carefully warning his audience that all condoms are secretly made with many microscopic holes, through which the AIDS virus can pass? Close your eyes and try to picture what you might say if you had the authority to inflict the greatest possible suffering in the least number of words. Consider the damage that such a dogma has caused: presumably those holes permit the passage of other things too, which rather destroys the point of a condom in the first place. To make such a statement in Rome is wicked enough. But translate the message into the language of poor and stricken countries and see what happens. During carnival season in Brazil, the auxiliary bishop of Rio de Janeiro, Rafael Llano Cifuentes, told his congregation in a sermon that “the church is against condom use. Sexual relations between a man and a woman have to be natural. I have never seen a little dog using a condom during sexual intercourse with another dog.” Senior clerical figures in several other countries—Cardinal Obando y Bravo of Nicaragua, the archbishop of Nairobi in Kenya, Cardinal Emmanuel Wama la of Uganda—have all told their flocks that condoms transmit AIDS. Cardinal Wamala, indeed, has opined that women who die of AIDS rather than employ

latex protection should be considered as martyrs (though presumably this martyrdom must take place within the confines of marriage).

The Islamic authorities have been no better and sometimes worse. In 1995, the Council of Ulemas in Indonesia urged that condoms only be made available to married couples, and on prescription. In Iran, a worker found to be HIV-positive can lose his job, and doctors and hospitals have the right to refuse treatment to AIDS patients. An official of Pakistan's AIDS Control Program told *Foreign Policy* magazine in 2005 that the problem was smaller in his country because of "better social and Islamic values." This, in a state where the law allows a woman to be sentenced to be gang-raped in order to expiate the "shame" of a crime committed by her brother. This is the old religious combination of repression and denial: a plague like AIDS is assumed to be unmentionable because the teachings of the Koran are enough in themselves to inhibit premarital intercourse, drug use, adultery, and prostitution. Even a very brief visit to, say, Iran, will demonstrate the opposite. It is the mullahs themselves who profit from hypocrisy by licensing "temporary marriages," in which wedding certificates are available for a few hours, sometimes in specially designated houses, with a divorce declaration ready to hand at the conclusion of business. You could almost call it prostitution . . . The last time I was offered such a bargain it was just outside the ugly shrine to the Ayatollah Khomeini in south Tehran. But veiled and burqa-clad women, infected by their husbands with the virus, are expected to die in silence. It is a certainty that millions of other harmless and decent people will die, very miserably and quite needlessly, all over the world as a result of this obscurantism.

The attitude of religion to medicine, like the attitude of religion to science, is always necessarily problematic and very often necessarily hostile. A modern believer can say and even believe that his faith is quite compatible with science and medicine, but the awkward fact will always be that both things have a tendency to break religion's monopoly, and have often been fiercely resisted for that reason. What happens to the faith healer and the shaman when any poor citizen can see the full effect of drugs and surgeries, administered without ceremonies or mystifications? Roughly the same thing as happens to the rainmaker when the climatologist turns up, or to the diviner from the heavens when schoolteachers get hold of elementary telescopes. Plagues of antiquity were held to be punishment from the gods, which did much to strengthen the hold of the priesthood and much to encourage the burning of infidels and heretics who were thought—in an alternative explanation—to be spreading disease by witchcraft or else poisoning the wells.

We may make allowances for the orgies of stupidity and cruelty that were indulged in before humanity had a clear concept of the germ theory of disease. Most of the "miracles" of the New Testament have to do with healing, which was of such great importance in a time when even minor illness was often the end. (Saint Augustine himself said that he would not have believed in Christianity if it were not for the miracles.) Scientific critics of religion such as Daniel Dennett have been generous enough to point out that apparently useless healing rituals may even have helped people get better, in

that we know how important morale can be in aiding the body to fight injury and infection. But that would be an excuse only available in retrospect. By the time Dr. Jenner had discovered that a cowpox vaccine could ward off smallpox, this excuse had become void. Yet Timothy Dwight, a president of Yale University and to this day one of America's most respected "divines," was opposed to the smallpox vaccination because he regarded it as an interference with god's design. And this mentality is still heavily present, long after its pretext and justification in human ignorance has vanished.

It is interesting, and suggestive, that the archbishop of Rio makes his analogy with dogs. They do not trouble to roll on a condom: who are we to quarrel with their fidelity to "nature"? In the recent division in the Anglican Church over homosexuality and ordination, several bishops made the fatuous point that homosexuality is "unnatural" because it does not occur in other species. Leave aside the fundamental absurdity of this observation: are humans part of "nature" or not? Or, if they chance to be homosexual, are they created in god's image or not? Leave aside the well-attested fact that numberless kinds of birds and mammals and primates do engage in homosexual play. Who are the clerics to interpret nature? They have shown themselves quite unable to do so. A condom is, quite simply, a necessary but not a sufficient condition for avoiding the transmission of AIDS. All qualified authorities, including those who state that abstinence is even better, are agreed on this. Homosexuality is present in all societies, and its incidence would appear to be part of human "design." We must perforce confront these facts as we find them. We now know that the bubonic plague was spread not by sin or moral backsliding but by rats and fleas. Archbishop Lancelot Andrewes, during the celebrated "Black Death" in London in 1665, noticed uneasily that the horror fell upon those who prayed and kept the faith as well as upon those who did not. He came perilously close to stumbling upon a real point. As I was writing this chapter, an argument broke out in my hometown of Washington, D.C. The human papillomavirus (HPV) has long been known as a sexually transmitted infection that, at its worst, can cause cervical cancer in women. A vaccine is now available—these days, vaccines are increasingly swiftly developed—not to cure this malady but to immunize women against it. But there are forces in the administration who oppose the adoption of this measure on the grounds that it fails to discourage premarital sex. To accept the spread of cervical cancer in the name of god is no different, morally or intellectually, from sacrificing these women on a stone altar and thanking the deity for giving us the sexual impulse and then condemning it.

We do not know how many people in Africa have died or will die because of the AIDS virus, which was isolated and became treatable, in a great feat of humane scientific research, very soon after it made its lethal appearance. On the other hand, we do know that having sex with a virgin—one of the more popular local "cures"—does not in fact prevent or banish the infection. And we also know that the use of condoms can at least contribute, as a form of prophylaxis, to the limitation and containment of the virus. We are not dealing, as early missionaries might have liked to believe, with witch doctors and savages who resist the boons that the missionaries bring. We are instead

dealing with the Bush administration, which, in a supposedly secular republic in the twenty-first century, refuses to share its foreign aid budget with charities and clinics that offer advice on family planning. At least two major and established religions, with millions of adherents in Africa, believe that the cure is much worse than the disease. They also harbor the belief that the AIDS plague is in some sense a verdict from heaven upon sexual deviance—in particular upon homosexuality. A single stroke of Ockham’s potent razor eviscerates this half-baked savagery: female homosexuals not only do not contract AIDS (except if they are unlucky with a transfusion or a needle), they are also much freer of all venereal infection than even heterosexuals. Yet clerical authorities persistently refuse to be honest about even the existence of the lesbian. In doing so, they further demonstrate that religion continues to pose an urgent threat to public health.

I pose a hypothetical question. As a man of some fifty-seven years of age, I am discovered sucking the penis of a baby boy. I ask you to picture your own outrage and revulsion. Ah, but I have my explanation all ready. I am a mohel: an appointed circumciser and foreskin remover. My authority comes from an ancient text, which commands me to take a baby boy’s penis in my hand, cut around the prepuce, and complete the action by taking his penis in my mouth, sucking off the foreskin, and spitting out the amputated flap along with a mouthful of blood and saliva. This practice has been abandoned by most Jews, either because of its unhygienic nature or its disturbing associations, but it still persists among the sort of Hasidic fundamentalists who hope for the Second Temple to be rebuilt in Jerusalem. To them, the primitive rite of the *peri’ah metsitsah* is part of the original and unbreakable covenant with god. In New York City in the year 2005, the ritual, as performed by a fifty-seven-year-old mohel, was found to have given genital herpes to several small boys, and to have caused the deaths of at least two of them. In normal circumstances, the disclosure would have led the public health department to forbid the practice and the mayor to denounce it. But in the capital of the modern world, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, such was not the case. Instead, Mayor Bloomberg overrode the reports by distinguished Jewish physicians who had warned of the danger of the custom, and told his health care bureaucracy to postpone any verdict. The crucial thing, he said, was to be sure that the free exercise of religion was not being infringed. In a public debate with Peter Steinfelds, the liberal Catholic “religion editor” of the New York Times, I was told the same thing.

It happened to be election year in New York for the mayor, which often explains a lot. But this pattern recurs in other denominations and other states and cities, as well as in other countries. Across a wide swath of animist and Muslim Africa, young girls are subjected to the hell of circumcision and infibulation, which involves the slicing off of the labia and the clitoris, often with a sharp stone, and then the stitching up of the vaginal opening with strong twine, not to be removed until it is broken by male force on the bridal night. Compassion and biology allow for a small aperture to be left, meanwhile, for the passage of menstrual blood. The resulting stench, pain, humil-

iation, and misery exceed anything that can be easily imagined, and inevitably result in infection, sterility, shame, and the death of many women and babies in childbirth. No society would tolerate such an insult to its womanhood and therefore to its survival if the foul practice was not holy and sanctified. But then, no New Yorker would permit atrocities against infants if not for the same consideration. Parents professing to believe the nonsensical claims of “Christian Science” have been accused, but not always convicted, of denying urgent medical care to their offspring. Parents who imagine themselves to be “Jehovah’s Witnesses” have refused permission for their children to receive blood transfusions. Parents who imagine that a man named Joseph Smith was led to a set of buried golden tablets have married their underage “Mormon” daughters to favored uncles and brothers-in-law, who sometimes have older wives already. The Shia fundamentalists in Iran lowered the age of “consent” to nine, perhaps in admiring emulation of the age of the youngest “wife” of the “Prophet” Muhammad. Hindu child brides in India are flogged, and sometimes burned alive, if the pathetic dowry they bring is judged to be too small. The Vatican, and its vast network of dioceses, has in the past decade alone been forced to admit complicity in a huge racket of child rape and child torture, mainly but by no means exclusively homosexual, in which known pederasts and sadists were shielded from the law and reassigned to parishes where the pickings of the innocent and defenseless were often richer. In Ireland alone—once an unquestioning disciple of Holy Mother Church—it is now estimated that the unmolested children of religious schools were very probably the minority.

Now, religion professes a special role in the protection and instruction of children. “Woe to him,” says the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, “who harms a child.” The New Testament has Jesus informing us that one so guilty would be better off at the bottom of the sea, and with a millstone around his neck at that. But both in theory and in practice, religion uses the innocent and the defenseless for the purposes of experiment. By all means let an observant Jewish adult male have his raw-cut penis placed in the mouth of a rabbi. (That would be legal, at least in New York.) By all means let grown women who distrust their clitoris or their labia have them sawn away by some other wretched adult female. By all means let Abraham offer to commit filicide to prove his devotion to the Lord or his belief in the voices he was hearing in his head. By all means let devout parents deny themselves the succor of medicine when in acute pain and distress. By all means—for all I care—let a priest sworn to celibacy be a promiscuous homosexual. By all means let a congregation that believes in whipping out the devil choose a new grown-up sinner each week and lash him until he or she bleeds. By all means let anyone who believes in creationism instruct his fellows during lunch breaks. But the conscription of the unprotected child for these purposes is something that even the most dedicated secularist can safely describe as a sin.

I do not set myself up as a moral exemplar, and would be swiftly knocked down if I did, but if I was suspected of raping a child, or torturing a child, or infecting a child with venereal disease, or selling a child into sexual or any other kind of slavery, I might

consider committing suicide whether I was guilty or not. If I had actually committed the offense, I would welcome death in any form that it might take. This revulsion is innate in any healthy person, and does not need to be taught. Since religion has proved itself uniquely delinquent on the one subject where moral and ethical authority might be counted as universal and absolute, I think we are entitled to at least three provisional conclusions. The first is that religion and the churches are manufactured, and that this salient fact is too obvious to ignore. The second is that ethics and morality are quite independent of faith, and cannot be derived from it. The third is that religion is—because it claims a special divine exemption for its practices and beliefs—not just amoral but immoral. The ignorant psychopath or brute who mistreats his children must be punished but can be understood. Those who claim a heavenly warrant for the cruelty have been tainted by evil, and also constitute far more of a danger.

In the city of Jerusalem, there is a special ward in the mental hospital for those who represent a special danger to themselves and others. These deluded patients are the sufferers from the “Jerusalem syndrome.” Police and security officers are trained to recognize them, though their mania is often concealed behind a mask of deceptively beatific calm. They have come to the holy city in order to announce themselves as the Messiah or redeemer, or to proclaim the end of days. The connection between religious faith and mental disorder is, from the viewpoint of the tolerant and the “multicultural,” both very obvious and highly unmentionable. If someone murders his children and then says that God ordered him to do it, we might find him not guilty by reason of insanity but he would be incarcerated nonetheless. If someone lives in a cave and claims to be seeing visions and experiencing prophetic dreams, we may leave him alone until he turns out to be planning, in a nonphantasmal way, the joy of suicide bombing. If someone announces himself to be God’s anointed, and begins stockpiling Kool-Aid and weapons and helping himself to the wives and daughters of his acolytes, we raise a bit more than a skeptical eyebrow. But if these things can be preached under the protection of an established religion, we are expected to take them at face value. All three monotheisms, just to take the most salient example, praise Abraham for being willing to hear voices and then to take his son Isaac for a long and rather mad and gloomy walk. And then the caprice by which his murderous hand is finally stayed is written down as divine mercy.

The relationship between physical health and mental health is now well understood to have a strong connection to the sexual function, or dysfunction. Can it be a coincidence, then, that all religions claim the right to legislate in matters of sex? The principal way in which believers inflict on themselves, on each other, and on nonbelievers, has always been their claim to monopoly in this sphere. Most religions (with the exception of the few cults that actually permit or encourage it) do not have to bother much with enforcing the taboo on incest. Like murder and theft, this is usually found to be abhorrent to humans without any further explanation. But merely to survey the history of sexual dread and proscription, as codified by religion, is to be met with a very disturbing connection between extreme prurience and extreme repression. Almost

every sexual impulse has been made the occasion for prohibition, guilt, and shame. Manual sex, oral sex, anal sex, non-missionary position sex: to name it is to discover a fearsome ban upon it. Even in modern and hedonistic America, several states legally define “sodomy” as that which is not directed at face-to-face heterosexual procreation.

This raises gigantic objections to the argument from “design,” whether we choose to call that design “intelligent” or not. Clearly, the human species is designed to experiment with sex. No less clearly, this fact is well-known to the priesthoods. When Dr. Samuel Johnson had completed the first real dictionary of the English language, he was visited by a delegation of respectable old ladies who wished to congratulate him for not including any indecent words. His response—which was that he was interested to see that the ladies had been looking them up—contains almost all that needs to be said on this point. Orthodox Jews may not conduct congress by means of a hole in the sheet, but they do subject their women to ritual baths to cleanse the stain of menstruation. Muslims subject adulterers to public lashings with a whip. Christians used to lick their lips while examining women for signs of witchcraft. I need not go on in this vein: any reader of this book will know of a vivid example, or will simply guess my meaning.

A consistent proof that religion is man-made and anthropomorphic can also be found in the fact that it is usually “man” made, in the sense of masculine, as well. The holy book in the longest continuous use—the Talmud—commands the observant one to thank his maker every day that he was not born a woman. (This raises again the insistent question: who but a slave thanks his master for what his master has decided to do without bothering to consult him?) The Old Testament, as Christians condescendingly call it, has woman cloned from man for his use and comfort. The New Testament has Saint Paul expressing both fear and contempt for the female. Throughout all religious texts, there is a primitive fear that half the human race is simultaneously defiled and unclean, and yet is also a temptation to sin that is impossible to resist. Perhaps this explains the hysterical cult of virginity and of a Virgin, and the dread of the female form and of female reproductive functions? And there may be someone who can explain the sexual and other cruelties of the religious without any reference to the obsession with celibacy, but that someone will not be me. I simply laugh when I read the Koran, with its endless prohibitions on sex and its corrupt promise of infinite debauchery in the life to come: it is like seeing through the “let’s pretend” of a child, but without the indulgence that comes from watching the innocent at play. The homicidal lunatics—rehearsing to be genocidal lunatics—of 9/11 were perhaps tempted by virgins, but it is far more revolting to contemplate that, like so many of their fellow jihadists, they were virgins. Like monks of old, the fanatics are taken early from their families, taught to despise their mothers and sisters, and come to adulthood without ever having had a normal conversation, let alone a normal relationship, with a woman. This is disease by definition. Christianity is too repressed to offer sex in paradise—indeed it has never been able to evolve a tempting heaven at all—but it has been lavish in its promise of

sadistic and everlasting punishment for sexual backsliders, which is nearly as revealing in making the same point in a different way.

A special subgenre of modern literature is the memoir of a man or woman who once underwent a religious education. The modern world is now sufficiently secular for some of these authors to attempt to be funny about what they underwent, and what they were expected to believe. However, such books tend necessarily to be written by those with enough fortitude to have survived the experience. We have no way to quantify the damage done by telling tens of millions of children that masturbation will make them blind, or that impure thoughts will lead to an eternity of torment, or that members of other faiths including members of their own families will burn, or that venereal disease will result from kisses. Nor can we hope to quantify the damage done by holy instructors who rammed home these lies and accompanied them with floggings and rapes and public humiliations. Some of those who “rest in unvisited tombs” may have contributed to the good of the world, but those who preached hatred and fear and guilt and who ruined innumerable childhoods should have been thankful that the hell they preached was only one among their wicked falsifications, and that they were not sent to rot there.

Violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism and tribalism and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children: organized religion ought to have a great deal on its conscience. There is one more charge to be added to the bill of indictment. With a necessary part of its collective mind, religion looks forward to the destruction of the world. By this I do not mean it “looks forward” in the purely eschatological sense of anticipating the end. I mean, rather, that it openly or covertly wishes that end to occur. Perhaps half aware that its unsupported arguments are not entirely persuasive, and perhaps uneasy about its own greedy accumulation of temporal power and wealth, religion has never ceased to proclaim the Apocalypse and the day of judgment. This has been a constant trope, ever since the first witch doctors and shamans learned to predict eclipses and to use their half-baked celestial knowledge to terrify the ignorant. It stretches from the epistles of Saint Paul, who clearly thought and hoped that time was running out for humanity, through the deranged fantasies of the book of Revelation, which were at least memorably written by the alleged Saint John the Divine on the Greek island of Patmos, to the best-selling pulp-fiction Left Behind series, which, ostensibly “authored” by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, was apparently generated by the old expedient of letting two orangutans loose on a word processor:

The blood continued to rise. Millions of birds flocked into the area and feasted on the remains . . . and the winepress was trampled outside the city, and blood came out of the winepress, up to the horse’s bridles, for one thousand six hundred furlongs.

This is sheer manic relish, larded with half-quotations. More reflectively, but hardly less regrettably, it can be found in Julia Ward Howe’s “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” which dwells on the same winepress, and in Robert Oppenheimer’s murmur as he watched the first nuclear detonation at Alamogordo, New Mexico, and heard him-

self quoting the Hindu epic the Bhagavad Gita: “I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.” One of the very many connections between religious belief and the sinister, spoiled, selfish childhood of our species is the repressed desire to see everything smashed up and ruined and brought to naught. This tantrum-need is coupled with two other sorts of “guilty joy,” or, as the Germans say, *schadenfreude*. First, one’s own death is canceled—or perhaps repaid or compensated—by the obliteration of all others. Second, it can always be egotistically hoped that one will be personally spared, gathered contentedly to the bosom of the mass exterminator, and from a safe place observe the sufferings of those less fortunate. Tertullian, one of the many church fathers who found it difficult to give a persuasive account of paradise, was perhaps clever in going for the lowest possible common denominator and promising that one of the most intense pleasures of the afterlife would be endless contemplation of the tortures of the damned. He spoke more truly than he knew in evoking the man-made character of faith.

As in all cases, the findings of science are far more awe-inspiring than the rantings of the godly. The history of the cosmos begins, if we use the word “time” to mean anything at all, about twelve billion years ago. (If we use the word “time” wrongly, we shall end up with the infantile computation of the celebrated Archbishop James Ussher of Armagh, who calculated that the earth—“the earth” alone, mind you, not the cosmos—had its birthday on Saturday, October 22, in 4004 BC, at six in the afternoon. This dating was endorsed by William Jennings Bryan, a former American secretary of state and two-time Democratic presidential nominee, in courtroom testimony in the third decade of the twentieth century.) The true age of the sun and its orbiting planets—one of them destined to harbor life and all the others doomed to lifelessness—is perhaps four and a half billion years and subject to revision. This particular microscopic solar system most probably has at least that long again to run its fiery course: the life expectancy of our sun is a solid five billion more years. However, mark your calendar. At around that point, it will emulate millions of other suns and explosively mutate into a swollen “red giant,” causing the earth’s oceans to boil and extinguishing all possibility of life in any form. No description by any prophet or visionary has even begun to picture the awful intensity and irrevocability of that moment. One has at least some pitiful self-centered reason not to fear undergoing it: on current projections the biosphere will very probably have been destroyed by different and slower sorts of warming and heating in the meantime. As a species on earth, according to many sanguine experts, we do not have many more eons ahead of us.

With what contempt and suspicion, then, must one regard those who are not willing to wait, and who beguile themselves and terrify others—especially the children, as usual—with horrific visions of apocalypse, to be followed by stern judgment from the one who supposedly placed us in this inescapable dilemma to begin with. We may laugh now at the foam-flecked hell-and-damnation preachers who loved to shrivel young souls with pornographic depictions of eternal torture, but this phenomenon has reappeared in a more troubling form with the holy alliance between the believers and what they

can borrow or steal from the world of science. Here is Professor Pervez Hoodbhoy, a distinguished professor of nuclear and high-energy physics at the University of Islamabad in Pakistan, writing about the frightening mentality which prevails in his country—one of the world's first states to define its very nationality by religion:

In a public debate on the eve of the Pakistani nuclear tests, the former chief of the Pakistani army General Mirza Aslam Beg said: "We can make a first strike and a second and even a third." The prospect of nuclear war left him unmoved. "You can die crossing the street," he said, "or you could die in a nuclear war. You've got to die someday, anyway." . . . India and Pakistan are largely traditional societies, where the fundamental belief structure demands disempowerment and surrender to larger forces. A fatalistic Hindu belief that the stars above determine our destiny, or the equivalent Muslim belief in kismet certainly account for part of the problem.

I shall not disagree with the very brave Professor Hoodbhoy, who helped alert us to the fact that there were several secret bin Laden supporters among the bureaucrats of the Pakistani nuclear program, and who also exposed the wild fanatics within that system who hoped to harness the power of the mythical djinns, or desert devils, for military purposes. In his world, the enemies are mainly Muslims and Hindus. But within the "Judeo-Christian" world also, there are those who like to fantasize about a final conflict and embellish the vision with mushroom-shaped clouds. It is a tragic and potentially lethal irony that those who most despise science and the method of free inquiry should have been able to pilfer from it and annex its sophisticated products to their sick dreams.

The death wish, or something not unlike it, may be secretly present in all of us. At the turn of the year 1999 into 2000, many educated people talked and published infinite nonsense about a series of possible calamities and dramas. This was no better than primitive numerology: in fact it was slightly worse in that 2000 was only a number on Christian calendars and even the stoutest defenders of the Bible **story** now admit that if Jesus was ever born it wasn't until at least AD 4. The occasion was nothing more than an odometer for idiots, who sought the cheap thrill of impending doom. But religion makes such impulses legitimate, and claims the right to officiate at the end of life, just as it hopes to monopolize children at life's beginning. There can be no doubt that the cult of death and the insistence upon portents of the end proceed from a surreptitious desire to see it happen, and to put an end to the anxiety and doubt that always threaten the hold of faith. When the earthquake hits, or the tsunami inundates, or the twin towers ignite, you can see and hear the secret satisfaction of the faithful. Gleefully they strike up: "You see, this is what happens when you don't listen to us!" With an unctuous smile they offer a redemption that is not theirs to bestow and, when questioned, put on the menacing scowl that says, "Oh, so you reject our offer of paradise? Well, in that case we have quite another fate in store for you." Such love! Such care!

The element of the wish for obliteration can be seen without disguise in the millennial sects of our own day, who betray their selfishness as well as their nihilism by

announcing how many will be “saved” from the ultimate catastrophe. Here the extreme Protestants are almost as much at fault as the most hysterical Muslims. In 1844, one of the greatest American religious “revivals” occurred, led by a semiliterate lunatic named William Miller. Mr. Miller managed to crowd the mountaintops of America with credulous fools who (having sold their belongings cheap) became persuaded that the world would end on October 22 that year. They removed themselves to high ground—what difference did they expect that to make?—or to the roofs of their hovels. When the ultimate failed to arrive, Miller’s choice of terms was highly suggestive. It was, he announced, “The Great Disappointment.” In our own time, Mr. Hal Lindsey, author of the best-selling *The Late Great Planet Earth*, has betrayed the same thirst for extinction. Indulged by senior American conservatives and respectfully interviewed on TV, Mr. Lindsey once dated the start of “The Tribulation”—a seven-year period of strife and terror—for 1988. This would have produced Armageddon itself (the closure of “The Tribulation”) in 1995. Mr. Lindsey may be a charlatan, but it is a certainty that he and his followers suffer from a persistent feeling of anticlimax.

Antibodies to fatalism and suicide and masochism do exist, however, and are just as innate in our species. There is a celebrated story from Puritan Massachusetts in the late eighteenth century. During a session of the state legislature, the sky suddenly became leaden and overcast at midday. Its threatening aspect—a darkness at noon—convinced many legislators that the event so much on their clouded minds was imminent. They asked to suspend business and go home to die. The speaker of the assembly, Abraham Davenport, managed to keep his nerve and dignity. “Gentlemen,” he said, “either the Day of Judgment is here or it is not. If it is not, there is no occasion for alarm and lamentation. If it is, however, I wish to be found doing my duty. I move, therefore, that candles be brought.” In his own limited and superstitious day, this was the best that Mr. Davenport could do. Nonetheless, I second his motion.

Chapter Five. The Metaphysical Claims of Religion Are False

I am a man of one book.

—Thomas Aquinas

We sacrifice the intellect to God.

—Ignatius Loyola

Reason is the Devil's harlot, who can do nought but slander and harm whatever God says and does.

—Martin Luther

Looking up at the stars, I know quite well
That for all they care, I can go to hell.

—W. H. Auden, "The More Loving One"

I wrote earlier that we would never again have to confront the impressive faith of an Aquinas or a Maimonides (as contrasted with the blind faith of millennial or absolutist sects, of which we have an apparently unlimited and infinitely renewable supply). This is for a simple reason. Faith of that sort—the sort that can stand up at least for a while in a confrontation with reason—is now plainly impossible. The early fathers of faith (they made very sure that there would be no **mothers**) were living in a time of abysmal ignorance and fear. Maimonides did not include, in his *Guide to the Perplexed*, those whom he described as not worth the effort: the "Turkish" and black and nomadic peoples whose "nature is like the nature of mute animals." Aquinas half believed in astrology, and was convinced that the fully formed nucleus (not that he would have known the word as we do) of a human being was contained inside each individual sperm. One can only mourn over the dismal and stupid lectures on sexual continence that we might have been spared if this nonsense had been exposed earlier than it was. Augustine was a self-centered fantasist and an earth-centered ignoramus: he was guiltily convinced that god cared about his trivial theft from some unimportant pear trees, and quite persuaded—by an analogous solipsism—that the sun revolved around the earth. He also fabricated the mad and cruel idea that the souls of unbaptized children were sent to "limbo." Who can guess the load of misery that this diseased "theory" has placed on millions of Catholic parents down the years, until its shamefaced and only partial revision by the church in our own time? Luther was terrified of demons and believed that the mentally afflicted were the devil's work. Muhammad is claimed by his own followers to have thought, as did Jesus, that the desert was pullulating with djinns, or evil spirits.

One must state it plainly. Religion comes from the period of human prehistory where nobody—not even the mighty Democritus who concluded that all matter was made from atoms—had the smallest idea what was going on. It comes from the bawling and fearful infancy of our species, and is a babyish attempt to meet our inescapable demand for knowledge (as well as for comfort, reassurance, and other infantile needs). Today the least educated of my children knows much more about the natural order than any of the founders of religion, and one would like to think—though the connection is not a fully demonstrable one—that this is why they seem so uninterested in sending fellow humans to hell.

All attempts to reconcile faith with science and reason are consigned to failure and ridicule for precisely these reasons. I read, for example, of some ecumenical conference of Christians who desire to show their broad-mindedness and invite some physicists along. But I am compelled to remember what I know—which is that there would be no such churches in the first place if humanity had not been afraid of the weather, the dark, the plague, the eclipse, and all manner of other things now easily explicable. And also if humanity had not been compelled, on pain of extremely agonizing consequences, to pay the exorbitant tithes and taxes that raised the imposing edifices of religion.

It is true that scientists have sometimes been religious, or at any rate superstitious. Sir Isaac Newton, for example, was a spiritualist and alchemist of a particularly laughable kind. Fred Hoyle, an ex-agnostic who became infatuated with the idea of “design,” was the Cambridge astronomer who coined the term “big bang.” (He came up with that silly phrase, incidentally, as an attempt to discredit what is now the accepted theory of the origins of the universe. This was one of those lampoons that, so to speak, backfired, since like “Tory” and “impressionist” and “suffragette” it became adopted by those at whom it was directed.) Steven Hawking is not a believer, and when invited to Rome to meet the late Pope John Paul II asked to be shown the records of the trial of Galileo. But he does speak without embarrassment of the chance of physics “knowing the mind of God,” and this now seems quite harmless as a metaphor, as for example when the Beach Boys sing, or I say, “God only knows . . .”

Before Charles Darwin revolutionized our entire concept of our origins, and Albert Einstein did the same for the beginnings of our cosmos, many scientists and philosophers and mathematicians took what might be called the default position and professed one or another version of “deism,” which held that the order and predictability of the universe seemed indeed to imply a designer, if not necessarily a designer who took any active part in human affairs. This compromise was a logical and rational one for its time, and was especially influential among the Philadelphia and Virginia intellectuals, such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, who managed to seize a moment of crisis and use it to enshrine Enlightenment values in the founding documents of the United States of America.

Yet as Saint Paul so unforgettably said, when one is a child one speaks and thinks as a child. But when one becomes a man, one puts away childish things. It is not quite possible to locate the exact moment when men of learning stopped spinning the

coin as between a creator and a long complex process, or ceased trying to split the “deistic” difference, but humanity began to grow up a little in the closing decades of the eighteenth century and the opening decades of the nineteenth. (Charles Darwin was born in 1809, on the very same day as Abraham Lincoln, and there is no doubt as to which of them has proved to be the greater “emancipator.”) If one had to emulate the foolishness of Archbishop Ussher and try to come up with the exact date on which the conceptual coin came down solidly on one side, it would be the moment when Pierre-Simon de Laplace was invited to meet Napoleon Bonaparte.

Laplace (1749–1827) was the brilliant French scientist who took the work of Newton a stage further and showed by means of mathematical calculus how the operations of the solar system were those of bodies revolving systematically in a vacuum. When he later turned his attention to the stars and the nebulae, he postulated the idea of gravitational collapse and implosion, or what we now breezily term the “black hole.” In a five-volume book entitled *Celestial Mechanics* he laid all this out, and like many men of his time was also intrigued by the orrery, a working model of the solar system as seen, for the first time, from the outside. These are now commonplace but were then revolutionary, and the emperor asked to meet Laplace in order to be given either a set of the books or (accounts differ) a version of the orrery. I personally suspect that the gravedigger of the French Revolution wanted the toy rather than the volumes: he was a man in a hurry and had managed to get the church to baptize his dictatorship with a crown. At any event, and in his childish and demanding and imperious fashion, he wanted to know why the figure of god did not appear in Laplace’s mind-expanding calculations. And there came the cool, lofty, and considered response. “Je n’ai pas besoin de cette hypothèse.” Laplace was to become a marquis and could perhaps more modestly have said, “It works well enough without that idea, Your Majesty.” But he simply stated that he didn’t need it.

And neither do we. The decay and collapse and discredit of god-worship does not begin at any dramatic moment, such as Nietzsche’s histrionic and self-contradictory pronouncement that god was dead. Nietzsche could no more have known this, or made the assumption that god had ever been alive, than a priest or witch doctor could ever declare that he knew god’s will. Rather, the end of god-worship discloses itself at the moment, which is somewhat more gradually revealed, when it becomes optional, or only one among many possible beliefs. For the greater part of human existence, it must always be stressed, this “option” did not really exist. We know, from the many fragments of their burned and mutilated texts and confessions, that there were always human beings who were unconvinced. But from the time of Socrates, who was condemned to death for spreading unwholesome skepticism, it was considered ill-advised to emulate his example. And for billions of people down the ages, the question simply did not come up. The votaries of Baron Samedi in Haiti enjoyed the same monopoly, founded upon the same brute coercion, as did those of John Calvin in Geneva or Massachusetts: I select these examples because they are yesterday in terms of human time. Many religions now come before us with ingratiating smirks and outspread

hands, like an unctuous merchant in a bazaar. They offer consolation and solidarity and uplift, competing as they do in a marketplace. But we have a right to remember how barbarically they behaved when they were strong and were making an offer that people could not refuse. And if we chance to forget what that must have been like, we have only to look to those states and societies where the clergy still has the power to dictate its own terms. The pathetic vestiges of this can still be seen, in modern societies, in the efforts made by religion to secure control over education, or to exempt itself from tax, or to pass laws forbidding people to insult its omnipotent and omniscient deity, or even his prophet.

In our new semi-secular and mediocre condition, even the religious will speak with embarrassment of the time when theologians would dispute over futile propositions with fanatical intensity: measuring the length of angels' wings, for example, or debating how many such mythical creatures could dance on the head of a pin. Of course it is horrifying to remember how many people were tortured and killed, and how many sources of knowledge fed to the flames, in bogus arguments over the Trinity, or the Muslim hadith, or the arrival of a false Messiah. But it is better for us not to fall into relativism, or what E. P. Thompson called "the enormous condescension of posterity." The scholastic obsessives of the Middle Ages were doing the best they could on the basis of hopelessly limited information, ever-present fear of death and judgment, very low life expectancy, and an audience of illiterates. Living in often genuine fear of the consequences of error, they exerted their minds to the fullest extent then possible, and evolved quite impressive systems of logic and the dialectic. It is not the fault of men like Peter Abelard if they had to work with bits and pieces of Aristotle, many of whose writings were lost when the Christian emperor Justinian closed the schools of philosophy, but were preserved in Arabic translation in Baghdad and then retransmitted to a benighted Christian Europe by way of Jewish and Muslim Andalusia. When they got hold of the material and reluctantly conceded that there had been intelligent discussion of ethics and morality before the supposed advent of Jesus, they tried their hardest to square the circle. We have nothing much to learn from what they thought, but a great deal to learn from how they thought.

One medieval philosopher and theologian who continues to speak eloquently across the ages is William Ockham. Sometimes known as William of Ockham (or Occam) and presumably named after his native village in Surrey, England, that still boasts the name, he was born on a date unknown to us and died—probably in great agony and fear, and probably of the horrific Black Death—in Munich in 1349. He was a Franciscan (in other words, an acolyte of the aforementioned mammal who was said to have preached to birds) and thus conditioned to a radical approach to poverty, which brought him into collision with the papacy in Avignon in 1324. The quarrel between the papacy and the emperor over secular and ecclesiastical division of powers is irrelevant to us now (since both sides ultimately "lost"), but Ockham was forced to seek even the emperor's protection in face of the worldliness of the pope. Faced with charges of heresy and the threat of excommunication, he had the fortitude to respond that the pope himself was

the heretic. Nonetheless, and because he always argued within the enclosed frame of Christian reference, he is admitted even by the most orthodox Christian authorities to have been an original and courageous thinker.

He was interested, for example, in the stars. He knew far less about the nebulae than we do, or than Laplace did. In fact, he knew nothing about them at all. But he employed them for an interesting speculation. Assuming that god can make us feel the presence of a nonexistent entity, and further assuming that he need not go to this trouble if the same effect can be produced in us by the actual presence of that entity, god could still if he wished cause us to believe in the existence of stars without their being actually present. "Every effect which God causes through the mediation of a secondary cause he can produce immediately by himself." However, this does not mean that we must believe in anything absurd, since "God cannot cause in us knowledge such that by it a thing is seen evidently to be present though it is absent, for that involves a contradiction." Before you begin to drum your fingers at the huge tautology that impends here, as it does in so much theology and theodicy, consider what Father Copleston, the eminent Jesuit, has to say in commentary:

If God had annihilated the stars, he could still cause in us the act of seeing what had once been, so far as the act is considered subjectively, just as he could give us a vision of what will be in the future. Either act would be an immediate apprehension, in the first case of what has been and in the second case of what will be.

This is actually very impressive, and not just for its time. It has taken us several hundred years since Ockham to come to the realization that when we gaze up at the stars, we very often are seeing light from distant bodies that have long since ceased to exist. It doesn't particularly matter that the right to look through telescopes and speculate about the result was obstructed by the church: this is not Ockham's fault and there is no general law that obliges the church to be that stupid. And, moving from the unimaginable interstellar past which sends light across distances that overwhelm our brains, we have come to the realization that we also know something about the future of our system, including the rate of its expansion and the notion of its eventual terminus. However, and crucially, we can now do this while dropping (or even, if you insist, retaining) the idea of a god. But in either case, the theory works without that assumption. You can believe in a divine mover if you choose, but it makes no difference at all, and belief among astronomers and physicists has become private and fairly rare.

It was actually Ockham who prepared our minds for this unwelcome (to him) conclusion. He devised a "principle of economy," popularly known as "Ockham's razor," which relied for its effect on disposing of unnecessary assumptions and accepting the first sufficient explanation or cause. "Do not multiply entities beyond necessity." This principle extends itself. "Everything which is explained through positing something different from the act of understanding," he wrote, "can be explained without positing such a distinct thing." He was not afraid to follow his own logic wherever it might take him, and anticipated the coming of true science when he agreed that it was possible to know the nature of "created" things without any reference to their "creator." Indeed,

Ockham stated that it cannot be strictly proved that god, if defined as a being who possesses the qualities of supremacy, perfection, uniqueness, and infinity, *exists* at all. However, if one intends to identify a first cause of the existence of the world, one may choose to call that “god” even if one does not know the precise nature of the first cause. And even the first cause has its difficulties, since a cause will itself need another cause. “It is difficult or impossible,” he wrote, “to prove against the philosophers that there cannot be an infinite regress in causes of the same kind, of which one can exist without the other.” Thus the postulate of a designer or creator only raises the unanswerable question of who designed the designer or created the creator. Religion and theology and theodicy (this is now me talking and not Ockham) have consistently failed to overcome this objection. Ockham himself simply had to fall back on the hopeless position that the existence of god can only be “demonstrated” by faith.

Credibile est, quia ineptum est, as the “church father” Tertullian put it, either disarmingly or annoyingly according to your taste, “its very improbability makes it believable.” It is impossible to quarrel seriously with such a view. If one must have faith in order to believe something, or believe in something, then the likelihood of that something having any truth or value is considerably diminished. The harder work of inquiry, proof, and demonstration is infinitely more rewarding, and has confronted us with findings far more “miraculous” and “transcendent” than any theology.

Actually, the “leap of faith”—to give it the memorable name that Soren Kierkegaard bestowed upon it—is an imposture. As he himself pointed out, it is not a “leap” that can be made once and for all. It is a leap that has to go on and on being performed, in spite of mounting evidence to the contrary. This effort is actually too much for the human mind, and leads to delusions and manias. Religion understands perfectly well that the “leap” is subject to sharply diminishing returns, which is why it often doesn’t in fact rely on “faith” at all but instead corrupts faith and insults reason by offering evidence and pointing to confected “proofs.” This evidence and these proofs include arguments from design, revelations, punishments, and miracles. Now that religion’s monopoly has been broken, it is within the compass of any human being to see these evidences and proofs as the feeble-minded inventions that they are.

Chapter Six. Arguments from Design

All my moral and intellectual being is penetrated by an invincible conviction that whatever falls under the dominion of our senses must be in nature and, however exceptional, cannot differ in its essence from all the other effects of the visible and tangible world of which we are a self-conscious part. The world of the living contains enough marvels and mysteries as it is—marvels and mysteries acting upon our emotions and intelligence in ways so inexplicable that it would almost justify the conception of life as an enchanted state. No, I am too firm in my consciousness of the marvelous to be ever fascinated by the mere supernatural which (take it any way you like) is but a manufactured article, the fabrication of minds insensitive to the intimate delicacies of our relation to the dead and to the living, in their countless multitudes; a desecration of our tenderest memories; an outrage on our dignity.

—Joseph Conrad, Author's Note to *The Shadow-Line*

There is a central paradox at the core of religion. The three great monotheisms teach people to think abjectly of themselves, as miserable and guilty sinners prostrate before an angry and jealous god who, according to discrepant accounts, fashioned them either out of dust and clay or a clot of blood. The positions for prayer are usually emulations of the supplicant serf before an ill-tempered monarch. The message is one of continual submission, gratitude, and fear. Life itself is a poor thing: an interval in which to prepare for the hereafter or the coming—or second coming—of the Messiah.

On the other hand, and as if by way of compensation, religion teaches people to be extremely self-centered and conceited. It assures them that god cares for them individually, and it claims that the cosmos was created with them specifically in mind. This explains the supercilious expression on the faces of those who practice religion ostentatiously: pray excuse my modesty and humility but I happen to be busy on an errand for god.

Since human beings are naturally solipsistic, all forms of superstition enjoy what might be called a natural advantage. In the United States, we exert ourselves to improve high-rise buildings and high-speed jet aircraft (the two achievements that the murderers of September 11, 2001, put into hostile apposition) and then pathetically refuse to give them floors, or row numbers, that carry the unimportant number thirteen. I know that Pythagoras refuted astrology by the simple means of pointing out that identical twins do not have the same future, I further know that the zodiac was drawn up long before several of the planets in our solar system had been detected,

and of course I understand that I could not be “shown” my immediate or long-term future without this disclosure altering the outcome. Thousands of people consult their “stars” in the newspapers every day, and then have unpredicted heart attacks or traffic accidents. (An astrologer of a London tabloid was once fired by means of a letter from his editor which began, “As you will no doubt have foreseen.”) In his *Minima Moralia*, Theodor Adorno identified the interest in stargazing as the consummation of feeble-mindedness. However, happening to glance at the projected situation for Aries one morning, as I once did to be told that “a member of the opposite sex is interested and will show it,” I found it hard to suppress a tiny surge of idiotic excitement, which in my memory has outlived the later disappointment. Then again, every time I leave my apartment there is no sign of a bus, whereas everytime I return to it a bus is just drawing up. In bad moods I mutter “just my luck” to myself, even though a part of my small two- or three-pound brain reminds me that the mass-transit schedule of Washington, D.C., is drawn up and implemented without any reference to my movements. (I mention this in case it might later become important: if I am hit by a bus on the day this book is published there will certainly be people who will say it was no accident.)

So why should I not be tempted to overrule W. H. Auden and believe that the firmament is in some mysterious way ordered for my benefit? Or, coming down by a few orders of magnitude, that fluctuations in my personal fortunes are of absorbing interest to a supreme being? One of the many faults in my design is my propensity to believe or to wish this, and though like many people I have enough education to see through the fallacy, I have to admit that it is innate. In Sri Lanka once, I was traveling in a car with a group of Tamils, on a relief expedition to a Tamil area of the coastline that had been hard- hit by a cyclone. My companions were all members of the Sai Baba sect, which is very strong in South India and Sri Lanka. Sai Baba himself has claimed to raise the dead, and makes a special on-camera performance of producing holy ash from his bare palms. (Why ash? I used to wonder.)

Anyway, the trip began with my friends breaking some coconuts on a rock to ensure a safe journey. This evidently did not work, because halfway across the island our driver plowed straight into a man who staggered out in front of us as we were racing, too fast, through a village. The man was horribly injured and—this being a Sinhala village—the crowd that instantly gathered was not well disposed to these Tamil intruders. It was a very sticky situation, but I was able to defuse it somewhat by being an Englishman wearing an off-white Graham Greene type suit, and by having press credentials that had been issued by the London Metropolitan Police. This impressed the local cop enough to have us temporarily released, and my companions, who had been very scared indeed, were more than grateful for my presence and for my ability to talk fast. In fact, they telephoned their cult headquarters to announce that Sai Baba himself had been with us, in the temporary shape of my own person. From then on, I was treated literally with reverence, and not allowed to carry anything or fetch my own food. It did occur to me meanwhile to check on the man we had run over: he had died of his injuries in hospital. (I wonder what his horoscope had foreshadowed for that day.) Thus in miniature I saw

how one mere human mammal—myself—can suddenly begin to attract shy glances of awe and wonder, and how another human mammal—our luckless victim—could be somehow irrelevant to Sai Baba’s benign design.

“There but for the grace of God,” said John Bradford in the sixteenth century, on seeing wretches led to execution, “go I.” What this apparently compassionate observation really means—not that it really “means” anything—is, “There by the grace of God goes someone else.” As I was writing this chapter, a heart-stopping accident took place in a coal mine in West Virginia. Thirteen miners survived the explosion but were trapped underground, compelling the nation’s attention for a whole fraught news cycle until with huge relief it was announced that they had been located safe and sound. These glad tidings turned out to be premature, which was an impossible additional anguish for the families who had already begun celebrating and giving thanks before discovering that all but one of their menfolk had suffocated under the rock. It was also an embarrassment to the newspapers and news bulletins that had rushed out too soon with the false consolation. And can you guess what the headline on those newspapers and bulletins had been? Of course you can. “Miracle!”—with or without the exclamation point—was the invariable choice, surviving mockingly in print and in the memory to intensify the grief of the relatives. There doesn’t seem to be a word to describe the absence of divine intervention in this case. But the human wish to credit good things as miraculous and to charge bad things to another account is apparently universal. In England the monarch is the hereditary head of the church as well as the hereditary head of the state: William Cobbett once pointed out that the English themselves colluded in this servile absurdity by referring to “The Royal Mint” but “The National Debt.” Religion plays the same trick, and in the same way, and before our very eyes. On my first visit to the Sacré Coeur in Montmartre, a church that was built to celebrate the deliverance of Paris from the Prussians and the Commune of 1870–71, I saw a panel in bronze which showed the exact pattern in which a shower of Allied bombs, dropped in 1944, had missed the church and burst in the adjoining neighborhood . . .

Given this overwhelming tendency to stupidity and selfishness in myself and among our species, it is somewhat surprising to find the light of reason penetrating at all. The brilliant Schiller was wrong in his *Joan of Arc* when he said that “against stupidity the gods themselves contend in vain.” It is actually by means of the gods that we make our stupidity and gullibility into something ineffable.

The “design” arguments, which are products of this same solipsism, take two forms: the macro and micro. They were most famously summarized by William Paley (1743–1805) in his book *Natural Theology*. Here we encounter the homespun example of the primitive human who stumbles across a ticking watch. He may not know what it is for, but he can discern that it is not a rock or a vegetable, and that it has been manufactured, and even manufactured for some purpose. Paley wanted to extend this analogy both to nature and to man. His complacency and wrongheadedness are well

caught by J. G. Farrell in his portrayal of a Paley-trained Victorian divine in *The Siege of Krishnapur*:

“How d’you explain the subtle mechanism of the eye, infinitely more complex than the mere telescope that miserable humanity has been able to invent? How d’you explain the eel’s eye, which might be damaged by burrowing into mud and stones and is therefore protected by a transparent horny covering? How is it that the iris of a fish’s eye does not contract? Ah, poor, misguided youth, it is because the fish’s eye has been designed by Him who is above all, to suit the dim light in which the fish makes his watery dwelling! How d’you explain the Indian Hog?” he cried. “How d’you account for its two bent teeth, more than a yard long, growing upwards from its upper jaw?”

“To defend itself?”

“No, young man, it has two tusks for that purpose issuing from the lower jaw like those of a common boar. . . . No, the answer is that the animal sleeps standing up and, in order to support its head, it hooks its upper tusks on the branches of the trees . . . for the Designer of the World has given thought even to the hog’s slumbers!”

(Paley did not bother to explain how the Designer of the World came to command so many of his human creatures to treat the said hog as if it were a demon or a leper.) In fact, surveying the natural order, John Stuart Mill was far nearer the mark when he wrote:

If a tenth part of the pains taken in finding signs of an all- powerful benevolent god had been employed in collecting evidence to blacken the creator’s character, what scope would not have been found in the animal kingdom? It is divided into devourers and devoured, most creatures being lavishly fitted with instruments to torment their prey.

Now that the courts have protected Americans (at least for the moment) from the inculcation of compulsory “creationist” stupidity in the classroom, we can echo that other great Victorian Lord Macaulay and say that “every schoolchild knows” that Paley had put his creaking, leaking cart in front of his wheezing and broken-down old horse. Fish do not have fins because they need them for the water, any more than birds are equipped with wings so that they can meet the dictionary definition of an “avian.” (Apart from anything else, there are too many flightless species of birds.) It is exactly the other way about: a process of adaptation and selection. Let no one doubt the power of the original illusion. Whittaker Chambers in his seismic book *Witness* recounts the first moment when he abandoned historical materialism, mentally deserted the Communist cause, and embarked on the career which would undo Stalinism in America. It was on the morning when he glimpsed the ear of his baby daughter. The pretty whorls and folds of this external organ persuaded him in a flash of revelation that no coincidence could have created it. A fleshly flap of such utter beauty must be divine. Well, I too have marveled at the sweet little ears of my female offspring, but never without noticing that (a) they always need a bit of a clean-out, (b) that they look mass-produced even when set against the inferior ears of other people’s daughters, (c) that as people get older their ears look more and more absurd from behind, and (d)

that much lower animals, such as cats and bats, have much more fascinating and lovely and more potent ears. To echo Laplace, in fact, I would say that there are many, many persuasive arguments against Stalin-worship, but that the anti-Stalin case is fully valid without Mr. Chambers's ear-flap-based assumption.

Ears are predictable and uniform, and their flaps are every bit as adorable when the child has been born stone deaf. The same is not true, in the same sense, of the universe. Here there are anomalies and mysteries and imperfections—to use the most minimal terms—that do not even show adaptation, let alone selection. Thomas Jefferson in old age was fond of the analogy of the timepiece in his own case, and would write to friends who inquired after his health that the odd spring was breaking and the occasional wheel wearing out. This of course raises the uncomfortable (for believers) idea of the built-in fault that no repairman can fix. Should this be counted as part of the “design” as well? (As usual, those who take the credit for the one will fall silent and start shuffling when it comes to the other side of the ledger.) But when it comes to the whirling, howling wilderness of outer space, with its red giants and white dwarfs and black holes, its titanic explosions and extinctions, we can only dimly and shiveringly conclude that the “design” hasn't been imposed quite yet, and wonder if this is how dinosaurs “felt” when the meteors came smashing through the earth's atmosphere and put an end to the pointless bellowing rivalry across primeval swamps.

Even what was first known about the comparatively consoling symmetry of the solar system, with its nonetheless evident tendency to instability and entropy, upset Sir Isaac Newton enough to make him propose that god intervened every now and then to put the orbits back on an even keel. This exposed him to teasing from Leibniz, who asked why god couldn't have got it working right the first time around. It is, indeed, only because of the frightening emptiness elsewhere that we are bound to be impressed by the apparently unique and beautiful conditions that have allowed intelligent life to occur on earth. But then, vain as we are, we would be impressed, wouldn't we? This vanity allows us to overlook the implacable fact that, of the other bodies in our own solar system alone, the rest are all either far too cold to support anything recognizable as life, or far too hot. The same, as it happens, is true of our own blue and rounded planetary home, where heat contends with cold to make large tracts of it into useless wasteland, and where we have come to learn that we live, and have always lived, on a climatic knife edge. Meanwhile, the sun is getting ready to explode and devour its dependent planets like some jealous chief or tribal deity. Some design!

So much for the macro-dimension. What of the micro? Ever since they were forced to take part in this argument, which they were with great reluctance, the religious have tried to echo Hamlet's admonition to Horatio that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of by mere humans. Our side willingly concedes this point: we are prepared for discoveries in the future that will stagger our faculties even more than the vast advances in knowledge that have come to us since Darwin and Einstein. However, these discoveries will come to us in the same way—by means of patient and scrupulous and (this time, we hope) unfettered inquiry. In the meanwhile, we also

have to improve our minds by the laborious exercise of refuting the latest foolishness contrived by the faithful. When the bones of prehistoric animals began to be discovered and scrutinized in the nineteenth century, there were those who said that the fossils had been placed in the rock by god, in order to test our faith. This cannot be disproved. Nor can my own pet theory that, from the patterns of behavior that are observable, we may infer a design that makes planet earth, all unknown to us, a prison colony and lunatic asylum that is employed as a dumping ground by far-off and superior civilizations. However, I was educated by Sir Karl Popper to believe that a theory that is unfalsifiable is to that extent a weak one.

Now we are being told that astonishing features, such as the human eye, cannot be the result of, so to speak, “blind” chance. As it happens, the “design” faction have chosen an example that could not be bettered. We now know a great deal about the eye, and about which creatures have it and which do not, and why. I must here for a moment give way to my friend Dr. Michael Shermer:

Evolution also posits that modern organisms should show a variety of structures from simple to complex, reflecting an evolutionary history rather than an instantaneous creation. The human eye, for example, is the result of a long and complex pathway that goes back hundreds of millions of years. Initially a simple eyespot with a handful of light-sensitive cells that provided information to the organism about an important source of the light; it developed into a recessed eyespot, where a small surface indentation filled with light-sensitive cells provided additional data on the direction of light; then into a deep recession eyespot, where additional cells at greater depth provide more accurate information about the environment; then into a pinhole camera eye that is able to focus an image on the back of a deeply-recessed layer of light-sensitive cells; then into a pinhole lens eye that is able to focus the image; then into a complex eye found in such modern mammals as humans.

All the intermediate stages of this process have been located in other creatures, and sophisticated computer models have been developed which have tested the theory and shown that it actually “works.” There is a further proof of the evolution of the eye, as Shermer points out. This is the ineptitude of its “design”:

The anatomy of the human eye, in fact, shows anything but “intelligence” in its design. It is built upside down and backwards, requiring photons of light to travel through the cornea, lens, aqueous fluid, blood vessels, ganglion cells, amacrine cells, horizontal cells, and bipolar cells before they reach the light-sensitive rods and cones that transduce the light signal into neural impulses—which are then sent to the visual cortex at the back of the brain for processing into meaningful patterns. For optimal vision, why would an intelligent designer have built an eye upside down and backwards?

It is because we evolved from sightless bacteria, now found to share our DNA, that we are so myopic. These are the same ill-designed optics, complete with deliberately “designed” retinal blind spot, through which earlier humans claimed to have “seen” miracles “with their own eyes.” The problem in those cases was located elsewhere in

the cortex, but we must never forget Charles Darwin's injunction that even the most highly evolved of us will continue to carry "the indelible stamp of their lowly origin."

I would add to Shermer that, though it is true we are the highest and smartest animals, ospreys have eyes we have calculated to be sixty times more powerful and sophisticated than our own and that blindness, often caused by microscopic parasites that are themselves miracles of ingenuity, is one of the oldest and most tragic disorders known to man. And why award the superior eye (or in the case of the cat or bat, also the ear) to the inferior species? The osprey can swoop accurately on a fast-moving fish that it has detected underwater from many, many feet above, all the while maneuvering with its extraordinary wings. Ospreys have almost been exterminated by man, while you yourself can be born as blind as a worm and still become a pious and observant Methodist, for example.

"To suppose that the eye," wrote Charles Darwin,

with all its inimitable contrivances for adjusting the focus to different distances, for admitting different amounts of light, and for the correction of spherical and chromatic aberration, could have been formed by natural selection, seems, I freely confess, absurd in the highest possible degree.

He wrote this in an essay titled "Organs of Extreme Perfection and Complication." Since that time, the evolution of the eye has become almost a separate department of study. And why should it not? It is immensely fascinating and rewarding to know that at least forty different sets of eyes, and possibly sixty different sets, have evolved in quite distinct and parallel, if comparable, ways. Dr. Daniel Nilsson, perhaps the foremost authority on the subject, has found among other things that three entirely different groups of fish have independently developed four eyes. One of these sea creatures, *Bathylchnops exilis*, possesses a pair of eyes that look outward, and another pair of eyes (set in the wall of the main two) that direct their gaze straight downward. This would be an encumbrance to most animals, but it has some obvious advantages for an aquatic one. And it is highly important to notice that the embryological development of the second set of eyes is not a copy or a miniature of the first set, but an entirely different evolution. As Dr. Nilsson puts it in a letter to Richard Dawkins: "This species has reinvented the lens despite the fact that it already had one. It serves as a good support for the view that lenses are not difficult to evolve." A creative deity, of course, would have been more likely to double the complement of optics in the first place, which would have left us with nothing to wonder about, or to discover. Or as Darwin went on to say, in the same essay:

When it was first said that the sun stood still and the world turned round, the common sense of mankind declared the doctrine false; but the old saying of *vox populi, vox Dei*, as every philosopher knows, cannot be trusted in science. Reason tells me, that if numerous gradations from an imperfect and simple eye to one perfect and complex, each grade being useful to its possessor, can be shown to exist, as is certainly the case; if further, the eye ever slightly varies, and the variations be inherited, as is likewise certainly the case; and if such variations should ever be useful to any animal under

changing conditions of life, then the difficulty of believing that a perfect and complex eye could be formed by natural selection, though insuperable by our imagination, cannot be considered real.

We may smile slightly when we notice that Darwin wrote of the sun standing still, and when we notice that he spoke of the eye's "perfection," but only because we are fortunate enough to know more than he did. What is worth noting, and retaining, is his proper use of the sense of what is wondrous.

The real "miracle" is that we, who share genes with the original bacteria that began life on the planet, have evolved as much as we have. Other creatures did not develop eyes at all, or developed extremely weak ones. There is an intriguing paradox here: evolution does not have eyes but it can create them. The brilliant Professor Francis Crick, one of the discoverers of the double helix, had a colleague named Leslie Orgel who encapsulated this paradox more elegantly than I can. "Evolution," he said, "is smarter than you are." But this compliment to the "intelligence" of natural selection is not by any means a concession to the stupid notion of "intelligent design." Some of the results are extremely impressive, as we are bound to think in our own case. ("What a piece of work is a man!" as Hamlet exclaims, before going on to contradict himself somewhat by describing the result as a "quintessence of dust"; both statements having the merit of being true.) But the process by which the results are attained is slow and infinitely laborious, and has given us a DNA "string" which is crowded with useless junk and which has much in common with much lower creatures. The stamp of the lowly origin is to be found in our appendix, in the now needless coat of hair that we still grow (and then shed) after five months in the womb, in our easily worn-out knees, our vestigial tails, and the many caprices of our urinogenital arrangements. Why do people keep saying, "God is in the details"? He isn't in ours, unless his yokel creationist fans wish to take credit for his clumsiness, failure, and incompetence.

Those who have yielded, not without a struggle, to the overwhelming evidence of evolution are now trying to award themselves a medal for their own acceptance of defeat. The very magnificence and variety of the process, they now wish to say, argues for a directing and originating mind. In this way they choose to make a fumbling fool of their pretended god, and make him out to be a tinkerer, an approximator, and a blunderer, who took eons of time to fashion a few serviceable figures and heaped up a junkyard of scrap and failure meanwhile. Have they no more respect for the deity than that? They unwisely say that evolutionary biology is "only a theory," which betrays their ignorance of the meaning of the word "theory" as well as of the meaning of the word "design." A "theory" is something evolved—if you forgive the expression—to fit the known facts. It is a successful theory if it survives the introduction of hitherto unknown facts. And it becomes an accepted theory if it can make accurate predictions about things or events that have not yet been discovered, or have not yet occurred. This can take time, and is also subject to a version of Ockham's procedure: Pharaonic astronomers in Egypt could predict eclipses even though they believed the earth to be flat: it just took them a great deal more unnecessary work. Einstein's prediction

of the precise angular deflection of starlight due to gravity—verified during an eclipse off the west coast of Africa that occurred in 1919—was more elegant, and was held to vindicate his “theory” of relativity.

There are many disputes between evolutionists as to how the complex process occurred, and indeed as to how it began. Francis Crick even allowed himself to flirt with the theory that life was “inseminated” on earth by bacteria spread from a passing comet. However, all these disputes, when or if they are resolved, will be resolved by using the scientific and experimental methods that have proven themselves so far. By contrast, creationism, or “intelligent design” (its only cleverness being found in this underhanded rebranding of itself) is not even a theory. In all its well-financed propaganda, it has never even attempted to show how one single piece of the natural world is explained better by “design” than by evolutionary competition. Instead, it dissolves into puerile tautology. One of the creationists’ “questionnaires” purports to be a “yes/no” interrogation of the following:

Do you know of any building that didn’t have a builder?

Do you know of any painting that didn’t have a painter?

Do you know of any car that didn’t have a maker?

If you answered YES for any of the above, give details.

We know the answer in all cases: these were painstaking inventions (also by trial and error) of mankind, and were the work of many hands, and are still “evolving.” This is what makes piffle out of the ignorant creationist sneer, which compares evolution to a whirlwind blowing through a junkyard of parts and coming up with a jumbo jet. For a start, there are no “parts” lying around waiting to be assembled. For another thing, the process of acquisition and discarding of “parts” (most especially wings) is as far from a whirlwind as could conceivably be. The time involved is more like that of a glacier than a storm. For still another thing, jumbo jets are not riddled with nonworking or superfluous “parts” lamely inherited from less successful aircraft. Why have we agreed so easily to call this exploded old nontheory by its cunningly chosen new disguise of “intelligent design”? There is nothing at all “intelligent” about it. It is the same old mumbo-jumbo (or in this instance, jumbo-mumbo).

Airplanes are, in their human-designed way, “evolving.” And so, in a quite different way, are we. In early April 2006 a long study at the University of Oregon was published in the journal *Science*. Based on the reconstruction of ancient genes from extinct animals, the researchers were able to show how the nontheory of “irreducible complexity” is a joke. Protein molecules, they found, slowly employed trial and error, reusing and modifying existing parts, to act in a key-and-lock manner and switch discrepant hormones “on” and “off.” This genetic march was blindly inaugurated 450 million years ago, before life left the ocean and before the evolution of bones. We now know things about our nature that the founders of religion could not even begin to guess at, and that would have stilled their overconfident tongues if they had known of them. Yet again, once one has disposed of superfluous assumptions, speculation about who designed us to be designers becomes as fruitless and irrelevant as the question of

who designed that designer. Aristotle, whose reasoning about the unmoved mover and the uncaused cause is the beginning of this argument, concluded that the logic would necessitate forty-seven or fifty-five gods. Surely even a monotheist would be grateful for Ockham's razor at this point? From a plurality of prime movers, the monotheists have bargained it down to a single one. They are getting ever nearer to the true, round figure.

We must also confront the fact that evolution is, as well as smarter than we are, infinitely more callous and cruel, and also capricious. Investigation of the fossil record and the record of molecular biology shows us that approximately 98 percent of all the species that have ever appeared on earth have lapsed into extinction. There have been extraordinary periods of life explosion, invariably succeeded by great "dyings out." In order for life to take hold at all on a cooling planet, it had first to occur with fantastic profusion. We have a micro-glimpse of this in our little human lives: men produce infinitely more seminal fluid than is required to build a human family, and are tortured—not completely unpleasantly—by the urgent need to spread it all over the place or otherwise get rid of it. (Religions have needlessly added to the torture by condemning various simple means of relieving this presumably "designed" pressure.) The exuberant teeming variety of insect life, or sparrow or salmon or codfish life, is a titanic waste that ensures, in some but not all cases, that there will be enough survivors.

The higher animals are hardly exempt from this process. The religions that we know of have—for self-evident reasons—also emerged from peoples that we know of. And in Asia and the Mediterranean and the Middle East, the human record is traceable back for an impressively long and continuous period of time. However, even the religious myths mention periods of darkness and plague and calamity, when it seemed that nature had turned against human existence. The folk memory, now confirmed by archaeology, makes it seem highly probable that huge inundations occurred when the Black Sea and the Mediterranean were formed, and that these forbidding and terrifying events continued to impress the storytellers of Mesopotamia and elsewhere. Every year, Christian fundamentalists renew their expeditions to Mount Ararat in modern Turkey, convinced that one day they will discover the wreckage of Noah's Ark. This effort is futile and would prove nothing even if it were successful, but if these people should chance to read the reconstructions of what really did happen, they would find themselves confronted with something far more memorable than the banal account of Noah's flood: a sudden massive wall of dark water roaring across a thickly populated plain. This "Atlantis" event would have adhered to the prehistoric memory, all right, as indeed it does to ours.

However, we do not even possess a buried or ill-chronicled memory of what happened to most of our fellow humans in the Americas. When the Catholic Christian conquistadores arrived in the Western Hemisphere in the early sixteenth century AD, they behaved with such indiscriminate cruelty and destructiveness that one of their number, Bartolemeo de las Casas, actually proposed a formal renunciation and apology, and an

acknowledgment that the whole enterprise had been a mistake. Well-intentioned as he may have been, he based his bad conscience on the idea that the “Indians” had been living in an undisturbed Eden, and that Spain and Portugal had missed their chance of rediscovering the innocence that had pre-dated the fall of Adam and Eve. This was wishful piffle and also extreme condescension: the Olmec and other tribes had gods of their own—mainly propitiated by human sacrifice—and had also developed elaborate systems of writing, astronomy, agriculture, and trade. They wrote down their history and had discovered a 365-day calendar that was more accurate than its European counterparts. One particular society—the Mayan—had also managed to come up with that beautiful concept of zero to which I alluded earlier, and without which mathematical computation is very difficult. It may be significant that the papacy of the Middle Ages always resisted the idea of “zero” as alien and heretical, perhaps because of its supposedly Arab (in fact Sanskrit) origin but perhaps also because it contained a frightening possibility.

Something is known of the civilizations of the American isthmus, but until very recently we were unaware of the vast cities and networks that once stretched across the Amazon basin and some regions of the Andes. Serious work has only just begun on the study of these impressive societies, which grew and flourished when Moses and Abraham and Jesus and Muhammad and Buddha were being revered, but which took no part at all in those arguments and were not included in the calculations of the monotheistic faithful. It is a *certainty* that these people, too, had their creation myths and their revelations of the divine will, for all the good it did them. But they suffered and triumphed and expired without ever being in “our” prayers. And they died out in the bitter awareness that there would be nobody to remember them as they had been, or even as if they had been. All their “promised lands” and prophecies and cherished legends and ceremonies might as well have occurred on another planet. This is how arbitrary human history actually is.

There seems to be little or no doubt that these peoples were annihilated not just by human conquerors but by microorganisms of which neither they nor their invaders had any knowledge. These germs may have been indigenous or they may have been imported, but the effect was the same. Here again one sees the gigantic man-made fallacy that informs our “Genesis” story. How can it be proven in one paragraph that this book was written by ignorant men and not by any god? Because man is given “dominion” over all beasts, fowl and fish. But no dinosaurs or plesiosaurs or pterodactyls are specified, because the authors did not know of their existence, let alone of their supposedly special and immediate creation. Nor are any marsupials mentioned, because Australia—the next candidate after Mesoamerica for a new “Eden”—was not on any known map. Most important, in Genesis man is not awarded dominion over germs and bacteria because the existence of these necessary yet dangerous fellow creatures was not known or understood. And if it had been known or understood, it would at once have become apparent that these forms of life had “dominion” over us, and would continue to enjoy it uncontested until the priests had been elbowed aside and medical

research at last given an opportunity. Even today, the balance between *Homo sapiens* and Louis Pasteur's "invisible army" of microbes is by no means decided, but DNA has at least enabled us to sequence the genome of our lethal rivals, like the avian flu virus, and to elucidate what we have in common.

Probably the most daunting task that we face, as partly rational animals with adrenal glands that are too big and prefrontal lobes that are too small, is the contemplation of our own relative weight in the scheme of things. Our place in the cosmos is so unimaginably small that we cannot, with our miserly endowment of cranial matter, contemplate it for long at all. No less difficult is the realization that we may also be quite random as presences on earth. We may have learned about our modest position on the scale, about how to prolong our lives, cure ourselves of disease, learn to respect and profit from other tribes and other animals, and employ rockets and satellites for ease of communication; but then, the awareness that our death is coming and will be succeeded by the death of the species and the heat death of the universe is scant comfort. Still, at least we are not in the position of those humans who died without ever having the chance to tell their story, or who are dying today at this moment after a few bare, squirming minutes of painful and fearful existence.

In 1909, a discovery of immense importance was made in the Canadian Rockies, on the border of British Columbia. It is known as the Burgess shale, and though it is a natural formation and has no magical properties, it is almost like a time machine or a key that enables us to visit the past. The very remote past: this limestone quarry came into existence about 570 million years ago and records what palaeontologists familiarly call "the Cambrian explosion." Just as there have been great "dyings" and extinctions during evolutionary time, so there have been energetic moments when life was suddenly profuse and various again. (An intelligent "designer" might have managed without these chaotic episodes of boom and bust.)

Most of the surviving modern animals have their origins in this grand Cambrian burgeoning, but until 1909 we were unable to view them in anything like their original habitat. Until then, also, we had to rely upon the evidence mainly of bones and shells, whereas the Burgess shale contains much fossilized "soft anatomy," including the contents of digestive systems. It is a sort of Rosetta Stone for the decoding of life forms.

Our own solipsism, often expressed in diagram or cartoon form, usually represents evolution as a kind of ladder or progression, with a fish gasping on the shore in the first frame, hunched and prognathous figures in the succeeding ones, and then, by slow degrees, an erect man in a suit waving his umbrella and shouting "Taxi!" Even those who have observed the "sawtooth" pattern of fluctuation between emergence and destruction, further emergence and still further destruction, and who have already charted the eventual end of the universe, are half agreed that there is a stubborn tendency toward an upward progression. This is no great surprise: inefficient creatures will either die out or be destroyed by more successful ones. But progress does not negate the idea of randomness, and when he came to examine the Burgess shale, the

great paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould arrived at the most disquieting and unsettling conclusion of all. He examined the fossils and their development with minute care and realized that if this tree could be replanted or this soup set boiling again, it would very probably not reproduce the same results that we now “know.”

It may be worth mentioning that this conclusion was no more welcome to Gould than it is to you or to me: in his youth he had imbibed a version of Marxism and the concept of “progress” was real to him. But he was too scrupulous a scholar to deny the evidence that was so plainly displayed, and while some evolutionary biologists are willing to say that the millimetrical and pitiless process had a “direction” toward our form of intelligent life, Gould subtracted himself from their company. If the numberless evolutions from the Cambrian period could be recorded and “rewound,” as it were, and the tape then played again, he established there was no certainty that it would come out the same way. Several branches of the tree (a better analogy would be with small twigs on an extremely dense bush) end up going nowhere, but given another “start” they might have blossomed and flourished, just as some that did blossom and flourish might equally well have withered and died. We all appreciate that our nature and existence is based upon our being vertebrate. The earliest known vertebrate (or “chordate”) located in the Burgess shale is a two-inch and rather elegant creature named, after an adjoining mountain and also for its sinuous beauty, *Pikaia gracilens*. It was originally and wrongly classified as a worm (one must never forget how recent most of our knowledge really is), but in its segments, muscularity, and dorsal-rod flexibility it is a necessary ancestor that yet demands no worship. Millions of other life forms perished before the Cambrian period was over, but this little prototype survived. To quote Gould:

Wind the tape of time back to Burgess times, and let it play again. If *Pikaia* does not survive in the replay, we are wiped out of future history—all of us, from shark to robin to orangutan. And I don’t think that any handicapper, given Burgess evidence as known today, would have granted very favorable odds for the persistence of *Pikaia*.

And so, if you wish to ask the question of the ages—why do humans exist?—a major part of the answer, touching those aspects of the issue that science can treat at all, must be: because *Pikaia* survived the Burgess decimation. This response does not cite a single law of nature; it embodies no statement about predictable evolutionary pathways, no calculation of probabilities based on general rules of anatomy or ecology. The survival of *Pikaia* was a contingency of “just history.” I do not think that any “higher” answer can be given, and I cannot imagine that any resolution could be more fascinating. We are the offspring of history, and must establish our own paths in this most diverse and interesting of conceivable universes—one indifferent to our suffering, and therefore offering us maximum freedom to thrive, or to fail, in our own chosen way.

A way “chosen,” one must add, within very strictly defined limits. Here is the cool, authentic voice of a dedicated scientist and humanist. In a dim way, we knew all this already. Chaos theory has familiarized us with the idea of the unscripted butterfly wing-

flap that, stirring a tiny zephyr, eventuates in a raging typhoon. Saul Bellow's Augie March shrewdly observed the fritillary corollary that "if you hold down one thing, you hold down the adjoining." And Gould's mind-stunning but mind-opening book on the Burgess shale is entitled *Wonderful Life*, a double entendre with an echo of the best-loved of all American sentimental movies. At the climax of this engaging but abysmal film, Jimmy Stewart wishes he had never been born but is then shown by an angel what the world would be like if his wish had been granted. A middlebrow audience is thus given a vicarious glimpse of a version of Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty: any attempt to measure something will have the effect of minutely altering that which is being measured. We have only recently established that a cow is closer in family to a whale than to a horse: other wonders certainly await us. If our presence here, in our present form, is indeed random and contingent, then at least we can consciously look forward to the further evolution of our poor brains, and to stupendous advances in medicine and life extension, derived from work on our elementary stem cells and umbilical-cord blood cells.

In the steps of Darwin, Peter and Rosemary Grant of Princeton University have gone for the past thirty years to the Galápagos Islands, lived in the arduous conditions of the tiny island of Daphne Major, and actually watched and measured the way that finches evolved and adapted as their surroundings changed. They have shown conclusively that the size and shape of the finches' beaks would adjust themselves to drought and scarcity, by adaptation to the size and character of different seeds and beetles. Not only could the three-million-year-old original flock change in one way, but if the beetle and seed situation changed back, their beaks could follow suit. The Grants took care, and they saw it happening, and could publish their findings and proofs for all to see. We are in their debt. Their lives were harsh, but who could wish that they had mortified themselves in a holy cave or on top of a sacred pillar instead?

In 2005, a team of researchers at the University of Chicago conducted serious work on two genes, known as *microcephalin* and *ASPM*, that when disabled are the cause of microcephaly. Babies born with this condition have a shrunken cerebral cortex, quite probably an occasional reminder of the period when the human brain was very much smaller than it is now. The evolution of humans has been generally thought to have completed itself about fifty to sixty thousand years ago (an instant in evolutionary time), yet those two genes have apparently been evolving faster in the past thirty-seven thousand years, raising the possibility that the human brain is a work in progress. In March 2006, further work at the same university revealed that there are some seven hundred regions of the human genome where genes have been reshaped by natural selection within the past five thousand to fifteen thousand years. These genes include some of those responsible for our "senses of taste and smell, digestion, bone structure, skin color and brain function." (One of the great emancipating results of genomics is to show that all "racial" and color differences are recent, superficial, and misleading.) It is a moral certainty that between the time I finish writing this book and the time that it is published, several more fascinating and enlightening discoveries will be made in this

burgeoning field. It may be too soon to say that all the progress is positive or “upward,” but human development is still under way. It shows in the manner in which we acquire immunities, and also in the way in which we do not. Genome studies have identified early groups of northern Europeans who learned to domesticate cattle and acquired a distinct gene for “lactose tolerance,” while some people of more recent African descent (we all originate from Africa) are prone to a form of sickle-cell anemia which, while upsetting in and of itself, results from an earlier mutation that gave protection against malaria. And all this will be further clarified if we are modest and patient enough to understand the building blocks of nature and the lowly stamp of our origins. No divine plan, let alone angelic intervention, is required. Everything works without that assumption.

Thus, though I dislike to differ with such a great man, Voltaire was simply ludicrous when he said that if god did not exist it would be necessary to invent him. The human invention of god is the problem to begin with. Our evolution has been examined “backward,” with life temporarily outpacing extinction, and knowledge now at last capable of reviewing and explaining ignorance. Religion, it is true, still possesses the huge if cumbersome and unwieldy advantage of having come “first.” But as Sam Harris states rather pointedly in *The End of Faith*, if we lost all our hard-won knowledge and all our archives, and all our ethics and morals, in some Márquez-like fit of collective amnesia, and had to reconstruct everything essential from scratch, it is difficult to imagine at what point we would need to remind or reassure ourselves that Jesus was born of a virgin.

Thoughtful believers can take some consolation, too. Skepticism and discovery have freed them from the burden of having to defend their god as a footling, clumsy, straws-in-the-hair mad scientist, and also from having to answer distressing questions about who inflicted the syphilis bacillus or mandated the leper or the idiot child, or devised the torments of Job. The faithful stand acquitted on that charge: we no longer have any need of a god to explain what is no longer mysterious. What believers will do, now that their faith is optional and private and irrelevant, is a matter for them. We should not care, as long as they make no further attempt to inculcate religion by any form of coercion.

Chapter Seven. Revelation: The Nightmare of the “Old” Testament

Another way in which religion betrays itself, and attempts to escape mere reliance on faith and instead offer “evidence” in the sense normally understood, is by the argument from revelation. On certain very special occasions, it is asserted, the divine will was made known by direct contact with randomly selected human beings, who were supposedly vouchsafed unalterable laws that could then be passed on to those less favored.

There are some very obvious objections to be made to this. In the first place, several such disclosures have been claimed to occur, at different times and places, to hugely discrepant prophets or mediums. In some cases—most notably the Christian—one revelation is apparently not sufficient, and needs to be reinforced by successive apparitions, with the promise of a further but ultimate one to come. In other cases, the opposite difficulty occurs and the divine instruction is delivered, only once, and for the final time, to an obscure personage whose lightest word then becomes law. Since all of these revelations, many of them hopelessly inconsistent, cannot by definition be simultaneously true, it must follow that some of them are false and illusory. It could also follow that only one of them is authentic, but in the first place this seems dubious and in the second place it appears to necessitate religious war in order to decide whose revelation is the true one. A further difficulty is the apparent tendency of the Almighty to reveal himself only to unlettered and quasi-historical individuals, in regions of Middle Eastern wasteland that were long the home of idol worship and superstition, and in many instances already littered with existing prophecies.

The syncretic tendencies of monotheism, and the common ancestry of the tales, mean in effect that a rebuttal to one is a rebuttal to all. Horribly and hatefully though they may have fought with one another, the three monotheisms claim to share a descent at least from the Pentateuch of Moses, and the Koran certifies Jews as “people of the book,” Jesus as a prophet, and a virgin as his mother. (Interestingly, the Koran does not blame the Jews for the murder of Jesus, as one book of the Christian New Testament does, but this is only because it makes the bizarre claim that someone else was crucified by the Jews in his place.)

The foundation story of all three faiths concerns the purported meeting between Moses and god, at the summit of Mount Sinai. This in turn led to the handing down of the Decalogue, or Ten Commandments. The tale is told in the second book of Moses, known as the book of Exodus, in chapters 20–40. Most attention has been concentrated

on chapter 20 itself, where the actual commandments are given. It should not perhaps be necessary to summarize and expose these, but the effort is actually worthwhile.

In the first place (I am using the King James or “Authorized” Version: one among many rival texts laboriously translated by mortals either from Hebrew or Greek or Latin), the so-called commandments do not appear as a neat list of ten orders and prohibitions. The first three are all variations of the same one, in which god insists on his own primacy and exclusivity, forbids the making of graven images, and prohibits the taking of his own name in vain. This prolonged throat-clearing is accompanied by some very serious admonitions, including a dire warning that the sins of the fathers will be visited on their children “even unto the third and fourth generation.” This negates the moral and reasonable idea that children are innocent of their parents’ offenses. The fourth commandment insists on the observance of a holy Sabbath day, and forbids all believers—and their slaves and domestic servants—to perform any work in the course of it. It is added that, as was said in the book of Genesis, god made all the world in six days and rested on the seventh (leaving room for speculation as to what he did on the eighth day). The dictation then becomes more terse. “Honor thy father and thy mother” (this not for its own sake but in order “that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee”). Only then come the four famous “shalt nots,” which flatly prohibit killing, adultery, theft, and false witness. Finally, there is a ban on covetousness, forbidding the desire for “thy neighbor’s” house, manservant, maidservant, ox, ass, wife, and other chattel.

It would be harder to find an easier proof that religion is man-made. There is, first, the monarchical growling about respect and fear, accompanied by a stern reminder of omnipotence and limitless revenge, of the sort with which a Babylonian or Assyrian emperor might have ordered the scribes to begin a proclamation. There is then a sharp reminder to keep working and only to relax when the absolutist says so. A few crisp legalistic reminders follow, one of which is commonly misrendered because the original Hebrew actually says “thou shalt do no murder.” But however little one thinks of the Jewish tradition, it is surely insulting to the people of Moses to imagine that they had come this far under the impression that murder, adultery, theft, and perjury were permissible. (The same unanswerable point can be made in a different way about the alleged later preachings of Jesus: when he tells the story of the Good Samaritan on that Jericho road he is speaking of a man who acted in a humane and generous manner without, obviously, ever having heard of Christianity, let alone having followed the pitiless teachings of the god of Moses, who never mentions human solidarity and compassion at all.) No society ever discovered has failed to protect itself from self-evident crimes like those supposedly stipulated at Mount Sinai. Finally, instead of the condemnation of evil actions, there is an oddly phrased condemnation of impure thoughts. One can tell that this, too, is a man-made product of the alleged time and place, because it throws in “wife” along with the other property, animal, human, and material, of the neighbor. More important, it demands the impossible: a recurrent problem with all religious edicts. One may be forcibly restrained from wicked actions, or barred from

committing them, but to forbid people from contemplating them is too much. In particular, it is absurd to hope to banish envy of other people's possessions or fortunes, if only because the spirit of envy can lead to emulation and ambition and have positive consequences. (It seems improbable that the American fundamentalists, who desire to see the Ten Commandments emblazoned in every schoolroom and courtroom—almost like a graven image—are so hostile to the spirit of capitalism.) If god really wanted people to be free of such thoughts, he should have taken more care to invent a different species.

Then there is the very salient question of what the commandments do not say. Is it too modern to notice that there is nothing about the protection of children from cruelty, nothing about rape, nothing about slavery, and nothing about genocide? Or is it too exactly "in context" to notice that some of these very offenses are about to be positively recommended? In verse 2 of the immediately following chapter, god tells Moses to instruct his followers about the conditions under which they may buy or sell slaves (or bore their ears through with an awl) and the rules governing the sale of their daughters. This is succeeded by the insanely detailed regulations governing oxes that gore and are gored, and including the notorious verses forfeiting "life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth." Micromanagement of agricultural disputes breaks off for a moment, with the abrupt verse (22:18) "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." This was, for centuries, the warrant for the Christian torture and burning of women who did not conform. Occasionally, there are injunctions that are moral, and also (at least in the lovely King James version) memorably phrased: "Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil" was taught to Bertrand Russell by his grandmother, and stayed with the old heretic all his life. However, one mutters a few sympathetic words for the forgotten and obliterated Hivites, Canaanites, and Hittites, also presumably part of the Lord's original creation, who are to be pitilessly driven out of their homes to make room for the ungrateful and mutinous children of Israel. (This supposed "covenant" is the basis for a nineteenth-century irredentist claim to Palestine that has brought us endless trouble up to the present day.)

Seventy-four of the elders, including Moses and Aaron, then meet god face-to-face. Several whole chapters are given over to the minutest stipulations about the lavish, immense ceremonies of sacrifice and propitiation that the Lord expects of his newly adopted people, but this all ends in tears and with collapsing scenery to boot: Moses returns from his private session on the mountaintop to discover that the effect of a close encounter with god has worn off, at least on Aaron, and that the children of Israel have made an idol out of their jewelry and trinkets. At this, he impetuously smashes the two Sinai tablets (which appear therefore to have been man-made and not god-made, and which have to be redone hastily in a later chapter) and orders the following:

"Put every man his sword by his side, and go in and out from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbor."

And the children of Levi did according to the word of Moses, and there fell of the people that day about three thousand men.

A small number when compared to the Egyptian infants already massacred by god in order for things to have proceeded even this far, but it helps to make the case for “antitheism.” By this I mean the view that we ought to be glad that none of the religious myths has any truth to it, or in it. The Bible may, indeed does, contain a warrant for trafficking in humans, for ethnic cleansing, for slavery, for bride-price, and for indiscriminate massacre, but we are not bound by any of it because it was put together by crude, uncultured human mammals.

It goes without saying that none of the gruesome, disordered events described in Exodus ever took place. Israeli archaeologists are among the most professional in the world, even if their scholarship has sometimes been inflected with a wish to prove that the “covenant” between god and Moses was founded on some basis in fact. No group of diggers and scholars has ever worked harder, or with greater expectations, than the Israelis who sifted through the sands of Sinai and Canaan. The first of them was Yigael Yadin, whose best-known work was at Masada and who had been charged by David Ben-Gurion to dig up “the title deeds” that would prove the Israeli claim to the Holy Land. Until a short time ago, his evidently politicized efforts were allowed a certain superficial plausibility. But then much more extensive and objective work was undertaken, presented most notably by Israel Finkelstein of the Institute of Archaeology at Tel Aviv University, and his colleague Neil Asher Silberman. These men regard the “Hebrew Bible” or Pentateuch as beautiful, and the story of modern Israel as an all-around inspiration, in which respects I humbly beg to differ. But their conclusion is final, and the more creditable for asserting evidence over self-interest. There was no flight from Egypt, no wandering in the desert (let alone for the incredible four-decade length of time mentioned in the Pentateuch), and no dramatic conquest of the Promised Land. It was all, quite simply and very ineptly, made up at a much later date. No Egyptian chronicle mentions this episode either, even in passing, and Egypt was the garrison power in Canaan as well as the Nilotic region at all the material times. Indeed, much of the evidence is the other way. Archaeology does confirm the presence of Jewish communities in Palestine from many thousands of years ago (this can be deduced, among other things, from the absence of those pig bones in the middens and dumps), and it does show that there was a “kingdom of David,” albeit rather a modest one, but all the Mosaic myths can be safely and easily discarded. I do not think that this is what the sour critics of faith sometimes call a “reductionist” conclusion. There is great pleasure to be had from the study of archaeology and of ancient texts, and great instruction, too. And it brings us ever nearer to some approximation of the truth. On the other hand, it also raises the question of antitheism once more. In *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud made the obvious point that religion suffered from one incurable deficiency: it was too clearly derived from our own desire to escape from or survive death. This critique of wish-thinking is strong and unanswerable, but it does not really deal with the horrors and cruelties and madneses of the Old Testament. Who—except for

an ancient priest seeking to exert power by the tried and tested means of fear—could possibly wish that this hopelessly knotted skein of fable had any veracity?

Well, the Christians had been at work on the same wishful attempt at “proof” long before the Zionist school of archaeology began to turn a spade. Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians had transmitted god’s promise to the Jewish patriarchs, as an unbroken patrimony, to the Christians, and in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries you could hardly throw away an orange peel in the Holy Land without hitting a fervent excavator. General Gordon, the biblical fanatic later slain by the Mahdi at Khartoum, was very much to the fore. William Albright of Baltimore was continually vindicating Joshua’s Jericho and other myths. Some of these diggers, even given the primitive techniques of the period, counted as serious rather than merely opportunistic. Morally serious too: the French Dominican archaeologist Roland de Vaux gave a hostage to fortune by saying that “if the historical faith of Israel is not founded in history, such faith is erroneous, and therefore, our faith is also.” A most admirable and honest point, on which the good father may now be taken up.

Longbefore modern inquiry and painstaking translation and excavation had helped enlighten us, it was well within the compass of a thinking person to see that the “revelation” at Sinai and the rest of the Pentateuch was an ill-carpentered fiction, bolted into place well after the nonevents that it fails to describe convincingly or even plausibly. Intelligent schoolchildren have been upsetting their teachers with innocent but unanswerable questions ever since Bible study was instituted. The self-taught Thomas Paine has never been refuted since he wrote, while suffering dire persecution by French Jacobin antireligionists, to show

that these books are spurious, and that Moses is not the author of them; and still further, that they were not written in the time of Moses, nor till several hundred years afterwards, that they are an attempted history of the life of Moses, and of the times in which he is said to have lived; and also of the times prior thereto, written by some very ignorant and stupid pretenders several hundred years after the death of Moses; as men now write histories of things that happened, or are supposed to have happened, several hundred or several thousand years ago.

In the first place, the middle books of the Pentateuch (Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers: Genesis contains no mention of him) allude to Moses in the third person, as in “the Lord spake unto Moses.” It could be argued that he preferred to speak of himself in the third person, though this habit is now well associated with megalomania, but this would make laughable such citations as Numbers 12:3 in which we read, “Now the man Moses was very meek above all the men which were on the face of the earth.” Apart from the absurdity of claiming to be meek in such a way as to assert superiority in meekness over all others, we have to remember the commandingly authoritarian and bloody manner in which Moses is described, in almost every other chapter, as having behaved. This gives us a choice between raving solipsism and the falsest of modesty.

Butperhaps Moses himself can be acquitted on these two charges, since he could hardly have managed the contortions of Deuteronomy. In this book there is an intro-

duction of the subject, then an introduction of Moses himself in mid-speech, then a resumption of narrative by whoever is writing, then another speech by Moses, and then an account of the death, burial, and magnificence of Moses himself. (It is to be presumed that the account of the funeral was not written by the man whose funeral it was, though this problem does not seem to have occurred to whoever fabricated the text.)

That whoever wrote the account was writing many years later seems to be very clear. We are told that Moses reached the age of one hundred and twenty, with “his eye not dim nor his natural force abated,” and then ascended to the summit of Mount Nebo, from which he could obtain a clear view of the Promised Land that he would never actually enter. The prophet, his natural force all of a sudden abated, then dies in the land of Moab and is interred there. No one knows, says the author, “unto this day,” where the sepulcher of Moses lies. It is added that there has since been no comparable prophet in Israel. These two expressions have no effect if they do not denote the passage of a considerable time. We are then expected to believe that an unspecified “he” buried Moses: if this was Moses himself in the third person again it seems distinctly implausible, and if it was god himself who performed the obsequy then there is no way for the writer of Deuteronomy to have known it. Indeed, the author seems very unclear about all the details of this event, as would be expected if he was reconstructing something half-forgotten. The same is self-evidently true of innumerable other anachronisms, where Moses speaks of events (the consumption of “manna” in Canaan; the capture of the huge bedstead of the “giant” Og, king of Bashan) which may never have occurred at all but which are not even claimed to have occurred until well after his death.

The strong likelihood that this interpretation is the correct one is reinforced in Deuteronomy’s fourth and fifth chapters, where Moses *assembles* his followers and gives them the Lord’s commandments all over again. (This is not such a surprise: the Pentateuch contains two discrepant accounts of the Creation, two different genealogies of the seed of Adam, and two narratives of the Flood.) One of these chapters has Moses talking about himself at great length, and the other has him in reported speech. In the fourth chapter, the commandment against making graven images is extended to prohibiting any “similitude” or “likeness” of any figure, whether human or animal, for any purpose. In the fifth chapter, the contents of the two stone tablets are repeated roughly in the same form as in Exodus, but with a significant difference. This time, the writer forgets that the Sabbath day is holy because god made heaven and earth in six days and then rested on the seventh. Suddenly, the Sabbath is holy because god brought his people out of the land of Egypt.

Then we must come to those things which probably did not happen and which we must be glad did not. In Deuteronomy Moses gives orders for parents to have their children stoned to death for indiscipline (which seems to violate at least one of the commandments) and continually makes demented pronouncements (“He that is wounded in the stones, or hath his privy member cut off, shall not enter into the

congregation of the Lord"). In Numbers, he addresses his generals after a battle and rages at them for sparing so many civilians:

Now, therefore, kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that hath known a man by lying with him. But all the women-children that hath not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves.

This is certainly not the worst of the genocidal incitements that occur in the Old Testament (Israeli rabbis solemnly debate to this very day whether the demand to exterminate the Amalekites is a coded commandment to do away with the Palestinians), but it has an element of lasciviousness that makes it slightly too obvious what the rewards of a freebooting soldier could be. At least so I think and so thought Thomas Paine, who wrote not to disprove religion but rather to vindicate deism against what he considered to be foul accretions in the holy books. He said that this was "an order to butcher the boys, to massacre the mothers, and debauch the daughters," which drew him a hurt reply from one of the celebrated divines of the day, the bishop of Llandaff. The stout Welsh bishop indignantly claimed that it was not at all clear from the context that the young females were being preserved for immoral purposes rather than for unpaid labor. Against dumb innocence like this it might be heartless to object, if it were not for the venerable clergyman's sublime indifference to the fate of the boy-children and indeed their mothers.

One could go through the Old Testament book by book, here pausing to notice a lapidary phrase ("Man is born to trouble," as the book of Job says, "as the sparks fly upward") and there a fine verse, but always encountering the same difficulties. People attain impossible ages and yet conceive children. Mediocre individuals engage in single combat or one-on-one argument with god or his emissaries, raising afresh the whole question of divine omnipotence or even divine common sense, and the ground is forever soaked with the blood of the innocent. Moreover, the context is oppressively confined and local. None of these provincials, or their deity, seems to have any idea of a world beyond the desert, the flocks and herds, and the imperatives of nomadic subsistence. This is forgivable on the part of the provincial yokels, obviously, but then what of their supreme guide and wrathful tyrant? Perhaps he was made in their image, even if not graven?

Chapter Eight. The “New” Testament Exceeds the Evil of the “Old” One

The work of rereading the Old Testament is sometimes tiring but always necessary, because as one proceeds there begin to occur some sinister premonitions. Abraham—another ancestor of all monotheism—is ready to make a human sacrifice of his own firstborn. And a rumor comes that “a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son.” Gradually, these two myths begin to converge. It’s needful to bear this in mind when coming to the New Testament, because if you pick up any of the four Gospels and read them at random, it will not be long before you learn that such and such an action or saying, attributed to Jesus, was done so that an ancient prophecy should come true. (Speaking of the arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem, riding astride a donkey, Matthew says in his chapter 21, verse 4, “All of this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet.” The reference is probably to Zechariah 9:9, where it is said that when the Messiah comes he will be riding on an ass. The Jews are still awaiting this arrival and the Christians claim it has already taken place!) If it should seem odd that an action should be deliberately performed in order that a foretelling be vindicated, that is because it is odd. And it is necessarily odd because, just like the Old Testament, the “New” one is also a work of crude carpentry, hammered together long after its purported events, and full of improvised attempts to make things come out right. For concision, I shall again defer to a finer writer than myself and quote what H. L. Mencken irrefutably says in his *Treatise on the Gods*:

The simple fact is that the New Testament, as we know it, is a helter-skelter accumulation of more or less discordant documents, some of them probably of respectable origin but others palpably apocryphal, and that most of them, the good along with the bad, show unmistakable signs of having been tampered with.

Both Paine and Mencken, who put themselves for different reasons to an honest effort to read the texts, have been borne out by later biblical scholarship, much of it first embarked upon to show that the texts were still relevant. But this argument takes place over the heads of those to whom the “Good Book” is all that is required. (One recalls the governor of Texas who, asked if the Bible should also be taught in Spanish, replied that “if English was good enough for Jesus, then it’s good enough for me.” Rightly are the simple so called.)

In 2004, a soap-opera film about the death of Jesus was produced by an Australian fascist and ham actor named Mel Gibson. Mr. Gibson adheres to a crackpot and schismatic Catholic sect consisting mainly of himself and of his even more thuggish father, and has stated that it is a pity that his own dear wife is going to hell because she does not accept the correct sacraments. (This foul doom he calmly describes as “a statement from the chair.”) The doctrine of his own sect is explicitly anti-Semitic, and the movie sought tirelessly to lay the blame for the Crucifixion upon the Jews. In spite of this obvious bigotry, which did lead to criticism from some more cautious Christians, *The Passion of the Christ* was opportunistically employed by many “mainstream” churches as a **box-office** recruiting tool. At one of the ecumenical prepublicity events which he sponsored, Mr. Gibson defended his filmic farrago—which is also an exercise in sado-masochistic homoeroticism starring a talentless lead actor who was apparently born in Iceland or Minnesota—as being based on the reports of “eyewitnesses.” At the time, I thought it extraordinary that a multimillion-dollar hit could be openly based on such a patently fraudulent claim, but nobody seemed to turn a hair. Even Jewish authorities were largely silent. But then, some of them wanted to dampen down this old argument, which for centuries had led to Easter pogroms against the “Christ-killing Jews.” (It was not until two decades after the Second World War that the Vatican formally withdrew the charge of “deicide” against the Jewish people as a whole.) And the truth is that the Jews used to claim credit for the Crucifixion. Maimonides described the punishment of the detestable Nazarene heretic as one of the greatest achievements of the Jewish elders, insisted that the name Jesus never be mentioned except when accompanied by a curse, and announced that his punishment was to be boiled in excrement for all eternity. What a good Catholic Maimonides would have made!

However, he fell into the same error as do the Christians, in assuming that the four Gospels were in any sense a historical record. Their multiple authors—none of whom published anything until many decades after the Crucifixion—cannot agree on anything of importance. Matthew and Luke cannot concur on the Virgin Birth or the genealogy of Jesus. They flatly contradict each other on the “Flight into Egypt,” Matthew saying that Joseph was “warned in a dream” to make an immediate escape and Luke saying that all three stayed in Bethlehem until Mary’s “purification according to the laws of Moses,” which would make it forty days, and then went back to Nazareth via Jerusalem. (Incidentally, if the dash to Egypt to conceal a child from Herod’s infanticide campaign has any truth to it, then Hollywood and many, many Christian iconographers have been deceiving us. It would have been very difficult to take a blond, blue-eyed baby to the Nile delta without attracting rather than avoiding attention.)

The Gospel according to Luke states that the miraculous birth occurred in a year when the Emperor Caesar Augustus ordered a census for the purpose of taxation, and that this happened at a time when Herod reigned in Judaea and Quirinius was governor of Syria. That is the closest to a triangulation of historical dating that any biblical writer even attempts. But Herod died four years “BC,” and during his rulership the governor of Syria was not Quirinius. There is no mention of any Augustan census

by any Roman historian, but the Jewish chronicler Josephus mentions one that did occur—without the onerous requirement for people to return to their places of birth, and six years after the birth of Jesus is supposed to have taken place. This is, all of it, quite evidently a garbled and oral-based reconstruction undertaken some considerable time after the “fact.” The scribes cannot even agree on the mythical elements: they disagree wildly about the Sermon on the Mount, the anointing of Jesus, the treachery of Judas, and Peter’s haunting “denial.” Most astonishingly, they cannot converge on a common account of the Crucifixion or the Resurrection. Thus, the one interpretation that we simply have to discard is the one that claims divine warrant for all four of them. The book on which Matthew and Luke may possibly have been based, known speculatively to scholars as “Q,” has been lost forever, which seems distinctly careless on the part of the god who is claimed to have “inspired” it.

Sixty years ago, at Nag Hammadi in Egypt, a trove of neglected “Gospels” was discovered near a very ancient Coptic Christian site. These scrolls were of the same period and provenance as many of the subsequently canonical and “authorized” Gospels, and have long gone under the collective name of “Gnostic.” This was the title given them by a certain Irenaeus, an early church father who placed them under a ban as heretical. They include the “Gospels” or narratives of marginal but significant figures in the accepted “New” Testament, such as “Doubting Thomas” and Mary Magdalene. They now also include the Gospel of Judas, known for centuries to have existed but now brought to light and published by the National Geographic Society in the spring of 2006.

The book is chiefly spiritualist drivel, as one might expect, but it offers a version of “events” that is fractionally more credible than the official account. For one thing, it maintains as do its partner texts that the supposed god of the “Old” Testament is the one to be avoided, a ghastly emanation from sick minds. (This makes it easy to see why it was so firmly banned and denounced: orthodox Christianity is nothing if it is not a vindication and completion of that evil story.) Judas attends the final Passover meal, as usual, but departs from the customary script. When Jesus appears to pity his other disciples for knowing so little about what is at stake, his rogue follower boldly says that he believes he knows what the difficulty is. “I know who you are and where you have come from,” he tells the leader. “You are from the immortal realm of Barbelo.” This “Barbelo” is not a god but a heavenly destination, a motherland beyond the stars. Jesus comes from this celestial realm, but is not the son of any Mosaic god. Instead, he is an avatar of Seth, the third and little-known son of Adam. He is the one who will show the Sethians the way home. Recognizing that Judas is at least a minor adept of this cult, Jesus takes him to one side and awards him the special mission of helping him shed his fleshly form and thus return heavenward. He also promises to show him the stars that will enable Judas to follow on.

Deranged science fiction though this is, it makes infinitely more sense than the everlasting curse placed on Judas for doing what somebody had to do, in this otherwise pedantically arranged chronicle of a death foretold. It also makes infinitely more sense

than blaming the Jews for all eternity. For a long time, there was incandescent debate over which of the “Gospels” should be regarded as divinely inspired. Some argued for these and some for others, and many a life was horribly lost on the proposition. Nobody dared say that they were all man-inscribed long after the supposed drama was over, and the “Revelation” of Saint John seems to have squeezed into the canon because of its author’s (rather ordinary) name. But as Jorge Luis Borges put it, had the Alexandrian Gnostics won the day, some later Dante would have drawn us a hypnotically beautiful word-picture of the wonders of “Barbelo.” This concept I might choose to call “the Borges shale”: the verve and imagination needed to visualize a cross section of evolutionary branches and bushes, with the extraordinary but real possibility that a different stem or line (or tune or poem) had predominated in the labyrinth. Great ceilings and steeples and hymns, he might have added, would have consecrated it, and skilled torturers would have worked for days on those who doubted the truth of Barbelo: beginning with the fingernails and working their way ingeniously toward the testicles, the vagina, the eyes, and the viscera. Nonbelief in Barbelo would, correspondingly, have been an unfailing sign that one had no morals at all.

The best argument I know for the highly questionable existence of Jesus is this. His illiterate living disciples left us no record and in any event could not have been “Christians,” since they were never to read those later books in which Christians must affirm belief, and in any case had no idea that anyone would ever found a church on their master’s announcements. (There is scarcely a word in any of the later-assembled Gospels to suggest that Jesus wanted to be the founder of a church, either.)

Notwithstanding all that, the jumbled “Old” Testament prophecies indicate that the Messiah will be born in the city of David, which seems indeed to have been Bethlehem. However, Jesus’s parents were apparently from Nazareth and if they had a child he was most probably delivered in that town. Thus a huge amount of fabrication—concerning Augustus, Herod, and Quirinius—is involved in confecting the census tale and moving the nativity scene to Bethlehem (where, by the way, no “stable” is ever mentioned). But why do this at all, since a much easier fabrication would have had him born in Bethlehem in the first place, without any needless to-do? The very attempts to bend and stretch the story may be inverse proof that someone of later significance was indeed born, so that in retrospect, and to fulfill the prophecies, the evidence had to be massaged to some extent. But then even my attempt to be fair and open-minded in this case is subverted by the Gospel of John, which seems to suggest that Jesus was neither born in Bethlehem nor descended from King David. If the apostles do not know or cannot agree, of what use is my analysis? In any case, if his royal lineage is something to brag and prophesy about, why the insistence elsewhere on apparently lowly birth? Almost all religions from Buddhism to Islam feature either a humble prophet or a prince who comes to identify with the poor, but what is this if not populism? It is hardly a surprise if religions choose to address themselves first to the majority who are poor and bewildered and uneducated.

The contradictions and illiteracies of the New Testament have filled up many books by eminent scholars, and have never been explained by any Christian authority except in the feeblest terms of “metaphor” and “a Christ of faith.” This feebleness derives from the fact that until recently, Christians could simply burn or silence anybody who asked any inconvenient questions. The Gospels are useful, however, in re-demonstrating the same point as their predecessor volumes, which is that religion is man-made. “The law was given by Moses,” says Saint John, “but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.” Saint Matthew tries for the same effect, basing everything on a verse or two from the prophet Isaiah which told King Ahaz, almost eight centuries before the still unfixed date of the birth of Jesus, that “the Lord shall give you a sign; a virgin will conceive and bear a son.” This encouraged Ahaz to believe that he would be given victory over his enemies (which in the result, even if you take his story as historical narrative, he was not). The picture is even further altered when we know that the word translated as “virgin,” namely *almah*, means only “a young woman.” In any case, parthenogenesis is not possible for human mammals, and even if this law were to be relaxed in just one case, it would not prove that the resulting infant had any divine power. Thus, and as usual, religion arouses suspicion by trying to prove too much. By reverse analogy, the Sermon on the Mount replicates Moses on Mount Sinai, and the nondescript disciples stand in for the Jews who followed Moses wherever he went, and thus prophecy is fulfilled for anyone who doesn’t notice or doesn’t care that the story is being “reverse-engineered,” as we might now say. In a short passage of only one Gospel (seized upon by the Jew-baiting Mel Gibson) the rabbis are made to echo god on Sinai and actually to call for the guilt in the blood of Jesus to descend upon all their subsequent generations: a demand that, even if it were to be made, lay well beyond their right, or their power.

But the case of the Virgin Birth is the easiest possible proof that humans were involved in the manufacture of a legend. Jesus makes large claims for his heavenly father but never mentions that his mother is or was a virgin, and is repeatedly very rude and coarse to her when she makes an appearance, as Jewish mothers will, to ask or to see how he is getting on. She herself appears to have no memory of the Archangel Gabriel’s visitation, or of the swarm of angels, both telling her that she is the mother of god. In all accounts, everything that her son does comes to her as a complete surprise, if not a shock. What can he be doing talking to rabbis in the temple? What’s he saying when he curtly reminds her that he’s on his father’s business? One might have expected a stronger maternal memory, especially from someone who had undergone the experience, alone among all women, of discovering herself pregnant without having undergone the notorious preconditions for that happy state. Luke even makes a telling slip at one point, speaking of the “parents of Jesus” when he refers only to Joseph and Mary as they visit the temple for her purification and are hailed by the old man Simeon who pronounces his wonderful *Nunc dimittis*, which (another of my old chapel favorites) may also be an intended echo of Moses glimpsing the Promised Land only in extreme old age.

Then there is the extraordinary matter of Mary's large brood. Matthew informs us (13:55–57) that there were four brothers of Jesus, and some sisters also. In the Gospel of James, which is not canonical but not disowned either, we have the account by Jesus's brother of that same name, who was evidently very active in religious circles at the same period. Arguably, Mary could have "conceived" as a *virgo intacta* and delivered a baby, which would certainly have made her to that extent less intact. But how did she go on producing children, by the man Joseph who only exists in reported speech, and thus make the holy family so large that "eyewitnesses" kept remarking on it?

In order to resolve this near-unmentionable and near-sexual dilemma, reverse-engineering is again applied, this time much more recently than the frantic early church councils that decided which Gospels were "synoptic" and which were "apocryphal." It is determined that Mary herself (of whose birth there is absolutely no account in any holy book) must have had a prior "Immaculate Conception" that rendered her essentially stainless. And it is further determined that, since the wage of sin is death and she cannot possibly have sinned, she cannot have died. Hence the dogma of the "Assumption," which asserts out of thin air that thin air is the medium through which she went to heaven while avoiding the grave. It is of interest to note the dates of these magnificently ingenious edicts. The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was announced or discovered by Rome in 1852, and the dogma of the Assumption in 1951. To say that something is "man-made" is not always to say that it is stupid. These heroic rescue attempts deserve some credit, even as we watch the leaky original vessel sink without trace. But, "inspired" though the church's resolution may be, it would insult the deity to claim that such inspiration was in any way divine.

Just as the script of the Old Testament is riddled with dreams and with astrology (the sun standing still so that Joshua can complete his massacre at a site that has never been located), so the Christian bible is full of star-predictions (notably the one over Bethlehem) and witch doctors and sorcerers. Many of the sayings and deeds of Jesus are innocuous, most especially the "beatitudes" which express such fanciful wish-thinking about the meek and the peacemakers. But many are unintelligible and show a belief in magic, several are absurd and show a primitive attitude to agriculture (this extends to all mentions of plowing and sowing, and all allusions to mustard or fig trees), and many are on the face of it flat-out immoral. The analogy of humans to lilies, for instance, suggests—along with many other injunctions—that things like thrift, innovation, family life, and so forth are a sheer waste of time. ("Take no thought for the morrow.") This is why some of the Gospels, canonical and apocryphal, report people (including his family members) saying at the time that they thought Jesus must be mad. There were also those who noticed that he was often a rather rigid Jewish sectarian: in Matthew 15:21–28 we read of his contempt for a Canaanite woman who implored his aid for an exorcism and was brusquely told that he would not waste his energy on a non-Jew. (His disciples, and the persistence of the woman, eventually persuaded him to unbend, and to cast out the non-devil.) In my opinion, an idiosyncratic story like

this is another oblique reason for thinking that some such personality may at some time have lived. There were many deranged prophets roaming Palestine at the time, but this one reportedly believed himself, at least some of the time, to be god or the son of god. And that has made all the difference. Make just two assumptions: that he believed this and that he also promised his followers that he would reveal his kingdom before they came to the end of their own lives, and all but one or two of his gnomic remarks make some kind of sense. This point was never put more frankly than by C. S. Lewis (who has recently reemerged as the most popular Christian apologist) in his *Mere Christianity*. He happens to be speaking about the claim of Jesus to take sins on himself:

Now, unless the speaker is God, this is really so preposterous as to be comic. We can all understand how a man forgives offenses against himself. You tread on my toes and I forgive you, you steal my money and I forgive you. But what should we make of a man, himself unrobbed and untrodden-on, who announced that he forgave you for treading on other men's toes and stealing other men's money? Asinine fatuity is the kindest description we should give of his conduct. Yet this is what Jesus did. He told people that their sins were forgiven, and never waited to consult all the other people whom their sins had undoubtedly injured. He unhesitatingly behaved as if He was the party chiefly concerned, the person chiefly offended in all offenses. This makes sense only if he really was the God whose laws are broken and whose love is wounded in every sin. In the mouth of any speaker who is not God, these words would imply what I can only regard as a silliness and conceit unrivalled by any other character in history.

It will be noticed that Lewis assumes on no firm evidence whatever that Jesus actually was a "character in history," but let that pass. He deserves some credit for accepting the logic and morality of what he has just stated. To those who argue that Jesus may have been a great moral teacher without being divine (of whom the deist Thomas Jefferson incidentally claimed to be one), Lewis has this stinging riposte:

That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman and something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

I am not choosing a straw man here: Lewis is the main chosen propaganda vehicle for Christianity in our time. And nor am I accepting his rather wild supernatural categories, such as devil and demon. Least of all do I accept his reasoning, which is so pathetic as to defy description and which takes his two false alternatives as exclusive antitheses, and then uses them to fashion a crude non sequitur ("Now it seems to me obvious that He was neither a lunatic nor a fiend: and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was and is God.").

However, I do credit him with honesty and with some courage. Either the Gospels are in some sense literal truth, or the whole thing is essentially a fraud and perhaps an immoral one at that. Well, it can be stated with certainty, and on their own evidence, that the Gospels are most certainly not literal truth. This means that many of the “sayings” and teachings of Jesus are hearsay upon hearsay upon hearsay, which helps explain their garbled and contradictory nature. The most glaring of these, at least in retrospect and certainly from the believers’ point of view, concern the imminence of his second coming and his complete indifference to the founding of any temporal church. The logia or reported speeches are repeatedly cited, by bishops of the early church who wished that they had been present at the time but were not, as eagerly solicited thirdhand commentaries. Let me give a conspicuous example. Many years after C. S. Lewis had gone to his reward, a very serious young man named Barton Ehrman began to examine his own fundamentalist assumptions. He had attended the two most eminent Christian fundamentalist academies in the United States, and was considered by the faithful to be among their champions. Fluent in Greek and Hebrew (he is now holder of a chair in religious studies), he eventually could not quite reconcile his faith with his scholarship. He was astonished to find that some of the best-known Jesus stories were scribbled into the canon long after the fact, and that this was true of perhaps the best-known of them all.

This story is the celebrated one about the woman taken in adultery (John 8:3–11). Who has not heard or read of how the Jewish Pharisees, skilled in casuistry, dragged this poor woman before Jesus and demanded to know if he agreed with the Mosaic punishment of stoning her to death? If he did not, he violated the law. If he did, he made nonsense of his own preachings. One easily pictures the squalid zeal with which they pounced upon the woman. And the calm reply (after writing upon the ground)—“He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her”—has entered our literature and our consciousness.

This episode is even celebrated on celluloid. It makes a flashback appearance in Mel Gibson’s travesty, and it is a lovely moment in David Lean’s *Dr. Zhivago*, where Lara goes to the priest in her extremity and is asked what Jesus said to the fallen woman. “Go, and sin no more,” is her reply. “And did she, child?” asks the priest fiercely. “I don’t know, Father.” “Nobody knows,” responds the priest, unhelpfully in the circumstances.

Nobody, indeed, does know. Long before I read Ehrman, I had some questions of my own. If the New Testament is supposed to vindicate Moses, why are the gruesome laws of the Pentateuch to be undermined? An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth and the killing of witches may seem brutish and stupid, but if only non-sinners have the right to punish, then how could an imperfect society ever determine how to prosecute offenders? We should all be hypocrites. And what authority did Jesus have to “forgive”? Presumably, at least one wife or husband somewhere in the city felt cheated and outraged. Is Christianity, then, sheer sexual permissiveness? If so, it has been gravely misunderstood ever since. And what was being written on the ground? Nobody knows, again. Furthermore, the story says that after the Pharisees and the crowd had melted

away (presumably from embarrassment), nobody was left except Jesus and the woman. In that case, who is the narrator of what he said to her? For all that, I thought it a fine enough story.

Professor Ehrman goes further. He asks some more obvious questions. If the woman was “taken in adultery,” which means in flagrante delicto, then where is her male partner? Mosaic law, adumbrated in *Leviticus*, makes it clear that both must undergo the stoning. I suddenly realized that the core of the story’s charm is that of the shivering lonely girl, hissed at and dragged away by a crowd of sex-starved fanatics, and finally encountering a friendly face. As to the writing in the dust, Ehrman mentions an old tradition which postulates that Jesus was scrawling the known transgressions of others present, thus leading to blushing and shuffling and eventually to hasty departure. I find I love this idea, even if it would mean a level of worldly curiosity and prurience (and foresight) on his part that raises its own difficulties.

Overarching all this is the shocking fact that, as Ehrman concedes:

The story is not found in our oldest and best manuscripts of the Gospel of John; its writing style is very different from what we find in the rest of John (including the stories immediately before and after); and it includes a large number of words and phrases that are otherwise alien to the Gospel. The conclusion is unavoidable: this passage was not originally part of the Gospel.

I have again selected my source on the basis of “evidence against interest”: in other words from someone whose original scholarly and intellectual journey was not at all intended to challenge holy writ. The case for biblical consistency or authenticity or “inspiration” has been in tatters for some time, and the rents and tears only become more obvious with better research, and thus no “revelation” can be derived from that quarter. So, then, let the advocates and partisans of religion rely on faith alone, and let them be brave enough to admit that this is what they are doing.

Chapter Nine. The Koran Is Borrowed from Both Jewish and Christian Myths

The doings and “sayings” of Moses and Abraham and Jesus being so ill-founded and so inconsistent, as well as so often immoral, one must proceed in the same spirit of inquiry to what many believe is the last revelation: that of the Prophet Muhammad and his Koran or “recitation.” Here again, the Angel (or Archangel) Gabriel is found at work, dictating suras, or verses, to a person of little or no learning. Here again are stories of a Noah-like flood, and injunctions against idol worship. Here again the Jews are the first recipients of the message and the first both to hear it and to discard it. And here again there is a vast commentary of doubtful anecdote about the actual doings and sayings of the Prophet, this time known as the hadith.

Islam is at once the most and the least interesting of the world’s monotheisms. It builds upon its primitive Jewish and Christian predecessors, selecting a chunk here and a shard there, and thus if these fall, it partly falls also. Its founding narrative likewise takes place within an astonishingly small compass, and relates facts about extremely tedious local quarrels. None of the original documents, such as they are, can be contrasted with any Hebrew or Greek or Latin texts. Almost all of the tradition is oral, and all of it is in Arabic. Indeed, many authorities agree that the Koran is only intelligible in that tongue, which is itself subject to innumerable idiomatic and regional inflections. This would leave us, on the face of it, with the absurd and potentially dangerous conclusion that god was a monoglot. Before me is a book, *Introducing Muhammad*, written by two extremely unctuous British Muslims who are hoping to present a friendly version of Islam to the West. Ingratiating and selective as their text may be, they insist that “as the literal Word of God, the Koran is the Koran only in the original revealed text. A translation can never be the Koran, that inimitable symphony, ‘the very sound of which moves men and women to tears.’ A translation can only be an attempt to give the barest suggestion of the meaning of words contained in the Koran. This is why all Muslims, whatever their mother tongue, always recite the Koran in its original Arabic.” The authors go on to make some highly disobliging observations about the Penguin translation by N. J. Dawood, which makes me glad that I have always employed the Pickthall version but no likelier to be convinced that if I wish to become a convert I must master another language. In my own country of

birth, I am sadly aware that there is a beautiful poetic tradition, unavailable to me because I will never know the marvelous tongue called Gaelic. Even if god is or was an Arab (an unsafe assumption), how could he expect to “reveal” himself by way of an illiterate person who in turn could not possibly hope to pass on the unaltered (let alone unalterable) words?

The point may seem minor but it is not. To Muslims, the annunciation of the divine to a person of extreme unlettered simplicity has something of the same value as the humble vessel of the Virgin Mary has to Christians. It also possesses the same useful merit of being entirely unverifiable, and unfalsifiable. Since Mary must be presumed to have spoken Aramaic and Muhammad Arabic, it can I suppose be granted that god is in fact multilingual and can speak any language he chooses. (He opted in both cases to use the Archangel Gabriel as ~~the~~intermediate deliverer of his message.) However, the impressive fact remains that all religions have staunchly resisted any attempt to translate their sacred texts into languages “understood of the people,” as the Cranmer prayer book phrases it. There would have been no Protestant Reformation if it were not for the long struggle to have the Bible rendered into the vernacular and the priestly monopoly therefore broken. Devout men like Wycliffe, Coverdale, and Tyndale were burned alive for even attempting early translations. The Catholic Church has never recovered from its abandonment of the mystifying Latin ritual, and the Protestant mainstream has suffered hugely from rendering its own Bibles into more everyday speech. Some mystical Jewish sects still insist on Hebrew and play Kabbalistic word games even with the spaces between letters, but among most Jews, too, the supposedly unchangeable rituals of antiquity have been abandoned. The spell of the clerical class has been broken. Only in Islam has there been no reformation, and to this day any vernacular version of the Koran must still be printed with an Arabic parallel text. This ought to arouse suspicion even in the slowest mind.

Later Muslim conquests, impressive in their speed and scope and decisiveness, have lent point to the idea that these Arabic incantations must have had something to them. But if you allow this cheap earthly victory as a proof, you allow the same to Joshua’s blood-soaked tribesmen or to the Christian crusaders and conquistadores. There is a further objection. All religions take care to silence or to execute those who question them (and I choose to regard this recurrent tendency as a sign of their weakness rather than their strength). It has, however, been some time since Judaism and Christianity resorted openly to torture and censorship. Not only did Islam begin by condemning all doubters to eternal fire, but it still claims the right to do so in almost all of its dominions, and still preaches that these same dominions can and must be extended by war. There has never been an attempt in any age to challenge or even investigate the claims of Islam that has not been met with extremely harsh and swift repression. Provisionally, ~~then~~, one is entitled to conclude that the apparent unity and confidence of the faith is a mask for a very deep and probably justifiable insecurity. That there are and always have been sanguinary feuds between different schools of Islam, resulting

in strictly inter-Muslim accusations of heresy and profanity and in terrible acts of violence, naturally goes without saying.

I have tried my best with this religion, which is as foreign to me as it is to the many millions who will always doubt that god entrusted a nonreader (through an intermediary) with the demanding call to “read.” As I said, I long ago acquired a copy of the Marmaduke Pickthall translation of the Koran, which has been certified by senior sources in the ulema, or Islamic religious authority, to be the nearest to an approximate rendition into English. I have been to innumerable gatherings, from Friday prayers in Tehran to mosques in Damascus and Jerusalem and Doha and Istanbul and Washington, D.C., and I can attest that “the recitation” in Arabic does indeed have the apparent power to create bliss and also rage among those who hear it. (I have also attended prayers in Malaysia and Indonesia and Bosnia where there is resentment, among non-Arabic-speaking Muslims, at the privilege granted to Arabs and to Arabic, and to Arab movements and regimes, in a religion that purports to be universal.) I have in my own home received Sayed Hossein Khomeini, grandson of the ayatollah and a cleric from the holy city of Qum, and carefully handed him my own copy of the Koran. He kissed it, discussed it at length and with reverence, and for my instruction wrote in the back-flap the verses which he thought had disproved his grandfather’s claim to clerical authority in this world, as well as overthrown his grandfather’s claim to take the life of Salman Rushdie. Who am I to adjudicate in such a dispute? However, the idea that the identical text can yield different commandments to different people is quite familiar to me for other reasons. There is no need to overstate the difficulty of understanding Islam’s alleged profundities. If one comprehends the fallacies of any “revealed” religion, one comprehends them all.

I have only once, in twenty-five years of often heated arguments in Washington, D.C., been threatened with actual violence. This was when I was at dinner with some staffers and supporters of the Clinton White House. One of those present, a then well-known Democratic pollster and fund-raiser, questioned me about my most recent trip to the Middle East. He wanted my opinion as to why the Muslims were so “all-fired, god-damn fundamentalist.” I ran through my repertoire of explanations, adding that it was often forgotten that Islam was a relatively young faith, and still in the heat of its self-confidence. Not for Muslims the crisis of self-doubt that had overtaken Western Christianity. I added that, for example, while there was little or no evidence for the life of Jesus, the figure of the Prophet Muhammad was by contrast a person in ascertainable history. The man changed color faster than anyone I have ever seen. After shrieking that Jesus Christ had meant more to more people than I could ever imagine, and that I was disgusting beyond words for speaking so casually, he drew back his foot and aimed a kick which only his decency—conceivably his Christianity—prevented him from landing on my shin. He then ordered his wife to join him in leaving.

I now feel that I owe him an apology, or at least half of one. Although we do know that a person named Muhammad almost certainly existed within a fairly small bracket of time and space, we have the same problem as we do in all the precedent cases. The

accounts that relate his deeds and words were assembled many years later and are hopelessly corrupted into incoherence by self-interest, rumor, and illiteracy.

The tale is familiar enough even if it is new to you. Some Meccans of the seventh century followed an Abrahamic tradition and even believed that their temple, the Kaaba, had been built by Abraham. The temple itself—most of its original furnishings having been destroyed by later fundamentalists, notably the Wahhabis—is said to have become depraved by idolatry. Muhammad the son of Abdullah became one of those Hunafa who “turned away” to seek solace elsewhere. (The book of Isaiah also enjoins true believers to “come out” from the ungodly and be separate.) Retiring to a desert cave on Mount Hira for the month of heat, or Ramadan, he was “asleep or in a trance” (I am quoting Pickthall’s commentary) when he heard a voice commanding him to read. He replied twice that he was unable to read and was thrice commanded to do so. Eventually asking what he should read, he was further commanded in the name of a lord who “created man from a clot of blood.” After the Angel Gabriel (who so identified himself) had told Muhammad that he was to be Allah’s messenger, and had departed, Muhammad confided in his wife Khadijah. On their return to Mecca she took him to meet her cousin, an elderly man named Waraqa ibn Naufal, “who knew the Scriptures of the Jews and Christians.” This whiskered veteran declared that the divine envoy who once visited Moses had come again to Mount Hira. From then on, Muhammad adopted the modest title of “Slave of Allah,” the latter word being simply the Arabic for “god.”

The only people who at first took the smallest interest in Muhammad’s claim were the greedy guardians of the temple at Mecca, who saw it as a threat to their pilgrimage business, and the studious Jews of Yathrib, a town two hundred miles distant, who had been for some time proclaiming the advent of the Messiah. The first group became more threatening and the second more friendly, as a result of which Muhammad made the journey, or hejira, to Yathrib, which is now known as Medina. The date of the flight counts as the inauguration of the Muslim era. But as with the arrival of the Nazarene in Jewish Palestine, which began with so many cheerful heavenly auguries, this was all to end very badly with a realization on the part of the Arabian Jews that they were faced with yet another disappointment, if not indeed another impostor.

According to Karen Armstrong, one of the most sympathetic—not to say apologetic—analysts of Islam, the Arabs of the time had a wounded feeling that they had been left out of history. God had appeared to Christians and Jews, “but he had sent the Arabs no prophet and no scripture in their own language.” Thus, though she does not put it this way, the time for someone to have a local revelation was long overdue. And, once having had it, Muhammad was not inclined to let it be criticized as secondhand by adherents of older faiths. The record of his seventh-century career, like the books of the Old Testament, swiftly becomes an account of vicious quarrels between a few hundred or sometimes a few thousand unlearned villagers and townspeople, in which the finger of god was supposed to settle and determine the outcome of parochial disputes. As with the primeval bloodlettings of the Sinai

and Canaan, which are likewise unattested by any independent evidence, millions of people have been held hostage ever since by the supposedly providential character of these ugly squabbles.

There is some question as to whether Islam is a separate religion at all. It initially fulfilled a need among Arabs for a distinctive or special creed, and is forever identified with their language and their impressive later conquests, which, while not as striking as those of the young Alexander of Macedonia, certainly conveyed an idea of being backed by a divine will until they petered out at the fringes of the Balkans and the Mediterranean. But Islam when examined is not much more than a rather obvious and ill-arranged set of plagiarisms, helping itself from earlier books and traditions as occasion appeared to require. Thus, far from being “born in the clear light of history,” as Ernest Renan so generously phrased it, Islam in its origins is just as shady and approximate as those from which it took its borrowings. It makes immense claims for itself, invokes prostrate submission or “surrender” as a maxim to its adherents, and demands deference and respect from nonbelievers into the bargain. There is nothing—absolutely nothing—in its teachings that can even begin to justify such arrogance and presumption.

The prophet died in the year 632 of our own approximate calendar. The first account of his life was set down a full hundred and twenty years later by Ibn Ishaq, whose original was lost and can only be consulted through its reworked form, authored by Ibn Hisham, who died in 834. Adding to this hearsay and obscurity, there is no agreed-upon account of how the Prophet’s followers assembled the Koran, or of how his various sayings (some of them written down by secretaries) became codified. And this familiar problem is further complicated—even more than in the Christian case—by the matter of succession. Unlike Jesus, who apparently undertook to return to earth very soon and who (pace the absurd Dan Brown) left no known descendants, Muhammad was a general and a politician and—though unlike Alexander of Macedonia a prolific father—left no instruction as to who was to take up his mantle. Quarrels over the leadership began almost as soon as he died, and so Islam had its first major schism—between the Sunni and the Shia—before it had even established itself as a system. We need take no side in the schism, except to point out that one at least of the schools of interpretation must be quite mistaken. And the initial identification of Islam with an earthly caliphate, made up of disputatious contenders for the said mantle, marked it from the very beginning as man-made.

It is said by some Muslim authorities that during the first caliphate of Abu Bakr, immediately after Muhammad’s death, concern arose that his orally transmitted words might be forgotten. So many Muslim soldiers had been killed in battle that the number who had the Koran safely lodged in their memories had become alarmingly small. It was therefore decided to assemble every living witness, together with “pieces of paper, stones, palm leaves, shoulder-blades, ribs and bits of leather” on which sayings had been scribbled, and give them to Zaid ibn Thabit, one of the Prophet’s former secretaries,

for an authoritative collation. Once this had been done, the believers had something like an authorized version.

If true, this would date the Koran to a time fairly close to Muhammad's own life. But we swiftly discover that there is no certainty or agreement about the truth of the story. Some say that it was Ali—the fourth and not the first caliph, and the founder of Shiism—who had the idea. Many others—the Sunni majority—assert that it was Caliph Uthman, who reigned from 644 to 656, who made the finalized decision. Told by one of his generals that soldiers from different provinces were fighting over discrepant accounts of the Koran, Uthman ordered Zaid ibn Thabit to bring together the various texts, unify them, and have them transcribed into one. When this task was complete, Uthman ordered standard copies to be sent to Kufa, Basra, Damascus, and elsewhere, with a master copy retained in Medina. Uthman thus played the canonical role that had been taken, in the standardization and purging and censorship of the Christian Bible, by Irenaeus and by Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria. The roll was called, and some texts were declared sacred and inerrant while others became “apocryphal.” Outdoing Athanasius, Uthman ordered that all earlier and rival editions be destroyed.

Even supposing this version of events to be correct, which would mean that no chance existed for scholars ever to determine or even dispute what really happened in Muhammad's time, Uthman's attempt to abolish disagreement was a vain one. The written Arabic language has two features that make it difficult for an outsider to learn: it uses dots to distinguish consonants like “b” and “t,” and in its original form it had no sign or symbol for short vowels, which could be rendered by various dashes or comma-type marks. Vastly different readings even of Uthman's version were enabled by these variations. Arabic script itself was not standardized until the later part of the ninth century, and in the meantime the undotted and oddly voweled Koran was generating wildly different explanations of itself, as it still does. This might not matter in the case of the Iliad, but remember that we are supposed to be talking about the unalterable (and final) word of god. There is obviously a connection between the sheer feebleness of this claim and the absolutely fanatical certainty with which it is advanced. To take one instance that can hardly be called negligible, the Arabic words written on the outside of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem are different from any version that appears in the Koran.

The situation is even more shaky and deplorable when we come to the hadith, or that vast orally generated secondary literature which supposedly conveys the sayings and actions of Muhammad, the tale of the Koran's compilation, and the sayings of “the companions of the Prophet.” Each hadith, in order to be considered authentic, must be supported in turn by an *isnad*, or chain, of supposedly reliable witnesses. Many Muslims allow their attitude to everyday life to be determined by these anecdotes: regarding dogs as unclean, for example, on the sole ground that Muhammad is said to have done so. (My own favorite tale goes the other way: the Prophet is said to have cut off the long sleeve of his garment rather than disturb a cat that was slumbering

on it. Cats in Muslim lands have been generally spared the awful treatment visited on them by Christians, who have often regarded them as satanic familiars of witches.)

As one might expect, the six authorized collections of hadith, which pile hearsay upon hearsay through the unwinding of the long spool of isnads (“A told B, who had it from C, who learned it from D”), were put together centuries after the events they purport to describe. One of the most famous of the six compilers, Bukhari, died 238 years after the death of Muhammad. Bukhari is deemed unusually reliable and honest by Muslims, and seems to have deserved his reputation in that, of the three hundred thousand attestations he accumulated in a lifetime devoted to the project, he ruled that two hundred thousand of them were entirely valueless and unsupported. Further exclusion of dubious traditions and questionable isnads reduced his grand total to ten thousand hadith. You are free to believe, if you so choose, that out of this formless mass of illiterate and half-remembered witnessing the pious Bukhari, more than two centuries later, managed to select only the pure and undefiled ones that would bear examination.

Some of these candidates for authenticity might have been easier to sift out than others. The Hungarian scholar Ignaz Goldziher, to quote a recent study by Reza Aslan, was among the first to show that many of the hadith were no more than “verses from the Torah and the Gospels, bits of Rabbinic sayings, ancient Persian maxims, passages of Greek philosophy, Indian proverbs, and even an almost word- for- word reproduction of the Lord’s Prayer.” Great chunks of more or less straight biblical quotation can be found in the hadith, including the parable of the workers hired at the last moment, and the injunction “Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth,” the last example meaning that this piece of pointless pseudoprofundity has a place in two sets of revealed scripture. Aslan notes that by the time of the ninth century, when Muslim legal scholars were attempting to formulate and codify Islamic law through the process known as *ijtihad*, they were obliged to separate many hadith into the following categories: “lies told for material gain and lies told for ideological advantage.” Quite rightly, Islam effectively disowns the idea that it is a new faith, let alone a cancellation of the earlier ones, and it uses the prophecies of the Old Testament and the Gospels of the New like a perpetual crutch or fund, to be leaned on or drawn upon. In return for this derivative modesty, all it asks is to be accepted as the absolute and final revelation.

As might be expected, it contains many internal contradictions. It is often cited as saying that “there is no compulsion in religion,” and as making reassuring noises about those of other faiths being peoples “of the book” or “followers of an earlier revelation.” The idea of being “tolerated” by a Muslim is as repulsive to me as the other condescensions whereby Catholic and Protestant Christians agreed to “tolerate” one another, or extend “toleration” to Jews. The Christian world was so awful in this respect, and for so long, that many Jews preferred to live under Ottoman rule and submit to special taxes and other such distinctions. However, the actual Koranic reference to Islam’s benign tolerance is qualified, because some of these same “peoples”

and “followers” may be “such of them as are bent on evil-doing.” And it takes only a short acquaintance with the Koran and the hadith to discover other imperatives, such as the following:

Nobody who dies and finds good from Allah (in the hereafter) would wish to come back to this world even if he were given the whole world and whatever is in it, except the martyr who, on seeing the superiority of martyrdom, would like to come back to the world and be killed again.

Or:

God will not forgive those who serve other gods beside Him; but he will forgive whom He will for other sins. He that serves other gods besides God is guilty of a heinous sin.

I chose the first of these two violent excerpts (from a whole thesaurus of unsavory possible ones) because it so perfectly negates what Socrates is reported to have said in Plato’s *Apology* (to which I am coming). And I chose the second because it is such a patent and abject borrowing from the “Ten Commandments.”

The likelihood that any of this humanly derived rhetoric is “inerrant,” let alone “final,” is conclusively disproved not just by its innumerable contradictions and incoherencies but by the famous episode of the Koran’s alleged “satanic verses,” out of which Salman Rushdie was later to make a literary project. On this much-discussed occasion, Muhammad was seeking to conciliate some leading Meccan polytheists and in due course experienced a “revelation” that allowed them after all to continue worshipping some of the older local deities. It struck him later that this could not be right and that he must have inadvertently been “channeled” by the devil, who for some reason had briefly chosen to relax his habit of combating monotheists on their own ground. (Muhammad believed devoutly not just in the devil himself but in minor desert devils, or djinns, as well.) It was noticed even by some of his wives that the Prophet was capable of having a “revelation” that happened to suit his short-term needs, and he was sometimes teased about it. We are further told—on no authority that need be believed—that when he experienced revelation in public he would sometimes be gripped by pain and experience loud ringing in his ears. Beads of sweat would burst out on him, even on the chilliest of days. Some heartless Christian critics have suggested that he was an epileptic (though they fail to notice the same symptoms in the seizure experienced by Paul on the road to Damascus), but there is no need for us to speculate in this way. It is enough to rephrase David Hume’s unavoidable question. Which is more likely—that a man should be used as a transmitter by god to deliver some already existing revelations, or that he should utter some already existing revelations and believe himself to be, or claim to be, ordered by god to do so? As for the pains and the noises in the head, or the sweat, one can only regret the seeming fact that direct communication with god is not an experience of calm, beauty, and lucidity.

The physical existence of Muhammad, however poorly attested by the hadith, is a source of both strength and weakness for Islam. It appears to put it squarely in the world, and provides us with plausible physical descriptions of the man himself, but

it also makes the whole story earthy, material, and gross. We may flinch a little at this mammal's betrothal to a nine-year-old girl, and at the keen interest he took in the pleasures of the dining table and the division of the spoils after his many battles and numerous massacres. Above all—and here is a trap that Christianity has mostly avoided by awarding its prophet a human body but a nonhuman nature—he was blessed with numerous descendants and thus placed his religious posterity in a position where it was hostage to his physical one. Nothing is more human and fallible than the dynastic or hereditary principle, and Islam has been racked from its birth by squabbles between princelings and pretenders, all claiming the relevant drop of original blood. If the total of those claiming descent from the founder was added up, it would probably exceed the number of holy nails and splinters that went to make up the thousand-foot cross on which, judging by the number of splinter-shaped relics, Jesus was evidently martyred. As with the lineage of the isnads, a direct kinship line with the Prophet can be established if one happens to know, and be able to pay, the right local imam.

In the same way, Muslims still make a certain obeisance to those **same**“satanic verses,” and tread the pagan polytheistic path that was laid out long before their Prophet was born. Every year at the hajj, or annual pilgrimage, one can see them circling the cuboid Kaaba shrine in the center of Mecca, taking care to do so seven times (“following the direction of the sun around the earth,” as Karen Armstrong weirdly and no doubt multiculturally puts it) before kissing the black stone set in the Kaaba's wall. This probable meteorite, which no doubt impressed the yokels when it first fell to earth (“the gods must be crazy: no, make that god must be crazy”), is a stop on the way to other ancient pre-Islamic propitiations, during which pebbles must be hurled defiantly at a rock that represents the Evil One. Animal sacrifices complete the picture. Like many but not all of Islam's principal sites, Mecca is closed to unbelievers, which somewhat contradicts its claim to universality.

It is often said that Islam differs from other monotheisms in not having had a “reformation.” This is both correct and incorrect. There are versions of Islam—most notably the Sufi, much detested by the devout—which are principally spiritual rather than literal and which have taken on some accretions from other faiths. And, since Islam has avoided the mistake of having an absolute papacy capable of uttering binding edicts (hence the proliferation of conflicting fatwas from conflicting authorities) its adherents cannot be told to cease believing what they once held as dogma. This might be to the good, but the fact remains that Islam's core claim—to be unimprovable and final—is at once absurd and unalterable. Its many warring and discrepant sects, from Ismaili to Ahmadi, all agree on this indissoluble claim.

“Reformation” has meant, for Jews and Christians, a minimal willingness to reconsider holy writ as if it were (as Salman Rushdie so daringly proposed in his turn) something that can be subjected to literary and textual scrutiny. The number of possible “Bibles” is now admitted to be immense, and we know for example that the portentous Christian term “Jehovah” is a mistranslation of the unuttered spaces between the letters of the Hebrew “Yahweh.” Yet no comparable project has ever been

undertaken in Koranic scholarship. No serious attempt has been made to catalog the discrepancies between its various editions and manuscripts, and even the most tentative efforts to do so have been met with almost Inquisitional rage. A critical case in point is the work of Christoph Luxenburg, *The Syriac-Aramaic Version of the Koran*, published in Berlin in the year 2000. Luxenburg coolly proposes that, far from being a monoglot screed, the Koran is far better understood once it is conceded that many of its words are Syriac- Aramaic rather than Arabic. (His most celebrated example concerns the rewards of a “martyr” in paradise: when retranslated and redacted the heavenly offering consists of sweet white raisins rather than virgins.) This is the same language, and the same region, from which much of Judaism and Christianity emerged: there can be no doubt that unfettered research would result in the dispelling of much obscurantism. But, at the very point when Islam ought to be joining its predecessors in subjecting itself to rereadings, there is a “soft” consensus among almost all the religious that, because of the supposed duty of respect that we owe the faithful, this is the very time to allow Islam to assert its claims at their own face value. Once again, faith is helping to choke free inquiry and the emancipating consequences that it might bring.

Chapter Ten. The Tawdriness of the Miraculous and the Decline of Hell

The daughters of the high priest Anius changed whatever they chose into wheat, wine or oil. Athalida, daughter of Mercury, was resuscitated several times. Aesculapius resuscitated Hippolytus. Hercules dragged Alcestis back from death. Heres returned to the world after passing a fortnight in hell. The parents of Romulus and Remus were a god and a vestal virgin. The Palladium fell from heaven in the city of Troy. The hair of Berenice became a constellation. . . . Give me the name of one people among whom incredible prodigies were not performed, especially when few knew how to read and write.

—Voltaire, *Miracles and Idolatry*

An old fable concerns the comeuppance of a braggart who was forever retelling the story of a truly stupendous leap that he had once made on the island of Rhodes. Never, it seemed, had there ever been witnessed such a heroic long-jump. Though the teller never grew tired of the tale, the same could not be said of his audience. Finally, as he again drew breath to relate the story of the great feat, one of those present silenced him by saying gruffly, “Hic Rhodus, hic salta!” (Here is Rhodes, jump here!)

In much the same way as prophets and seers and great theologians seem to have died out, so the age of miracles seems to lie somewhere in our past. If the religious were wise, or had the confidence of their convictions, they ought to welcome the eclipse of this age of fraud and conjuring. But faith, yet again, discredits itself by proving to be insufficient to satisfy the faithful. Actual events are still required to impress the credulous. We have no difficulty in seeing this when we study the witch doctors and magicians and soothsayers of earlier or more remote cultures: obviously it was a clever person who first learned to predict an eclipse and then to use this planetary event to impress and cow his audience. Ancient kings in Cambodia worked out the day on which the Mekong and the Bassac rivers would annually suddenly start to flood and conjoin and, under terrific water pressure, appear to actually reverse their flow back into the great lake at Tonle Sap. Relatively soon, there was a ceremony at which the divinely appointed leader would duly appear and seem to order the waters to flow backward. Moses on the shore of the Red Sea could only have gaped at such a thing. (In more

modern times, the showman King Sihanouk of Cambodia exploited this natural miracle to considerable effect.)

Given all that, it is surprising how petty some of the “supernatural” miracles now seem. As with spiritualist séances, which cynically offer burblings from the beyond to relatives of the late deceased, nothing truly interesting is ever said or done. To the story of Muhammad’s “night flight” to Jerusalem (the hoofprint of his horse Borak is still allegedly to be seen on the site of the Al-Aqsa Mosque) it would be unkind to make the obvious riposte that horses cannot and do not fly. It is more pertinent to notice that people, ever since the beginning of their long and exhausting journeys across the earth’s surface, gazing for days at the rear end of a mule, have fantasized about speeding up the tedious process. Folkloric seven-league boots can give the wearer a spring in his step, but this is only tinkering with the problem. The real dream, for thousands of years, involved envy of the birds (feathered descendants of the dinosaurs, as we now know) and the yearning to fly. Chariots in the sky, angels that could glide freely on the thermals . . . it is only too easy to see the root of the wish. Thus the Prophet speaks to the longing of every peasant who wishes that his beast could take wing and get on with it. But given infinite power, one might have thought that a more striking or less simpleminded miracle could have been confected. Levitation plays a vast role in Christian fantasy as well, as the stories of the Ascension and the Assumption confirm. At that epoch, the sky was thought to be a bowl, and its ordinary weather a source of portent or intervention. Given this pathetically limited view of the cosmos, the most trivial event could appear miraculous while an event that would truly astonish us—such as the sun ceasing to move—could yet appear as a local phenomenon.

Assuming that a miracle is a favorable change in the natural order, the last word on the subject was written by the Scottish philosopher David Hume, who granted us free will in the matter. A miracle is a disturbance or interruption in the expected and established course of things. This could involve anything from the sun rising in the west to an animal suddenly bursting into the recitation of verse. Very well, then, free will also involves decision. If you seem to witness such a thing, there are two possibilities. The first is that the laws of nature have been suspended (in your favor). The second is that you are under a misapprehension, or suffering from a delusion. Thus the likelihood of the second must be weighed against the likelihood of the first.

If you only hear a report of the miracle from a second or third party, the odds must be adjusted accordingly before you can decide to credit a witness who claims to have seen something that you did not see. And if you are separated from the “sighting” by many generations, and have no independent corroboration, the odds must be adjusted still more drastically. Again we might call upon the trusty Ockham, who warned us not to multiply unnecessary contingencies. Thus, let me give one ancient and one modern example: the first being bodily resurrection and the second being UFOs.

Miracles have declined, in their wondrous impact, since ancient times. Moreover, the more recent ones that have been offered us have been slightly tawdry. The notorious annual liquefaction of the blood of San Gennaro in Naples, for example, is a

phenomenon that can easily be (and has been) repeated by any competent conjuror. Great secular “magicians” like Harry Houdini and James Randi have demonstrated with ease that levitation, fire-walking, water-divining, and spoon-bending can all be performed, under laboratory conditions, in order to expose the fraud and to safeguard the unwary customer from a fleecing. Miracles in any case do not vindicate the truth of the religion that practices them: Aaron supposedly vanquished Pharaoh’s magicians in an open competition but did not deny that they could perform wonders as well. However, there has not been a claimed resurrection for some time and no shaman who purports to do it has ever agreed to reproduce his trick in such a way as to stand a challenge. Thus we must ask ourselves: Has the art of resurrection died out? Or are we relying on dubious sources?

The New Testament is itself a highly dubious source. (One of Professor Bart Ehrman’s more astonishing findings is that the account of Jesus’s resurrection in the Gospel of Mark was only added many years later.) But according to the New Testament, the thing could be done in an almost commonplace way. Jesus managed it twice in other people’s cases, by raising both Lazarus and the daughter of Jairus, and nobody seems to have thought it worthwhile to interview either survivor to ask about their extraordinary experiences. Nor does anyone seem to have kept a record of whether or not, or how, these two individuals “died” again. If they stayed immortal, then they joined the ancient company of the “Wandering Jew,” who was condemned by early Christianity to keep walking forever after he met Jesus on the Via Dolorosa, this misery being inflicted upon a mere bystander in order to fulfill the otherwise unfulfilled prophecy that Jesus would come again in the lifetime of at least one person who had seen him the first time around. On the same day that Jesus met that luckless vagrant, he was himself put to death with revolting cruelty, at which time, according to the Gospel of Matthew 27:52–53, “the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, and came out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many.” This seems incoherent, since the corpses apparently rose both at the time of the death on the cross and of the Resurrection, but it is narrated in the same matter-of-fact way as the earthquake, the rending of the veil of the temple (two other events that did not attract the attention of any historian), and the reverent comments of the Roman centurion.

This supposed frequency of resurrection can only undermine the uniqueness of the one by which mankind purchased forgiveness of sins. And there is no cult or religion before or since, from Osiris to vampirism to voodoo, that does not rely on some innate belief in the “undead.” To this day, Christians disagree as to whether the day of judgment will give you back the old wreck of a body that has already died on you, or will reequip you in some other form. For now, and on a review even of the claims made by the faithful, one can say that resurrection would not prove the truth of the dead man’s doctrine, nor his paternity, nor the probability of still another return in fleshly or recognizable form. Yet again, also, too much is being “proved.” The action of a man who volunteers to die for his fellow creatures is universally regarded as no-

ble. The extra claim not to have “really” died makes the whole sacrifice tricky and meretricious. (Thus, those who say “Christ died for my sins,” when he did not really “die” at all, are making a statement that is false in its own terms.) Having no reliable or consistent witnesses, in anything like the time period needed to certify such an extraordinary claim, we are finally entitled to say that we have a right, if not an obligation, to respect ourselves enough to disbelieve the whole thing. That is, unless or until superior evidence is presented, which it has not been. And exceptional claims demand exceptional evidence.

I have spent much of my life as a correspondent and long ago became used to reading firsthand accounts of the very same events I had **witnessed**, written by people I otherwise trusted, which did not accord with my own. (In my days as a Fleet Street correspondent, I even read stories in print under my own name which were not recognizable to me once the sub-editors had finished with them.) And I have interviewed some of the hundreds of thousands of people who claim to have had direct encounters with spacecraft, or the crew of spacecraft, from another galaxy. Some of these are so vivid and detailed (and so comparable with other depositions from other people who cannot have compared notes) that a few impressionable academics have proposed that we grant them the presumption of truth. But here is the obvious Ockhamist reason why it would be utterly wrong to do so. If the huge number of “contacts” and abductees are telling even a particle of truth, then it follows that their alien friends are not attempting to keep their own existence a secret. Well, in that case, why do they never stay still for anything more than a single-shot photo? There has never been an uncut roll of film offered, let alone a small piece of a metal unavailable on earth, or a tiny sample of tissue. And sketches of the beings have a consistent anthropomorphic resemblance to those offered in science-fiction comics. Since travel from Alpha Centauri (the preferred origin) would involve some bending of the laws of physics, even the smallest particle of matter would be of enormous use, and would have a literally earth-shattering effect. Instead of which—nothing. Nothing, that is, except the growth of a huge new superstition, based upon a belief in occult texts and shards that are available only to a favored few. Well, I have seen that happen before. The only responsible decision is to suspend or withhold judgment until the votaries have come up with something that is not merely childish.

Extend this to the present day, where the statues of virgins or saints are sometimes said to weep or bleed. Even if I could not easily introduce you to people who can produce this identical effect in their spare time, using pig fat or other materials, I would still ask myself why a deity should be content to produce such a paltry effect. As it happens, I am one of the very few people who has ever taken part in the examination of a sainthood “cause,” as the Roman Catholic Church calls it. In June of 2001 I was invited by the Vatican to testify at a hearing on the beatification of Agnes Bojaxhiu, an ambitious Albanian nun who had become well-known under the nom de guerre of “Mother Teresa.” Although the then pope had abolished the famous office of “Devil’s Advocate,” the better to confirm and canonize an enormous number of new “saints,”

the church was still obliged to seek testimony from critics, and thus I found myself representing the devil, as it were, pro bono.

I had already helped expose one of the “miracles” connected with the work of this woman. The man who originally made her famous was a distinguished if rather silly British evangelist (later a Catholic) named Malcolm Muggeridge. It was his BBC documentary, *Something Beautiful for God*, which launched the “Mother Teresa” brand on the world in 1969. The cameraman for this film was a man named Ken Macmillan, who had won high praise for his work on Lord Clark’s great art history series, *Civilisation*. His understanding of color and lighting was of a high order. Here is the story as Muggeridge told it, in the book that accompanied the film:

[Mother Teresa’s] Home for the Dying is dimly lit by small windows high up in the walls, and Ken [Macmillan] was adamant that filming was quite impossible there. We only had one small light with us, and to get the place adequately lighted in the time at our disposal was quite impossible. It was decided that, nonetheless, Ken should have a go, but by way of insurance he took, as well, some film in an outside courtyard where some of the inmates were sitting in the sun. In the processed film, the part taken inside was bathed in a particularly beautiful soft light, whereas the part taken outside was rather dim and confused. . . . I myself am absolutely convinced that the technically unaccountable light is, in fact, the Kindly Light that Cardinal Newman refers to in his well-known exquisite hymn.

He concluded that

This is precisely what miracles are for—to reveal the inner reality of God’s outward creation. I am personally persuaded that Ken recorded the first authentic photographic miracle. . . . I fear I talked and wrote about it to the point of tedium.

He was certainly correct in that last sentence: by the time he had finished he had made Mother Teresa into a world-famous figure. My contribution was to check out and put into print the direct verbal testimony of Ken Macmillan, the cameraman himself. Here it is:

During *Something Beautiful for God*, there was an episode where we were taken to a building that Mother Teresa called the House of the Dying. Peter Chafer, the director, said, “Ah well, it’s very dark in here. Do you think we can get something?” And we had just taken delivery at the BBC of some new film made by Kodak, which we hadn’t had time to test before we left, so I said to Peter, “Well, we may as well have a go.” So we shot it. And when we got back several weeks later, a month or two later, we are sitting in the rushes theater at Ealing Studios and eventually up come the shots of the House of the Dying. And it was surprising. You could see every detail. And I said, “That’s amazing. That’s extraordinary.” And I was going to go on to say, you know, three cheers for Kodak. I didn’t get a chance to say that though, because Malcolm, sitting in the front row, spun around and said: “It’s divine light! It’s Mother Teresa. You’ll find that it’s divine light, old boy.” And three or four days later I found that I was being phoned by journalists from London newspapers who were saying things like:

“We hear you’ve just come back from India with Malcolm Muggeridge and you were the witness of a miracle.”

Soa star was born . . . For these and for my other criticisms I was invited by the Vatican into a closed room containing a Bible, a tape recorder, a monsignor, a deacon, and a priest, and asked if I could throw any light of my own on the matter of “the Servant of God, Mother Teresa.” But, even as they appeared to be asking me this in good faith, their colleagues on the other side of the world were certifying the necessary “miracle” that would allow the beatification (prelude to full canonization) to go forward. Mother Teresa died in 1997. On the first anniversary of her death, two nuns in the Bengali village of Raigunj claim to have strapped an aluminum medal of the departed (a medal that had supposedly been in contact with her dead body) to the abdomen of a woman named Monica Besra. This woman, who was said to be suffering from a large uterine tumor, was thereupon quite cured of it. It will be noticed that Monica is a Catholic girl’s name not very common in Bengal, and thus that probably the patient and certainly the nuns were already Mother Teresa fans. This definition would not cover Dr. Manju Murshed, the superintendent of the local hospital, nor Dr. T. K. Biswas and his gynecologist colleague Dr. Ranjan Mustafi. All three came forward to say that Mrs. Besra had been suffering from tuberculosis and an ovarian growth, and had been successfully treated for both afflictions. Dr. Murshed was particularly annoyed at the numerous calls he had received from Mother Teresa’s order, the “Missionaries of Charity,” pressing him to say that the cure had been miraculous. The patient herself did not make a very impressive interview subject, talking at high speed because, as she put it, she “might otherwise forget” and begging to be excused questions because she might have to “remember.” Her own husband, a man named Selku Murmu, broke silence after a while to say that his wife had been cured by ordinary, regular medical treatment.

Any hospital supervisor in any country will tell you that patients sometimes make astonishing recoveries (just as apparently healthy people often fall inexplicably and gravely ill). Those who desire to *certify* miracles may wish to say that such recoveries have no “natural” explanation. But this does not at all mean that there is therefore a “supernatural” one. In this case, however, there was nothing even remotely surprising in Mrs. Besra’s return to health. Some familiar disorders had been treated with well-known methods. Extraordinary claims were being made without even ordinary evidence. Yet there will soon come a day in Rome when a vast and solemn ceremony will proclaim the sainthood of Mother Teresa, as one whose intercession can improve upon medicine, to the entire world. Not only is this a scandal in itself, but it will further postpone the day when Indian villagers cease to trust quacks and fakirs. In other words, many people will die needlessly as a result of this phony and contemptible “miracle.” If this is the best the church can do in a time when its claims can be checked by physicians and reporters, it isn’t difficult to imagine what was rigged in past times of ignorance and fear, when the priests faced less doubt or opposition.

Once again the razor of Ockham is clean and decisive. When two explanations are offered, one must discard the one that explains the least, or explains nothing at all, or raises more questions than it answers.

The same goes for those occasions when the laws of nature are apparently suspended in a way that does not offer joy or apparent consolation. Natural disasters are actually not violations of the laws of nature, but rather are part of the inevitable fluctuations within them, but they have always been used to overawe the gullible with the mightiness of god's disapproval. Early Christians, operating in zones of Asia Minor where earthquakes were and are frequent, would rally crowds when a pagan temple fell down, and urge them to convert while there was still time. The colossal volcanic explosion at Krakatoa in the late nineteenth century provoked an enormous swing toward Islam among the terrified population of Indonesia. All the holy books talk excitedly of floods, hurricanes, lightning, and other portents. After the terrible Asian tsunami of 2004, and after the inundation of New Orleans in 2005, quite serious and learned men such as the archbishop of Canterbury were reduced to the level of stupefied peasants when they publicly agonized over how to interpret god's will in the matter. But if one makes the simple assumption, based on absolutely certain knowledge, that we live on a planet that is still cooling, has a molten core, faults and cracks in its crust, and a turbulent weather system, then there is simply no need for any such anxiety. Everything is already explained. I fail to see why the religious are so reluctant to admit this: it would free them from all the futile questions about why god permits so much suffering. But apparently this annoyance is a small price to pay in order to keep alive the myth of divine intervention.

The suspicion that a calamity might also be a punishment is further useful in that it allows an infinity of speculation. After New Orleans, which suffered from a lethal combination of being built below sea level and neglected by the Bush administration, I learned from a senior rabbi in Israel that it was revenge for the evacuation of Jewish settlers from the Gaza Strip, and from the mayor of New Orleans (who had not performed his own job with exceptional prowess) that it was god's verdict on the invasion of Iraq. You can nominate your own favorite sin here, as did the "reverends" Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell after the immolation of the World Trade Center. In that instance, the proximate cause was to be sought and found in America's surrender to homosexuality and abortion. (Some ancient Egyptians believed that sodomy was the cause of earthquakes: I expect this interpretation to revive with especial force when the San Andreas Fault next gives a shudder under the Gomorrah of San Francisco.) When the debris had eventually settled on Ground Zero, it was found that two pieces of mangled girder still stood in the shape of a cross, and much wondering comment resulted. Since all architecture has always involved crossbeams, it would be surprising only if such a feature did not emerge. I admit that I would have been impressed if the wreckage had formed itself into a Star of David or a star and crescent, but there is no record of this ever having occurred anywhere, even in places where local people might be impressed by it. And remember, miracles are supposed to occur at the behest of a

being who is omnipotent as well as omniscient and omnipresent. One might hope for more magnificent performances than ever seem to occur.

The “evidence” for faith, then, seems to leave faith looking even weaker than it would if it stood, alone and unsupported, all by itself. What can be asserted without evidence can also be dismissed without evidence. This is even more true when the “evidence” eventually offered is so shoddy and self-interested.

The “argument from authority” is the weakest of all arguments. It is weak when it is asserted at second or third hand (“the Good Book says”), and it is even weaker when asserted at first hand, as every child knows who has heard a parent say “because I say so” (and as every parent knows who has heard himself reduced to uttering words he once found so unconvincing). Nonetheless, it takes a certain “leap” of another kind to find oneself asserting that all religion is made up by ordinary mammals and has no secret or mystery to it. Behind the veil of Oz, there is nothing but bluff. Can this really be true? As one who has always been impressed by the weight of history and culture, I do keep asking myself this question. Was it all in vain, then: the great struggle of the theologians and scholars, and the stupendous efforts of painters and architects and musicians to create something lasting and marvelous that would testify to the glory of god?

Not at all. It does not matter to me whether Homer was one person or many, or whether Shakespeare was a secret Catholic or a closet agnostic. I should not feel my own world destroyed if the greatest writer about love and tragedy and comedy and morals was finally revealed to have been the Earl of Oxford all along, though I must add that sole authorship is important to me and I would be saddened and diminished to learn that Bacon had been the man. Shakespeare has much more moral salience than the Talmud or the Koran or any account of the fearful squabbles of Iron Age tribes. But there is a great deal to be learned and appreciated from the scrutiny of religion, and one often finds oneself standing atop the shoulders of distinguished writers and thinkers who were certainly one’s intellectual and sometimes even one’s moral superiors. Many of them, in their own time, had ripped away the disguise of idolatry and paganism, and even risked martyrdom for the sake of disputes with their own coreligionists. However, a moment in history has now arrived when even a pygmy such as myself can claim to know more—through no merit of his own—and to see that the final ripping of the whole disguise is overdue. Between them, the sciences of textual criticism, archaeology, physics, and molecular biology have shown religious myths to be false and man-made and have also succeeded in evolving better and more enlightened explanations. The loss of faith can be compensated by the newer and finer wonders that we have before us, as well as by immersion in the near-miraculous work of Homer and Shakespeare and Milton and Tolstoy and Proust, all of which was also “man-made” (though one sometimes wonders, as in the case of Mozart). I can say this as one whose own secular faith has been shaken and discarded, not without pain.

When I was a Marxist, I did not hold my opinions as a matter of faith but I did have the conviction that a sort of unified field theory might have been discovered. The

concept of historical and dialectical materialism was not an absolute and it did not have any supernatural element, but it did have its messianic element in the idea that an ultimate moment might arrive, and it most certainly had its martyrs and saints and doctrinaires and (after a while) its mutually excommunicating rival papacies. It also had its schisms and inquisitions and heresy hunts. I was a member of a dissident sect that admired Rosa Luxemburg and Leon Trotsky, and I can say definitely that we also had our prophets. Rosa Luxemburg seemed almost like a combination of Cassandra and Jeremiah when she thundered about the consequences of the First World War, and the great three-volume biography of Leon Trotsky by Isaac Deutscher was actually entitled *The Prophet* (in his three stages of being armed, unarmed, and outcast). As a young man Deutscher had been trained for the rabbinate, and would have made a brilliant Talmudist—as would Trotsky. Here is what Trotsky says—anticipating the gnostic Gospel of Judas—about the way that Stalin took over the Bolshevik Party:

Of Christ's twelve Apostles Judas alone proved to be traitor. But if he had acquired power, he would have represented the other eleven Apostles as traitors, and also all the lesser Apostles whom Luke numbers as seventy.

And here, in Deutscher's chilling words, is what happened when the pro-Nazi forces in Norway forced the government to deny Trotsky asylum and deport him once again, to wander the world until he met death. The old man met with the Norwegian foreign minister Tr ygve Lie and others, and then:

Trotsky raised his voice so that it resounded through the halls and corridors of the Ministry: "This is your first act of surrender to Nazism in your own country. You will pay for this. You think yourselves free and secure to deal with a political exile as you please. But the day is near—remember this!—the day is near when the Nazis will drive you from your country, all of you . . ." Tr ygve Lie shrugged at this odd piece of sooth-saying. Yet after less than four years the same government had indeed to flee from Norway before the Nazi invasion; and as the Ministers and their aged King Haakon stood on the coast, huddled together and waiting anxiously for a boat that was to take them to England, they recalled with awe Trotsky's words as a prophet's curse come true.

Trotsky had a sound materialist critique that enabled him to be prescient, not all of the time by any means, but impressively so on some occasions. And he certainly had a sense—expressed in his emotional essay *Literature and Revolution*—of the unquenchable yearning of the poor and oppressed to rise above the strictly material world and to achieve something transcendent. For a good part of my life, I had a share in this idea that I have not yet quite abandoned. But there came a time when I could not protect myself, and indeed did not wish to protect myself, from the onslaught of reality. Marxism, I conceded, had its intellectual and philosophical and ethical glories, but they were in the past. Something of the heroic period might perhaps be retained, but the fact had to be faced: there was no longer any guide to the future. In addition, the very concept of a total solution had led to the most appalling human sacrifices, and to the invention of excuses for them. Those of us who had sought a rational alterna-

tive to religion had reached a terminus that was comparably dogmatic. What else was to be expected of something that was produced by the close cousins of chimpanzees? Infallibility? Thus, dear reader, if you have come this far and found your own faith undermined—as I hope—I am willing to say that to some extent I know what you are going through. There are days when I miss my old convictions as if they were an amputated limb. But in general I feel better, and no less radical, and you will feel better too, I guarantee, once you leave hold of the doctrinaire and allow your chainless mind to do its own thinking.

Chapter Eleven. “The Lowly Stamp of Their Origin”: Religion’s Corrupt Beginnings

Where questions of religion are concerned, people are guilty of every possible sort of dishonesty and intellectual misdemeanor.

—Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*

The various forms of worship, which prevailed in the Roman world, were all considered by the people to be equally true, by the philosopher as equally false, and by the magistrate as equally useful.

—Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*

An old popular saying from Chicago has it that if you want to maintain your respect for city aldermen, or your appetite for sausages, you should take care not to be present when the former are being groomed or the latter are being manufactured. It is the anatomy of man, said Engels, that is the key to the anatomy of the ape. Thus, if we watch the process of a religion in its formation, we can make some assumptions about the origins of those religions that were put together before most people could read. From a wide selection of openly manufactured sausage religions, I shall pick the Melanesian “cargo cult,” the Pentecostal superstar **Marjoe**, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, commonly known as the Mormons.

The thought has surely occurred to many people throughout the ages: what if there is an afterlife but no god? What if there is a god but no afterlife? As far as I know, the clearest writer to give expression to this problem was Thomas Hobbes in his 1651 masterwork *Leviathan*. I strongly recommend that you read part III, chapter 38, and part IV, chapter 44, for yourselves, because Hobbes’s command of both holy scripture and the English language is quite breathtaking. He also reminds us how perilous it was, and always has been, even to think about these things. His brisk and ironic throat-clearing is eloquent in itself. Reflecting on the nonsense story of Adam’s “Fall” (the original instance of someone being created free and then loaded with impossible-to-obey prohibitions), Hobbes opined—not forgetting fearfully to add that he did so “with submission nevertheless both in this, and in all questions, whereof the determination dependeth on the Scriptures”—that if Adam was condemned to death by sinning, his death must have been postponed, since he contrived to raise a large posterity before actually dying.

Having planted the subversive thought—that forbidding Adam to eat from one tree lest he die, and from another lest he live forever, is absurd and contradictory—Hobbes was forced to imagine alternative scriptures and even alternative punishments and alternative eternities. His point was that people might not obey the rule of men if they were more afraid of divine retribution than of horrible death in the here and now, but he had acknowledged the process whereby people are always free to make up a religion that suits or gratifies or flatters them. Samuel Butler was to adapt this idea in his *Erewhon Revisited*. In the original *Erewhon*, Mr. Higgs pays a visit to a remote country from which he eventually makes his escape in a balloon. Returning two decades later, he finds that in his absence he has become a god named the “Sun Child,” worshipped on the day he ascended into heaven. Two high priests are on hand to celebrate the ascension, and when Higgs threatens to expose them and reveal himself as a mere mortal he is told, “You must not do that, because all the morals of this country are bound around this myth, and if they once know that you did not ascend into heaven they will all become wicked.”

In 1964 there appeared a celebrated documentary movie called *Mondo Cane*, or “the world of the dog,” in which the directors captured numerous human cruelties and illusions. This was the first occasion on which one could see a new religion being assembled, in plain view, on camera. The inhabitants of the Pacific islands may have been separated for centuries from the more economically developed world, but when visited by the fatal impact many of them were shrewd enough to get the point immediately. Here were great vessels with billowing sails, bearing treasures and weapons and devices that were beyond any compare. Some of the more untutored islanders did what many people do when confronted with a new phenomenon, and tried to translate it into a discourse that they could themselves understand (not unlike those fearful Aztecs who, first seeing mounted Spanish soldiers in Mesoamerica, concluded that they had a centaur for an enemy). These poor souls decided that the westerners were their long-mourned ancestors, come back at last with goods from beyond the grave. That illusion cannot long have survived the encounter with the colonists, but later it was observed in several places that the brighter islanders had a better idea. Docks and jetties were built, they noticed, after which more ships came and unloaded more goods. Acting by analogy and mimesis, the locals constructed their own jetties and waited for these, too, to attract some ships. Futile as this proceeding was, it badly retarded the advance of later Christian missionaries. When they made their appearance, they were asked where the gifts were (and soon came up with some trinkets).

In the twentieth century the “cargo cult” revived in an even more impressive and touching form. Units of the United States armed forces, arriving in the Pacific to build airfields for the war on Japan, found that they were the objects of slavish emulation. Local enthusiasts abandoned their lightly worn Christian observances and devoted all their energies to the construction of landing strips that might attract loaded airplanes. They made simulated antennae out of bamboo. They built and lit fires, to simulate the flares that guided the American planes to land. This still goes on, which is the saddest

bit of the Mondo Cane sequence. On the island of Tana, an American GI was declared to be the redeemer. His name, John Frum, seems to have been an invention too. But even after the last serviceman flew or sailed away after 1945, the eventual return of the savior Frum was preached and predicted, and an annual ceremony still bears his name. On another island named New Britain, adjacent to Papua New Guinea, the cult is even more strikingly analogous. It has ten commandments (the “Ten Laws”), a trinity that has one presence in heaven and another on earth, and a ritual system of paying tributes in the hope of propitiating these authorities. If the ritual is performed with sufficient purity and fervor, so its adherents believe, then an age of milk and honey will be ushered in. This radiant future, sad to say, is known as the “Period of the Companies,” and will cause New Britain to flourish and prosper as if it were a multinational corporation.

Some people may be insulted at even the suggestion of a comparison here, but are not the holy books of official monotheism absolutely dripping with material yearning and with admiring—almost mouthwatering—descriptions of Solomon’s wealth, the thriving flocks and herds of the faithful, the rewards for a good Muslim in paradise, to say nothing of many, many lurid tales of plunder and spoils? Jesus, it is true, shows no personal interest in gain, but he does speak of treasure in heaven and even of “mansions” as an inducement to follow him. Is it not further true that all religions down the ages have shown a keen interest in the amassment of material goods in the real world?

The thirst for money and worldly comfort is only a subtext of the mind-numbing story of Marjoe Gortner, the “infant phenomenon” of American evangelical hucksterism. Grotesquely christened “Marjoe” (a cretinous lumping together of the names Mary and Joseph) by his parents, young Master Gortner was thrust into the pulpit at the age of four, dressed in a revolting Little Lord Fauntleroy suit, and told to say that he had been divinely commanded to preach. If he complained or cried, his mother would hold him under the water tap or press a cushion on his face, always being careful, as he relates it, to leave no marks. Trained like a seal, he soon attracted the cameras and by the age of six was officiating at the weddings of grown-ups. His celebrity spread, and many flocked to see the miraculous child. His best guess is that he raised three million dollars in “contributions,” none of which was earmarked for his education or his own future. At the age of seventeen he rebelled against his pitiless and cynical parents and “dropped out” into the early sixties California counterculture.

In the immortal children’s Christmas pantomime Peter Pan, there comes a climactic moment when the little angel Tinkerbell seems to be dying. The glowing light that represents her on the stage begins to dim, and there is only one possible way to save the dire situation. An actor steps up to the front of the house and asks all the children, “Do you believe in fairies?” If they keep confidently answering “YES!” then the tiny light will start to brighten again. Who can object to this? One wants not to spoil children’s belief in magic—there will be plenty of time later for disillusionment—and nobody is waiting at the exit asking them hoarsely to contribute their piggy banks to the Tinkerbell Salvation Church. The events at which Marjoe was exploited had all

the intellectual content of the Tinkerbell scene, nastily combined with the ethics of Captain Hook.

A decade or so later, Mr. Gortner exacted the best possible revenge for his stolen and empty childhood, and decided to do the general public a favor in order to make up for his conscious fraudulence. He invited a film crew to follow him as he ostensibly “returned” to preach the gospel, and took the trouble to explain how all the tricks are pulled. This is how you induce motherly women (he was a handsome lad) to part with their savings. This is how you time the music to create an ecstatic effect. This is when you speak of how Jesus visited you personally. Here is how you put invisible ink on your forehead, in the shape of a cross, so that it will suddenly show up when you start perspiring. This is when you really move in for the kill. He keeps all his promises, telling the film’s director in advance what he can and will do and then going out into the auditorium to enact it with absolute conviction. People weep and yell, and collapse in spasms and fits, shrieking their savior’s name. Cynical, coarse, brutish old men and women wait for the psychological moment to demand money, and start counting it gleefully before the charade of the “service” is even over. Occasionally one sees the face of a small child, dragged to the tent and looking wretched and uncomfortable as its parents writhe and moan and give away their hard-won pay. One knew, of course, that the whole racket of American evangelism was just that: a heartless con run by the second-string characters from Chaucer’s “Pardoner’s Tale.” (You saps keep the faith. We’ll just keep the money.) And this is what it must have been like when indulgences were openly sold in Rome, and when a nail or a splinter from the Crucifixion could fetch a nice price in any flea market in Christendom. But to see the crime exposed by someone who is both a victim and a profiteer is nonetheless quite shocking even to a hardened unbeliever. After such knowledge, what forgiveness? The film *Marjoe* won an Academy Award in 1972, and has made absolutely no difference at all. The mills of the TV preachers continue to grind, and the poor continue to finance the rich, just as if the glittering temples and palaces of Las Vegas had been built by the money of those who won rather than those who lost.

In his bewitching novel *The Child in Time*, Ian McEwan gives us a desolate character and narrator who is reduced by tragedy to a near-inert state in which he vacantly watches a great deal of daytime TV. Observing the way in which his fellow creatures allow themselves—volunteer themselves—to be manipulated and humiliated, he coins the phrase for those who indulge themselves in witnessing the spectacle. It is, he decides, “the democrat’s pornography.” It is not snobbish to notice the way in which people show their gullibility and their herd instinct, and their wish, or perhaps their need, to be credulous and to be fooled. This is an ancient problem. Credulity may be a form of innocence, and even innocuous in itself, but it provides a standing invitation for the wicked and the clever to exploit their brothers and sisters, and is thus one of humanity’s great vulnerabilities. No honest account of the growth and persistence of religion, or the reception of miracles and revelations, is possible without reference to this stubborn fact.

If the followers of the prophet Muhammad hoped to put an end to any future “revelations” after the immaculate conception of the Koran, they reckoned without the founder of what is now one of the world’s fastest-growing faiths. And they did not foresee (how could they, mammals as they were?) that the prophet of this ridiculous cult would model himself on theirs. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—hereafter known as the Mormons—was founded by a gifted opportunist who, despite couching his text in openly plagiarized Christian terms, announced that “I shall be to this generation a new Muhammad” and adopted as his fighting slogan the words, which he thought he had learned from Islam, “Either the Al-Koran or the sword.” He was too ignorant to know that if you use the word al you do not need another definite article, but then he did resemble Muhammad in being able only to make a borrowing out of other people’s bibles.

In March 1826 a court in Bainbridge, New York, convicted a twenty-one-year-old man of being “a disorderly person and an impostor.” That ought to have been all we ever heard of Joseph Smith, who at trial admitted to defrauding citizens by organizing mad gold-digging expeditions and also to claiming to possess dark or “necromantic” powers. However, within four years he was back in the local newspapers (all of which one may still read) as the discoverer of the “Book of Mormon.” He had two huge local advantages which most mountebanks and charlatans do not possess. First, he was operating in the same hectically pious district that gave us the Shakers, the previously mentioned George Miller who repeatedly predicted the end of the world, and several other self-proclaimed American prophets. So notorious did this local tendency become that the region became known as the “Burned-Over District,” in honor of the way in which it had surrendered to one religious craze after another. Second, he was operating in an area which, unlike large tracts of the newly opening North America, did possess the signs of an ancient history.

A vanished and vanquished Indian civilization had bequeathed a considerable number of burial mounds, which when randomly and amateurishly desecrated were found to contain not merely bones but also quite advanced artifacts of stone, copper, and beaten silver. There were eight of these sites within twelve miles of the underperforming farm which the Smith family called home. There were two equally stupid schools or factions who took a fascinated interest in such matters: the first were the gold-diggers and treasure-diviners who brought their magic sticks and crystals and stuffed toads to bear in the search for lucre, and the second those who hoped to find the resting place of a lost tribe of Israel. Smith’s cleverness was to be a member of both groups, and to unite cupidity with half-baked anthropology.

The actual story of the imposture is almost embarrassing to read, and almost embarrassingly easy to uncover. (It has been best told by Dr. Fawn Brodie, whose 1945 book *No Man Knows My History* was a good-faith attempt by a professional historian to put the kindest possible interpretation on the relevant “events.”) In brief, Joseph Smith announced that he had been visited (three times, as is customary) by an angel named Moroni. The said angel informed him of a book, “written upon gold plates,”

which explained the origins of those living on the North American continent as well as the truths of the gospel. There were, further, two magic stones, set in the twin breast-plates Urim and Thummim of the Old Testament, that would enable Smith himself to translate the aforesaid book. After many wrestlings, he brought this buried apparatus home with him on September 21, 1827, about eighteen months after his conviction for fraud. He then set about producing a translation.

The resulting “books” turned out to be a record set down by ancient prophets, beginning with Nephi, son of Levi, who had fled Salem in approximately 600 BC and come to America. Many battles, curses, and afflictions accompanied their subsequent wanderings and those of their numerous progeny. How did the books turn out to be this way? Smith refused to show the golden plates to anybody, claiming that for other eyes to view them would mean death. But he encountered a problem that will be familiar to students of Islam. He was extremely glib and fluent as a debater and story-weaver, as many accounts attest. But he was illiterate, at least in the sense that while he could read a little, he could not write. A scribe was therefore necessary to take his inspired dictation. This scribe was at first his wife Emma and then, when more hands were necessary, a luckless neighbor named Martin Harris. Hearing Smith cite the words of Isaiah 29, verses 11–12, concerning the repeated injunction to “Read,” Harris mortgaged his farm to help in the task and moved in with the Smiths. He sat on one side of a blanket hung across the kitchen, and Smith sat on the other with his translation stones, intoning through the blanket. As if to make this an even happier scene, Harris was warned that if he tried to glimpse the plates, or look at the prophet, he would be struck dead.

Mrs. Harris was having none of this, and was already furious with the fecklessness of her husband. She stole the first hundred and sixteen pages and challenged Smith to reproduce them, as presumably—given his power of revelation—he could. (Determined women like this appear far too seldom in the history of religion.) After a very bad few weeks, the ingenious Smith countered with another revelation. He could not replicate the original, which might be in the devil’s hands by now and open to a “satanic verses” interpretation. But the all-foreseeing Lord had meanwhile furnished some smaller plates, indeed the very plates of Nephi, which told a fairly similar tale. With infinite labor, the translation was resumed, with new scribes behind the blanket as occasion demanded, and when it was completed all the original golden plates were transported to heaven, where apparently they remain to this day.

Mormon partisans sometimes say, as do Muslims, that this cannot have been fraudulent because the work of deception would have been too much for one poor and illiterate man. They have on their side two useful points: if Muhammad was ever convicted in public of fraud and attempted necromancy we have no record of the fact, and Arabic is a language that is somewhat opaque even to the fairly fluent outsider. However, we know the Koran to be made up in part of earlier books and stories, and in the case of Smith it is likewise a simple if tedious task to discover that twenty-five thousand words of the Book of Mormon are taken directly from the Old Testament.

These words can mainly be found in the chapters of Isaiah available in Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews: The Ten Tribes of Israel in America*. This then popular work by a pious loony, claiming that the American Indians originated in the Middle East, seems to have started the other Smith on his gold-digging in the first place. A further two thousand words of the Book of Mormon are taken from the New Testament. Of the three hundred and fifty "names" in the book, more than one hundred come straight from the Bible and a hundred more are as near stolen as makes no difference. (The great Mark Twain famously referred to it as "chloroform in print," but I accuse him of hitting too soft a target, since the book does actually contain "The Book of Ether.") The words "and it came to pass" can be found at least two thousand times, which does admittedly have a soporific effect. Quite recent scholarship has exposed every single other Mormon "document" as at best a scrawny compromise and at worst a pitiful fake, as Dr. Brodie was obliged to notice when she reissued and updated her remarkable book in 1973.

Like Muhammad, Smith could produce divine revelations at short notice and often simply to suit himself (especially, and like Muhammad, *when* he wanted a new girl and wished to take her as another wife). As a result, he overreached himself and came to a violent end, having meanwhile excommunicated almost all the poor men who had been his first disciples and who had been browbeaten into taking his dictation. Still, this story raises some very absorbing questions, concerning what happens when a plain racket turns into a serious religion before our eyes.

Professor Daniel Dennett and his supporters have attracted a great deal of criticism for their "natural science" explanation of religion. Never mind the supernatural, argues Dennett, we may discard that while accepting that there have always been those for whom "belief in belief" is a good thing in itself. Phenomena can be explained in biological terms. In primitive times, is it not possible that those who believed in the shaman's cure had a better morale as a result, and thus a slightly but significantly higher chance of actually being cured? "Miracles" and similar nonsense to one side, not even modern medicine rejects this thought. And it seems possible, moving to the psychological arena, that people can be better off believing in something than in nothing, however untrue that something may be.

Some of this will always be disputed among anthropologists and other scientists, but what interests me and always has is this: Do the preachers and prophets also believe, or do they too just "believe in belief"? Do they ever think to themselves, this is too easy? And do they then rationalize the trick by saying that either (a) if these wretches weren't listening to me they'd be in even worse shape; or (b) that if it doesn't do them any good then it still can't be doing them much harm? Sir James Frazer, in his famous study of religion and magic *The Golden Bough*, suggests that the novice witch doctor is better off if he does not share the illusions of the ignorant congregation. For one thing, if he does take the magic literally he is much more likely to make a career-ending mistake. Better by far to be a cynic, and to rehearse the conjury, and to tell himself that everybody is better off in the end. Smith obviously seems like a mere cynic, in

that he was never happier than when using his “revelation” to claim supreme authority, or to justify the idea that the flock should make over their property to him, or to sleep with every available woman. There are gurus and cult leaders of that kind born every day. Smith must certainly have thought it was too easy to get innocent wretches like Martin Harris to believe everything he told them, especially when they were thirsty for just a glimpse of that mouthwatering golden trove. But was there a moment when he also believed that he did have a destiny, and was ready to die to prove it? In other words, was he a huckster all the time, or was there a pulse inside him somewhere? The study of religion suggests to me that, while it cannot possibly get along without great fraud and also minor fraud, this remains a fascinating and somewhat open question.

There were dozens of part-educated, unscrupulous, ambitious, fanatical men like Smith in the Palmyra, New York, area at that epoch, but only one of them achieved “takeoff.” This is for two probable reasons. First, and by all accounts, including those of his enemies, Smith had great natural charm and authority and fluency: what Max Weber called the “charismatic” part of leadership. Second, there were at that time a great number of people hungry for soil and a new start in the West, constituting a huge latent force behind the notion of a new leader (let alone a new holy book) that could augur a “Promised Land.” The wanderings of the Mormons in Missouri and Illinois and Utah, and the massacres that they both suffered and inflicted on the way, gave body and sinew to the idea of martyrdom and exile—and to the idea of the “Gentiles,” as they scornfully called the unbelievers. It is a great historical story and (unlike its origin in a piece of vulgar fabrication) can be read with respect. It does, however, have two indelible stains. The first is the sheer obviousness and crudity of its “revelations,” which were opportunistically improvised by Smith and later by his successors as they went along. And the second is its revoltingly crude racism. Christian preachers of all kinds had justified slavery until the American Civil War and even afterwards, on the supposed biblical warrant that of the three sons of Noah (Shem, Ham, and Japhet), Ham had been cursed and cast into servitude. But Joseph Smith took this nasty fable even further, fulminating in his “Book of Abraham” that the swarthy races of Egypt had inherited this very curse. Also, at the made-up battle of “Cumorah,” a site located conveniently near his own birthplace, the “Nephites”—described as fair-skinned and “handsome”—contended against the “Lamanites,” whose descendants were punished with dark pigment for turning away from god. As the crisis over American slavery mounted, Smith and his even more dubious disciples preached against the abolitionists in antebellum Missouri. They solemnly said that there had been a third group in heaven during the ultimate battle between God and Lucifer. This group, as it was explained, had tried to remain neutral. But after Lucifer’s defeat they had been forced into the world, compelled “to take bodies in the accursed lineage of Canaan; and hence the negro or African race.” Thus, when Dr. Brodie first wrote her book, no black American was allowed to hold even the lowly position of deacon, let alone a priesthood, in the Mormon Church. Nor were the descendants of Ham admitted to the sacred rites of the temple.

If anything proves the human manufacture of religion, it is the way that the Mormon elders resolved this difficulty. Confronted by the plain words of one of their holy books and the increasing contempt and isolation that it imposed upon them, they did as they had done when their fondness for polygamy would have brought federal retribution upon god's own Utah. They had still another "revelation", on 8 June 1978, thirteen years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, in which it was divinely disclosed to them that black people were human after all.

It must be said for the "Latter-day Saints" (these conceited words were added to Smith's original "Church of Jesus Christ" in 1833) that they have squarely faced one of the great difficulties of revealed religion. This is the problem of what to do about those who were born before the exclusive "revelation," or who died without ever having the opportunity to share in its wonders. Christians used to resolve this problem by saying that Jesus descended into hell after his crucifixion, where it is thought that he saved or converted the dead. There is indeed a fine passage in Dante's *Inferno* where he comes to rescue the spirits of great men like Aristotle, who had presumably been boiling away for centuries until he got around to them. (In another less ecumenical scene from the same book, the Prophet Muhammad is found being disemboweled in revolting detail.) The Mormons have improved on this rather backdated solution with something very literal-minded. They have assembled a gigantic genealogical database at a huge repository in Utah, and are busy filling it with the names of all people whose births, marriages, and deaths have been tabulated since records began. This is very useful if you want to look up your own family tree, and as long as you do not object to having your ancestors becoming Mormons. Every week, at special ceremonies in Mormon temples, the congregations meet and are given a certain quota of names of the departed to "pray in" to their church. This retrospective baptism of the dead seems harmless enough to me, but the American Jewish Committee became incensed when it was discovered that the Mormons had acquired the records of the Nazi "final solution," and were industriously baptizing what for once could truly be called a "lost tribe": the murdered Jews of Europe. For all its touching inefficacy, this exercise seemed in poor taste. I sympathize with the American Jewish Committee, but I nonetheless think that the followers of Mr. Smith should be congratulated for hitting upon even the most simpleminded technological solution to a problem that has defied solution ever since man first invented religion.

Chapter Twelve. A Coda: How Religions End

It can be equally useful and instructive to take a glimpse at the closing of religions, or religious movements. The Millerites, for example, are no more. And we shall not hear again, in any but the most vestigial and nostalgic way, of Pan or Osiris or any of the thousands of gods who once held people in utter thrall. But I have to confess to a slight sympathy, that I have tried and failed to repress, for Sabbatai Sevi, the most imposing of the “false Messiahs.” In the mid-seventeenth century, he galvanized whole Jewish communities across the Mediterranean and the Levant (and as far afield as Poland, Hamburg, and even Amsterdam, repudiator of Spinoza) with his claim to be the chosen one who would lead the exiles back to the Holy Land and begin the era of universal peace. His key to revelation was the study of the Kabbalah—more recently revived in fashion by a showbiz woman bizarrely known as Madonna—and his arrival was greeted by hysterical Jewish congregations from his home base in Smyrna to Salonika, Constantinople, and Aleppo. (The rabbis of Jerusalem, having been inconvenienced by premature messianic claims before, were more skeptical.) By the use of Kabbalistic conjury that made his own name the equivalent of “Mosiach” or “Messiah” when unscrambled from a Hebrew anagram, he may have persuaded himself, and certainly persuaded others, that he was the expected one. As one of his disciples phrased it:

The prophet Nathan prophesied and Sabbatai Sevi preached that whoever did not mend his ways would not behold the comforting of Zion and Jerusalem, and that they would be condemned to shame and to everlasting contempt. And there was a repentance, the like of which has never been seen since the world was created and unto this day.

This was no crude “Millerite” panic. Scholars and learned men debated the question passionately and in writing, and as a consequence we have a very good record of events. All the elements of a true (and a false) prophecy were present. Sabbatai’s devotees pointed to his equivalent of John the Baptist, a charismatic rabbi called Nathan of Gaza. Sabbatai’s enemies described him as an epileptic and a heretic, and accused him of violating the law. They in turn were stoned by Sabbatai’s partisans. Convocations and congregations raged together, and raged against each other. On a voyage to announce himself in Constantinople, Sabbatai’s ship was storm-tossed yet he rebuked the waters, and when incarcerated by the Turks his prison was illuminated with holy fires and sweet scents (or not, according to many discrepant accounts). Echoing a

very harsh Christian dispute, the supporters of Rabbi Nathan and Sabbatai maintained that without faith, knowledge of the Torah and the performance of good works would be unavailing. Their opponents asserted that the Torah and good works were the main thing. So complete in every respect was the drama that even the stubbornly anti-Sabbatai rabbis in Jerusalem at one point asked to be told if any verifiable miracles or signs had been attached to the claimant who was intoxicating the Jews with joy. Men and women sold all that they had and prepared to follow him to the Promised Land.

The Ottoman imperial authorities had a good deal of experience in dealing with civil unrest among confessional minorities at the time (they were just in the process of wresting Crete from the Venetians) and behaved with much more circumspection than the Romans are supposed to have done. They understood that if Sabbatai was to claim kingdom over all kings, let alone to claim a large tract of their province in Palestine, then he was a secular challenger as well as a religious one. But when he arrived in Constantinople, all they did was lock him up. The ulema, or Muslim religious authority, was likewise sagacious. They counseled against the execution of this turbulent subject, lest his enthused believers “make a new religion.”

The script was almost complete when a former disciple of Sabbatai's, one Nehemiah Kohen, came to the grand vizier's headquarters in Edirne and denounced his former master as a practitioner of immorality and heresy. Summoned to the vizier's palace, and allowed to make his way from prison with a procession of hymn-singing supporters, the Messiah was very bluntly asked if he would agree to a trial by ordeal. The archers of the court would use him as a target, and if heaven deflected the arrows he would be adjudged genuine. Should he refuse, he would be impaled. If he wished to decline the choice altogether, he could affirm himself to be a true Muslim and be allowed to live. Sabbatai Zevi did what almost any ordinary mammal would have done, made the standard profession of belief in the one god and his messenger and was awarded a sinecure. He was later deported to an almost Judenrein part of the empire, on the Albanian-Montenegrin border, and there expired, supposedly on Yom Kippur 1676, at the precise hour of the evening prayer when Moses is said to have breathed his last. His grave, much sought, has never been conclusively identified.

His distraught followers immediately divided into several factions. There were those who refused to believe in his conversion or apostasy. There were those who argued that he had only become a Muslim in order to be an even greater Messiah. There were those who felt that he had only adopted a disguise. And of course there were those who claimed that he had risen into the heavens. His true disciples eventually adopted the doctrine of “occultation,” which, it may not surprise you to learn, involves the belief that the Messiah, invisible to us, has not “died” at all but awaits the moment when humanity will be ready for his magnificent return. (“Occultation” is also the term employed by pious Shia, to describe the present and long-standing condition of the Twelfth Imam or “Mahdi”: a child of five who apparently vanished from human view in the year 873.)

So the Sabbatai Sevi religion came to an end, and survives only in the tiny syncretic sect known in Turkey as the Donme, which conceals a Jewish loyalty within an outward Islamic observance. But had its founder been put to death, we should be hearing of it still, and of the elaborate mutual excommunications, stonings, and schisms that its followers would subsequently have engaged in. The nearest approximation in our own day is the Hasidic sect known as Chabad, the Lubavitcher movement once led (and according to some, still led) by Menachem Schneerson. This man's death in Brooklyn in 1994 was confidently expected to produce an age of redemption, which it so far has not. The United States Congress had already established an official "day" in Schneerson's honor in 1983. Just as there are still Jewish sects who maintain that the Nazi "final solution" was a punishment for living in exile from Jerusalem, so there are those who preserve the ghetto policy which maintained a watcher at the gates, whose job it was to alert the others if the Messiah arrived unexpectedly. ("It's steady work," as one of these watchmen is supposed, rather defensively, to have said.) Surveying the not-quite and might-have-been religions, one could experience a slight feeling of pathos, were it not for the constant din of other sermonizers, all of them claiming that it is their Messiah, and not anybody else's, who is to be awaited with servility and awe.

Chapter Thirteen. Does Religion Make People Behave Better?

A little more than a century after Joseph Smith fell victim to the violence and mania that he had helped to unleash, another prophetic voice was raised in the United States. A young black pastor named Dr. Martin Luther King began to preach that his people—the descendants of the very slavery that Joseph Smith and all other Christian churches had so warmly approved—should be free. It is quite impossible even for an atheist like myself to read his sermons or watch recordings of his speeches without profound emotion of the sort that can sometimes bring genuine tears. Dr. King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” written in response to a group of white Christian clerics who had urged him to show restraint and “patience”—in other words, to know his place—is a model of polemic. Icily polite and generous-minded, it still breathes with an unquenchable conviction that the filthy injustice of racism must be borne no longer.

Taylor Branch’s magnificent three-volume biography of Dr. King is successively titled *Parting the Waters*, *Pillar of Fire*, and *At Canaan’s Edge*. And the rhetoric with which King addressed his followers was designed to evoke the very story that they all knew best—the one that begins when Moses first tells Pharaoh to “Let my people go.” In speech after speech he inspired the oppressed, and exhorted and shamed their oppressors. Slowly, the embarrassed religious leadership of the country moved to his side. Rabbi Abraham Heschel asked, “Where in America today do we hear a voice like the voice of the prophets of Israel? Martin Luther King is a sign that God has not forsaken the United States of America.”

Most eerie of all, if we follow the Mosaic narrative, was the sermon that King gave on the last night of his life. His work of transforming public opinion and shifting the stubborn Kennedy and Johnson administrations was almost done, and he was in Memphis, Tennessee, to support a long and bitter strike by the city’s ground-down garbage collectors, on whose placards appeared the simple words “I Am a Man.” In the pulpit at Mason Temple, he reviewed the protracted struggle of the past years and then very suddenly said, “But it doesn’t matter with me now.” There was silence until he went on. “Because I’ve been to the mountaintop. And I don’t mind. Like anybody I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And he’s allowed me to go up the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I have seen the Promised Land. And I may not get there with you, but I want you to know, tonight, that we as a people will get to the Promised Land!” Nobody who was there that night has ever forgotten it, and I daresay the same can be

said for anyone who views the film that was so fortunately taken of that transcendent moment. The next best way of experiencing this feeling at second hand is to listen to how Nina Simone sang, that same terrible week, "The King of Love Is Dead." The entire drama has the capacity to unite elements of Moses on Mount Nebo with the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. The effect is scarcely diminished even when we discover that this was one of his favorite sermons, and one that he had delivered several times before, and into which he could slip as occasion demanded.

But the examples King gave from the books of Moses were, **fortunately** for all of us, metaphors and allegories. His most imperative preaching was that of nonviolence. In his version of the story, there are no savage punishments and genocidal bloodlettings. Nor are there cruel commandments about the stoning of children and the burning of witches. His persecuted and despised people were not promised the territory of others, nor were they incited to carry out the pillage and murder of other tribes. In the face of endless provocation and brutality, King beseeched his followers to become what they for a while truly became; the moral tutors of America and of the world beyond its shores. He in effect forgave his murderer in advance: the one detail that would have made his last public words flawless and perfect would have been an actual declaration to that effect. But the difference between him and the "prophets of Israel" could not possibly have been more marked. If the population had been raised from its mother's knee to hear the story of Xenophon's *Anabasis*, and the long wearying dangerous journey of the Greeks to their triumphant view of the sea, that allegory might have done just as well. As it was, though, the "Good Book" was the only point of reference that everybody had in common.

Christian reformism arose originally from the ability of its advocates to contrast the Old Testament with the New. The cobbled-together ancient Jewish books had an ill-tempered and implacable and bloody and provincial god, who was probably more frightening when he was in a good mood (the classic attribute of the dictator). Whereas the cobbled-together books of the last two thousand years contained handholds for the hopeful, and references to meekness, forgiveness, lambs and sheep, and so forth. This distinction is more apparent than real, since it is only in the reported observations of Jesus that we find any mention of hell and eternal punishment. The god of Moses would brusquely call for other tribes, including his favorite one, to suffer massacre and plague and even extirpation, but when the grave closed over his victims he was essentially finished with them unless he remembered to curse their succeeding progeny. Not until the advent of the Prince of Peace do we hear of the ghastly idea of further punishing and torturing the dead. First presaged by the rantings of John the Baptist, the son of god is revealed as one who, if his milder words are not accepted straightaway, will condemn the inattentive to everlasting fire. This has provided texts for clerical sadists ever since, and features very lip-smackingly in the tirades of Islam. At no point did Dr. King—who was once photographed in a bookstore waiting calmly for a physician while the knife of a maniac was sticking straight out of his chest—even hint that those who injured and reviled him were to be threatened with any revenge or punishment, in this

world or the next, save the consequences of their own brute selfishness and stupidity. And he even phrased that appeal more courteously than, in my humble opinion, its targets deserved. In no real as opposed to nominal sense, then, was he a Christian.

This does not in the least diminish his standing as a great preacher, any more than does the fact that he was a mammal like the rest of us, and probably plagiarized his doctoral dissertation, and had a notorious fondness for booze and for women a good deal younger than his wife. He spent the remainder of his last evening in orgiastic dissipation, for which I don't blame him. (These things, which of course disturb the faithful, are rather encouraging in that they show that a high moral character is not a precondition for great moral accomplishments.) But if his example is to be deployed, as it often is, to show that religion has an uplifting and liberating effect, then let us examine the wider claim.

Taking the memorable story of black America as our instance, we should find, first, that the enslaved were not captives of some Pharaoh but of several Christian states and societies that for many years operated a triangular "trade" between the west coast of Africa, the eastern seaboard of North America, and the capitals of Europe. This huge and terrible industry was blessed by all churches and for a long time aroused absolutely no religious protest. (Its counterpart, the slave trade in the Mediterranean and North Africa, was explicitly endorsed by, and carried out in the name of, Islam.) In the eighteenth century, a few dissenting Mennonites and Quakers in America began to call for abolition, as did some freethinkers like Thomas Paine. Thomas Jefferson, ruminating on the way that slavery corrupted and brutalized the masters as well as exploited and tortured the slaves, wrote, "Indeed, I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just." This was a statement as incoherent as it is memorable: given the marvel of a god who was also just there would be, in the long term, nothing much to tremble about. At any rate, the Almighty managed to tolerate the situation while several generations were born and died under the lash, and until slavery became less profitable, and even the British Empire began to get rid of it.

This was the spur for the revival of abolitionism. It sometimes took a Christian form, most notably in the case of William Lloyd Garrison, the great orator and founder of the *Liberator*. Mr. Garrison was a splendid man by any standards, but it is probably fortunate that all of his early religious advice was not followed. He based his initial claim on the dangerous verse from St. Paul that calls on the faithful to "come out, and be separated" (this is also the theological basis of Ian Paisley's fundamentalist and bigoted Presbyterianism in Northern Ireland). In Garrison's view, the Union and the United States Constitution were "a covenant with death" and ought both to be destroyed: it was in effect he who called for secession before the Confederates did. (In later life he discovered the work of Thomas Paine and became less of a preacher and a more effective abolitionist, as well as an early supporter of female suffrage.) It was the escaped slave Frederick Douglass, author of the stirring and mordant *Autobiography*, who eschewed apocalyptic language and demanded instead that the United States live up to the universalist promises contained in its Declaration and its Constitution. The

lionlike John Brown, who also began as a fearsome and pitiless Calvinist, did the same. Later in life, he had Paine's works in his camp and admitted freethinkers to his tiny but epoch-changing army, and even produced and printed a new "Declaration," modeled on that of 1776, on behalf of the enslaved. This was in practice a much more revolutionary as well as a more realistic demand, and prepared the way—as Lincoln admitted—for the Emancipation Proclamation. Douglass was somewhat ambivalent about religion, noting in his Autobiography that the most devout Christians made the most savage slaveholders. The obvious truth of this was underlined when secession really did come and the Confederacy adopted the Latin motto "Deo Vindice" or, in effect, "God on Our Side." As Lincoln pointed out in his highly ambivalent second inaugural address, both sides in the quarrel made that claim, at least in their pulpits, just as both were addicted to loud, confident quotations from holy writ.

Lincoln himself was hesitant to claim authority in this manner. In fact, at one point he famously said that such invocations of the divine were wrong, because it was rather a matter of trying to be on god's side. Pressed to issue an immediate Emancipation Proclamation at a gathering of Christians in Chicago, he continued to see both sides of the argument as endorsed by faith, and said that "these are not, however, the days of miracles, and I suppose it will be granted that I am not to expect a direct revelation." This was neatly evasive, yet when he finally did nerve himself to issue the Proclamation he told the remaining waverers that he had promised himself to do so—on condition that god gave victory to the Union forces at Antietam. On that day, the largest ever number of deaths on United States soil was recorded. So it is possible that Lincoln wanted somehow to sanctify and justify that appalling carnage. This would be a noble enough thing, until one reflects that, on the same logic, the same carnage decided the other way would have postponed the freeing of the slaves! As he also said, "The rebel soldiers are praying with a great deal more earnestness, I fear, than our own troops, and expecting God to favor their side; for one of our soldiers, who had been taken prisoner, said that he met with nothing so discouraging as the evident sincerity of those he was among in their prayers." One more bit of battlefield luck for the gray uniforms at Antietam and the president might have become worried that god had deserted the antislavery cause altogether.

We do not know Lincoln's private religious beliefs. He was fond of references to Almighty God, but he never joined any church and his early candidacies were much opposed by clergymen. His friend Herndon knew that he had read Paine and Volney and other freethinkers very closely and formed the opinion that he was privately an outright unbeliever. This seems improbable. However, it would also be inaccurate to say that he was a Christian. Much evidence supports the view that he was a tormented skeptic with a tendency to deism. Whatever may be the case, the very most that can be said for religion in the grave matter of abolition is that after many hundreds of years, and having both imposed and postponed the issue until self-interest had led to a horrifying war, it finally managed to undo some small part of the damage and misery that it had inflicted in the first place.

The same can be said of the King epoch. The southern churches returned to their old ways after Reconstruction, and blessed the new institutions of segregation and discrimination. It was not until after the Second World War and the spread of decolonization and human rights that the cry for emancipation was raised again. In response, it was again very forcefully asserted (on American soil, in the second half of the twentieth century) that the discrepant descendants of Noah were not intended by god to be mixed. This barbaric stupidity had real-world consequences. The late Senator Eugene McCarthy told me that he had once urged Senator Pat Robertson—father of the present television prophet—to support some mild civil rights legislation. “I’d sure like to help the colored,” came the response, “but the Bible says I can’t.” The entire self-definition of “the South” was that it was white, and Christian. This is exactly what gave Dr. King his moral leverage, because he could outreach the rednecks. But the heavy burden would never have been laid upon him if religiosity had not been so deeply entrenched to begin with. As Taylor Branch shows, many of King’s inner circle and entourage were secular Communists and socialists who had been manuring the ground for a civil rights movement for several decades and helping train brave volunteers like Mrs. Rosa Parks for a careful strategy of mass civil disobedience, and these “atheistic” associations were to be used against King all the time, especially from the pulpit. Indeed, one result of his campaign was to generate the “backlash” of white right-wing Christianity which is still such a potent force below the Mason-Dixon line.

When Dr. King’s namesake nailed his theses to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral in 1517 and later announced at Worms, “Here I stand, I can do no other,” he set a standard for intellectual and moral courage. But Martin Luther, who started his religious life being terribly frightened by a near-miss lightning strike, went on to become a bigot and a persecutor in his own right, railing murderously against Jews, screaming about demons, and calling on the German principalities to stamp on the rebellious poor. When Dr. King took a stand on the steps of Mr. Lincoln’s memorial and changed history, he too adopted a position that had effectively been forced upon him. But he did so as a profound humanist and nobody could ever use his name to justify oppression or cruelty. He endures for that reason, and his legacy has very little to do with his professed theology. No supernatural force was required to make the case against racism.

Anybody, therefore, who uses the King legacy to justify the role of religion in public life must accept all the corollaries of what they seem to be implying. Even a glance at the whole record will show, first, that person for person, American freethinkers and agnostics and atheists come out the best. The chance that someone’s secular or freethinking opinion would cause him or her to denounce the whole injustice was extremely high. The chance that someone’s religious belief would cause him or her to take a stand against slavery and racism was statistically quite small. But the chance that someone’s religious belief would cause him or her to uphold slavery and racism was statistically extremely high, and the latter fact helps us to understand why the victory of simple justice took so long to bring about.

As far as I am aware, there is no country in the world today where slavery is still practiced where the justification of it is not derived from the Koran. This returns us to the retort delivered, in the very early days of the Republic, to Thomas Jefferson. A slaveholder, Jefferson had called on the ambassador of Tripoli in London to ask him by what right he and his fellow Barbary potentates presumed to capture and sell American crews and passengers from ships using the Strait of Gibraltar. (It is now estimated that between 1530 and 1780 more than one and a quarter million Europeans were carried off in this way.) As Jefferson reported to Congress:

The Ambassador answered us that it was founded on the Laws of the Prophet, that it was written in their Koran, that all nations who should not have answered their authority were sinners, that it was their right and duty to make war upon them whenever they could be found and to make slaves of all they could take as prisoners.

Ambassador Abdrahaman went on to mention the requisite price of ransom, the price of protection from kidnapping, and last but not least his own personal commission in these proceedings. (Religion once again betrays its man-made conveniences.) As it happens, he was quite right in what he said about the Koran. The eighth sura, revealed at Medina, deals at some length with the justified spoils of war and dwells continually on the further postmortem “torments of fire” that await those who are defeated by the believers. It was this very sura that was to be used only two centuries later by Saddam Hussein to justify his mass murder and dispossession of the people of Kurdistan.

Another grand historical episode—the emancipation of India from colonial rule—is often portrayed as though it involved a connection between religious belief and ethical outcomes. As with the heroic battle of Dr. King, the real story tends to show that something like the opposite is the case.

After the critical weakening of the British Empire by the First World War, and most particularly after the notorious massacre of Indian protestors at the city of Amritsar in April 1919, it became apparent even to the then controllers of the subcontinent that rule from London would come to an end sooner rather than later. It was no longer a matter of “if” but of “when.” Had this not been the case, a campaign of peaceful disobedience would have stood no chance. Thus Mohandas K. Gandhi (sometimes known as “the Mahatma” in respect for his standing as a Hindu elder) was in a sense pushing at an open door. There is no dishonor in that, but it is exactly his religious convictions that make his legacy a dubious rather than a saintly one. To state the matter shortly: he wanted India to revert to a village-dominated and primitive “spiritual” society, he made power-sharing with Muslims much harder, and he was quite prepared to make hypocritical use of violence when he thought it might suit him.

The whole question of Indian independence was interleaved with the question of unity: would the former British Raj be reborn as the same country, with the same borders and territorial integrity, and yet still be called India? To this, a certain rugged faction of Muslims answered “no.” Under British rule they had enjoyed some protection as a very large minority, not to say a privileged one, and they were not willing to exchange this state of affairs for becoming a large minority in a Hindu-dominated state.

Thus the sheer fact that the main force for independence—the Congress Party—was dominated by a conspicuous Hindu made conciliation very difficult. It could be argued, and indeed I would argue, that Muslim intransigence would have played a destructive role in any case. But the task of persuading ordinary Muslims to leave Congress and to join with the partitionist “Muslim League” was made much easier by Gandhi’s talk of Hinduism and by the long ostentatious hours he spent in cultish practices and in tending his spinning wheel.

This wheel—which still appears as the symbol on the Indian Congress Party flag—was the emblem of Gandhi’s rejection of modernity. He took to dressing in rags of his own manufacture, and sandals, and to carrying a staff, and expressing hostility to machinery and technology. He rhapsodized about the Indian village, where the millennial rhythms of animals and crops would determine how human life was lived. Millions of people would have mindlessly starved to death if his advice had been followed, and would have continued to worship cows (cleverly denominated by the priests as “sacred” so that the poor ignorant people would not kill and eat their only capital during times of drought and famine). Gandhi deserves credit for his criticism of the inhuman Hindu system of caste, whereby lower orders of humanity were condemned to an ostracism and contempt that was in some ways even more absolute and cruel than slavery. But at just the moment when what India most needed was a modern secular nationalist leader, it got a fakir and guru instead. The crux of this unwelcome realization came in 1941, when the Imperial Japanese Army had conquered Malaya and Burma and was on the frontiers of India itself. Believing (wrongly) that this spelled the end of the Raj, Gandhi chose this moment to boycott the political process and issue his notorious call for the British to “Quit India.” He added that they should leave it “To God or to Anarchy,” which in the circumstances would have meant much the same thing. Those who naively credit Gandhi with a conscientious or consistent pacifism might wish to ask if this did not amount to letting the Japanese imperialists do his fighting for him.

Among the many bad consequences of the Gandhi/Congress decision to withdraw from negotiations was the opening it gave to Muslim League adherents to “stay on” in the state ministries which they controlled, and thus to enhance their bargaining positions when the moment for independence arrived shortly thereafter. Their insistence that independence take the form of mutilation and amputation, with western Punjab and eastern Bengal hacked away from the national body, became unstoppable. The hideous consequences endure to this day, with further Muslim-on-Muslim bloodbaths in Bangladesh in 1971, the rise of an aggressive Hindu nationalist party, and a confrontation in Kashmir that is still the likeliest provocation for a thermonuclear war.

There was always an alternative, in the form of the secular position taken by Nehru and Rajagopalachari, who would have traded a British promise of immediate postwar independence for a common alliance, on the part of both India and Britain, against fascism. In the event, it was in fact Nehru and not Gandhi who led his country to independence, even at the awful price of partition. For decades, a solid brotherhood

between British and Indian secularists and leftists had laid out the case for, and won the argument for, the liberation of India. There was never any need for an obscurantist religious figure to impose his ego on the process and both retard and distort it. The whole case was complete without that assumption. One wishes every day that Martin Luther King had lived on and continued to lend his presence and his wisdom to American politics. For “the Mahatma,” who was murdered by members of a fanatical Hindu sect for not being devout enough, one wishes that he could have lived if only to see what damage he had wrought (and is relieved that he did not live to implement his ludicrous spinning-wheel program).

The argument that religious belief improves people, or that it helps to civilize society, is one that people tend to bring up when they have exhausted the rest of their case. Very well, they seem to say, we cease to insist on the Exodus (say), or the Virgin Birth or even the Resurrection, or the “night flight” from Mecca to Jerusalem. But where would people be without faith? Would they not abandon themselves to every kind of license and selfishness? Is it not true, as G. K. Chesterton once famously said, that if people cease to believe in god, they do not believe in nothing but in anything?

The first thing to be said is that virtuous behavior by a believer is no proof at all of—indeed is not even an argument for—the truth of his belief. I might, just for the sake of argument, act more charitably if I believed that Lord Buddha was born from a slit in his mother’s side. But would not this make my charitable impulse dependent upon something rather tenuous? By the same token, I do not say that if I catch a Buddhist priest stealing all the offerings left by the simple folk at his temple, Buddhism is thereby discredited. And we forget in any case how contingent all this is. Of the thousands of possible desert religions there were, as with the millions of potential species there were, one branch happened to take root and grow. Passing through its Jewish mutations to its Christian form, it was eventually adopted for political reasons by the Emperor Constantine, and made into an official faith with—eventually—a codified and enforceable form of its many chaotic and contradictory books. As for Islam, it became the ideology of a highly successful conquest that was adopted by successful ruling dynasties, codified and set down in its turn, and promulgated as the law of the land. One or two military victories the other way—as with Lincoln at Antietam—and we in the West would not be the hostages of village disputes that took place in Judaea and Arabia before any serious records were kept. We could have become the votaries of another belief altogether—perhaps a Hindu or an Aztec or a Confucian one—in which case we should still be told that, strictly true or not, it nonetheless helped teach the children the difference between right and wrong. In other words, to believe in a god is in one way to express a willingness to believe in anything. Whereas to reject the belief is by no means to profess belief in nothing.

I once watched the late Professor A. J. Ayer, the distinguished author of *Language, Truth and Logic* and a celebrated humanist, debate with a certain Bishop Butler. The chairman was the philosopher Bryan Magee. The exchange proceeded politely enough until the bishop, hearing Ayer assert that he saw no evidence at all for the existence

of any god, broke in to say, "Then I cannot see why you do not lead a life of unbridled immorality."

At this point "Freddie," as his friends knew him, abandoned his normal suave urbanity and exclaimed, "I must say that I think that is a perfectly monstrous insinuation." Now, Freddie had certainly broken most commandments respecting the sexual code as adumbrated from Sinai. He was, in a way, justly famous for this. But he was an excellent teacher, a loving parent, and a man who spent much of his spare time pressing for human rights and free speech. To say that his life was an immoral one would be a travesty of the truth.

From the many writers who exemplify the same point in a different way, I shall select Evelyn Waugh, who was of the same faith as Bishop Butler, and who did his best in his fiction to argue for the operations of divine grace. In his novel *Brideshead Revisited* he makes a very acute observation. The two protagonists, Sebastian Flyte and Charles Ryder, the first of whom is heir to an old Catholic nobility, are visited by Father Phipps, who believes that all young men must be passionately interested in cricket. When disabused of this notion, he looks at Charles "with the expression I have seen since in the religious, of innocent wonder that those who expose themselves to the dangers of the world should avail themselves so little of its varied solace."

Thus I rescrutinize Bishop Butler's question. Was he in fact not telling Ayer, in his own naive way, that if freed from the restraints of doctrine he himself would choose to lead "a life of unbridled immorality"? One naturally hopes not. But much empirical evidence exists to reinforce the suggestion. When priests go bad, they go very bad indeed, and commit crimes that would make the average sinner pale. One might prefer to attribute this to sexual repression than to the actual doctrines preached, but then one of the actual doctrines preached is sexual repression . . . Thus the connection is unavoidable, and a litany of folkloric jokes have been told by all lay members of the church ever since religion began.

Waugh's own life was far more stained by offenses against chastity and sobriety than was the life of Ayer (only it seemed to bring less happiness to the former than to the latter), and in consequence he was often asked how he reconciled his private conduct with his public beliefs. His reply has become celebrated: he asked his friends to imagine how much worse he would be if he were not a Catholic. For a believer in original sin this might have served as a turning of the tables, but any examination of Waugh's actual life shows that its most wicked elements arose precisely from his faith. Never mind the sad excesses of drunkenness and marital infidelity: he once sent a wedding telegram to a divorced and now remarried friend telling her that her nuptial night would increase the loneliness of Calvary and add to the spittle on the face of Christ. He supported fascist movements in Spain and Croatia, and Mussolini's foul invasion of Abyssinia, because they enjoyed the support of the Vatican, and he wrote in 1944 that only the Third Reich now stood between Europe and barbarism. These deformities in one of my most beloved authors arose not in spite of his faith, but because of it. No doubt there were private acts of charity and contrition, but these could equally well

have been performed by a person of no faith at all. To look no further than the United States, the great Colonel Robert Ingersoll, who was the nation's leading advocate of unbelief until his death in 1899, maddened his opponents because he was a person of immense generosity, a loving and constant husband and father, a gallant officer, and the possessor of what Thomas Edison with pardonable exaggeration called "all the attributes of a perfect man."

In my own recent life in Washington, I have been bombarded with obscene and menacing phone calls from Muslims, promising to punish my family because I do not support a campaign of lies and hatred and violence against democratic Denmark. But when my wife accidentally left a large amount of cash on the backseat of a taxi, the Sudanese cab driver went to a good deal of trouble and expense to work out whose property this was, and to drive all the way to my home to return it untouched. When I made the vulgar mistake of offering him 10 percent of the money, he made it quietly but firmly plain that he expected no recompense for performing his Islamic duty. Which of these two versions of faith is the one to rely upon?

The question is in some ways ultimately undecidable. I would prefer to have Evelyn Waugh's shelf of writing just as it is, and to appreciate that one cannot have the novels without the torments and evils of its author. And if all Muslims conducted themselves like the man who gave up more than a week's salary in order to do the right thing, I could be quite indifferent to the weird exhortations of the Koran. If I search my own life for instances of good or fine behavior I am not overwhelmed by an excess of choice. I did once, shivering with fear, take off my flak jacket in Sarajevo and lend it to an even more frightened woman who I was helping escort to a place of safety (I am not the only one who has been an atheist in a foxhole). I felt at the time that it was the least I could do for her, as well as the most. The people shelling and sniping were Serbian Christians, but then, so was she.

In northern Uganda in late 2005, I sat in a center for the rehabilitation of kidnapped and enslaved children in the land of the Acholi people who live on the northern side of the Nile. The listless, vacant, hardened little boys (and some girls) were all around me. Their stories were distressingly similar. They had been seized, at the age of anything from eight to thirteen, from their schools or homes by a stone-faced militia that was itself originally made up of abducted children. Marched into the bush, they were "initiated" into the force by one (or two) of two methods. They either had to take part in a murder themselves, in order to feel "dirtied up" and implicated, or they had to submit to a prolonged and savage whipping, often of up to three hundred strokes. ("Children who have felt cruelty," said one of the elders of the Acholi people, "know very well how to inflict it.") The misery inflicted by this army of wretches turned zombies was almost beyond computation. It had razed villages, created a vast refugee population, committed hideous crimes such as mutilation and disemboweling, and (in a special touch of evil) had continued to kidnap children so that the Acholi were wary of taking strong countermeasures lest they kill or injure one of their "own."

The name of the militia was the “Lord’s Resistance Army” (LRA), and it was led by a man named Joseph Kony, a passionate former altar boy who wanted to subject the area to the rule of the Ten Commandments. He baptized by oil and water, held fierce ceremonies of punishment and purification, and insured his followers against death. His was a fanatical preachment of Christianity. As it happened, the rehabilitation center in which I was sitting was also run by a fundamentalist Christian organization. Having been out into the bush and seen the work of the LRA, I fell to talking with the man who tried to repair the damage. How did he know, I asked him, which of them was the truest believer? Any secular or state-run outfit could be doing what he was doing—fitting prosthetic limbs and providing shelter and “counseling”—but in order to be Joseph Kony one had to have real faith.

To my surprise, he did not dismiss my question. It was true, he said, that Kony’s authority arose in part from his background in a priestly Christian family. It was also true that people were apt to believe he could work miracles, by appealing to the spirit world and promising his acolytes that they were death-proof. Even some of those who had run away would still swear that they had seen wonders performed by the man. All that a missionary could do was to try and show people a different face of Christianity.

I was impressed by this man’s frankness. There were some other defenses that he might have offered. Joseph Kony is obviously far away from the Christian “mainstream.” For one thing, his paymasters and armorers are the cynical Muslims of the Sudanese regime, who use him to make trouble for the government of Uganda, which has in turn supported rebel groups in Sudan. In an apparent reward for this support, Kony at one stage began denouncing the keeping and eating of pigs, which, unless he has become a fundamentalist Jew in his old age, suggests a payoff to his bosses. These Sudanese murderers, in their turn, have for years been conducting a war of extermination not just against the Christians and animists of southern Sudan, but against the non-Arab Muslims of Darfur province. Islam may officially make no distinction between races and nations, but the slaughterers in Dar- fur are Arab Muslims and their victims are African Muslims. The “Lord’s Resistance Army” is nothing but a Christian Khmer Rouge sideshow in this more general horror.

An even more graphic example is afforded by the case of Rwanda, which in 1992 gave the world a new synonym for genocide and sadism. This former Belgian possession is the most Christian country in Africa, boasting the highest percentage of churches per head of population, with 65 percent of Rwandans professing Roman Catholicism and another 15 percent adhering to various Protestant sects. The words “per head” took on a macabre ring in 1992, when at a given signal the racist militias of “Hutu Power,” incited by state and church, fell upon their Tutsi neighbors and slaughtered them en masse.

This was no atavistic spasm of bloodletting but a coldly rehearsed African version of the Final Solution, which had been in preparation for some time. The early warning of it came in 1987 when a Catholic visionary with the deceptively folksy name of Little Pebbles began to boast of hearing voices and seeing visions, these deriving from the

Virgin Mary. The said voices and visions were distressingly bloody, predicting massacre and apocalypse but also—as if in compensation—the return of Jesus Christ on Easter Sunday, 1992. Apparitions of Mary on a hilltop named Kibeho were investigated by the Catholic Church and announced to be reliable. The wife of the Rwandan president, Agathe Habyarimana, was specially entranced by these visions and maintained a close relationship with the bishop of Kigali, Rwanda’s capital city. This man, Monsignor Vincent Nsengiyumva, was also a central-committee member of President Habyarimana’s single ruling party, the National Revolutionary Movement for Development, or NRMD. This party, together with other organs of state, was fond of rounding up any women of whom it disapproved as ‘prostitutes’ and of encouraging Catholic activists to trash any stores that sold contraceptives. Over time, the word spread that prophecy would be fulfilled and that the “cockroaches”—the Tutsi minority— would soon get what was coming to them.

When the apocalyptic year of 1994 actually hit, and the premeditated and coordinated massacres began, many frightened Tutsi and dissident Hutu were unwise enough to try and take refuge in churches. This made life considerably easier for the interahamwe, or government and military death squads, who knew where to find them and who could rely on priests and nuns to point out the locations. (This is why so many of the mass-grave sites that have been photographed are on consecrated ground, and it is also why several clergymen and nuns are in the dock at the ongoing Rwandan genocide trials.) The notorious Father Wenceslas Munyeshyaka, for example, a leading figure at the Kigali Cathedral of Saint Famille, was smuggled out of the country with the assistance of French priests, but he has since been charged with genocide, with providing lists of civilians to the interahamwe, and with the rape of young refugee women. He is by no means the only cleric to have faced similar charges. Lest it be thought that he was merely a “rogue” priest, we have the word of another member of the Rwandan hierarchy, the bishop of Gikongoro, otherwise known as Monsignor Augustin Misago. To quote one careful account of these atrocious events:

Bishop Misago was often described as a Hutu Power sympathizer; he had been publicly accused of barring Tutsis from places of refuge, criticizing fellow members of the clergy who helped “cockroaches,” and asking a Vatican emissary who visited Rwanda in June 1994 to tell the Pope “to find a place for Tutsi priests because the Rwandan people do not want them anymore.” What’s more, on May 4 of that year, shortly before the last Marian apparition at Kibeho, the bishop appeared there himself with a team of policemen and told a group of ninety Tutsi schoolchildren, who were being held in preparation for slaughter, not to worry, because the police would protect them. Three days later, the police helped to massacre eighty-two of the children.

Schoolchildren “held in preparation for slaughter” . . . Perhaps you remember the pope’s denunciation of this inefaceable crime, and of the complicity of his church in it? Or perhaps you do not, since no such comment was ever made. Paul Rusesabagina, the hero of Hotel Rwanda, remembers Father Wenceslas Munyeshyaka referring even to his own Tutsi mother as a “cockroach.” But this did not prevent him, before his arrest

in France, from being allowed by the French church to resume his “pastoral duties.” As for Bishop Misago, there were those in the postwar Rwandan Ministry of Justice who felt that he should be charged as well. But, as one of the officials of the Ministry phrased it: “The Vatican is too strong, and too unapologetic, for us to go taking on bishops. Haven’t you heard of infallibility?”

At a minimum, this makes it impossible to argue that religion causes people to behave in a more kindly or civilized manner. The worse the offender, the more devout he turns out to be. It can be added that some of the most dedicated relief workers are also believers (though as it happens the best ones I have met are secularists who were not trying to proselytize for any faith). But the chance that a person committing the crimes was “faith-based” was almost 100 percent, while the chances that a person of faith was on the side of humanity and decency were about as good as the odds of a coin flip. Extend this back into history, and the odds become more like those of an astrological prediction that just happens to come true. This is because religions could never have got started, let alone thrived, unless for the influence of men as fanatical as Moses or Muhammad or Joseph Kony, while charity and relief work, while they may appeal to tenderhearted believers, are the inheritors of modernism and the Enlightenment. Before that, religion was spread not by example but as an auxiliary to the more old-fashioned methods of holy war and imperialism.

I was a guarded admirer of the late Pope John Paul II, who by any human standards was a brave and serious person capable of displaying both moral and physical courage. He helped the anti-Nazi resistance in his native country as a young man, and in later life did much to assist its emancipation from Soviet rule. His papacy was in some ways shockingly conservative and authoritarian, but showed itself open to science and inquiry (except when the AIDS virus was under discussion) and even in its dogma about abortion made some concessions to a “life ethic” which, for example, began to teach that capital punishment was almost always wrong. On his death, Pope John Paul was praised among other things for the number of apologies he had made. These did not include, as they should have done, an atonement for the million or so put to the sword in Rwanda. However, they did include an apology to the Jews for the centuries of Christian anti-Semitism, an apology to the Muslim world for the Crusades, an apology to Eastern Orthodox Christians for the many persecutions that Rome had inflicted upon them, too, and some general contrition about the Inquisition as well. This seemed to say that the church had mainly been wrong and often criminal in the past, but was now purged of its sin by confession and quite ready to be infallible all over again.

Chapter Fourteen. There Is No “Eastern” Solution

The crisis of organized religion in the West, and the numberless ways in which religious morality has actually managed to fall well below the human average, has always led some anxious “seekers” to pursue a softer solution east of Suez. Indeed, I once joined these potential adepts and acolytes, donning orange garb and attending the ashram of a celebrated guru in Poona (or Pune), in the lovely hills above Bombay. I adopted this sannyas mode in order to help make a documentary film for the BBC, so you may well question my objectivity if you wish, but the BBC at that time did have a standard of fairness and my mandate was to absorb as much as I could. (One of these days, having in the course of my life been an Anglican, educated at a Methodist school, converted by marriage to Greek Orthodoxy, recognized as an incarnation by the followers of Sai Baba, and remarried by a rabbi, I shall be able to try and update William James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.)

The guru in question was named Bhagwan Sri Rajneesh. “Bhag wan” simply means god or godly, and “Sri” means holy. He was a man with huge soulful eyes and a bewitching smile, and a natural if somewhat dirty sense of humor. His sibilant voice, usually deployed through a low-volume microphone at early-morning dharshan, possessed a faintly hypnotic quality. This was of some use in alleviating the equally hypnotic platitudinousness of his discourses. Perhaps you have read Anthony Powell’s tremendous twelve-volume novel sequence *A Dance to the Music of Time*. In it, a mysterious seer named Dr. Trelawney keeps his group of enlightened followers together in spite of various inevitable difficulties. These initiates can recognize each other not by the individuality of their garb but by an exchange of avowals. On meeting, the first must intone, “The essence of the all is the godhead of the true.” The proper response to this is, “The vision of visions heals the blindness of sight.” Thus is the spiritual handshake effected. I heard nothing at the Bhagwan’s knee (one had to sit cross-legged) that was any more profound than that. There was more emphasis on love, in its eternal sense, than in Dr. Trelawney’s circle, and certainly there was more emphasis on sex, in its immediate sense. But on the whole, the instruction was innocuous. Or it would have been, if not for a sign at the entrance to the Bhagwan’s preaching-tent. This little sign never failed to irritate me. It read: “Shoes and minds must be left at the gate.” There was a pile of shoes and sandals next to it, and in my transcendent condition I could almost picture a heap of abandoned and empty mentalities to round out this literally

mindless little motto. I even attempted a brief parody of a Zen koan: “What is the reflection of a mind discarded?”

For the blissed-out visitor or tourist, the ashram presented the outward aspect of a fine spiritual resort, where one could burble about the beyond in an exotic and luxurious setting. But within its holy precincts, as I soon discovered, there was a more sinister principle at work. Many damaged and distraught personalities came to Poona seeking advice and counsel. Several of them were well-off (the clients or pilgrims included a distant member of the British royal family) and were at first urged—as with so many faiths—to part with all their material possessions. Proof of the efficacy of this advice could be seen in the fleet of Rolls-Royce motorcars maintained by the Bhagwan and deemed to be the largest such collection in the world. After this relatively brisk fleecing, initiates were transferred into “group” sessions where the really nasty business began.

Wolfgang Dobrowolny’s film *Ashram*, shot in secret by a former devotee and adapted for my documentary, shows the “playful” term kundalini in a fresh light. In a representative scene, a young woman is stripped naked and surrounded by men who bark at her, drawing attention to all her physical and psychic shortcomings, until she is abject with tears and apologies. At this point, she is hugged and embraced and comforted, and told that she now has “a family.” Sobbing with masochistic relief, she humbly enters the tribe. (It was not absolutely clear what she had to do in order to be given her clothes back, but I did hear some believable and ugly testimony on this point.) In other sessions involving men, things were rough enough for bones to be broken and lives lost: the German princeling of the House of Windsor was never seen again, and his body was briskly cremated without the tedium of an autopsy.

I had been told in respectful and awed tones that “the Bhagwan’s body has some allergies,” and not long after my sojourn he fled the ashram and then apparently decided that he had no further use for his earthly frame. What happened to the Rolls-Royce collection I never found out, but his acolytes received some kind of message to reconvene in the small town of Antelope, Oregon, in the early months of 1983. And this they did, though now less committed to the pacific and laid-back style. The local inhabitants were disconcerted to find an armed compound being erected in their neighborhood, with unsmiling orange-garbed security forces. An attempt to create “space” for the new ashram was apparently made. In a bizarre episode, food-poisoning matter was found to have been spread over the produce in an Antelope supermarket. Eventually the commune broke up and dispersed amid serial recriminations, and I have occasionally run into empty-eyed refugees from the Bhagwan’s long and misleading tuition. (He himself has been reincarnated as “Osho,” in whose honor a glossy but stupid magazine was being produced until a few years ago. Possibly a remnant of his following still survives.) I would say that the people of Antelope, Oregon, missed being as famous as Jonestown by a fairly narrow margin.

El sueño de la razón produce monstruos. “The sleep of reason,” it has been well said, “brings forth monsters.” The immortal Francisco Goya gave us an etching with

this title in his series *Los Caprichos*, where a man in defenseless slumber is hag-ridden by bats, owls, and other haunters of the darkness. But an extraordinary number of people appear to believe that the mind, and the reasoning faculty—the only thing that divides us from our animal relatives—is something to be distrusted and even, as far as possible, dulled. The search for nirvana, and the dissolution of the intellect, goes on. And whenever it is tried, it produces a Kool-Aid effect in the real world.

“Make me one with everything.” So goes the Buddhist’s humble request to the hot-dog vendor. But when the Buddhist hands over a twenty-dollar bill to the vendor, in return for his slathered bun, he waits a long time for his change. Finally asking for it, he is informed that “change comes only from within.” All such rhetoric is almost too easy to parody, as is that of missionary Christianity. In the old Anglican cathedral in Calcutta I once paid a visit to the statue of Bishop Reginald Heber, who filled the hymn books of the Church of England with verses like these:

What though the tropic breezes
Blow soft o’er Ceylon’s isle
Where every prospect pleases
And only man is vile
What though with loving kindness
The gifts of God are strown
The heathen in his blindness
Bows down to wood and stone.

It is partly in reaction to the condescension of old colonial boobies like this that many westerners have come to revere the apparently more seductive religions of the Orient. Indeed, Sri Lanka (the modern name for the lovely island of Ceylon) is a place of great charm. Its people are remarkable for their kindness and generosity: how dare Bishop Heber have depicted them as vile? However, Sri Lanka is a country now almost utterly ruined and disfigured by violence and repression, and the contending forces are mainly Buddhist and Hindu. The problem begins with the very name of the state: “Lanka” is the old Sinhalese-language name for the island, and the prefix “Sri” simply means “holy,” in the Buddhist sense of the word. This postcolonial renaming meant that the Tamils, who are chiefly Hindu, felt excluded at once. (They prefer to call their homeland “Eelam.”) It did not take long for this ethnic tribalism, reinforced by religion, to wreck the society.

Though I personally think that the Tamil population had a reasonable grievance against the central government, it is not possible to forgive their guerrilla leadership for pioneering, long before Hez- bollah and al-Qaeda, the disgusting tactic of suicide murder. This barbarous technique, which was also used by them to assassinate an elected Prime Minister of India, does not excuse the Buddhist-led pogroms against Tamils or the murder, by a Buddhist priest, of the first elected president of independent Sri Lanka.

Conceivably, some readers of these pages will be shocked to learn of the existence of Hindu and Buddhist murderers and sadists. Perhaps they dimly imagine that contem-

plative easterners, devoted to vegetarian diets and meditative routines, are immune to such temptations? It can even be argued that Buddhism is not, in our sense of the word, a “religion” at all. Nonetheless, the perfect one is alleged to have left one of his teeth behind in Sri Lanka, and I once attended a ceremony which involved a rare public showing by priests of this gold-encased object. Bishop Heber did not mention bone in his stupid hymn (though it would have made just as good a rhyme as “stone”), and perhaps this was because Christians have always foregathered to bow down to bones of supposed saints, and to keep them in grisly reliquaries in their churches and cathedrals. However that may be, at the tooth-propitiation I had no feeling at all of peace and inner bliss. To the contrary, I realized that if I was a Tamil I would have a very good chance of being dismembered.

The human species is an animal species without very much variation within it, and it is idle and futile to imagine that a voyage to Tibet, say, will discover an entirely different harmony with nature or eternity. The Dalai Lama, for example, is entirely and easily recognizable to a secularist. In exactly the same way as a medieval prince-ling, he makes the claim not just that Tibet should be independent of Chinese hegemony—a “perfectly good” demand, if I may render it into everyday English—but that he himself is a hereditary king appointed by heaven itself. How convenient! Dissenting sects within his faith are persecuted; his one-man rule in an Indian enclave is absolute; he makes absurd pronouncements about sex and diet and, when on his trips to Hollywood fundraisers, anoints major donors like Steven Segal and Richard Gere as holy. (Indeed, even Mr. Gere was moved to whine a bit when Mr. Segal was invested as a tulku, or person of high enlightenment. It must be annoying to be outbid at such a spiritual auction.) I will admit that the current “Dalai” or supreme lama is a man of some charm and presence, as I will admit that the present queen of England is a person of more integrity than most of her predecessors, but this does not invalidate the critique of hereditary monarchy, and the first foreign visitors to Tibet were downright appalled at the feudal domination, and hideous punishments, that kept the population in permanent serfdom to a parasitic monastic elite.

How might one easily prove that “Eastern” faith was identical with the unverifiable assumptions of “Western” religion? Here is a decided statement by “Gudo,” a very celebrated Japanese Buddhist of the first part of the twentieth century:

As a propagator of Buddhism I teach that “all sentient beings have the Buddha nature” and that “within the Dharma there is equality with neither superior nor inferior.” Furthermore, I teach that “all sentient beings are my children.” Having taken these golden words as the basis of my faith, I discovered that they are in complete agreement with the principles of socialism. It was thus that I became a believer in socialism.

There you have it again: a baseless assumption that some undefined external “force” has a mind of its own, and the faint but menacing suggestion that anyone who disagrees is in some fashion opposed to the holy or paternal will. I excerpt this passage from Brian Victoria’s exemplary book *Zen at War*, which describes the way the majority of

Japanese Buddhists decided that Gudo was right in general but wrong in particular. People were indeed to be considered children, as they are by all faiths, but it was actually fascism and not socialism that the Buddha and the dharma required of them.

Mr. Victoria is a Buddhist adept and claims—I leave this to him—to be a priest as well. He certainly takes his faith seriously, and knows a great deal about Japan and the Japanese. His study of the question shows that Japanese Buddhism became a loyal servant—even an advocate—of imperialism and mass murder, and that it did so, not so much because it was Japanese, but because it was Buddhist. In 1938, leading members of the Nichiren sect founded a group devoted to “Imperial-Way Buddhism.” It declared as follows:

Imperial-Way Buddhism utilizes the exquisite truth of the Lotus Sutra to reveal the majestic essence of the national polity. Exalting the true spirit of Mahayana Buddhism is a teaching which reverently supports the emperor’s work. This is what the great founder of our sect, Saint Nichiren, meant when he referred to the divine unity of Sovereign and Buddha. . . . For this reason the principal image of adoration in Imperial-Way Buddhism is not Buddha Shakyamuni who appeared in India, but his majesty the emperor, whose lineage extends over ten thousand generations.

Effusions like this are—however wicked they may be—almost beyond criticism. They consist, like most professions of faith, in merely assuming what has to be proved. Thus, a bald assertion is then followed with the words “for this reason,” as if all the logical work had been done by making the assertion. (All of the statements of the Dalai Lama, who happens not to advocate imperialist slaughter but who did loudly welcome the Indian government’s nuclear tests, are also of this non-sequitur type.) Scientists have an expression for hypotheses that are utterly useless even for learning from mistakes. They refer to them as being “not even wrong.” Most so-called spiritual discourse is of this type.

You will notice, further, that in the view of this school of Buddhism there are other schools of Buddhism, every bit as “contemplative,” that are in error. This is just what an anthropologist of religion would expect to find of something that was, having been manufactured, doomed to be schismatic. But on what basis could a devotee of Buddha Shakyamuni argue that his Japanese co-thinkers were in error themselves? Certainly not by using reasoning or evidence, which are quite alien to those who talk of the “exquisite truth of the Lotus Sutra.”

Things went from bad to worse once Japanese generals had mobilized their Zen-obedient zombies into complete obedience. The mainland of China became a killing field, and all the major sects of Japanese Buddhism united to issue the following proclamation:

Revering the imperial policy of preserving the Orient, the subjects of imperial Japan bear the humanitarian destiny of one billion people of color. . . . We believe it is time to effect a major change in the course of human history, which has been centered on Caucasians.

This echoes the line taken by the Shinto—another quasi-religion enjoying state support—that Japanese soldiers really fell for the cause of Asian independence. Every year, there is a famous controversy about whether Japan’s civil and spiritual leaders should visit the Yasukuni shrine, which officially ennobles Hirohito’s army. Every year, millions of Chinese and Koreans and Burmese protest that Japan was not the enemy of imperialism in the Orient but a newer and more vicious form of it, and that the Yasukuni shrine is a place of horror. How interesting, however, to note that Japanese Buddhists of the time regarded their country’s membership of the Nazi/Fascist Axis as a manifestation of liberation theology. Or, as the united Buddhist leadership phrased it at the time:

In order to establish eternal peace in East Asia, arousing the great benevolence and compassion of Buddhism, we are sometimes accepting and sometimes forceful. We now have no choice but to exercise the benevolent forcefulness of “killing one in order that many may live” (*issatsu tasho*). This is something which Mahayana Buddhism approves of only with the greatest of seriousness.

No “holy war” or “Crusade” advocate could have put it better. The “eternal peace” bit is particularly excellent. By the end of the dreadful conflict that Japan had started, it was Buddhist and Shinto priests who were recruiting and training the suicide bombers, or Kamikaze (“Divine Wind”), fanatics, assuring them that the emperor was a “Golden Wheel-Turning Sacred King,” one indeed of the four manifestations of the ideal Buddhist monarch and a Tathagata, or “fully enlightened being,” of the material world. And since “Zen treats life and death indifferently,” why not abandon the cares of this world and adopt a policy of prostration at the feet of a homicidal dictator?

This grisly case also helps to undergird my general case for considering “faith” as a threat. It ought to be possible for me to pursue my studies and researches in one house, and for the Buddhist to spin his wheel in another. But contempt for the intellect has a strange way of not being passive. One of two things may happen: those who are innocently credulous may become easy prey for those who are less scrupulous and who seek to “lead” and “inspire” them. Or those whose credulity has led their own society into stagnation may seek a solution, not in true self-examination, but in blaming others for their backwardness. Both these things happened in the most consecratedly “spiritual” society of them all.

Although many Buddhists now regret that deplorable attempt to prove their own superiority, no Buddhist since then has been able to demonstrate that Buddhism was wrong in its own terms. A faith that despises the mind and the free individual, that preaches submission and resignation, and that regards life as a poor and transient thing, is ill-equipped for self-criticism. Those who become bored by conventional “Bible” religions, and seek “enlightenment” by way of the dissolution of their own critical faculties into nirvana in any form, had better take a warning. They may think they are leaving the realm of despised materialism, but they are still being asked to put their reason to sleep, and to discard their minds along with their sandals.

Chapter Fifteen. Religion as an Original Sin

There are, indeed, several ways in which religion is not just amoral, but positively immoral. And these faults and crimes are not to be found in the behavior of its adherents (which can sometimes be exemplary) but in its original precepts. These include:

- Presenting a false picture of the world to the innocent and the credulous
- The doctrine of blood sacrifice
- The doctrine of atonement
- The doctrine of eternal reward and/or punishment
- The imposition of impossible tasks and rules

The first point has already been covered. All the creation myths of all peoples have long been known to be false, and have fairly recently been replaced by infinitely superior and more magnificent explanations. To its list of apologies, religion should simply add an apology for foisting man-made parchments and folk myths upon the unsuspecting, and for taking so long to concede that this had been done. One senses a reluctance to make this admission, since it might tend to ~~explode~~ the whole religious worldview, but the longer it is delayed the more heinous the denial will become.

Blood Sacrifice

Before monotheism arose, the altars of primitive society reeked of blood, much of it human and some of it infant. The thirst for this, at least in animal form, is still with us. Pious Jews are at this moment trying to breed the spotlessly pure “red heifer” mentioned in the book of Numbers, chapter 19, which if slaughtered again according to the exact and meticulous ritual will bring about the return of animal sacrifices in the Third Temple, and hasten the end of time and the coming of the Messiah. This may appear merely absurd, but a team of like-minded Christian maniac farmers are attempting as I write to help their co-fundamentalists by employing special breeding techniques (borrowed or stolen from modern science) to produce a perfect “Red Angus” beast in Nebraska. Meanwhile in Israel, the Jewish biblical fanatics are also trying to raise a human child, in a pure “bubble” free from contamination, who will at the attainment of the right age be privileged to cut that heifer’s throat. Ideally,

this should be done on the Temple Mount, awkwardly the site of the Muslim holy places but nonetheless the very spot where Abraham is alleged to have drawn the knife over the live body of his own child. Other sacramental guttings and throat-cuttings, particularly of lambs, occur every year in the Christian and Muslim world, either to celebrate Easter or the feast of Eid.

The latter, which honors Abraham's willingness to make a human sacrifice of his son, is common to all three monotheisms, and descends from their primitive ancestors. There is no softening the plain meaning of this frightful story. The prelude involves a series of vilenesses and delusions, from the seduction of Lot by both his daughters to the marriage of Abraham to his stepsister, the birth of Isaac to Sarah when Abraham was a hundred years old, and many other credible and incredible rustic crimes and misdemeanors. Perhaps afflicted by a poor conscience, but at any rate believing himself commanded by god, Abraham agreed to murder his son. He prepared the kindling, laid the tied-up boy upon it (thus showing that he knew the procedure), and took up the knife in order to kill the child like an animal. At the last available moment his hand was stayed, not by god as it happens, but by an angel, and he was praised from the clouds for showing his sturdy willingness to murder an innocent in expiation of his own crimes. As a reward for his fealty, he was promised a long and large posterity.

Not long after this (though the Genesis narrative is not very well illustrated in point of time) his wife Sarah expired at the age of one hundred and twenty-seven, and her dutiful husband found her a place of burial in a cave in the town of Hebron. Having outlived her by attaining the fine old age of one hundred and seventy-five, and having fathered six more children meanwhile, Abraham was eventually buried in the same cave. To this day, religious people kill each other and kill each other's children for the right to exclusive property in this unidentifiable and unlocatable hole in a hill.

There was a terrible massacre of Jewish residents of Hebron during the Arab revolt of 1929, when sixty-seven Jews were slaughtered. Many of these were Lubavitchers, who regard all non-Jews as racially inferior and who had moved to Hebron because they believed the Genesis myth, but this does not excuse the pogrom. Remaining outside the border of Israel until 1967, the town was captured that year with much fanfare by Israeli forces and became part of the occupied West Bank. Jewish settlers began to "return," under the leadership of a particularly violent and obnoxious rabbi named Moshe Levinger, and to build an armed settlement named Kiryat Arba above the town, as well as some smaller settlements within it. The Muslims among the mainly Arab inhabitants continued to claim that the praiseworthy Abraham indeed had been willing to murder his son, but only for their religion and not for the Jews. This is what "submission" means. When I visited the place I found that the supposed "Cave of the Patriarchs," or "Cave of Machpela," had separate entrances and separate places of worship for the two warring claimants to the right to celebrate this atrocity in their own names.

A short while before I arrived, another atrocity had occurred. An Israeli zealot named Dr. Baruch Goldstein had come to the cave and, unslinging the automatic

weapon that he was allowed to carry, discharged it into the Muslim congregation. He killed twenty-seven worshippers and injured countless others before being overwhelmed and beaten to death. It turned out that many people already knew that Dr. Goldstein was dangerous. While serving as a physician in the Israeli army he had announced that he would not treat non-Jewish patients, such as Israeli Arabs, especially on the Sabbath. As it happens, he was obeying rabbinic law in declining to do this, as many Israeli religious courts have confirmed, so an easy way to spot an inhumane killer was to notice that he was guided by a sincere and literal observance of the divine instruction. Shrines in his name have been set up by the more doggedly observant Jews ever since, and of those rabbis who condemned his action, not all did so in unequivocal terms. The curse of Abraham continues to poison Hebron, but the religious warrant for blood sacrifice poisons our entire civilization.

Atonement

Previous sacrifices of humans, such as the Aztec and other ceremonies from which we recoil, were common in the ancient world and took the form of propitiatory murder. An offering of a virgin or an infant or a prisoner was assumed to appease the gods: once again, not a very good advertisement for the moral properties of religion. "Martyrdom," or a deliberate sacrifice of oneself, can be viewed in a slightly different light, though when practiced by the Hindus in the form of suttee, or the strongly suggested "suicide" of widows, it was put down by the British in India for imperial as much as for Christian reasons. Those "martyrs" who wish to kill others as well as themselves, in an act of religious exaltation, are viewed more differently still: Islam is ostensibly opposed to suicide per se but cannot seem to decide whether to condemn or recommend the act of such a bold shahid.

However, the idea of a vicarious atonement, of the sort that so much troubled even C. S. Lewis, is a further refinement of the ancient superstition. Once again we have a father demonstrating love by subjecting a son to death by torture, but this time the father is not trying to impress god. He is god, and he is trying to impress humans. Ask yourself the question: how moral is the following? I am told of a human sacrifice that took place two thousand years ago, without my wishing it and in circumstances so ghastly that, had I been present and in possession of any influence, I would have been duty-bound to try and stop it. In consequence of this murder, my own manifold sins are forgiven me, and I may hope to enjoy everlasting life.

Let us just for now overlook all the contradictions between the tellers of the original story and assume that it is basically true. What are the further implications? They are not as reassuring as they look at first sight. For a start, and in order to gain the benefit of this wondrous offer, I have to accept that I am responsible for the flogging and mocking and crucifixion, in which I had no say and no part, and agree that every time I decline this responsibility, or that I sin in word or deed, I am intensifying the agony of it. Furthermore, I am required to believe that the agony was necessary in order to compensate for an earlier crime in which I also had no part, the sin of Adam. It is useless to object that Adam seems to have been created with insatiable

discontent and curiosity and then forbidden to slake it: all this was settled long before even Jesus himself was born. Thus my own guilt in the matter is deemed “original” and inescapable. However, I am still granted free will with which to reject the offer of vicarious redemption. Should I exercise this choice, however, I face an eternity of torture much more awful than anything endured at Calvary, or anything threatened to those who first heard the Ten Commandments.

The tale is made no easier to follow by the necessary realization that Jesus both wished and needed to die and came to Jerusalem at Passover in order to do so, and that all who took part in his murder were unknowingly doing god’s will, and fulfilling ancient prophecies. (Absent the gnostic version, this makes it hopelessly odd that Judas, who allegedly performed the strangely redundant act of identifying a very well-known preacher to those who had been hunting for him, should suffer such opprobrium. Without him, there could have been no “Good Friday,” as the Christians naively call it even when they are not in a vengeful mood.)

There is a charge (found in only one of the four Gospels) that the Jews who condemned Jesus asked for his blood to be “on their heads” for future generations. This is not a problem that concerns only the Jews, or those Catholics who are worried by the history of Christian anti-Semitism. Suppose that the Jewish Sanhedrin had in fact made such a call, as Maimonides thought they had, and should have. How could that call possibly be binding upon successor generations? Remember that the Vatican did not assert that it was some Jews who had killed Christ. It asserted that it was the Jews who had ordered his death, and that the Jewish people as a whole were the bearers of a collective responsibility. It seems bizarre that the church could not bring itself to drop the charge of generalized Jewish “dei cide” until very recently. But the key to its reluctance is easy to find. If you once admit that the descendants of Jews are not implicated, it becomes very hard to argue that anyone else not there present was implicated, either. One rent in the fabric, as usual, threatens to tear the whole thing apart (or to make it into something simply man-made and woven, like the discredited Shroud of Turin). The collectivization of guilt, in short, is immoral in itself, as religion has been occasionally compelled to admit. **Eternal Punishment and Impossible Tasks**

The Gospel story of the Garden of Gethsemane used to absorb me very much as a child, because its “break” in the action and its human whimper made me wonder if some of the fantastic scenario might after all be true. Jesus asks, in effect, “Do I have to go through with this?” It is an impressive and unforgettable question, and I long ago decided that I would cheerfully wager my own soul on the belief that the only right answer to it is “no.” We cannot, like fear-ridden peasants of antiquity, hope to load all our crimes onto a goat and then drive the hapless animal into the desert. Our everyday idiom is quite sound in regarding “scapegoating” with contempt. And religion is scapegoating writ large. I can pay your debt, my love, if you have been imprudent, and if I were a hero like Sidney Carton in *A Tale of Two Cities* I could even serve your term in prison or take your place on the scaffold. Greater love hath no man. But I cannot absolve you of your responsibilities. It would be immoral of me to offer, and

immoral of you to accept. And if the same offer is made from another time and another world, through the mediation of middlemen and accompanied by inducements, it loses all its grandeur and becomes debased into wish-thinking or, worse, a combination of blackmailing with bribery.

The ultimate degeneration of all this into a mere bargain was made unpleasantly obvious by Blaise Pascal, whose theology is not far short of sordid. His celebrated “wager” puts it in hucksterish form: what have you got to lose? If you believe in god and there is a god, you win. If you believe in him and you are wrong—so what? I once wrote a response to this cunning piece of bet-covering, which took two forms. The first was a version of Bertrand Russell’s hypothetical reply to the hypothetical question: what will you say if you die and are confronted with your Maker? His response? “I should say, Oh God, you did not give us enough evidence.” My own reply: Imponderable Sir, I presume from some if not all of your many reputations that you might prefer honest and convinced unbelief to the hypocritical and **self-interested** affectation of faith or the smoking tributes of bloody altars. But I would not count on it.

Pascal reminds me of the hypocrites and frauds who abound in Talmudic Jewish rationalization. Don’t do any work on the Sabbath yourself, but pay someone else to do it. You obeyed the letter of the law: who’s counting? The Dalai Lama tells us that you can visit a prostitute as long as someone else pays her. Shia Muslims offer “temporary marriage,” selling men the permission to take a wife for an hour or two with the usual vows and then divorce her when they are done. Half of the splendid buildings in Rome would never have been raised if the sale of indulgences had not been so profitable: St. Peter’s itself was financed by a special one-time offer of that kind. The newest pope, the former Joseph Ratzinger, recently attracted Catholic youths to a festival by offering a certain “remission of sin” to those who attended.

This pathetic moral spectacle would not be necessary if the original rules were ones that it would be possible to obey. But to the totalitarian edicts that begin with revelation from absolute authority, and that are enforced by fear, and based on a sin that had been committed long ago, are added regulations that are often immoral and impossible at the same time. The essential principle of totalitarianism is to make laws that are impossible to obey. The resulting tyranny is even more impressive if it can be enforced by a privileged caste or party which is highly zealous in the detection of error. Most of humanity, throughout its history, has dwelt under a form of this stupefying dictatorship, and a large portion of it still does. Allow me to give a few examples of the rules that must, yet cannot, be followed.

The commandment at Sinai which forbade people even to think about coveting goods is the first clue. It is echoed in the New Testament by the injunction which says that a man who looks upon a woman in the wrong way has actually committed adultery already. And it is almost equaled by the current Muslim and former Christian prohibition against lending out money at interest. All of these, in their different fashion, attempt to place impossible restraints on human initiative. They can only be met in one of two ways. The first is by a continual scourging and mortification of

the flesh, accompanied by incessant wrestling with “impure” thoughts which become actual as soon as they are named, or even imagined. From this come hysterical confessions of guilt, false promises of improvement, and loud, violent denunciations of other backsliders and sinners: a spiritual police state. The second solution is organized hypocrisy, where forbidden foods are rebaptized as something else, or where a donation to the religious authorities will purchase some wiggle-room, or where ostentatious orthodoxy will buy some time, or where money can be paid into one account and then paid back—with perhaps a slight percentage added in a non-usurious manner—into another. This we might term the spiritual banana republic. Many theocracies, from medieval Rome to modern Wahhabi Saudi Arabia, have managed to be spiritual police states and spiritual banana republics at the same time.

This objection applies even to some of the noblest and some of the basest rules. The order to “love thy neighbor” is mild and yet stern: a reminder of one’s duty to others. The order to “love thy neighbor as thyself ” is too extreme and too strenuous to be obeyed, as is the hard-to-interpret instruction to love others “as I have loved you.” Humans are not so constituted as to care for others as much as themselves: the thing simply cannot be done (as any intelligent “creator” would well understand from studying his own design). Urging humans to be superhumans, on pain of death and torture, is the urging of terrible self-abasement at their repeated and inevitable failure to keep the rules. What a grin, meanwhile, on the face of those who accept the cash donations that are made in lieu! The so-called Golden Rule, sometimes needlessly identified with a folktale about the Babylonian Rabbi Hillel, simply enjoins us to treat others as one would wish to be treated by them. This sober and rational precept, which one can teach to any child with its innate sense of fairness (and which predates all Jesus’s “beatitudes” and parables), is well within the compass of any atheist and does not require masochism and hysteria, or sadism and hysteria, when it is breached. It is gradually learned, as part of the painfully slow evolution of the species, and once grasped is never forgotten. Ordinary conscience will do, without any heavenly wrath behind it.

As to the basest rules, one need only consult the argument from design once more. People wish to enrich and better themselves, and though they may well lend or even give money to a friend or relative in need and ask for nothing but its eventual return or its grateful acknowledgment, they will not advance money to perfect strangers without expecting interest. By a nice chance, cupidity and avarice are the spur to economic development. No student of the subject from David Ricardo to Karl Marx to Adam Smith has been unaware of this fact. It is “not from the benevolence” of the baker, observed Smith in his shrewd Scots manner, that we expect our daily bread, but from his self-interest in baking and selling it. In any case, one may choose to be altruistic, whatever that may mean, but by definition one may not be compelled into altruism. Perhaps we would be better mammals if we were not “made” this way, but surely nothing could be sillier than having a “maker” who then forbade the very same instinct he instilled.

“Free will,” reply the casuists. You do not have to obey the laws against murder or theft either. Well, one may be genetically programmed for a certain amount of aggression and hatred and greed, and yet also evolved enough to beware of following every prompting. If we gave in to our every base instinct every time, civilization would have been impossible and there would be no writing in which to continue this argument. However, there can be no question that a human being, whether standing up or lying down, finds his or her hand resting just next to the genitalia. Useful no doubt in warding off primeval aggressors once our ancestors decided to take the risk of going erect and exposing the viscera, this is both a privilege and a provocation denied to most quadrupeds (some of whom can compensate by getting their mouths to the same point that we can reach with our fingers and palms). Now: who devised the rule that this easy **apposition** between the manual and the genital be forbidden, even as a thought? To put it more plainly, who ordered that you must touch (for other reasons having nothing to do with sex or reproduction) but that you also must not? There does not even seem to be any true scriptural authority here, yet almost all religions have made the prohibition a near-absolute one.

One could write an entire book that was devoted only to the grotesque history of religion and sex, and to holy dread of the procreative act and its associated impulses and necessities, from the emission of semen to the effusion of menstrual blood. But a convenient way of condensing the whole fascinating story may be to ask one single provocative question.

Chapter Sixteen. Is Religion Child Abuse?

“Tell me straight out, I call on you—answer me: imagine that you yourself are building the edifice of human destiny with the object of making people happy in the finale, of giving them peace and rest at last, but for that you must inevitably and unavoidably torture just one tiny creature, that same child who was beating her chest with her little fist, and raise your edifice on the foundation of her unrequited tears—would you agree to be the architect on such conditions? Tell me the truth.”

—Ivan to Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov*

When we consider whether religion has “done more harm than good”—not that this would say anything at all about its truth or authenticity—we are faced with an imponderably large question. How can we ever know how many children had their psychological and physical lives irreparably maimed by the compulsory inculcation of faith? This is almost as hard to determine as the number of spiritual and religious dreams and visions that came “true,” which in order to possess even a minimal claim to value would have to be measured against all the unrecorded and unremembered ones that did not. But we can be sure that religion has always hoped to practice upon the unformed and undefended minds of the young, and has gone to great lengths to make sure of this privilege by making alliances with secular powers in the material world.

One of the great instances of moral terrorism in our literature is the sermon preached by Father Arnall in James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. This disgusting old priest is readying Stephen Dedalus and his other young “charges” for a retreat in honor of Saint Francis Xavier (the man who brought the Inquisition to Asia and whose bones are still revered by those who choose to revere bones). He decides to impress them with a long and gloating account of eternal punishment, of the sort which the church used to mandate when it still had the confidence to do so. It is impossible to quote the entire rant, but two particularly vivid elements—concerning the nature of torture and the nature of time—are of interest. It is easy to see that the priest’s words are designed precisely to frighten children. In the first place, the images are themselves childlike. In the torture section, the very devil himself makes a mountain shrivel like wax. Every frightening malady is summoned, and the childlike worry that this pain might go on forever is deftly played upon. When it comes to the picture of a unit of time, we see a child on the beach playing with grains of sand, and then the infantile magnification of units (“Daddy, what if there were a million million million squillion

kittens: would they fill up the whole world?"), and then, adding further multiplicities, the evocation of nature's leaves, and the easily conjured fur and feathers and scales of the family pet. For centuries, grown men have been paid to frighten children in this way (and to torture and beat and violate them as well, as they also did in Joyce's memory and the memory of countless others).

The other man-made stupidities and cruelties of the religious are easy to detect as well. The idea of torture is as old as the nastiness of mankind, which is the only species with the imagination to guess what it might feel like when imposed upon another. We cannot blame religion for this impulse, but we can condemn it for institutionalizing and refining the practice. The museums of medieval Europe, from Holland to Tuscany, are crammed with instruments and devices upon which holy men labored devoutly, in order to see how long they could **keepsomeone** alive while being roasted. It is not needful to go into further details, but there were also religious books of instruction in this art, and guides for the detection of heresy by pain. Those who were not lucky enough to be allowed to take part in the auto-da-fé (or "act of faith," as a torture session was known) were permitted free rein to fantasize as many lurid nightmares as they could, and to inflict them verbally in order to keep the ignorant in a state of permanent fear. In an era where there was little enough by way of public entertainment, a good public burning or disembowelment or breaking on the wheel was often as much recreation as the saintly dared to allow. Nothing proves the man-made character of religion as obviously as the sick mind that designed hell, unless it is the sorely limited mind that has failed to describe heaven—except as a place of either worldly comfort, eternal tedium, or (as Tertullian thought) continual relish in the torture of others.

Pre-Christian hells were highly unpleasant too, and called upon the same sadistic ingenuity for their invention. However, some of the early ones we know of—most notably the Hindu—were limited in time. A sinner, for example, might be sentenced to a given number of years in hell, where every day counted as 6,400 human years. If he slew a priest, the sentence thus adjusted would be 149,504,000,000 years. At this point, he was allowed nirvana, which seems to mean annihilation. It was left to Christians to find a hell from which there was no possible appeal. (And the idea is easily plagiarized: I once heard Louis Farrakhan, leader of the heretical black-only "Nation of Islam," as he drew a hideous roar from a mob in Madison Square Garden. Hurling spittle at the Jews, he yelled, "And don't you forget—when it's God who puts you in the ovens, it's FOREVER!")

The obsession with children, and with rigid control over their upbringing, has been part of every system of absolute authority. It may have been a Jesuit who was first actually quoted as saying, "Give me the child until he is ten, and I will give you the man," but the idea is very much older than the school of Ignatius Loyola. Indoctrination of the young often has the reverse effect, as we also know from the fate of many secular ideologies, but it seems that the religious will run this risk in order to imprint the average boy or girl with enough propaganda. What else can they hope to do? If religious instruction were not allowed until the child had attained the age of reason, we would

be living in a quite different world. Faithful parents are divided over this, since they naturally hope to share the wonders and delights of Christmas and other fiestas with their offspring (and can also make good use of god, as well as of lesser figures like Santa Claus, to help tame the unruly) but mark what happens if the child should stray to another faith, let alone another cult, even in early adolescence. The parents will tend to proclaim that this is taking advantage of the innocent. All monotheisms have, or used to have, a very strong prohibition against apostasy for just this reason. In her *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, Mary McCarthy remembers her shock at learning from a Jesuit preacher that her Protestant grandfather—her guardian and friend—was doomed to eternal punishment because he had been baptized in the wrong way. A precociously intelligent child, she would not let the matter drop until she had made the Mother Superior consult some higher authorities and discover a loophole in the writings of Bishop Athanasius, who held that heretics were only damned if they rejected the true church with full awareness of what they were doing. Her grandfather, then, might be sufficiently unaware of the true church to evade hell. But what an agony to which to subject an eleven-year-old girl! And only think of the number of less curious children who simply accepted this evil teaching without questioning it. Those who lie to the young in this way are wicked in the extreme.

Two instances—one of immoral teaching and the other of immoral practice—may be adduced. The immoral teaching concerns abortion. As a materialist, I think it has been demonstrated that an embryo is a separate body and entity, and not merely (as some really did used to argue) a growth on or in the female body. There used to be feminists who would say that it was more like an appendix or ~~even-this~~ was seriously maintained—a tumor. That nonsense seems to have stopped. Of the considerations that have stopped it, one is the fascinating and moving view provided by the sonogram, and another is the survival of “premature” babies of featherlike weight, who have achieved “viability” outside the womb. This is yet another way in which science can make common cause with humanism. Just as no human being of average moral capacity could be indifferent to the sight of a woman being kicked in the stomach, so nobody could fail to be far more outraged if the woman in question were pregnant. Embryology confirms morality. The words “unborn child,” even when used in a politicized manner, describe a material reality.

However, this only opens the argument rather than closes it. There may be many circumstances in which it is not desirable to carry a fetus to full term. Either nature or god appears to appreciate this, since a very large number of pregnancies are “aborted,” so to speak, because of malformations, and are politely known as “miscarriages.” Sad though this is, it is probably less miserable an outcome than the vast number of deformed or idiot children who would otherwise have been born, or stillborn, or whose brief lives would have been a torment to themselves and others. As with evolution in general, therefore, in utero we see a microcosm of nature and evolution itself. In the first place we begin as tiny forms that are amphibian, before gradually developing lungs and brains (and growing and shedding that now useless coat of fur) and then struggling

out and breathing fresh air after a somewhat difficult transition. Likewise, the system is fairly pitiless in eliminating those who never had a very good chance of surviving in the first place: our ancestors on the savannah were not going to survive in their turn if they had a clutch of sickly and lolling infants to protect against predators. Here the analogy of evolution might not be to Adam Smith's "invisible hand" (a term that I have always distrusted) so much as to Joseph Schumpeter's model of "creative destruction," whereby we accustom ourselves to a certain amount of natural failure, taking into account the pitilessness of nature and extending back to the remote prototypes of our species.

Thus, not all conceptions are, or ever were, going to lead to births. And ever since the mere struggle for existence began to abate, it has been an ambition of the human intelligence to gain control over the rate of reproduction. Families who are at the mercy of mere nature, with its inevitable demand for profusion, will be tied to a cycle that is not much better than animal. The best way of achieving a measure of control is by prophylaxis, which has been restlessly sought since records were kept and which has in our own time become relatively foolproof and painless. The second-best fallback solution, which may sometimes be desirable for other reasons, is termination of pregnancy: an expedient which is regretted by many even when it has been undertaken in dire need. All thinking people recognize a painful conflict of rights and interests in this question, and strive to achieve a balance. The only proposition that is completely useless, either morally or practically, is the wild statement that sperms and eggs are all potential lives which must not be prevented from fusing and that, when united however briefly, have souls and must be protected by law. On this basis, an intrauterine device that prevents the attachment of the egg to the wall of the uterus is a murder weapon, and an ectopic pregnancy (the disastrous accident that causes the egg to begin growing inside the Fallopian tube) is a human life instead of an already doomed egg that is also an urgent threat to the life of the mother.

Every single step toward the clarification of this argument has been opposed root and branch by the clergy. The attempt even to educate people in the possibility of "family planning" was anathematized from the first, and its early advocates and teachers were arrested (like John Stuart Mill) or put in jail or thrown out of their jobs. Only a few years ago, Mother Teresa denounced contraception as the moral equivalent of abortion, which "logically" meant (since she regarded abortion as murder) that a sheath or a pill was a murder weapon also. She was a little more fanatical even than her church, but here again we can see that the strenuous and dogmatic is the moral enemy of the good. It demands that we believe the impossible, and practice the *unfeasible*. The whole case for extending protection to the unborn, and to expressing a bias in favor of life, has been wrecked by those who use unborn children, as well as born ones, as mere manipulable objects of their doctrine.

As to immoral practice, it is hard to imagine anything more grotesque than the mutilation of infant genitalia. Nor is it easy to imagine anything more incompatible with the argument from design. We must assume that a designer god would pay especial

attention to the reproductive organs of his creatures, which are so essential for the continuation of the species. But religious ritual since the dawn of time has insisted on snatching children from the cradle and taking sharp stones or knives to their pudenda. In some animist and Muslim societies, it is the female babies who suffer the worst, with the excision of the labia and the clitoris. This practice is sometimes postponed to adolescence and, as earlier described, accompanied by infibulation, or the sewing up of the vagina with only a small aperture for the passage of blood and urine. The aim is clear—to kill or dull the girl's sexual instinct and destroy the temptation to experiment with any man save the one to whom she will be given (and who will have the privilege of rending those threads on the dreaded nuptial night). Meanwhile, she will be taught that her monthly visitation of blood is a curse (all religions have expressed a horror of it, and many still prohibit menstruating women from attending service) and that she is an unclean vessel.

In other cultures, notably the “Judeo-Christian,” it is the sexual mutilation of small boys that is insisted upon. (For some reason, little girls can be Jewish without genital alteration: it is useless to look for consistency in the covenants that people believe they have made with god.) Here, the original motives appear to be twofold. The shedding of blood—which is insisted upon at circumcision ceremonies—is most probably a symbolic survival from the animal and human sacrifices which were such a feature of the gore-soaked landscape of the Old Testament. By adhering to the practice, parents could offer to sacrifice a part of the child as a stand-in for the whole. Objections to interference with something that god must have designed with care—the human penis—were overcome by the invented dogma that Adam was born circumcised and in the image of god. Indeed, it is argued by some rabbis that Moses, too, was born circumcised, though this claim may result from the fact that his own circumcision is nowhere mentioned in the Pentateuch.

The second purpose—very unambivalently stated by Maimonides—was the same as for girls: the destruction as far as possible of the pleasurable side of sexual intercourse. Here is what the sage tells us in his *Guide to the Perplexed*:

With regard to circumcision, one of the reasons for it is, in my opinion, the wish to bring about a decrease in sexual intercourse and a weakening of the organ in question, so that this activity be diminished and the organ be in as quiet a state as possible. It has been thought that circumcision perfects what is defective congenitally. . . . How can natural things be defective so that they need to be perfected from outside, all the more because we know how useful the foreskin is for that member? In fact this commandment has not been prescribed with a view to perfecting what is defective congenitally, but to perfecting what is defective morally. The bodily pain caused to that member is the real purpose of circumcision. . . . The fact that circumcision weakens the faculty of sexual excitement and sometimes perhaps diminishes the pleasure is indubitable. For if at birth this member has been made to bleed and has had its covering taken away from it, it must indubitably be weakened.

Maimonides did not seem particularly impressed by the promise (made to Abraham in Genesis 17) that circumcision would lead to his having a vast progeny at the age of ninety-nine. Abraham's decision to circumcise his slaves as well as his male household was a side issue or perhaps an effect of enthusiasm, since these non-Jews were not part of the covenant. But he did circumcise his son Ishmael, who was then thirteen. (Ishmael only had to part with his foreskin: his younger brother Isaac—oddly described as Abraham's "only" son in Genesis 22—was circumcised when he was eight days old but later offered as a sacrifice in his whole person.)

Maimonides also argued that circumcision would be a means of reinforcing ethnic solidarity, and he laid particular stress on the need to perform the operation on babies rather than on those who had reached the age of reason:

The first [argument] is that if the child were let alone until he grew up, he would sometimes not perform it. The second is that a child does not suffer as much pain as a grown-up man because his membrane is still soft and his imagination weak; for a grownup man would regard the thing, which he would imagine before it occurred, as terrible and hard. The third is that the parents of a child that is just born take lightly matters concerning it, for up to that time the imaginative form that compels the parents to love it is not yet consolidated. . . . Consequently if it were left uncircumcised for two or three years, this would necessitate the abandonment of circumcision because of the father's love and affection for it. At the time of its birth, on the other hand, this imaginative form is very weak, especially as far as concerns the father upon whom this commandment is imposed.

In ordinary words, Maimonides is perfectly aware that, if not supposedly mandated by god, this hideous procedure would, even in the most devout parent—he stipulates only a father—create a natural revulsion in favor of the child. But he represses this insight in favor of "divine" law.

In more recent times, some pseudosecular arguments have been adduced for male circumcision. It has been argued that the process is more hygienic for the male and thus more healthy for females in helping them avoid, for example, cervical cancer. Medicine has exploded these claims, or else revealed them as problems which can just as easily be solved by a "loosening" of the foreskin. Full excision, originally ordered by god as the blood price for the promised future massacre of the Canaanites, is now exposed for what it is—a mutilation of a powerless infant with the aim of ruining its future sex life. The connection between religious barbarism and sexual repression could not be plainer than when it is "marked in the flesh." Who can count the number of lives that have been made miserable in this way, especially since Christian doctors began to adopt ancient Jewish folklore in their hospitals? And who can bear to read the medical textbooks and histories which calmly record the number of boy babies who died from infection after their eighth day, or who suffered gross and unbearable dysfunction and disfigurement? The record of syphilitic and other infection, from rotting rabbinical teeth or other rabbinical indiscretions, or of clumsy slitting of the urethra and sometimes a vein, is simply dreadful. And it is permitted in New York in 2006! If religion and its arrogance

were not involved, no healthy society would permit this primitive amputation, or allow any surgery to be practiced on the genitalia without the full and informed consent of the person concerned.

Religion is also to be blamed for the hideous consequences of the masturbation taboo (which also furnished yet another excuse for circumcision among the Victorians). For decades, millions of young men and boys were terrified in adolescence by supposedly “medical” advice that warned them of blindness, nervous collapse, and descent into insanity if they resorted to self-gratification. Stern lectures from clergymen, replete with nonsense about semen as an irreplaceable and finite energy source, dominated the upbringing of generations. Robert Baden-Powell composed an entire obsessive treatise on the subject, which he used to reinforce the muscular Christianity of his Boy Scout movement. To this day, the madness persists on Islamic Web sites purporting to offer counsel to the young. Indeed, it seems that the mullahs have been poring over the same discredited texts, by Samuel Tissot and others, which used to be wielded by their Christian predecessors to such dire effect. The identical weird and dirty-minded misinformation is on offer, especially from Abd al-Aziz bin Baz, the late grand mufti of Saudi Arabia, whose warnings against onanism are repeated on many Muslim sites. The habit will disrupt the digestive system, he warns, damage the eyesight, inflame the testicles, erode the spinal cord (“the place from which sperm originates!”), and lead to tremors and shakes. Nor are the “cerebral glands” unaffected, with concomitant decline in IQ and eventual insanity. Last of all, and still tormenting millions of healthy youngsters with guilt and worry, the mufti tells them that their semen will grow thin and insipid and prevent them from becoming fathers later on. The Inter-Islam and Islamic Voice sites recycle this tripe, as if there were not already enough repression and ignorance among young males in the Muslim world, who are often kept apart from all female company, taught in effect to despise their mothers and sisters, and subjected to stultifying rote recitation of the Koran. Having met some of the products of this “education” system, in Afghanistan and elsewhere, I can only reiterate that their problem is not so much that they desire virgins as that they are virgins: their emotional and psychic growth irremediably stunted in the name of god, and the safety of many others menaced as a consequence of this alienation and deformation.

Sexual innocence, which can be charming in the young if it is not needlessly protracted, is positively corrosive and repulsive in the mature adult. Again, how shall we reckon the harm done by dirty old men and hysterical spinsters, appointed as clerical guardians to supervise the innocent in orphanages and schools? The Roman Catholic Church in particular is having to answer this question in the most painful of ways, by calculating the monetary value of child abuse in terms of compensation. Billions of dollars have already been awarded, but there is no price to be put on the generations of boys and girls who were introduced to sex in the most alarming and disgusting ways by those whom they and their parents trusted. “Child abuse” is really a silly and pathetic euphemism for what has been going on: we are talking about the systematic rape and torture of children, positively aided and abetted by a hierarchy which know-

ingly moved the grossest offenders to parishes where they would be safer. Given what has come to light in modern cities in recent times, one can only shudder to think what was happening in the centuries where the church was above all criticism. But what did people expect would happen when the vulnerable were controlled by those who, misfits and inverts themselves, were required to affirm hypocritical celibacy? And who were taught to state grimly, as an article of belief, that children were “imps of” or “limbs of” Satan? Sometimes the resulting frustration expressed itself in horrible excesses of corporal punishment, which is bad enough in itself. But when the artificial inhibitions really collapse, as we have seen them do, they result in behavior which no average masturbating, fornicating sinner could even begin to contemplate without horror. This is not the result of a few delinquents among the shepherds, but an outcome of an ideology which sought to establish clerical control by means of control of the sexual instinct and even of the sexual organs. It belongs, like the rest of religion, to the fearful childhood of our species. Alyosha’s answer to Ivan’s question about the sacred torture of a child was to say (“softly”) —“No, I do not agree.” Our reply, to the repellent original offer of the defenseless boy Isaac on the pyre, right up to the current abuses and repressions, must be the same, only not delivered so softly.

Chapter Seventeen. An Objection Anticipated: The Last-Ditch “Case” Against Secularism

If I cannot definitively prove that the usefulness of religion is in the past, and that its foundational books are transparent fables, and that it is a man-made imposition, and that it has been an enemy of science and inquiry, and that it has subsisted largely on lies and fears, and been the accomplice of ignorance and guilt as well as of slavery, genocide, racism, and tyranny, I can most certainly claim that religion is now fully aware of these criticisms. It is also fully aware of the ever-mounting evidence, concerning the origins of the cosmos and the origin of species, which consign it to marginality if not to irrelevance. I have tried to deal with most faith-based objections as they occur in the unfolding argument, but there is one remaining argument that one may not avoid.

When the worst has been said about the Inquisition and the witch trials and the Crusades and the Islamic imperial conquests and the horrors of the Old Testament, is it not true that secular and atheist regimes have committed crimes and massacres that are, in the scale of things, at least as bad if not worse? And does not the corollary hold, that men freed from religious awe will act in the most unbridled and abandoned manner? Dostoyevsky in his *Brothers Karamazov* was extremely critical of religion (and lived under a despotism that was sanctified by the church) and he also represented his character Smerdyakov as a vain and credulous and stupid figure, but Smerdyakov’s maxim, that “if there is no God there is no morality,” understandably resonates with those who look back on the Russian Revolution through the prism of the twentieth century.

One could go further and say that secular totalitarianism has actually provided us with the summa of human evil. The examples most in common use—those of the Hitler and Stalin regimes—show us with terrible clarity what can happen when men usurp the role of gods. When I consult with my secular and atheist friends, I find that this has become the most common and frequent objection that they encounter from religious audiences. The point deserves a detailed reply.

To begin with a slightly inexpensive observation, it is interesting to find that people of faith now seek defensively to say that they are no worse than fascists or Nazis or Stalinists. One might hope that religion had retained more sense of its dignity than that. I would not say that the ranks of secularism and atheism are exactly crammed

with Communists or fascists, but it can be granted for the sake of argument that, just as secularists and atheists have withstood clerical and theocratic tyrannies, so religious believers have resisted pagan and materialistic ones. But this would only be to split the difference.

The word “totalitarian” was probably first used by the dissident Marxist Victor Serge, who had become appalled by the harvest of Stalinism in the Soviet Union. It was popularized by the secular Jewish intellectual Hannah Arendt, who had fled the hell of the Third Reich and who wrote *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. It is a useful term, because it separates “ordinary” forms of despotism—those which merely exact obedience from their subjects—from the absolutist systems which demand that citizens become wholly subjects and surrender their private lives and personalities entirely to the state, or to the supreme leader.

If we accept that latter definition, then the first point to be made is likewise an easy one. For most of human history, the idea of the total or absolute state was intimately bound up with religion. A baron or king might compel you to pay taxes or serve in his army, and he would usually arrange to have priests on hand to remind you that this was your duty, but the truly frightening despotisms were those which also wanted the contents of your heart and your head. Whether we examine the oriental monarchies of China or India or Persia, or the empires of the Aztec or the Incas, or the medieval courts of Spain and Russia and France, it is almost unvaryingly that we find that these dictators were also gods, or the heads of churches. More than mere obedience was owed them: any criticism of them was profane by definition, and millions of people lived and died in pure fear of a ruler who could select you for a sacrifice, or condemn you to eternal punishment, on a whim. The slightest infringement—of a holy day, or a holy object, or an ordinance about sex or food or caste—could bring calamity. The totalitarian principle, which is often represented as “systematic,” is also closely bound up with caprice. The rules might change or be extended at any moment, and the rulers had the advantage of knowing that their subjects could never be sure if they were obeying the latest law or not. We now value the few exceptions from antiquity—such as Periclean Athens with all its deformities—precisely because there were a few moments when humanity did not live in permanent terror of a Pharaoh or Nebuchadnezzar or Darius whose least word was holy law.

This was even true when the divine right of despots began to give way to versions of modernity. The idea of a utopian state on earth, perhaps modeled on some heavenly ideal, is very hard to efface and has led people to commit terrible crimes in the name of the ideal. One of the very first attempts to create such an ideal Edenic society, patterned on the scheme of human equality, was the totalitarian socialist state established by the Jesuit missionaries in Paraguay. It managed to combine the maximum of egalitarianism with the maximum of unfreedom, and could only be kept going by the maximum of fear. This ought to have been a warning to those who sought to perfect the human species. Yet the object of perfecting the species—which is the very root and source of the totalitarian impulse—is in essence a religious one.

George Orwell, the ascetic unbeliever whose novels gave us an ineradicable picture of what life in a totalitarian state might truly feel like, was in no doubt about this. “From the totalitarian point of view,” he wrote in “The Prevention of Literature” in 1946, “history is something to be created rather than learned. A totalitarian state is in effect a theocracy, and its ruling caste, in order to keep its position, has to be thought of as infallible.” (You will notice that he wrote this in a year when, having fought for more than a decade against fascism, he was turning his guns even more on the sympathizers of Communism.)

In order to be a part of the totalitarian mind-set, it is not necessary to wear a uniform or carry a club or a whip. It is only necessary to wish for your own subjection, and to delight in the subjection of others. What is a totalitarian system if not one where the abject glorification of the perfect leader is matched by the surrender of all privacy and individuality, especially in matters sexual, and in denunciation and punishment—“for their own good”—of those who transgress? The sexual element is probably decisive, in that the dullest mind can grasp what Nathaniel Hawthorne captured in *The Scarlet Letter*: the deep connection between repression and perversion.

In the early history of mankind, the totalitarian principle was the regnant one. The state religion supplied a complete and “total” answer to all questions, from one’s position in the social hierarchy to the rules governing diet and sex. Slave or not, the human was property, and the clerisy was the reinforcement of absolutism. Orwell’s most imaginative projection of the totalitarian idea—the offense of “thoughtcrime”—was a commonplace. An impure thought, let alone a heretical one, could lead to your being flayed alive. To be accused of demonic possession or contact with the Evil One was to be convicted of it. Orwell’s first realization of the hellishness of this came to him early in life, when he was enclosed in a hermetic school run by Christian sadists in which it was not possible to know when you had broken the rules. Whatever you did, and however many precautions you took, the sins of which you were unaware could always be made to find you out.

It was possible to leave that awful school (traumatized for life, as millions of children have been) but it is not possible, in the religious totalitarian vision, to escape this world of original sin and guilt and pain. An infinity of punishment awaits you even after you die. According to the really extreme religious totalitarians, such as John Calvin, who borrowed his awful doctrine from Augustine, an infinity of punishment can be awaiting you even before you are born. Long ago it was written which souls would be chosen or “elected” when the time came to divide the sheep from the goats. No appeal against this primordial sentence is possible, and no good works or professions of faith can save one who has not been fortunate enough to be picked. Calvin’s Geneva was a prototypical totalitarian state, and Calvin himself a sadist and torturer and killer, who burned Servetus (one of the great thinkers and questioners of the day) while the man was still alive. The lesser wretchedness induced in Calvin’s followers, compelled to waste their lives worrying if they had been “elected” or not, is well caught in George Eliot’s *Adam Bede*, and in an old English plebeian satire against the other sects, from Jehovah’s

Witnesses to Plymouth Brethren, who dare to claim that they are of the elect, and that they alone know the exact number of those who will be plucked from the burning:

We are the pure and chosen few, and all the rest are damned.

There's room enough in hell for you—we don't want heaven crammed.

I had an innocuous but weak-spirited uncle whose life was ruined and made miserable in just this way. Calvin may seem like a far-off figure to us, but those who used to grab and use power in his name are still among us and go by the softer names of Presbyterians and Baptists. The urge to ban and censor books, silence dissenters, condemn outsiders, invade the private sphere, and invoke an exclusive salvation is the very essence of the totalitarian. The fatalism of Islam, which believes that all is arranged by Allah in advance, has some points of resemblance in its utter denial of human autonomy and liberty, as well as in its arrogant and insufferable belief that its faith already contains everything that anyone might ever need to know.

Thus, when the great antitotalitarian anthology of the twentieth century came to be published in 1950, its two editors realized that it could only have one possible name. They called it *The God That Failed*. I slightly knew and sometimes worked for one of these two men—the British socialist Richard Crossman. As he wrote in his introduction to the book:

For the intellectual, material comforts are relatively unimportant; what he cares about most is spiritual freedom. The strength of the Catholic Church has always been that it demands the sacrifice of that freedom uncompromisingly, and condemns spiritual pride as a deadly sin. The Communist novice, subjecting his soul to the canon law of the Kremlin, felt something of the release which Catholicism also brings to the intellectual, wearied and worried by the privilege of freedom.

The only book that had warned of all this in advance, a full thirty years earlier, was a small but brilliant volume published in 1919 and entitled *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism*. Long before Arthur Koestler and Richard Crossman had begun to survey the wreckage in retrospect, the whole disaster was being predicted in terms that still command admiration for their prescience. The mordant analyst of the new religion was Bertrand Russell, whose atheism made him more far-seeing than many naive “Christian socialists” who claimed to detect in Russia the beginnings of a new paradise on earth. He was also more far-seeing than the Anglican Christian establishment in his native England, whose newspaper of record the *London Times* took the view that the Russian Revolution could be explained by *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*. This revolting fabrication by Russian Orthodox secret policemen was republished by Eyre and Spottiswoode, the official printers to the Church of England.

Given its own record of succumbing to, and of promulgating, dictatorship on earth and absolute control in the life to come, how did religion confront the “secular” totalitarians of our time? One should first consider, in order, fascism, Nazism, and Stalinism.

Fascism—the precursor and model of National Socialism—was a movement that believed in an organic and corporate society, presided over by a leader or guide. (The “fascis”—symbol of the “lictors” or enforcers of ancient Rome—were a bundle of rods,

tied around an axe, that stood for unity and authority.) Arising out of the misery and humiliation of the First World War, fascist movements were in favor of the defense of traditional values against Bolshevism, and upheld nationalism and piety. It is probably not a coincidence that they arose first and most excitedly in Catholic countries, and it is certainly not a coincidence that the Catholic Church was generally sympathetic to fascism as an idea. Not only did the church regard Communism as a lethal foe, but it also saw its old Jewish enemy in the most senior ranks of Lenin's party. Benito Mussolini had barely seized power in Italy before the Vatican made an official treaty with him, known as the Lateran Pact of 1929. Under the terms of this deal, Catholicism became the only recognized religion in Italy, with monopoly powers over matters such as birth, marriage, death, and education, and in return urged its followers to vote for Mussolini's party. Pope Pius XI described Il Duce ("the leader") as "a man sent by providence." Elections were not to be a feature of Italian life for very long, but the church nonetheless brought about the dissolution of lay Catholic centrist parties and helped sponsor a pseudoparty called "Catholic Action" which was emulated in several countries. Across southern Europe, the church was a reliable ally in the instatement of fascist regimes in Spain, Portugal, and Croatia. General Franco in Spain was allowed to call his invasion of the country, and his destruction of its elected republic, by the honorific title *La Cruzada*, or "the crusade." The Vatican either supported or refused to criticize Mussolini's operatic attempt to re-create a pastiche of the Roman Empire by his invasions of Libya, Abyssinia (today's Ethiopia), and Albania: these territories being populated either by non-Christians or by the wrong kind of Eastern Christian. Mussolini even gave, as one of his justifications for the use of poison gas and other gruesome measures in Abyssinia, the persistence of its inhabitants in the heresy of Monophysitism: an incorrect dogma of the Incarnation that had been condemned by Pope Leo and the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

In central and eastern Europe the picture was hardly better. The extreme right-wing military coup in Hungary, led by Admiral Horthy, was warmly endorsed by the church, as were similar fascistic movements in Slovakia and Austria. (The Nazi puppet regime in Slovakia was actually led by a man in holy orders named Father Tiso.) The cardinal of Austria proclaimed his enthusiasm at Hitler's takeover of his country at the time of the Anschluss.

In France, the extreme right adopted the slogan of "*Meilleur Hitler Que Blum*"—in other words, better to have a German racist dictator than an elected French socialist Jew. Catholic fascist organizations such as Charles Maurras's *Action Française* and the *Croix de Feu* campaigned violently against French democracy and made no bones about their grievance, which was the way in which France had been going downhill since the acquittal of the Jewish captain Alfred Dreyfus in 1899. When the German conquest of France arrived, these forces eagerly collaborated in the rounding up and murder of French Jews, as well as in the deportation to forced labor of a huge number of other Frenchmen. The Vichy regime conceded to clericalism by wiping the slogan of 1789—"Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite"—off the national currency and replacing it with

the Christian ideal motto of “*Famille, Travail, Patrie.*” Even in a country like England, where fascist sympathies were far less prevalent, they still managed to get an audience in respectable circles by the agency of Catholic intellectuals such as T. S. Eliot and Evelyn Waugh.

In neighboring Ireland, the Blue Shirt movement of General O’Duffy (which sent volunteers to fight for Franco in Spain) was little more than a dependency of the Catholic Church. As late as April 1945, on the news of the death of Hitler, President Eamon de Valera put on his top hat, called for the state coach, and went to the German embassy in Dublin to offer his official condolences. Attitudes like this meant that several Catholic-dominated states, from Ireland to Spain to Portugal, were ineligible to join the United Nations when it was first founded. The church has made efforts to apologize for all this, but its complicity with fascism is an ineffaceable mark on its history, and was not a short-term or a hasty commitment so much as a working alliance which did not break down until after the fascist period had itself passed into history.

The case of the church’s surrender to German National Socialism is considerably more complicated but not very much more elevating. Despite sharing two important principles with Hitler’s movement— those of anti-Semitism and anti-Communism—the Vatican could see that Nazism represented a challenge to itself as well. In the first place, it was a quasi-pagan phenomenon which in the long run sought to replace Christianity with pseudo-Nordic blood rites and sinister race myths, based upon the fantasy of Aryan superiority. In the second place, it advocated an exterminationist attitude to the unwell, the unfit, and the insane, and began quite early on to apply this policy not to Jews but to Germans. To the credit of the church, it must be said that its German pulpits denounced this hideous eugenic culling from a very early date.

But if ethical principle had been the guide, the Vatican would not have had to spend the next fifty years vainly trying to account for, or apologize for, its contemptible passivity and inaction. “Passivity” and “inaction,” in fact, may be the wrong choice of words here. To decide to do nothing is itself a policy and a decision, and it is unfortunately easy to record and explain the church’s alignment in terms of a *realpolitik* that sought, not the defeat of Nazism, but an accommodation with it.

The very first diplomatic accord undertaken by Hitler’s government was consummated on July 8, 1933, a few months after the seizure of power, and took the form of a treaty with the Vatican. In return for unchallenged control of the education of Catholic children in Germany, the dropping of Nazi propaganda against the abuses inflicted in Catholic schools and orphanages, and the concession of other privileges to the church, the Holy See instructed the Catholic Center Party to disband, and brusquely ordered Catholics to abstain from any political activity on any subject that the regime chose to define as off-limits. At the first meeting of his cabinet after this capitulation was signed, Hitler announced that these new circumstances would be “especially significant in the struggle against international Jewry.” He was not wrong about this. In fact, he could have been excused for disbelieving his own luck. The twenty-three million Catholics living in the Third Reich, many of whom had shown great individual courage in re-

sisting the rise of Nazism, had been gutted and gelded as a political force. Their own Holy Father had in effect told them to render everything unto the worst Caesar in human history. From then on, parish records were made available to the Nazi state in order to establish who was and who was not “racially pure” enough to survive endless persecution under the Nuremberg laws.

Not the least appalling consequence of this moral surrender was the parallel moral collapse of the German Protestants, who sought to preempt a special status for Catholics by publishing their own accommodation with the führer. None of the Protestant churches, however, went as far as the Catholic hierarchy in ordering an annual celebration for Hitler’s birthday on April 20. On this auspicious date, on papal instructions, the cardinal of Berlin regularly transmitted “warmest congratulations to the führer in the name of the bishops and dioceses in Germany,” these plaudits to be accompanied by “the fervent prayers which the Catholics of Germany are sending to heaven on their altars.” The order was obeyed, and faithfully carried out.

To be fair, this disgraceful tradition was not inaugurated until 1939, in which year there was a change of papacy. And to be fair again, Pope Pius XI had always harbored the most profound misgivings about the Hitler system and its evident capacity for radical evil. (During Hitler’s first visit to Rome, for example, the Holy Father rather ostentatiously took himself out of town to the papal retreat at Castelgandolfo.) However, this ailing and weak pope was continually outpointed, throughout the 1930s, by his secretary of state, Eugenio Pacelli. We have good reason to think that at least one papal encyclical, expressing at least a modicum of concern about the maltreatment of Europe’s Jews, was readied by His Holiness but suppressed by Pacelli, who had another strategy in mind. We now know Pacelli as Pope Pius XII, who succeeded to the office after the death of his former superior in February 1939. Four days after his election by the College of Cardinals, His Holiness composed the following letter to Berlin:

To the Illustrious Herr Adolf Hitler, Führer and Chancellor of the German Reich! Here at the beginning of Our Pontificate We wish to assure you that We remain devoted to the spiritual welfare of the German people entrusted to your leadership. . . . During the many years We spent in Germany, We did all in Our power to establish harmonious relations between Church and State. Now that the responsibilities of Our pastoral function have increased Our opportunities, how much more ardently do We pray to reach that goal. May the prosperity of the German people and their progress in every domain come, with God’s help, to fruition!

Within six years of this evil and fatuous message, the once prosperous and civilized people of Germany could gaze around themselves and see hardly one brick piled upon another, as the godless Red Army swept toward Berlin. But I mention this conjuncture for another reason. Believers are supposed to hold that the pope is the vicar of Christ on earth, and the keeper of the keys of Saint Peter. They are of course free to believe this, and to believe that god decides when to end the tenure of one pope or (more important) to inaugurate the tenure of another. This would involve believing in the death of an anti-Nazi pope, and the accession of a pro-Nazi one, as a matter of divine will, a few

months before Hitler's invasion of Poland and the opening of the Second World War. Studying that war, one can perhaps accept that 25 percent of the SS were practicing Catholics and that no Catholic was ever even threatened with excommunication for participating in war crimes. (Joseph Goebbels was excommunicated, but that was earlier on, and he had after all brought it on himself for the offense of marrying a Protestant.) Human beings and institutions are imperfect, to be sure. But there could be no clearer or more vivid proof that holy institutions are man-made.

The collusion continued even after the war, as wanted Nazi criminals were spirited to South America by the infamous "rat line." It was the Vatican itself, with its ability to provide passports, documents, money, and contacts, which organized the escape network and also the necessary shelter and succor at the other end. Bad as this was in itself, it also involved another collaboration with extreme-right dictatorships in the Southern Hemisphere, many of them organized on the fascist model. Fugitive torturers and murderers like Klaus Barbie often found themselves second careers as servants of these regimes, which until they began to collapse in the last decades of the twentieth century had also enjoyed a steady relationship of support from the local Catholic clergy. The connection of the church to fascism and Nazism actually outlasted the Third Reich itself.

Many Christians gave their lives to protect their fellow creatures in this midnight of the century, but the chance that they did so on orders from any priesthood is statistically almost negligible. This is why we revere the memory of the very few believers, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemöller, who acted in accordance only with the dictates of conscience. The papacy took until the 1980s to find a candidate for sainthood in the context of the "final solution," and even then could only identify a rather ambivalent priest who—after a long record of political anti-Semitism in Poland—had apparently behaved nobly in Auschwitz. An earlier nominee—a simple Austrian named Franz Jägerstätter—was unfortunately unqualified. He had indeed refused to join Hitler's army on the grounds that he was under higher orders to love his neighbor, but while in prison facing execution had been visited by his confessors who told him that he ought to be obeying the law. The secular left in Europe comes far better out of the anti-Nazi struggle than that, even if many of its adherents believed that there was a worker's paradise beyond the Ural Mountains.

It is often forgotten that the Axis triad included another member—the Empire of Japan—which had not only a religious person as its head of state, but an actual deity. If the appalling heresy of believing that Emperor Hirohito was god was ever denounced from any German or Italian pulpit or by any prelate, I have been unable to discover the fact. In the sacred name of this ridiculously overrated mammal, huge areas of China and Indochina and the Pacific were plundered and enslaved. In his name, too, millions of indoctrinated Japanese were martyred and sacrificed. So imposing and hysterical was the cult of this god-king that it was believed that the whole Japanese people might resort to suicide if his person was threatened at the end of the war. It was accordingly decided that he could "stay on," but that he would henceforward have to claim to be

an emperor only, and perhaps somewhat divine, but not strictly speaking a god. This deference to the strength of religious opinion must involve the admission that faith and worship can make people behave very badly indeed.

Thus, those who invoke “secular” tyranny in contrast to religion are hoping that we will forget two things: the connection between the Christian churches and fascism, and the capitulation of the churches to National Socialism. This is not just my assertion: it has been admitted by the religious authorities themselves. Their poor conscience on the point is illustrated by a piece of bad faith that one still has to combat. On religious Web sites and in religious propaganda, you may come across a statement purportedly made by Albert Einstein in 1940:

Being a lover of freedom, when the revolution came to Germany, I looked to the universities to defend it, knowing that they had always boasted of their devotion to the cause of truth; but, no, the universities immediately were silenced. Then I looked to the great editors of the newspapers whose flaming editorials in days gone by had proclaimed their love of freedom; but they, like the universities were silenced in a few short weeks. . . . Only the Church stood squarely across the path of Hitler’s campaign for suppressing truth. I never had any special interest in the Church before, but now I feel a great affection and admiration because the Church alone has had the courage and persistence to stand for intellectual truth and moral freedom. I am forced thus to confess that what I once despised I now praise unreservedly.

Originally printed in Time magazine (without any verifiable attribution), this supposed statement was once cited in a national broadcast by the famous American Catholic spokesman and cleric Fulton Sheen, and remains in circulation. As the analyst William Waterhouse has pointed out, it does not sound like Einstein at all. Its rhetoric is too florid, for one thing. It makes no mention of the persecution of the Jews. And it makes the cool and careful Einstein look silly, in that he claims to have once “despised” something in which he also “never had any special interest.” There is another difficulty, in that the statement never appears in any anthology of Einstein’s written or spoken remarks. Eventually, Waterhouse was able to find an unpublished letter in the Einstein Archives in Jerusalem, in which the old man in 1947 complained of having once made a remark praising some German “churchmen” (not “churches”) which had since been exaggerated beyond all recognition.

Anyone wanting to know what Einstein did say in the early days of Hitler’s barbarism can easily look him up. For example:

I hope that healthy conditions will soon supervene in Germany and that in future her great men like Kant and Goethe will not merely be commemorated from time to time but that the principles which they taught will also prevail in public life and in the general consciousness.

It is quite clear from this that he put his “faith,” as always, in the Enlightenment tradition. Those who seek to misrepresent the man who gave us an alternative theory of the cosmos (as well as those who remained silent or worse while his fellow Jews were being deported and destroyed) betray the prickings of their bad consciences.

Turning to Soviet and Chinese Stalinism, with its exorbitant cult of personality and depraved indifference to human life and human rights, one cannot expect to find too much overlap with preexisting religions. For one thing, the Russian Orthodox Church had been the main prop of the czarist autocracy, while the czar himself was regarded as the formal head of the faith and something a little more than merely human. In China, the Christian churches were overwhelmingly identified with the foreign “concessions” extracted by imperial powers, which were among the principal causes of the revolution in the first place. This is not to explain or excuse the killing of priests and nuns and the desecration of churches—any more than one should excuse the burning of churches and the murder of clergy in Spain during the struggle of the Spanish republic against Catholic fascism—but the long association of religion with corrupt secular power has meant that most nations have to go through at least one anticlerical phase, from Henry VIII through Cromwell to the French Revolution to the Risorgimento, and in the conditions of warfare and collapse that obtained in Russia and China these interludes were exceptionally brutal ones. (I might add, though, that no serious Christian ought to hope for the restoration of religion as it was in either country: the church in Russia was the protector of serfdom and the author of anti-Jewish pogroms, and in China the missionary and the tight-fisted trader and concessionaire were partners in crime.)

Lenin and Trotsky were certainly convinced atheists who believed that illusions in religion could be destroyed by acts of policy and that in the meantime the obscenely rich holdings of the church could be seized and nationalized. In the Bolshevik ranks, as among the Jacobins of 1789, there were also those who saw the revolution as a sort of alternative religion, with connections to myths of redemption and messianism. For Joseph Stalin, who had trained to be a priest in a seminary in Georgia, the whole thing was ultimately a question of power. “How many divisions,” he famously and stupidly inquired, “has the pope?” (The true answer to his boorish sarcasm was, “More than you think.”) Stalin then pedantically repeated the papal routine of making science conform to dogma, by insisting that the shaman and charlatan Trofim Lysenko had disclosed the key to genetics and promised extra harvests of specially inspired vegetables. (Millions of innocents died of gnawing internal pain as a consequence of this “revelation.”) This Caesar unto whom all things were dutifully rendered took care, as his regime became a more nationalist and statist one, to maintain at least a puppet church that could attach its traditional appeal to his. This was especially true during the Second World War, when the “Internationale” was dropped as the Russian anthem and replaced by the sort of hymnal propaganda that had defeated Bonaparte in 1812 (this at a time when “volunteers” from several European fascist states were invading Russian territory under the holy banner of a crusade against “godless” Communism). In a much-neglected passage of *Animal Farm*, Orwell allowed Moses the raven, long the croaking advocate of a heaven beyond the skies, to return to the farm and preach to the more credulous creatures after Napoleon had vanquished Snowball. His analogy to Stalin’s manipulation of the Russian Orthodox Church was, as ever, quite exact. (The postwar Polish Stalinists had recourse to much the same tactic, legalizing a Catholic

front organization called Pax Christi and giving it seats in the Warsaw parliament, much to the delight of fellow-traveling Catholic Communists such as Graham Greene.) Antireligious propaganda in the Soviet Union was of the most banal materialist sort: a shrine to Lenin often had stained glass while in the official museum of atheism there was testimony offered by a Russian astronaut, who had seen no god in outer space. This idiocy expressed at least as much contempt for the gullible yokels as any wonder-working icon. As the great laureate of Poland, Czeslaw Milosz, phrased it in his antitotalitarian classic *The Captive Mind*, first published in 1953:

I have known many Christians—Poles, Frenchmen, Spaniards—who were strict Stalinists in the field of politics but who retained certain inner reservations, believing God would make corrections once the bloody sentences of the all-mighties of History were carried out. They pushed their reasoning rather far. They argue that history develops according to immutable laws that exist by the will of God; one of these laws is the class struggle; the twentieth century marks the victory of the proletariat, which is led in its struggle by the Communist Party; Stalin, the leader of the Communist Party, fulfils the law of history, or in other words acts by the will of God, therefore one must obey him. Mankind can be renewed only on the Russian pattern; that is why no Christian can oppose the one—cruel, it is true—idea which will create a new kind of man over the entire planet. Such reasoning is often used by clerics who are Party tools. “Christ is a new man. The new man is the Soviet man. Therefore Christ is a Soviet man!” said Justinian Marina, the Rumanian patriarch.

Men like Marina were hateful and pathetic no doubt, and hateful and pathetic simultaneously, but this is no worse in principle than the numberless pacts made between church and empire, church and monarchy, church and fascism, and church and state, all of them justified by the need of the faithful to make temporal alliances for the sake of “higher” goals, while rendering unto Caesar (the word from which “czar” is derived) even if he is “godless.”

A political scientist or anthropologist would have little difficulty in recognizing what the editors and contributors of *The God That Failed* put into such immortal secular prose: Communist absolutists did not so much negate religion, in societies that they well understood were saturated with faith and superstition, as seek to replace it. The solemn elevation of infallible leaders who were a source of endless bounty and blessing; the permanent search for heretics and schismatics; the mummification of dead leaders as icons and relics; the lurid show trials that elicited incredible confessions by means of torture . . . none of this was very difficult to interpret in traditional terms. Nor was the hysteria during times of plague and famine, when the authorities unleashed a mad search for any culprit but the real one. (The great Doris Lessing once told me that she left the Communist Party when she discovered that Stalin’s inquisitors had plundered the museums of Russian Orthodoxy and czarism and reemployed the old instruments of torture.) Nor was the ceaseless invocation of a “Radiant Future,” the arrival of which would one day justify all crimes and dissolve all petty doubts. “*Extraecclesiam, nulla salus,*” as the older faith used to say. “*Within the revolution anything,*” as Fidel Cas-

tro was fond of remarking. “Outside the revolution—nothing.” Indeed, within Castro’s periphery there evolved a bizarre mutation known oxymoronically as “liberation theology,” where priests and even some bishops adopted “alternative” liturgies enshrining the ludicrous notion that Jesus of Nazareth was really a dues-paying socialist. For a combination of good and bad reasons (Archbishop Romero of El Salvador was a man of courage and principle, in the way that some Nicaraguan “base community” clerics were not), the papacy put this down as a heresy. Would that it could have condemned fascism and Nazism in the same unhesitating and unambiguous tones.

In a very few cases, such as Albania, Communism tried to extirpate religion completely and to proclaim an entirely atheist state. This only led to even more extreme cults of mediocre human beings, such as the dictator Enver Hoxha, and to secret baptisms and ceremonies that proved the utter alienation of the common people from the regime. There is nothing in modern secular argument that even hints at any ban on religious observance. Sigmund Freud was quite correct to describe the religious impulse, in *The Future of an Illusion*, as essentially ineradicable until or unless the human species can conquer its fear of death and its tendency to wish-thinking. Neither contingency seems very probable. All that the totalitarians have demonstrated is that the religious impulse—the need to worship—can take even more monstrous forms if it is repressed. This might not necessarily be a compliment to our worshipping tendency.

In the early months of this century, I made a visit to North Korea. Here, contained within a hermetic quadrilateral of territory enclosed either by sea or by near-impenetrable frontiers, is a land entirely given over to adulation. Every waking moment of the citizen—the subject—is consecrated to praise of the Supreme Being and his Father. Every schoolroom resounds with it, every film and opera and play is devoted to it, every radio and television transmission is given up to it. So are all books and magazines and newspaper articles, all sporting events and all workplaces. I used to wonder what it would be like to have to sing everlasting praises, and now I know. Nor is the devil forgotten: the unsleeping evil of outsiders and unbelievers is warded off with a perpetual vigilance, which includes daily moments of ritual in the workplace in which hatred of the “other” is inculcated. The North Korean state was born at about the same time that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published, and one could almost believe that the holy father of the state, Kim Il Sung, was given a copy of the novel and asked if he could make it work in practice. Yet even Orwell did not dare to have it said that “Big Brother’s” birth was attended by miraculous signs and portents—such as birds hailing the glorious event by singing in human words. Nor did the Inner Party of Airstrip One/Oceania spend billions of scarce dollars, at a time of horrific famine, to prove that the ludicrous mammal Kim Il Sung and his pathetic mammal son, Kim Jong Il, were two incarnations of the same person. (In this version of the Arian heresy so much condemned by Athanasius, North Korea is unique in having a dead man as head of state: Kim Jong Il is the head of the party and the army but the presidency is held in perpetuity by his deceased father, which makes the country a necrocracy or mausolocacy as well as a regime that is only one figure short of a Trinity.) The afterlife

is not mentioned in North Korea, because the idea of a defection in any direction is very strongly discouraged, but as against that it is not claimed that the two Kims will continue to dominate you after you are dead. Students of the subject can easily see that what we have in North Korea is not so much an extreme form of Communism—the term is hardly mentioned amid the storms of ecstatic dedication—as a debased yet refined form of Confucianism and ancestor worship.

When I left North Korea, which I did with a sense of mingled relief, outrage, and pity so strong that I can still summon it, I was leaving a totalitarian state and also a religious one. I have since talked with many of the brave people who are trying to undermine this atrocious system from within and without. Let me admit at once that some of the bravest of these resisters are fundamentalist Christian anti-Communists. One of these courageous men gave an interview not long ago in which he was honest enough to say that he had a difficult time preaching the idea of a savior to the half-starved and terrified few who had managed to escape their prison-state. The whole idea of an infallible and all-powerful redeemer, they said, struck them as a bit too familiar. A bowl of rice and some exposure to some wider culture, and a little relief from the hideous din of compulsory enthusiasm, would be the most they could ask for, for now. Those who are fortunate enough to get as far as South Korea, or the United States, may find themselves confronted with yet another Messiah. The jailbird and tax evader Sun Myung Moon, undisputed head of the “Unification Church” and major contributor to the extreme right in the United States, is one of the patrons of the “intelligent design” racket. A leading figure of this so-called movement, and a man who never fails to award his god-man guru his proper name of “Father,” is Jonathan Wells, the author of a laughable antievolutionist diatribe entitled *The Icons of Evolution*. As Wells himself touchingly put it, “Father’s words, my studies, and my prayers convinced me that I should devote my life to destroying Darwinism, just as many of my fellow Unificationists had already devoted their lives to destroying Marxism. When Father chose me (along with about a dozen other seminary graduates) to enter a Ph.D. program in 1978, I welcomed the opportunity to do battle.” Mr. Wells’s book is unlikely even to rate a footnote in the history of piffle, but having seen “fatherhood” at work in both of the two Koreas, I have an idea of what the “Burned-Over District” of upstate New York must have looked and felt like when the believers had everything their own way.

Religion even at its meekest has to admit that what it is proposing is a “total” solution, in which faith must be to some extent blind, and in which all aspects of the private and public life must be submitted to a permanent higher supervision. This constant surveillance and continual subjection, usually reinforced by fear in the shape of infinite vengeance, does not invariably bring out the best mammalian characteristics. It is certainly true that emancipation from religion does not always produce the best mammal either. To take two salient examples: one of the greatest and most enlightening scientists of the twentieth century, J. D. Bernal, was an abject votary of Stalin and wasted much of his life defending the crimes of his leader. H. L. Mencken, one of the best satirists of religion, was too keen on Nietzsche and advocated a form of “social

Darwinism” which included eugenics and a contempt for the weak and sick. He also had a soft spot for Adolf Hitler and wrote an unpardonably indulgent review of *Mein Kampf*. Humanism has many crimes for which to apologize. But it can apologize for them, and also correct them, in its own terms and without having to shake or challenge the basis of any unalterable system of belief. Totalitarian systems, whatever outward form they may take, are fundamentalist and, as we would now say, “faith-based.”

In her magisterial examination of the totalitarian phenomenon, Hannah Arendt was not merely being a tribalist when she gave a special place to anti-Semitism. The idea that a group of people—whether defined as a nation or as a religion—could be condemned for all time and without the possibility of an appeal was (and is) essentially a totalitarian one. It is horribly fascinating that Hitler began by being a propagator of this deranged prejudice, and that Stalin ended by being both a victim and an advocate of it. But the virus was kept alive for centuries by religion. Saint Augustine positively relished the myth of the Wandering Jew, and the exile of the Jews in general, as a proof of divine justice. The Orthodox Jews are not blameless here. By claiming to be “chosen” in a special exclusive covenant with the Almighty, they invited hatred and suspicion and evinced their own form of racism. However, it was the secular Jews above all who were and are hated by the totalitarians, so no question of “blaming the victim” need arise. The Jesuit order, right up until the twentieth century, refused by statute to admit a man unless he could prove that he had no “Jew- ish blood” for several generations. The Vatican preached that all Jews inherited the responsibility for deicide. The French church aroused the mob against Dreyfus and “the intellectuals.” Islam has never forgiven “the Jews” for encountering Muhammad and deciding that he was not the authentic messenger. For emphasizing tribe and dynasty and racial provenance in its holy books, religion must accept the responsibility for transmitting one of mankind’s most primitive illusions down through the generations.

The connection between religion, racism, and totalitarianism is also to be found in the other most hateful dictatorship of the twentieth century: the vile system of apartheid in South Africa. This was not just the ideology of a Dutch-speaking tribe bent on extorting forced labor from peoples of a different shade of pigmentation, it was also a form of Calvinism in practice. The Dutch Reformed Church preached as a dogma that black and white were biblically forbidden to mix, let alone to coexist in terms of equality. Racism is totalitarian by definition: it marks the victim in perpetuity and denies him, or her, the right to even a rag of dignity or privacy, even the elemental right to make love or marry or produce children with a loved one of the “wrong” tribe, without having love nullified by law . . . And this was the life of millions living in the “Christian West” in our own time. The ruling National Party, which was also heavily infected with anti-Semitism and had taken the Nazi side in the Second World War, relied on the ravings of the pulpit to justify its own blood myth of a Boer “Exodus” that awarded it exclusive rights in a “promised land.” As a result, an Afrikaner permutation of Zionism created a backward and despotic state, in which the rights of all other peoples were abolished and in which eventually the survival of Afrikaners themselves

was threatened by corruption, chaos, and brutality. At that point the bovine elders of the church had a revelation which allowed the gradual abandonment of apartheid. But this can never permit forgiveness for the evil that religion did while it felt strong enough to do so. It is to the credit of many secular Christians and Jews, and many atheist and agnostic militants of the African National Congress, that South African society was saved from complete barbarism and implosion.

The last century saw many other improvisations on the old idea of a dictatorship that could take care of more than merely secular or everyday problems. These ranged from the mildly offensive and insulting—the Greek Orthodox Church baptized the usurping military junta of 1967, with its eyeshades and steel helmets, as “a Greece for Christian Greeks”—to the all-enslaving “Angka” of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, which sought its authority in prehistoric temples and legends. (Their sometime friend and sometime rival, the aforementioned King Sihanouk, who took a playboy’s refuge under the protection of the Chinese Stalinists, was also adept at being a god-king when it suited him.) In between lies the shah of Iran, who claimed to be “the shadow of god” as well as “the light of the Aryans,” and who repressed the secular opposition and took extreme care to be represented as the guardian of the Shiite shrines. His megalomania was succeeded by one of its close cousins, the Khomeinist heresy of the velayet-i-faqui, or total societal control by mullahs (who also display their deceased leader as their founder, and assert that his holy words can never be rescinded). At the very extreme edge can be found the primeval puritanism of the Taliban, which devoted itself to discovering new things to forbid (everything from music to recycled paper, which might contain a tiny fleck of pulp from a discarded Koran) and new methods of punishment (the burial alive of homosexuals). The alternative to these grotesque phenomena is not the chimera of secular dictatorship, but the defense of secular pluralism and of the right not to believe or be compelled to believe. This defense has now become an urgent and inescapable responsibility: a matter of survival.

Chapter Eighteen. A Finer Tradition: The Resistance of the Rational

I am thus one of the very few examples, in this country, of one who has, not thrown off religious belief, but never had it. . . . This point in my early education had however incidentally one bad consequence deserving notice. In giving me an opinion contrary to that of the world, my father thought it necessary to give it as one which could not prudently be avowed to the world. This lesson of keeping my thoughts to myself, at that early age, was attended with some moral disadvantages.”

—John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography*

Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m’effraie.

(The eternal silence of these infinite spaces makes me afraid.)

—Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*

The book of Psalms can be deceiving. The celebrated opening of psalm 121, for example—“I shall lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help”—is rendered in English as a statement but in the original takes the form of a question: where is the help coming from? (Never fear: the glib answer is that the believers will be immune from all danger and suffering.) Whoever the psalmist turns out to have been, he was obviously pleased enough with the polish and address of psalm 14 to repeat it virtually word for word as psalm 53. Both versions begin with the identical statement that “The fool has said in his heart, there is no God.” For some reason, this null remark is considered significant enough to be recycled throughout all religious apologetics. All that we can tell for sure from the otherwise meaningless assertion is that unbelief—not just heresy and backsliding but unbelief—must have been known to exist even in that remote epoch. Given the then absolute rule of unchallenged and brutally punitive faith, it would perhaps have been a fool who did not keep this conclusion buried deep inside himself, in which case it would be interesting to know how the psalmist knew it was there. (Dissidents used to be locked up in Soviet lunatic asylums for “reformist delusions,” it being quite naturally and reasonably assumed that anybody mad enough to propose reforms had lost all sense of self-preservation.)

Our species will never run out of fools but I dare say that there have been at least as many credulous idiots who professed faith in god as there have been dolts and simpletons who concluded otherwise. It might be immodest to suggest that the odds

rather favor the intelligence and curiosity of the atheists, but it is the case that some humans have always noticed the improbability of god, the evil done in his name, the likelihood that he is man-made, and the availability of less harmful alternative beliefs and explanations. We cannot know the names of all these men and women, because they have in all times and all places been subject to ruthless suppression. For the identical reason, nor can we know how many ostensibly devout people were secretly unbelievers. As late as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in relatively free societies such as Britain and the United States, unbelievers as secure and prosperous as James Mill and Benjamin Franklin felt it advisable to keep their opinions private. Thus, when we read of the glories of “Christian” devotional painting and architecture, or “Islamic” astronomy and medicine, we are talking about advances of civilization and culture—some of them anticipated by Aztecs and Chinese—that have as much to do with “faith” as their predecessors had to do with human sacrifice and imperialism. And we have no means of knowing, except in a very few special cases, how many of these architects and painters and scientists were preserving their innermost thoughts from the scrutiny of the godly. Galileo might have been unmolested in his telescopic work if he had not been so unwise as to admit that it had cosmological implications.

Doubt, skepticism, and outright unbelief have always taken the same essential form as they do today. There were always observations on the natural order which took notice of the absence or needlessness of a prime mover. There were always shrewd comments on the way in which religion reflected human wishes or human designs. It was never that difficult to see that religion was a cause of hatred and conflict, and that its maintenance depended upon ignorance and superstition. Satirists and poets, as well as philosophers and men of science, were capable of pointing out that if triangles had gods their gods would have three sides, just as Thracian gods had blond hair and blue eyes.

The original collision between our reasoning faculties and any form of organized faith, though it must have occurred before in the minds of many, is probably exemplified in the trial of Socrates in 399 BC. It does not matter at all to me that we have no absolute certainty that Socrates even existed. The records of his life and his words are secondhand, almost but not quite as much as are the books of the Jewish and Christian Bible and the hadiths of Islam. Philosophy, however, has no need of such demonstrations, because it does not deal in “revealed” wisdom. As it happens, we have some plausible accounts of the life in question (a stoic soldier somewhat resembling Schweik in appearance; a shrewish wife; a tendency to attacks of catalepsy), and these will do. On the word of Plato, who was perhaps an eyewitness, we may accept that during a time of paranoia and tyranny in Athens, Socrates was indicted for godlessness and knew his life to be forfeit. The noble words of the Apology also make it plain that he did not care to save himself by affirming, like a later man faced with an inquisition, anything that he did not believe. Even though he was not in fact an atheist, he was quite correctly considered unsound for his advocacy of free thought and unrestricted inquiry, and his refusal to give assent to any dogma. All he really “knew,” he said,

was the extent of his own ignorance. (This to me is still the definition of an educated person.) According to Plato, this great Athenian was quite content to observe the customary rites of the city, testified that the Delphic oracle had instructed him to become a philosopher, and on his deathbed, condemned to swallow the hemlock, spoke of a possible afterlife in which those who had thrown off the world by mental exercise might yet continue to lead an existence of pure mind. But even then, he remembered as always to qualify himself by adding that this might well not be the case. The question, as always, was worth pursuing. Philosophy begins where religion ends, just as by analogy chemistry begins where alchemy runs out, and astronomy takes the place of astrology.

From Socrates, also, we can learn how to argue two things that are of the highest importance. The first is that conscience is innate. The second is that the dogmatic faithful can easily be outpointed and satirized by one who pretends to take their preachings at face value.

Socrates believed that he had a daimon, or oracle, or internal guide, whose good opinion was worth having. Everybody but the psychopath has this feeling to a greater or lesser extent. Adam Smith described a permanent partner in an inaudible conversation, who acted as a check and scrutineer. Sigmund Freud wrote that the voice of reason was small, but very persistent. C. S. Lewis tried to prove too much by opining that the presence of a conscience indicated the divine spark. Modern vernacular describes conscience—not too badly—as whatever it is that makes us behave well when nobody is looking. At any event, Socrates absolutely refused to say anything of which he was not morally sure. He would sometimes, if he suspected himself of casuistry or crowd-pleasing, break off in the very middle of a speech. He told his judges that at no point in his closing plea had his “oracle” hinted at him to stop. Those who believe that the existence of conscience is a proof of a godly design are advancing an argument that simply cannot be disproved because there is no evidence for or against it. The case of Socrates, however, demonstrates that men and women of real conscience will often have to assert it against faith.

He was facing death but had the option, even if convicted, of a lesser sentence if he chose to plead for it. In almost insulting tones, he offered to pay a negligible fine instead. Having thus given his angry judges no alternative but the supreme penalty, he proceeded to explain why murder at their hands was meaningless to him. Death had no terror: it was either perpetual rest or the chance of immortality—and even of communion with great Greeks like Orpheus and Homer who had predeceased him. In such a happy case, he observed drily, one might even wish to die and die again. It need not matter to us that the Delphic oracle is no more, and that Orpheus and Homer are mythical. The point is that Socrates was mocking his accusers in their own terms, saying in effect: I do not know for certain about death and the gods—but I am as certain as I can be that you do not know, either.

Some of the antireligious effect of Socrates and his gentle but relentless questioning can be gauged from a play that was written and performed in his own lifetime. The

Clouds, composed by Aristophanes, features a philosopher named Socrates who keeps up a school of skepticism. A nearby farmer manages to come up with all the usual dull questions asked by the faithful. For one thing, if there is no Zeus, who brings the rain to water the crops? Inviting the man to use his head for a second, Socrates points out that if Zeus could make it rain, there would or could be rain from cloudless skies. Since this does not happen, it might be wiser to conclude that the clouds are the cause of the rainfall. All right then, says the farmer, who moves the clouds into position? That must surely be Zeus. Not so, says Socrates, who explains about winds and heat. Well in that case, replies the old rustic, where does the lightning come from, to punish liars and other wrongdoers? The lightning, it is gently pointed out to him, does not seem to discriminate between the just and the unjust. Indeed, it has often been noticed to strike the temples of Olympian Zeus himself. This is enough to win the farmer over, though he later recants his impiety and burns down the school with Socrates inside it. Many are the freethinkers who have gone the same way, or escaped very narrowly. All major confrontations over the right to free thought, free speech, and free inquiry have taken the same form—of a religious attempt to assert the literal and limited mind over the ironic and inquiring one.

In essence, the argument with faith begins and ends with Socrates, and you may if you wish take the view that the city prosecutors did right in protecting Athenian youth from his troublesome speculations. However, it cannot be argued that he brought much science to bear against superstition. One of his prosecutors alleged that he had called the sun a piece of stone and the moon a piece of earth (the latter of which would have been true), but Socrates turned aside the charge, saying that it was a problem for Anaxagoras. This Ionian philosopher had in fact been prosecuted earlier for saying that the sun was a red-hot piece of rock and the moon a piece of earth, but he was not as insightful as Leucippus and Democritus, who proposed that everything was made of atoms in perpetual motion. (Incidentally, it is also quite possible that Leucippus never existed, and nothing important depends on whether or not he actually did.) The important thing about the brilliant “atomist” school is that it regarded the question of first cause or origin as essentially irrelevant. At the time, this was as far as any mind could reasonably go.

This left the problem of the “gods” unresolved. Epicurus, who took up the theory of Democritus concerning atoms, could not quite disbelieve in “their” existence, but he did find it impossible to convince himself that the gods played any role in human affairs. For one thing, why would “they” bother with the tedium of human existence, let alone the tedium of human government? They avoid unnecessary pain, and humans are wise to do likewise. Thus there is nothing to be feared in death, and in the meantime all attempts to read the gods’ intentions, such as studying the entrails of animals, are an absurd waste of time.

In some ways, the most attractive and the most charming of the founders of antireligion is the poet Lucretius, who lived in the first century before Christ and admired the work of Epicurus beyond measure. Reacting to a revival of ancient worship by the Em-

peror Augustus, he composed a witty and brilliant poem entitled *De Re- rum Natura*, or “On the Nature of Things.” This work was nearly destroyed by Christian fanatics in the Middle Ages, and only one printed manuscript survived, so we are fortunate even to know that a person writing in the time of Cicero (who first discussed the poem) and Julius Caesar had managed to keep alive the atomic theory. Lucretius anticipated David Hume in saying that the prospect of future annihilation was no worse than the contemplation of the nothingness from which one came, and also anticipated Freud in ridiculing the idea of prearranged burial rites and memorials, all of them expressing the vain and useless wish to be present in some way at one’s own funeral. Following Aristophanes, he thought that the weather was its own explanation and that nature, “rid of all gods,” did the work that foolish and self-centered people imagined to be divinely inspired, or directed at their puny selves:

Who can wheel all the starry spheres, and blow
Over all land the fruitful warmth from above
Be ready in all places and all times,
Gather black clouds and shake the quiet sky
With terrible thunder, to hurl down bolts which often
Rattle his own shrines, to rage in the desert, retreating
For target drill, so that his shafts can pass
The guilty by, and slay the innocent?

Atomism was viciously persecuted throughout Christian Europe for many centuries, on the not unreasonable ground that it offered a far better explanation of the natural world than did religion. But, like a tenuous thread of thought, the work of Lucretius managed to persist in a few learned minds. Sir Isaac Newton may have been a believer—in all sorts of pseudoscience as well as in Christianity—but when he came to set out his *Principia* he included ninety lines of *De Rerum Natura* in the early drafts. Galileo’s 1623 volume *Saggiatore*, while it does not acknowledge Epicurus, was so dependent on his atomic theories that both its friends and its critics referred to it as an Epicurean book.

In view of the terror imposed by religion on science and scholarship throughout the early Christian centuries (Augustine maintained that the pagan gods did exist, but only as devils, and that the earth was less than six thousand years old) and the fact that most intelligent people found it prudent to make an outward show of conformity, one need not be surprised that the revival of philosophy was often originally expressed in quasi-devout terms. Those who followed the various schools of philosophy that were permitted in Andalusia during its brief flowering—a synthesis between Aristotelianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—were permitted to speculate about duality in truth, and a possible balance between reason and revelation. This concept of “double truth” was advanced by supporters of Averroes but strongly opposed by the church for obvious reasons. Francis Bacon, writing during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, liked to say—perhaps following Tertullian’s assertion that the greater the absurdity the stronger his belief in it—that faith is at its greatest when its teachings are least amenable to

reason. Pierre Bayle, writing a few decades later, was fond of stating all the claims of reason against a given belief, only to add “so much the greater is the triumph of faith in nevertheless believing.” We can be fairly sure that he did not do this merely in order to escape punishment. The time when irony would punish and confuse the literal and the fanatical was about to dawn.

But this was not to happen without many revenges and rearguard actions from the literal and the fanatical. For a brief but splendid time in the seventeenth century, the staunch little nation of Holland was the tolerant host of many freethinkers such as Bayle (who moved there to be safe) and René Descartes (who moved there for the same reason). It was also the birthplace, one year before the arraignment of Galileo by the Inquisition, of the great Baruch Spinoza, a son of the Spanish and Portuguese Jewry who had themselves originally emigrated to Holland to be free of persecution. On July 27, 1656, the elders of the Amsterdam synagogue made the following cherm, or damnation, or fatwa, concerning his work:

With the judgment of the angels and of the saints we excommunicate, cut off, curse, and anathematize Baruch de Espinoza, with the consent of the elders and of all this holy congregation, in the presence of the holy books: by the 613 precepts which are written therein, with the anathema wherewith Joshua cursed Jericho, with the curse which Elisha laid upon the children, and with all the curses which are written in the law. Cursed be he by day and cursed be he by night. Cursed be he in sleeping and cursed be he in waking, cursed in going out and cursed in coming in. The Lord shall not pardon him, the wrath and fury of the Lord shall henceforth be kindled against this man, and shall lay upon him all the curses which are written in the book of the law. The Lord shall destroy his name under the sun, and cut him off for his undoing from all the tribes of Israel, with all the curses of the firmament which are written in the book of the law.

The multiple malediction concluded with an order requiring all Jews to avoid any contact with Spinoza, and to refrain on pain of punishment from reading “any paper composed or written by him.” (Incidentally, “the curse which Elisha laid upon the children” refers to the highly elevating biblical story in which Elisha, annoyed by children who teased him for his baldness, called upon god to send some she- bears to rend the children limb from limb. Which, so says the story, the bears dutifully did. Perhaps Thomas Paine was not wrong in saying that he could not believe in any religion that shocked the mind of a child.)

The Vatican, and the Calvinist authorities in Holland, heartily approved of this hysterical Jewish condemnation and joined in the Europe-wide suppression of all Spinoza’s work. Had the man not questioned the immortality of the soul, and called for the separation of church and state? Away with him! This derided heretic is now credited with the most original philosophical work ever done on the mind/body distinction, and his meditations on the human condition have provided more real consolation to thoughtful people than has any religion. Argument continues about whether Spinoza was an atheist: it now seems odd that we should have to argue as to whether pantheism is atheism

or not. In its own expressed terms it is actually theistic, but Spinoza's definition of a god made manifest throughout the natural world comes very close to defining a religious god out of existence. And if there is a pervasive, preexisting cosmic deity, who is part of what he creates, then there is no space left for a god who intervenes in human affairs, let alone for a god who takes sides in vicious hamlet-wars between different tribes of Jews and Arabs. No text can have been written or inspired by him, for one thing, or can be the special property of one sect or tribe. (One recalls the question that was asked by the Chinese when the first Christian missionaries made their appearance. If god has revealed himself, how is it that he has allowed so many centuries to elapse before informing the Chinese? "Seek knowledge even if it is in China," said the Prophet Muhammad, unconsciously revealing that the greatest civilization in the world at that time was on the very outer rim of his awareness.) As with Newton and Galileo building on Democritus and Epicurus, we find Spinoza projected forward into the mind of Einstein, who answered a question from a rabbi by stating firmly that he believed only in "Spinoza's god," and not at all in a god "who concerns himself with the fates and actions of human beings."

Spinoza de-Judaized his name by changing it to Benedict, outlasted the Amsterdam anathema by twenty years, and died with extreme stoicism, always persisting in calm and rational conversation, as a consequence of the powdered glass that entered his lungs. His was a career devoted to the grinding and polishing of lenses for telescopes and medicine: an appropriate scientific activity for one who taught humans to see with greater acuity. "All our modern philosophers," wrote Heinrich Heine, "though often perhaps unconsciously, see through the glasses which Baruch Spinoza ground." Heine's poems were later to be thrown on a pyre by gibbering Nazi bully-boys who did not believe that even an assimilated Jew could have been a true German. The frightened, backward Jews who ostracized Spinoza had thrown away a pearl richer than all their tribe: the body of their bravest son was stolen after his death and no doubt subjected to other rituals of desecration.

Spinoza had seen some of this coming. In his correspondence he would write the word *Caute!* (Latin for "take care") and place a little rose underneath. This was not the only aspect of his work that was *sub rosa*: he gave a false name for the printer of his celebrated *Tractatus* and left the author's page blank. His prohibited work (much of which might not have survived his death if not for the bravery and initiative of a friend) continued to have a subterranean existence in the writing of others. In Pierre Bayle's 1697 critical *Dictionnaire* he earned the longest entry. Montesquieu's 1748 *Spirit of the Laws* was considered so dependent on Spinoza's writing that its author was compelled by the church authorities in France to repudiate this Jewish monster and to make a public statement announcing his belief in a (Christian) creator. The great French *Encyclopédie* that came to define the Enlightenment, edited by Denis Diderot and d'Alembert, contains an immense entry on Spinoza.

I do not wish to repeat the gross mistake that Christian apologists have made. They expended huge and needless effort to show that wise men who wrote before Christ were

in effect prophets and prefigurations of his coming. (As late as the nineteenth century, William Ewart Gladstone covered reams of wasted paper trying to prove this about the ancient Greeks.) I have no right to claim past philosophers as putative ancestors of atheism. I do, however, have the right to point out that because of religious intolerance we cannot know what they really thought privately, and were very nearly prevented from learning what they wrote publicly. Even the relatively conformist Descartes, who found it advisable to live in the freer atmosphere of the Netherlands, proposed a few lapidary words for his own headstone: "He who hid well, lived well."

In the cases of Pierre Bayle and Voltaire, for example, it is not easy to determine whether they were seriously irreligious or not. Their method certainly tended to be irreverent and satirical, and no reader clinging to uncritical faith could come away from their works without having that faith severely shaken. These same works were the best-sellers of their time, and made it impossible for the newly literate classes to go on believing in things like the literal truth of the biblical stories. Bayle in particular caused a huge but wholesome uproar when he examined the deeds of David the supposed "psalmist" and showed them to be the career of an unscrupulous bandit. He also pointed out that it was absurd to believe that religious faith caused people to conduct themselves better, or that unbelief made them behave worse. A vast accumulation of observable experience testified to this common sense, and Bayle's delineation of it is the reason why he has been praised or blamed for oblique, surreptitious atheism. Yet he accompanied or bodyguarded this with many more orthodox affirmations, which probably allowed his successful work to enjoy a second edition. Voltaire balanced his own savage ridicule of religion with some devotional gestures, and smilingly proposed that his own tomb (how these men did rattle on about the view of their own funerals) be built so as to be half inside and half outside the church. But in one of his most celebrated defenses of civil liberty and the rights of conscience, Voltaire had also seen his client Jean Calas broken on the wheel with hammers, and then hanged, for the "offense" of trying to convert someone in his household to Protestantism. Not even an aristocrat like himself could be counted safe, as he knew from seeing the inside of the Bastille. Let us at least not fail to keep this in mind.

Immanuel Kant believed for a time that all the planets were populated and that these populations improved in character the farther away they were. But even while beginning from this rather charmingly limited cosmic base, he was able to make convincing arguments against any theistic presentation that depended upon reason. He showed that the old argument from design, then as now a perennial favorite, might possibly be stretched to imply an architect but not a creator. He overthrew the cosmological proof of god—which suggested that one's own existence must posit another necessary existence—by saying that it only restated the ontological argument. And he undid the ontological argument by challenging the simpleminded notion that if god can be conceived as an idea, or stated as a predicate, he must therefore possess the quality of existence. This traditional tripe is accidentally overthrown by Penelope Lively in

her much-garlanded novel *Moon Tiger*. Describing her daughter Lisa as a “dull child,” she nonetheless delights in the infant’s dim but imaginative questions:

“Are there dragons?” she asked. I said that there were not. “Have there ever been?” I said all the evidence was to the contrary. “But if there is a word dragon,” she said, “then once there must have been dragons.”

Who has not protected an innocent from the disproof of such ontology? But for the sake of pith, and since we do not have all our lives to waste simply in growing up, I quote Bertrand Russell here: “Kant objects that existence is not a predicate. A hundred thalers that I merely imagine, he says, have all the same predicates as a hundred real thalers.” I have stated Kant’s disproofs in reverse order so as to notice the case, recorded by the Inquisition in Venice in 1573, of a man named Matteo de Vincenti, who opined on the doctrine of the “real presence” of Christ in the Mass that: “It’s nonsense, having to believe these things—they’re stories. I would rather believe I had money in my pocket.” Kant did not know of this predecessor of his among the commonpeople, and when he switched to the more rewarding topic of ethics he may not have known that his “categorical imperative” had an echo of Rabbi Hillel’s “Golden Rule.” Kant’s principle enjoins us to “act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a general natural law.” In this summary of mutual interest and solidarity, there is no requirement for any enforcing or supernatural authority. And why should there be? Human decency is not derived from religion. It precedes it.

It is of great interest to see, in the period of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, how many great minds thought alike, and intersected with each other, and also took great care to keep their opinions cautiously expressed, or confined as far as possible to a circle of educated sympathizers. One of my choice instances would be that of Benjamin Franklin, who, if he did not exactly discover electricity, was certainly one of those who helped uncover its principles and practical applications. Among the latter were the lightning rod, which was to decide forever the question of whether god intervened to punish us in sudden random flashes. There is no steeple or minaret now standing that does not boast one. Announcing his invention to the public, Franklin wrote:

It has pleased God in his Goodness to Mankind, at length to discover to them the Means of Securing their Habitations and other Buildings from Mischief by Thunder and Lightning. The Method is this. . . .

He then goes on to elaborate the common household equipment—brass wire, a knitting needle, “a few small staples”—that is required to accomplish the miracle.

This shows perfect outward conformity with received opinion, but is embellished with a small yet obvious dig in the words “at length.” You may choose to believe, of course, that Franklin sincerely meant every word of it, and desired people to believe that he credited the Almighty with relenting after all these years and finally handing over the secret. But the echo of Prometheus, stealing the fire from the gods, is too plain to miss. And Prometheans in those days still had to be watchful. Joseph Priestley, the virtual discoverer of oxygen, had his Birmingham laboratory smashed by a Tory-inspired mob yelling “for Church and King,” and had to take his Unitarian convictions

across the Atlantic in order to begin work again. (Nothing is perfect in these accounts: Franklin took as strong an interest in Freemasonry as Newton had in alchemy, and even Priestley was a devotee of the phlogiston theory. Remember that we are examining the childhood of our species.)

Edward Gibbon, who was revolted by what he discovered about Christianity during the labor of his massive *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, dispatched an early copy to David Hume, who warned him that there would be trouble, which there was. Hume received Benjamin Franklin as a guest in Edinburgh, and traveled to Paris to meet with the editors of the *Encyclopédie*. These sometimes flamboyantly irreligious men were at first disappointed when their careful Scottish guest remarked on the absence of atheists and therefore on the possible absence of such a thing as atheism. They might have liked him better if they had read his *Dialogue Concerning Natural Religion* a decade or so later.

Based on a Ciceronian dialogue, with Hume himself apparently (but cautiously) taking the part of Philo, the traditional arguments about the existence of god are qualified a little by the availability of more modern evidence and reasoning. Borrowing perhaps from Spinoza—much of whose own work was still only available at second hand—Hume suggested that the profession of belief in a perfectly simple and omnipresent supreme being was in fact a covert profession of atheism, because such a being could possess nothing that we could reasonably call a mind, or a will. Moreover, if “he” did chance to possess such attributes, then the ancient inquiry of Epicurus would still stand:

Is he willing to prevent evil but not able? Then is he impotent. Is he able but not willing? Then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?

Atheism cuts through this non-quandary like the razor of Ockham. It is absurd, even for a believer, to imagine that god should owe him an explanation. But a believer nonetheless takes on the impossible task of interpreting the will of a person unknown, and thus brings these essentially absurd questions upon himself. Let the assumption lapse, though, and we shall see where we are and be able to apply our intelligence, which is all that we have. (To the inescapable question—where do all the creatures come from?—Hume’s answer anticipates Darwin by saying that in effect they evolve: the efficient ones survive and the inefficient ones die out.) At the close, he chose, as had Cicero, to split the difference between the deist Cleanthes and the skeptic Philo. This could have been playing it safe, as Hume tended to do, or it could have represented the apparent appeal of deism in the age before Darwin.

Even the great Thomas Paine, a friend to Franklin and Jefferson, repudiated the charge of atheism that he was not afraid to invite. Indeed, he set out to expose the crimes and horrors of the Old Testament, as well as the foolish myths of the New, as part of a vindication of god. No grand and noble deity, he asserted, should have such atrocities and stupidities laid to his charge. Paine’s *Age of Reason* marks almost the first time that frank contempt for organized religion was openly expressed. It had a tremendous worldwide effect. His American friends and contemporaries, partly inspired by him to declare independence from the Hanoverian usurpers and their private

Anglican Church, meanwhile achieved an extraordinary and unprecedented thing: the writing of a democratic and republican constitution that made no mention of god and that mentioned religion only when guaranteeing that it would always be separated from the state. Almost all of the American founders died without any priest by their bedside, as also did Paine, who was much pestered in his last hours by religious hooligans who demanded that he accept Christ as his savior. Like David Hume, he declined all such consolation and his memory has outlasted the calumnious rumor that he begged to be reconciled with the church at the end. (The mere fact that such deathbed “repentances” were sought by the godly, let alone subsequently fabricated, speaks volumes about the bad faith of the faith-based.)

Charles Darwin was born within the lifetime of Paine and Jefferson and his work was eventually able to transcend the limitations of ignorance, concerning the origins of plants and animals and other phenomena, under which they had had to labor. But even Darwin, when he began his quest as a botanist and natural historian, was quite sure that he was acting in a way that was consistent with god’s design. He had wanted to be a clergyman. And the more discoveries he made, the more he tried to “square” them with faith in a higher intelligence. Like Edward Gibbon, he anticipated a controversy upon publication, and (a bit less like Gibbon) he made some protective and defensive notes. In fact, he at first argued with himself very much as some of today’s “intelligent design” boobies are wont to do. Faced with the unarguable facts of evolution, why not claim that those prove how much greater is god than we even thought he was? The discovery of natural laws “should exalt our notion of the power of the omniscient Creator.” Not quite convinced by this in his own mind, Darwin feared that his first writings on natural selection would be the end of his reputation, equivalent to “confessing a murder.” He also appreciated that, if he ever found adaptation conforming to environment, he would have to confess to something even more alarming: the absence of a first cause or grand design.

The symptoms of old-style between-the-lines encoded concealment are to be found throughout the first edition of *The Origin of Species*. The term “evolution” never appears, while the word “creation” is employed frequently. (Fascinatingly, his first 1837 notebooks were given the provisional title *The Transmutation of Species*, almost as if Darwin were employing the archaic language of alchemy.) The title page of the eventual *Origin* bore a comment, significantly drawn from the apparently respectable Francis Bacon, about the need to study not just the word of god but also his “work.” In *The Descent of Man* Darwin felt able to push matters a little further, but still submitted to some editorial revisions by his devout and beloved wife Emma. Only in his autobiography, which was not intended for publication, and in some letters to friends, did he admit that he had no remaining belief. His “agnostic” conclusion was determined as much by his life as by his work: he had suffered many bereavements and could not reconcile these with any loving creator let alone with the Christian teaching concerning eternal punishment. Like so many people however brilliant, he was prone to that solipsism that either makes or breaks faith, and which imagines that the universe is

preoccupied with one's own fate. This, however, makes his scientific rigor the more praiseworthy, and fit to be ranked with Galileo, since it did not arise from any intention but that of finding out the truth. It makes no difference that this intention included the false and disappointed expectation that that same truth would finally resound *ad majorem dei gloriam*.

After his death, Darwin too was posthumously insulted by fabrications from a hysterical Christian, who claimed that the great and honest and tormented investigator had been squinting at the Bible at the last. It took a little while to expose the pathetic fraud who had felt that this would be a noble thing to do.

When accused of scientific plagiarism, of which he was quite probably guilty, Sir Isaac Newton made the guarded admission—which was itself plagiarized—that he had in his work had the advantage of “standing on the shoulders of giants.” It would seem only minimally gracious, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, to concede the same. As and when I wish, I can use a simple laptop to acquaint myself with the life and work of Anaxagoras and Erasmus, Epicurus and Wittgenstein. Not for me the poring in the library by candlelight, the shortage of texts, or the difficulties of contact with like-minded persons in other ages or societies. And not for me (except when the telephone sometimes rings and I hear hoarse voices condemning me to death, or hell, or both) the persistent fear that something I write will lead to the extinction of my work, the exile or worse of my family, the eternal blackening of my name by religious frauds and liars, and the painful choice between recantation or death by torture. I enjoy a freedom and an access to knowledge that would have been unimaginable to the pioneers. Looking back down the perspective of time, I therefore cannot help but notice that the giants upon whom I depend, and upon whose massive shoulders I perch, were all of them forced to be a little weak in the crucial and highly (and poorly) evolved joints of their knees. Only one member of the giant and genius category ever truly spoke his mind without any apparent fear or excess of caution. I therefore cite Albert Einstein, so much misrepresented, once again. He is addressing a correspondent who is troubled by yet another of those many misrepresentations:

It was, of course, a lie what you read about my religious convictions, a lie which is being systematically repeated. I do not believe in a personal God and I have never denied this but expressed it clearly. If something is in me which can be called religious then it is the unbounded admiration for the structure of the world so far as our science can reveal it.

Years later he answered another query by stating:

I do not believe in the immortality of the individual, and I consider ethics to be an exclusively human concern with no superhuman authority behind it.

These words stem from a mind, or a man, who was rightly famed for his care and measure and scruple, and whose sheer genius had laid *barea* theory that might, in the wrong hands, have obliterated not only this world but also its whole past and the very possibility of its future. He devoted the greater part of his life to a grand refusal of the role of a punitive prophet, preferring to spread the message of enlightenment and

humanism. Decidedly Jewish, and exiled and defamed and persecuted as a consequence, he preserved what he could of ethical Judaism and rejected the barbaric mythology of the Pentateuch. We have more reason to be grateful to him than to all the rabbis who have ever wailed, or who ever will. (Offered the first presidency of the state of Israel, Einstein declined because of his many qualms about the way Zionism was tending. This was much to the relief of David Ben-Gurion, who had nervously asked his cabinet, “What are we going to do if he says ‘yes’?”)

Wreathed in the widow’s weeds of grief, the greatest Victorian of all is said to have appealed to her favorite prime minister to ask if he could produce one unanswerable argument for the existence of god. Benjamin Disraeli hesitated briefly before his queen—the woman whom he had made “Empress of India”—and replied, “The Jews, Ma’am.” It seemed to this worldly but superstitious political genius that the survival of the Jewish people, and their admirably stubborn adherence to their ancient rituals and narratives, showed the invisible hand at work. In fact, he was changing ships on a falling tide. Even as he spoke, the Jewish people were emerging from two different kinds of oppression. The first and most obvious was the ghettoization that had been imposed on them by ignorant and bigoted Christian authorities. This has been too well documented to need any elaboration from me. But the second oppression was self-imposed. Napoleon Bonaparte, for example, had with some reservations removed the discriminatory laws against Jews. (He may well have hoped for their financial support, but no matter.) Yet when his armies invaded Russia, the rabbis urged their flock to rally to the side of the very czar who had been defaming and flogging and fleecing and murdering them. Better this Jew-baiting despotism, they said, than even a whiff of the unholy French Enlightenment. This is why the silly, ponderous melodrama in that Amsterdam synagogue was and remains so important. Even in a country as broad-minded as Holland, the elders had preferred to make common cause with Christian anti-Semites and other obscurantists, rather than permit the finest of their number to use his own free intelligence.

When the walls of the ghettos fell, therefore, the collapse liberated the inhabitants from the rabbis as well as “the gentiles.” There ensued a flowering of talent such as has seldom been seen in any epoch. A formerly stultified population proceeded to make immense contributions to medicine, science, law, politics, and the arts. The reverberations are still being felt: one need only instance Marx, Freud, Kafka, and Einstein, though Isaac Babel, Arthur Koestler, Billy Wilder, Lenny Bruce, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Joseph Heller, and countless others are also the product of this dual emancipation.

If one could nominate an absolutely tragic day in human history, it would be the occasion that is now commemorated by the vapid and annoying holiday known as “Hanukkah.” For once, instead of Christianity plagiarizing from Judaism, the Jews borrow shamelessly from Christians in the pathetic hope of a celebration that coincides with “Christmas,” which is itself a quasi-Christian annexation, complete with burning logs and holly and mistletoe, of a pagan Northland solstice originally illuminated by the

Aurora Borealis. Here is the terminus to which banal “multiculturalism” has brought us. But it was nothing remotely multicultural that induced Judah Maccabeus to reconsecrate the Temple in Jerusalem in 165 BC, and to establish the date which the soft celebrants of Hannukah now so emptily commemorate. The Maccabees, who founded the Hasmonean dynasty, were forcibly restoring Mosaic fundamentalism against the many Jews of Palestine and elsewhere who had become attracted by Hellenism. These true early multiculturalists had become bored by “the law,” offended by circumcision, interested by Greek literature, drawn by the physical and intellectual exercises of the gymnasium, and rather adept at philosophy. They could feel the pull exerted by Athens, even if only by way of Rome and by the memory of Alexander’s time, and were impatient with the stark fear and superstition mandated by the Pentateuch. They obviously seemed too cosmopolitan to the votaries of the old Temple—and it must have been easy to accuse them of “dual loyalty” when they agreed to have a temple of Zeus on the site where smoky and bloody altars used to propitiate the unsmiling deity of yore. At any rate, when the father of Judah Maccabeus saw a Jew about to make a Hellenic offering on the old altar, he lost no time in murdering him. Over the next few years of the Maccabean “revolt,” many more assimilated Jews were slain, or forcibly circumcised, or both, and the women who had flirted with the new Hellenic dispensation suffered even worse. Since the Romans eventually preferred the violent and dogmatic Maccabees to the less militarized and fanatical Jews who had shone in their togas in the Mediterranean light, the scene was set for the uneasy collusion between the old-garb ultra-Orthodox Sanhedrin and the imperial governorate. This lugubrious relationship was eventually to lead to Christianity (yet another Jewish heresy) and thus ineluctably to the birth of Islam. We could have been spared the whole thing.

No doubt there would still have been much foolishness and solipsism. But the connection between Athens and history and humanity would not have been so sundered, and the Jewish people might have been the carriers of philosophy instead of arid monotheism, and the ancient schools and their wisdom would not have become prehistoric to us. I once sat in the Knesset office of the late Rabbi Meir Kahane, a vicious racist and demagogue among whose supporters the mad Dr. Baruch Goldstein and other violent Israeli settlers were to be found. Kahane’s campaign against mixed marriages, and for the expulsion of all non-Jews from Palestine, had earned him the contempt of many Israelis and diaspora Jews, who compared his program to that of the Nuremberg laws in Germany. Kahane raved for a bit in response to this, saying that any Arab could remain if he converted to Judaism by a strictly halacha test (not a concession, admittedly, that Hitler would have permitted), but then became bored and dismissed his Jewish opponents as mere “Hellenized” riffraff. [To this day, the Orthodox Jewish curse word for a heretic or apostate is *apikoros*, meaning “follower of Epicurus.”] And he was correct in a formal sense: his bigotry had little to do with “race” and everything to do with “faith.” Sniffing this insanitary barbarian, I had a real pang about the world of light and color that we had lost so long ago, in the black-and-white nightmares of his dreary and righteous ancestors. The stench of Calvin and Torquemada and bin Laden

came from the dank, hunched figure whose Kach Party goons patrolled the streets looking for Sabbath violations and unauthorized sexual contacts. Again to take the metaphor of the Burgess shale, here was a poisonous branch that should have been snapped off long ago, or allowed to die out, before it could infect any healthy growth with its junk DNA. But yet we still dwell in its unwholesome, life-killing shadow. And little Jewish children celebrate Hannukah, so as not to feel left out of the tawdry myths of Bethlehem, which are now being so harshly contested by the more raucous propaganda of Mecca and Medina.

Chapter Nineteen. In Conclusion: The Need for a New Enlightenment

The true value of a man is not determined by his possession, supposed or real, of Truth, but rather by his sincere exertion to get to the Truth. It is not possession of the Truth, but rather the pursuit of Truth by which he extends his powers and in which his ever-growing perfectibility is to be found. Possession makes one passive, indolent, and proud. If God were to hold all Truth concealed in his right hand, and in his left only the steady and diligent drive for Truth, albeit with the proviso that I would always and forever err in the process, and to offer me the choice, I would with all humility take the left hand.

—Gotthold Lessing, *Anti-Goeze* (1778)

“The Messiah Is Not Coming—and He’s Not Even Going to Call!”

—Israeli hit tune in 2001

The great Lessing put it very mildly in the course of his exchange of polemics with the fundamentalist preacher Goeze. And his becoming modesty made it seem as if he had, or could have, a choice in the matter. In point of fact, we do not have the option of “choosing” absolute truth, or faith. We only have the right to say, of those who do claim to know the truth of revelation, that they are deceiving themselves and attempting to deceive—or to intimidate—others. Of course, it is better and healthier for the mind to “choose” the path of skepticism and inquiry in any case, because only by continual exercise of these faculties can we hope to achieve anything. Whereas religions, wittily defined by Simon Blackburn in his study of Plato’s *Republic*, are merely “fossilized philosophies,” or philosophy with the questions left out. To “choose” dogma and faith over doubt and experiment is to throw out the ripening vintage and to reach greedily for the Kool-Aid.

Thomas Aquinas once wrote a document on the Trinity and, modestly regarding it as one of his more finely polished efforts, laid it on the altar at Notre Dame so that god himself could scrutinize the work and perhaps favor “the Angelic doctor” with an opinion. (Aquinas here committed the same mistake as those who made nuns in convents cover their baths with canvas during ablutions: it was felt that god’s gaze would be deflected from the undraped female forms by such a modest device, but forgotten that he could supposedly “see” anything, anywhere, at any time by virtue of his omniscience and omnipresence, and further forgotten that he could undoubtedly “see” through the walls and ceilings of the nunnery before being baffled by the canvas

shield. One supposes that the nuns were actually being prevented from peering at their own bodies, or rather at one another's.)

However that may be, Aquinas later found that god indeed had given his treatise a good review—he being the only author ever to have claimed this distinction—and was discovered by awed monks and novices to be blissfully levitating around the interior of the cathedral. Rest assured that we have eyewitnesses for this event.

On a certain day in the spring of 2006, President Ahmadinejad of Iran, accompanied by his cabinet, made a procession to the site of a well between the capital city of Tehran and the holy city of Qum. This is said to be the cistern where the Twelfth or “occulted” or “hidden” Imam took refuge in the year 873, at the age of five, never to be seen again until his long-awaited and beseeched reappearance will astonish and redeem the world. On arrival, Ahmadinejad took a scroll of paper and thrust it down the aperture, so as to update the occulted one on Iran’s progress in thermonuclear fission and the enrichment of uranium. One might have thought that the imam could keep abreast of these developments wherever he was, but it had in some way to be the well that acted as his dead-letter box. One might add that President Ahmadinejad had recently returned from the United Nations, where he had given a speech that was much covered on both radio and television as well as viewed by a large “live” audience. On his return to Iran, however, he told his supporters that he had been suffused with a clear green light—green being the preferred color of Islam—all throughout his remarks, and that the emanations of this divine light had kept everybody in the General Assembly quite silent and still. Private to him as this phenomenon was—it appears to have been felt by him alone—he took it as a further sign of the imminent return of the Twelfth Imam, not so say a further endorsement of his ambition to see the Islamic Republic of Iran, sunk as it was in beggary and repression and stagnation and corruption, as nonetheless a nuclear power. But like Aquinas, he did not trust the Twelfth or “hidden” Imam to be able to scan a document unless it was put, as it were, right in front of him.

Having often watched Shia ceremonies and processions, I was not surprised to learn that they are partly borrowed, in their form and liturgy, from Catholicism. Twelve imams, one of them now “in occultation” and awaiting reappearance or reawakening. A frenzied cult of martyrdom, especially over the agonizing death of Hussein, who was forsaken and betrayed on the arid and bitter plains of Karbala. Processions of flagellants and self-mortifiers, awash in grief and guilt at the way in which their sacrificed leader had been abandoned. The masochistic Shia holiday of Ashura bears the strongest resemblances to the sort of *Semana Santa*, or “Holy Week,” in which the cowls and crosses and hoods and torches are borne through the streets of Spain. Yet again it is demonstrated that monotheistic religion is a plagiarism of a plagiarism of a hearsay of a hearsay, of an illusion of an illusion, extending all the way back to a fabrication of a few nonevents.

Another way of putting this is to say that, as I write, a version of the Inquisition is about to lay hands on a nuclear weapon. Under the stultified rule of religion, the great and inventive and sophisticated civilization of Persia has been steadily losing its pulse.

Its writers and artists and intellectuals are mainly in exile or stifled by censorship; its women are chattel and sexual prey; its young people are mostly half- educated and without employment. After a quarter century of theocracy, Iran still exports the very things it exported when the theocrats took over—pistachio nuts and rugs. Modernity and technology have passed it by, save for the one achievement of nuclearization.

This puts the confrontation between faith and civilization on a whole new footing. Until relatively recently, those who adopted the clerical path had to pay a heavy price for it. Their societies would decay, their economies would contract, their best minds would go to waste or take themselves elsewhere, and they would consistently be outdone by societies that had learned to tame and sequester the religious impulse. A country like Afghanistan would simply rot. Bad enough as this was, it became worse on September 11, 2001, when from Afghanistan the holy order was given to annex two famous achievements of modernism—the high-rise building and the jet aircraft—and use them for immolation and human sacrifice. The succeeding stage, very plainly announced in hysterical sermons, was to be the moment when apocalyptic nihilists coincided with Armageddon weaponry. Faith-based fanatics could not design anything as useful or beautiful as a skyscraper or a passenger aircraft. But, continuing their long history of plagiarism, they could borrow and steal these things and use them as a negation.

This book has been about the oldest argument in human history, but almost every week that I was engaged in writing it, I was forced to break off and take part in the argument as it was actually continuing. These arguments tended to take ugly forms: I was not so often leaving my desk to go and debate with some skillful old Jesuit at Georgetown, but rather hurrying out to show solidarity at the embassy of Denmark, a small democratic country in northern Europe whose other embassies were going up in smoke because of the appearance of a few caricatures in a newspaper in Copenhagen. This last confrontation was an especially depressing one. Islamic mobs were violating diplomatic immunity and issuing death threats against civilians, yet the response from His Holiness the Pope and the archbishop of Canterbury was to condemn—the cartoons! In my own profession, there was a rush to see who could capitulate the fastest, by reporting on the disputed images without actually showing them. And this at a time when the mass media has become almost exclusively picture-driven. Euphemistic noises were made about the need to show “respect,” but I know quite a number of the editors concerned and can say for a certainty that the chief motive for “restraint” was simple fear. In other words, a handful of religious bullies and bigmouths could, so to speak, outvote the tradition of free expression in its Western heartland. And in the year 2006, at that! To the ignoble motive of fear one must add the morally lazy practice of relativism: no group of nonreligious people threatening and practicing violence would have been granted such an easy victory, or had their excuses—not that they offered any of their own—made for them.

Then again, on another day, one might open the newspaper to read that the largest study of prayer ever undertaken had discovered yet again that there was no correlation

of any kind between “intercessory” prayer and the recovery of patients. (Well, perhaps some correlation: patients who knew that prayers were being said for them had more postoperative complications than those who did not, though I would not argue that this proved anything.) Elsewhere, a group of dedicated and patient scientists had located, in a remote part of the Canadian Arctic, several skeletons of a large fish that, 375 million years ago, exhibited the precursor features of digits, proto-wrists, elbows, and shoulders. The *Tiktaalik*, named at the suggestion of the local Nunavut people, joins the *Archaeopteryx*, a transitional form between dinosaurs and birds, as one of the long-sought so-called missing links that are helping us to enlighten ourselves about our true nature. Meanwhile, the hoarse proponents of “intelligent design” would be laying siege to yet another school board, demanding that tripe be taught to children. In my mind, these contrasting events began to take on the characteristics of a race: a tiny step forward by scholarship and reason; a huge menacing lurch forward by the forces of barbarism—the people who know they are right and who wish to instate, as Robert Lowell once phrased it in another context, “a reign of piety and iron.”

Religion even boasts a special branch of itself, devoted to the study of the end. It calls itself “eschatology,” and broods incessantly on the passing away of all earthly things. This death cult refuses to abate, even though we have every reason to think that “earthly things” are all that we have, or are ever going to have. Yet in our hands and within our view is a whole universe of discovery and clarification, which is a pleasure to study in itself, gives the average person access to insights that not even Darwin or Einstein possessed, and offers the promise of near-miraculous advances in healing, in energy, and in peaceful exchange between different cultures. Yet millions of people in all societies still prefer the myths of the cave and the tribe and the blood sacrifice. The late Stephen Jay Gould generously wrote that science and religion belong to “non-overlapping magisteria.” They most certainly do not overlap, but this does not mean that they are not antagonistic.

Religion has run out of justifications. Thanks to the telescope and the microscope, it no longer offers an explanation of anything important. Where once it used to be able, by its total command of a world-view, to prevent the emergence of rivals, it can now only impede and retard—or try to turn back—the measurable advances that we have made. Sometimes, true, it will artfully concede them. But this is to offer itself the choice between irrelevance and obstruction, impotence or outright reaction, and, given this choice, it is programmed to select the worse of the two. Meanwhile, confronted with undreamed-of vistas inside our own evolving cortex, in the farthest reaches of the known universe, and in the proteins and acids which constitute our nature, religion offers either annihilation in the name of god, or else the false promise that if we take a knife to our foreskins, or pray in the right direction, or ingest pieces of wafer, we shall be “saved.” It is as if someone, offered a delicious and fragrant out-of-season fruit, matured in a painstakingly and lovingly designed hothouse, should throw away the flesh and the pulp and gnaw moodily on the pit.

Above all, we are in need of a renewed Enlightenment, which will base itself on the proposition that the proper study of mankind is man, and woman. This Enlightenment will not need to depend, like its predecessors, on the heroic breakthroughs of a few gifted and exceptionally courageous people. It is within the compass of the average person. The study of literature and poetry, both for its own sake and for the eternal ethical questions with which it deals, can now easily depose the scrutiny of sacred texts that have been found to be corrupt and confected. The pursuit of unfettered scientific inquiry, and the availability of new findings to masses of people by easy electronic means, will revolutionize our concepts of research and development. Very importantly, the divorce between the sexual life and fear, and the sexual life and disease, and the sexual life and tyranny, can now at last be attempted, on the sole condition that we banish all religions from the discourse. And all this and more is, for the first time in our history, within the reach if not the grasp of everyone.

However, only the most naive utopian can believe that this new humane civilization will develop, like some dream of “progress,” in a straight line. We have first to transcend our prehistory, and escape the gnarled hands which reach out to drag us back to the catacombs and the reeking altars and the guilty pleasures of subjection and abjection. “Know yourself,” said the Greeks, gently suggesting the consolations of philosophy. To clear the mind for this project, it has become necessary to know the enemy, and to prepare to fight it.

Acknowledgments

I have been writing this book all my life and intend to keep on writing it, but it would have been impossible to produce this version without the extraordinary collaboration between agent and publisher—I mean to say Steve Wasserman and Jonathan Karp—that enabled me. All authors ought to have such careful and literate friends and allies. All authors ought also to have book-finders as astute and determined as Windsor Mann.

My old schoolfriend Michael Prest was the first person to make it plain to me that while the authorities could compel us to attend prayers, they could not force us to pray. I shall always remember his upright posture while others hypocritically knelt or inclined themselves, and also the day that I decided to join him. All postures of submission and surrender should be part of our prehistory.

I have been fortunate in having many moral tutors, formal and informal, many of whom had to undergo considerable intellectual trial, and evince notable courage, in order to break with the faith of their tribes. Some of these would still be in some danger if I were to name them, but I must admit my debt to the late Dr. Israel Shahak, who introduced me to Spinoza; to Salman Rushdie, who bravely witnessed for reason and humor and language in a very dark time; to Ibn Warraq and Irfan Khawaja, who also know something about the price of the ticket; and to Dr. Michael Shermer, the very model of the reformed and recovered Christian fundamentalist. Among the many others who have shown that life and wit and inquiry begin just at the point where faith ends, I ought to salute Penn and Teller, that other amazing myth- and fraud-buster James Randi (Houdini of our time), and Tom Flynn, Andrea Szalanski and all the other staffers at Free Inquiry magazine. Jennifer Michael Hecht put me immensely in her debt when she sent me a copy of her extraordinary *Doubt: A History*.

To all those who I do not know, and who live in the worlds where superstition and barbarism are still dominant, and into whose hands I hope this little book may fall, I offer the modest encouragement of an older wisdom. It is in fact this, and not any arrogant preaching, that comes to us out of the whirlwind: *Die Stimme der Vernunft ist leise*. Yes, “The voice of Reason is soft.” But it is very persistent. In this, and in the lives and minds of combatants known and unknown, we repose our chief hope.

Over many years I have pursued these questions with Ian McEwan, whose body of fiction shows an extraordinary ability to elucidate the numinous without conceding anything to the supernatural. He has subtly demonstrated that the natural is wondrous enough for anyone. It was in some discussions with Ian, first on that remote Uruguayan coast where Darwin so boldly put ashore and took samples, and later in Manhattan,

that I felt this essay beginning to germinate. I am very proud to have sought and received his permission to dedicate the ensuing pages to him.

REFERENCES

Chapter TWO. RELIGION KILLS

[p. [17]–[18] Mother Teresa was interviewed by Daphne Barak, and her comments on Princess Diana can be found in *Ladies' Home Journal*, April 1996.

[p. [24] The details of the murder of Yusra al-Azami in Bethlehem can be found in “Gaza Taliban?,” editorial, *New Humanist* 121:1 (January 2006), http://www.newhumanist.org.uk/volume121issuel_comments.php?id=1860_0_40_0_C. See also Isabel Kershner, “The Sheikh’s Revenge,” *Jerusalem Report*, March 20, 2006.

[p. [27] For Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s letter to Osama bin Laden, see <http://www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/31694.htm>.

[p. [33] For the story of the born-again Air Force Academy cadets and MeLinda Morton, see Faye Fiore and Mark Mazzetti, “School’s Religious Intolerance Misguided, Pentagon Reports,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 23, 2005, p. 10; Laurie Goodstein, “Air Force Academy Staff Found Promoting Religion,” *New York Times*, June 23, 2005, p. A12; David Van Biema, “Whose God Is Their Co-Pilot?,” *Time*, June 27, 2005, p. 61; and United States Air Force, *The Report of the Headquarters Review Group Concerning the Religious Climate at the U.S. Air Force Academy*, June 22, 2005, <http://www.af.mil/shared/media/document/AFD-051014-008.pdf>

[p. [33] For James Madison on the constitutionality of religious establishment in government or public service, see Brooke Allen, *Moral Minority: Our Skeptical Founding Fathers* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), pp. 116–117.

[p. [35] For Charles Stanley and Tim LaHaye, see Charles Marsh, “Wayward Christian Soldiers,” *New York Times*, January 20, 2006.

Chapter FOUR

A NOTE ON HEALTH, TO WHICH RELIGION CAN BE HAZARDOUS

[p. [45] For the Bishop Cifuentes sermon, see the BBC-TV production *Panorama*, aired June 27, 2004.

[p. [46] The Foreign Policy quotation comes from Laura M. Kelley and Nicholas Eberstadt, “The Muslim Face of AIDS,” *Foreign Policy*, July/August 2005, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=3081.

[p. [47] For Daniel Dennett’s criticisms of religion, see his *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking Adult, 2006).

[p. [57] For the Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins quote, see their *Glorious Appearing: The End of Days* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2004), pp. 250, 260.

[p. [59] Pervez Hoodbhoy's comments on the Pakistani nuclear tests can be found in *Free Inquiry*, spring 2002.

Chapter FIVE

THE METAPHYSICAL CLAIMS OF RELIGION ARE FALSE

[p. [68] E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1966), p. 12.

[p. [69] Father Copleston's commentary is from his *History of Philosophy*, vol. iii (Kent, England: Search Press, 1953).

Chapter SIX

ARGUMENTS FROM DESIGN

[pp. [81]–[83] On the evolution of the eye and why it argues against intelligent design, see Michael Shermer, *Why Darwin Matters: The Case Against Intelligent Design* (New York: Times Books, 2006), p. 17. The emphasis is in the original. See also *Climbing Mount Improbable*, by Richard Dawkins (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), pp. 138–197.

[p. [87] For the University of Oregon “irreducible complexity” study, see Jamie T. Bridgham, Sean M. Carroll, and Joseph W. Thornton, “Evolution of Hormone-Receptor Complexity by Molecular Exploitation,” *Science* 312:5770 (April 7, 2006): pp. 97–101.

[p. [93] For Stephen Jay Gould's quotation on the Burgess shale, see his *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), p. 323.

[p. [95] For the University of Chicago human genome study, see Nicholas Wade, “Still Evolving, Human Genes Tell New Story,” *New York Times*, March 7, 2006.

[p. [96] Voltaire's statement—*Si Dieu n'existait pas, il faudrait l'inventer*—is taken from his “*À l'auteur du livre des trois imposteurs*,” *Epîtres*, no. 96 (1770).

[p. [96] Sam Harris's observation on Jesus being born of a virgin can be found in his *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005).

Chapter SEVEN

REVELATION: THE NIGHTMARE OF THE “OLD” TESTAMENT

[p. [102] For Finkelstein and Silberman's work, see Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts* (New York: Touchstone, 2002).

[p. [103] For Sigmund Freud on religion's incurable deficiency, see *The Future of an Illusion*, translated by W. D. Robson-Scott, revised and newly edited by James Strachey (New York: Anchor, 1964).

[p. [104] The Thomas Paine quotation is from *The Age of Reason* in Eric Foner, ed., *Collected Writings* (Library of America, 1995).

Chapter EIGHT
THE “NEW” TESTAMENT EXCEEDS THE
EVIL OF THE “OLD” ONE

[p. [110] For H. L. Mencken’s assessment of the New Testament, see his *Treatise on the Gods* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 176.

[p. [118] For C. S. Lewis’s quotation beginning “Now, unless the speaker is God,” see his *Mere Christianity* (New York: Harper- Collins, 2001), pp. 51–52.

[p. [119] For C. S. Lewis’s quotation beginning “That is the one thing we must not say,” see *Mere Christianity*, p. 52. For his quotation beginning “Now it seems to me obvious,” see p. 53.

[p. [122] For Bart Ehrman, see his *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).

Chapter NINE
THE KORAN IS BORROWED FROM BOTH
JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN MYTHS

[p. [124] For why Muslims must recite the Koran in its original Arabic, see Ziauddin Sardar and Zafar Abbas Malik, *Introducing Mohammed* (Totem Books, 1994), p. 47.

[p. [136] The Karen Armstrong quotation comes from her *Islam: A Short History* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), p. 10.

Chapter TEN
THE TAWDRINESS OF THE MIRACULOUS AND THE DECLINE OF HELL

[pp. [145]–[146] The Malcolm Muggeridge and Ken Macmillan anecdotes regarding Mother Teresa are included in my *Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice* (Verso, 1995), pp. 25–26.

[p. [147] The information on Monica Besra’s tumor and recovery comes from Aroup Chatterjee, *Mother Teresa: The Final Verdict* (Calcutta: Meteor Books, 2003), pp. 403–406.

Chapter ELEVEN
“THE LOWLY STAMP OF THEIR ORIGIN”: RELIGION’S CORRUPT BEGIN-
NINGS

[p. [164] Mark Twain’s “chloroform in print” comes from his *Roughing It* (New York: Signet Classics, 1994), p. 102.

[p. [165] On the possible utility of religion in curing disease, see Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking Adult, 2006).

[p. [165] For Sir James George Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1922), see <http://www.bartleby.com/196/>.

Chapter TWELVE
A CODA: HOW RELIGIONS END

[p. [170] For the story of Sabbatai Sevi, see John Freely, *The Last Messiah* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2001).

Chapter THIRTEEN
DOES RELIGION MAKE PEOPLE BEHAVE BETTER?

[p. [177] The information on William Lloyd Garrison can be found in his letter to Rev. Samuel J. May, July 17, 1845, in Walter M. Merrill, ed., *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison* (1973) 3:303, and in *The Liberator*, May 6, 1842.

[p. [178] The information on Lincoln comes from Susan Jacoby, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004), p. 118.

[p. [181] Barbary ambassador Abdrahaman's justification for slavery is included in my *Thomas Jefferson: Author of America* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), p. 128.

[p. [191] The material on Rwandan genocide is derived primarily from Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998) pp. 69–141.

[pp. [201]–[202] The philosophy of “Gudo” and the Nichiren declaration are excerpted from Brian Victoria's *Zen at War* (Weatherhill, 1997), pp. 41 and 84, respectively; the Japanese Buddhist wartime proclamations are from pp. 86–87.

Chapter SIXTEEN

IS RELIGION CHILD ABUSE?

[p. [220] Mary McCarthy, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (New York: Harcourt, 1946).

[p. [221] Joseph Schumpeter's model of “creative destruction” can be found in his *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1976), pp. 81–86.

[p. [224] For Maimonides on circumcision, see Leonard B. Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh: Circumcision from Ancient Judea to Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 64–66 [emphasis added].

Chapter SEVENTEEN

AN OBJECTION ANTICIPATED : THE LAST-DITCH “CASE” AGAINST SECULARISM

[p. [239]–[240] On the Vatican's endorsement of Nazi Germany, see John Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII* (New York: Viking Adult, 1999).

[p. [242] On the misrepresentation of Einstein, see William Waterhouse, “Misquoting Einstein,” in *Skeptic* vol. 12, no. 3, pp. 60–61.

[p. [250] For H. L. Mencken's social Darwinism, see his *Treatise on the Gods* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 176.

[p. [250] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1994).

Chapter EIGHTEEN

A FINER TRADITION: THE RESISTANCE OF THE RATIONAL

[p. [262] Einstein's statement on “Spinoza's god” can be found in Jennifer Michael Hecht's *Doubt: A History* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), p. 447. See also Ronald W. Clark, *Einstein: The Life and Times* (New York: Avon, 1984), p. 502.

[p. [263] The Heinrich Heine quotation can be found in Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History*, p. 376. See also Heine as cited in Joseph Ratner's introduction to

The Philosophy of Spinoza: Selections from His Works (New York: Modern Library, 1927).

[p. [264] The information about Pierre Bayle can be found in Ruth Whelan, “Bayle, Pierre,” in Tom Flynn, ed., *The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2006).

[p. [265] The Matteo de Vincenti quotation can be found in Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History*, p. 287. See also Nicholas Davidson, “Unbelief and Atheism in Italy, 1500-1700,” in Michael Hunter and David Wootton, ed., *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1992), p. 63.

[p. [266] Benjamin Franklin’s quotation on the lightning rod can be found in *The Autobiography and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin, 1986), p. 213.

[p. [268] Hume’s quotation can be found in Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History*, p. 351.

[p. [268] The information on Paine and his religious views comes from Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History*, pp. 356–57.

[p. [271] The Albert Einstein quotation beginning “It was, of course, a lie” can be found in Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History*, p. 447. See also Helen Dukas and Banesh Hoffinan, eds., *Albert Einstein, the Human Side: New Glimpses from His Archives*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 43. The quotation beginning “I do not believe in the immortality of the individual” can be found in Hecht, *Doubt: A History*, p. 447. See also Dukas and Hoffman, *Albert Einstein, the Human Side*, p. 39.

Chapter NINETEEN
IN CONCLUSION: THE NEED FOR
A NEW ENLIGHTENMENT

[p. [282] For the Robert Lowell quotation, see Walter Kirn, “The Passion of Robert Lowell,” *New York Times*, June 26, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/26/books/review/26KIR-NL.html>.

ARGUABLY

Front Matter

ALSO BY CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS

Books

Hostage to History: Cyprus from the Ottomans to Kissinger

Blood, Class and Nostalgia: Anglo-American Ironies

Imperial Spoils: The Curious Case of the Elgin Marbles

Why Orwell Matters

No One Left to Lie to: The Triangulations of William Jefferson Clinton

Letters to a Young Contrarian

The Trial of Henry Kissinger

Thomas Jefferson: Author of America

Thomas Paine's "Rights of Man": A Biography

god Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything

The Portable Atheist

Hitch-22: A Memoir

Pamphlets

Karl Marx and the Paris Commune

The Monarchy: A Critique of Britain's Favorite Fetish

The Missionary Position: Mother Theresa in Theory and Practice

A Long Short War: The Postponed Liberation of Iraq

Collected Essays

Prepared for the Worst: Essays and Minority Reports

For the Sake of Argument

Unacknowledged Legislation: Writers in the Public Sphere

Love, Poverty and War: Journeys and Essays

Collaborations

James Callaghan: The Road to Number Ten (with Peter Kellner)

Blaming the Victims (edited with Edward Said)

When the Borders Bleed: The Struggle of the Kurds (photographs by Ed Kash)

International Territory: The United Nations (photographs by Adam Bartos)

Vanity Fair's Hollywood (with Graydon Carter and David Friend)

The Quotable Hitchens (with Windsor Mann)

"Live all you can: It's a mistake not to."

—Lambert Strether, in *The Ambassadors*

To the memory of Mohamed Bouazizi, Abu-Abdel Monaam Hamedeh, and Ali Mehdi Zeu.

Contents

- Introduction
- ALL AMERICAN
- Gods of Our Fathers: The United States of Enlightenment
- The Private Jefferson
- Jefferson Versus the Muslim Pirates
- Benjamin Franklin: Free and Easy
- John Brown: The Man Who Ended Slavery
- Abraham Lincoln: Misery's Child
- Mark Twain: American Radical
- Upton Sinclair: A Capitalist Primer
- JFK: In Sickness and by Stealth
- Saul Bellow: The Great Assimilator
- Vladimir Nabokov: Hurricane Lolita
- John Updike, Part One: No Way
- John Updike, Part Two: Mr. Geniality
- Vidal Loco
- America the Banana Republic
- An Anglosphere Future
- Political Animals
- Old Enough to Die
- In Defense of Foxhole Atheists
- In Search of the Washington Novel

- ECLECTIC AFFINITIES
- Isaac Newton: Flaws of Gravity
- The Men Who Made England: Hilary Mantel's Wolf Hall
- Edmund Burke: Reactionary Prophet
- Samuel Johnson: Demons and Dictionaries
- Gustave Flaubert: I'm with Stupide
- The Dark Side of Dickens
- Marx's Journalism: The Grub Street Years
- Rebecca West: Things Worth Fighting For
- Ezra Pound: A Revolutionary Simpleton
- On Animal Farm
- Jessica Mitford's Poison Pen
- W. Somerset Maugham: Poor Old Willie
- Evelyn Waugh: The Permanent Adolescent
- P. G. Wodehouse: The Honorable Schoolboy
- Anthony Powell: An Omnivorous Curiosity
- John Buchan: Spy Thriller's Father
- Graham Greene: I'll Be Damned
- Death from a Salesman: Graham Greene's Bottled Ontology
- Loving Philip Larkin
- Stephen Spender: A Nice Bloody Fool
- Edward Upward: The Captive Mind
- C. L. R. James: Mid Off, Not Right On
- J. G. Ballard: The Catastrophist
- Fraser's Flashman: Scoundrel Time

- Fleet Street's Finest: From Waugh to Frayn
- Saki: Where the Wild Things Are
- Harry Potter: The Boy Who Lived
- AMUSEMENTS, ANNOYANCES, AND DISAPPOINTMENTS
- Why Women Aren't Funny
- Stieg Larsson: The Author Who Played with Fire
- As American as Apple Pie
- So Many Men's Rooms, So Little Time
- The New Commandments
- In Your Face
- Wine Drinkers of the World, Unite
- Charles, Prince of Piffle
- OFFSHORE ACCOUNTS
- Afghanistan's Dangerous Bet
- First, Silence the Whistle-Blower
- Believe Me, It's Torture
- Iran's Waiting Game
- Long Live Democratic Seismology
- Benazir Bhutto: Daughter of Destiny
- From Abbottabad to Worse
- The Perils of Partition
- Algeria: A French Quarrel
- The Case of Orientalism
- Edward Said: Where the Twain Should Have Met
- The Swastika and the Cedar

- Holiday in Iraq
- Tunisia: At the Desert's Edge
- What Happened to the Suicide Bombers of Jerusalem?
- Childhood's End: An African Nightmare
- The Vietnam Syndrome
- Once Upon a Time in Germany
- Worse Than Nineteen Eighty-four
- North Korea: A Nation of Racist Dwarves
- The Eighteenth Brumaire of the Castro Dynasty
- Hugo Boss
- Is the Euro Doomed?
- Overstating Jewish Power
- The Case for Humanitarian Intervention
- LEGACIES OF TOTALITARIANISM
- Victor Serge: Pictures from an Inquisition
- André Malraux: One Man's Fate
- Arthur Koestler: The Zealot
- Isabel Allende: Chile Redux
- The Persian Version
- Martin Amis: Lightness at Midnight
- Imagining Hitler
- Victor Klemperer: Survivor
- A War Worth Fighting
- Just Give Peace a Chance?
- W. G. Sebald: Requiem for Germany

- WORDS' WORTH
- When the King Saved God
- Let Them Eat Pork Rinds
- Stand Up for Denmark!
- Eschew the Taboo
- She's No Fundamentalist
- Burned Out
- Easter Charade
- Don't Mince Words
- History and Mystery
- Words Matter
- This Was Not Looting
- The Other L-Word
- The You Decade
- Suck It Up
- A Very, Very Dirty Word
- Prisoner of Shelves
- Acknowledgments
- Index

Introduction

The three names on the dedication page belonged to a Tunisian street vendor, an Egyptian restaurateur, and a Libyan husband and father. In the spring of 2011, the first of them set himself alight in the town of Sidi Bouzid, in protest at just one too many humiliations at the hands of petty officialdom. The second also took his own life as Egyptians began to rebel en masse at the stagnation and meaninglessness of Mubarak's Egypt. The third, it might be said, gave his life as well as took it: loading up his modest car with petrol and homemade explosives and blasting open the gate of the Katiba barracks in Benghazi—symbolic Bastille of the detested and demented Qadafi regime in Libya.

In the long human struggle, the idea of “martyrdom” presents itself with a Janus-like face. Those willing to die for a cause larger than themselves have been honored from the Periclean funeral oration to the Gettysburg Address. Viewed more skeptically, those with a zeal to die have sometimes been suspect for excessive enthusiasm and self-righteousness, even fanaticism. The anthem of my old party, the British Labour Party, speaks passionately of a flag that is deepest red, and which has “shrouded oft our martyred dead.” Underneath my college windows at Oxford stood—stands—the memorial to the “Oxford Martyrs”: Bishops Cranmer, Latimer, and Ridley, who were burned alive for Protestant heresies by the Catholic Queen Mary in October 1555. “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church,” wrote the Church Father Tertullian in late first-century Carthage, and the association of the martyr with blind faith has been consistent down the centuries, with the faction being burned often waiting for its own turn to do the burning. I think the Labour Party can be acquitted on that charge. So can Jan Palach, the young Czech student who immolated himself in Wenceslas Square in January 1969 in protest against the Soviet occupation of his country. I helped organize a rally at the Oxford Memorial in his honor, and later became associated with the Palach Press: a center of exile dissent and publication which was a contributor, two decades later, to the “Velvet Revolution” of 1989. This was a completely secular and civil initiative, which never caused a drop of human blood to be spilled.

Especially over the course of the last ten years, the word “martyr” has been utterly degraded by the wolfish image of Mohammed Atta: a cold and loveless zombie—a suicide murderer—who took as many innocents with him as he could manage. The organizations that find and train men like Atta have since been responsible for unutterable crimes in many countries and societies, from England to Iraq, in their attempt to create a system where the cold and loveless zombie would be the norm, and culture would be dead. They claim that they will win because they love death more than

life, and because life-lovers are feeble and corrupt degenerates. Practically every word I have written, since 2001, has been explicitly or implicitly directed at refuting and defeating those hateful, nihilistic propositions, as well as those among us who try to explain them away.

The Tunisian, Egyptian, and Libyan martyrs were thinking and acting much more like Palach than like Atta. They were not trying to take life. They desired, rather, that it be lived on a higher level than that of a serf, treated as an inconvenience by a moribund oligarchy. They did not make sordid and boastful claims, about how their homicidal actions would earn them a place in a gross fantasy of carnal afterlife. They did not wish to inspire hoarse, yelling mobs, tossing coffins on a sea of hysteria. Jan Palach told his closest comrades that the deep reason for his gesture was not just the occupation, but the awful apathy that was settling over Prague as that “spring” gave way to a frosty winter. In preferring a life-affirming death to a living death-in-life, the harbingers of the Arab spring likewise hoped to galvanize their fellow subjects and make them aspire to be citizens. Tides will ebb, waves will recede, the landscape will turn brown and dusty again, but nothing can expel from the Arab mind the example and esprit of Tahrir. Once again it is demonstrated that people do not love their chains or their jailers,* and that the aspiration for a civilized life—that “universal eligibility to be noble,” as Saul Bellow’s Augie March so imperishably phrases it—is proper and common to all.

Invited to deliver a lecture at the American University of Beirut in February 2009, with the suggested title “Who Are the Real Revolutionaries in the Middle East?” I did my best to blow on the few sparks that then seemed dimly perceptible. I instanced the burgeoning civil resistance in Iran. I cited the great Egyptian dissident and political scientist (and political prisoner) Saad-Eddin Ibrahim, now recognized as one of the intellectual fathers of the Tahrir movement. I praised the “Cedar Revolution” movement in Lebanon itself, which had brought about a season of hope and succeeded in putting an end to the long Syrian occupation of the country. I took the side of the Kurdish forces in Iraq who had helped write “finis” to the Caligula regime of Saddam Hussein, while also beginning the work of autonomy for the region’s largest and most oppressed minority. I praised the work of Salim Fayyad, who was attempting to bring “transparency” to bear on the baroque corruption of the “Palestinian Authority.” These were the disparate but not-unconnected strands out of which, I hoped and part believed, a new cloth could be woven.

It was clear that a good number of the audience (including, I regret to say, most of the Americans) regarded me as some kind of stooge. For them, revolutionary authenticity belonged to groups like Hamas or Hezbollah, resolute opponents of the global colossus and tireless fighters against Zionism. For me, this was yet another round in a long historic dispute. Briefly stated, this ongoing polemic takes place between the anti-imperialist Left, and the anti-totalitarian Left. In one shape or another, I have been involved—on both sides of it—all my life. And, in the case of any conflict, I have increasingly resolved it on the anti-totalitarian side. (This may not seem much of a

claim, but some things need to be found out by experience and not merely derived from principle.) Several of these rehearsals and excursions of mine were discussed in my memoir, *Hitch-22*, and several of them are reflected here, too, again in reportage as well as argument. I affirm that the forces who regard pluralism as a virtue, “moderate” though that may make them sound, are far more profoundly revolutionary (and quite likely, over the longer term, to make better anti-imperialists as well).

Evolving or honing any of these viewpoints has necessitated constant argument about the idea of America. There is currently much easy talk about the “decline” of my adopted country, both in confidence and in resources. I don’t choose to join this denigration. The secular republic with the separation of powers is still the approximate model, whether acknowledged or not, of several democratic revolutions that are in progress or impending. Sometimes the United States is worthy of the respect to which this emulation entitles it; sometimes not. Where not—as in the question of waterboarding, discussed later—I endeavor to say so. I also believe that the literature and letters of the country since the founding show forth a certain allegiance to the revolutionary and emancipating idea, and in a section on American traditions I try to breathe my best on those sparks, too.

“Barbarism,” wrote Alain Finkielkraut not long ago, “is not the inheritance of our prehistory. It is the companion that dogs our every step.” In writing here, quite a lot, about the examples and lessons of past totalitarianisms, I try not to banish the specter too much. And how easy it is to recognize the revenant shapes that the old unchanging enemies—racism, leader worship, superstition—assume when they reappear amongst us (often bodyguarded by their new apologists). I have attempted to alleviate the morbid task of combat here, by writing also about authors and artists who have contributed to culture and civilization: not words or concepts that can be defended simply in the abstract. It took me decades to dare the attempt, but finally I did write about Vladimir Nabokov....

The people who must never have power are the humorless. To impossible certainties of rectitude they ally tedium and uniformity. Since an essential element of the American idea is its variety, I have tried to celebrate things that are amusing for their own sake, or ridiculous but revealing, or simply of intrinsic interest. All of the above might apply to the subject of my little essay on the art and science of the blowjob, for example, while not quite saving me from the most instantly misinterpreted of all my articles, concerning the humor deficit as registered by gender. Still, I like to believe that these small-scale ventures, too, make some contribution to a conversation without limits or proscriptions: the *sin qua non* of the sort of society that knows to keep the solemn and the pious at bay.

This book marks my fifth collection. In the preface to the first one, *Prepared for the Worst*, in 1988, I annexed a thought of Nadine Gordimer’s, to the effect that a serious person should try to write posthumously. By that I took her to mean that one should compose as if the usual constraints—of fashion, commerce, self-censorship, public and perhaps especially intellectual opinion—did not operate. Impossible perhaps to live up

to, this admonition and aspiration did possess some muscle, as well as some warning of how it can decay. Then, about a year ago, I was informed by a doctor that I might have as little as another year to live. In consequence, some of these articles were written with the full consciousness that they might be my very last. Sobering in one way and exhilarating in another, this practice can obviously never become perfected. But it has given me a more vivid idea of what makes life worth living, and defending, and I hope very much that some of this may infect those of you who have been generous enough to read me this far.

Christopher Hitchens

June 26, 2011

* The best encapsulation of the disordered, sado-masochistic relationship between rulers and ruled in a closed society with a One Man regime is provided, as so often, by George Orwell, who in *Coming Up for Air* wrote of “the processions and the posters with enormous faces, and the crowds of a million people all cheering for the Leader until they deafen themselves into thinking that they really worship him, and all the time, underneath, they hate him so that they want to puke.”

ALL AMERICAN

Gods of Our Fathers: The United States of Enlightenment

Review of Moral Minority: Our Skeptical Founding Fathers, by Brooke Allen.

WHY SHOULD we care what the Founding Fathers believed, or did not believe, about religion? They went to such great trouble to insulate faith from politics, and took such care to keep their own convictions private, that it would scarcely matter if it could now be proved that, say, George Washington was a secret Baptist. The ancestor of the American Revolution was the English Revolution of the 1640s, whose leaders and spokesmen were certainly Protestant fundamentalists, but that did not bind the Framers and cannot be said to bind us, either. Indeed, the established Protestant church in Britain was one of the models which we can be quite sure the signatories of 1776 were determined to avoid emulating.

Moreover, the eighteenth-century scholars and gentlemen who gave us the U.S. Constitution were in a relative state of innocence respecting knowledge of the cosmos, the Earth, and the psyche, of the sort that has revolutionized the modern argument over faith. Charles Darwin was born in Thomas Jefferson's lifetime (on the very same day as Abraham Lincoln, as it happens), but Jefferson's guesses about the fossils found in Virginia were to Darwinism what alchemy is to chemistry. And the insights of Einstein and Freud lay over a still more distant horizon. The furthest that most skeptics could go was in the direction of an indeterminate deism, which accepted that the natural order seemed to require a designer but did not necessitate the belief that the said designer actually intervened in human affairs. Invocations such as "nature's god" were partly intended to hedge this bet, while avoiding giving offense to the pious. Even Thomas Paine, the most explicitly anti-Christian of the lot, wrote *The Age of Reason* as a defense of god from those who traduced him in man-made screeds like the Bible.

Considering these limitations, it is quite astonishing how irreligious the Founders actually were. You might not easily guess, for example, who was the author of the following words:

Oh! Lord! Do you think that a Protestant Popedom is annihilated in America? Do you recollect, or have you ever attended to the ecclesiastical Strifes in Maryland Pensilvania [sic], New York, and every part of New England? What a mercy it is that these People cannot whip and crop, and pillory and roast, as yet in the U.S.! If they could they would.... There is a germ of religion in human nature so strong that

whenever an order of men can persuade the people by flattery or terror that they have salvation at their disposal, there can be no end to fraud, violence, or usurpation.

That was John Adams, in relatively mild form. He was also to point out, though without too much optimism, the secret weapon that secularists had at their disposal—namely the profusion of different religious factions:

The multitude and diversity of them, You will say, is our Security against them all. God grant it. But if We consider that the Presbyterians and Methodists are far the most numerous and the most likely to unite; let a George Whitefield arise, with a military cast, like Mahomet, or Loyola, and what will become of all the other Sects who can never unite?

George Whitefield was the charismatic preacher who is so superbly mocked in Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*. Of Franklin it seems almost certainly right to say that he was an atheist (Jerry Weinberger's excellent recent study *Benjamin Franklin Unmasked* being the best reference here), but the master tacticians of church-state separation, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, were somewhat more opaque about their beliefs. In passing the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom—the basis of the later First Amendment—they brilliantly exploited the fear that each Christian sect had of persecution by the others. It was easier to get the squabbling factions to agree on no tithes than it would have been to get them to agree on tithes that might also benefit their doctrinal rivals. In his famous "wall of separation" letter, assuring the Baptists of Danbury, Connecticut, of their freedom from persecution, Jefferson was responding to the expressed fear of this little community that they would be oppressed by—the Congregationalists of Connecticut.

This same divide-and-rule tactic may have won him the election of 1800 that made him president in the first place. In the face of a hysterical Federalist campaign to blacken Jefferson as an infidel, the Voltaire of Monticello appealed directly to those who feared the arrogance of the Presbyterians. Adams himself thought that this had done the trick.

"With the Baptists, Quakers, Methodists, and Moravians," he wrote, "as well as the Dutch and German Lutherans and Calvinists, it had an immense effect, and turned them in such numbers as decided the election. They said, let us have an Atheist or Deist or any thing rather than an establishment of Presbyterianism."

The essential point—that a religiously neutral state is the chief guarantee of religious pluralism—is the one that some of today's would-be theocrats are determined to miss. Brooke Allen misses no chance to rub it in, sometimes rather heavily stressing contemporary "faith-based" analogies. She is especially interesting on the extent to which the Founders felt obliged to keep their doubts on religion to themselves. Madison, for example, did not find himself able, during the War of 1812, to refuse demands for a national day of prayer and fasting. But he confided his own reservations to his private papers, published as "Detached Memoranda" only in 1946. It was in those pages, too, that he expressed the view that to have chaplains opening Congress, or chaplains in the armed forces, was unconstitutional.

Of all these pen-portraits of religious reservation, the one most surprising to most readers will probably be that of George Washington. While he was president, he attended the Reverend James Abercrombie's church, but on "sacramental Sundays" left the congregation immediately before the taking of communion. When reproached for this by the good Reverend, he acknowledged the reproof—and ceased attending church at all on those Sundays which featured "the Lord's supper." To do otherwise, as he put it, would be "an ostentatious display of religious zeal arising altogether from his elevated station."

Jefferson was content to take part in public religious observances and to reserve his scorn and contempt for Christianity for his intimate correspondents, but our first president would not give an inch to hypocrisy. In that respect, if in no other, the shady, ingratiating Parson Weems had him right.

In his 1784 book, *Reason: The Only Oracle of Man*, Ethan Allen wrote: "The doctrine of the Incarnation itself, and the Virgin mother, does not merit a serious confutation and therefore is passed in silence, except the mere mention of it." John Adams was prepared to be a little more engaged with theological subjects, in which he possessed a huge expertise, but he also reposed his real faith in the bedrock of reason. Human understanding, he wrote (seemingly following David Hume), is its own revelation, and:

[h]as made it certain that two and one make three; and that one is not three; nor can three be one.... Miracles or Prophecies might frighten us out of our Wits; might scare us to death; might induce Us to lie; to say that We believe that 2 and 2 make 5. But we should not believe it. We should know the contrary.

From David Hume via ridicule of the Trinity to a prefiguration of Winston Smith! The connection between religious skepticism and political liberty may not be as absolute as that last allusion implies, but there is no doubt that some such connection existed very vividly in the minds of those "men of the Enlightenment" who adorned Philadelphia and Boston and New York and Washington as the eighteenth century evolved into the nineteenth.

In a first-class closing chapter on the intellectual and scientific world that shaped the Framers, Allen discusses the wide influence then exerted by great humanist thinkers like Hume, Shaftesbury, Bolingbroke, Locke, and Voltaire. It became a point of principle as well as of practice to maintain that liberty of conscience and the freedom of the individual were quite incompatible with any compulsion in religion, just as they would be incompatible with any repression of belief. (This is precisely why the French Revolution, which seemed to negate the promise of Enlightenment, was to become such a painful cause of disagreement, and worse, between Federalists and Republicans.)

In 1821 Thomas Jefferson wrote of his hope "that the human mind will some day get back to the freedom it enjoyed 2000 years ago. This country, which has given the world an example of physical liberty, owes to it that of moral emancipation also." I think that Allen is not wrong in comparing this to the finest passages in Edward Gibbon. She causes us to catch our breath at the thought that, at the birth of the United States, there were men determined to connect it to a philosophical wisdom

that pre-dated the triumph of monotheism. It is the only reason for entertaining the belief that America was ever blessed by “Providence”—as Roger Williams named his open-minded settlement in Rhode Island, a refuge from the tyranny of Pilgrims and Puritans.

In a time when the chief declared enemy of the American experiment is theocratic fanaticism, we should stand together and demand, “Mr. Jefferson: Build Up That Wall!” (The Weekly Standard, December 11, 2006)

The Private Jefferson

Review of Jefferson’s *Secrets: Death and Desire at Monticello*, by Andrew Burstein.

IT IS ARGUABLY A GOOD THING—and in no way detracts from Andrew Burstein’s absorbing book—that Jefferson’s *Secrets* does not quite live up to its title. Secrecy, death, and desire are the ingredients of the sensational, even of the violent, and they consort ill with the measure and scruple for which Thomas Jefferson is still renowned. It might be better to say that this study is an inquiry into the privacy and reticence of a very self-contained man, along with an educated speculation upon the motives and promptings for his defensive style.

Celebrated for many paradoxes, Jefferson was especially notable as a revolutionary who believed above all in order. Often ardent in his partisanship for rebellion in America and France (though somewhat less so when it came to slave revolts in Haiti and the Old South), he could seem airy and promiscuous with regard to violence. Indeed, he rather commended the Whiskey Rebellion as something desirable for its own sake—“like a storm in the atmosphere.” Yet this expression in itself furnishes us with a clue. The outbreak of insurrection, like a storm, was necessary to restore normality by relieving unnatural pressure. The wisdom of nature had provided such outlets precisely in order to forestall, or to correct, what Jefferson was wont to call—always pejoratively—“convulsions.”

Burstein, a professor of history at the University of Tulsa, acutely makes the connection between what men of the Enlightenment considered “the body politic” and what they thought about bodily health. Here, the maxim *Mens sana in corpore sano* was taken very seriously. Excess was to be avoided, in diet and in matters sexual, but so too was undue repression or continence. A true philosophe ought to spend as much time in exercise and labor as he did with books and papers. He should emulate the balance and symmetry of nature. He should be careful about what he put into his system, and cautious about any fluid disbursements from it.

As president, Jefferson began to suffer intermittently from diarrhea (which he at first cured by what seems the counterintuitive method of hard horseback riding), and though he was unusually hale until his eightieth year, it was diarrhea and a miserable infection of the urinary tract that eventually carried him off. In one of his few profitless speculations, Burstein quotes a letter from one of Jefferson’s physicians, Dr. Thomas

Watkins (whose middle name was Gassaway), in which gonorrhoea is mentioned as a possible cause of the persistent dysuria. It seems plain from the context that Jefferson had not contracted gonorrhoea, but rather suffered from the traditional woes of an old man's prostate; Dr. Watkins was eliminating gonorrhoea as a possible cause, not diagnosing it.

However, the question of Jefferson's sex life does have to be raised at some point. Here again, we find a man who was afraid in almost equal measure of too much gratification and too little. His letters from France contain many warnings of the sexual traps set by Parisian females for unwary and innocent Americans, yet it was his own time in France that saw Jefferson at his most vulnerable and impassioned. I still remember the slight shock I experienced when I read a letter he wrote in Paris to Maria Cosway, full of rather clumsy phallic jokes borrowed from Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. And it must have been in Paris that he first had carnal knowledge of Sally Hemings, who was his late wife's half-sister as well as his own personal property.

Burstein's chapter on this matter—which is, after all, a fairly open “secret”—is admirable. He doesn't waste time, as so many historians have, in making a mystery where none exists. It is obvious without any reference to DNA testing that Jefferson took Sally Hemings as his concubine and fathered several of her children. And, if we look at the books in Jefferson's library, and study the opinions he uttered on related matters, we can readily see how he would have justified the arrangement to himself.

First came the question of bodily integrity. The leading expert on sexual health at the time, the Swiss physician Samuel Tissot, took the view that intercourse of any kind was far less ignoble and life threatening than masturbation. Semen was provided for a purpose and should be neither squandered nor pent up. Knowing—and doubtless appreciating—this, Jefferson had nonetheless to protect the memory of his wife and avoid scandal in general. As he was well aware, the ancient Greek method of doing both these things, and of avoiding venereal disease in the bargain, was to establish a consistent relationship with a compliant member of the household. *Et voilà!* A small element of eugenics may have been involved too, since Jefferson also believed that it was necessary to people the earth and that too many men of position wasted their generative urges on alliances with unfit women. The children he had with Hemings were sturdy and smart, and they made very serviceable slaves on his near-bankrupt estate until he kept his promise to their mother to manumit them at adulthood.

Jefferson applied to himself the same method of analysis he employed for scrutinizing the universe and for anatomizing his beloved Virginia. Surely such symmetry and order implied a design, and therefore a designer? This deistic rationalism was as far as most thinking people could go in an epoch that just preceded the work of Charles Darwin (who was born on the same day as Abraham Lincoln). And Jefferson hit on the same analogy arrived at by the “natural philosopher” William Paley: the timepiece. Even a person who did not know what a clock was for would be able to tell that it was not a vegetable or a stone, that it had a maker.

Interestingly, Jefferson made more use of this example as he got older, referring to himself as “an old watch, with a pinion worn here, and a wheel there, until it can go no longer.” Did he think that a creator’s global creation was subject to similar laws? He appears not to have asked himself. But then, this was a man who could oppose the emancipation of slaves because he feared the “ten thousand recollections” they would retain of their hated condition, while almost in the same breath saying dismissively that “their griefs are transient.”

In other words, and despite his notable modesty and decorum, Jefferson was subject to the same solipsism that encumbered all those who lived before the conclusive analysis of the fossil record and the elements of microbiology. (He could never work out, in his Notes on the State of Virginia, how it was that seashells could be found so high up on the local mountains.) On his Monticello mountaintop he was the center of a universe of his very own, and he was never quite able to dispense with the corollary illusions. This is what makes the account of his death so impressive. He wished to make a good and dignified end, and to be properly remembered for his proudest achievements, yet he seems to have guessed (telling John Adams that he felt neither “hope” nor “fear”) that only extinction awaited him. He certainly did not request the attendance of any minister of religion.

Burstein reproduces a verse of revolting sentimentality, composed by Jefferson on his deathbed, in which he promises his surviving daughter to bear her love to the “Two Seraphs” who have gone before. The lines seem ambivalent to me, in that Jefferson speaks not so much of crossing a boundary as of coming to an impassable one: “I go to my fathers; I welcome the shore, / which crowns all my hopes, or which buries my cares.” Anyway, a moment’s thought will remind us that a designer who causes the deaths of infant daughters to occur so long before the death of their father has lost hold of the argument from natural order, while a moment’s ordinary sympathy will excuse the dying and exhausted man this last indulgence in the lachrymose. The rest of Burstein’s book has already demonstrated the main and unsurprising point, which is that the author of the Declaration of Independence was in every respect a mammal like ourselves. The only faint cause of surprise is that this can still seem controversial. (The Wilson Quarterly, Spring 2005)

Jefferson Versus the Muslim Pirates

Review of Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, 1776 to the Present, by Michael Oren.

WHEN I FIRST BEGAN to plan my short biography of Thomas Jefferson, I found it difficult to research the chapter concerning the so-called Barbary Wars: an event or series of events that had seemingly receded over the lost horizon of American history. Henry Adams, in his discussion of our third president, had some boyhood reminiscences of the widespread hero-worship of naval officer Stephen Decatur, and other fragments

and shards showed up in other quarries, but a sound general history of the subject was hard to come by. When I asked a professional military historian—a man with direct access to Defense Department archives—if there was any book that he could recommend, he came back with a slight shrug.

But now the curious reader may choose from a freshet of writing on the subject. Added to my own shelf in the recent past have been *The Barbary Wars: American Independence in the Atlantic World*, by Frank Lambert (2005); *Jefferson's War: America's First War on Terror 1801–1805*, by Joseph Wheelan (2003); *To the Shores of Tripoli: The Birth of the U.S. Navy and Marines*, by A. B. C. Whipple (1991, republished 2001); and *Victory in Tripoli: How America's War with the Barbary Pirates Established the U.S. Navy and Shaped a Nation*, by Joshua E. London (2005). Most recently, in his new general history, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, 1776 to the Present*, the Israeli scholar Michael Oren opens with a long chapter on the Barbary conflict. As some of the subtitles—and some of the dates of publication—make plain, this new interest is largely occasioned by America's latest round of confrontation in the Middle East, or the Arab sphere or Muslim world, if you prefer those expressions.

In a way, I am glad that I did not have the initial benefit of all this research. My quest sent me to some less obvious secondary sources, in particular to Linda Colley's excellent book *Captives*, which shows the reaction of the English and American publics to a slave trade of which they were victims rather than perpetrators. How many know that perhaps 1.5 million Europeans and Americans were enslaved in Islamic North Africa between 1530 and 1780? We dimly recall that Miguel de Cervantes was briefly in the galleys. But what of the people of the town of Baltimore in Ireland, all carried off by "corsair" raiders in a single night?

Some of this activity was hostage trading and ransom-farming rather than the more labor-intensive horror of the Atlantic trade and the Middle Passage, but it exerted a huge effect on the imagination of the time—and probably on no one more than on Thomas Jefferson. Peering at the paragraph denouncing the American slave trade in his original draft of the Declaration of Independence, later excised, I noticed for the first time that it sarcastically condemned "the Christian King of Great Britain" for engaging in "this piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers." The allusion to Barbary practice seemed inescapable.

One immediate effect of the American Revolution, however, was to strengthen the hand of those very same North African potentates: roughly speaking, the Maghrebian provinces of the Ottoman Empire that conform to today's Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia. Deprived of Royal Navy protection, American shipping became even more subject than before to the depredations of those who controlled the Strait of Gibraltar. The infant United States had therefore to decide not just upon a question of national honor but upon whether it would stand or fall by free navigation of the seas.

One of the historians of the Barbary conflict, Frank Lambert, argues that the imperative of free trade drove America much more than did any quarrel with Islam or "tyranny," let alone "terrorism." He resists any comparison with today's tormenting con-

frontations. “The Barbary Wars were primarily about trade, not theology,” he writes. “Rather than being holy wars, they were an extension of America’s War of Independence.”

Let us not call this view reductionist. Jefferson would perhaps have been just as eager to send a squadron to put down any Christian piracy that was restraining commerce. But one cannot get around what Jefferson heard when he went with John Adams to wait upon Tripoli’s ambassador to London in March 1785. When they inquired by what right the Barbary states preyed upon American shipping, enslaving both crews and passengers, America’s two foremost envoys were informed that “it was written in the Koran, that all Nations who should not have acknowledged their authority were sinners, that it was their right and duty to make war upon whoever they could find and to make Slaves of all they could take as prisoners, and that every Mussulman who should be slain in battle was sure to go to Paradise.” (It is worth noting that the United States played no part in the Crusades, or in the Catholic reconquista of Andalusia.)

Ambassador Abd Al-Rahman did not fail to mention the size of his own commission, if America chose to pay the protection money demanded as an alternative to piracy. So here was an early instance of the “heads I win, tails you lose” dilemma, in which the United States is faced with corrupt regimes, on the one hand, and Islamic militants, on the other—or indeed a collusion between them.

It seems likely that Jefferson decided from that moment on that he would make war upon the Barbary kingdoms as soon as he commanded American forces. His two least favorite institutions—enthroned monarchy and state-sponsored religion—were embodied in one target, and it may even be that his famous ambivalences about slavery were resolved somewhat when he saw it practiced by the Muslims.

However that may be, it is certain that the Barbary question had considerable influence on the debate that ratified the United States Constitution in the succeeding years. Many a delegate, urging his home state to endorse the new document, argued that only a strong federal union could repel the Algerian threat. In “The Federalist” No. 24, Alexander Hamilton argued that without a “federal navy ... of respectable weight ... the genius of American Merchants and Navigators would be stifled and lost.” In No. 41, James Madison insisted that only union could guard America’s maritime capacity from “the rapacious demands of pirates and barbarians.” John Jay, in his letters, took a “bring-it-on” approach; he believed that “Algerian Corsairs and the Pirates of Tunis and Tripoli” would compel the feeble American states to unite, since “the more we are ill-treated abroad the more we shall unite and consolidate at home.” The eventual Constitution, which provides for an army only at two-year renewable intervals, imposes no such limitation on the navy.

Thus, Lambert may be limiting himself in viewing the Barbary conflict primarily through the lens of free trade. Questions of nation-building, of regime change, of “mission creep,” of congressional versus presidential authority to make war, of negotiation versus confrontation, of “entangling alliances,” and of the “clash of civilizations”—all arose in the first overseas war that the United States ever fought. The “nation-building”

that occurred, however, took place not overseas but in the thirteen colonies, welded by warfare into something more like a republic.

There were many Americans—John Adams among them—who made the case that it was better policy to pay the tribute. It was cheaper than the loss of trade, for one thing, and a battle against the pirates would be “too rugged for our people to bear.” Putting the matter starkly, Adams said: “We ought not to fight them at all unless we determine to fight them forever.”

The cruelty, exorbitance, and intransigence of the Barbary states, however, would decide things. The level of tribute demanded began to reach 10 percent of the American national budget, with no guarantee that greed would not increase that percentage, while from the dungeons of Algiers and Tripoli came appalling reports of the mistreatment of captured men and women. Gradually, and to the accompaniment of some of the worst patriotic verse ever written, public opinion began to harden in favor of war. From Jefferson’s perspective, it was a good thing that this mood shift took place during the Adams administration, when he was out of office and temporarily “retired” to Monticello. He could thus criticize federal centralization of power, from a distance, even as he watched the construction of a fleet—and the forging of a permanent Marine Corps—that he could one day use for his own ends.

At one point, Jefferson hoped that John Paul Jones, naval hero of the Revolution, might assume command of a squadron that would strike fear into the Barbary pirates. While ambassador in Paris, Jefferson had secured Jones a commission with Empress Catherine of Russia, who used him in the Black Sea to harry the Ottomans, the ultimate authority over Barbary. But Jones died before realizing his dream of going to the source and attacking Constantinople. The task of ordering war fell to Jefferson.

Michael Oren thinks that he made the decision reluctantly, finally forced into it by the arrogant behavior of Tripoli, which seized two American brigs and set off a chain reaction of fresh demands from other Barbary states. I believe—because of the encounter with the insufferable Abd Al-Rahman and because of his long engagement with Jones—that Jefferson had long sought a pretext for war. His problem was his own party and the clause in the Constitution that gave Congress the power to declare war. With not atypical subtlety, Jefferson took a shortcut through this thicket in 1801 and sent the navy to North Africa on patrol, as it were, with instructions to enforce existing treaties and punish infractions of them. Our third president did not inform Congress of his authorization of this mission until the fleet was too far away to recall.

Once again, Barbary obstinacy tipped the scale. Yusuf Karamanli, the pasha of Tripoli, declared war on the United States in May 1801, in pursuit of his demand for more revenue. This earned him a heavy bombardment of Tripoli and the crippling of one of his most important ships. But the force of example was plainly not sufficient. In the altered mood that prevailed after the encouraging start in Tripoli, Congress passed an enabling act in February 1802 that, in its provision for a permanent Mediterranean presence and its language about the “Tripolitan Corsairs,” amounted to a declaration of

war. The Barbary regimes continued to underestimate their new enemy, with Morocco declaring war in its turn and the others increasing their blackmail.

A complete disaster—Tripoli’s capture of the new U.S. frigate *Philadelphia*—became a sort of triumph, thanks to Edward Preble and Stephen Decatur, who mounted a daring raid on Tripoli’s harbor and blew up the captured ship, while inflicting heavy damage on the city’s defenses. Now there were names—Preble and Decatur—for newspapers back home to trumpet as heroes. Nor did their courage draw notice only in America. Admiral Lord Nelson himself called the raid “the most bold and daring act of the age,” and Pope Pius VII declared that the United States “had done more for the cause of Christianity than the most powerful nations of Christendom have done for ages.” (In his nostalgia for Lepanto, perhaps, His Holiness was evidently unaware that the Treaty of Tripoli, which in 1797 had attempted to formalize the dues that America would pay for access to the Mediterranean, stated in its preamble that the United States had no quarrel with the Muslim religion and was in no sense a Christian country. Of course, those secularists like myself who like to cite this treaty must concede that its conciliatory language was part of America’s attempt to come to terms with Barbary demands.)

Watching all this with a jaundiced eye was the American consul in Tunis, William Eaton. For him, behavior modification was not a sufficient policy; regime change was needed. And he had a candidate. On acceding to the throne in Tripoli, Yusuf Karamanli had secured his position by murdering one brother and exiling another. Eaton befriended this exiled brother, Hamid, and argued that he should become the American nominee for Tripoli’s crown. This proposal wasn’t received with enthusiasm in Washington, but Eaton pursued it with commendable zeal. He exhibited the downside that often goes with such quixotic bravery: railing against Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin as a “cowardly Jew,” for example, and alluding to President Jefferson with contempt. He ended up a supporter of Aaron Burr’s freebooting secessionist conspiracy.

His actions in 1805, however, belong in the annals of derring-do, almost warranting the frequent comparison made with T. E. Lawrence’s exploits in Arabia. With a small detachment of marines, headed by Lieutenant Presley O’Bannon, and a force of irregulars inevitably described by historians as “motley,” Eaton crossed the desert from Egypt and came at Tripoli—as Lawrence had come at Aqaba—from the land and not from the sea. The attack proved a total surprise. The city of Darna surrendered its far larger garrison, and Karamanli’s forces were heavily engaged, when news came that Jefferson and Karamanli had reached an understanding that could end the war. The terms weren’t too shabby, involving the release of the *Philadelphia*’s crew and a final settlement of the tribute question. And Jefferson took care to stress that Eaton had played a part in bringing it about.

This graciousness did not prevent Eaton from denouncing the deal as a sellout. The caravan moved on, though, as the other Barbary states gradually followed Tripoli’s lead and came to terms. Remember, too, that this was the year of the Battle of Trafal-

gar. Lord Nelson was not the only European to notice that a new power had arrived in Mediterranean waters. Francis Scott Key composed a patriotic song to mark the occasion. As I learned from Joshua London's excellent book, the original verses ran (in part):

In conflict resistless each toil they endure'd,
Till their foes shrunk dismay'd from the war's desolation:
And pale beamed the Crescent, its splendor obscure'd
By the light of the star-bangled flag of our nation.
Where each flaming star gleamed a meteor of war,
And the turban'd head bowed to the terrible glare.
Then mixt with the olive the laurel shall wave
And form a bright wreath for the brow of the brave.

The song was part of the bad-verse epidemic. But brushed up and revised a little for the War of 1812, and set to the same music, it has enjoyed considerable success since. So has the Marine Corps anthem, which begins: "From the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli." It's no exaggeration to describe the psychological fallout of this first war as formative of the still-inchoate American character.

There is of course another connection between 1805 and 1812. Renewed hostilities with Britain on the high seas and on the American mainland, which did not terminate until the Battle of New Orleans, might have ended less conclusively had the United States not developed a battle-hardened naval force in the long attrition on the North African coast.

The Barbary states sought to exploit Anglo-American hostilities by resuming their depredations and renewing their demands for blood money. So in 1815, after a brief interval of recovery from the war with Britain, President Madison asked Congress for permission to dispatch Decatur once again to North Africa, seeking a permanent settling of accounts. This time, the main offender was the dey of Algiers, Omar Pasha, who saw his fleet splintered and his grand harbor filled with heavily armed American ships. Algiers had to pay compensation, release all hostages, and promise not to offend again. President Madison's words on this occasion could scarcely be bettered: "It is a settled policy of America, that as peace is better than war, war is better than tribute. The United States, while they wish for war with no nation, will buy peace with none." (The expression "the United States is" did not come into usage until after Gettysburg.)

Oren notes that the stupendous expense of this long series of wars was a partial vindication of John Adams's warning. However, there are less quantifiable factors to consider. The most obvious is commerce. American trade in the Mediterranean increased enormously in the years after the settlement with Algiers, and America's ability to extend its trade and project its forces into other areas, such as the Caribbean and South America, was greatly enhanced. Then we should attend to what Linda Colley says on the subject of slavery. Campaigns against the seizure of hostages by Muslim powers, and their exploitation as forced labor, fired up many a church congregation in Britain and America and fueled many a press campaign. But even the dullest soul

could regard the continued triangular Atlantic slave trade between Africa, England, and the Americas and perceive the double standard at work. Thus, the struggle against Barbary may have helped to force some of the early shoots of abolitionism.

Perhaps above all, though, the Barbary Wars gave Americans an inkling of the fact that they were, and always would be, bound up with global affairs. Providence might have seemed to grant them a haven guarded by two oceans, but if they wanted to be anything more than the Chile of North America—a long littoral ribbon caught between the mountains and the sea—they would have to prepare for a maritime struggle as well as a campaign to redeem the unexplored landmass to their west. The U.S. Navy’s Mediterranean squadron has, in one form or another, been on patrol ever since.

And then, finally, there is principle. It would be simplistic to say that something innate in America made it incompatible with slavery and tyranny. But would it be too much to claim that many Americans saw a radical incompatibility between the Barbary system and their own? And is it not pleasant when the interests of free trade and human emancipation can coincide? I would close with a few staves of Kipling, whose poem “Dane-Geld” is a finer effort than anything managed by Francis Scott Key:

It is always a temptation to an armed and agile nation

To call upon a neighbor and to say:—

“We invaded you last night—

we are quite prepared to fight,

Unless you pay us cash to go away.”

And that is called asking for Dane-geld,

And the people who ask it explain

That you’ve only to pay ’em the Dane-geld

And then you’ll get rid of the Dane!

Kipling runs briskly through the stages of humiliation undergone by any power that falls for this appeasement, and concludes:

It is wrong to put temptation in the path of any nation,

For fear they should succumb and go astray;

So when you are requested to pay up or be molested,

You will find it better policy to say:—

“We never pay any-one Dane-geld,

No matter how trifling the cost;

For the end of that game is oppression and shame,

And the nation that plays it is lost!”

It may be fortunate that the United States had to pass this test, and imbibe this lesson, so early in its life as a nation.

(City Journal, Spring 2007)

Benjamin Franklin: Free and Easy

Review of Benjamin Franklin Unmasked, by Jerry Weinberger.

THERE CAME A TIME many years ago when I decided to agree to the baptism of my firstborn. It was a question of pleasing his mother's family. Nonetheless, I had to endure some teasing from Christian friends—how could the old atheist have sold out so easily? I decided to go deadpan and say, Well, I don't want his infant soul to go to hell or purgatory for want of some holy water. And it was often value for money: The faces of several believers took on a distinct look of discomfort at the literal rendition of their own supposed view.

Now turn, if you will, to the opening words of Benjamin Franklin's short essay "How to secure Houses, &c. from LIGHTNING": "It has pleased God in his Goodness to Mankind, at length to discover to them the Means of securing their Habitations and other Buildings from Mischief by Thunder and Lightning."

Franklin proceeds to describe the apparatus of an elementary conductor. Now, you may believe if you choose that the author of that sentence was sincerely of the opinion that God had decided to deny this blessing to his mortal creation until the middle of the eighteenth century of the Christian era. Or you may decide that an excess of humility led him to downplay or omit his own seminal role in "discovering" electricity. Or you may wonder whether he was deliberately ridiculing a theistic view by setting it down so innocently, yet in such a way as to actuate a stir of unease in even the most credulous reader.

I came up with the preceding example myself, after reading Jerry Weinberger's elegant and fascinating companion to, and analysis of, the work of our cleverest Founding Father. In its title the word "unmasked" is purposely provocative and misleading, as is fitting for a book that derives from close reading and a Straussian attention to the arcane. This is not an exposé of Benjamin Franklin's folie in respect of the fair sex—though it doesn't suffer from lack of attention to this intriguing subject. It is an attempt to describe, rather than to remove, the disguises that he assumed in a long and sinuous life.

There are two kinds of people: those who read Franklin's celebrated Autobiography with a solemn expression, and those who keep laughing out loud as they go along. For centuries the book has been seriously put forward as a sort of moral manual, especially for growing boys—an ancestor of the precepts of Horatio Alger, made more lustrous by its famous provenance. But Weinberger is of the school of cackle. I deliberately postponed re-reading the Autobiography until I had finished his book, and then—deciding to read it in a bar in Annapolis—was continually interrupted by people asking me to share the joke. When I pointed to the cover, I met with really rewarding looks of bemusement.

The conundrum begins quite early, when Franklin refers to his habit of disputation, as acquired from his father's "Books of Dispute about Religion." He remarks that "Persons of good Sense" seldom fall into this habit, "except Lawyers, University Men,

and Men of all Sorts that have been bred at Edinborough.” This is dry, but with little or no edge to it. A few pages farther on we read of the tyranny exerted by his brother, who wanted both to indenture him and to beat him, “Tho’ He was otherwise not an ill-natur’d Man: Perhaps I was too saucy & provoking.” Surely an instance of what I call moral jujitsu (of which more later), in which pretended humility can cut like a lash. We descend into vengeful farce not long after this, when we meet the case of Mr. Keimer, Franklin’s dislikable first boss in Philadelphia. Young Ben challenged this nasty Sabbatarian to keep a three-month Lenten fast, during which both would abjure all meat.

I went on pleasantly, but Poor Keimer suffer’d grievously, tir’d of the Project, long’d for the Flesh Pots of Egypt, and order’d a roast Pig; He invited me & two Women Friends to dine with him, but it being brought too soon upon table, he could not resist the Temptation, and ate it all up before we came.

This Falstaffian scene of the hapless hypocrite demolishing an entire pig demonstrates comic genius. And only a few pages before, we met Keimer as he resented the attention paid to his young apprentice by the governor, and “star’d like a Pig poison’d.” The image of porcine cannibalism makes a good counterpart to Franklin’s disavowal of the vegetarian idea. Seeing large fish being gutted, and noticing smaller fish inside their bellies, he felt entitled to convince himself that there was nothing offensive in resuming his fish diet. Again, you may if you wish take this as an anecdote about nutrition, offered for the moral elevation of the young, but bear in mind the village atheist in Peter De Vries’s *Slouching Towards Kalamazoo*, who could not conceive a deity that created every species as predatory and then issued a terse commandment against killing.

“Created sick, and then commanded to be well.” This is one of the first, easiest, and most obvious of the satirical maxims that eventually lay waste to the illusion of faith. Franklin was well aware of this annihilating expression, which he employed in his “Dialogue Between Philocles and Horatio,” written in 1730. Weinberger seizes hold of his professed and repressed attitudes to religion, and employs them as a thread of Ariadne through the labyrinth of Franklin’s multifarious writings. The first and most obvious of Weinberger’s targets are those who really did take the *Autobiography* at face value. It is no surprise to find D. H. Lawrence among these, because a more humorless man probably never drew mortal breath. But it is astonishing to find Mark Twain saying in effect that the book had made life harder for his Toms and Hucks, who had to bear this additional burden of schoolmarmery and moral exhortation, imposed by those determined to “improve” them at any price.

In fairness to Twain, whose fondness for imposture and joking was renowned, he may not have scanned Franklin’s early and anonymous Massachusetts journalism, in which the pen name “Silence Dogood” was an almost too obvious giveaway. To write as if in emulation of Cotton Mather’s *Bonifacius*, or “*Essays to Do Good*,” and to subvert its style and purpose so blatantly, must have repaid the tedium of many a New England Sunday. The 1747 “*Speech of Miss Polly Baker*,” in which a common whore

made a notably eloquent speech in defense of her right to bear bastard children, fooled almost everyone at the time. We may be right in speaking of an age of innocence, in which Miss Baker's apologia (she is "hard put to it" for a living, "cannot conceive" the nature of her offense, and half admits "all my Faults and Miscarriages") was received with furrowed and anxious brows. But the only wonder, once you get the trick of it, is how Franklin was able to use such broad and easy punning to lampoon the Pharisees of the day. He even tells us in the Autobiography how it became a delight to him to pen anonymous screeds, put them under the door of the newspaper office at night, and then watch the local worthies try to puzzle out their authorship. I always used to think when I saw the customary portraits of Franklin, with his spectacles and his Quakerish homespun garb and his bunlike hair, that there was something grannyish about him. It took me years to appreciate that in youth, at least in prose, he had been quite a good female impersonator. So that's one mask off.

In his *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, which I am assuming Professor Weinberger knows almost by heart, Leo Strauss made the surprisingly unesoteric observation that the best way to avoid the wrath of the censor is to present an apparently balanced debate in which the views of the side disliked by the censor are given a "straight" denunciation. Only a little subtlety is required to make these views slightly more attractive than the censor might wish. And many are those who have been seduced, or disillusioned, in this manner, even by debates into which no conscious "twist" has been inserted. (De Vries's novel also contains a hilarious scene in which the town atheist and the town clergyman have a public argument and succeed in completely winning each other over.)

That Franklin had the necessary cast of mind for this dialectic is not to be doubted. He even tells us himself, with an open and friendly face,

Some Books against Deism fell into my Hands; they were said to be the Substance of Sermons preached at Boyle's Lectures. It happened that they wrought an Effect on me quite contrary to what was intended by them: For the Arguments of the Deists which were quoted to be refuted, appeared to me much Stronger than the Refutations.

But Franklin isn't done with the reader quite yet. He gives an account of a Deism in which it is quite impossible that he believed. Or is it true that he ever "from the Attributes of God, his infinite Wisdom, Goodness & Power concluded that nothing could possibly be wrong in the World, & that Vice & Virtue were empty Distinctions, no such Things existing"? Everything in his life and writing argues against this likelihood, and Weinberger wittily appends a note on how to distinguish between "dry," "wet," and "very wet" Deism. Only the ultra-dry Deists denied human beings all free will, and even then the idea that the world was as good as it possibly could be was dependent on the fatalistic and tautological conviction that it was, *ex hypothesi*, the only possible world in the first place. Franklin was never a Pangloss, and his bald statement of what such a belief would entail is the equal of Voltaire's.

He seems to have disclosed his true ambition only by appearing to disown or abandon it. At about the midpoint of the Autobiography, having already familiarized us with

his suspicion of all established churches, he relates his intention, in 1731, of setting the world to rights by establishing a “Party for Virtue.” This would form the “Virtuous and good Men of all Nations” into “a regular Body, to be govern’d by suitable good and wise Rules.” This apparently platitudinous project was to involve a “creed,” which would comprise “the Essentials of every known Religion” while “being free of every thing that might shock the Professors of any Religion.” This was as much as to say that a frontal disagreement with the godly was not to be entertained: an unsurprising proposition in that or any other epoch. The party’s manifesto included some ecumenical boilerplate about one God, divine providence, and the reward of virtue and punishment of vice “either here or hereafter” (my italics), but its point of distinction lay in the clause stipulating that “the most acceptable Service of God is doing Good to Man.” Having laid out this essentially humanist appeal with some care over a couple of pages, Franklin writes with diffidence that the pressure of other work led him to postpone it indefinitely. Weinberger believes, to the contrary, that he made this project his unostentatious life’s work, always seeking to unite men of science and reason, and even, if rather belatedly, abandoning his pro-slavery position and becoming an advocate of emancipation. There is good evidence that he is right. Franklin’s decision to become a Freemason, for instance, can be interpreted first as somewhat anticlerical and second as signifying his adherence to a common brotherhood without frontiers. And there is the usual Franklin joke: With great attention to the proprieties of frugality and thrift, he still straight-facedly suggested that the “Party for Virtue” be actually named “the Society of the Free and Easy.”

It is precisely Franklin’s homespun sampler quotations about frugality and thrift that made him rich and famous through the audience of his Almanack. And it was these maxims, collected and distilled in the last of the Poor Richard series and later given the grand title *The Way to Wealth*, that so incensed Mark Twain as to cause him to write that they were “full of animosity toward boys” and “worked up with a great show of originality out of truisms that had become wearisome platitudes as early as the dispersion from Babel.” A point, like a joke, is a terrible thing to miss. When I re-read *The Way to Wealth* from the perspective of Jerry Weinberger, I could not bring myself to believe that it had ever been taken with the least seriousness. In the old days at the *New Statesman* we once ran a celebrated weekend competition that asked readers to submit made-up gems of cretinous bucolic wisdom. Two of the winning entries, I still recall, were “He digs deepest who deepest digs” and “An owl in a sack bothers no man.” Many of Poor Richard’s attempts at epigram and aphorism do not even rise to this level. My favorite, “ ’Tis hard for an empty Bag to stand upright,” is plainly not a case in which Franklin thinks he has polished his own renowned wit to a diamond-hard edge. The whole setting of *The Way to Wealth* is a “lift,” it seems to me, from Christian’s encounter with Vanity Fair in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. And the heartening injunctions (of which “The Cat in Gloves catches no Mice” is another stellar example) are so foolish that it is a shock to remember that the old standby “God helps them that help themselves” comes from the same anthology of wisdom.

Franklin's moral jujitsu, in which he always seemingly deferred to his opponents in debate but left them first punching the air and then adopting his opinions as their own, is frequently and slyly boasted about in the *Autobiography*, but it cannot have afforded him as much pleasure as the applause and income he received from people who didn't know he was kidding. The tip-offs are all there once you learn to look for them, as with Franklin's friend Osborne, who died young.

He and I had made a serious Agreement, that the one who happen'd first to die, should if possible make a friendly Visit to the other, and acquaint him how he found things in that separate State. But he never fulfill'd his Promise.

At a time when some noisy advocates are attempting to revise American history, and to represent the Founders as men who believed in a Christian nation, this book could not be more welcome. I close with what Franklin so foxily said about the Reverend Whitefield, whose oral sermons were so fine but whose habit of writing them down exposed him to fierce textual criticism: "Opinions [delivered] in Preaching might have been afterwards explain'd, or qualify'd by supposing others that might have accompany'd them; or they might have been deny'd; But *litera scripta manet*." Yes, indeed, "the written word shall remain." And the old printer left enough of it to delight subsequent generations and remind us continually of the hidden pleasures of the text.

(*The Atlantic*, November 2005)

John Brown: The Man Who Ended Slavery

Review of *John Brown, Abolitionist*, by David S. Reynolds.

WHEN ABRAHAM LINCOLN gave an audience to Harriet Beecher Stowe, he is supposed to have greeted her by saying that she was the little woman who had started this great war. That fondly related anecdote illustrates the persistent tendency to Parson Weemsishness in our culture. It was not at all the tear-jerking sentiment of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that catalyzed the War Between the States. It was, rather, the blood-spilling intransigence of John Brown, field-tested on the pitiless Kansas prairies and later deployed at Harpers Ferry. And John Brown was a man whom Lincoln assiduously disowned, until the time came when he himself was compelled to adopt the policy of "war to the knife, and the knife to the hilt," as partisans of the slaveocracy had hitherto been too proud of saying.

David Reynolds sets himself to counter several misapprehensions about the pious old buzzard (Brown, I mean, not Lincoln). Among these are the impressions that he was a madman, that he was a homicidal type, and that his assault on a federal arsenal was foredoomed and quixotic. The critical thing here is context. And the author succeeds admirably in showing that Brown, far from being a crazed fanatic, was a serious legatee of the English and American Revolutions who anticipated the Emancipation Proclamation and all that has ensued from it.

Until 1850, perhaps, the “peculiar institution” of slavery might have had a chance of perpetuating itself indefinitely by compromise. But the exorbitance and arrogance of “the slave power” forbade this accommodation. Not content with preserving their own domain in its southeastern redoubt, the future Confederates insisted on extending their chattel system into new territories, and on implicating the entire Union in their system. The special symbol of this hubris was the Fugitive Slave Act, which legalized the recovery of human property from “free” states. The idea of secession or separation first arose among abolitionists confronted with this monstrous imposition. Men like William Lloyd Garrison took their text from the Book of Isaiah, describing the U.S. Constitution as a “covenant with death and an agreement with hell,” and exhorting their supporters to “come out now and be separate.” (This hermeneutic rejectionism, incidentally, is identical to that preached today by Ian Paisley and the Presbyterian hardliners of Northern Ireland.)

The proto-libertarian and anarchist Lysander Spooner argued that nowhere did the Constitution explicitly endorse slavery. It was for defenders of the values of 1776 and 1789 to help the slaves overthrow an illegitimate tyranny. In this he had the support of the Republican Frederick Douglass, who also wanted the United States to live up to its founding documents rather than to nullify or negate them. Meanwhile, the Democrats were unashamed advocates of the extension of slavery, and Lincoln was willing to submit to one humiliation after another in order, as he never tired of saying, “to preserve the Union.”

John Brown could effortlessly outdo Garrison in any biblical condemnation of slavery. He could also easily surpass Lysander Spooner in his zeal to encourage and arm what the authorities called “servile insurrection.” He strongly agreed with Douglass that the Union should be preserved and not dissolved. But he was incapable of drawing up any balance sheet between “preservation” and gradual emancipation, because he saw quite plainly that the balance was going the other way, and that the slave power was influencing and subordinating the North, rather than the other way about. Thus, despite his commitment to the Union, he was quite ready to regard the federal government as an enemy.

Originally a New Englander (and possibly a Mayflower descendant), Brown appeared to adopt and exemplify the adamant Calvinism of Jonathan Edwards, with his strict insistence on predestination and the “elect” and his vivid belief in eternal punishment for sinners. Reynolds gives some hair-raising examples of the culture of corporal punishment and cruel austerity that ruled Brown’s own upbringing and the raising of his twenty children, and it is easy to see how such a combination of dogma and discipline might have given rise to the persistent rumor that he was partly unhinged (more than one of his sons became mentally disturbed). However, the story of his longer evolution makes this speculation a highly unsafe one.

For all his attachment to Calvinist orthodoxy, Brown felt himself very close to the transcendental school of Emerson and Thoreau. He formed important friendships in this circle, and relied on a “Secret Six” committee of supporters in Massachusetts, who

stood ready to provide money and even weapons for his projects. He can hardly have been unaware of the religious heterodoxy of this group; and when it came to the no less critical matter of choosing his immediate entourage of radical would-be guerrillas, he readily included Jews, Indians, Paine-ite deists, and agnostics. Most of all, however, he insisted on including blacks. This at once distinguished him from most abolitionists, who preferred to act “for” the slaves rather than with them. But Brown had made a friendship with a slave boy at the age of twelve, and would appear to have undergone a Huck Finn-like experience in the recognition of a common humanity. Later he studied the life and tactics of Nat Turner, and of the rebellious Haitian Toussaint L’Ouverture, and decided that a full-scale revolt of the oppressed, rather than any emancipation from above, was the need of the hour.

I was very much interested to learn that his other great hero was Oliver Cromwell, whose “New Model Army” had swept away profane kingship in England and established a Puritan regime. The revisionist view of Cromwell as a liberator rather than a regicide was the work of Thomas Carlyle in the 1840s, and a result of Carlyle’s friendship with Emerson. The American writer Joel Tyler Headley “recycled” Carlyle, as Reynolds phrases it, for the American mass market, portraying Cromwell as an ancestor of the American Revolution as well as a synthesizer of “religion, republicanism, and violence.” (It seems probable that Brown got his introduction to Cromwell from Headley rather than directly from Carlyle: I cannot easily imagine him esteeming the Carlyle who apostatized from Calvinism, let alone the Carlyle who, in justifying slavery in the West Indies in 1850, published “Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question.” Reynolds does not discuss this awkward paradox.)

* * *

Reynolds focuses on the three most sanguinary and dramatic episodes in Brown’s career: the engagements at Pottawatomie and Osawatomie, in Kansas, and the culminating battle at Harpers Ferry. To read this extended account is to appreciate that Brown, far from being easily incited to rage and rashness, was capable of playing a very long game. He was naturally drawn to Kansas, because it had become the battleground state in a Union that was half slave and half free. The pro-slavery settlers and infiltrators from Missouri were determined to colonize the territory and to pack its polling booths, and in this they often had the indulgence of decrepit and cowardly presidents, including Franklin Pierce. Until the appearance of Brown and his men on the scene, the slave power had had things mostly its own way, and was accustomed to using any method it saw fit. After the murder of the abolitionist editor Elijah Lovejoy, and especially after the famous assault on Senator Charles Sumner by Representative Preston Brooks, Brown decided on a reprisal raid, and slew several leading pro-slavery Kansans in the dead of night. There is no question that this represented only a small installment of payback, though Reynolds nervously characterizes it as “terrorism” and spends a great deal of time and ink in partly rationalizing the deed.

The superfluity of this is easily demonstrated. Not only had the slave-holders perpetrated the preponderance of atrocities, and with impunity at that, but they had begun to boast that northerners and New Englanders were congenitally soft and altogether lacking in “chivalric” and soldierly qualities. What could be more apt than that they should encounter John Brown, careless of his own safety and determined to fill the ungodly with the fear of the risen Christ? Every Cavalier should meet such a Roundhead. After Pottawatomie the swagger went out of the southerners, and after the more conventional fighting at Osawatomie, and Brown’s cool-headed raid to liberate a group of slaves and take them all the way to Canada, they came to realize that they were in a hard fight. Furthermore, their sulfurous reaction to this discovery, and their stupid tendency to paint Brown as an agent of the Republican Party, made it harder and harder for the invertebrate Lincolnians to keep the issue of slavery under control.

In his work in Kansas, and his long toil on the Underground Railroad, Brown was essentially mounting a feint. He knew that subscribers and supporters in New England would give him money, and even arms, for these limited and shared objectives. But he wanted to divert the money, and the arms, to the larger purpose of making any further Lincolnian retreats and compromises impossible. For years he had been studying the keystone town of Harpers Ferry, situated at the confluence of the Shenandoah and the Potomac, and handily placed for the potentially guerrilla-friendly Allegheny Mountains.

Reynolds shows that the strategic design was not as quixotic as one has often been led to believe. This northwestern portion of Virginia was generally sympathetic to abolition and to the Union (indeed, its later cleaving into the new free state of West Virginia, in 1862, is the only secession from that epoch that still survives). The fall months were the harvest season, when disaffection among overdriven slaves was more general. And the national political climate was becoming more febrile and polarized.

Brown’s raid at Harpers Ferry failed badly, of course, but the courage and bearing he demonstrated after his humiliating defeat were of an order to impress his captors, who announced that far from being “mad,” their prisoner was lucid and eloquent as well as brave. The slander of insanity was circulated by the weaker members of the anti-slavery camp, who cringingly sought to avoid the identification with Brown that the southern press had opportunistically made. By falling for its own propaganda, however, and in the general panic that followed the botched insurrection, the South persuaded itself that war was inevitable and that Lincoln (who had denounced Brown in his campaign against Douglas and in his famous speech at Cooper Union) was a Brown-ite at heart. The history of the six years after 1859 is the history not so much of Brown’s prophecy as of the self-fulfilling prophecy of his enemies. As Reynolds hauntingly words it,

The officer who supervised the capture of Brown was Robert E. Lee ... Lee’s retreat from the decisive battle of Gettysburg would pass over the same road that Brown took to Harpers Ferry on the night of his attack. The lieutenant who demanded Brown’s surrender was J.E.B. Stuart, later Lee’s celebrated cavalry officer. Among the officers who supervised at Brown’s hanging was Thomas Jackson, soon to become the renowned

“Stonewall.” Among the soldiers at Brown’s execution was a dashing Southern actor, John Wilkes Booth.

If this does not vindicate Brown’s view that all had been predestined by the Almighty before the world was made, it nonetheless does do something to the hair on the back of one’s neck. As do the words finally uttered in Lincoln’s Second Inaugural, about every drop of blood drawn by the lash being repaid by the sword, and the utter destruction of the piled-up wealth of those who live by the bondsman’s toil. The final reckoning with slavery and secession was described by Lincoln himself as one great “John Brown raid” into the South, and was on a scale that would have brought a wintry smile to the stern face of Oliver Cromwell. The “Marseillaise” of that crusade (“The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” which first appeared, as did many other important documents of the Brown-Emerson alliance, in the pages of this magazine) was an adaptation of the foot soldiers’ song about Old Osawatomie Brown. One reserves the term “quixotic” for hopeless causes. Harpers Ferry was the first defeat, as it was also the seminal victory, of a triumphant cause, precisely because it sounded a trumpet that could never call retreat.

So much for the apocalyptic and, if you like, “transcendental” influence of Brown. Reynolds, building on the earlier work of Merrill Peterson, traces another, gentler influence that may be no less consequential. Almost all whites in that epoch feared almost all blacks. And many blacks resented the condescension of anti-slavery organizations—most especially those groups that wanted to free them and then deport them to Africa. John Brown shared his life with slaves, and re-wrote the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution so as to try to repair the hideous wrong that had been done to them. (In issuing these documents, by the way, he exculpated himself from any ahistorical charge of “terrorism,” which by definition offers nothing programmatic.) The record shows that admiration for Brown was intense, widespread, and continuous, from Douglass to DuBois and beyond. Our world might be a good deal worse than it is had not numberless African-Americans, from that day to this, taken John Brown as proof that fraternity and equality, as well as liberty, were feasible things and could be exemplified by real people.

(The Atlantic, May 2005)

Abraham Lincoln: Misery’s Child

Review of Abraham Lincoln: A Life, by Michael Burlingame.

LINCOLN’S BICENTENNIAL has permitted us to revisit and reconsider every facet of his story and personality, from the Bismarckian big-government colossus so disliked by the traditional right and the isolationists, to the “Great Emancipator” who used to figure on the posters of the American Communist Party, to the reluctant anti-slaver so plausibly caught in Gore Vidal’s finest novel. Absent from much of this consideration has been the unfashionable word destiny: the sense conveyed by Lincoln

of a man who was somehow brought forth by the hour itself, as if his entire life had been but a preparation for that moment.

We cannot get this frisson from other great American presidents. Washington, Jefferson, Madison—these were all experienced members of the existing and indeed preexisting governing class. So was Roosevelt. However exaggerated or invented some parts of the Lincoln legend may be, it is nonetheless a fact that he came from the very loam and marrow of the new country, and that—unlike the other men I have mentioned—he cannot possibly be imagined as other than an American.

No review could do complete justice to the magnificent two-volume biography that has been so well-wrought by Michael Burlingame, but one way of paying tribute to it is to say that it introduces the elusive idea of destiny from the very start, and one means of illustrating this is to show how the earlier chapters continually prefigure, or body forth, the more momentous events that are to be dealt with in the later ones.

Before I try to demonstrate that, I would like to call attention to something that Professor Burlingame says in his Author's Note:

Many educated guesses, informed by over twenty years of research on Lincoln, appear in this biography. Each such guess might well begin with a phrase like "in all probability," or "it may well be that," or "it seems likely that." Such warnings, if inserted into the text, would prove wearisome; readers are encouraged to provide such qualifiers silently whenever the narrative explores Lincoln's unconscious motivation.

It is agreeable to be informed, when embarking on such a long and demanding work, that one will be treated like a grown-up.

There is, whether intentionally or not, a sort of biblical cadence and flavor to the way in which Burlingame relates the early family history: the grandmother Bathsheba; the father's older brother Mordecai; and Mary Lincoln's half sister, who said that "the reason why Thomas Lincoln grew up unlettered was that his brother Mordecai, having all the land in his possession ... turned Thomas out of the house when the latter was 12 years; so he went out among his relations." The story of Jacob and Esau, and of Naboth's vineyard, was surely known to the person who recounted that.

As for the social background, here is a sentence that conveys a great deal of misery in a very few words. It is Burlingame's summary of the area in which Sinking Spring farm, Kentucky, young Abraham's birthplace, was situated. "The neighborhood was thinly settled; the 36-square-mile tax district where the Lincoln farm was located contained 85 taxpayers, 44 slaves, and 392 horses." Lincoln himself said that his early life could be "condensed into a single sentence" from Gray's "Elegy": "The short and simple annals of the poor." But this would be to euphemize his true boyhood situation, which was much more like that of a serf or a domestic animal than of Gray's lowly but sturdy peasantry. To read of the unrelenting coarseness and brutality of the boy's father is lowering to the spirit, as is the shame he felt at his mother's reputation for unchastity. The wretchedness of these surroundings made Lincoln tell a later acquaintance in Illinois: "I have seen a good deal of the back side of this world." (Incidentally, one has to imagine this being said with some kind of wink and nudge: Burlingame is not

content, as so many historians are, merely to hint at Lincoln's fondness for broad humor, but furnishes us with some actual examples, which are heavy on the side of scatology and flatulence.)

Lincoln's own experience of legal bondage and hard usage is very graphically told: Not only did his father's improvidence deprive him of many necessities, but it resulted in his being hired out as a menial to be a hewer of wood and drawer of water for his father's rough and miserly neighbors. The law as it then stood made children the property of their father, so young Abraham was "hired out" only in the sense of chattel, since he was obliged to turn over his wages. From this, and from the many groans and sighs that are reported of the boy (who still struggled to keep reading, an activity feared and despised by his father, as it was by the owner of Frederick Douglass), we receive a prefiguration of the politician who declared in 1856, "I used to be a slave." In Lincoln's unconcealed resentment toward his male parent, we get an additional glimpse of the man who also declared, in 1858, "As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master."

Yet the contours and character of the frontier region also fitted Lincoln for compromise: This was the area of the United States where the two systems were beginning their long, cruel attrition. Both as an aspiring congressman and as an ambitious lawyer, Lincoln managed on occasion to keep silent on the slavery issue and even, when appropriately briefed, to act as counsel for a slaveholder. Burlingame gives an intriguing account of the Matson case of 1847, in which, on technical procedural grounds and on the principle of "first come, first served," Lincoln agreed to represent a man who wanted some of his slaves back. On the other hand, he generally steered clear of fugitive-slave cases, "because of his unwillingness to be a party to a violation of the Fugitive Slave Law, arguing that the way to overcome the difficulty was to repeal the law." Here again, we can see the legalistic and sometimes pedantic mind that exhausted all the possibilities of compromise before coming up with the tortuous form of words that finally became the Emancipation Proclamation.

In rather the same way, Lincoln sought a deft means of negotiating the shoals of the religious question. Burlingame's highly diverting early pages show Lincoln being actively satirical in matters of faith, lampooning preachers, staging mock services, and praying to God "to put stockings on the chickens' feet in winter," in the words of his stepsister Matilda. Reminiscing about frontier Baptists many years later, he told an acquaintance: "I don't like to hear cut and dried sermons. No—when I hear a man preach, I like to see him act as if he were fighting bees!"

However, in his 1846 election campaign, Lincoln was cornered by the faithful and forced to deny that he was an "open scoffer at Christianity." His handbill on the subject is rightly criticized as too lawyerly by Burlingame, who elegantly points out:

In this document Lincoln seemed to make two different claims: that he never believed in infidel doctrines, and that he never publicly espoused them. If the former were true, the latter would be superfluous; if the former were untrue, the latter would be irrelevant.

Several moments in the narrative—the bee-fighting preacher being one such—put me in mind of Mark Twain. The tall tales, the dry wit, the broadgauge humor, the imminence of farce even in grave enterprises: Lincoln’s inglorious participation in the Black Hawk War has many points of similarity with Twain’s “Private History of a Campaign That Failed.” Lincoln was once invited to referee a cockfight where a bird refused combat. Its enraged owner, one Babb McNabb, flung the creature onto a woodpile, whereat it spread its feathers and crowed mightily. “Yes, you little cuss,” yelled McNabb, “you are great on dress parade, but you ain’t worth a damn in a fight.” Long afterward, confronted with the unmartial ditherings of General George B. McClellan, Lincoln would compare the chief of his army—and subsequent electoral challenger—to McNabb’s pusillanimous rooster.

Mark Twain and Frederick Douglass, too, were persons who could only have been original Americans, sprung from American ground. It is engaging and affecting to read of Lincoln’s lifelong troubles with spelling and pronunciation (he addressed himself to “Mr. Cheerman” in his famous Cooper Union Speech of 1860) and of his frequent appearance with as much as six inches of shin or arm protruding from his ill-made clothes: truly a Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance. Yet despite, or perhaps because of, the extreme harshness of his early life, he was innately opposed to any form of cruelty, and despite his lack of polish and refinement, he almost never stooped to crudity or vulgarity in political speech. Without overdrawing the contrast, Burlingame shows us a Judge Stephen Douglas who was a slave to every kind of anti-Negro demagogy and political mendacity. And Lincoln bested him, admittedly while hedging on the race question, by constantly stressing the need to secure “to each laborer the whole product of his labor.” In more modern terms, we might say that he used the language of class to neutralize racism. (I would say that the account given here of the famous debates surpasses all its predecessors.)

It has lately become fashionable to say that Lincoln was not, or was not “really,” a believer in black-white equality. A thread that runs consistently through Burlingame’s narrative is that of self-education on this question, to the eventual point where Lincoln came as close to an egalitarian position as made almost no difference. Even the infamous discussion about the postwar expatriation of black Americans to “colonies” in Africa or on the American isthmus was conducted, by Burlingame’s account, with very strict regard on Lincoln’s side for the dignity and stature of those whose fate he was discussing. And it goes almost without saying that he had already had every opportunity to see that there was nothing very “superior” about the color white. By the end, Frederick Douglass—who had often criticized him—was able to say that Lincoln was “emphatically the black man’s President.” And Burlingame’s survey of the life and opinions of the “mad racist” John Wilkes Booth makes it equally plain that the white supremacists felt the same way. Still, even this is to understate the universalist intransigence with which Lincoln never conceded an inch of American ground, and with which he quarreled with his generals, including McClellan, for referring to the

North as “our soil,” when every state was still, always, and invariably to be considered a part of the Union.

It was once said that the Civil War was the last of the old wars and the first of the new: Cavalry and infantry charges gave way to cannon and railways, and sail gave way to steam. It is of great interest to read Lincoln’s meditations on the projected postwar expansion of the United States, with a strong emphasis on mining and manufacturing. He had completely shed the bucolic influence of his early career and was looking in the very last days of his life to renew industry and immigration. Before Gettysburg, people would say “the United States are ...” After Gettysburg, they began to say “the United States is ...” That they were able to employ the first three words at all was a tribute to the man who did more than anyone to make that hard transition himself, and then to secure it for others, and for posterity.

(The Atlantic, July/August 2009)

Mark Twain: American radical

Review of *The Singular Mark Twain*, by Fred Kaplan.

THERE ARE FOUR RULES governing literary art in the domain of biography—some say five. In *The Singular Mark Twain*, Fred Kaplan violates all five of them. These five require:

1. That a biography shall cause us to wish we had known its subject in person, and inspire in us a desire to improve on such vicarious acquaintance as we possess. *The Singular Mark Twain* arouses in the reader an urgently fugitive instinct, as at the approach of an unpolished yet tenacious raconteur.

2. That the elements of biography make a distinction between the essential and the inessential, winnowing the quotidian and burnishing those moments of glory and elevation that place a human life in the first rank. *The Singular Mark Twain* puts all events and conversations on the same footing, and fails to enforce any distinction between wood and trees.

3. That a biographer furnish something by way of context, so that the place of the subject within history and society is illuminated, and his progress through life made intelligible by reference to his times. This condition is by no means met in *The Singular Mark Twain*.

4. That the private person be allowed to appear in all his idiosyncrasy, and not as a mere reflection of the correspondence or reminiscences of others, or as a subjective projection of the mind of the biographer. But this rule is flung down and danced upon in *The Singular Mark Twain*.

5. That a biographer have some conception of his subject, which he wishes to advance or defend against prevailing or even erroneous interpretations. This detail, too, has been overlooked in *The Singular Mark Twain*.

As can readily be seen from this attempt on my part at a pastiche of Twain's hatchet-wielding arraignment of James Fenimore Cooper (and of Cooper's anti-masterpiece *The Deerslayer*), the work of Samuel Langhorne Clemens is in the proper sense inimitable. But it owes this quality to certain irrepressible elements—many of them quite noir—in the makeup of the man himself. I reflect on Mark Twain and I see not just the man who gave us Judge Thatcher's fetching daughter but also the figure who wrote so cunningly about the charm of underage girls and so bluntly about defloration. The man who impaled the founder of Christian Science on a stake of contemptuous ridicule and who dismissed the Book of Mormon as "chloroform in print." The man who was so livid with anger at his country's arrogance abroad that he laid aside his work to inveigh against imperialism. The man who addressed an after-dinner gathering of the Stomach Club, in Paris, on the subject of masturbation, and demonstrated that he had done the hard thinking about hand jobs. Flickers of this enormous and subversive personality illumine Kaplan's narrative, but only rarely, and then in the manner of the lightning bug that Twain himself contrasted with the lightning.

Ernest Hemingway's much cited truism—to the effect that Huckleberry Finn hadn't been transcended by any subsequent American writer—understates, if anything, the extent to which Twain was not just a founding author but a founding American. Until his appearance, even writers as adventurous as Hawthorne and Melville would have been gratified to receive the praise of a comparison to Walter Scott. (A boat named the *Walter Scott* is sunk with some ignominy in Chapter 13 of *Huckleberry Finn*.) Twain originated in the riverine, slaveholding heartland; compromised almost as much as Missouri itself when it came to the Civil War; headed out to California ("the Lincoln of our literature" made a name in the state that Lincoln always hoped to see and never did); and conquered the eastern seaboard in his own sweet time. But though he had an unimpeachable claim to be from native ground, there was nothing provincial or crabbed about his declaration of independence for American letters. (His evisceration of Cooper can be read as an assault on any form of pseudo-native authenticity.) More than most of his countrymen, he voyaged around the world and pitted himself against non-American authors of equivalent contemporary weight.

What about his name? Kaplan's title and introduction imply a contradiction between the uniqueness of the man and the suggestion, in his selection of a *nom de plume*, of a divided self. When I was a lad, I am quite sure, I read of the young Clemens's listening to the incantation of a leadsman plumbing the shoals from the bow of a riverboat and calling out, "By the mark—twain!" as he indicated the deeps and shallows. This story, if true, would account for both the first and the second name, and it would also be apt in seeing both as derived from life on the Mississippi. But there's some profit (not all that much, but some) in doing as Kaplan does and speculating on other origins. In 1901 Twain told an audience at the Lotos Club, in New York, "When I was born, I was a member of a firm of twins. And one of them disappeared." This was not the case, but by 1901 Twain had been Twain for thirty-eight years (a decade longer than he had been Samuel Clemens), and had probably acquired a repertoire of

means by which to answer a stale question from the audience. Twinship and impersonation come up in his stories, it is true. Pudd'nhead Wilson relies on the old fantasy of the changeling, and notebook scenarios for late Huck and Tom stories involve rapid switches of identity, with elements of racial as well as sexual cross-dressing. But then, how new is the discovery that Twain never lost his access to the marvels and memories of childhood?

Clearly, he meant to create a mild form of mystery if he could, because elsewhere he claimed to have annexed the name from "one Captain Isaiah Sellers who used to write river news over it for the New Orleans Picayune." But the Picayune never carried any such byline. And Twain was known all his life to be fond of hoaxes and spoofs in print, among them the "Petrified Man." So, absent any new or decisive information, this portentous search for the roots of an identity crisis may be somewhat pointless.

* * *

One of the difficulties confronting a Twain biographer is the sheer volume of ink the man expended on his own doings. One needs a persuasive reason for preferring a secondhand account of an episode that is already available in the original. Take, for instance, Twain's inglorious participation on the Confederate side in the Civil War. We already have his own hilarious but sour account of this interlude, in "The Private History of a Campaign That Failed," a sort of brief and memoiristic precursor of *The Good Soldier Schweik*. This melancholy, rueful, and slightly self-hating account of cowardice and bravado, with its awful culmination in the slaying of an innocent, clearly sets the tone for all Twain's later writings on the subject of war. Kaplan furnishes a brisk yet somehow trudging précis of the "Private History," adding that it is "undoubtedly partly fictional" but declining to say in what respect this is so or how he knows it.

It is much the same when we come to the fabled voyage of the good ship Quaker City to the Holy Land and back. This wickedly close observation of the habits and mentality of the common American pilgrim was a huge sensation when first published, and it is easy to see even today how scandalized the pious and the respectable must have been. But how much fun is there to be had in scanning a condensed and potted summary of *Innocents Abroad*? Moreover, and as with the Civil War passage, Kaplan almost bowdlerizes the tale by omitting much of Twain's original pungency and contempt, or by rendering it very indirectly.

One would be grateful for some idea of the root of Twain's dislike for religiosity, and especially of his revulsion from Christianity. In a somewhat oblique earlier passage Kaplan suggests that it originated in shock at the death of his brother Henry, in a ghastly steamboat explosion in 1858. The randomness and caprice of this event, we are told, persuaded Twain that there was no such thing as a merciful Providence. This seems a pardonable surmise. Similar tragic events, however, have the effect of reinforcing faith in many other people. What was it about Twain that made him not

just an agnostic or an atheist but a probable sympathizer with the Devil's party? We are not enlightened.

On lesser matters Kaplan can speculate until the cows come home. What was the origin of the physical frailty that afflicted Livy Langdon, Twain's future wife?

It may be that her condition was psychosomatic, an instance of the widespread phenomenon of Victorian young women withdrawing from the world for unspecified emotional reasons with serious physical symptoms, often referred to as neurasthenia. It may be that her illness was organic. Perhaps she was indeed ill with a disease of the spine, such as Pott's disease, which has recently been suggested: an illness in which chronic back pain and stiffness lead to partial paralysis. Perhaps she had in fact injured her spine in a fall. Without magnetic resonance imaging and CAT scans, the Victorians were even more helpless than later generations to diagnose or cure back pain.

This is padding. (The same needless verbosity occurs when Twain's daughter Jean dies in her bath, much later on: "Perhaps Jean had had an epileptic attack and blacked out. She may have drowned. Perhaps she had had a heart attack. What exactly killed her is unclear.")

Kaplan's prose is something less than an unalloyed joy to read, and its faults are such that one can sometimes not be certain when, or if, he is joking. A little after the dull passage about Livy above we learn of Langdon's regaining the ability to walk and are informed that "Livy's recovery, along with their continued prosperity, confirmed the family's strong religious faith." After reading this aloud several times, I concluded that it was meant as a plain statement of fact. Later, in retelling a story in which Finley Peter Dunne affected to think that he himself was a greater celebrity than Twain, Kaplan appears to exclude altogether the possibility that the author of the "Mr. Dooley" columns might have been joking.

Twain was often nettled by the contrary suggestion, that he was playing the comic when in fact he was attempting to be serious. This was especially the case at the turn of the century, when he became outraged by the McKinley-Roosevelt policy of expansionism in the Philippines and Cuba, and also by the sanguinary hypocrisy of America's Christian "missionaries" in China. The articles and pamphlets he wrote in that period, some of them too incendiary to see print at the time, are an imperishable part both of his own oeuvre and of the American radical journalistic tradition. I would single out in particular his essay on the massacre of the Moro Islanders—a piece of work to stand comparison with Swift's "A Modest Proposal." Nor did he confine himself to the printed word: With William Dean Howells he helped to animate the Anti-Imperialist League. This entire passage in his career is all but skipped by Kaplan, who awards it a few paragraphs, mentioning only that the New England branch of the Anti-Imperialist League reprinted one of the polemics, and confining himself to brief excerpts from a couple of the better-known articles. This scant treatment is redeemed only partially by an account of the celebrated public exchange between Twain and the young Winston Churchill in New York. Twain famously teased and chided the youthful firebrand of Britain's imperial war in South Africa. (One would like to have

been present at that meeting.) Kaplan does give us a contemporary snippet from an anonymous attendee that makes those remarks appear to have been even more sulfurous than we had previously thought.

In general, though, this biography is terse when it ought to be expansive, and expansive when it could well do with being more terse. The student who will benefit from it most is that student who wishes to study the phenomenon of the author as businessman. The record of Twain's battles over copyright and royalties, and the story of his fluctuating success and failure as an investor, are told with great assiduity. Contemptuous as he may have been of the Gilded Age and the acquisitive society, Twain was ever ravenous for money, and his acumen was almost inversely proportionate to his ambition. Usually a man with a keen eye for fraud and imposture, he was lured to invest in numerous improbable schemes, and the tale of his won-and-lost fortunes is worth relating as a great American example of thwarted but unquenchable entrepreneurship. As a result of these exigencies he wrote altogether too many words, and now his biographer has cited too many of the mediocre ones and not enough of the brilliant ones. I did eventually come across a reference to the 1879 Stomach Club lecture on "the Science of Onanism." This masterly effort is only a few paragraphs long and screams aloud for quotation but does not get it. Instead Kaplan merely repeats the title of the talk and describes it thus:

A brilliant, bawdy takeoff on the subject of masturbation, it was, like "1601," an expression of the subversive, anti-Victorian side of Twain that, perforce, found some of its best moments in private jokes. Stoically he accepted that he himself and everything he did was determined by forces beyond his control. Some were cultural. Some were genetic. All were implacable.

The solemnity of this is near terminal. And the stone of non sequitur is further laid upon the grave of the joke. It is altogether wrong that a book about Mark Twain should be boring.

(The Atlantic, November 2003)

Upton Sinclair: A Capitalist Primer

Review of *The Jungle*, by Upton Sinclair.

PROBABLY NO TWO WORDS in our language are now more calculated to shrivel the sensitive nostril than "socialist realism." Taken together, they evoke the tractor opera, the granite-jawed proletarian sculpture, the cultural and literary standards of Commissar Zhdanov, and the bone-deep weariness that is paradoxically produced by ceaseless uplift and exhortation. Yet these words used to have an authentic meaning, which was also directly related to "social" realism. And the most fully realized instance of the genre, more telling and more moving than even the works of Dickens and Zola, was composed in these United States.

Like Dickens and Zola, Upton Sinclair was in many ways a journalist. His greatest novel was originally commissioned as a serial, for the popular socialist paper *Appeal to Reason*, which was published (this now seems somehow improbable) in Kansas. An advance of \$500 sent Sinclair to Chicago in 1904, there to make radical fiction out of brute reality. The city was then the great maw of American capitalism. That is to say, it took resources and raw materials from everywhere and converted them into money at an unprecedented rate. Hogs and steers, coal and iron, were transmuted into multifarious products by new and ruthless means. The Chicago system created almost every imaginable kind of goods. But the main thing it consumed was people. Upton Sinclair tried to elucidate and illuminate the ways in which commodities deposed, and controlled, human beings. His novel is the most successful attempt ever made to fictionalize the central passages of Marx's *Das Kapital*.

The influence of Dickens can be felt in two ways. First, we are introduced to a family of naive but decent Lithuanian immigrants, sentimentally portrayed at a wedding feast where high hopes and good cheer provide some protection against the cruelty of quotidian life. There are lavishly spread tables, vital minor characters, and fiddle music. Second, we see these natural and spontaneous people being steadily reduced, as in *Hard Times*, by crass utilitarian calculation. They dwell in a place named Packingtown, and "steadily reduced" is a euphemism. The extended family of the stolid Jurgis is exposed to every variety of misery and exploitation, and discovers slowly—necessarily slowly—that the odds are so arranged that no honest person can ever hope to win. The landlord, the saloonkeeper, the foreman, the shopkeeper, the ward heeler, all are leagued against the gullible toiler in such a way that he can scarcely find time to imagine what his actual employer or boss might be getting away with. To this accumulation of adversity Jurgis invariably responds with the mantra "I will work harder."

This is exactly what the innocent cart horse Boxer later says as he wears out his muscles on the cynical futilities of *Animal Farm*. Orwell was an admirer of Sinclair's work, and wrote in praise of *The Jungle* in 1940, but Sinclair may have been depressed to see his main character redeployed in the service of allegory.

Sinclair's realism, indeed, got in the way of his socialism, in more than one fashion. His intention was to direct the conscience of America to the inhuman conditions in which immigrant labor was put to work. However, so graphic and detailed were his depictions of the filthy way in which food was produced that his book sparked a revolution among consumers instead (and led at some remove to the passage of the Food and Drugs Act and the Meat Inspection Act of 1906). He wryly said of this unintended consequence that he had aimed for the public's heart but had instead hit its stomach.

There would be meat stored in great piles in rooms; and the water from leaky roofs would drip over it, and thousands of rats would race about on it. It was too dark in these storage places to see well, but a man could run his hand over these piles of meat and sweep off handfuls of the dried dung of rats. These rats were nuisances, and the packers would put poisoned bread out for them; they would die, and then rats, bread,

and meat would go into the hoppers together. This is no fairy story and no joke; the meat would be shovelled into carts, and the man who did the shovelling would not trouble to lift out a rat even when he saw one—there were things that went into the sausage in comparison with which a poisoned rat was a tidbit.

To this Sinclair added well-researched observations about the adulteration of food with chemicals and coloring. He also spared a thought, as did many of his later readers, for the animals themselves, especially (and ironically, in view of *Animal Farm*) for the pigs:

At the head there was a great iron wheel, about twenty feet in circumference, with rings here and there along its edge. Upon both sides of this wheel was a narrow space, into which came the hogs ... [Men] had chains which they fastened about the leg of the nearest hog, and the other end of the chain they hooked into one of the rings upon the wheel. So, as the wheel turned, a hog was suddenly jerked off his feet and borne aloft.

At the same instant the ear was assailed by a most terrifying shriek ... And meantime another [hog] was swung up, and then another, and another, until there was a double line of them, each dangling by a foot and kicking in frenzy—and squealing ... It was too much for some of the visitors—the men would look at each other, laughing nervously, and the women would stand with hands clenched, and the blood rushing to their faces, and the tears starting in their eyes.

Meantime, heedless of all these things, the men upon the floor were going about their work. Neither squeals of hogs nor tears of visitors made any difference to them; one by one they hooked up the hogs, and one by one with a swift stroke they slit their throats.

Again, the demands of verisimilitude have a tendency to work against the recruitment of any sympathy for the calloused and even brutalized laborer. Sinclair's title, *The Jungle*, along with indirectly evoking the ideology of Thomas Hobbes, inverts anthropomorphism by making men into brutes. In her rather deft introduction Jane Jacobs dwells on the passage above and on the sinister implications of machine civilization without registering what to me seems an obvious point: Sinclair was unconsciously prefiguring the industrialization of the mass slaughter of human beings—the principle of the abattoir applied to politics and society by the degraded experimenters of the assembly line.

Eugene Debs, the great Socialist Party leader and orator of that period, announced that his ambition was to be “the John Brown of the wage slaves.” This noble hyperbole was not all that much of an exaggeration: The lower orders in Chicago may have come voluntarily, to escape a Russian or a Polish house of bondage, rather than being brought by force from Africa to a house of bondage; but once here they were given only enough to keep them alive until their bodies wore out. Their children were exploited too, and their womenfolk were sexually vulnerable to the overseers. Indeed, the most wrenching section of the book comes in the middle, when Jurgis discovers that his wife has been preyed upon, under threat of dismissal, by a foreman. Not following the socialist script in the least, he sacrifices self-interest for pride and pounds the foreman

to a pulp. By this means he swiftly discovers what side the courts and the cops and the laws are on, and is made to plumb new depths of degradation in prison. Among other humiliations, he stinks incurably from the materials of the plant, and offends even his fellow inmates. (We are not spared another Dickensian moment when he realizes that he has been jailed for the Christmas holidays and is overwhelmed by childhood memories.) Sinclair interrupts himself at this point to quote without attribution from *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (Oscar Wilde was not long dead in 1905), and it seems a sure thing that Sinclair would have read *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, the most brilliant line of which says that it is capitalism that lays upon men “the sordid necessity of living for others.”

Robert Tressell’s novel *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (1914) is the only rival to *The Jungle* in its combination of realism with didacticism and its willingness to impose a bit of theory on the readership. In both “proletarian” novels the weapon often deployed is satire: the workers are too dumb, and too grateful for their jobs, to consider the notions that might emancipate them.

Jurgis had no sympathy with such ideas as this—he could do the work himself, and so could the rest of them, he declared, if they were good for anything. If they couldn’t do it, let them go somewhere else. Jurgis had not studied the books, and he would not have known how to pronounce “laissez-faire”; but he had been round the world enough to know that a man has to shift for himself in it, and that if he gets the worst of it, there is nobody to listen to him holler.

But gradually, after being for so long the anvil and not the hammer, he awakes from his bovine stupor and comes to understand that he has striven only to enrich others. The book ends with the soaring notes of a socialist tribune of the people, and the triumphant yell—thrice repeated—“Chicago will be ours.”

Before this happy ending, however, there is a passage that I am surprised Jane Jacobs does not discuss. A bitter strike is in progress in the stockyards, and gangs of scabs are being mobilized. They are from the South, and they are different. Indeed, the reader is introduced to “young white girls from the country rubbing elbows with big buck negroes with daggers in their boots, while rows of woolly heads peered down from every window of the surrounding factories.”

The ancestors of these black people had been savages in Africa; and since then they had been chattel slaves, or had been held down by a community ruled by the traditions of slavery. Now for the first time they were free, free to gratify every passion, free to wreck themselves ...

This is no slip of the pen on Sinclair’s part. He elsewhere refers to “a throng of stupid black negroes,” a phrasing that convicts him of pleonasm as well as of racism. It is often forgotten that the early American labor movement preached a sort of “white socialism” and—though Debs himself didn’t subscribe to it—that this sadly qualified its larger claim to be the liberator of the wage slaves.

The final way in which Sinclair's realism got the better of his socialism is this: Like Karl Marx in *The Communist Manifesto*, he couldn't help being exceedingly impressed by the dynamic, innovative, and productive energy of capitalism:

No tiniest particle of organic matter was wasted in Durham's. Out of the horns of the cattle they made combs, buttons, hair-pins, and imitation ivory; out of the shin bones and other big bones they cut knife and tooth-brush handles, and mouthpieces for pipes; out of the hoofs they cut hair-pins and buttons, before they made the rest into glue. From such things as feet, knuckles, hide clippings, and sinews came such strange and unlikely products as gelatin, isinglass, and phosphorus, bone-black, shoe-blackening, and bone oil. They had curled-hair works for the cattle-tails, and a "wool-pullery" for the sheep-skins; they made pepsin from the stomachs of the pigs, and albumen from the blood, and violin strings from the ill-smelling entrails. When there was nothing else to be done with a thing, they first put it into a tank and got out of it all the tallow and grease, and then they made it into fertilizer.

This account of the magnificent profusion that results from the assembly line and the division of labor is so awe-inspiring that Sinclair seems impelled to follow it almost at once with a correct and ironic discourse on the nature of monopoly and oligopoly: "So guileless was he, and ignorant of the nature of business, that he did not even realize that he had become an employee of Brown's, and that Brown and Durham were supposed by all the world to be deadly rivals—were even required to be deadly rivals by the law of the land, and ordered to try to ruin each other under penalty of fine and imprisonment!"

Thus, though it lives on many a veteran's bookshelf as a stirring monument to the grandeur of the American socialist and labor movements, *The Jungle* may also be read today as a primer on the versatility of the capitalist system. But not all its "morals" belong to the past. The anti-Jungle ethos lived on, in a subterranean fashion, through the League for Industrial Democracy, founded by Sinclair and Jack London. (Its junior branch, the Student League for Industrial Democracy, survived long enough to provide the auspices for the first meeting of Students for a Democratic Society.) In Eric Schlosser's bestseller *Fast Food Nation* (2001) the values and practices of the slaughterhouse system were revisited. Most of the reviews, rather predictably, concentrated on the shock effect of Schlosser's intimate—almost intestinal—depiction of "hamburger" ingredients. But Schlosser also spent a great deal of time with those whose lives are lived at the point of production. Recruited, often illegally, from the Central American isthmus rather than the Baltic littoral, these workers are sucked into cutting machines, poisoned by chemicals, and made wretched by a pervasive stench that won't wash off. Their wages are low, their hours long, their conditions arduous, and their job security nonexistent. The many women among them are considered bounty by lascivious supervisors, who sometimes dangle the prospect of green cards or safer jobs, and sometimes don't bother even to do that. The health-and-safety inspectors are about as vigilant and incorruptible as they were a century ago. The main difference is that these plants are usually located in remote areas or rural states, so the consolations

of urban and communal solidarity are less available to the atomized work force than they were to Jurgis and his peers. This nonfiction work is also a blow to the national gut; but if properly read, it might succeed where *The Jungle* failed, and bring our stomachs and our hearts—and even our brains—into a better alignment.

(*The Atlantic*, July/August 2002)

JFK: In Sickness and by Stealth

Review of *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917–1963*, by Robert Dallek.

EVEN AS I WAS grazing on the easy slopes of this book, in June and July, the quotidian press brought me fairly regular updates on the doings and undoings of the “fabled Kennedy dynasty.” A new volume by Ed Klein, portentously titled *The Kennedy Curse*, revealed the brief marriage of John Kennedy Jr. and Carolyn Bessette to have been a cauldron of low-level misery, infidelity, and addiction.

The political-matrimonial alliance between Andrew Cuomo and Kerry Kennedy was discovered to be in the process of acrimonious dissolution. Representative Patrick Kennedy of Rhode Island, whose ability to find his way to the House unaided has long been a source of intermittent wonder, became inflamed while making a speech at a liberal fund-raising event and yelled: “I don’t need Bush’s tax cut! I have never worked a fucking day in my life.” The electoral career of Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, which had never achieved escape velocity from local Maryland politics, seemed to undergo a final eclipse in the last mid-term vote. Robert F. Kennedy Jr. failed to convince anyone of the innocence of his cousin Michael Skakel, convicted of beating a teenage girlfriend to death with a golf club.

Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts still retains a certain grandeur, on the grounds of longevity and persistence alone, but his solidity on the landscape derives in part from his resemblance, pitilessly identified by his distant kinsman Gore Vidal, to “three hundred pounds of condemned veal.” And even Vidal, who first broke a lance against the Kennedy clan with his 1967 essay “The Holy Family,” might be open-mouthed at the possibility of Arnold Schwarzenegger winning the upcoming race for the governorship of California and thereby making Maria Shriver, a collateral Kennedy descendant, the first lady of the nation’s richest and most populous state. Such a macho Republican triumph would be a bizarre way for the family charisma to mutate. Or would it? Not if you bear in mind Vidal’s phrase about the tribe’s “coldblooded jauntiness.” The calculated combination of sex, showbiz, money, and bravado was—as Robert Dallek unwittingly demonstrates in *An Unfinished Life*—the successful, if volatile, mixture all along.

Otherwise, one can reasonably look forward to a future where the entire meretricious Kennedy cult has staled. It is already more or less meaningless to younger Americans. And even those like myself, who are near-contemporary with all the verbiage and imagery of the “New Frontier” or—even worse—“Camelot,” have had the opportunity

to become bored, sated, and better informed. Pierre Salinger and Oliver Stone, votaries of the cult, have spun off into the bliss that comforts and shields the paranoid. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Theodore Sorenson, the officially consecrated historians, are, one feels, at last reaching an actuarial point of diminishing returns. Meanwhile, the colossal images of September 11, 2001, have easily deposed the squalid scenes in Dallas, of the murders of Kennedy and Oswald, which once supplied the bond of a common televised melodramatic “experience.”

This is not to say that hair and nails do not continue to sprout on the corpse.

Professor Dallek’s title, itself portentous and platitudinous at the same time, is part of the late growth. Since President Kennedy was shot dead at the age of forty-six, it is self-evidently true in one way to describe his life as “unfinished.” But anyone scanning this or several other similar accounts would have to be astonished, not that the man’s career was cut short, but rather that it lasted so long. In addition to being a moral defective and a political disaster, John Kennedy was a physical and probably mental also-ran for most of his presidency. Even someone impervious to his supposed charm has to feel a piercing pang of pity when reading passages such as this one:

Despite the steroids he was apparently taking, he continued to have abdominal pain and problems gaining weight. Backaches were a constant problem.... He also had occasional burning when urinating, which was the result of a nonspecific urethritis dating from 1940 and a possible sexual encounter in college, which left untreated became a chronic condition. He was later diagnosed as having “a mild, chronic, non-specific prostatitis” that sulfa drugs temporarily suppressed.

Moreover, a strenuous daily routine intensified the symptoms—fatigue, nausea, and vomiting—of the Addison’s disease that would not be diagnosed until 1947.

This was the state of affairs when the young “Jack,” pressed and driven by his gruesome tyrant of a father, first ran for a seat in Congress in 1946.

Obviously, a good deal of “spin” is required to make an Achilles out of such a poxed and suppurating Philoctetes. The difference was supplied by family money in heaping measure, by the canny emphasis on a war record, and by serious attention to the flattery and suborning of the media. (As Dallek is the latest to concede, the boy-wonder later had a Pulitzer Prize procured for him, for a superficial book he had hardly read, let alone written.) One doesn’t want to overstress the medical dimension, but it is the truly macabre extent of disclosure on that front that constitutes this book’s only claim to originality. At the very time of the Bay of Pigs disaster, Kennedy “struggled with ‘constant,’ ‘acute diarrhea’ and a urinary tract infection. His doctors treated him with increased amounts of antispasmodics, a puree diet, and penicillin, and scheduled him for a sigmoidoscopy.”

During the next crisis over Cuba—the nuclear confrontation in the autumn of 1962—we learn that the president took his usual doses of anti-spasmodics to control his colitis; antibiotics for a flareup of his urinary tract problem and a bout of sinusitis; and increased amounts of hydrocortisone and testosterone as well as salt tablets to control his Addison’s disease.... On November 2, he took 10 additional grams of hydrocortisone

and 10 grams of salt to boost him before giving a brief report to the American people on the dismantling of the Soviet missile bases in Cuba. In December, Jackie asked the president's gastroenterologist, Dr. Russell Boles, to eliminate anti-histamines for food allergies. She described them as having a "depressing action" on the president and asked Boles to prescribe something that would ensure "mood elevation without irritation to the gastrointestinal tract." Boles prescribed 1 milligram twice a day of Stelazine, an anti-psychotic that was also used as an anti-anxiety medication.

Further mind-boggling revelations are given, and it becomes clearer and clearer that Dallek wants the credit for the disclosures without allowing any suggestion that they might qualify his hero-worship for the subject. Thus, and again in lacerating detail from the "previously secret medical records" of another of his numerous physicians, Dr. Janet Travell:

During the first six months of his presidency, stomach/colon and prostate problems, high fevers, occasional dehydration, abscesses, sleeplessness and high cholesterol accompanied Kennedy's back and adrenal ailments. Medical attention was a fixed part of his routine. His physicians administered large doses of so many drugs that they kept an ongoing "Medicine Administration Record" (MAR) cataloguing injected and oral corticosteroids for his adrenal insufficiency; procaine shots to painful "trigger points," ultrasound treatments, and hot packs for his back; Lomotil, Metamucil, paregoric, Phenobarbital, testosterone, and Transentine to control his diarrhea, abdominal discomfort, and weight loss; penicillin and other antibiotics for his urinary infections and abscesses; and Tuinal to help him sleep.

To this pharmacopoeia, Dallek somewhat fatuously adds that "though the treatments occasionally made him feel groggy and tired, Kennedy did not see them as a problem." He thus perpetuates the fealty required by and of the "JFK" school, which insists that we judge Kennedy more or less as he judged himself.

Plain evidence is available on neighboring pages that this would be simplistic or foolish in the extreme. Dr. Travell and her colleagues did not know that their famous patient had a secret relationship with yet another doctor, who flew on another plane. As early as the election campaign of 1960—this revelation is not original to Dallek—Kennedy had begun seeing Dr. Max Jacobson, the New York physician who had made a reputation for treating celebrities with "pep pills," or amphetamines, that helped combat depression and fatigue.

Jacobson, whom patients termed "Dr. Feelgood," administered back injections of painkillers and amphetamines that allowed Kennedy to stay off crutches, which he believed essential to project a picture of robust good health.

The clumsy phrasing here makes it slightly obscure whether Kennedy or Jacobson was nurturing the image, but it was clearly the candidate himself.

Even on the day of his celebrated inaugural speech, he worried that his steroid-inflated face would be too fat and puffy for the cameras, and was saved by a swift Palm Beach suntan. This false projection of youthful vigor was more than narcissism. It was the essence of the presentation, and had been the backdrop to his wild accusation

of a “missile gap” between the Soviet Union and the USA, neglected by the wrinkly and tired Eisenhower regime. Also, and unlike, say, Franklin Roosevelt’s polio, the concealment was of a serious condition, or set of conditions, that might really affect performance in office. If Kennedy had not succumbed to his actual ill health, he might as easily have flamed out like Jimi Hendrix or Janis Joplin from the avalanche of competing uppers and downers that he was swallowing.

But the furthest that Dallek will go here is to admit—following Seymour Hersh’s earlier book *The Dark Side of Camelot*—that Kennedy’s back-brace held him upright in the open car in Dallas, unable to duck the second and devastating bullet from Lee Harvey Oswald. This is almost the only connection between the president’s health and his fitness that is allowable in these pages, and I presume that it is its relative blamelessness which allows the concession. On other pages, Dallek flatly if unconsciously contradicts his own soothing analysis. “Judging from tape recordings of conversations made during the crisis, the medications were no impediment to long days and lucid thought; to the contrary, Kennedy would have been significantly less effective without them and might not have been able to function.”

Consider for yourself: How reassuring is that? Elsewhere we learn that, during the disastrous summit with Khrushchev in Vienna, a long day under much tension certainly accounts for most of Kennedy’s weariness by the early evening, but we cannot discount the impact of the Jacobson chemicals on him as well. As the day wore on and an injection Jacobson had given him just before he met Khrushchev wore off, Kennedy may have lost the emotional and physical edge initially provided by the shot.

This is no small matter, because the sense that Kennedy retained—of having been outdone by Khrushchev in their first man-to-man confrontation—decided him to show “resolve” in the worst of all possible locations, which was Vietnam.

A mere sixty-three pages later, Dallek simply states without qualification that “personal problems added to the strains of office, testing Kennedy’s physical and emotional endurance. His health troubles were a constant strain on his ability to meet presidential responsibilities.”

The other “personal problems,” which Dallek also approaches with a combination of fawning and concession, are at least suggested by the injections of testosterone mentioned above. This was notoriously a department in which Kennedy did not require any extra boost. We learn again from this book about the way in which he regularly humiliated his wife, abused his staffers and Secret Servicemen by suborning them as procurers, and endangered the security of his administration by fornicating with a gun-moll—the property of the Mafia boss Sam Giancana—in the White House. But Dallek almost outpoints Schlesinger himself in the deployment of euphemism here:

Did Kennedy’s compulsive womanizing distract him from public business? Some historians think so, especially when it comes to Vietnam. Kennedy’s reluctance, however, to focus the sort of attention on Vietnam he gave to Berlin or other foreign and domestic concerns is not evidence of a distracted president, but of a determination to

keep Vietnam from becoming more important to his administration than he wished it to be.

Certainly, when one reviews Kennedy's White House schedules, he does not seem to have been derelict about anything he considered a major problem.... But the supposition that he was too busy chasing women or satisfying his sexual passions to attend to important presidential business is not borne out by the record of his daily activities. And, according to Richard Reeves, another Kennedy historian, the womanizing generally "took less time than tennis."

One is forced into a bark of mirth by the way that bathos succeeds banality here.

(Forget the fact, already admitted, that some of Kennedy's health problems originated with a clinging and neglected case of VD.) A solemn review of the official appointment book is supposed to show no trace of strenuous venery and thus to rule it out as a problem, while this non-evidence is allegedly buttressed by the assertion that the tennis court was as much of an arena as the boudoir. We are not, here, really comparing like with like. And if record-keeping is to count as evidence, then what of the numerous holes and gaps in the White House taping system that Kennedy secretly installed? Dallek does his best to explain these away, admitting in the process that the excisions probably involve assassination plots against Castro, as well as involvement with Marilyn Monroe and with Judith Campbell Exner (Giancana's girlfriend). The Kennedy Library remains as hermetic as ever, withholding the transcripts of four missing tapes, "which may contain embarrassing revelations or national security secrets." Wrong-footing himself at almost every step, Dallek lamely concludes that "by and large, however, the tapes seem to provide a faithful record of some of the most important events in Kennedy's presidency..." "By and large," the same could be said of the Nixon tapes too.

Like many of his fellow devotees, Dallek rests a tentative defense on what might have been: the speech at American University about ultimate disarmament, or the possibility that reason might have prevailed in Indo-China—always given the chance of a second term. Why is it not recognized, with Kennedy, that the job of the historian is to record and evaluate what actually did happen? And why is it forgotten that, had he lived, Kennedy would necessarily have been even more distressingly ill than he was already? The usual compromise is to invest with a retrospective numinousness the relative banality of what did occur. Thus Dallek relates the set-piece events with the customary awe: the brinkmanship over Cuba, the "ich bin ein Berliner" speech, the confrontations with revolution in Vietnam and the Congo. Tougher scholarship has dimmed the phony glamour of most of these recovered memories. Michael Beschloss's *Crisis Years* demonstrated in 1991 that Kennedy was for most practical purposes complicit in the erection of the Berlin Wall, played it down as an issue wherever possible, and only made his defiant public speech when he was quite sure that it could make no difference. As in the case of Cuba, he first created the conditions for a crisis by using inflamed rhetoric and tactics, then just managed to extricate himself from catastrophe,

and finally agreed to a consolidation of Communist power that was much more “locked in” than it had been before.

Whether you approach matters from the standpoint of those concerned with nuclear holocaust and superpower promiscuity, or of those desiring a long-term strategy to outlast the Stalinist monolith, this record is a dismal one. It was further punctuated by episodes of more or less gangsterish conduct, most conspicuously in the coup that murdered Kennedy’s South Vietnamese client Ngo Dinh Diem, but also in such vignettes as Robert Kennedy’s serious proposal to blow up the American consulate in the Dominican Republic, in order to supply a pretext for a U.S. invasion. Dallek allows this latter moment all of two sentences.

Their hysterical and profitless hyperactivity on one front is in the boldest contrast to the millimetrical trudging and grudging with which the Kennedy brothers approached their genuinely urgent, and constitutionally mandated, responsibility for civil rights. Confronted with an inescapable matter, they abandoned the flamboyance of their overseas melodramas and confined themselves to the most minimal Fabian tactics. Since Robert Kennedy was at least physically robust, it may not be fair to attribute this mood-swing regime too intimately to the influence of stimulants and analgesics. But as Robert Dallek inadvertently shows, it would be highly imprudent to discard the hypothesis altogether. The reputation of the Kennedy racket is now dependent on a sobbing effort of will: an applauding chorus demanding that the flickering Tinker Bell not be allowed to expire. It is pardonable for children to yell that they believe in fairies, but it is somehow sinister when the piping note shifts from the puerile to the senile.

(Times Literary Supplement, August 22, 2003)

Saul Bellow: The Great Assimilator

Review of Saul Bellow’s Novels 1944–1953: *Dangling Man*, *The Victim*, *The Adventures of Augie March*; and Novels 1956–1964: *Seize the Day*, *Henderson the Rain King*, *Herzog*.

LOOK FIRST UPON THIS PICTURE, and on this ... the two photographs of Saul Bellow that adorn the initial covers of the Library of America edition of his collected works. In the first, we see a somewhat rakish fellow, sharply dressed and evidently fizzing with moxie, who meets the world with a cool and level gaze that belies the slight impression of a pool shark or racetrack con artist. In the second, and in profile, we get a survey of a sage in a more reflective pose; but this is a sage who still might utter a well-chosen wisecrack out of the side of his mouth. The antique history of the shtetl and the ghetto is inscribed in both studies of the man, but some considerable mental and physical distance has evidently been traveled in each case.

At Bellow’s memorial meeting, held in the Young Men’s Hebrew Association at Lexington Avenue and 92nd Street two years ago, the main speakers were Ian McEwan, Jeffrey Eugenides, Martin Amis, William Kennedy, and James Wood (now the editor

of this finely produced collection). Had it not been for an especially vapid speech by some forgettable rabbi, the platform would have been exclusively composed of non-Jews, many of them non-American. How had Bellow managed to exert such an effect on writers almost half his age, from another tradition and another continent? Putting this question to the speakers later on, I received two particularly memorable responses. Ian McEwan related his impression that Bellow, alone among American writers of his generation, had seemed to assimilate the whole European classical inheritance. And Martin Amis vividly remembered something Bellow had once said to him, which is that if you are born in the ghetto, the very conditions compel you to look skyward, and thus to hunger for the universal.

In *The Victim*, the Jewish son of an anti-gentile and ghetto-mentality storekeeper is being given a hard time by an insecure and alcoholic WASP. "I'm a fine one to be talking about tradition, you must be saying," admits the latter:

"But still I was born into it. And try to imagine how New York affects me. Isn't it preposterous? It's really as if the children of Caliban were running everything. You go down in the subway and Caliban gives you two nickels for your dime. You go home and he has a candy store in the street where you were born. The old breeds are out. The streets are named after them. But what are they themselves? Just remnants."

"I see how it is; you're actually an aristocrat," said Leventhal.

"It may not strike you as it struck me," said Allbee. "But I go into the library once in a while, to look around, and last week I saw a book about Thoreau and Emerson by a man named Lipschitz ..."

"What of it?"

"A name like that?" Allbee said this with great earnestness. "After all, it seems to me that people of such background simply couldn't understand ..."

Remember that when Bellow was growing up, Lionel Trilling could be sacked from a teaching post at Columbia on the grounds that a Jew could not really appreciate English literature. Recall also the exquisite pain with which Henry James, in *The American Scene* in 1907, had registered "the whole hard glitter of Israel" on New York's Lower East Side, and especially the way in which Yiddish-speaking authors operated the "torture-rooms of the living idiom." Bellow in his time was to translate Isaac Bashevis Singer into English (and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" into Yiddish), but it mattered to him that the ghetto be transcended and that he, too, could sing America. The various means of this assertion included pyrotechnic versatility with English, a ferocious assimilation of learning, and an emphasis on the man of action as well as the man of reflection.

If you reread Bellow's fiction in this light, you will, I think, be sure to find these considerations recurring to you. As early as the text of *Dangling Man*, there are fairly effortless references to Goethe, Diderot, Alexander the Great; *Measure for Measure*, Machiavelli, Berkeley, Dr. Johnson, Joyce, Marx, and Baudelaire. The novel contains, in parallel, a replication of Bellow's own life experience as a slum kid, as an illegal immigrant from Quebec, and as an aspirant member of the United States armed forces.

A much later short story—"Something to Remember Me By"—sees a young Jewish boy being rolled by a whore and saved by the sordid denizens of a Chicago speakeasy, but depicts the kid as distressed most of all by the loss of a torn book that he had bought for a nickel. All around him are people who have become coarsened and street-smart, but this variety of common "wisdom" is to be despised as too cheaply bought.

When I think of Bellow, I think not just of a man whose genius for the vernacular could seem to restate Athenian philosophy as if run through a Damon Runyon synthesizer, but of the author who came up with such graphic expressions for vulgarity and thuggery and stupidity—the debased currency of those too brutalized to have retained the capacity for wonder. "A goon's rodeo" is Augie March's description of a saturnalia of the mindless. "The moronic inferno"—apparently annexed from Wyndham Lewis—is the phrasing that occurs in Humboldt's Gift. "Moral buggery" is the crisp summary of New York values in Dangling Man. Best of all, in a confrontation between a thoughtful person and an uncivilized one that also occurs in Humboldt's Gift, is the dawning recognition that the latter belongs to the "mental rabble of the wised-up world." The narrator of Dangling Man states it shortly:

Most serious matters are closed to the hard-boiled. They are unpracticed in introspection, and therefore badly equipped to deal with opponents whom they cannot shoot like big game or outdo in daring ... The hard-boiled are compensated for their silence: they fly planes or fight bulls or catch tarpon, whereas I rarely leave my room.

Yet Bellow by no means dismisses the Hemingway style as easily as that. Several of his heroes and protagonists—including the thick-necked Henderson—rise above the sickly and the merely bookish. They tackle lions and, in the case of Augie March, a truly fearsome eagle. They mix it up with revolutionaries and bandits and hard-core criminals. Commenting on Socrates's famous dictum about the worthlessness of the unexamined life, the late Kurt Vonnegut once inquired: "What if the examined life turns out to be a clunker as well?" Bellow would have seen, and indeed did see, the force of this question. Like Lambert Strether's in *The Ambassadors*, his provisional answer seems to have been: "Live all you can; it's a mistake not to." And the tough-guy Henderson, so gross and physical and intrepid (and so inarticulate when he speaks, yet so full of reflective capacity when he thinks), cannot repress his wonder when flying: He keeps pointing out that his is the first generation to have seen the clouds from above as well as below:

What a privilege! First people dreamed upward. Now they dream both upward and downward. This is bound to change something, somewhere.

Erich Fromm once gave a course at the New School on "the struggle against pointlessness," and one wonders whether Bellow heard of, or took, this class. Pervasive in his work is a sense of the awful trap posed by aimlessness and its cousins, impotence and the death wish. In *Dangling Man*, the narrator hears of a college friend's death in the war and diagnoses it as an indirect act of will:

I always suspected of him that he had in some fashion discovered there were some ways in which to be human was to be unutterably dismal, and that all his life was given over to avoiding those ways.

Whereas in *The Adventures of Augie March*, the hero signs up for the same combat and, reflecting on what it does for his sex life, asks, "What use was war without also love?" Yiddishism or no Yiddishism, this must count as one of the most affirmative and masculine sentences ever set down.

Against pointlessness and futility, Bellow strove to counterpose what Augie calls "the universal eligibility to be noble"—the battle to overcome not just ghetto conditions but also ghetto psychoses. Such yearning ambition, as Bellow knew, can be a torment to those who are not innately noble to begin with. Even Wilhelm, the desperate and perspiring arriviste in *Seize the Day*, has a touch of higher aspiration amid his death-of-a-salesman panics, and he finds snatches of English lyric poetry coming back to him at improbable moments. And Allbee, the drunken anti-Semite in *The Victim*, the man who says that "evil is as real as sunshine," chooses to speak loftily about his "honor" when he comes to oppress and exhaust Asa Leventhal. In all this, the great precursor is the strongly drawn King Dahfu in *Henderson the Rain King*, who makes splendid use of his secondhand English when addressing his massive and worried American guest as follows:

Yet you are right for the long run, and good exchanged for evil truly is the answer. I also subscribe, but it appears a long way off, for the human species as a whole. Perhaps I am not the one to make a prediction, Sungo, but I think the noble will have its turn in the world.

Perhaps the best illustration of nobility that Bellow offers is Augie March's brief glimpse of Trotsky in Mexico, from which he receives a strong impression of "deepwater greatness" and an ability to steer by the brightest stars. Bellow himself had arrived in Mexico in 1940, just too late to see Trotsky, who had been murdered by a hireling assassin the morning they were meant to meet. Like Henderson, Trotsky was a man upon whom life had "decided to use strong measures." The founder of the Red Army was also the author of *Literature and Revolution* and a coauthor of *Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art*. In his own person he united the Jew, the cosmopolitan, the man of ideas, and the man of action. And the speed with which Bellow learned from the experience of Trotsky's murder is a theme in several of his fictions. In *Dangling Man*, Joseph astonishes his friend Myron by the amount he can deduce from the simple fact that a former "comrade" will no longer speak to him in public. "Oh, Joseph," exclaims Myron, as if reproving exaggeration; but Joseph isn't merely piqued in the sense of personal offense:

No, really, listen to me. Forbid one man to talk to another, forbid him to communicate with someone else, and you've forbidden him to think, because, as a great many writers will tell you, thought is a kind of communication. And his party doesn't want him to think, but to follow its discipline. So there you are ... When a man obeys an order like that he's helping to abolish freedom and begin tyranny.

This “insolence,” Joseph concluded, “figured the whole betrayal of an undertaking to which I had once devoted myself,” and who is to say that Bellow selected the wrong microcosm of trahison? From a detail of political etiquette, he could infer the incipient mentality of the totalitarian. His life as a public intellectual is sometimes held to have followed a familiar arc or trajectory: that from quasi-Trotskyist to full-blown “neocon,” and of course it is true that the earlier novels contain portraits of members of the Partisan Review group, from Delmore Schwartz to Dwight Macdonald, whereas the final novel, *Ravelstein*, features an affectionate portrayal of Allan Bloom (whose *Closing of the American Mind* Bellow had helped make into a bestseller), and even of Paul Wolfowitz during the intra-Washington struggle over the Gulf War, in 1991.

But Bellow’s political evolution was by no means an uncomplicated or predictable one. He had been loosely associated with the dynamic ex-Trotskyist Max Schachtman (a man, incidentally, who is much more the founder of neoconservatism than Leo Strauss). Bellow’s first published short story, a fiercely polemical reply to Sinclair Lewis’s novel *It Can’t Happen Here* that was no less polemically titled “The Hell It Can’t,” was obviously written under the influence of the Trotskyist youth movement. As late as the 1990s, Bellow eulogized Schachtman’s widow, Yetta Barshevsky, recalling her fiery anti-Stalinism with affection. And until quite late in the day, his name appeared on the editorial masthead of Julius Jacobson’s *New Politics*, an essentially post-Schachtmanite journal of democratic socialism.

Of the single occasion when I met Bellow properly, Martin Amis has given a brilliantly scandalized account in his memoir, *Experience*. Actually, the evening wasn’t as rough as all that. Bellow read to us from some fascinating old correspondence with John Berryman. He recalled the occasion when he had been denied a job at *Time* magazine by no less a person than Whittaker Chambers for giving the wrong answer to a question about William Wordsworth (the episode is loosely fictionalized in *The Victim*). When asked his opinion, Bellow had said that he thought of Wordsworth as a Romantic poet, and then been rudely turned away. He wondered aloud what he ought to have said instead, and I daringly suggested that the answer was an easy one: Chambers wanted him to say that Wordsworth was a former revolutionary and republican poet who saw the error of his ways and became a counter-revolutionary and a monarchist. This seemed to satisfy and amuse Bellow, who then wondered aloud what his writing life would have been like if he had secured that safe billet at *Time*.

So all was going fairly smoothly, except that on the reading table, like a revolver in a Chekhov play, there lay a loaded copy of *Commentary*. It soon became apparent that Bellow really had moved to the right, without losing his taste for Talmudic and trotskisant dialectic, and that in his mind there was a strong connection between the decay of American cities and campuses, and wider questions of ideological promiscuity. I do not think I am wrong in guessing that he regarded the battle in the Middle East as something of an allegory of the distraught state of black- white (and black-Jewish) relations in his beloved Chicago. Anyone who has read his nonfiction work *To Jerusalem and Back* will be compelled to notice that the Arab inhabitants of the

holy city are as nearly invisible and alien as their equivalents in Oran in Camus's *La Peste*. At any event, we ended up having a strong disagreement about the Palestinians in general, and the work of Edward Said in particular. I have several times devoutly wished that we could have had this discussion again.

The thread in the labyrinth of Bellow's politics has undoubtedly something to do with the "ghetto" also, and with a certain awkward possessiveness about the employment of that same pejorative. In a revealing moment in *Ravelstein*, the hero objects to the commonplace use of the term as customarily applied to black American life:

"Ghetto nothing!" Ravelstein said. "Ghetto Jews had highly developed feelings, civilized nerves—thousands of years of training. They had communities and laws. 'Ghetto' is an ignorant newspaper term. It's not a ghetto that they come from, it's a noisy, pointless, nihilistic turmoil."

So, perhaps paradoxically, Bellow echoes a defensive and even admiring attitude to the very place from which he wished to escape. This is almost conservatism defined. One can locate the same trope as early as *Dangling Man*, where the boy recalling the horrors of slum life remembers "a man rearing over someone on a bed, and, on another occasion, a Negro with a blond woman on his lap." And the underage black boy who transmits AIDS to Ravelstein (who himself is fatally attracted to the very thing that he supposedly most despises), was in early drafts given the same name as Augie March's only black character. In *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, the eponymous figure is haunted by a large "Negro" who stops him in the street and flaunts a massive penis in his face. In *The Dean's December*, black crime and big-city corruption have become hard to distinguish in Bellow's mind; he was later to manifest alarm and disgust when a black demagogue in Chicago accused Jewish doctors of spreading the AIDS virus. I don't want to make any insinuation here, but it's clear that Bellow had concluded that one of the fondest hopes of the democratic left—that of a black-Jewish alliance—had become a thing of the past: another slightly sappy project of what in a more genial and witty moment he had called "the Good Intentions Paving Company."

However, he never quite succumbed to the affectless cynicism that he had always despised. His famously provocative 1988 question, "Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus? The Proust of the Papuans?," asked in the context of a defense of Bloom, seemed to many people to contradict the generosity of what he had offered about Africa in *Henderson*, and evidently must have struck Bellow himself in the same light, since six years later he wrote a muchless-noticed essay in praise of the novel of *Zululand Chaka*, by Thomas Mofolo. Life and politics might have had souring results, and so might personal experience, but to the end, he put his money on the life-affirming and on the will to live (as *Henderson's* understanding of the benediction *grun-tumolani* loosely translates), and he could never quite abandon his faith in that crucial eligibility to be noble.

(*The Atlantic*, November 2007)

Vladimir Nabokov: Hurricane Lolita

Review of *Lolita*, by Vladimir Nabokov; and *The Annotated Lolita*, edited by Alfred Appel, Jr.

IN AZAR NAFISI'S *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, in which young female students meet in secret with Xeroxed copies of Nabokov's masterpiece on their often chaste and recently chadored laps, it is at first a surprise to discover how unscandalized the women are. Without exception, it turns out, they concur with Vera Nabokov in finding that the chief elements of the story are "its beauty and pathos." They "identify" with *Lolita*, because they can see that she wants above all to be a normal girl-child; they see straight through Humbert, because he is always blaming his victim and claiming that it was she who seduced him. And this perspective—such a bracing change from our conventional worried emphasis on pedophilia—is perhaps more easily come by in a state where virgins are raped before execution because the Koran forbids the execution of virgins; where the censor cuts Ophelia out of the Russian movie version of *Hamlet*; where any move that a woman makes can be construed as lascivious and inciting; where goatish old men can be gifted with infant brides; and where the age of "consent" is more like nine. As Nafisi phrases it,

This was the story of a twelve-year-old girl who had nowhere to go. Humbert had tried to turn her into his fantasy, into his dead love, and he had destroyed her. The desperate truth of *Lolita's* story is not the rape of a twelve-year-old by a dirty old man but the confiscation of one individual's life by another. We don't know what *Lolita* would have become if Humbert had not engulfed her. Yet the novel, the finished work, is hopeful, beautiful even, a defense not just of beauty but of life ... Warming up and suddenly inspired, I added that in fact Nabokov had taken revenge on our own solipsizers; he had taken revenge on the Ayatollah Khomeini ...

It's extraordinary to think that the author of those anti-tyrannical classics *Bend Sinister* and *Invitation to a Beheading*, who would surely have felt extreme pleasure at this tribute, can be posthumously granted such an unexpected yet—when you reflect on it—perfectly intelligible homage. In his own essay on the fate of *Lolita*, Nabokov recalled a publisher who warned him that if he helped the author get it into print, they would both go straight to jail. And one of the many, many pleasures of Alfred Appel's masterly introduction and annotation is the discovery that Nabokov did not realize that Maurice Girodias and the Olympia Press were specialists in—well, shall we just say "erotica"?—when he let them have the manuscript. (The shock and awe surrounding its publication were later well netted by the great lepidopterist in one of John Shade's cantos in *Pale Fire*: "It was a year of tempests, Hurricane / *Lolita* swept from Florida to Maine.") Innocence of that kind is to be treasured.

And innocence, of course, is the problem to begin with. If Dolores Haze, whose first name means suffering and grief, that "dolorous and hazy darling," had not been an innocent, there would be nothing tragic in the tale. (Azar Nafisi is someone who, in spite of her acuity and empathy, fails what I call the Martin Amis test. Amis once

admitted that he had read the novel carefully before noticing that in its “foreword”—written not by the unreliable Humbert but by “John Ray, Jr., Ph.D.”—we learn that Lolita has died in childbirth. She’s over before she’s begun. That’s where the yearning search for a normal life and a stable marriage got her. I fear that the young ladies of Tehran missed that crucial, callous postdate/update sentence as well.)

Then we must approach the question of how innocent we are in all this. Humbert writes without the smallest intention of titillating his audience. The whole narrative is, after all, his extended jailhouse/madhouse plea to an unseen jury. He has nothing but disgust for the really pornographic debauchee Quilty, for whose murder he has been confined. But he does refer to him as a “brother,” and at one point addresses us, too, as “Reader! Bruder!” which is presumably designed to make one think of Baudelaire’s address of *Les Fleurs du Mal* to “Hypocrite lecteur,—mon semblable—mon frère!” I once read of an interview given by Roman Polanski in which he described listening to a lurid radio account of his offense even as he was fleeing to the airport. He suddenly realized the trouble he was in, he said, when he came to appreciate that he had done something for which a lot of people would furiously envy him. Hamlet refers to Ophelia as a nymph (“Nymph, in thy orisons, be all my sins remembered”), but she is of marriageable age, whereas a nymphet is another thing altogether.

Actually, it is impossible to think of employing Lolita for immoral or unsavory purposes, and there is now a great general determination to approach the whole book in an unfussed, grown-up, broad-minded spirit. “Do not misunderstand me,” said Amis père when he reviewed the first edition, “if I say that one of the troubles with Lolita is that, so far from being too pornographic, it is not pornographic enough.” When he wrote that, his daughter, Sally, was a babe in arms, and now even those innocuous words seem fraught with implication. This doesn’t necessarily alter the case, but neither can I forget Sally’s older brother, who wrote,

Parents and guardians of twelve-year-old girls will have noticed that their wards have a tendency to be difficult. They may take Humbert’s word for it that things are much more difficult—are in fact entirely impossible—when your twelve-year-old girl is also your twelve-year-old girlfriend. The next time that you go out with your daughter, imagine you are going out with your daughter.

When I first read this novel, I had not had the experience of having a twelve-year-old daughter. I have had that experience twice since, which is many times fewer than I have read the novel. I daresay I chortled, in an outraged sort of way, when I first read, “How sweet it was to bring that coffee to her, and then deny it until she had done her morning duty.” But this latest time I found myself almost congealed with shock. What about the fatherly visit to the schoolroom, for example, where Humbert is allowed the privilege of sitting near his (wife’s) daughter in class:

I unbuttoned my overcoat and for sixty-five cents plus the permission to participate in the school play, had Dolly put her inky, chalky, red-knuckled hand under the desk. Oh, stupid and reckless of me no doubt, but after the torture I had been subjected to, I simply had to take advantage of a combination that I knew would never occur again.

Or this, when the child runs a high fever: “She was shaking from head to toe. She complained of a painful stiffness in the upper vertebrae—and I thought of poliomyelitis as any American parent would. Giving up all hope of intercourse ...”

Forgive me, hypocrite lecteur, if I say that I still laughed out loud at the deadpan way in which Nabokov exploded that land mine underneath me. And of course, as Amis fils half admits in his words about “parents and guardians,” *Lolita* is not Humbert’s daughter. If she were, the book probably would have been burned by the hangman, and its author’s right hand sliced off and fed to the flames. But, just as Humbert’s mind is on a permanent knife-edge of sexual mania, so his creator manages to tread the vertiginous path between incest, by which few are tempted, and engagement with pupating or nymph-like girls, which will not lose its frisson. (You will excuse me if, like Humbert, I dissolve into French when euphemism is required.) For me the funniest line in the book—because it is so farcical—comes in the moment after the first motel rape, when the frenzied Humbert, who has assumed at least the authority and disguise of fatherhood, is “forced to devote a dangerous amount of time (was she up to something downstairs?) to arranging the bed in such a way as to suggest the abandoned nest of a restless father and his tomboy daughter, instead of an ex-convict’s saturnalia with a couple of fat old whores.” None of this absurdity allows us to forget—and Humbert himself does not allow us to forget—that immediately following each and every one of the hundreds of subsequent rapes, the little girl weeps for quite a long time ...

How complicit, then, is Nabokov himself? The common joking phrase among adult men, when they see nymphets on the street or in the park or, nowadays, on television and in bars, is “Don’t even think about it.” But it is very clear that Nabokov did think about it, and had thought about it a lot. An earlier novella, written in Russian and published only after his death—*The Enchanter*—centers on a jeweler who hangs around playgrounds and forces himself into gruesome sex and marriage with a vache-like mother, all for the sake of witnessing her death and then possessing and enjoying her twelve-year-old daughter. (I note one correspondence I had overlooked before: The hapless old bag in *The Enchanter* bears many unappetizing scars from the surgeon’s knife, and when Humbert scans *Lolita*’s statistics—height, weight, thigh measurements, IQ, and so forth—he discovers that she still has her appendix and says to himself, “Thank God.” You do not want to think about that for very long either.) And then there is, just once, a hint of incest so elaborate and so deranged that you can read past it, as many critics have, before going back and whistling with alarm.

... the thought that with patience and luck I might have her produce eventually a nymphet with my blood in her exquisite veins, a *Lolita the Second*, who would be eight or nine around 1960, when I would still be *dans la force d’age*; indeed, the telescoping of my mind, or un-mind, was strong enough to distinguish in the remoteness of time a *vieillard encore vert*—or was it *green rot*?—bizarre, tender, salivating Dr. Humbert, practicing on supremely lovely *Lolita the Third* the art of being a granddad.

Arresting, as well as disgusting, to suddenly notice that *Lolita* (who died giving birth to a stillborn girl, for Christ’s sake) would have been seventy this year ... However, I

increasingly think that Nabokov's celebrated, and tiresomely repeated, detestation of Sigmund Freud must itself be intended as some kind of acknowledgment. If he thought "the Viennese quack" and "Freudian voodooism" were so useless and banal, why couldn't he stay off the subject, or the subtext?

I could very well do with a little rest in this subdued, frightened-to-death rocking chair, before I drove to wherever the beast's lair was—and then pulled the pistol's foreskin back, and then enjoyed the orgasm of the crushed trigger. I was always a good little follower of the Viennese medicine man ...

Many a true word is spoken in jest, especially about the kinship between Eros and Thanatos. The two closest glimpses Humbert gives us of his own self-hatred are not without their death wish—made explicit in the closing paragraphs—and their excremental aspects: "I am lanky, big-boned, woolychested Humbert Humbert, with thick black eyebrows and a queer accent, and a cesspoolful of rotting monsters behind his slow boyish smile." Two hundred pages later: "The turquoise blue swimming pool some distance behind the lawn was no longer behind that lawn, but within my thorax, and my organs swam in it like excrements in the blue sea water in Nice." And then there's the offhand aside "Since (as the psychotherapist, as well as the rapist, will tell you) the limits and rules of such girlish games are fluid ..." in which it takes a moment to notice that "therapist" and "the rapist" are in direct apposition.

Once you start to take a shy hand in the endless game of decoding the puns and allusions and multiple entendres (the Umberto echoes, if I may be allowed) that give this novel its place next to Ulysses, you are almost compelled to agree with Freud that the unconscious never lies. Swinburne's poem Dolores sees a young lady ("Our Lady of Pain") put through rather more than young Miss Haze. Lord Byron's many lubricities are never far away; in the initial stages of his demented scheme Humbert quotes from Childe Harold's Pilgrimage: "To hold thee lightly on a gentle knee and print on thine soft cheek a parent's kiss," and when we look up the lines we find they are addressed to Harold's absent daughter (who, like Byron's child and Nabokov's longest fiction, is named Ada). Humbert's first, lost girlfriend, Annabel, is perhaps not unrelated to Byron's first wife, Anne Isabella, who was known as "Annabella," and she has parents named Leigh, just like Byron's ravished half-sister Augusta. The Haze family physician, who gives Humbert the sleeping pills with which he drugs Lolita preparatory to the first rape at the Enchanted Hunters Hotel, is named Dr. Byron. And while we are on the subject of physicians, remember how Humbert is recommended to "an excellent dentist":

Our neighbor, in fact. Dr. Quilty. Uncle or cousin, I think, of the playwright. Think it will pass? Well, just as you wish. In the fall I shall have him "brace" her, as my mother used to say. It may curb Lo a little.

Another Quilty, with his own distinctive hint of sadism. "Sade's Justine was twelve at the start," as Humbert reflects, those three so ordinary words "at the start" packing a huge, even gross, potential weight ... These clues are offset by more innocuous puns ("We had breakfast in the township of Soda, pop 1001") and by dress rehearsals for

puns, as when Humbert decides to decline a possible joke about the Mann Act, which forbids the interstate transport of girls for immoral purposes. (Alexander Dolinin has recently produced a fascinating article on the contemporaneous abduction of a girl named Sally Horner, traces of the reportage of which are to be found throughout *Lolita*.)

All is apparently redeemed, of course, by the atrocious punishment that Nabokov inflicts for this most heinous of humanity's offenses. The molester in *The Enchanter* was hit by a truck, and Humbert dies so many little deaths—eroding his heart muscles most pitifully—that in some well-wrought passages we almost catch ourselves feeling sorry for him. But the urge to punish a crime (“Why dost thou lash that whore?” Shakespeare makes us ask ourselves in *King Lear*) is sometimes connected to the urge to commit it. Naming a girls' school for Beardsley must have taken a good deal of reflection, with more Sade than Lewis Carroll in it, but perhaps there is an almost inaudible note of redemption at Humbert and *Lolita*'s last meeting (the only time, as he ruefully minutes, that she ever calls him “honey”), when “I looked and looked at her, and knew as clearly as I know I am to die, that I loved her more than anything I had ever seen or imagined on earth, or hoped for anywhere else.”

The most unsettling suggestion of all must be the latent idea that nymphomania is, as well as a form of sex, a form of love.

Alfred Appel's most sage advice is to make yourself slow down when reading *Lolita*, not be too swiftly ravished and caught up. Follow this counsel and you will find that—more than almost any other novel of our time—it keeps the promise of genius and never presents itself as the same story twice. I mentioned the relatively obvious way in which it strikes one differently according to one's age; and if aging isn't a theme here, with its connotation of death and extinction, then I don't know what is. But there are other ways in which *Lolita* is, to annex Nabokov's word, “telescopic.” Looking back on it, he cited a critic who “suggested that *Lolita* was the record of my love affair with the romantic novel,” and continued, “The substitution ‘English language’ for ‘romantic novel’ would make this elegant formula more correct.” That's profoundly true, and constitutes the most strenuous test of the romantic idea that worshipful time will forgive all those who love, and who live by, language. After half a century this work's “transgressiveness” makes every usage of that term in our etiolated English departments seem stale, pallid, and domesticated.

(*The Atlantic*, December 2005)

John Updike, Part One: No Way

Review of *Terrorist*, by John Updike.

IN 1978, just as I was beginning to become intrigued by the nascent menace of Islamist fanaticism, I read John Updike's novel *The Coup*. Set in the fictional African state of Kush, a Chad-like vastness dominated by a demagogue named Hakim Ellelloû,

it took its author far from the Pennsylvania suburbs and car lots, and indeed offered, through the hoarse voice of Ellelloû, a highly dystopian view of them. “What does the capitalist infidel make, you may ask, of the priceless black blood of Kush?” Ellelloû asks, and then answers his own question:

He extracts from it, of course, a fuel that propels him and his over-weight, quarrelsome family—so full of sugar and starch their faces fester—back and forth on purposeless errands and ungratefully received visits. Rather than live as we do in the same village with our kin and our labor, the Americans have flung themselves wide across the land, which they have buried under tar and stone. They consume our blood also in their factories and skyscrapers, which are ablaze with light throughout the night ... I have visited this country of devils and can report that they make from your sacred blood slippery green bags in which they place their garbage and even the leaves that fall from their trees! They make of petroleum toys that break in their children’s hands, and hair curlers in which their obese brides fatuously think to beautify themselves while they parade in supermarkets buying food wrapped in transparent petroleum and grown from fertilizers based upon your blood! Of your blood they make deodorants to mask their God-given body scents and wax for the matches to ignite their death-dealing cigarettes and more wax to shine their shoes while the people of Kush tread upon the burning sands barefoot!

I marked this passage at the time, thinking that I might one day want to refer to it. The two elements that it contains—apart from the actual commingling of oil and blood—are of some interest. The first is a sort of ventriloquization of Muslim rage, with care taken to give this an element of “social gospel” as well as Koranic puritanism. The second is an intellectual and aesthetic disgust—somewhat reminiscent of the more literary passages of John Kenneth Galbraith’s *Affluent Society*—with the grossness and banality of much of American life.

This was quite prescient, and it anticipated some of the rhetorical tropes of Muslim self-pity with which we have since become so familiar. Only Monica Ali, in *Brick Lane*, has caught the same tone of pseudo-socialist populism, and in her novel the crucial speech is delivered after the aggression of September 11, 2001. On that day Updike happened to be looking at Manhattan from just across the river, in Brooklyn Heights, and later described what he saw in a “Talk of the Town” essay in the *New Yorker*, in which he wrote, *inter alia*:

Determined men who have transposed their own lives to a martyr’s afterlife can still inflict an amount of destruction that defies belief. War is conducted with a fury that requires abstraction—that turns a plane-ful of peaceful passengers, children included, into a missile the faceless enemy deserves. The other side has the abstractions; we have only the mundane duties of survivors.

Perhaps feeling that this was somewhat inert, not to say pathetic, Updike then inserted a rather unconvincing note of stoicism, urging his readers to “fly again” on planes, since (guess what?) “risk is a price of freedom,” and issuing what was by comparison a bugle call: “Walking around Brooklyn Heights that afternoon, as ash drifted in the

air and cars were few and open-air lunches continued as usual on Montague Street, renewed the impression that, with all its failings, this is a country worth fighting for.” Understatement could do no more: Was it the ash or the absence of cars—or maybe those tempting alfresco snacks—that (America’s manifold failings notwithstanding) straightened the Updike spine?

Taking time to let his manly reflections mature and ripen in the cask, Updike has now given us Terrorist, another vantage point from which to view Manhattan from across the water. His “terrorist” is a boy named Ahmad living in today’s New Prospect, New Jersey, for whom the immolation of 3,000 of his fellow citizens is by no means enough. For him, only a huge detonation inside the Lincoln Tunnel will do. Let’s grant Updike credit for casting his main character against type: Ahmad is not only the nicest person in the book but is as engaging a young man as you could meet in a day’s march. Tenderly, almost lovingly, Updike feels and feels, like a family doctor, until he can detect the flickering pulse of principle that animates the would-be martyr.

Once again, obesity and consumerism and urban sprawl are the radix malorum. At the seaside:

Devils. The guts of the men sag hugely and the monstrous buttocks of the women seesaw painfully as they tread the boardwalk in swollen sneakers. A few steps from death, these American elders defy decorum and dress as toddlers.

Whereas in the schools:

They think they’re doing pretty good, with some flashy-trashy new outfit they’ve bought at half-price, or the latest hyper-violent new computer game, or some hot new CD everyone has to have, or some ridiculous new religion when you’ve drugged your brain back into the Stone Age. It makes you wonder if people deserve to live seriously—if the massacre masterminds in Rwanda and Sudan and Iraq didn’t have the right idea.

The speaker in this latter instance is Jack Levy, a burned-out little Jewish man with a wife named Beth (“a whale of a woman giving off too much heat through her blubber”). He has ended up as the guidance counselor at uninspired New Prospect Central High, while his missus piles on the fat in front of the TV. Fortunately, though, she has a sister who works for the secretary of Homeland Security and who, though she rightly regards her corpulent New Jersey sibling as a moron, keeps calling her up to tell her absolutely everything about the nation’s anti-terrorist secrets. This, too, is fortunate, because although he doesn’t yet know it (the irony!), Jack Levy has a “massacre mastermind” in his own school, right under his nose. (I have just flipped through the book again to be quite certain that I did not make any of this up.)

Young Ahmad, who has an absent Muslim father and a ditsy and whorish Irish mother (who probably has red hair and freckles and green eyes; I honestly couldn’t be bothered to go back and double-check that), is quite a study. With such a start in life, who wouldn’t start hanging around the mosque and dreaming of a high-octane ticket to Paradise? Rejecting Jack Levy’s rather diffident offers of help with further education and a career, the bright lad puts all his energies into qualifying to drive a

truck. The sort of truck that can carry hazardous materials. In immediate post-9/11 New Jersey, this innocent ploy by a green young Islamist sets off no alarm bells at all.

Ordinary life still manages to go on, as it must. At the high school's commencement festivities, Jack finds himself in the procession just behind a West Indian teacher (who really does address him as "mon"), who says:

"Jack, tell me. There is something I am embarrassed to ask anyone. Who is this J. Lo? My students keep mentioning him."

"A her. Singer. Actress," Jack calls ahead. "Hispanic. Very well turned out. Great ass, apparently ..."

Yes, that's right: Updike has given us a black high-school teacher who, in the early years of this very century, thinks that J. Lo is a guy. And who is embarrassed to ask more about the subject. And who therefore raises his voice, at commencement, and seeks enlightenment from a sixty-three-year-old Jewish washout. Could anything be more hip and up-to-the-minute? When this Updike feels for a pulse—know what I'm saying?—he really, really, like, feels. Some pages later we find Jack exclaiming, "No way," and the daring idiomatic usage is explained by his "having picked up this much slang from his students." The expression was universal long before any of these students was born.

Indeed, Updike continues to offer us, as we have come to expect of him, his grueling homework. The sinuous imam of the local mosque (Shaikh Rashid) does not try to impress the half-educated and credulous Ahmad with the duty to fight the enemies of the Prophet. Far from it. He prepares him for stone-faced single-mindedness with some intricate Koranic hermeneutics, designed to shake his faith. And guess which example is adduced? The theory of the German Orientalist Christoph Luxenberg, who has argued that the "virgins" promised to martyrs in Paradise are actually a mistranslation for "white raisins." Bet you never heard that! My feeling—call it a guess or an intuition—is that this is not how madrassas train their suicide bombers. My other feeling is that Updike could have placed this rather secondhand show of his recent learning in some other part of the novel.

But where would that be? Almost immediately after Ahmad's graduation, he is in the throes of a conspiracy that is too ingenious for words. While delivering furniture one day, he drops off an ottoman (get it?) that, when cut open in a sinister Muslim home tenanted only by men, proves to be stuffed with "quantities of green American currency." The young inductee to terrorism cannot make out the denominations of these non-blue and non-brown notes, but "to judge by the reverence with which the men are counting and arranging the bills on the tile-top table, the denominations are high." No bill is higher than a hundred, which doesn't buy you much high explosive these days, but one imagines—if one absolutely must—that a whole ottoman can also hold a goodly number of ones and fives. This novel and risky and cumbersome way of delivering cash only whets Ahmad's appetite for the more intoxicating suras of the Koran. Before we can catch our breath, he is at the wheel of his jam-packed juggernaut of annihilation (and still registering strip malls and other urban deformities), and is pressing ahead

with his desperate plan. Never mind that the plot has been exposed by a cunning last-minute call from the frumpy Washington bureaucrat sister to the impossibly bulbous homebound New Jersey sister. And never mind that this exposure has not led the forces of Homeland Security to close the Lincoln Tunnel. No, stopping Ahmad comes down to the crushed, demoralized Jack Levy, who manages, with exquisite timing, to flag down Ahmad's truck and climb aboard and talk him out of it at the very last available cinematic second.

After I had sent Terrorist windmilling across the room in a spasm of boredom and annoyance, I retrieved it to check my notes in its margins. In Roger's Version, I remembered, Updike had described blacks and Jews as the only "magical" people in America. In this sloppy latest effort he becomes more inclusive. Here's Jack rhapsodizing about Ahmad's sluttish mama, with whom he has a torrid moment in which this constant reader could not suspend disbelief:

The Irish in her, he thinks. That's what he loves, that's what he can't do without. The moxie, the defiant spark of craziness people get if they're sat on long enough—the Irish have it, the blacks and Jews have it, but it's died in him.

This is a fair-enough attempt to push all the clichés about Irish-Americans into one brief statement, and I can only think that it's put in as some kind of oblique tribute to the New York Fire Department on 9/11. Not for them the fate of the flabby, torpid average Americans, thoughtlessly reaping by their very herdlike existence the whirlwind of jihad-ist revenge.

When writing *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, which also opened its action in New Jersey, Updike gave us considerable insight into the Reverend Clarence Wilmot as he endured a full-dress crisis of Calvinist conscience. There was knowledge to be won from the portrayal, and some dry humor, and some imaginative sympathy. A good deal of work on the Presbyterian texts had been performed and was lightly but learnedly deployed. With *The Coup*, also, Updike had been somewhat in advance of the tremors that he was sensing. But he is now some considerable distance behind the story, giving the impression of someone who has been keeping up with the "Inside Radical Islam" features in something like *Newsweek*. It could be, I suppose, that he might write better about "exotic religions" if he kept his characters overseas, in their "exotic settings," and tried to make sense of them there. He includes one more religious set piece in *Terrorist*, of a charismatic black preacher jiving away at his congregation. Irrelevant to the "plot," this is justified by the black girl in whom Ahmad is briefly interested. As if to confirm his loathing for American sexual degeneracy, she has a boyfriend-pimp named Tylenol Jones—the sort of name that Tom Wolfe might come up with on a bad day.

The novel's conclusion is much the same as that of Updike's *New Yorker* essay. He looks at the quotidian crowd in Manhattan, "scuttling, hurrying, intent in the milky morning sun upon some plan or scheme or hope they are hugging to themselves, their reason for living another day, each impaled live upon the pin of consciousness, fixed upon self-advancement and self-preservation. That and only that." Insects, in fact. Ahmad resents them for taking away his God, and, really, one is hard put not to

empathize with the poor boy. Given some admittedly stiff competition, Updike has produced one of the worst pieces of writing from any grown-up source since the events he has so unwisely tried to draw upon.

(The Atlantic, June 2006)

John Updike, Part Two: Mr. Geniality

Review of *Due Considerations: Essays and Criticism*, by John Updike.

THE ELEMENTS OF THIS COLLECTION fully justify the rather modest promise offered by the title. All things are indeed considered, and they are mostly considered in a highly considerate manner. As to the “due” part, John Updike himself informs us: “Bills come due; dues must be paid. After eight years, I was due for another collection of nonfictional prose.” To which one might add that he seems determined to give everyone his or her due. Indeed, in a highly affable preface he wonders if his only fault might be a tendency to be critical—in the ordinary sense of the term—at all. Rereading his book reviews, he wonders aloud “if their customary geniality, almost effusive in the presence of a foreign writer or a factual topic, didn’t somewhat sour when faced with a novel by a fellow-countryman.” Should he perhaps have been a little kinder to E. L. Doctorow, Don DeLillo, and Norman Rush or (by implication) a fraction more harsh with Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Haruki Murakami? Such scruple no doubt does its author credit, and yet “Customary Genialities” would surely have been a rather insipid title.

In fact, on the sole occasion where Updike does display a hint of fang, it is in his treatment of Michel Houellebecq, whose novel *The Possibility of an Island* he is determined not to allow to shock him. Nonetheless, after giving a few graphic staves of Houellebecq’s not always bracing combo of obscenity and nihilism, he comments mildly that a microcosm that excludes such things as parenting and compassion is wanting in verisimilitude, and concludes that “the sensations Houellebecq gives us are not nutritive.” By Updikean standards, this counts as a pretty stern condemnation. In partial contrast, when one consults the generous review of DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis*, a notice that now causes its author such misgiving, we find the worst he can say is that “the trouble with a tale where anything can happen is that somehow nothing happens.” I can’t see DeLillo exactly biting through his umbrella handle with rage on reading that lenient verdict.

In a culture more and more dominated by dunces and frauds, it might be salutary if one of our senior critics laid about himself with a bit more brio. But Updike does not so much avoid this task as rise above it. He chooses to review classical authors, from Emerson to Proust, or, among the living or contemporary, only those who meet some kind of gold standard. And he regards the responsibility of the reviewer to be the rendering of a fair précis of the work under consideration, where the word “fair” has inescapable consequences of its own. The nearest we get to a review of the “popular” is a treatment of George MacDonald Fraser’s “Flashman” series, and again, amid

the punctilious summary of the subject's many admirable points, the few cautious reproaches tend to stand out. Which admirer of Fraser's "cheerful potboilers" would not concede that his historical endnotes are "distractingly informative" or ruefully agree that "to keep his pot boiling, Fraser keeps tossing fresh female bodies into it"?

I am myself familiar with the reviewing cliché, from both ends of the business, so I say deliberately that Updike's scope is rather breathtaking (from Isaac Babel straight to James Thurber on successive pages), and I add that he seems almost incapable of writing badly. When I do not know the subject well—as in his finely illustrated art reviews of Bruegel, Dürer, and Goya—I learn much from what Updike has to impart. When he considers an author I love, like Proust or Czeslaw Milosz, I often find myself appreciating familiar things in a new way. I enjoy the little feuilletons he appends, for example on the ten greatest moments of the American libido. And I admire the way he can construct a classical sentence that makes an abrupt, useful turn to the American demotic: "Having patiently read both versions" of Philip Larkin's *Collected Poems*, "this reviewer believes that the second, chastened version, confining itself to the four trade volumes Larkin supervised and the uncollected poems 'published in other places,' does give the verse itself a better shake."

This appears in one of the best long treatments of Larkin's poetry I have ever read. Those of us who adore this work have a tendency to feel personally addressed by it and to resent any other commentators as interlopers. Updike seems almost to know what we are thinking. It's of interest, also, that his own vestigial Christianity—or do I mean surviving attachment to Christianity?—proves on other pages to be not dissimilar to Larkin's own synthesis, in "Aubade" and in "Church Going," of a bleak materialism fused with an admiration for the liturgy and the architecture.

I wrote "yuck" in the margin only twice, first when Updike describes Kierkegaard (in an otherwise very penetrating essay) as "the great Dane," and second when, summarizing Peter Carey's *Theft: A Love Story*, he writes that someone turns up "strangled in a Nice (not nice) hotel." One is much more inclined to make approving ticks, as when Updike notices the prehistory of Doctorow's Ragtime character Coalhouse Walker in *The March*, or when he spots Tulla Pokriefke, a minor Danzig character from *Cat and Mouse* and *Dog Years*, turning up again in Günter Grass's *Crabwalk*.

Yet it was in a paragraph of the *Crabwalk* review that I began to realize what was irritating me. Discussing Grass's rather recent discovery that Germans had also been the victims of atrocities, Updike asks:

Can a nation war against a regime without warring against the people the regime rules? Is the very concept "war crime" tautological, given the context of determined violence? As Kofi Annan, the United Nations secretary general, said a few weeks ago, "War is always a catastrophe." Are discriminations possible between appropriate and excessive bombing, between legitimate and atrocious ship-sinkings, between proper combat of armed soldiers and such tactics as using civilians, including children, as human shields or disguising an ambush as a surrender? An American soldier recently wounded in such an ambush, when interviewed on television, shrugged and, with strik-

ing dispassion, conceded that, given the great imbalance of firepower between the Coalition and Saddam Hussein's Iraq, he could hardly blame his attackers for their murderous ruse.

This is evenhandedness taken almost to the point of masochism. (What of the "imbalance" between the jihad-ists and the girls' schools they blow up?) And Updike doesn't choose to answer any of the questions—familiar enough at a sophomore level, as is Annan's affectless remark—that he poses. I have the suspicion that he is overcompensating for the rather lame defense of the war in Vietnam that he mounted in his memoir *Self-Consciousness*. The same thought recurred to me in a rereading of his offhand "Talk of the Town" report, written for the *New Yorker* after he watched the collapse of the twin towers from across the river in Brooklyn Heights:

War is conducted with a fury that requires abstraction—that turns a plane of peaceful passengers, children included, into a missile the faceless enemy deserves. The other side has the abstractions; we have only the mundane duties of survivors—to pick up the pieces, to bury the dead, to take more precautions, to go on living.

Really? Fair-mindedness here threatens to decline into something completely passive, neutral and inert. Come to think of it, what is the most celebrated statement about giving someone his due?

(The New York Times Book Review, November 4, 2007)

Vidal Loco

MORE THAN A DECADE AGO I sat on a panel in New York to review the life and work of Oscar Wilde. My fellow panelist was that heroic old queen Quentin Crisp, perhaps the only man ever to have made a success of the part of Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Inevitably there arose the question: Is there an Oscar Wilde for our own day? The moderator proposed Gore Vidal, and, really, once that name had been mentioned, there didn't seem to be any obvious rival.

Like Wilde, Gore Vidal combined tough-mindedness with subversive wit (*The Importance of Being Earnest* is actually a very mordant satire on Victorian England) and had the rare gift of being amusing about serious things as well as serious about amusing ones. Like Wilde, he was able to combine radical political opinions with a lifestyle that was anything but solemn. And also like Wilde, he was almost never "off": His private talk was as entertaining and shocking as his more prepared public appearances. Admirers of both men, and of their polymorphous perversity, could happily debate whether either of them was better at fiction or in the essay form.

I was fortunate enough to know Gore a bit in those days. The price of knowing him was exposure to some of his less adorable traits, which included his pachydermatous memory for the least slight or grudge and a very, very minor tendency to bring up the Jewish question in contexts where it didn't quite belong. One was made aware, too, that he suspected Franklin Roosevelt of playing a dark hand in bringing on Pearl Harbor

and still nurtured an admiration in his breast for the dashing Charles Lindbergh, leader of the American isolationist right in the 1930s. But these tics and eccentricities, which I did criticize in print, seemed more or less under control, and meanwhile he kept on saying things one wished one had said oneself. Of a certain mushy spiritual writer named Idries Shah: "These books are a great deal harder to read than they were to write." Of a paragraph by Herman Wouk: "This is not at all bad, except as prose." He once said to me of the late Teddy Kennedy, who was then in his low period of red-faced, engorged, and abandoned boyo-hood, that he exhibited "all the charm of three hundred pounds of condemned veal." Who but Gore could begin a discussion by saying that the three most dispiriting words in the English language were "Joyce Carol Oates"? In an interview, he told me that his life's work was "making sentences." It would have been more acute to say that he made a career out of pronouncing them.

However, if it's true even to any degree that we were all changed by September 11, 2001, it's probably truer of Vidal that it made him more the way he already was, and accentuated a crackpot strain that gradually asserted itself as dominant. If you look at his writings from that time, thrown together in a couple of cheap paperbacks titled *Dreaming War* and *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace*, you will find the more crass notions of Michael Moore or Oliver Stone being expressed in language that falls some distance short of the Wildean ideal. "Meanwhile, Media was assigned its familiar task of inciting public opinion against Osama bin Laden, still not the proven mastermind." To that "sentence," abysmal as it is in so many ways, Vidal put his name in November 2002. A small anthology of half-argued and half-written shock pieces either insinuated or asserted that the administration had known in advance of the attacks on New York and Washington and was seeking a pretext to build a long-desired pipeline across Afghanistan. (Not much sign of that, incidentally, not that the luckless Afghans mightn't welcome it.) For academic authority in this Grassy Knoll enterprise, Vidal relied heavily on the man he thought had produced "the best, most balanced report" on 9/11, a certain Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed, of the Institute for Policy Research & Development, whose book *The War on Freedom* had been brought to us by what Vidal called "a small but reputable homeland publisher." Mr. Ahmed on inspection proved to be a risible individual wedded to half-baked conspiracy-mongering, his "Institute" a one-room sideshow in the English seaside town of Brighton, and his publisher an outfit called "Media Monitors Network" in association with "Tree of Life," whose now-deceased Web site used to offer advice on the ever awkward question of self-publishing. And to think that there was once a time when Gore Vidal could summon Lincoln to the pages of a novel or dispute points of strategy with Henry Cabot Lodge.

It became more and more difficult to speak to Vidal after this (and less fun too), but then I noticed something about his last volume of memoirs, *Point to Point Navigation*, which brought his life story up to 2006. Though it contained a good ration of abuse directed at Bush and Cheney, it didn't make even a gesture to the wild-eyed and croaking stuff that Mr. Ahmed had been purveying. This meant one of two things: Either Vidal didn't believe it any longer or he wasn't prepared to put such sorry, silly,

sinister stuff in a volume published by Doubleday, read by his literary and intellectual peers, and dedicated to the late Barbara Epstein. The second interpretation, while slightly contemptible, would be better than nothing and certainly a good deal better than the first.

But I have now just finished reading a long interview conducted by Johann Hari of the London Independent (Hari being a fairly consecrated admirer of his) in which Vidal decides to go slumming again and to indulge the lowest in himself and in his followers. He openly says that the Bush administration was “probably” in on the 9/11 attacks, a criminal complicity that would “certainly fit them to a T”; that Timothy McVeigh was “a noble boy,” no more murderous than Generals Patton and Eisenhower; and that “Roosevelt saw to it that we got that war” by inciting the Japanese to attack Pearl Harbor. Coming a bit more up-to-date, Vidal says that the whole American experiment can now be described as “a failure”; the country will soon take its place “somewhere between Brazil and Argentina, where it belongs”; President Obama will be buried in the wreckage—broken by “the madhouse”—after the United States has been humiliated in Afghanistan and the Chinese emerge supreme. We shall then be “the Yellow Man’s burden,” and Beijing will “have us running the coolie cars, or whatever it is they have in the way of transport.” Asian subjects never seem to bring out the finest in Vidal: He used to say it was Japan that was dominating the world economy, and that in the face of that other peril “there is now only one way out. The time has come for the United States to make common cause with the Soviet Union.” That was in 1986—not perhaps the ideal year to have proposed an embrace of Moscow, and certainly not as good a year as 1942, when Franklin Roosevelt did join forces with the USSR, against Japan and Nazi Germany, in a war that Vidal never ceases to say was (a) America’s fault and (b) not worth fighting.

Rounding off his interview, an obviously shocked Mr. Hari tried for a change of pace and asked Vidal if he felt like saying anything about his recently deceased rivals, John Updike, William F. Buckley Jr., and Norman Mailer. He didn’t manage to complete his question before being interrupted. “Updike was nothing. Buckley was nothing with a flair for publicity. Mailer was a flawed publicist, too, but at least there were signs every now and then of a working brain.” One sadly notices, as with the foregoing barking and effusions, the utter want of any grace or generosity, as well as the entire absence of any wit or profundity. Sarcastic, tired flippancy has stolen the place of the first, and lugubrious resentment has deposed the second. Oh, just in closing, then, since Vidal was in London, did he have a word to say about England? “This isn’t a country, it’s an American aircraft carrier.” Good grief.

For some years now, the old boy’s stock-in-trade has been that of the last Roman: the stoic eminence who with unclouded eyes foresees the coming end of the noble republic. Such an act doesn’t require a toga, but it does demand a bit of dignity. Vidal’s phrasings sometimes used to have a certain rotundity and extravagance, but now he has descended straight to the cheap, and even to the counterfeit. What business

does this patrician have in the gutter markets, where paranoids jabber and the coinage is debased by every sort of vulgarity?

If Vidal ever reads this, I suppose I know what he will say. Asked about our differences a short while ago at a public meeting in New York, he replied, “You know, he identified himself for many years as the heir to me. And unfortunately for him, I didn’t die. I just kept going on and on and on.” (One report of the event said that this not-so-rapier-like reply had the audience in “stitches”: Vidal in his decline has fans like David Letterman’s, who laugh in all the wrong places lest they suspect themselves of not having a good time.) But his first sentence precisely inverts the truth. Many years ago he wrote to me unprompted—I have the correspondence—and freely offered to nominate me as his living successor, dauphin, or, as the Italians put it, delfino. He very kindly inscribed a number of his own books to me in this way, and I asked him for permission to use his original letter on the jacket of one of mine. I stopped making use of the endorsement after 9/11, as he well knows. I have no wish to commit literary patricide, or to assassinate Vidal’s character—a character which appears, in any case, to have committed suicide.

I don’t in the least mind his clumsy and nasty attempt to re-write his history with me, but I find I do object to the crank-revisionist and denialist history he is now peddling about everything else, as well as to the awful, spiteful, miserable way—“going on and on and on,” indeed—in which he has finished up by doing it. Oscar Wilde was never mean-spirited, and never became an Ancient Mariner, either.

(Vanity Fair, February 2010)

America the Banana Republic

IN A STATEMENT on the huge state-sponsored salvage of private bankruptcy that was first proposed last September, a group of Republican lawmakers, employing one of the very rudest words in their party’s thesaurus, described the proposed rescue of the busted finance and discredited credit sectors as “socialistic.” There was a sort of half-truth to what they said. But they would have been very much nearer the mark—and rather more ironic and revealing at their own expense—if they had completed the sentence and described the actual situation as what it is: “socialism for the rich and free enterprise for the rest.”

I have heard arguments about whether it was Milton Friedman or Gore Vidal who first came up with this apt summary of a collusion between the overweening state and certain favored monopolistic concerns, whereby the profits can be privatized and the debts conveniently socialized, but another term for the same system would be “banana republic.”

What are the main principles of a banana republic? A very salient one might be that it has a paper currency which is an international laughingstock: a definition that would immediately qualify today’s United States of America. We may snicker at the

thriller from Wasilla, who got her first passport only last year, yet millions of once well-traveled Americans are now forced to ask if they can afford even the simplest overseas trip when their folding money is apparently issued by the Boardwalk press of Atlantic City. But still, the chief principle of banana-ism is that of kleptocracy, whereby those in positions of influence use their time in office to maximize their own gains, always ensuring that any shortfall is made up by those unfortunates whose daily life involves earning money rather than making it. At all costs, therefore, the one principle that must not operate is the principle of accountability. In fact, if possible, even the similar-sounding term (deriving from the same root) of accountancy must be jettisoned as well. Just listen to Christopher Cox, chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission, as he explained how the legal guardians of fair and honest play had made those principles go away. On September 26, he announced that “the last six months have made it abundantly clear that voluntary regulation does not work.” Now listen to how he enlarges on this somewhat lame statement. It seems to him on reflection that “voluntary regulation”

was fundamentally flawed from the beginning, because investment banks could opt in or out of supervision voluntarily. The fact that investment bank holding companies could withdraw from this voluntary supervision at their discretion diminished the perceived mandate of the program and weakened its effectiveness.

Yes, I think one might say that. Indeed, the “perceived mandate” of a parole program that allowed those enrolled in it to take off their ankle bracelets at any time they chose to leave the house might also have been open to the charge that it was self-contradictory and wired for its own self-destruction. But in banana-republicland, like Alice’s Wonderland, words tend to lose their meaning and to dissolve into the neutral, responsibility-free verbiage of a Cox.

And still, in so many words in the phrasing of the first bailout request to be placed before Congress, there appeared the brazen demand that, once passed, the “package” be subject to virtually no more congressional supervision or oversight. This extraordinary proposal shows the utter contempt in which the deliberative bodies on Capitol Hill are held by the unelected and inscrutable financial panjandrums. But welcome to another aspect of banana-republicdom. In a banana republic, the members of the national legislature will be (a) largely for sale and (b) consulted only for ceremonial and rubber-stamp purposes some time after all the truly important decisions have already been made elsewhere.

I was very struck, as the liquefaction of a fantasy-based system proceeded, to read an observation by Professor Jeffrey A. Sonnenfeld, of the Yale School of Management. Referring to those who had demanded—successfully—to be indemnified by the customers and clients whose trust they had betrayed, the professor phrased it like this:

These are people who want to be rewarded as if they were entrepreneurs. But they aren’t. They didn’t have anything at risk.

That’s almost exactly right, except that they did have something at risk. What they put at risk, though, was other people’s money and other people’s property. How

very agreeable it must be to sit at a table in a casino where nobody seems to lose, and to play with a big stack of chips furnished to you by other people, and to have the further assurance that, if anything should ever chance to go wrong, you yourself are guaranteed by the tax dollars of those whose money you are throwing about in the first place! It's enough to make a cat laugh. These members of the "business community" are indeed not buccaneering and risk-taking innovators. They are instead, to quote my old friend Nicholas von Hoffman about another era, those who were standing around with tubas in their arms on the day it began to rain money. And then, when the rain of gold stopped and the wind changed, they were the only ones who didn't feel the blast. Daniel Mudd and Richard Syron, the former bosses of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, have departed with \$9.43 million in retirement benefits. I append no comment.

Another feature of a banana republic is the tendency for tribal and cultish elements to flourish at the expense of reason and good order. Did it not seem quite bizarre, as the first vote on the rescue of private greed by public money was being taken, that Congress should adjourn for a religious holiday—Rosh Hashanah—in a country where the majority of Jews are secular? What does this say, incidentally, about the separation of religion and government? And am I the only one who finds it distinctly weird to reflect that the last head of the Federal Reserve and the current head of the Treasury, Alan Greenspan and Hank "The Hammer" Paulson, should be respectively the votaries of the cults of Ayn Rand and Mary Baker Eddy, two of the battiest females ever to have infested the American scene? That Paulson should have gone down on one knee to Speaker Nancy Pelosi, as if prayer and beseechment might get the job done, strikes me as further evidence that sheer superstition and incantation have played their part in all this. Remember the scene at the end of *Peter Pan*, where the children are told that, if they don't shout out aloud that they all believe in fairies, then Tinker Bell's gonna fucking die? That's what the fall of 2008 was like, and quite a fall it was, at that.

And before we leave the theme of falls and collapses, I hope you read the findings of the Department of Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration that followed the plunge of Interstate 35W in Minneapolis into the Mississippi River last August. Sixteen states, after inspecting their own bridges, were compelled to close some, lower the weight limits of others, and make emergency repairs. Of the nation's 600,000 bridges, 12 percent were found to be structurally deficient. This is an almost perfect metaphor for Third World conditions: A money class fleeces the banking system while the very trunk of the national tree is permitted to rot and crash.

At a dinner party in New York during the Wall Street meltdown, where the citizens were still serious enough to do what they are supposed to do—break off the chat and tune in to the speech of the President of the United States and Leader of the Free World—the same impression of living in a surreal country that was a basket-case pensioner of the international monetary system was hugely reinforced. The staring eyes (close enough together for their owner to use a monocle) and the robotic delivery were a fine accompaniment to the already sweaty "Don't panic. Don't whatever you

do panic!” injunction that was being so hastily improvised. At a White House meeting with his financial wizards—and I mean the term in its literal sense—the same chief executive is reported to have whimpered, “This sucker could go down,” or words to that effect. It’s not difficult to imagine the scene. So add one more banana-republic feature to the profile: a president who is a figure-head one day and a despot the next, and who goes all wide-eyed and calls on witch doctors when the portents don’t seem altogether reassuring.

Now ask yourself another question. Has anybody resigned, from either the public or the private sectors (overlapping so lavishly as they now do)? Has anybody even offered to resign? Have you heard anybody in authority apologize, as in: “So very sorry about your savings and pensions and homes and college funds, and I feel personally rotten about it”? Have you even heard the question being posed? Okay, then, has anybody been fired? Any regulator, any supervisor, any runaway would-be golden-parachute artist? Anyone responsible for smugly putting the word “derivative” like a virus into the system? To ask the question is to answer it. The most you can say is that some people have had to take a slightly early retirement, but a retirement very much sweetened by the wherewithal on which to retire. That doesn’t quite count. These are the rules that apply in Zimbabwe or Equatorial Guinea or Venezuela, where the political big boys mimic what is said about our hedge funds and investment banks: the stupid mantra about being “too big to fail.”

In a recent posting on the New York Times Web site, Paul Krugman said that the United States was now reduced to the status of a banana republic with nuclear weapons. This is a variation on the old joke about the former Soviet Union (“Burkina Faso with rockets”). It’s also wrong: In fact, it’s the reverse of the truth. In banana republics, admittedly, very often the only efficient behavior is displayed by the army (and the secret police). But our case is rather different. In addition to exhibiting extraordinary efficiency and, most especially under the generalship of David Petraeus, performing some great feats of arms and ingenuity, the American armed forces manifest all the professionalism and integrity that our rulers and oligarchs lack. Who was it who the stricken inhabitants of New Orleans and later of the Texas coastline yearned to see? Who was it who informed the blithering and dithering idiots at FEMA that they could have as many troops as they could remember to ask for, even as volunteers were embarking for Afghanistan and Iraq? What is one of the main engines of integration for blacks and immigrants, as well as one of the finest providers of education and training for those whom the system had previously failed? It may be true that the government has succeeded in degrading our armed forces as well—tasking them with absurdities and atrocities like Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib—but this only makes the banana-republic point in an even more emphatic way.

(Vanity Fair online, October 9, 2008)

An Anglosphere Future

Review of *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples Since 1900*, by Andrew Roberts.

HAVING DEVoured the Sherlock Holmes stories as a boy, I did what their author hoped and graduated to his much finer historical novels. The best of these, *The White Company*, appeared in 1890; it describes the recruitment and deployment of a detachment of Hampshire archers during the reign of King Edward III, a period that, as Arthur Conan Doyle phrased it, “constituted the greatest epoch in English History—an epoch when both the French and the Scottish kings were prisoners in London.”

This book, it’s of interest to note, also influenced Dwight Eisenhower’s boyhood (I owe this information to the extraordinary *Arthur Conan Doyle: A Life in Letters*, edited by Jon Lellenberg, Daniel Stashower, and Charles Foley). For there came a time when this child of German-American parents also had to muster a considerable force from Hampshire headquarters, and launch them across the Channel in one of the greatest military interventions in history. Of course, on D-Day, Eisenhower took care to have a French leader on his side (admittedly a turbulent and mutinous one), and Scottish regiments were as usual to the fore in the storming of the Atlantic Wall. But it’s funny how one somehow can thrill to the same tradition, whether it’s the medieval yeomen and bowmen of Anglo-Saxondom or the modern, mechanized, multinational coalition against fascism.

Doyle was only a few years from his first trip to the United States when he published *The White Company*, which he dedicated as follows: “To the hope of the future, the reunion of the English-speaking races, this little chronicle of our common ancestry is inscribed.” Around the same time, two other renowned figures—Cecil Rhodes and Rudyard Kipling—made similar pitches. Two monuments, the Rhodes scholarships and the poem “The White Man’s Burden,” still survive in American life. The purpose of the scholarships was to proselytize for the return of the U.S. to the British imperial fold. The poem, written for Theodore Roosevelt, who passed it to Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, sought to influence the vote of the U.S. Senate on the annexation of the Philippines. (The poem’s subtitle was “The United States and the Philippine Islands.”) In urging the U.S. to pick up the scepter of empire, Kipling had one hope and one fear: hope of Anglo-American solidarity against rising German power; and fear of a revival of the demagogic atmosphere of 1894 and 1895, in which America and Britain almost went to war after the United States, citing the Monroe Doctrine, intervened in a border dispute between Britain and Venezuela.

Doyle’s visit coincided with the height of this anti-British feeling, and at a dinner in his honor in Detroit he had this to say:

You Americans have lived up to now within your own palings, and know nothing of the real world outside. But now your land is filled up, and you will be compelled to mix more with the other nations. When you do so you will find that there is only

one which can at all understand your ways and your aspirations, or will have the least sympathy. That is the mother country which you are now so fond of insulting. She is an Empire, and you will soon be an Empire also, and only then will you understand each other, and you will realize that you have only one real friend in the world.

After Detroit, Doyle spent Thanksgiving with Kipling and his American wife, Carrie, in Brattleboro, Vermont. It is of unquantifiable elements such as this that the Anglo-American story, or the English-speaking story, is composed.

To a remarkable extent, Americans continue to assume a deep understanding with the English—one that, in their view, reflects a common heritage much more than it does anything as mundane as a common interest. This assumption, at least as exemplified in the Bush-Blair alliance that sent expeditionary forces to Afghanistan and Mesopotamia, has recently taken a severe bruising on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as north of the U.S. border and in the countries of the antipodes: the historical homelands of the “English-speaking” adventure. The conservative British historian Andrew Roberts, author of the important new book *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples Since 1900*, regards this as a matter of regret, as do I, though for different reasons. For no less different reasons, he and I believe that the “Anglosphere,” to give it a recently updated name, may have a future as well as a past.

The idea is certainly in the air. Earlier this year, President Bush hosted a lunch for Roberts in the Oval Office, with senior advisers Karl Rove, Stephen Hadley, and Josh Bolten in attendance, and Dick Cheney was seen holding Roberts’s book on a trip to Afghanistan. Other writers, including John O’Sullivan, have recently written about the unique virtues of Anglo- Americanism.

Roberts’s book, though, exhibits some of the potential problems that can befall a defense of the Anglosphere. One shows up in its title. You will notice that Arthur Conan Doyle referred to the English-speaking “races.” On the model of Winston Churchill’s famous book of almost the same name, Roberts prefers the term “peoples.” But this is to make a distinction without much difference. No such thing as an Australian or a Canadian “race” exists, so one either means to describe people of originally Anglo-Saxon “stock” (as we used to say) or one doesn’t. It hasn’t been very long since Lionel Trilling was denied tenure on the grounds, frankly stated, that a Jew could not understand English literature. Without an appreciation of the ways in which the language and ethnicity are quite distinct, a kind of imperialist nostalgia is likely.

Regrettably, Roberts doesn’t always avoid such nostalgia, devoting a major portion of his book to vindicating episodes in the British colonial past that most Tories long ago ceased to defend. He represents General Reginald Dyer’s massacre of protesters in the Indian city of Amritsar in 1919, for example, as a necessary law-and-order measure. He defends the catastrophic Anglo-French-Israeli invasion of Egypt in 1956: a folly that Eisenhower had to terminate. He writes leniently about the white settler regimes in southern Africa. And he never misses an opportunity to insult Irish nationalism, while whitewashing the Tory and Orange policies that led first to rebellion and second to bloody partition.

Determined to shoehorn everything into one grand theory, Roberts also flirts with tautology. For example, he mentions the opening of the Hoover Dam at Boulder City and comments: “The English-speaking peoples had long excelled at creating the wonders of the modern industrial world: the Great Eastern, the Brooklyn Bridge, the Sydney Bridge, the American, Canadian and Australian transcontinental railroads, the Panama Canal among them.” A theory that tries to explain everything explains nothing: We can all think of other countries that have accomplished industrial and engineering marvels.

Further, the many advances in physics and medicine attributed to Jewish refugees in America (especially, for some reason, from Hungary) are slighted if credited to the genius of Englishness. Roberts describes radar as “another vital invention of the English-speaking peoples”—an insult to international scientific cooperation. One might add that Ferdinand de Lesseps did not shout orders in English when he organized the building of the Suez Canal. And the Magna Carta wasn’t written in English.

Nonetheless, properly circumscribed, the idea of an “Anglosphere” can constitute something meaningful. We should not commit the mistake of “thinking with the blood,” as D. H. Lawrence once put it, however, but instead emphasize a certain shared tradition, capacious enough to include a variety of peoples and ethnicities and expressed in a language—perhaps here I do betray a bias—uniquely hostile to euphemisms for tyranny. In his postwar essay “Towards European Unity,” George Orwell raised the possibility that the ideas of democracy and liberty might face extinction in a world polarized between superpowers but that they also might hope to survive in some form in “the English-speaking parts of it.” English is, of course, the language of the English and American Revolutions, whose ideas and values continue to live after those of more recent revolutions have been discredited and died.

Consider in this light one of Nelson Mandela’s first acts as elected president of South Africa: applying to rejoin the British Commonwealth, from which South Africa had found itself expelled in the 1960s (by a British Tory government, incidentally) because of its odious racism. Many people forget that the Soweto revolt in the 1980s, which ultimately spelled apartheid’s downfall, exploded after the Nationalist regime made the medium of school instruction exclusively Afrikaans, banning the classroom use of English, along with Xhosa and Zulu.

More recently, in July 2005, Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh came to Oxford University to receive an honorary degree and delivered a speech, not uncontroversial in India itself, in which he observed that many of India’s splendors as a rising twenty-first-century superpower—from railroads to democracy to a law-bound civil service—were the result of its connection with England. “If there is one phenomenon on which the sun cannot set,” Singh observed, “it is the world of the English-speaking peoples, in which the people of Indian origin are the single largest component.” He added that the English language was a key element in the flourishing of India’s high-tech sector. Few would have wanted to point this out, but it was Karl Marx who argued that India

might benefit in this way from being colonized by England and not (and he spelled out the alternatives) Russia or Persia or Turkey.

We owe the term “Anglosphere” in large part to the historian and poet Robert Conquest, who this summer celebrated his ninetieth year of invincible common sense and courage in the fight against totalitarian thinking. In an appendix to his marvelous 2005 book *The Dragons of Expectation: Reality and Delusion in the Course of History*, he offers a detailed proposal for a broad Anglosphere alliance among the United States, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific Islands, and the Caribbean, with the multiethnic English-speaking island of Bermuda as the enterprise’s headquarters. Though he unfortunately does not include India, he does find it “perfectly conceivable that other countries particularly close to our condition might also accede—for example Norway and Gambia, in each of which English is widely understood and in each of which the political and civic structure is close to that of the rest of the states.” Quixotic as all this may sound, it probably understates the growing influence of English as a world language—the language of business and the Internet and air-traffic control, as well as of literature (or of literatures, given the emergence, first predicted by Orwell, of a distinct English written by Indians).

The shape of the world since September 11 has, in fact, shown the outline of such an alliance in practice. Everybody knows of Tony Blair’s solidarity with the United States, but when the chips were down, Australian forces also went to Iraq. Attacked domestically for being “all the way with the USA,” Australian prime minister John Howard made the imperishable observation that in times of crisis, there wasn’t much point in being 75 percent a friend. Howard won reelection in 2004. Even in relatively neutralist Canada, an openly pro-U.S. government headed by Stephen Harper was elected in 2006, surprising pundits who predicted that a tide of anti-Americanism made such an outcome impossible.

Howard’s statement has a great deal of history behind it. Roberts defines that history as an intimate alliance that defeated German Wilhelmine imperialism in 1918, the Nazi-Fascist Axis in 1945, and international Communism in 1989. This long arc of cooperation means that a young officer in, say, a Scottish regiment has a good chance of having two or even three ancestors who fought in the same trenches as did Americans and New Zealanders. No military force evolved by NATO, let alone the European Union, can hope to begin with such a natural commonality, the lack of which was painfully evident in Europe’s post-1989 Balkan bungling (from which a largely Anglo-American initiative had to rescue it).

The world now faces a challenge from a barbarism that is no less menacing than its three predecessors—and may even be more so. And in this new struggle, a post-9/11 America came—not a moment too soon—to appreciate the vital fact that India had been fighting bin-Ladenism (and had been its target) far longer than we had. That fact alone should have mandated a change of alignment away from the chronically unreliable Pakistani regime that had used the Taliban as its colonial proxy in Afghanistan. But it helped that India was also a polyethnic secular democracy with a largely English-

speaking military, political, and commercial leadership. We're only in the earliest stages of this new relationship, which so far depends largely on a nuclear agreement with New Delhi, and with the exception of Silicon Valley, the U.S. does not yet boast a politically active Indian population. But the future of American-Indian relations is crucial to our struggle against jihad-ism, as well as to our management of the balance of power with China.

In considering the future of the broader Anglosphere tradition, especially in the context of anti-jihad-ism, it may help to contrast it with the available alternatives. As a supranational body, the United Nations has obviously passed the point of diminishing returns. Inaugurated as an Anglo-American "coalition of the willing" against Hitler and his allies, the UN—in its failure to confront the genocides in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Darfur and in its abject refusal to enforce its own resolutions in the case of Iraq—is a prisoner of the "unilateralism" of France, Russia, and, to a lesser extent, China. NATO may have been somewhat serviceable in Kosovo (the first engagement in which it ever actually fought as an alliance), but it has performed raggedly in Afghanistan. The European Union has worked as an economic solvent on redundant dictatorships in Spain, Portugal, and Greece, and also on old irredentist squabbles in Ireland, Cyprus, and Eastern Europe. But it is about to reach, if it has not already, a membership saturation point that will disable any effective decision-making capacity. A glaring example of this disability is the EU's utter failure to compose a viable constitution. Roberts correctly notes that "along with over two centuries of amendments the entire (readable and easily intelligible) U.S. Constitution can be printed out onto twelve pages of A4-sized paper; the (unreadable and impenetrably complicated) proposed European Constitution ran to 265." (Roberts doesn't mention the lucidity and brevity of the British constitution, perhaps because the motherland of the English-speaking peoples has absentmindedly failed to evolve one in written form, and thus will, on the demise of the present queen, have as head of state a strange middle-aged man with a soft spot for Islam and bizarre taste in wives.)

But the temptation to construe the Anglosphere too narrowly persists. Another recent book, *The Anglosphere Challenge*, by James C. Bennett, expresses astonishment at the low price that the British establishment has put on its old Commonwealth and Dominion ties, and some hostility to the way in which European connections now take precedence. But viewed historically, it is surely neither surprising nor alarming that the British decided to reverse Winston Churchill's greatest mistake—abstaining from original membership in the European Common Market—and to associate more closely with the neighboring landmass. As Roberts himself concedes, Britain now enjoys a unique Atlanticist partnership along with full and energetic participation in the councils of the European Union.

For most of my adult life, British prime ministers were classifiable as either Atlanticist or European in orientation. Thus, the conservative Edward Heath fixated on Brussels and distrusted Washington, while the Labour leaders Harold Wilson and James Callaghan were Euro-isolationists and little better than dittos to presidents

Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, respectively. In fact, with the notable exception of Margaret Thatcher, the Anglo-American relationship has fared rather better under the British center-Left. Perhaps this has something to do with the old devotion of the British Left, from Thomas Paine onward, to the ideals of the American Revolution. Of the defenders of the liberation of Iraq in the British media and political spheres, for example, most of the best-known spokesmen—Nick Cohen of the Observer, the Financial Times's John Lloyd, and parliamentarians Denis MacShane, Peter Hain, and John Reid—belonged to the traditional Left. And it is many senior Conservatives who have recently gone the furthest in exploiting vulgar anti-American feeling among British voters. These are the ironies of history that Roberts's instinctive Toryism often prevents him from seeing.

An important thing to recognize about Tony Blair is that he was as much at home with American style and popular culture as he was when vacationing in France or Tuscany: that for the first time, the British had a prime minister who regarded the Atlanticist/European dichotomy as a false one. Nor did it hurt that on one day he could give a decent public speech in French and then on the next rally his party to identify its historical internationalism with the cause of the United States. He could even visit Dublin and claim some Irish descent, while offering a few conciliatory words about the wrongs of British policy since the Famine. And—not forgetting the Commonwealth and the Third World—he committed British forces to uphold a treaty with Sierra Leone and drove out the child-mutilating warlords who had invaded from Liberia.

This is quite a lot to set against the old Commonwealth tradition of Australian prime minister Sir Robert Menzies, who in the 1950s objected to being in the same “club” as newly independent African states and who forbade “colored” immigration to Australia itself. One of Roberts's Tory heroes, the late Enoch Powell, opposed emigration from nonwhite former colonies with the same fervor that he had once shown in opposing Indian independence. If he had stressed religion rather than race, he might have been seen as prescient; as it was, the majority of the British Right always openly favored Islamic Pakistan.

Today, the experience of true multicultural tolerance is something that needs defending, in Australia and Canada as much as in the U.K., against Islamist sectarianism and violence directed most virulently against Hindus and Jews. There is no way to fight this critical ideological battle on the imperial terrain of Kipling and Rhodes.

In late 1967, Britain's rule in Yemen ended, bringing an end to its centuries of presence “East of Suez.” On the very last evening, the Labour defense minister Denis Healey shared a nostalgic sundowner with the British governor. As the shadows lengthened over the great harbor at Aden, the governor said that he thought the British Empire would be remembered for only two things: “the game of soccer and the expression ‘fuck off.’ ” Who can doubt that these phenomena have endured and become part of the landscape of globalization? But the masochistic British attitude to inevitable decline seems to have reversed itself, at least to some extent. And the recent election of fresh governments in France and Germany shows that other Europeans—increasingly

English-speaking—would rush to embrace the special American connection if, by any short-term miscalculation, the British might look to discard or vacate it.

Roberts's closing passage is his strongest. He gives a first-rate summary of the case for intransigent opposition to Islamist theocracy and to its cruel and violent epigones (as well as to its shady and illiterate apologists). He establishes all the essentials of the case for declaring our survival incompatible with totalitarianism and makes a crisp presentation of the urgency, necessity, and justice of the removal of Saddam Hussein. Along with William Shawcross's book *Allies*, his pages on this theme will find themselves consulted long after the ephemeral and half-baked anti-war texts are discredited and forgotten.

I myself doubt that a council of the Anglosphere will ever convene in the agreeable purlieu of postcolonial Bermuda, and the prospect of a formal reunion does not entice me in any case. It seems too close to the model on which France gravely convenes its own former possessions under the narrow banner of *La Francophonie*. It may not be too much to hope, though, that, along with soccer and a famously pungent injunction, some of the better ideas of 1649 and 1776 will continue to spread in diffuse, and ironic, ways.

(City Journal, Fall 2007)

Political Animals

Review of *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy*, by Matthew Scully.

THERE IS A CERTAIN CULTURE of humor in the speech-writing division of the Bush administration—a culture that involves a mild form of hazing. For example, David Frum, the Canadian Jewish neo-conservative who helped to originate the phrase “axis of evil,” was tasked with writing the welcoming address for the first White House Ramadan dinner. And last Thanksgiving, when the jokey annual ritual of the presidential turkey pardon came rolling around with the same mirthless inevitability as Groundhog Day, the job of penning the words of executive clemency on the eve of mass turkey slaughter was given to Matthew Scully, the only principled vegetarian on the team. Scully is a Roman Catholic, a former editor at *National Review*, and, I should add, a friendly Washington acquaintance of mine. He left his job in the executive mansion to forward this passionate piece of advocacy. Who can speak for the dumb? A man who has had to answer this question on behalf of the president himself is now stepping forward on behalf of the truly voiceless.

As the title suggests, Scully takes Genesis 1:24-26 as his point of departure. In that celebrated passage God awards “dominion” to man over all the fish, fowl, and beasts. As if to show that human beings are not, after all, much more reflective than brutes, Scully adopts the tone of a biblical literalist and wastes great swaths of paper in wrestling with the hermeneutics of this. A moment's thought will suffice to show

that any pleader for animals who adopts such a line has made a rod for his own back. First, the words of Genesis are unambiguous in placing lesser creatures at our mercy and at our disposal. Second, the crucial verses do not mention the marvelous creation of dinosaurs and pterodactyls, either because the semi-literate scribes who gathered the story together were unaware of these prodigies of design or because (shall I hint?) the Creator was unaware of having made them. The magnificence of the marsupials is likewise omitted. Even more to the point, although “everything creeping that creepeth upon the earth” is cited in general, God does not explicitly seek the credit for rats, flies, cockroaches, and mosquitoes. Most important of all, there is no mention of the mind-warping variety and beauty and complexity of the microorganisms. Again, either the scribes didn’t know about viruses and bacteria, or the Creator didn’t appreciate with how lavish a hand he had unleashed life on the only planet in his solar system that can manage to support it.

The latter point is, I think, a telling one for another reason, which is that for many generations the human species did not at all have “dominion” over other life forms. The germs had dominion over us. And so, until the advantage was slowly wrested from them, did creatures such as locusts. Today ticks still rule over immense tracts of the terrestrial globe, and microbes rule absolutely. Even the Christian image of the shepherd, which reduces the believer to a member of a flock, conveys the idea of guarding a human-organized and quasi-domesticated system from animal predators. And that, in turn, reminds us that the shepherd protects the sheep and the lambs not for their own good but the better to fleece and then to slay them.

The only reason I can imagine for Scully’s risking damage to his own argument in this way is that he feels a need to challenge the chilly eminence of Peter Singer in the field of animal rights. Professor Singer was the intellectual pioneer here, and receives generous if awkward notice in these pages, yet he is a strict materialist and regards human life as essentially, and without differentiation, mammalian. His views on the unborn—and, indeed, the born—must cause infinite distress to a man of Catholic sensibility. I can imagine that Singer would agree with me on a second-order point, which is that concern with the suffering and exploitation of animals can be expected to arise only in a fairly advanced and complex society where human beings are thoroughly in charge, and where they no longer need fear daily challenges from other species. (Or in societies under the sway of a greatly simplified unworld view like that of the Jains or some Hindus, in which it is prohibited for spiritual reasons to separate the body and soul of an ant or a flea.)

Our near absolute dominion over nature has, however, confronted us with one brilliant and ironic and inescapable insight. The decryption of DNA is not only useful in putting a merciful but overdue end to theories of creationism and racism but also enlightening in instructing us that we are ourselves animals. We share chromosomal material, often to a striking degree of overlap, not just with the higher primates but with quite humble life forms. Among those scholars who ridicule the claim of “animal rights,” the irreplaceable propaganda keyword is “anthropomorphism”—that laughable

combination of heresy and fallacy that uses human structure and human response for analogy. In fact the laugh is at the expense of those who deploy the word. The morphology of the anthropos is itself animalistic. This is a much better starting point than the burlblings of Bronze Age Palestine and Mesopotamia, because it permits us to see fellow creatures as just that, and because it allows us to trace our filiations and solidarities with them, as well as our conflicts of interest.

When we look more closely, we see that cats do not in fact torture their mice (only an “anthropomorphist” could make such a self-incriminating transference) but, rather, are fascinated by rapid movement and lose interest only when it ceases. We observe that animals, although they may respect one another’s territory, do not at all respect one another’s “rights”—unless those other animals happen to be human, in which case mutual-interest bargains can often be struck, and both sides can be brought to an agreement that neither will eat the other. We notice that creationism often entails “dispensationalism”—the demented belief that there is no point in preserving nature, because the Deity will soon replace it with a perfected form. This popular teleology does not just dispense with creatures and plants: It condemns human beings to an eternity of either torment or—what may well be worse—praise and jubilation.

The three critical areas of real-world debate are the human uses of animals for food, for sport, and for experiment. All these uses have now reached the point where they would be bound to arouse alarm even in a meat-eating, sport-loving person who was hoping for a particular medicine or organ graft that required extensive laboratory testing. I said earlier that such alarm could arise only when society had reached a certain plane of detachment from raw “nature.” But even in times when the idea of “rights” for beasts would have been inexpressible, many people had a conscience about the mistreatment of animals, a reverence for their dignity and sometimes their majesty, and a decent respect for the reciprocal value of good relations with them. No body of human mythology or folklore is without this element, even if it is only the ballad or epic of an exceptional war-horse or hunting dog. The prophet Muhammad cut away the sleeve of his robe rather than disturb a slumbering cat (and how Scully, who does not mention this episode, wishes that Jesus of Nazareth had by word or gesture admonished his followers to respect animals). William Blake could experience the agonies of animals almost as if they were his own. Saint Francis of Assisi may have been something of a freak, but those who heard him knew that he was employing one of the registers of human sensitivity. Animals, to make an obvious point, have been given names for at least as long as we have records. Even when this relationship was sinister or excessive or hysterical, as in ancient cults that worshipped crocodiles or bears, it shows that human awareness of a certain kinship predates our genetic mapping of it. If we call this “instinct” it is only a further acknowledgment of the same thing.

Thus when I read of the possible annihilation of the elephant or the whale, or the pouring of oven cleaner or cosmetics into the eyes of live kittens, or the close confinement of pigs and calves in lightless pens, I feel myself confronted by human stupidity, which I recognize as an enemy. This would be so even if I didn’t much care about the

subjective experience of the animals themselves. For example, although I find that I can't read Peter Singer for long without becoming dulled by his robotic utilitarianism, the parts of his famous book *Animal Liberation* that I find most impressive are the deadpan reprints of animal-experiment "reports," written by white-coated dolts or possibly white-coated sadists. (The connection between stupidity and cruelty is a close one.) If you subject this chimp or this dog to these given experiences, of shock or mutilation or sensory deprivation, it will exhibit just the responses any fool could have predicted. No claim of usefulness or human application is made; only requests for further funding. Such awful pointlessness and callousness had, I thought, been set back a bit by Singer and others—and so it has. But *Dominion* is replete with examples of pseudo-scientists who still maintain that animals cannot feel pain, let alone agony. (By "agony" I mean pain accompanied by fear-protracted, repeated anguish and misery.)

The dumb academics who mouth this stuff are legatees, whether they know it or not, of René Descartes, who held that animals were machines and that their yelps or cries were the noises emitted by broken machinery. One doesn't require much conceptual apparatus to refute this, and Scully is, I think, taking its current advocates too seriously. The morons who torture animals would obviously not get the same thrill from battering a toaster. Children, who are almost always en rapport with animals, do not treat them as toys. (And maltreatment of animals by a child is a famously strong indicator, as our investigators of psychopathology have found, of hideous future conduct. Hogarth intuited this centuries ago, in his sequence of illustrations *The Four Stages of Cruelty*.) The many old or lonely or infirm people who find therapeutic value in animal companionship do not get the same result even from a semi-animate object such as a TV.

Sentimental stuff may have been written about animals' having personalities, but it can easily be shown that they are able to distinguish human individuals almost as readily as human beings can distinguish one another. And great repertoires of learned or taught behavior among animals are only renamed if we decide to be minimalist and call them "conditioned reflexes." Finally, and to deploy an inelegant piece of evidence that is not even hinted at by Scully, who, unlike Singer, entirely shirks the subject of interspecies intimacy, I would point out that many human beings have found consolation in sexual intercourse with animals (for instance, the prototype of *Robinson Crusoe*)—and who will say that this cannot lead to the sort of love that would be wasted on a car, or a lawn mower?

This would leave us and the "machinists" with only the problem of language and cognition. The whale, we are in effect informed, has its cortex but is too non-sentient to know, say, that it is an endangered species. The great apes who learn to sign whole phrases to their human friends are just improving their food-acquisition skills. Dolphins can at best (at best!) talk only to one another. To all such assertions the correct response requires no strong proof of language or logic in nonhuman brains. It is enough to know that we do not know enough. All the advances in the study of animal sentience have been made extremely recently, and some of these findings are

fascinating and promising. If you insist, these same studies may even have benefits for human beings. Ordinary prudence, or straight utilitarianism, would therefore suggest that this is a bad time for us to be destroying whales for their blubber, or elephants for their tusks (or for mere “recreation”), or Rwandan gorillas in order to make their prehensile paws into ashtrays. “The end of natural history” was the arresting phrase used by Douglas Chadwick to describe this bleak state of affairs; one might suggest to the debased Cartesians that they conduct a thought experiment involving likely human response to a planet populated only by other human beings and their pets and farm animals, plus the lesser birds, reptiles, and insects. Oh, dear—I said “populated.”

Opponents of the careful attitude toward animals also have their “extreme scenario” tactics. Probably no group except the pacifists is the butt of as much taunting about inconsistency as the pro-animal faction. You don’t eat meat but—aha!—you do wear leather shoes. Scully shows a martyrlike patience in the face of this, as befits a man who’s had to hear innumerable jests about veal and spotted owls at carnivorous Republican fundraisers. Joy Williams, in *Ill Nature*, has a more mordant reply: “The animal people are vegetarians. They’d better be if they don’t want to be accused of being hypocritical. Of course, by being unhypocritical, they can be accused of being self-righteous.” But it must be noted that there are so-called “deep ecologists,” who materialize all the expectations of the cynics and who stoutly hold that there is no ethical difference between a human baby and a gerbil. Why must it be noted? First, because it is not the only symptom of a reactionary Malthusianism on the green fringe, and second, because arguments like this are taken up by defenders of the status quo and mobilized for dialectical purposes. The gerbil-baby equivalence is one of the very few human delusions for which there is no scriptural warrant; and for all I know, in the context of interstellar time and galactic indifference, it may be valid. There are sound reasons for concluding that all life is ultimately random. But there is no way of living and acting as if this is true; and if it is true, human beings cannot very well be condemned for making the best of things by taking advantage of other animals.

Like all casuistry and all dogmatism, this sort of stuff contains its own negation. But more interesting, and perhaps more encouraging, it also contains the germ of a complement. Just as those who experiment on animals are eager to deny that they are cruel (why, in point of their own theory, do they bother?), and just as the proprietors of factory farms maintain that the beasts are better off than they would be on the hillside, and just as some particularly fatuous Englishmen assert that the fox “really” enjoys being hunted, so the animal liberation fanatics use human life and human rights as their benchmark. What the Skinnerian behaviorists say about animals would, if true, largely hold good for people, and those who endow fleas with human rights are halfway toward ridiculing their own definition of human beings as a “plague species.” Loud, overconfident dismissals of obvious qualms betray the stirrings of an uneasy conscience. Neither side can break free of an inchoate but essential notion of our interdependence.

Scully is at his best when he stops wrangling with Aquinas and other Church fathers (I notice that if he wonders about animal souls, he keeps his concern to himself) and

goes out into the field. With an almost masochistic resolve, he exposes himself to the theory and practice of exploitation as it is found among the exponents of commercial hunting and industrial farming. The arguments he hears, about gutsy individualism in the first case and rationalized profit maximization in the second, are the disconcerting sounds of his own politics being played back to him. Making the finest use of this tension, he produces two marvelous passages of reporting. Without condescension but with a fine contempt he introduces us to “canned hunting”: the can’t-miss virtual safaris that charge a fortune to fly bored and overweight Americans to Africa and “big game” destinations on other continents for an air-conditioned trophy trip and the chance to butcher a charismatic animal in conditions of guaranteed safety. Those who can’t afford the whole package can sometimes shell out to shoot a rare wild creature that would otherwise be pensioned off from an American zoo.

Millions of animals, either semi-wild or semi-domestic, would never have been born if not for human design. Pheasants and deer are bred or preserved in profusion for sport and for food, and the famous British fox is, or was until recent parliamentary challenges, protected by horse-borne hunts-men from those who would otherwise have shot or poisoned it out of hand. Traditional farming, for which Scully evinces much nostalgia, is a logical extension of this—and factory farming seems to most people no more than a further extension and modernization of the idea that civilization and animal husbandry are inextricable. However, Scully’s second graphic account, of his visit to a pig plant in North Carolina, is a frontal challenge to such facile progressivism. In page after relentless page he shows that the horrible confinement of these smart and resourceful creatures, and the endless attempt to fatten and pacify them with hormones, laxatives, antibiotics, and swirls of rendered pigs recycled into their own swill (and then to use other treatments to counterweigh the unintended consequences of the original ones), is far worse than we had suspected. A sort of Gresham’s law means that more equals worse. The pigs develop hideous tumors and lesions; their litters are prone to stillbirths and malformations; their “stress levels” (another accidental revelation of the despised “anthropomorphic”) are bewildering and annoying even to their keepers. Hardened migrant laborers who really need the work are frequently revolted by the slaughtering process. And, perhaps direst of all from the corporate viewpoint, the resulting meat is rank. “Pink,” “spongy,” and “exudative” are among the tasty terms used in internal company documents to describe the “pork” that is being prepared for our delectation. When was the last time you peeled open a deli ham sandwich, or a BLT, to take a look at the color, let alone the consistency, of what you were being sold and were about to ingest? The ham doesn’t taste of anything, but upon reflection this comes as a distinct relief.

Thus in the three arenas—food, sport, and experiment—Scully asks the right questions even if he doesn’t canvass all the possible answers. When he is on form, he does this in beautiful and witty prose. I think he falls down on the optional fourth issue, the question of whether we lower our own moral threshold by deafening ourselves to animal bleats and roars and trumpeting. It is obviously tempting to think so, and

the example of disturbed, animal-torturing children is a powerful one; but both he and Singer are unpersuasive on this point. (Perhaps Singer has a folk memory of his fellow Australians' being forcibly employed in a historic theater of generalized cruelty.) Farmers, despite the rough jobs they have to perform with beasts, have not been more brutal, or brutalized, than those who work only with—or for—machines. The National Socialists in Germany enacted thoroughgoing legislation for the protection of animals and affected to regard Jewish ritual slaughter with abhorrence, meanwhile being enthusiastic about the ritual slaughter of Jews. Hindu nationalists are infinitely more tender toward cows than toward Muslims. As a species we can evidently live with a good deal of contradiction in this sphere. Conversely, one of the most idiotic jeers against animal lovers is the one about their preferring critters to people. As a matter of observation, it will be found that people who “care”—about rain forests or animals, miscarriages of justice or dictatorships—are, though frequently irritating, very often the same people. Whereas those who love hamburgers and riskless hunting and mink coats are not in the front ranks of Amnesty International. Like the quality of mercy, the prompting of compassion is not finite, and can be self-replenishing.

Taking myself as averagely cynical, I came to discern while reading *Dominion* that in all the cases where animal suffering disturbed me, it was largely because of rationalist humanism. When my turn comes to get a heart valve or a kidney from a pig (and how is that for anthropomorphism, by the by?), I don't want the pig to have been rotting and wretched, let alone cannibalistic or subjected to promiscuous mutations, while it was alive. Much animal experimentation is a wasteful perversion of science (Jonas Salk's vaccine seemed useless when tested on anything but a human being). The elimination of elephants and whales and tigers and other highly evolved animals would be impoverishing for us, and the disappearance of apes would be something like fratricide. The feeding of animal matter to protein-producing herds has been a catastrophe, resulting not only in ghastly pyres but in repulsive and sometimes lethally tainted food. The self-evidence of much of this has been obscured more than clarified by talk of “rights,” which in the case of non-bipeds does seem to meet Bentham's definition of “nonsense upon stilts.” Rights have to be asserted. Animals cannot make such assertions. We have to make representations to ourselves on their behalf. To the extent that we see our own interest in doing so, we unpick both the tautology that hobbles the utilitarian and the idealist delusion that surrounds the religious, and may simply become more “humane”—a word that seems to require its final vowel as never before.

(The Atlantic, November 2002)

Old Enough to Die

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA executes its own children. What is wrong with that sentence? Well, nothing factual. We may differ about whether the formative

years are an age of innocence or experience, but a whole body of law establishes and defends certain age limits, below which one is considered a child. And seventy-three such children have been growing old under sentence of death in American prisons as I write. William Blake, who perhaps excelled all other authors in his rage against cruelty to the young, put his “Little Boy Lost” in the “Experience” section of his *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*:

The weeping child could not be heard,
The weeping parents wept in vain;
They strip'd him to his little shirt,
And bound him in an iron chain.
And burn'd him in a holy place,
Where many had been burn'd before:
The weeping parents wept in vain.
Are such things done on Albion's shore.

Albion's shore—an antique name for England—was, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, famous for two things: intense sentimentality about images of innocent children, and extreme ruthlessness in the sexual and commercial and penal treatment of the very young. We shake our heads, now, at the obviousness of this hypocrisy. But here's what happened to George Stinney, in Clarendon County, South Carolina, on June 16, 1944. At the age of 14, weighing 95 pounds and standing five feet and one inch, he was lashed into an electric chair and a mask was put over his face. He was then given a hit of 2,400 volts. The mask, which was perhaps too big for him, thereupon slipped off. The witnesses saw his wide-open and weeping eyes, and his dribbling mouth, before another two jolts ended the business and fried him for good. They may not have “burn'd him in a holy place,” but it was a reverent state occasion and you can bet there was a minister on hand to see fair play done.

But, you say, this kind of thing doesn't go on anymore. That's true up to a point. On Albion's shore, it certainly doesn't. Nor are juveniles sentenced to death in any other European nation. Since 1990, indeed, only six countries have executed juvenile offenders: Iran, Yemen, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, and the United States of America. The United States has, you may be interested to hear, left the silver and bronze medals to be divided among these other fine contenders, keeping the gold for itself both by conducting the most executions and by having the largest number of juveniles awaiting extinction on death row.

Now, exactly what kind of village does this take? I can scarcely scan the press without learning that “our kids” are in need of more protection. In their name, I am supposed to have my Internet access and my cable TV more closely supervised. It will be years until I can send my teenage son out to buy my whisky and my tobacco supplies, and years until he can buy his own. You can't vote or be impaneled on a jury or sign up to be all you can be in Kosovo until you are at least eighteen. But if you step far enough out of line, the protections that safeguard the minor are abruptly withdrawn, and the state will snuff you like an old sow that eats her farrow. On the whole, and in

most states of the union that rely on the death penalty, you need to be at least sixteen to hear a judge instruct the proper authorities to take your life. But Governor Gary Johnson of New Mexico and former governor Pete Wilson of California are impatient with this “kid-glove” leniency. They have toyed with the idea that eighth-graders be brought within the tough-love embrace of the gas chamber and the lethal injection, Johnson by calling for the execution of thirteen-year-olds, and Wilson (influenced no doubt by California’s laid-back style) by suggesting that the authorities wait only until the perp is fourteen.

Let’s try not to be sentimental, or, rather, let us see what happens if we are not. Teenagers can be hell, and they have attained the age of reason if not responsibility. Most adults, reviewing the molten years of their own puberty, can think of at least one occasion where they really, really needed a break or a second chance, and where their lives and careers might have been literally as well as figuratively over if they hadn’t had one. (“Get me out of this and I swear ...”) But then, most people manage to get by without turning a .44 on their folks and without—as young Master George Stinney was said to have done—murdering an eleven-year-old girl. Sean Sellers, the condemned American youth most recently executed, for crimes committed when he was sixteen, was a bad poster boy for any cause. The state of Oklahoma killed him last February 4, for the casual murder of a store clerk and the deliberate slaying of his mother and stepfather. He never seriously pretended to be innocent; indeed, he was engaged at the time in a supposedly satanic effort to violate all of the Ten Commandments. While on death row, he additionally failed to get my personal vote by professing ostentatious reborn Christian evangelism, and by featuring on a Web site devoted to redemption through fundamentalist writings and a comic book. However, you do not lose any, let alone all, of your civil rights by opting for either yucky cults or sickly religiosity. (Where would we be if you did?) And the question for me became, as I went into the case: Was this boy gravely sick or not? There is, after all, a legal and moral presumption against executing even adults who are insane.

Anyone who has been involved with a death-row prisoner knows the piercing yet dull sense of pity and shame that descends. It’s always the same: the family background that makes you want to weep; the home usually festooned (as in the Sellers case) with deadly weapons; the educational and cultural level that would raise eyebrows in Calcutta or Bogotá; the overworked public defender who had two dimes and two days to make his case; the absence of any useful teacher or priest or shrink or “counselor” until it was too damned late; the occasional thoughtful relative who puts up some dough; the endless hearings and rehearings and then the long, dreary wait for a “stay” of execution that becomes a torture if it comes at all. Sometimes, at the last minute, an intercession from a celebrity or a certified moral authority. And then the tawdry ritual with the needles or the gas or the electric current, and then on to the next.

Often abandoned as an infant by his truck-driving mother and stepfather (his maternal grandfather took his side at trial) and introduced to Satanism by one of his many baby-sitters, Sean Sellers seems to have suffered from a childhood brain lesion and

from multiple-personality disorder. Bob Ravitz, the public defender who represented him, was allowed by the state \$750 to pay for an expert witness but, on this princely scale, wasn't able to afford a proper psychiatric evaluation. The extent of the boy's disorder—several different styles of handwriting, several different names for himself, various delusions, even the ability to switch from left- to right-handedness—was not discovered until he had been on death row for an awfully long time. But the whole point of the appeals procedure, and the whole justification for the grisly business of warehousing condemned people, is to avoid a miscarriage of justice.

In 1992, six years after his trial, a panel of three physicians administered a quantitative electroencephalograph test to the boy, who had become a legal adult while in prison. They discovered the traces of the childhood brain injury, the presence of several “alter” personalities, and the strong likelihood, therefore, that Sean Sellers had not in any sense attained a condition of criminal responsibility when he was tried and convicted.

Here comes the part that causes me to make a low and growling noise, even as I reread it for the dozenth time. In February 1998 the United States Court of Appeals Tenth Circuit finally heard the medical and psychiatric evidence that had gone undiscovered at the initial arraignment. The three judges wrote the following opinion:

Although troubled by the extent of uncontroverted clinical evidence proving Petitioner suffers from Multiple Personality Disorder, now and at the time of the offenses of conviction, and that the offenses were committed by an “alter” personality, we are constrained to hold Petitioner has failed to establish grounds for federal habeas corpus relief. Even though his illness is such that he may be able to prove his factual innocence of those crimes, we believe that he must be left to the avenue of executive clemency to pursue that claim. [My italics.]

So a sober panel of robed figures, calmly reviewing the life-and-death case of a disturbed child, determines in writing that said child may be “factually” or technically innocent, but further determines that this is not really any of its business. A federal district court in Oklahoma had briefly considered Sean Sellers's case in light of Clinton's newly minted Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (A.E.D.P.A.). This brave new law says that if you don't present your exculpatory evidence by a given date, then you are too late, mate. However, it wasn't this provision that doomed the appeal or its successor pleas in higher courts. The “controlling legal authority” here is the decision of the Rehnquist Supreme Court in 1993, known as *Herrera v. Collins*, where it was baldly stated that the execution of an innocent person is not necessarily a violation of federal constitutional protections. This February, Sellers was led out of his cell and put down like a diseased animal.

Article 6(5) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states that the “sentence of death shall not be imposed for crimes committed by persons below eighteen years of age.” The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child makes the same stipulation. So does the American Convention on Human Rights. The United States has signed the first and third of these treaties, while reserving the right

to execute any person except a pregnant woman (presumably out of deference to the natural right of children rather than mothers). It is one of only two nations that have yet to ratify the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child. The other nonsignatory is Somalia, for reasons you probably don't want to think about. Even Iran and Saudi Arabia have ratified the U.N. Convention. So astoundingly at variance with the international community is the position of the American state that in 1997 the U.N. Commission on Human Rights asked its special rapporteur to visit this country, to seek meetings with high officials, and to report back. At once, there was a titanic outcry from Senator Jesse Helms and others. What is this? We monitor other people's violations. How dare you ask to inspect ours?

Adults sentenced to death in this country are almost always vicious creeps, pitiable failures, or innocent losers. (Recall the instance of Anthony Porter, freed from seventeen years on death row this February after a Northwestern University journalism class did a project on his case by pure chance and discovered what the prosecutors and the judges had not: that he could not possibly have committed the double murder. For one thing, the more plausible suspect confessed to the crime, the sort of fact a good prosecutor is trained never to overlook. Mr. Porter has an I.Q. of 51 and is, in his way, a child also.) But the children condemned to death are losers in a category all their own. A decade ago, *The American Journal of Psychiatry* published an investigation, using a sample of four states, that covered juveniles on hold for execution. There were fourteen of them. Only two of these had I.Q. scores higher than 90.

Every one of them had suffered severe head trauma during childhood. All had deep psychiatric problems; only two had managed to grow up without extreme physical or sexual abuse, and five of them had undergone this at the hands of family members. Only five of them had been evaluated by psychiatrists before standing trial. (In case you wonder, yes, a disproportionate number of them were African-American. I don't think that Master George Stinney—see above—would have been roasted by the state of South Carolina even in 1944 if the same hadn't been as true of him as it was untrue of his victim.)

Very often, in fact, these minors are in trouble—real bad trouble—because they were the ones too slow or too panicked to flee the scene, or because they were used by cynical older criminals as patsies or decoys. Joseph John Cannon, executed in Texas in April of last year, was illiterate, brain-damaged, sexually scarred, and heavily addicted when they caught him, at the age of seventeen. He had attempted suicide at age fifteen, and told his interviewers that he could not remember anything good that had ever happened to him. Well, it was apparently the job of the state of Texas to make sure that this unbroken record was maintained. (During his execution by lethal injection, which took place over the objections of His Holiness the Pope, who was overruled by Governor George W. Bush, the needle “blew out” of Cannon's arm and the witnesses had to wait while a drape was brought in and a “new” vein was found.)

And the irony was not at Joseph John Cannon's expense. It may seem odd, to some people reading this column, that the United States joins Yemen and Pakistan

in putting down its troublesome young, and that it reads lectures on human rights to other countries while refusing to ratify treaties which most civilized societies regard as the ABCs of law. But I doubt Joseph John Cannon would have seen the joke. He probably never realized that he was living in the land of the free and the home of the brave to begin with. And soon he wasn't. And a country with a positive glut of lawyers and grief counselors and spiritual-awareness artists and fancy shrinks will continue to wonder what is wrong with kids these days.

(Vanity Fair, June 1999)

In Defense of Foxhole Atheists

ONE MONDAY IN MAY, I was setting off from Washington to Colorado Springs, home of the United States Air Force Academy. I had kindly been invited by the academy's "freethinkers association," a loose-knit group of cadets and instructors who are without religious affiliation. As I was making ready to depart, and checking my e-mail, I found I had been sent a near-incredible video clip from the Al Jazeera network. It had been shot at Bagram Air Force Base last year, and it showed a borderline-hysterical address by one Lieutenant Colonel Gary Hensley, chief of the United States military chaplains in Afghanistan. He was telling his evangelical audience, all of them wearing uniforms supplied by the taxpayer, that as followers of Jesus Christ they had a collective responsibility "to be witnesses for him." Heating up this theme, Lieutenant Colonel Hensley went on: "The Special Forces guys, they hunt men, basically. We do the same things, as Christians. We hunt people for Jesus. We do, we hunt them down. Get the hound of heaven after them, so we get them in the kingdom. Right? That's what we do, that's our business."

The comparison to the Special Forces would seem to suggest that the objects of this hunting and hounding are Afghans rather than Americans. But it's difficult to be certain, and indeed I am invited to Colorado Springs partly because chaplains there have been known to employ taxpayer dollars to turn the hounds of heaven loose on their own students and fellow citizens. As the Bagram tape goes on, however, it becomes obvious that Afghans are the targets in this case. Stacks of Bibles are on display, in the Dari and Pashto tongues that are the main languages in Afghanistan. A certain Sergeant James Watt, a candidate for a military chaplaincy, is shown giving thanks for the work of his back-home church, which subscribed the dough. "I also want to praise God because my church collected some money to get Bibles for Afghanistan. They came and sent the money out," he beamingly tells his Bible-study class. In another segment, those present show quite clearly that they understand they are in danger of violating General Order Number One of the U.S. Central Command, which explicitly prohibits "proselytizing of any religion, faith, or practice." A gathering of chaplains, all of them fed from the public trough, is addressed by Captain Emmit Furner, a military cleric who seems half in love with his own light-footed moral dexterity. "Do we know

what it means to proselytize?” he asks his audience. A voice from the audience is heard to say, “It is General Order Number One.” To this Sergeant Watt replies: “You can’t proselytize but you can give gifts.... I bought a carpet and then I gave the guy a Bible after I conducted my business.” So where’s the harm in a man who is paid by the United States government to be a Christian chaplain strolling condescendingly through the souk and handing out religious propaganda as if it were a handful of small change or backsheesh? Probably not much more damaging to the war effort, or insulting to Afghan sensibilities, than the activities of the anonymous torturers who have been found operating elsewhere on the Bagram base. But it is taking the ax to the root of the United States Constitution, never mind General Order Number One. (Neither of these seems to be in force locally: No action against the uniformed missionaries has been taken.)

The film was originally shot by Brian Hughes, a maker of documentaries and a former member of the United States military who had fought in the Gulf War. It was made available to James Bays, one of Al Jazeera’s more experienced Afghan reporters. By the time I had landed in Colorado Springs, later that day, I expected that the thing would have become a national story and that the cadets, perhaps most especially the freethinkers club, would be talking about it. But I was mistaken twice. Only a few fringe anti-war malcontents had made anything of this outrageous clip, and there was a general shrug when I mentioned it. “That sort of thing happened to me a lot in Afghanistan,” I was told by Carlos Bertha, a veteran of the war who now teaches philosophy to cadets and who helped organize my talk. “I used to complain and sometimes the word would come down to lay off, but it was always ready to start up again.”

He was talking, however, about in-your-face Christian-fundamentalist displays at the entrance to the chow hall. Perhaps local Afghan hired helpers would have to see these, too, but the propaganda wasn’t being inflicted directly on them. So the question becomes two related questions: Is there a clique within the United States military that is seeking to use the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as an opportunity to mount a new crusade and to Christianize the “heathen”? And does this clique also attempt to impose its beliefs on young Americans in uniform, many of whom may even be Christian already? If the answer to either question is “yes,” then we are directly financing the subversion of our own Constitution and inviting a “holy war” where we will not be able to say that only the other side is dogmatic and fanatical.

To take the questions in reverse: A few years ago I wrote a book that mentioned an astonishing state of affairs at the Air Force Academy. But don’t take my word for it. An official USAF panel of inquiry, reporting in 2005, admitted that the commandant of cadets, Brigadier General Johnny A. Weida, had sent out an academy-wide e-mail reminding all hands of the upcoming and exclusively Protestant National Day of Prayer. He had further informed cadets that they were “accountable to their God” and came up with an ingenious call-and-response chant that went like this: “Jesus ... Rocks!” Evidently quite a warrior. The head football coach, Fisher DeBerry, had improved on this only slightly by staging locker-room prayer-pleas to “The Master Coach”

and hanging out a banner that read, “Team Jesus.” A screening of Mel Gibson’s incendiary, Jew-baiting homoerotic extravaganza, *The Passion of the Christ*, had flyers in its favor placed on every seat in the Air Force Academy dining hall. A Pentecostal chaplain warned cadets that they should accept Christ or “burn in hell.” About the latter incident, the Air Force investigative panel decided to be lenient, on the perfectly good grounds that such language is “not uncommon” in this denomination. And that, I suspect, is part of the problem to begin with: Unexamined extremist Christian conservatism is the cultural norm in many military circles. One Lutheran chaplain at the academy, Captain Melinda Morton, resigned from the service after being transferred for protesting that the evangelical pressure was “systematic.” And, despite the tolerance for Pentecostal hellfire rants, by no means all forms of expression could be indulged; a nonbelieving cadet was forbidden to organize a club for “freethinkers.”

That has now changed as a result of the indoctrination scandal, which is why I was able to be at the Springs. The academy’s chaplains still would not allow our meeting to take place on the base, but that was fine by me, as it meant we could all meet out of uniform at the Old Chicago pub downtown. The last survey of student opinion found that of the 4,400 cadets, 85 percent were Christian of one kind or another, 2 percent were declared atheists, 1.5 percent were Jewish, 0.4 percent Muslim, 0.3 percent Hindu, and—note this—9.3 percent either indicated no allegiance or identified themselves as “other.” According to all measurements of opinion, the latter is the fastest-growing minority in the United States, and only slightly under-represented at the Air Force Academy. (The Pew report on the subject says that unbelievers in the armed services overall represent a higher percentage than that of the general population: This would track with my experience and disprove that silly old line about there being no atheists in foxholes.)

I am still not going to give any real names of cadets attending my little event: There were about twenty of them, mostly males. Two of the group, one Baptist and one Mormon, had given up their faith since enlisting at the academy. The others fluctuated between doubt and agnosticism and straight-out unbelief. They were good-humored, outspoken, and tough-minded: the sort of people who make you proud of being defended by a volunteer military. According to most of them, the situation had improved since the last scandal, or rather because of it. In an acronym-dominated world, the school’s SPIRE (Special Programs in Religious Education) could now include meetings for unbelievers, but even so an S.C.A. (Scheduling Committee Action) had to be approved before they could be allowed to meet with your humble servant in a pub overlooked by Pikes Peak. It seemed weird to me that people willing to fight and die for the United States should be treated as if they were children (or do I mean members of a “flock”?).

They all told me that they felt quite able to stand up to peers and community members who wanted to evangelize them. (The Colorado Springs area is home to James Dobson’s “Focus on the Family” campaign, as well as to the fragrant Reverend Ted Haggard, crusader and, when entwined with male hookers, meth buyer as well.) What

they would object to would be evangelizing from higher up. And there is ever stronger reason to think that, at the Pentagon, the fish rots from the head. It emerges that during the invasion of Iraq, one of Donald Rumsfeld's directors of intelligence, Major General Glen Shaffer, began to attach fiery biblical excerpts to the photographs that accompanied the daily briefings. For example, on one document delivered to President Bush by Rumsfeld there was a picture of an F-14 "Tomcat" on the deck of a carrier, with the accompaniment of verses from Psalm 139: "If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast, O Lord." Over a photograph of Saddam Hussein appeared the words, from the First Epistle of Peter: "It is by God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men." (I pause to note that this suggests that General Shaffer had no idea what hellishness Saddam Hussein had actually, apart from his inexplicable failure to accept Jesus as his personal savior, been responsible for.)

More alarming still is a book called *Under Orders: A Spiritual Handbook for Military Personnel*, by an Air Force lieutenant colonel named William McCoy, publicity for which describes the separation of church and state as a "twisted idea." Nor is this the book's only publicity: It comes—with its direct call for a religion-based military—with an endorsement from General David Petraeus.

It is outrageous that brave and intelligent young officers, seeing such theocratic absurdity rampant among the top brass, could suspect even for a second that their road to promotion was a longer one unless they acquiesced in this use of public resources for the promotion of (a single) religion. And if that thought can arise in a military academy or the corridors of the Pentagon, how much more oppressive is it when the volunteer is far from home, on the frontier, on a firebase, or aboard a submarine or a carrier, and being told that this time the objects of conversion are also the people we supposedly came to rescue from the Taliban and al-Qaeda? Captain Melinda Morton was, before quitting the Air Force Academy, a missile-launch commander. She believes that there is a fusion between the two types of proselytization. The evangelicals, she told Jeff Sharlet—whose work on this has been path-breaking—see the whole military as "a mission field. They wanted to send their missionaries to the military, and for the military itself to become missionaries to the world." If this bizarre ambition came anywhere close to being realized, it would make civilian taxpayers into mere hewers of wood and drawers of water for an armed but unelected religious elite, and it would make our soldiers into unwitting pawns in a very dangerous game where they were considered expendable cannon fodder for Christ. The only certain winners would be the death cultists of jihad, who are already marveling at their luck in being proved right about the Americans as "crusaders." This is as near to mutiny and treason as one could hope to sail and still wear the uniform.

And please do not think for a single second that, if proselytizing in our armed forces is permitted to extremist Christians, the precedent will not be taken up by other fanatics as well. There was a time when a man named Abdurahman Alamoudi

was operating freely in this country, and even being deployed as a “moderate” Muslim spokesman by the State Department. More than once received at the White House, he also helped found an outfit with the intriguing name of the Muslim Armed Forces and Veteran Affairs Council, which was used to select Islamic chaplains in the armed services. Mr. Alamoudi’s run of luck ended in 2004, when he was given a long sentence in federal prison for activities related to terrorism. Since then, serving officers like the now famous Major Nidal Malik Hasan have had to go online for their extremist spiritual advisers, such as the fugitive preacher Anwar al-Awlaki, who issued a general religious permission to shoot down U.S. servicemen only a short time before Major Hasan rose to his feet and sprayed his fellow countrymen at Fort Hood. Awlaki later praised the gallant major as “a hero.” This was not the only evidence of an early-stage attempt at setting up jihad-ist penetration of the ranks, but, yet again, the authorities decided to treat Major Hasan’s alarming statements as if they were protected religious speech rather than early warnings of the effect of a homicidal theology. A psychiatrist gives a lecture at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, on the government’s dime, and exclaims proudly that Muslim fighters love death more than we love life ... Not very Hippocratic.

Throughout modern American history, the armed forces have been a great engine for assimilation and integration. Segregation of blacks was abolished in the services long before it was done away with in the wider society. Hispanic soldiers who are not yet full citizens have won many awards for bravery in the field. Women—not always approved of by religious fanatics—have risen to occupy serious command posts at all levels. (Discrimination against homosexuals, another religion-based prejudice, remains official, but that is a political decision, not a military one, and even the British services now recruit gay men and women, so change is probably not far off.) It would be an unimaginable catastrophe for America if the ranks became an arena of contestation between competing religious sectarians, and the effect on morale in the field would be disastrous also. It is of high importance to stop it before it can get started, and this means applying the principle of church-state separation right across the military spectrum.

James Madison was the coauthor with Thomas Jefferson of the Virginia Statute on Religious Freedom, which became the basis of the First Amendment to the Constitution. Not accidentally the first clause of our Bill of Rights, this amendment unambiguously forbids any “establishment of religion” in or by these United States. In his “Detached Memoranda,” not published until after his death, Madison even wrote that the appointment of chaplains in the armed forces, and indeed in Congress, was “inconsistent with the Constitution, and with the pure principles of religious freedom.” He could never have foreseen a time when state-subsidized chaplains would be working to subvert the Constitution, and violating their sacred oath to uphold it. Let us be highly thankful that we have young soldiers and sailors and Air Force personnel who, busy and devoted as they already are, show themselves brave enough to fight back on this front too.

(Vanity Fair online, December 15, 2009)

In Search of the Washington Novel

FICTION ABOUT the nation's capital is a growth that flourishes only on the lower slopes of Parnassus. Think of the flower of our novelists—Updike, Mailer, Roth, Cheever, Bellow—and see if you can call to mind a single scene that is set on the banks of the Potomac. Mailer did a famous nonfiction account of the march on the Pentagon (*The Armies of the Night*), and Updike briefly created a lifelike President Buchanan, but that second exception proves a more general rule, exemplified by Gore Vidal's canon: Historical reconstruction is the form in which our novelists prefer to approach the matter.

Can one imagine a Dickens without London or a Zola or Flaubert without Paris? The radix malorum can probably be found in the famous bargain between Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton, made when New York was still the capital of these United States. In exchange for an agreement to build the constitutionally mandated new Federal City on the border of Jefferson's beloved Virginia, Hamilton could have his coveted national bank. Thus, and allowing for certain Philadelphian interludes, it was decided early on that the cultural capital of America would be separated from its political one. Other countries that have made similar two-headed arrangements include Australia, Brazil, Burma, and Canada: We yet await the Brasilia or Canberra novel.

I'm among the few who consider Mailer's *Harlot's Ghost* a triumph, but to the extent that it is a novel of Washington rather than of the Cold War, it's part of a formula on which too many authors have relied: the political thriller. As Thomas Mallon, one of the city's few resident literary novelists, once put it:

Washington novels, such as they are, tend to be found on racks at National Airport, the raised gold letters of their titles promising a bomb on Air Force One or a terrorist kidnapping of the First Lady. There's a reason for all the goofiness. A serious novelist must take his characters seriously, regard them as three-dimensional creatures with inner lives and authentic moral crises; and that's just what, out of a certain democratic pride, Americans refuse to do with their politicians.

"Democratic pride": the original of the Washington novel is Henry Adams's *Democracy*, published in 1880 with its very title a sneer at the illusion of popular sovereignty. (It also founded the tradition that culminates with Joe Klein and *Primary Colors*: Adams published his book anonymously, hoping that readers would attribute it to his friend John Hay. Joan Didion borrowed the title, if not the practice, in her antipolitical novel of the same name, published in 1984.)

Probably without wishing to do so, Adams provided a template for later authors to use as their glass of fashion and mold of form. Essential *dramatis personae* include a president, a society hostess, a British ambassador, a lobbyist or journalist, and a senator—the last customarily outfitted with a "mane." This mixture is repeated almost

pedantically as late as Allen Drury's classic *Advise and Consent*, published in 1959. I suspect that it was only with the assassination of President Kennedy that the stately Potomac-paced roman-fleuve began to give way to the imperatives of the anything-goes thriller and to the mounting demand for Washington stories that could easily make the transition to the big screen. I speak as one whose D.C. apartment, with its view of the presidential motorcade, was used by Clint Eastwood as the location of his character's hideout in the movie version of David Baldacci's novel *Absolute Power*. And do I not remember sneering in print at the close of one of Tom Clancy's ill-carpentered Jack Ryan hack jobs, which ended with a plane crashing into the Capitol dome during a joint session? Currently, a special bipartisan committee is working on recommendations for what to do if that ever does happen, as it so nearly did in 2001. That body's deliberations on the constitutional implications of such an event could form the basis for a fine novella.

But Washington, so dull to outward appearances, does have a way of outpacing the imagination of pulp writers. John F. Kennedy smuggling the Mob's molls into the White House bedroom? Nixon and Kissinger praying on the Oval Office rug? Nixon and Chuck Colson discussing a possible bombing of the Brookings Institution? Oliver North running a parallel state and a private treasury from the White House basement? Ronald Reagan musing on the biblical end times with the head of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee? Bill Clinton's furtive cigar with Monica Lewinsky, tagged and bagged by the FBI on the grounds—this actually is in a footnote of the Starr Report—that smoking materials were forbidden in the executive mansion?

Fiction somehow declines the responsibility of creating a realistic Washington in favor of various genre approaches. Of the comic one, always so tempting, my friend Christopher Buckley is the acknowledged maestro, feasting on the buffet provided by lobbyists and Hill rats and those unhinged by ambition. (I pause to acknowledge his underrated and noir-ish earlier novel, *Wet Work*.) Of the politico-ideological and also of the Potomosexual genre, I would nominate Mallon as the leader. How come that's two literary guys with backgrounds as conservative Catholic Republicans? Search me. Mallon's most recent novel, *Fellow Travelers*, is a splendid evocation of Washington in the McCarthy era, with two kinds of victims as the atmosphere thickens: the covert Communists and the closet gays (a faction with a foot more in the camp of the persecuting than in that of the persecuted). It also has what few District fictions possess: a sharp working knowledge of the city's neighborhoods, from northeast Capitol Hill to Foggy Bottom and the Penn Quarter. (George Pelecanos, in his novels about the city in the time before the 1968 race riots, has the same level of shoe-leather skills.)

But here again, we are on the relatively secure turf of the known past. In this dimension, Gore Vidal has no rival. I once heard Newt Gingrich rebuke someone who was bad-mouthing Vidal's politics, insisting that he wished to hear no ill of the author of the magnificent *Lincoln*. This work is indeed enormously praiseworthy, as is the larger sequence of which it forms a part. In *Burr*, for example, Vidal guessed the truth about Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings long before most historians grudgingly

conceded the point. However, Vidal's narrative—like the rest of his career—declines as it reaches its end: The last novel of the cycle, *The Golden Age*, gave as free a rein to paranoia about FDR's supposed foreknowledge of Pearl Harbor as the old boy's public pronouncements did to the drivel about 9/11 "truth."

Here is what Mrs. Lightfoot Lee, the inquisitive widow of Adams's tale, thinks about moving to a town where she will dwell "among the illiterate swarm of ordinary people who ... represented constituencies so dreary that in comparison New York was a New Jerusalem, and Broad Street a grove of academe." Perhaps there will be compensations for this exile to the provinces:

What she wished to see, she thought, was the clash of interests, the interests of forty millions of people and a whole continent, centering at Washington; guided, restrained, controlled, or unrestrained and uncontrollable, by men of ordinary mould; the tremendous forces of government, and the machinery of society, at work. What she wanted, was POWER.

Of course, that's not exactly what she gets, what with the enervating climate and the pervasive atmosphere of corruption and cynicism. She has to be content with some unsought attentions from a too-powerful senator (the name of this odious charmer is Clinton, as it happens; there is also a character named Gore). No, the fact is that Washington is and always has been irretrievably bogged down in process. And process doesn't generally make for electrifying prose—unless you're a fan of the novels of C. P. Snow, which describe the intestinal workings of inner-sanctum power struggles conducted by micro-megalomaniacs.

This brings us to Ward Just, possibly chief among those who have depicted the nation's capital as the bureaucratic and constipated place that it in fact is. Perhaps by way of offsetting the innate or latent tedium of this enterprise, Just—a former reporter for the *Washington Post* and *Newsweek*, who, like Allen Drury, pulled off the journalist's dream of publishing his bottom-drawer fiction—has a flair for the arresting title. He called one of his books *Honor, Power, Riches, Fame, and the Love of Women*, which certainly outpaces *Democracy* as an eye-catching title on a bookstall, as well as outbidding it as a definition of what most of our politicians actually work for. One of his short stories—"The Congressman Who Loved Flaubert"—is my selection for the most improbable title ever evolved on the banks of the Potomac.

Like Vidal, Just anchors his narratives in history, but unlike Vidal, he often brings them into our own day. In *Echo House*, he describes three generations of a political family named Behl. Somewhat didactic, the book is full of reminders that politics is not for the idealistic and is increasingly dominated by the media-savvy and the telegenic. (For some reason, we make this simple discovery anew every decade or so.) After an early disappointment connected with his failure to secure a vice-presidential nomination, the senior Behl hands his son a signed first edition—of Adams's *Democracy*.

It must say something that the Adams mold is so hard to break. The days of the Georgetown hostess are gone; the hostesses themselves are gone, too. Their reign began to close years ago, when senators started canceling dinners to appear on shows

like Nightline. (There's a prefiguration of this in Larry McMurtry's neglected 1982 Washington novel Cadillac Jack, in which a character pontificates on world-shaking matters of which he knows little.) The Washington pundit is also a thing of the past: It's been a good while since any insider columnist had the kind of access or influence that Ben Bradlee enjoyed with John F. Kennedy. And the British Embassy, while it still stages some of the best dinners, is not the brokerage of influence that it once was. Yet—if we except the intermittent efforts at describing catastrophe or conspiracy, themselves mostly falling short of observable reality—this is the sort of stereotype in which the model remains confined.

Mrs. Lightfoot Lee can say a bit more for herself than her creator, who stressed that consuming interest in POWER. She has a reflective capacity also:

“Who, then, is right? How can we all be right? Half of our wise men declare that the world is going straight to perdition; the other half that it is fast becoming perfect. Both cannot be right. There is only one thing in life,” she went on, laughing, “that I must and will have before I die. I must know whether America is right or wrong.”

It is that question, and no matter of process or advice or consent, that transcends all the others. We still await the novelist who can address the matter of the last, best hope of earth and treat it without frivolity, without cynicism, and without embarrassment.

(City Journal, Autumn 2010)

ECLECTIC AFFINITIES

Isaac Newton: Flaws of Gravity

WHEN I WAS A YOUNG BOY at a Methodist boarding school in Cambridge, England, I used to try to drink as much water as I possibly could. This practice was based on the false hope that I might acquire some slight knowledge of science and mathematics. In these areas I was hopelessly deficient, yet it seemed that only the water in Cambridge could explain the extraordinary profusion of mathematical genius that had flowered in this rather chilly little city on the flatlands of East Anglia.

You could take a walk in the town, for example, and pass the Cavendish Laboratory on Free School Lane. You could easily miss it: Its quaint lack of space and resources, its generally shoestring and amateur character are lovingly satirized in Penelope Fitzgerald's lovely novel *The Gate of Angels*. But a grand total of twenty-nine Nobel Prizes have been awarded for work done in this unassuming building, perhaps the best-known being to Sir John Cockcroft and Ernest Walton for the development of the first nuclear particle accelerator (which allowed them to be the first to split the atom without using radioactive material), in 1932. This was during the exceptional directorship of Professor Ernest Rutherford, under whose benign and brilliant rule work at the Cavendish also garnered Nobels for Sir James Chadwick's discovery of the neutron and Sir Edward Appleton's demonstration of the existence of a layer of the ionosphere that could reliably transmit radio waves. It's not exactly a footnote to add Sir Mark Oliphant, who pioneered the deployment of microwave radar and flew to the United States during the war to assist American scientists in their pursuit of the non-peaceful implications of Cavendish's split atom and the setup that would become the Manhattan Project. Within a very short time, Robert Oppenheimer, another of Rutherford's Cavendish protégés, was watching the first nuclear detonation, near Alamogordo, New Mexico, and murmuring to himself a line from the *Bhagavad Gita*: "I am become death: the shatterer of worlds."

As against that, and taking a break from work at the same laboratory on February 28, 1953, researchers James Watson and Francis Crick went round the corner to a pub on nearby Bene't Street. Watson recalled feeling "slightly queasy when at lunch Francis winged into the Eagle to tell everyone within hearing distance that we had found the secret of life." The structure of deoxyribonucleic acid, building block of existence itself, turned out to have the shapely form of a double helix. Humanity was well on its way to unraveling and analyzing the crucial strands that are our DNA. (It was in the Eagle,

less momentarily, that I later drank my first illegal beer and kicked the stupid water habit for life.)

Continuing our stroll—or pub crawl—we might pass Christ’s College, alma mater of the Reverend William Paley. In the early nineteenth century, Paley’s book *Natural Theology*, arguing that all of “creation” argued for the evidence of a divine designer, became the key text for those who saw the hand of god in the marvels of nature. A young student named Charles Darwin came to the same college not all that long afterward and was overcome by awe at being given the same rooms as Paley had occupied. As a naturalist and biologist, Darwin hoped to follow in the great man’s path and perhaps himself become a priest. In the event, his research was to compel him to a somewhat different conclusion. Tipping our hat to this astonishing double act, we might also pause to reflect outside the gates of Trinity Hall, the college that helped produce Stephen Hawking, who is now the Lucasian Professor of Mathematics and a fellow of Gonville & Caius College as well. Until relatively recently, it was possible to spot the celebrated anatomist of time and space, born on the 300th anniversary of the death of Galileo, grinding around these medieval streets and squares in his electric chariot: as good an instance of pure brain and intellect as one could hope to meet.

Who can pass the great and spacious lawns of Trinity College without thinking of Bertrand Russell, who could have been world famous in several departments, from adultery to radicalism, but whose most imposing work is probably *Principia Mathematica*, the result of a ten-year collaboration with Alfred North Whitehead. “The manuscript became more and more vast,” recalled Russell in his autobiography, and in merely writing it out, when the main labor was complete, he worked “from ten to twelve hours a day for about eight months in the year, from 1907 to 1910 ... and every time that I went out for a walk I used to be afraid that the house would catch fire and the manuscript get burned up. It was not, of course, the sort of manuscript that could be typed, or even copied. When we finally took it to the University Press, it was so large that we had to hire an old four-wheeler for the purpose.” Reflecting on this grueling experience, he remembered that it caused him to contemplate suicide very often, and wrote that “my intellect never quite recovered from the strain. I have been ever since definitely less capable of dealing with difficult abstractions than I was before.” (This, from the man who went on to produce *A History of Western Philosophy*.)

But to mention Trinity is also to summon the greatest figure of them all: the man who wrote the very first *Principia Mathematica*, who was Lucasian Professor of Mathematics more than three centuries before Hawking and who, while the rest of the country was paralyzed by fear of the Great Plague of 1665–66, “revolutionized the world of natural philosophy. He gave the first proper treatment of the calculus; he split white light into its constituent colors; he began his exploration of universal gravity. And he was only twenty-four years of age.”

I am quoting from Peter Ackroyd’s new biography of Sir Isaac Newton, who did not, as legend has it, find his consciousness of the implications of gravity provoked by the fall of an apple. He was rather more meticulous than that in his researches

and, like Madame Curie with radium, was unafraid to experiment on himself. In his eagerness to distinguish light from color, he stared at the sun with one eye, to discover the consequences. He was reckless of his own sight in the process, and had to spend three days in a darkened room in order to recuperate from the experience. Later, to test Descartes's theory that light pulsated as a "pressure" through the ether, he slid a large needle "betwixt my eye and the bone as near to the backside of my eye as I could." Single-minded to the point of obsession, he was attempting to alter the curve of his retina so he could observe the results, even at the risk of blinding himself.

We tend to love anecdotes about apples and eureka's because they make scientific genius seem more human and more random, but that other great Cambridge denizen Sir Leslie Stephen was closer to the mark when he claimed genius was "the capacity for taking trouble." Isaac Newton was one of the great workaholics of all time, as well as one of the great insomniacs. His industry and application made Bertrand Russell look like a slacker (and, like Russell, he was morbidly afraid of fire among his papers and books—fire which did, in fact, more than once break out). When he decided that a reflecting telescope would be a better instrument than the conventional refracting model, he also decided to construct it himself. When asked where he had obtained the tools for this difficult task, he responded with a laugh that he had made the tools himself, as well. He fashioned a parabolic mirror out of an alloy of tin and copper that he had himself evolved, smoothed, and polished to a glass-like finish, and built a tube and mounting to house it. This six-inch telescope had the same effectiveness as a six-foot refracting version, because it removed the distortions of light that were caused by the use of lenses.

In contrast with this clarity and purity, however, Newton spent much of his time dwelling in a self-generated fog of superstition and crankery. He believed in the lost art of alchemy, whereby base metals can be transmuted into gold, and the surviving locks of his hair show heavy traces of lead and mercury in his system, suggesting that he experimented upon himself in this fashion, too. (That would also help explain the fires in his room, since alchemists had to keep a furnace going at all times for their mad schemes.) Not content with the narrow views of the philosopher's stone and the elixir of life, he thought that there was a kind of universal semen in the cosmos, and that the glowing tails of the comets he tracked through the sky contained replenishing matter vital for life on Earth. He was a religious crackpot who, according to Ackroyd, considered Catholics to be "offspring of the Whore of Rome." He was also consumed by arcane readings of the book of Revelation and obsessed with the actual measurements of the Temple of Solomon. Newton elected to write his already difficult *Principia Mathematica* in Latin, boasting that this would make it even less accessible to the vulgar. He is still revered in the little world of esoteric and conspiratorial mania, featuring as a member of "the Priory of Sion" in *The Da Vinci Code*. And secularists and rationalists conspire, too, in their way, to keep his mythic reputation alive. The beautiful "Mathematical Bridge," which spans the River Cam at Queen's College, is still said to have been designed by Newton to stay in place without nails or screws or joints,

and to be supported by gravitational force alone. When later scientists dismantled it to discover the secret, according to legend, they could not work out how to put it back together again, and had to use crude bolts and hinges to re-erect it. Newton died in 1727, and the bridge was not built until 1749, but rumors and fantasies are much stronger than fact.

But then, so are unscientific prejudices. Francis Crick didn't believe in god at all (he proposed having a brothel at his Cambridge college instead of a chapel), but he did follow the godly Newton in speculating that life had been "seeded" on Earth by a higher civilization. His "double-helix" colleague James Watson has several times speculated, against all the evidence, that female people and people with too much melanin pigmentation are genetically programmed to underperform. Perhaps we shouldn't be too surprised at this. Joseph Priestley, the great Unitarian humanist and discoverer of oxygen, was wedded to a bogus theory of the chemistry of gasses wherein they burned into "phlogiston," which he called a "principle of inflammability." Alfred Russel Wallace, Darwin's great collaborator and perhaps even intellectual inspiration, was never happier than when attending spiritualist séances and marveling at the appearance of ectoplasm. It may not be until we get to Albert Einstein that we find a true scientist who is also a sane and lucid person with a genial humanism as part of his world outlook—and even Einstein was soft on Stalin and the Soviet Union.

We are inclined to forget that the word "scientist" itself was not in common use until 1834. Before that time, the rather finer title of "natural philosopher" was the regnant one. Isaac Newton may have been a crank and a recluse and a religious bigot and (during his period as master of the Royal Mint) an enthusiast for the hanging of forgers. However, the study of ancient thinkers and antique languages was second nature to him, and when he listed the seven colors of the spectrum—having carefully separated these from their formerly all-enveloping white light—he did so by an analogy with the seven notes of the musical scale. Any other conclusion, he felt, would violate the Pythagorean principle of harmony. He was probably wrong in this glimpse of the unified field theory that was to elude even Einstein, but one has to admire someone who could dare to be wrong in such a beautiful way.

Not everything about Newton was so harmonious. He clearly hated women, may well have died a virgin, and was terrified of sex (and believed that the menstrual blood of whores possessed magical properties). Peter Ackroyd, one of England's premier writers, makes a mystery where none exists when he writes of Newton's obsession with crimson and the furnishing of his room entirely in that color, from the drapes to the cushions. "There have been many explanations for this," he writes, "including his study of optics, his preoccupation with alchemy, or his desire to assume a quasi-regal grandeur." I would have thought that an easier and more uterine explanation might present itself ...

The book I have been discussing is the third volume in Ackroyd's Brief Lives series. Himself a gay son of Clare College, Cambridge, who has already "done" Chaucer and Turner, as well as longer biographies of Dickens, T. S. Eliot, Blake, and the city of

London (at 800-plus pages), he may well be the most prolific English author of his generation. And, which I find encouraging, he can write movingly and revealingly about Isaac Newton while being no more of a scientist or mathematician than I am. In our young day in Cambridge, the most famous public squabble was between the “scientist” C. P. Snow and the “literary” F. R. Leavis. It eventually turned into a multi-volume international tussle about “the two cultures,” or the inability of physicists to understand or appreciate literature versus the refusal of the English department to acquire the smallest “scientific” literacy. Ackroyd helps to show us that this is a false distinction with a long history. Keats, for example, thought that Newton had made our world into an arid and finite and unromantic place, and that work like his could “conquer all mysteries by rule and line ... Unweave a rainbow.” He couldn’t have been more wrong. Newton was a friend of all mysticism and a lover of the occult who desired at all costs to keep the secrets of the temple and to prevent the universe from becoming a known quantity. For all that, he did generate a great deal more light than he had intended, and the day is not far off when we will be able to contemplate physics as another department—perhaps the most dynamic department—of the humanities. I would never have believed this when I first despairingly tried to lap the water of Cambridge, but that was before Carl Sagan and Lawrence Krauss and Steven Weinberg and Stephen Hawking fused language and science (and humor) and clambered up to stand, as Newton himself once phrased it, “on the shoulders of giants.”

(Vanity Fair online, April 14, 2008)

The Men Who Made England: Hilary Mantel’s Wolf Hall

Review of *Wolf Hall*, by Hilary Mantel.

EARLY LAST FALL, the Vatican extended a somewhat feline paw in the direction of that rather singular group of Christians sometimes denominated as “Anglo-Catholic.” If this separated flock would rejoin the fold, the word came from Rome, it could be permitted to keep its peculiar English liturgy and even retain the married status of its existing priests. The reclaimed faithful need only forgo the ordination of women and of (I think I should here add the word “avowed”) homosexuals. This clever overture, evidently long meditated by Pope Benedict XVI as part of his generous approach to other conservative schismatics and former excommunicants like the ultra-right Lefebvrists, was written up mostly as a curiosity; a dawn raid on the much-beset Anglican Communion. In reality, it was another salvo discharged in one of Europe’s most enduring cultural and ideological wars: the one that began when the English Reformation first defied the divine rights of the papacy. On the origins of this once-world-shaking combat, with its still-vivid acerbity and cruelty, Hilary Mantel has written a historical novel of quite astonishing power.

Three portraits by Hans Holbein have for generations dictated the imagery of the epoch. The first shows King Henry VIII in all his swollen arrogance and finery. The second gives us Sir Thomas More, the ascetic scholar who seems willing to lay his life on a matter of principle. The third captures King Henry's enforcer Sir Thomas Cromwell, a sallow and saturnine fellow calloused by the exercise of worldly power. The genius of Mantel's prose lies in her reworking of this aesthetic: Look again at His Majesty and see if you do not detect something spoiled, effeminate, and insecure. Now scrutinize the face of More and notice the frigid, snobbish fanaticism that holds his dignity in place. As for Cromwell, this may be the visage of a ruthless bureaucrat, but it is the look of a man who has learned the hard way that books must be balanced, accounts settled, and zeal held firmly in check. By the end of the contest, there will be the beginnings of a serious country called England, which can debate temporal and spiritual affairs in its own language and which will vanquish Spain and give birth to Shakespeare and Marlowe and Milton.

When the action of the book opens, though, it is still a marginal nation subservient to Rome, and the penalty for rendering the Scriptures into English, or even reading them in that form, is torture and death. In Cromwell's mind, as he contemplates his antagonist More, Mantel allows us to discern the germinal idea of what we now call the Protestant ethic:

He never sees More—a star in another firmament, who acknowledges him with a grim nod—without wanting to ask him, what's wrong with you? Or what's wrong with me? Why does everything you know, and everything you've learned, confirm you in what you believed before? Whereas in my case, what I grew up with, and what I thought I believed, is chipped away a little and a little, a fragment then a piece and then a piece more. With every month that passes, the corners are knocked off the certainties of this world: and the next world too. Show me where it says, in the Bible, "Purgatory." Show me where it says "relics, monks, nuns." Show me where it says "Pope."

Thomas More, he reflects, will burn men, while the venal Cardinal Wolsey will burn only books, in "a holocaust of the English language, and so much rag-rich paper consumed, and so much black printer's ink." Cromwell has sufficient immunity to keep his own edition of William Tyndale's forbidden English Bible, published overseas and smuggled back home, with a title page that carries the mocking words printed in utopia. Thomas More will one day see to it that Tyndale, too, burns alive for that jibe. Curtain-raised here, also, is Cromwell's eventual readiness to smash the monasteries and confiscate their revenue and property to finance the building of a modern state, so that after Wolsey there will never again be such a worldly and puissant cardinal in the island realm.

These are the heavy matters that underlie the ostensible drama of which schoolchildren know, the king's ever-more-desperate search for a male heir and for a queen (or, as it turns out, queens) who will act as his broodmare in the business. With breathtaking subtlety—one quite ceases to notice the way in which she takes on the most intimate

male habits of thought and speech—Mantel gives us a Henry who is sexually pathetic, and who needs a very down-to-earth counselor. A man like Cromwell, in fact, “at home in courtroom or waterfront, bishop’s palace or inn yard. He can draft a contract, train a falcon, draw a map, stop a street fight, furnish a house and fix a jury.” Cromwell it is who catches the monarch’s eye as it strays toward the girls of the Seymour clan, and promptly invests in a loan to their family, whose country seat is named Wolf Hall. But this is not the only clue to the novel’s title: Cromwell is also acutely aware of the old saying *Homo homini lupus*. Man is wolf to man.

And so indeed he is, though in Greek-drama style, Mantel keeps most of the actual violence and slaughter offstage. Only at second hand do we hear of the terrifying carnage in the continuing war for the Papal States, and the sanguinary opportunism with which King Henry, hoping to grease the way to his first divorce, proposes to finance a French army to aid the pope. Cromwell is a practical skeptic here too, because he has spent some hard time on the Continent and knows, he says, that “the English will never be forgiven for the talent for destruction they have always displayed when they get off their own island.”

Still, from these extraordinary pages you can learn that it’s very bad to be burned alive on a windy day, because the breeze will keep flicking the flames away from you and thus protract the process. You come to see also how small heresies are bound to lead to bigger ones: Cromwell’s origins are so plebeian that he doesn’t know his own birthday. “I don’t have a natal chart. So I don’t have a fate.” Astrologers for the wealthy are of course eager to make up the difference with their elaborate charts, but the king’s chief minister is not impressed by any “hocus pocus” (the irreverent popular jeer at the *hoc est corpus* of the Latin Mass). He hears people saying the unsayable—that the sacrament of that Mass is only a scrap of bread—and is unshocked. He tracks down and exposes wonder-working nuns and other charlatans, leftovers from *The Canterbury Tales*, and instead of hanging or flogging them compels them to confess their fraudulence in public. Most of all, he understands that print is a revolution in itself, and that Thomas More will be defeated not just by William Tyndale but by William Caxton. As he tells the appalled bishop of Winchester:

Look at any part of this kingdom, my lord bishop, and you will find dereliction, destitution. There are men and women on the roads. The sheep farmers are grown so great that the little man is knocked off his acres and the plowboy is out of house and home. In a generation these people can learn to read. The plowman can take up a book. Believe me, Gardiner, England can be otherwise.

Part of the greatness of Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-four*, it has always seemed to me, is its conscious analogy to the English Reformation. The Inner Party is the holder of a secret book, on which profane eyes may not gaze, and the public language of the dictatorship is a jargon designed to obliterate the very possibility of free thought. Regular rituals of execration denounce the infidel and the Evil One. Over the scene rules an Eternal Father, or rather Big Brother. The struggle of the dissenter is to find

a tongue in which to speak: a vernacular that is, as the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England so quaintly yet memorably put it, one “understood of the people.”

Mantel contrives an unusual solution to the problem of idiom. She does not, for the most part, try to have her characters talk in sixteenth-century English. She does show Thomas More insulated in his library of Greek and Latin and Hebrew texts (and insisting that the great epistle of Saint Paul about “faith, hope, and love” should in English be “faith, hope, and charity”). She gives splendid examples of demotic blasphemy and obscenity from barge-men and publicans, one of the latter bluntly advising Cromwell not to choose a soup course that looks like what’s left over after “a whore’s washed her shift.” And she throws in—occasionally rather jarringly—some current English and even American slang usage. “Cost it out for him,” says Cromwell to Wolsey, proposing that Anne Boleyn’s father be shown the credits and debits. King Henry is described as “cutting a deal” over Church property. Expressions like “payoff,” “pretty much,” “stuff it,” and “downturn” are employed. Like sprinkles of holy water, even if these do no harm, they do no good, either.

A sequel is plainly in view, as we are given glimpses of the rival daughters who plague the ever-more-gross monarch’s hectic search for male issue. The ginger-haired baby Elizabeth is mainly a squalling infant in the period of the narrative, which chiefly covers the years 1527–35, but in the figure of her sibling Mary, one is given a chilling prefiguration of the coming time when the bonfires of English heretics will really start to blaze in earnest. Mantel is herself of Catholic background and education, and evidently not sorry to be shot of it (as she might herself phrase the matter), so it is generous of her to show the many pettinesses and cruelties with which the future “Bloody Mary” was visited by the callous statecraft and churchmanship of her father’s court. Cromwell is shown trying only to mitigate, not relieve, her plight. And Mary’s icy religiosity he can forgive, but not More’s. Anyone who has been bamboozled by the saccharine propaganda of *A Man for All Seasons* should read Mantel’s rendering of the confrontation between More and his interlocutors about the Act of Succession, deposing the pope as the supreme head of the Church in England. More discloses himself as a hybrid of Savonarola and *Bartleby the Scrivener*:

“Let us be clear. You will not take the oath because your conscience advises you against it?”

“Yes.”

“Could you be a little more comprehensive in your answers?”

“No.”

“You object but you won’t say why?”

“Yes.”

“Is it the matter of the statute you object to, or the form of the oath, or the business of oath-taking in itself?”

“I would rather not say.”

By this time, any luckless prisoner of More's would have been stretched naked on the rack, but his questioners persist courteously enough until he suddenly lashes out as the arrogant theocrat he is:

You say you have the majority. I say I have it. You say Parliament is behind you, and I say all the angels and saints are behind me, and all the company of the Christian dead, for as many generations as there have been since the church of Christ was founded, one body, undivided—

This casuistry is too much for Cromwell, who loses his composure for the first and only time:

“Oh, for Christ's sake!” he says. “A lie is no less a lie because it is a thousand years old. Your undivided church has liked nothing better than persecuting its own members, burning them and hacking them apart when they stood by their own conscience, slashing their bellies open and feeding their guts to dogs. You call history to your aid, but what is history to you? It is a mirror that flatters Thomas More. But I have another mirror, I hold it up and it shows a vain and dangerous man, and when I turn it about it shows a killer, for you will drag down with you God knows how many, who will have only the suffering, and not your martyr's gratification.”

The splendor of this outburst may conceal from the speaker, but not from us, the realization that he, too, will succeed More on the scaffold and that generations of sentimental and clerical history will canonize More while making Cromwell's name a hissing and a byword.

The means by which Mantel grounds and anchors her action so convincingly in the time she describes, while drawing so easily upon the past and hinting so indirectly at the future, put her in the very first rank of historical novelists. I cannot be quite sure why she leaves out the premonitory stirrings of the so-called Pilgrimage of Grace, the last stand of traditional conservative Catholic England against King Henry (so well caught by John Buchan in *The Blanket of the Dark*), unless she intends a successor volume. She certainly has the depth and versatility to bring off such a feat. *Wolf Hall* is a magnificent service to the language and literature whose early emancipation it depicts and also, in its demystifying of one of history's wickedest men, a service to the justice that Josephine Tey first demanded in *Daughter of Time*.

(*The Atlantic*, March 2010)

Edmund Burke: Reactionary Prophet

Review of *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, by Edmund Burke, edited by Frank W. Turner.

IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN WITH ME,” William Hazlitt wrote, “a test of the sense and candour of any one belonging to the opposite party, whether he allowed Burke to be a great man.” Not all radicals have been so generous. In a footnote to Volume One of *Das Kapital*, Karl Marx wrote with contempt of Burke:

The sycophant—who in the pay of the English oligarchy played the romantic laudator temporis acti against the French Revolution just as, in the pay of the North American colonies at the beginning of the American troubles, he had played the liberal against the English oligarchy—was an out-and-out vulgar bourgeois.

The old bruiser of the British Museum would not have known that he was echoing a remark by Thomas Jefferson, in a letter written to Benjamin Vaughan in May of 1791:

The Revolution of France does not astonish me so much as the revolution of Mr. Burke. I wish I could believe the latter proceeded from as pure motives as the former ... How mortifying that this evidence of the rottenness of his mind must oblige us now to ascribe to wicked motives those actions of his life which wore the mark of virtue and patriotism.

This attribution of mercenariness to Burke (who had in fact accepted a small pension from the British government for services rendered, and who had also been the London lobbyist or representative of the colony of New York during his defense of the rights of the American colonists) is also to be found in the work of Thomas Paine and Dr. Joseph Priestley. It is a frequent vice of radical polemic to assert, and even to believe, that once you have found the lowest motive for an antagonist, you have identified the correct one. And such reductionism makes a sort of rough partnership with the simplistic view that Burke was the founder or father of modern conservatism in general, and of its English Tory form in particular.

In point of fact Edmund Burke was neither an Englishman nor a Tory. He was an Irishman, probably a Catholic Irishman at that (even if perhaps a secret sympathizer), and for the greater part of his life he upheld the more liberal principles of the Whig faction. He was an advanced opponent of the slave trade, whose “Sketch of a Negro Code” was written in the early 1780s, and who before that had opposed the seating of American slaveholders at Westminster. His epic parliamentary campaign for the impeachment of Warren Hastings and the arraignment of the East India Company was the finest example in its day of a battle against pelf and perks and privilege. His writings on revolution and counterrevolution, and on empire, are ripe for a “Straussian” or Machiavellian reading that seeks to discover the arcane or occluded message contained within an ostensibly straightforward text.

This is most particularly true of his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, which has seldom if ever been better analyzed and, so to speak, “decoded” than in this excellent companion edition. One might begin by giving this imperishable book its full name. The original 1790 title page read “*Reflections on the Revolution in France, and on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London Relative to That Event: In a Letter Intended to Have Been Sent to a Gentleman in Paris.*” The gentleman in question was Charles-Jean-François Depont, a young man of Burke’s acquaintance who had become a member of the French National Assembly and had written to him in the fall of 1789. Burke owed him a reply, which turned into a very long letter indeed after its author had been further inspired to put pen to paper. The further inspiration was supplied by

two meetings in London, of the Constitutional Society and of the Revolution Society, at which were passed warm resolutions welcoming the fall of the Bastille. It was, more than anything else, the alarm he felt at these latter developments that impelled Burke to his response. Please note, then, that Burke chose to stress not the French Revolution but “The Revolution in France.” He seems to have intended, here, to speak of the phenomenon of revolution as it applied to French affairs, and as it might be made to apply to English ones. Hence the emphatic mention of “certain societies in London.”

The Revolution Society was not as insurgent or incendiary as its name might suggest. It was a rather respectable sodality, dedicated to celebrating the “Glorious Revolution” of 1688, a relatively bloodless coup that installed William and Mary of the House of Orange on the English throne, and established Protestantism as the state religion. One of the society’s leaders was the Reverend Richard Price, a great friend to the American Revolution and a staunch Unitarian clergyman. His resolution, carried by the same meeting that had forwarded a “Congratulatory Address” to the National Assembly in Paris, read in part, “This Society, sensible of the important advantages arising to this Country by its deliverance from Popery and Arbitrary Power ...”

It was made immediately plain to Burke that those who had enthused over revolution across the Channel were also interested in undermining and discrediting the same Church that he—an Irishman brought up under anti-Catholic penal laws—felt so obliged to defend. (This deep connection has been established by Conor Cruise O’Brien in a masterly series of studies that began with his own edition of the *Reflections* in 1968.) But the point is not a merely sectarian one. In 1780 London had been convulsed and shamed by the hysterical anti-Papist Gordon Riots, in which a crazed aristocratic demagogue had led a mob against supposedly subversive Catholics. (The best evocation of the fury and cruelty of that episode is to be found in Dickens’s *Barnaby Rudge*.) This memory was very vivid in Burke’s mind, and goes far to explain his visceral detestation of crowd violence. No less to the point, some emulators of Jacobinism—the United Irishmen, with many Protestants among their leaders—were at work in Ireland trying to bring off a rebellion that would compromise all parliamentary “moderates.” And several of the pro-Jacobin activists and spokesmen in England, not excluding the rather humane Price himself, had had political connections with Lord George Gordon. As between the Jacobite and the Jacobin, Burke could not be neutral for an instant; he might give up the Jacobite cause out of loyalty to the British crown, but he was profoundly stirred when he saw old-fashioned anti-Catholicism renascent under potentially republican colors. So one does well to keep *Barnaby Rudge* in mind along with *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Three questions will occur to anybody reconsidering the *Reflections* today. Was it a grand and prophetic indictment of revolutionary excess? Was it the disdainful shudder of a man who despised or feared what at one stage he described as the “swinish multitude”? And did it contain what we would now term a “hidden agenda”? The answer to all three questions, it seems to me, is a firm yes. Let us take the two most celebrated excerpts of Burke’s extraordinary prose. The first is the prescient one:

It is known; that armies have hitherto yielded a very precarious and uncertain obedience to any senate, or popular authority; and they will least of all yield it to an assembly which is only to have a continuance of two years. The officers must totally lose the characteristic disposition of military men, if they see with perfect submission and due admiration, the dominion of pleaders; especially when they find that they have a new court to pay to an endless succession of those pleaders; whose military policy, and the genius of whose command, (if they should have any,) must be as uncertain as their duration is transient. In the weakness of one kind of authority, and in the fluctuation of all, the officers of an army will remain for some time mutinous and full of faction, until some popular general, who understands the art of conciliating the soldiery, and who possesses the true spirit of command, shall draw the eyes of all men upon himself. Armies will obey him on his personal account. There is no other way of securing military obedience in this state of things. But the moment in which that event shall happen, the person who really commands the army is your master, the master (that is little) of your king, the master of your Assembly, the master of your whole republic.

This is almost eerily exact. Even in the solitary detail in which it does not body forth the actual coming of Napoleon Bonaparte (who did not emerge until well after the execution of King Louis), it takes care to state that the subordination of existing monarchy would be the least of it. There is only one comparably Cassandra-like prediction that I can call to mind, and that is Rosa Luxemburg's warning to Lenin that revolution can move swiftly from the dictatorship of a class to the dictatorship of a party, to be followed by the dictatorship of a committee of that party and eventually by the rule of a single man who will soon enough dispense with that committee.

Contrast this with Burke's even more famous passage about the fragrance and charisma of Marie Antoinette:

It is now sixteen or seventeen years since I saw the queen of France, then the dauphiness, at Versailles; and surely never lighted on this orb, which she hardly seemed to touch, a more delightful vision. I saw her just above the horizon, decorating and cheering the elevated sphere she just began to move in,—glittering like the morning-star, full of life, and splendour, and joy. Oh! what a revolution! and what a heart must I have to contemplate without emotion that elevation and that fall! Little did I dream when she added titles of veneration to those of enthusiastic, distant, respectful love, that she should ever be obliged to carry the sharp antidote against disgrace concealed in that bosom; little did I dream that I should have lived to see such disasters fallen upon her in a nation of gallant men, in a nation of men of honour, and of cavaliers. I thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult. But the age of chivalry is gone. That of sophisters, economists, and calculators, has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished for ever. Never, never more shall we behold that generous loyalty to rank and sex, that proud submission, that dignified obedience, that subordination of the heart, which kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom. The unbought grace of

life, the cheap defense of nations, the nurse of manly sentiment and heroic enterprise, is gone! It is gone, that sensibility of principle, that chastity of honour, which felt a stain like a wound, which inspired courage whilst it mitigated ferocity, which ennobled whatever it touched, and under which vice itself lost half its evil, by losing all its grossness.

One has read this passage very many times (I shall never forget the first time I heard it read out loud, by a Tory headmaster), and its meaning and majesty appear to alter with one's mood and evolution. "The unbought grace of life" is a most arresting phrase, however opaque, just as "the cheap defence of nations" remains unintelligible. The gallantry, and the appeal to chivalry, can sometimes seem like "the last enchantments of the Middle Age," breathing with an incomparable melancholy and resignation. Alternatively, the entire stave can be held to rank with the most preposterous and em-purpled sentimentality ever committed to print—not to be rivaled until the moist, vapid effusions that greeted the death of Diana Spencer, also in Paris, in a banal traffic accident.

The latter view, or something very like it, was the one expressed by Burke's friend and confidant Philip Francis, to whom he had sent the draft and the proofs. The friendship more or less ended when Francis replied,

In my opinion all that you say of the Queen is pure foppery. If she be a perfect female character you ought to take your ground upon her virtues. If she be the reverse it is ridiculous in any but a Lover, to place her personal charms in opposition to her crimes. Either way I know the argument must proceed upon a supposition; for neither have you said anything to establish her moral merits, nor have her accusers formally tried and convicted her of guilt.

The gash that this inflicted on Burke was not a shallow one: He had admired Philip Francis ever since the latter took an active part in the defense of the rights of India and the consequent impeachment of Warren Hastings. Francis, moreover, was one of the most feared and skillful pamphleteers of the day, writing excoriating letters under the pseudonym "Junius"—whose identity Burke was one of few to guess. (I can't resist pointing out here that Rosa Luxemburg wrote her most famous pamphlet under the same nom de guerre. I do so not just to make a connection that hasn't been observed before but because "Junius" is taken from Lucius Junius Brutus, not the Shakespearean regicide but the hero and founder of the Roman republic.) Not content with taunting Burke about his emotional spasm over Marie Antoinette, Francis urged him in effect to give up the whole project; and when it was finally published in spite of this advice, he wrote Burke a letter in which he coupled "the Church" with "that religion in short, which was practiced or professed, and with great Zeal too, by tyrants and villains of every denomination." This English Voltairianism had the effect of spurring Burke to an even more heated defense of the alliance of religion with order and property. To him, the alleged "deism" of the revolutionaries was a shabby mask for iconoclastic atheism. Nor did he care much for the then fashionable chatter about liberty and "rights." As he stated early in the *Reflections*,

Am I to congratulate an highwayman and murderer, who has broke prison, upon the recovery of his natural rights? This would be to act over again the scene of the criminals condemned to the galleys, and their heroic deliverer, the metaphysic knight of the sorrowful countenance.

In other words, Burke was quite ready to anticipate, or to meet, any charge of quixotism. This did not prevent Thomas Paine from responding that “in the rhapsody of his imagination, he has discovered a world of windmills, and his sorrows are, that there are no Quixotes to attack them.”

Paine’s reply, to the Reflections in general and to the paeon to Marie Antoinette in particular, is no less celebrated. In mourning the plumage, he wrote in *Rights of Man*, Burke forgot the dying bird. It is true, as O’Brien has pointed out, that this statement has since been employed by many pitiless revolutionaries to justify their less tasteful or unscrupulous actions, and that it can be made to rank with the omelet and the eggs as a remark that is dismissive and callous when applied to a “mere” individual. Indeed, in his essay in this edition O’Brien proposes Burke as the moral ancestor of all those who have warned until the present day of the awfulness of absolutist revolutions and of the terrifying results that ensue from any scheme for human perfectibility.

However, Paine—who also disliked the “mob,” and who described Lord George Gordon as a “madman”—was to take a much more considerable risk, in theory and practice, to assure humane treatment for the plumage. As a deputy in the French National Convention for the district of Pas de Calais, he spoke out strongly against the execution of King Louis. He did so first because of the way in which royalist France had come to the aid of the American Revolution. (Some historians, including Simon Schama, now maintain that the expense of this commitment led to the emptying of the French treasury, and thus to the original crisis of bankruptcy that precipitated the events of 1789.) He did so second because he could see that measures of revenge were likely to coarsen the French revolutionary regime. And he did so third because of an inborn revulsion against capital punishment, which he had seen practiced with the utmost brutality by the British authorities. The taking of these positions (and let us not forget that the vote on the execution of King Louis almost resulted in a tie) involved him in a very tough parliamentary confrontation with none other than Jean Paul Marat, who denounced Paine as a Quaker and a foreigner and ignited the train of suspicion and paranoia that would land Paine in a foul-smelling Parisian cell under sentence of death. It was in such circumstances that Paine composed *The Age of Reason*. In that book, as is often forgotten, he tried to vindicate deism against atheism, and certainly succeeded in disproving Burke’s crude contention that this was a distinction without a difference. For Paine, the Robespierrean annexation of religious property was not at all a separation between Church and State but, rather, a nationalizing by the State of the Church. That may be a more radical and useful objection than Burke’s furious refusal to regard the least trespass on ecclesiastical power as anything but profane or obscene.

The chief weakness of this volume is its refusal to take Paine at all seriously, or to consider whether he, too, might not have been defending one revolution in his own way in order to safeguard another. O'Brien has established to most people's satisfaction that Burke pleaded the cause of the American colonists, and indignantly denounced the French Revolution, because he hoped in this way to make the case for reform in Ireland and knew how far he could go. Paine, who had wanted the American Revolution to go further than it did (in the abolition of slavery, for example), wished to keep the French Revolution from becoming too bloody and fanatical. Like Jefferson and Lafayette, he had a not-so-hidden motive: to expand and consolidate a system that might rescue the new American republic from isolation. Along with Lafayette, he suffered considerable persecution and contumely from French hard-liners as a result.

Professor John Keane has reminded us, in his 1995 biography of Paine, that there was a time when Burke and Paine were friends. Burke accompanied Paine on some trips into the English countryside, in search of a site for Paine's newly designed iron bridge. Both were suspicious of arbitrary power ("We hunt in pairs," Burke once joked), and Paine had no reason to doubt that Burke, in his *Thoughts on the Causes of the Present Discontents* (1770), had been sincere in his liberal belief that it was corrupt authority, not protest against it, that required justification. The astonishment Paine expresses in *Rights of Man* at Burke's refusal to criticize or even to enumerate the crimes and cruelties of the *ancien régime* is clearly genuine. So is his scorn at Burke's concept of the franchise as a reward for property and piety. (Until Paine tried to salvage it the term "democracy"—like the words "Tory" and, later, "suffragette" and "impressionist"—had been deployed only as an insult.) Paine was a Newtonian and a believer in economic growth and modern technique; Burke was a prisoner of the feudal and the landed conception of society, who employed the words "innovation" and "despotism" as virtual twins. Notice, for example, how the word "economist" in the Marie Antoinette passage is used as a synonym for knavery. Paine was for a written constitution and a carefully designed welfare state (adumbrated in the second half of *Rights of Man*), whereas Burke was for the semi-mystical "unwritten constitution" of a Crowned Parliament, and spared few thoughts even for the deserving poor.

However often one awards the winning of the longer-term argument to Paine, the fact remains that he and Jefferson and Lafayette never even dreamed of the advent of Bonapartism. They all believed, at the time that the argument was actually taking place, that France would become a constitutional monarchy, or had actually become one already. It was Burke who took this romantic delusion—a delusion shared by Charles James Fox and the leaders of Burke's own Whig party, and even for a time by William Pitt and the more pragmatic Tories—and mercilessly exploded it. He also showed that the outcome of the French Revolution would be war on a continental scale. The tremendous power of the *Reflections* lies in this, the first serious argument that revolutions devour their own children and turn into their own opposites.

Indeed, Marx might have paid a little more attention to Burke in drawing his conclusion that the French events of 1789 were the harbinger chiefly of a bourgeois revolution.

Burke's attachment to the old order at least allowed him to see this with exemplary clarity. He wrote,

If this monster of a constitution can continue, France will be wholly governed by the agitators in corporations, by societies in the towns formed of directors of assignats and trustees for the sale of church lands, attornies, agents, money-jobbers, speculators, and adventurers, composing an ignoble oligarchy, founded on the destruction of the crown, the church, the nobility, and the people. Here end all the deceitful dreams and visions of the equality and rights of men.

In a similar piece of magnificent disdain for what English aristocrats used to call "trade," he made another penetrating observation about the kinship between tradition and the social contract:

The state ought not to be considered as nothing better than a partnership agreement in a trade of pepper and coffee, calico or tobacco, or some other such low concern ... it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born. Each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primeval contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher natures, connecting the visible and invisible world, according to a fixed compact sanctioned by the inviolable oath which holds all physical and all moral natures, each in their appointed place.

Again, one has to peel away the layers of holy awe with which Burke protected the idea of an ordained social and moral hierarchy, and the complacency of the hereditary principle in general. But something essential in him, not all of it attributable to his political allegiances, rebelled at the notion of a society begun anew—a place where humanity should begin from scratch. This is of huge importance, because Paine and Jefferson very adamantly took the view that only the living had any rights. "Man has no property in man," Paine wrote, making what could have been a very fine argument against slavery but going on to say,

Neither has any generation a property in the generations which are to follow. The parliament or the people of 1688, or of any other period, has no more right to dispose of the people of the present day, or to bind or to control them in any shape whatever, than the parliament or the people of the present day have to dispose of, bind or control those who are to live a hundred or a thousand years hence. Every generation is, and must be, competent to all the purposes which its occasions require. It is the living, and not the dead, that are to be accommodated.

Thus the French calendar that began the human story over again, or that at least tried to rewind its odometer. Thus Jefferson's notorious 1793 letter to William Short, stating that he had rather "seen half the earth desolated; were there but an Adam and Eve left in every country," than see the French Revolution defeated. A little stretch is required to derive the Khmer Rouge "Year Zero" from this; but those who are willing to

be millennial about origins will sometimes be millennial about consequences. Yet such hectic and short-term radical enthusiasm is distinctly odd in one way, since both Paine and Jefferson derived many of their claims of liberty from supposedly ancestral Saxon institutions that predated the Norman Conquest, and since Paine can hardly have been unaware that in challenging the 1688 revolution, he was pushing at an open door as far as Burke was concerned. Equally extraordinary is the implied lack of any duty toward future generations, which revolutionaries at all times have claimed to stand for. If modern conservatism can be held to derive from Burke, it is not just because he appealed to property owners in behalf of stability but also because he appealed to an everyday interest in the preservation of the ancestral and the immemorial. And the abolition of memory, as we have come to know in our own time, is an aspect of the totalitarian that spares neither right nor left. In the cult of “now,” just as in the making of Reason into an idol, the writhings of nihilism are to be detected.

It is vastly to the credit of Conor Cruise O’Brien that he still feels it necessary to defend Burke from the charge of being a “reactionary.” It may not be feasible to make this extenuation a consistent one. Burke was strongly in favor of repressive measures at home, including the silencing of all dissent. In calling for an all-out war, he outdid William Pitt himself. He died before the worst of the Bonapartist project for Europe was revealed, and it cannot easily be said that his gravest fears in this respect did not materialize. But in his discussion of the French philosophes he declined even to cite any of their secular and rationalist critique, because, as he put it in a footnote to *Reflections*, “I do not choose to shock the feeling of the moral reader with any quotation of their vulgar, base, and profane language.” That’s Tory pomposity defined. Furthermore, and as Darrin McMahon points out in his chapter of this edition, Burke in the year of his death (1797) wrote to the exiled Abbé Barruel to thank him in the most profuse terms for a copy of his *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire du jacobinisme*. This was a work, infamous in its time, of the most depraved and retrograde Jesuitism, which purported to find a grand conspiracy of Freemasons and other subversives in the overthrow of the Bourbons. Burke’s letter was no mere courtesy; it lauded the abbé for his justice, regularity, and exactitude. This is the only charge against Burke that I cannot find mentioned or dealt with in Conor Cruise O’Brien’s tremendous biography *The Great Melody*; but as O’Brien has observed in another context, those intellectuals who will not give up “civility” and “objectivity” for the cause of revolution have sometimes been observed to sacrifice these qualities for the sake of the counterrevolution. Clearly, Burke saw himself as willing to try all means and all alliances in order to “contain” revolutionary France, lest it pose a challenge similar to that presented by the Protestant Reformation, and then as far as possible to destroy it.

By 1815 that project might have been accounted a success. But the idea of the French Revolution managed to survive the Duke of Wellington and Prince Metternich as well as the literary power of Edmund Burke. The trinity of “liberté, égalité, fraternité” outlived those who had butchered in its name, and was deposed from the French currency only during the time of Vichy (which replaced it with the less sonorous

“travail, famille, patrie”). Lafayette lived long enough to take part in the anti-Bourbon Revolution of 1830. Paine died ruined and disappointed, yet his opinions resurfaced in the movement for the franchise that eventually defeated the Duke of Wellington’s government. And Thomas Jefferson was able to double the land area of the United States of America. The terms of the Louisiana Purchase would not have been available had it not been for a slave revolt in Haiti, inspired by the ideals and proclamations of 1789, that annihilated Napoleon’s fleet and army and put an end to French ambitions in the hemisphere. What might Burke have made of this momentous insurrection, later so brilliantly described by C. L. R. James? One recurs to Hazlitt’s generous judgment when one wishes to have read Burke on what happened when Jacobinism crossed the Atlantic and became black.

(The Atlantic, April 2004)

Samuel Johnson: Demons and Dictionaries

Review of Samuel Johnson: A Biography, by Peter Martin.

HOW OFTEN OUR USAGE manages to accomplish, for a name or an expression, the precise negation of its originally intended meaning. To satirize the sycophants among his courtiers, King Canute sarcastically commanded the waves to keep their distance and allowed his own majesty to be wetted by the tides: Now we give the name Canute to anyone in authority who foolishly attempts to ward off the inevitable. For the young scion of the Veronese house of Montague, only one girl in the whole world could possibly possess meaning, or be worth possessing: Accordingly, we use the word Romeo to designate a tireless philanderer. In eighteenth-century England, John Wilkes was the leader of a radical political faction known as the Patriots. In Dr. Samuel Johnson’s Tory view, affiliation with that subversive party was “the last refuge of a scoundrel”: This now is construed as an attack on all those—most often Tories themselves—who take shelter in a too-effusive love of country.

The life and sayings of Johnson were so replete with ironies that perhaps it is no surprise to find literalness exacting its effect over the course of time. Peter Martin’s outstanding new biography gives the best account I have yet read of another of its subject’s celebrated observations—“Depend upon it, Sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.” In 1777, a popular and fashionable clergyman named William Dodd was sentenced to death for forgery. Having read Johnson’s Rambler essays on the vagaries of the criminal-justice system, he bethought himself of the good doctor as a man who might be persuaded to intercede for him. Johnson took up the case for clemency and wrote not only a petition to the monarch, as if penned by Dodd, but also a sermon, “The Convict’s Address to His Unhappy Brethren,” which the hapless reverend delivered to his fellow inmates of Newgate Prison. So affecting was this address that it helped complete the swing of public opinion in favor of a pardon for Dodd. But authority was unflinching, and the

wretched cleric was duly and publicly executed. There were those who doubted that he had possessed “the force of mind” required to have written such a fine sermon himself, and those who even suspected that Johnson might have been the “ghost” writer in the case. It was to quell such speculation that Johnson made the remark, which we can therefore understand not as a cynical and clever one but as a very elegant and modest disclaimer. Having been disappointed by the failure of Walter Jackson Bate to tell this important tale aright in his immense 1978 biographical study, I was full of admiration for Peter Martin for managing to summarize it so deftly.

Not that Johnson was by any means incapable of cynicism. He made quite a little income by writing anonymous sermons for a two-guinea fee, and he assured a friend’s newly ordained son:

The composition of sermons is not very difficult. Invent first and then embellish ... Set down diligently your thoughts as they rise in the first words that occur ... I have begun a sermon after dinner and sent it off by the post that night.

He was quite as able to be terse and memorable when in conversation and, like Oscar Wilde (who was, like him, disconcertingly vast when seen at close quarters), seems seldom to have been off duty when it came to the epigrammatic and aphoristic. The urge felt by so many of Johnson’s contemporaries—not James Boswell alone—to keep a record of his doings and utterances has placed him among the first figures in history whom we feel we “know” as a person. Indeed, so well are even his tics and mannerisms and symptoms conveyed that Martin can confidently say that Johnson more probably suffered from emphysema than asthma, and Oliver Sacks was able some years ago to make a fairly definite retrospective diagnosis of Tourette’s syndrome.

And yet for all this, we know barely enough to know what we don’t know. In the last days of his life, in the mean little court off Fleet Street where he made his dwelling, Johnson staged a mockery of the disclosure industry that is associated with that address, and heaped up a huge pyre of his papers, diaries, manuscripts, and letters. With his loyal black servant, Frank Barber, serving as counter-amanuensis, he spent a week at the task of self-immolation. Had it not been for Boswell’s retention of some of their mutual correspondence, and Johnson’s own (and presumably significant) inability to burn the letters of Mrs. Hester Thrale, we might have lost the whole trove.

But if it comes to that, we might very nearly never have heard of Samuel Johnson of Lichfield in the first place. Having almost expired in childbirth (and having thus been hastily baptized to save his immortal soul), the little boy fell victim to scrofula and was stricken partially blind and deaf. In those days the remedy for scrofula—also known as “the King’s Evil”—was to be magically “touched” by the hereditary monarch. Young Samuel was taken to be touched by Queen Anne, and if the charm did not “take” in his case, well, then, it could be because there had been a disturbance in the legitimacy of the line after the Jacobite convulsions. Johnson thus operates in that extended period of English (and American) history when the divine right of kings is not yet quite exhausted or discredited but when the concept of “the rights of man” has yet to be fully born. Considering how nearly he was extinguished before he could

play any part in this great argument, it is perhaps surprising how little he esteemed Thomas Gray, author of the greatest elegy for the unsung.

Martin pursues the argument, about the relationship of health to personality, beyond the physical and well into the psychological. In his view, Johnson felt permanently hag-ridden by guilt, by fear of divine punishment, by self-loathing at his own laziness and greed and inadequacy, and also (this being my own interpretation of the case as presented) by his very failure to feel that guilt and fear strongly enough. His conscious mind, in other words, was at war with his superstitious instincts. His main mental weapon in this combat was his own industry. Sometimes even this industry took its contradictory forms—the only time Johnson ever got up early to read a book, it was Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*—but we owe his triumphs of spoof-parliamentary reportage, his *Rasselas*, and above all his immortal dictionary to the struggle against anomie, and against the hell of despair to which anomie can be the antechamber.

This in turn means that we are very much indebted to Mrs. Thrale, who in 1766 rescued him from that pit, nursed him back from a near-complete breakdown, and for the next sixteen years gave him a refuge in south London from the quotidian melancholies of his working life. The other members of his ever-famous "Club"—Sir Joshua Reynolds, Edmund Burke, Oliver Goldsmith, Edward Gibbon, and David Garrick—also had an alternative place of resort from their customary Soho haunt. Johnson's dependence on Mrs. Thrale was in some ways so utter and complete that it has given rise to speculations about literal masochism and its sadistic counterpart. In an essay published sixty years ago, Katharine Balderston claimed to have identified a recurrent motif of manacling and beating, begged for by Johnson and duly administered by his mother substitute. Walter Jackson Bate later argued—successfully, I think—that the same letters between them could have contained their private code for the understanding and treatment of incipient madness. More recently, Jeffrey Meyers has revived the Balderston speculation (because, after all, Johnson did give Mrs. Thrale a padlock, which she preserved), while Peter Martin follows Bate in identifying Johnson's obsessions about enchainment with the fear of that epoch's cruel treatment of the insane. For myself, I think that the evidence most often adduced in favor of the hypothesis is the most persuasive testimony for the other side of the case. In her *Thraliana*, Mrs. Thrale recounts:

Says Johnson a Woman has such power between the Ages of twenty five and forty five, that She may tye a Man to a post and whip him if She will.

It's not at all hard to imagine Johnson saying this, but when Mrs. Thrale adds her own footnote to tell us, "This he knew of him self was literally and strictly true I am sure," why, then, sir and ma'am, I think we may take it as obvious that whoever was plying the lash, if indeed a lash was ever "literally" applied, it was certainly not the respectable lady who wrote those disarmingly ingenuous words.

It was, though, some harsh breed of the "black dog" that helped condition the two constants in Johnson's life and writing: his Toryism and his religion. Martin makes some pleas in mitigation as regards the Toryism, reminding us of Johnson's sympathy

for the poor and the failed and the deformed, but he cannot keep the jury out for very long. Johnson's pitiless and violent hatred of the American Revolution, and his contemptuous cruelty toward those who apostatized from the established church (even if it was to join another Christian sect) was strong and consistent. The word established may well be the key one here, religion for Johnson being more a matter of security and stability (public as well as private) than a matter of faith, and the episcopal system a further insurance against the fearful "sedition," which he regarded as the twin of John Wilkes's "impiety."

Just as it was a primitive fear of hell that caused his parents to baptize him at birth lest his infant soul be consigned to the fire, so it was increasingly a holy terror that came to dominate his last years. As Macaulay was later to write, about the great man's ghastly tendency to superstition: "He began to be credulous precisely at the point where the most credulous people begin to be skeptical." Again, I see no reason to attribute this fixation upon eternal torture to any masochistic tendency. Johnson felt, as many fine writers have done, that he had wasted most of his time and squandered the greater part of his gift. (Exorbitant praise from others, such as Boswell in this instance, may often have the effect only of reinforcing such a morbid conviction of failure.) Yet it is owing to Boswell's generosity and curiosity that we have, and from the very same witness, an account of the deathbeds of both David Hume and Samuel Johnson. Hume—who lay dying in the days of 1776 that launched the American Revolution so much hated by Johnson—famously told Boswell that he was no more afraid of his own extinction after death than he was of the nonexistence that had preceded his birth. Johnson, when informed of this calm attitude, declined to credit it—I am going here by Hesketh Pearson's account—and would not listen even when Boswell reminded him that many Greek and Roman heroes had faced death stoically without the benefits of Christianity. At a subsequent meeting with Adam Smith, who vouched for the truth of Boswell's story, Johnson loudly called Smith a liar, to which Smith coldly responded that Johnson was "a son of a bitch." This collision with the author of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* seems to prepare one for Macaulay's later observation that Johnson "could discern clearly enough the folly and meanness of all bigotry but his own."

It occurs to me that both Hume and Smith were Scots (or "Scotchmen," as Johnson preferred to say) and that dislike for the North British was perhaps the one thing that Johnson had in common with his unscrupulous enemy Wilkes. Should you choose to look up any of Johnson's celebrated jokes at the expense of Scotland, whether in his dictionary or his reported speech, you will, I believe, notice that they fall short of the Wildean in being too long-winded and contrived, and too reliant for their leaden effect on mere prejudice. Teasing is very often a sign of inner misery: Johnson's grandeur is diminished the more we come to know of the well-earned honor and eminence of some of those with whom he did battle, as well as the sheer paltriness of some of the imaginary demons with which he merely fancied himself doing so.

(The Atlantic, March 2009)

Gustave Flaubert: I'm with Stupide

Review of *Bouvard and Pecuchet*, by Gustave Flaubert, translated from the French by Mark Polizzotti.

THE DEVOTEE of Gustave Flaubert may feel some of the same inhibition, in deciding whether to embark upon *Bouvard and Pecuchet*, as the admirer of Dickens or Schubert in contemplating *Edwin Drood* or that famously incomplete symphony. If their originators couldn't manage to finish them, then why should we? And in the case of Flaubert's last novel—initially reconstructed by his niece from some 4,000 manuscript pages after his sudden death in 1880—the word “finish” carries not just the meaning of completion but that crucial element of polish and rounding-off, so essential in the case of the man who fretted endlessly over *le mot juste*.

Economy and perfectionism in point of words would have been the last concern of the two losers featured here, whose working lives were spent as copy clerks and to whom words were mere objects or things. Drawn to each other by a common mediocrity (Flaubert's original title was *The Tale of Two Nobodies*), *Bouvard and Pecuchet* are liberated by an unexpected legacy to embark on a career of unfettered fatuity. Many fictions and scenarios have depended upon a male double-act, usually enriched by contrast as in the case of Holmes and Watson or Bertie and Jeeves, or of course the Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance and his rotund and pragmatic squire. More recently, each half of the sketch has been equally hapless and pitiful, as with Laurel and Hardy, Abbott and Costello, Vladimir and Estragon, or “Withnail and I.” If you stir in the rural setting, plus a shallow addiction to the mysteries of technique and innovation, you find that Flaubert's pairing has also anticipated *Dumb and Dumber*. It's often necessary to mark off two fools or jerks by discrepant heights: *Bouvard* is tall but pot-bellied while *Pecuchet* is short. A mnemonic here might be Schwarzenegger and DeVito in *Twins*.

An early disappointment for the reader of this deft and elegant new translation by Mark Polizzotti, therefore, is the way in which Flaubert's first draft so often reduces this field of alternation by telling us merely what “they” got up to. It is as if we had two Quixotes or two Sanchos. Two Quixotes would be nearer the mark, since this undynamic duo is at least fixated upon grand schemes of discovery and improvement. Together, they set out to illustrate and underline the Popean maxim that a little learning is a dangerous thing.

Flaubert is pitiless with his wretched creations, allowing them no moment of joy, or even ease. It is enough for them to turn their hands to a project for it to expire in chaos and slapstick, and after a while this, too, shows the shortcomings of the unpolished, because we can hear the sound of collapsing scenery before the stage has even been set. True bathos requires a slight interval between the sublime and the ridiculous, but no sooner have our clowns embarked on a project than we see the bucket of whitewash or the banana skin. The story is set in motion by their rash decision to quit Paris for the Norman countryside: It was a rule of fiction before Flaubert that city clerks

attempting agricultural improvements would end up with smellier sewage, thinner crops, sicker animals, and more combustible hayricks than even the dullest peasant. A hinge event in Flaubert's writing is the revolution of 1848. If he ever read Marx and Engels's manifesto of that year, with its remark about "the idiocy of rural life," he evidently decided to go it one better. In his bucolic scheme, every official is a dolt, every priest a fool or knave, every milkmaid diseased and unchaste, every villager either a boozier or a chiseler. (I am influenced here, perhaps, by Polizzotti's use of American idioms like "Are you putting me on?")

If only Bouvard and Pecuchet would restrict themselves to excavating bogus fossils or to collecting unsorted specimens of archaeology, Flaubert's unforgiving attitude might appear unkind. But they insist upon inflicting themselves, as advisers and even as physicians, upon others. Impatient with the counsel of Dr. Vaucorbeil, "they began visiting patients on their own, entering people's homes on the pretext of philanthropy." Their quackery does less harm than one might expect, but then they weary of it in favor of marveling at what we might call intelligent design: "Harmonies vegetal and terrestrial, as well as aerial, aquatic, human, fraternal and even conjugal: all of these were included.... They were astounded that fish had fins, birds wings, seeds a skin—and they subscribed to the philosophy that ascribes virtuous intentions to Nature and considers it a kind of St. Vincent de Paul perpetually occupied with spreading its munificence."

Alternately eclectic and omnivorous, our heroes are like cushions that bear the impression of whoever last sat upon them. Before they are through, they have tried mesmerism and magnetism, phrenology and the spiritualist séance, as well as some experiments in cross-breeding that might have made Lysenko blush. No fad or pseudoscience is beyond their hectic enthusiasm, and Flaubert's own ruthless skepticism about the idea of "progress" is evinced, I think, in the occasional cruelty that results from seeing human and other creatures as potential subjects for experiment. The examples are given more or less deadpan: Dr. Vaucorbeil's office has "a picture of a man flayed alive"; kittens are found to die after five minutes under water; and a cat is boiled in a cauldron by one of the children the hopeless couple adopt before they become bored with the idea. Callousness itself is a child of stupidity. In *Sentimental Education* the revolution of 1848 is a Parisian fiasco with some grandeur, but in these pages it appears as a provincial circus that is all farce and no tragedy.

This novel was plainly intended to show its author's deep contempt, however comedically expressed, for all grand schemes, most especially the Rousseauian ones, to improve the human lot. Such schemes founder because the human material is simply too base to be transmuted. Even Bouvard and Pecuchet receive a glimpse of this, if only through their own solipsism: "Then their minds developed a piteous faculty, that of perceiving stupidity and being unable to tolerate it. Insignificant things saddened them: newspaper advertisements, a burgher's profile, an inane comment overheard by chance.... They felt upon their shoulders the weight of the entire world." This anomie is the preface to a suicide pact (and they can't even get that right) and is then suc-

ceeded by a Christmas Eve reconciliation with Holy Mother Church that makes *It's a Wonderful Life* seem like an education in unsentimentality.

Jorge Luis Borges was of the opinion that Flaubert, the craftsman of the first truly realist novel with *Madame Bovary*, was also, with Bouvard and Pecuchet, the saboteur of his own project. And it is not difficult to trace the influence of these two men without qualities on the work of Joyce and Musil and Beckett, and on the twentieth century's evolution of the anti-hero. What is amazing is the industry with which Flaubert assimilated so many books on arcane subjects (some 1,500, according to Polizzotti), all of this knowledge acquired just so that a brace of nobodies could manage to get things not just wrong, but exactly wrong.

In one or two places in the story, most notably with his discussion of suicide and of syphilis, Flaubert makes indirect allusion to his celebrated *Dictionary of Received Ideas* (or "Accepted Ideas"). He had begun it as early as 1850, but he plainly intended to update it as a coda to Bouvard and Pecuchet, along with a *Catalogue of Fashionable Ideas*, which Polizzotti also includes. Flaubert's taxonomy is in fact one of expressions rather than opinions: It forms a collection of ready-made clichés for the use of the conformist or the unimaginative. Some of these make one blush ("Laurels: Keep one from resting") because one has used them oneself. Others are too self-evident ("Flagrante Delicto: Use in Latin. Is applied only to cases of adultery"). Some are out-moded ("Syphilis: Pretty much everyone has it"), or apply chiefly to Flaubert himself, who contracted syphilis enough times to cancel out many other people. Still, it is a trope to rival that of Proust's *Madame Verdurin*, who loved nothing better than "to frolic in her billow of stock expressions." At the close, as we know from the notes that Flaubert left behind, the two clerks would have been back at a common desk, once again copying out whatever was put in front of them. The *Dictionary* would have been part of the leaden chain that bound them to that desk.

(The New York Times Book Review, January 22, 2006)

The Dark Side of Dickens

Review of Charles Dickens, by Michael Slater.

IF OFFERED the onetime chance to travel back into the world of the nineteenth-century English novel, I once heard myself saying, I would brush past Messrs. Dickens and Thackeray for the opportunity to hold speech with George Eliot. I would of course be wanting to press Mary Ann Evans on her theological capacities and her labor in translating the liberal German philosophers, as well as on her near-Shakespearean gift for divining the well-springs of human motivation. When compared to that vista of the soul and the intellect, why trouble even with the creator of Rebecca Sharp, let alone with the man who left us the mawkish figures of Smeke and Oliver and Little Nell, to say nothing of the grisly inheritance that is the modern version of Christmas? Putting it even more high-mindedly, ought one not to prefer an author like Eliot, who really

did give her whole enormous mind to religious and social and colonial questions, over a vain actor-manager type who used pathetic victims as tear-jerking raw material, and who actually detested the real subjects of High Victorian power and hypocrisy when they were luckless enough to dwell overseas?

I can still think in this way if I choose, but I know I am protesting too much. The first real test is that of spending a long and arduous evening in the alehouses and outer purlieus of London, and here it has to be in the company of Dickens and nobody else. The second real test is that of passing the same evening in company with the possessor of an anarchic sense of humor: This yields the same result. What did oyster shuckers do, Dickens demanded to know, when the succulent bivalves were out of season?

Do they commit suicide in despair, or wrench open tight drawers and cupboards and hermetically-sealed bottles—for practice? Perhaps they are dentists out of the oyster season? Who knows?

This pearl was contained in a private letter not intended for publication (Dickens was almost always “on”) and is somewhat more searching than the dull question—“Where do the ducks in Central Park go in winter?”—that was asked by the boy who spoke so scornfully of “all that David Copperfield kind of crap.”

It would be understating matters to say that Thackeray rather looked down on Dickens, but, even as *Vanity Fair* was first being serialized in 1847, he picked up the fifth installment of *Dombey and Son* and then brought it down with a smack on the table, exclaiming the while, “There’s no writing against such power as this—one has no chance! Read that chapter describing young Paul’s death: It is unsurpassed—it is stupendous!”

Almost a decade later, Dickens was dispatching an admiring note to George Eliot on the publication of her very first fiction, *Scenes of Clerical Life*. He felt he had penetrated the guileless disguise of her *nom de plume*: “If [the sketches] originated with no woman, I believe that no man ever before had the art of making himself, mentally, so like a woman, since the world began.”

So I find the plan of my original enterprise falling away from me; I must give it up; there is something formidable about Dickens that may not be gain-said.

He may not have had Shakespeare’s or Eliot’s near omniscience about human character, but he did say, in an address on the anniversary of the Bard’s birthday: “We meet on this day to celebrate the birthday of a vast army of living men and women who will live for ever with an actuality greater than that of the men and women whose external forms we see around us.” As Peter Ackroyd commented in his *Dickens* (1990), he must have been “thinking here of Hamlet and Lear, of Macbeth and Prospero, but is it not also true” that in Portsmouth in February 1812 were born “Pecksniff and Scrooge, Oliver Twist and Sairey Gamp, Samuel Pickwick and Nicholas Nickleby ... the Artful Dodger and Wackford Squeers ... ?” I cite this occasion for a reason. In Michael Slater’s volume, we learn only that on April 22, 1854, Dickens chaired “a Garrick Club dinner to celebrate Shakespeare’s birthday.” This is of course worth knowing in its own right, but is perhaps a little bloodless by comparison. Slater is invariably

flattering toward Ackroyd's work, but could perhaps have taken a leaf or two from its emotional eloquence.

Who does not know of the formative moments in the life of Dickens the boy? The feeble male parent, the death of a sibling, the awful indenture to "the blacking factory," the pseudo-respectable school where the master slashed the boys with a cane as if to satisfy what was later identified in Mr. Creakle as "a craving appetite." The sending of the father to the Marshalsea debtors' prison, the refuge taken by a quakingly sensitive child in the consoling pages of fiction ... all this we have long understood. So great was the dependence of Dickens on his own life experience that he almost resented the fact and was very guarded, even with his loyal biographer, John Forster, on the question, as if unwilling to admit such a (very non-Shakespearean) limitation. This is why it is so good to have the "autobiographical fragment" that Forster preserved and later published, which formed a sort of posthumous codicil to *David Copperfield* and still helps explain why that novel above all others was its author's favorite. Forster diagnosed in his subject a syndrome of "the attraction of repulsion," which, while simple enough in its way, goes far to explain why Dickens was at his best when evoking childhood misery, incarceration, premature mortality, hard labor, cheating and exploitation by lawyers and doctors, and the other phenomena that were the shades of his own early prison house. With these, as we now slackly say, he could "identify."

If valid, this analysis would also go some distance to explain the very severe constraints on Dickens's legendary compassion. This is the man who had a poor woman arrested for using filthy language in the street; who essentially recast his friend Thomas Carlyle's pessimistic version of the French Revolution in fictional form in *A Tale of Two Cities* (Slater is especially good on this); who dreaded the mob more than he disliked the Gradgrinds. It would also account for his weakest and most contrived novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, and its companion nonfiction compilation, *American Notes*. Genuine radicals and reformers in mid-nineteenth-century England were to be defined above all as sympathizers with the American Revolution and with the cause of the Union in the Civil War. Dickens was scornful of the first and hostile to the second. His exiguous chapter on slavery in *American Notes* was lazily annexed word-for-word from a famous abolitionist pamphlet of the day, and employed chiefly to discredit the whole American idea. But when it came to a fight on the question, he was on balance sympathetic to the Confederate states, which he had never visited, and made remarks about Negroes that might have shocked even the pathologically racist Carlyle. I had not understood, before Slater's explanation, that the full title, *American Notes for General Circulation*, was a laborious pun on the supposed bankruptcy of the whole "currency" of the United States. Karl Marx, that great supporter of Lincoln and the Union, was therefore probably lapsing into a rare sentimentality when he wrote to Friedrich Engels that Dickens had "issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together." (Ackroyd mentions this letter, while Slater does not.)

Ackroyd, I find, is also more clear-eyed when it comes to Dickens and the Victorian empire. It's easy to tell, from the protractedly unfunny sarcasm about Mrs. Jellyby and the mock-African hellhole of Borrioboola-Gha in *Bleak House*, that the author did not possess the gift of imaginative sympathy when it came to those outside his immediate ken, or should I say kin.

But what is to excuse Dickens's writing to Angela Burdett-Coutts, about the 1857 Indian rebellion, that if he had the power, he would use all "merciful swiftness of execution ... to exterminate [these people from] the face of the Earth"? Slater allows this an attenuated sentence, while Ackroyd quotes a fuller and even fouler version of the same letter, adding, "It is not often that a great novelist recommends genocide." Nor will it do to say that such attitudes were common in that period: When Governor Eyre put down a revolt in Jamaica with appalling cruelty in 1865, it was Dickens and Carlyle who warmly applauded his sadism, while John Stuart Mill and Thomas Huxley demanded that Eyre be brought before Parliament. Once again, Ackroyd emphasizes this while Slater speeds rapidly past it.

Finally, is there not something a trifle sinister in Dickens's letter to Lord Normanby (such a name of lofty entitlement, he himself would have been hard put to invent), written while he was struggling to finish *The Old Curiosity Shop*, offering to go to Australia on behalf of the British government and there to write a properly cautionary account of the hellish conditions in Her Majesty's penal colonies? He had worried that the deterrent effect of this horrible system had been diluted, with too many stories in circulation of ex-convicts making fortunes. Old Magwitch, evidently, should not have been let off so easily ... (One of Dickens's ostensible purposes in visiting America was to study its prisons, yet Slater tells us there is no evidence that he ever troubled to read Tocqueville, who had formed and carried out the same intention in rather superior form. But what we want to understand is whether Dickens engaged in any vicarious gloating, on this and other "attraction-repulsion" forays into the lower depths.)

What is necessary, therefore, is a portrait that supplies for us what Dickens so generously served up to his hungry readers: some real villainy and cruelty to set against the angelic and the innocent. Yet somehow the same tale continues to write itself. We "know" the bewitching figure so well that speculations are possible about his suffering from obsessive-compulsive disorder and versions of the bipolar. Claire Tomalin has etched in for us the long-absent figure in the frame, Ellen Ternan, who was plainly the consolation of Dickens's distraught sexual life. We are aware that the great prose-poet of childhood was acutely conscious of having failed his own offspring. Yet we remain in much the same position as those naive Victorian readers who were so upset when John Forster told them that the respectable old entertainer was a man who had drawn his *dramatis personae* from wretched life itself. Always saying that he sought rest, and always exhausting himself, he may have been half in love with easeful death. The next biography should take this stark chiaroscuro as its starting point.

(*The Atlantic*, May 2010)

Marx's Journalism: The Grub Street Years

Review of Dispatches for the New York Tribune: Selected Journalism of Karl Marx, edited by James Ledbetter, with a foreword by Francis Wheen.

COMMENTING ACIDLY on a writer whom I perhaps too naively admired, my old classics teacher put on his best sneer to ask: "Wouldn't you say, Hitchens, that his writing was somewhat journalistic?" This lofty schoolmaster employed my name sarcastically, and stressed the last term as if he meant it to sting, and it rankled even more than he had intended. Later on in life, I found that I still used to mutter and improve my long-meditated reply. Emile Zola—a journalist. Charles Dickens—a journalist. Thomas Paine—another journalist. Mark Twain. Rudyard Kipling. George Orwell—a journalist par excellence. Somewhere in my cortex was the idea to which Orwell himself once gave explicit shape: the idea that "mere" writing of this sort could aspire to become an art, and that the word "journalist"—like the ironic modern English usage of the word "hack"—could lose its association with the trivial and the evanescent.

P. G. Wodehouse's 1915 novel, *Psmith, Journalist*, was a great prop and stay to me in this connection. The near-unchallenged master of English prose sets this adventure in New York, where Psmith pays a social visit that acquires significance when he falls in with the acting editor of the floundering journal *Cosy Moments*. The true editor being absent on leave, Psmith beguiles the weary hours by turning the little weekly into a crusading organ that comes into conflict with a thuggish slumlord. Threats and violence from the exploiters (which at one point lead to bullets flying and require Psmith to acquire a new hat) are met with a cool insouciance. A fighting slogan is evolved. "*Cosy Moments*," announces its new proprietor, "cannot be muzzled." He addresses all his friends and staff by the staunch title of "Comrade." At the close, the corrupt city politicians and their gangland friends are put to flight, and Psmith hands back the paper to its staff. Some years ago, when I wrote a book for Verso (the publishing arm of the *New Left Review*), we were sued by some especially scabrous tycoons and our comradely informal slogan became, to the slight bewilderment of our lawyers, "*Cosy Moments* cannot be muzzled."

Wodehouse often shows a fair working knowledge of Marxist theory (the locus classicus here being the imperishable Mulliner short story "Archibald and the Masses"), and it isn't as far as you might think from Psmith, *Journalist* to Karl Marx, journalist extraordinaire. Let us begin the tale where Francis Wheen began it in his admirable Marx biography. The great Spanish republican militant Jorge Semprun is being taken by cattle truck through Germany in the early days of the Nazi conquest of Europe. His fictionalized memoir *The Long Voyage* has the death train to Buchenwald stopping at the town of Trier, in the Moselle valley. When he sees the station sign through the window, the Semprun character reacts rather as Charles Ryder does when he realizes that he's pulled to a halt at Brideshead, or as Edward Thomas does when he sees the name "Adlestrop."

A magic place-name has been pronounced, one that exorcises all the banality and evil of the surrounding circumstances. Here Karl Marx—the Jewish internationalist name that haunts the demented Nazis—was born in 1818. And here, this son of an exhausted rabbinical line abandoned all belief in religion and began a career in radical writing for marginal campaigning newspapers. His first effort, for a Dresden sheet called the *Deutsche Jahrbucher*, was a blast against the evils of censorship as practiced by the Prussian monarch Friedrich Wilhelm IV; an essay that was unsmilingly banned by those it lampooned. The closure of the *Jahrbucher* itself was not long delayed. Marx thereupon applied to the *Rheinische Zeitung*, a Cologne publication, which in May 1842 printed his very first published effort: another assault upon censorship and on those in the Prussian parliament who did not abhor it. As he phrased matters, expressing the feelings of every writer who has had to submit his prose to the sub-literate invigilations of state hirelings: “The defenders of the press in this assembly have on the whole no real relation to what they are defending. They have never come to know freedom of the press as a vital need. For them, it is a matter of the head, in which the heart plays no part.”

When adds: “Quoting Goethe, who had said that a painter can only succeed in depicting a type of beauty which he has loved in a real human being, Marx suggested that freedom of the press also has its beauty, which one must have loved in order to defend it.”

But his attachment to the forms of free expression was something more than merely platonic. On becoming the editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung* a little while later (and how many promising writers have we lost as a result of their being promoted to the editorial chair?), he embarked on a piece of exposé journalism that connected the ideal of free inquiry to the material circumstances of the dispossessed. The inhabitants of the Rhineland had for generations been allowed to gather fallen branches for firewood, but now—in an assault on tradition that reminds one of the enclosures—they were told that this scavenging for elementary livelihood would become a crime against private property. The penalties would depend on the assessed “value” of what had been free timber, and would be determined by the putative “owners” of what nature and weather had let fall to the ground.

As with Newton’s apple and Darwin’s finches, Marx’s early polemics on this injustice were germinal. They contain the seed of his later views on the material superstructure of society, and the distinction between use value and exchange value. Another spasm of suppression was to follow their publication. Tsar Nicholas I of Russia became annoyed at the general tone of the newspaper and asked his Prussian monarchical counterpart to silence it in early 1843. Marx was then twenty-four, and obscure. It gives one a distinct frisson to think that the tsar’s later namesake and descendant Nicholas II was to lose his throne and his life to Marx’s less tender-minded Bolshevik disciples, but we need not dwell upon that too much for now. The point was that the young man had declared, in his heart, that the *Rheinische Zeitung* could not be muzzled.

He was true to this promise when he moved back to Cologne after the revolutionary upsurge of 1848, after his coauthorship with Friedrich Engels of *The Communist Manifesto*, to edit the revived *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*. There he met an inquisitive and intelligent young American editor named Charles A. Dana, an energetic member of Horace Greeley's staff at the *New York Tribune* who seems to have been a talent-spotter. But this time the Prussian authorities were taking no chances and, after arresting the staff of his paper, served Marx with an order of deportation, which was arguably the biggest mistake any reactionary government made in the whole of that year. In 1850, Marx took the route that many asylum-seekers have taken before and since, and came to London. The full flourishing of his journalistic career, and of his other careers as well, begins with that enforced exile, and with the approach that the *Tribune* made to him shortly after.

I have been both a Marxist and a journalist, and in some eclectic ways still am both of these things, and I can't decide which is the most interesting fork in the road to follow at this point. Let's take journalism. It is a profession full of vagaries and insecurities, and any of its practitioners will sympathize with Marx's familiar dilemma, and to a lesser extent with Greeley's: The spirited and ambitious author is caught in a trap of potboiling and hack-work in order to pay the rent, while the proprietor is locked in a cost-cutting war with (in this case) the *New York Times*. Of the toil he had to perform to make ends meet, Marx self-hatingly wrote that it amounted to "grinding bones and making soup of them like the paupers in a workhouse." Meanwhile, Greeley is bitching about the cut-throat and race-to-the-bottom tactics of the *New York Times*: "crowding us too hard ... conducted with the most policy and the least principle of any paper ever started. It is ever watching for the popular side of any question that turns up, and has made lots of friends by ultra abuse of Abolitionists, Women's Rights ..." I never myself walk through midtown Manhattan, past the Greeley Square that so few now notice, and toward the headquarters of the city's now dominant flagship paper, without thinking of this old circulation war that so impoverished the future author of *Das Kapital*.

Impoverished him, in fact, to the point where he wrote to Engels that "I have written nothing for Dana because I've not had the money to buy newspapers." The sheer Grub Street indigence of this to one side, it points up something that the great Murray Kempton noticed in his brilliant essay ("K. Marx: Reporter") in a very early number of the fledgling *New York Review of Books* in 1967. Marx was not at all ashamed to derive his reportage and analysis from secondary sources. "He was," wrote Kempton, "the journalist of the most despised credentials, the one who does not have access." In a witty speech to the American Newspaper Publishers Association, again in Manhattan, at the Waldorf-Astoria hotel in April 1961 (probably suggested by the late Arthur Schlesinger Jr.), the newly inaugurated President John F. Kennedy could perhaps be forgiven for getting the significance of this point so wrong. "We are told," he said to his audience of print magnates, "that foreign correspondent Marx, stone broke, and with a family ill and undernourished, constantly appealed to Greeley and managing editor

Charles Dana for an increase in his munificent salary of \$5 per installment, a salary which he and Engels ungratefully labelled as the ‘lousiest petty-bourgeois cheating.’ But when all his financial appeals were refused, Marx looked around for other means of livelihood and fame, eventually terminating his relationship with the Tribune and devoting his talents full time to the cause that would bequeath to the world the seeds of Leninism, Stalinism, revolution and the Cold War. If only this capitalistic New York newspaper had treated him more kindly; if only Marx had remained a foreign correspondent, history might have been different.”

A president is not on his oath when trying to amuse a publishers’ convention, but this is about as far from the truth as one might easily get. Marx’s family was a bit more than “ill and undernourished” (his firstborn son, Heinrich Guido, had died in the year he moved to London) but, as the record of the Rheinische Zeitung showed, there was no persuasion of any kind, moral or material, that could have reconciled him to social and political conditions as they actually were. And in any case, and despite the wretched pay and conditions, he continued to churn out first-rate copy for Greeley and Dana for a decade after complaining that they didn’t pay enough to keep up his daily subscriptions. Yet the point that JFK missed—and that almost everyone else has gone on to miss—is that much of this journalism was devoted to upholding and defending the ideas not of the coming Russian and Chinese or (as Kennedy failed to appreciate at the time) Cuban Revolutions, but of the earlier American one.

If you are looking for an irony of history, you will find it not in the fact that Marx was underpaid by an American newspaper, but in the fact that he and Engels considered Russia the great bastion of reaction and America the great potential nurse of liberty and equality. This is not the sort of thing they teach you in school (in either country). I beseeched Wheen to make more of it in his biography, and his failure to heed my sapient advice is the sole reproach to his otherwise superb book. Now James Ledbetter, himself a radical American scribbler, has somewhat redressed the balance by reprinting some of Marx’s most lucid and mordant essays on the great crisis that preoccupied Greeley and Dana: the confrontation over slavery and secession that came near to destroying the United States.

In considering this huge and multi-faceted question, Marx faced two kinds of antagonist. The first was composed of that English faction, grouped around the cotton interest and the Times newspaper, which hoped for the defeat of Abraham Lincoln and the wreckage of the American experiment. The second was made up of those Pharisees who denied that the Union, and its leader Lincoln, were “really” fighting a war for the abolition of slavery. Utterly impatient with casuistry, and as always convinced that people’s subjective account of their own interests was often misleading, Marx denounced both tendencies. Henry Adams, the direct descendant of two presidents and at that time a witness of his father’s embattled ambassadorship to London, wrote in his celebrated memoirs that Marx was almost the only friend that Lincoln had, against the cynical Tories and the hypocritical English Gladstonian liberals. Surveying the grim landscape of the English industrial revolution, he wrote, in *The Education of Henry*

Adams, that it “made a boy uncomfortable, though he had no idea that Karl Marx was standing there waiting for him, and that sooner or later the process of education would have to deal with Karl Marx much more than with Professor Bowen of Harvard College or his Satanic free-trade majesty John Stuart Mill.”

Marx himself, in reviewing a letter of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s to Lord Shaftesbury (and how splendid to have the author of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* seconding the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*), ridiculed the smarmy arguments of papers such as the *Economist*, which had written that “the assumption that the quarrel between the North and South is a quarrel between Negro Freedom on the one side and Negro Slavery on the other, is as impudent as it is untrue.” The Lincolnians, it was generally asserted, were fighting only for the preservation of the Union, not for the high-sounding cause of emancipation. Not so, said the great dialectician. The Confederacy had opened hostilities on the avowed basis of upholding slavery, which meant in turn that the Union would be forced to tackle emancipation, whether its leadership wanted to or not. See how he makes the point in so few sentences, and shows that it is the apparently hard-headed and realistic who are in practice the deluded ones: “The question of the principle of the American Civil War is answered by the battle slogan with which the South broke the peace. Stephens, the Vice-President of the Southern Confederacy, declared in the Secession Congress that what essentially distinguished the Constitution hatched at Montgomery from the Constitution of the Washingtons and Jeffersons was that now for the first time slavery was recognized as an institutional good in itself, and as the foundation of the whole state edifice, whereas the revolutionary fathers, men steeped in the prejudices of the eighteenth century, had treated slavery as an evil imported from England and to be eliminated in the course of time. Another matador of the South, Mr. Spratt, cried out: ‘For us, it is a question of founding a great slave republic.’ If, therefore, it was indeed only in defense of the Union that the North drew the sword, had not the South already declared that the continuance of slavery was no longer compatible with the continuance of the Union?”

Written in 1861, this cut like a razor through the cant of the pseudo-realists, while not omitting a good passing slap at the luckless Mr. Spratt (remember that Marx was teaching himself English as he went along). As war progressed, Marx and Engels were to predict correctly that the North would be able to exert industrial power as against Dixie feudalism, that iron-clad ships would play an important role, that the temporizing Union generals such as George McClellan would be fired by an impatient Lincoln, and that an emancipation proclamation would be required as a war-winning measure. For good measure, Marx helped organize a boycott of southern slave-picked cotton among British workers, and wrote and signed a letter from the International Workingmen’s Association in 1864, congratulating Lincoln on his re-election and his defeat of the anti-war Democrats. No other figure of the time even approached his combination of acuity and principle on this historic point, which may contain a clue as to why the American Revolution has outlasted the more ostensibly “Marxist” ones.

Marx's appreciation of the laws of unintended consequence, and his disdain for superficial moralism, also allowed him to see that there was more to the British presence in India than met the eye. No doubt the aim of the East India Company had been the subordination of Indian markets and Indian labor for selfish ends, but this did not alter the fact that capitalism was also transforming the subcontinent in what might be called a dynamic way. And he was clear-eyed about the alternatives. India, he pointed out, had always been subjugated by outsiders. "The question is not whether the English had a right to conquer India, but whether we are to prefer India conquered by the Turk, by the Persian, by the Russian, to India conquered by the Briton." If the conqueror was to be the country that pioneered the industrial revolution, he added, then India would benefit by the introduction of four new factors that would tend toward nation-building. These were the electric telegraph for communications, steamships for rapid contact with the outside world, railways for the movement of people and products, and "the free press, introduced for the first time to Asiatic society, and managed principally by the common offspring of Hindus and Europeans." His insight into the Janus-faced nature of the Anglo-Indian relationship, and of the potential this afforded for a future independence, may be one of the reasons why Marxism still remains a stronger force in India than in most other societies.

His belief that British-led "globalization" could be progressive did not blind him to the cruelties of British rule, which led him to write several impassioned attacks on torture and collective punishment, as well as a couple of bitter screeds on the way in which Indian opium was forced upon the defenseless consumers of foreign-controlled China. As he wrote, reprobating Victorian hypocrisy and religiosity and its vile drug traffic, it was the supposedly uncivilized peoples who were defending decent standards: "While the semi-barbarian stood on the principle of morality, the civilized opposed to him the principle of self."

And in writing about another irony—the fact that the Indian "mutiny" of 1857 began not among the wretched peasants, but among the sepoy soldiers whom the British had themselves trained and clothed and armed—he hit upon a powerful formulation: "There is something in human history like retribution; and it is a rule of historical retribution that its instrument be forged not by the offended but by the offender himself."

This recalls his more general proposition that, by calling into being a skilled working class concentrated in huge cities and factories, capitalism itself had given birth to its own eventual gravedigger. Of course, it goes without saying that this concept of his was in turn to fall prey to its own unintended consequences.

Like many a journalist before and since, Marx was not shy of recycling his best lines. Writing about Lord Palmerston's parliamentary effusions, he said: "He succeeds in the comic as in the heroic, in pathos as in familiarity, in tragedy as in farce, although the latter may be more congenial to his feelings."

Probably almost every literate person knows that Marx made a famous crack—derived from Hegel—about the first episode in history being tragic and the second time being farcical. (Like many of his memorable lines, it also comes from the opening

of his best-ever essay, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*.) He obviously liked it enough to keep on giving it further workouts, as in the following account of still another British parliamentary occasion, this time on the opening of the Crimean War: “A singularity of English tragedy, so repulsive to French feelings that Voltaire used to call Shakespeare a drunken savage, is its peculiar mixture of the sublime and the base, the terrible and the ridiculous, the heroic and the burlesque. But nowhere does Shakespeare devolve upon the Clown the task of speaking the prologue of a heroic drama. This invention was reserved for the Coalition Ministry ... All great historical movements appear, to the superficial observer, finally to subside into farce, or at least the common-place. But to commence with this is a feature peculiar alone to the tragedy entitled ‘War With Russia.’ ...”

Again—and as sometimes with writers such as Joseph Conrad and Isaac Deutscher, who came to mastery of it late in life—one notices that Marx is only just acquiring his magnificent hold on the English tongue. (“Peculiar alone” is a tautology, or maybe a pleonasm.) This makes it the more remarkable that he was able to lay bare the awful background to the no less awful war in the Crimea; a war that was launched over a stupid quarrel about great-power stewardship in Jerusalem, and thus a war that is still, in our own day, continuing to be fought. His essay “On the History of the Eastern Question” has the same penetrating quality as some of his writings on France and Russia, combining an eerie prescience about the consequences of imperialist “holy” war with a fine contempt for all theocracies and all superstitions, whether Christian, Jewish, or Islamic. If ruling elites and powerful states only squabbled over identifiable interests and privileges, there would have been no need for Marxist analysis. The genius of the old scribbler was to see how often the sheerly irrational intruded upon the material and utilitarian world of our great-grandfathers. That he knew and loved the classical texts as much as his despised antagonists was no disadvantage to his muscular prose style. Murray Kempton, indeed, puts him second only to Edmund Burke in this and other respects.

And I think it is with Kempton’s compliment that I ought to close. How can it be, he asked, that Marx knew so much about countries he had never visited and politicians he had never interviewed? How was it that we can read his scornful dismissal of the British government that was elected in 1852, and then turn to the memoirs of the statesmen who were directly involved and discover that they privately feared the very same paralysis and inanition that Marx had diagnosed?

Part of the answer involves a compliment to the Victorians, who compiled honest statistics about death rates and poverty and military spending (and even torture in India), and who published them for all to read. Like the late I. F. Stone, one of Washington’s greatest muckrakers, Marx understood that a serious ruling class will not lie to itself in its own statistics. He preferred delving in the archives to scraping acquaintance with the great and the good. When it came to the ghastly twin trades of slavery and opium, he was “a moralist with every stroke of his pen,” as Perry Anderson once phrased it. But he never lost his anchorage in the material world, and never ceased

to understand that a purely moral onslaught on capitalism and empire would be empty sermonizing. Isaiah Berlin, contrasting the two Jewish geniuses of nineteenth-century England, preferred Benjamin Disraeli to Karl Marx because the former was a hero of assimilation and accommodation and the latter was a prickly and irreconcilable subversive. Well, you may take your pick between the Tory dandy who flattered the Queen into becoming the Queen-Empress and the heretical exile who believed that India would one day burst its boundaries and outstrip its masters. But when journalists today are feeling good about themselves, and sitting through the banquets at which they give each other prizes and awards, they sometimes like to flatter one another by describing their hasty dispatches as “the first draft of history.” Next time you hear that tone of self-regard, you might like to pick up *Dispatches* for the New York Tribune and read the only reporter of whom it was ever actually true.

(The Guardian [London], June 16, 2007)

Rebecca West: Things Worth Fighting For

Introduction (2007) to *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, by Rebecca West.

MORE THAN A DECADE AGO, at the height of the Balkan wars of the 1990s that succeeded the disintegration or “fall” or “destruction” of Yugoslavia (and so much then hung upon which of the preceding terms one chose to employ for that bloody catastrophe), I returned from a voyage to Macedonia to attend a meeting for Yugoslav democrats at the Cooper Union in New York City. Here I was, under the roof where Abraham Lincoln himself had spoken of union and of the consequences of dis-union, and I remember the shiver with which I stood on the same podium to give my own little speech. At a bookstall, I picked up a copy of Ivo Andrić’s classic *The Bridge on the Drina*, and a few other texts I had read or desired to reread, and then hesitated over the book that you now hold in your hands.

I know, in other words, what you may be thinking: more than eleven hundred pages of densely wrought text, concerning what Neville Chamberlain once called, in the same context but another reference, “a faraway country of which we know nothing.” Not just far away in point of distance, either, but remote in point of time and period: a country that no longer exists, an Atlantis of the mind. (On page 773 of the edition I picked up, West resign-edly and pessimistically alludes to “this book, which hardly anyone will read by reason of its length.”) The action of buying it seemed almost antiquarian: like laying out money for the purchase of a large anachronistic device. Nevertheless, having learned from other readings to respect the mind of Rebecca West, I decided on the outlay and have been regarding it as a great bargain ever since.

Imagine that you have, in fact, purchased at least four fine books for the price of one: The first and most ostensible of these volumes is one of the great travel narratives of our time, which seeks to net and analyze one of the most gorgeous and various of ancient and modern societies. The second volume gives an account of the mentality and

philosophy of a superbly intelligent woman, whose feminism was above all concerned with the respect for, and the preservation of, true masculinity. The third volume transports any thoughtful or historically minded reader into the vertiginous period between the two World Wars: a time when those with intellectual fortitude could face the fact that the next war would be even more terrible than the last, and who did not flinch from that knowledge. The fourth volume is a meditation on the never-ending strife between the secular and the numinous, the faithful and the skeptical, the sacred and the profane.

The woman who brought off this signal polymathic achievement, based on three separate but interwoven visits to the Balkans and published just as the Second World War was disclosing itself as a conflict of ultimate horror, was born Cicely Fairfield in 1892. She demonstrated early brilliance as a reviewer and journalist, soon adopting the name Rebecca West (the heroine of Henrik Ibsen's play *Rosmersholm*). Her first published book, a study of Henry James, was issued in 1916 and her first novel, *The Return of the Soldier*, in 1918. She was thus ideally positioned, in point of age and precocity, to take a hand in the journalistic and critical ferment that followed the Great War. Although inclined to experiment and to the eclectic—she published articles in Wyndham Lewis's vorticist magazine *BLAST* in addition to Ford Madox Ford's *English Review*—she was no intellectual butterfly and, after a brief flirtation with Garsington and Bloomsbury and the world of Virginia Woolf and Ottoline Morrell, found her natural intellectual home on the freethinking liberal left. She was on terms with George Bernard Shaw and Bertrand Russell while barely out of her teens and continued this pattern by conducting a long “older man” affair with H. G. Wells, by whom she soon had a son, Anthony. Her relationships with men were always to be passionate and distraught and full of misery and infidelity (and they included a fling with Lord Beaverbrook, the power-crazy newspaper tycoon who is the original of Lord Copper in Evelyn Waugh's *Scoop*). She managed a long marriage to an English banker (“my husband,” otherwise never named, in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*), but even while in Yugoslavia with him, as her letters and diaries reveal, she was racked with anxiety about another lover. One has, from most accounts of her very long and tempestuous life, the sense of a brilliant and ambitious but unhappy woman, deeply intellectual and much preoccupied with public affairs, who had to strive extremely hard in a man's world and who found men both essential and impossible. There is an evocative description of her by Virginia Woolf, who wrote that “she has great vitality: is a broad-browed, very vigorous, distinguished woman, but a buffeter and a battler: has taken the waves, I suppose, and can talk in any language: why then this sense of her being a lit up modern block, floodlit by electricity?”

“Block,” there, may be somewhat unflattering—though for Mrs. Woolf to instance “the waves” is obviously a mark of respect—but “lit up” though West may have seemed, she was also frequently plunged into darkness. Indeed, nothing better conveys her sense of mingled urgency, responsibility, and pessimism than the way in which she describes the onset of her profound engagement with Yugoslavia. Recovering from surgery in

a hospital ward in England in October 1934, she hears a radio announcement of the assassination of King Alexander and appreciates at once that a grand crisis is in the making. Like any intelligent European of that date, she experiences a natural frisson at the murder of a crowned head of the Balkans, but she is also aware that the political class in her country is not much less myopic than it was at the time of Sarajevo, only twenty years earlier. She feels at once helpless and ignorant, and culpable in both these aspects. To know nothing about the Balkans is, she reflects, to “know nothing about my own destiny.” At this time, Naomi Mitchison is writing about the bloody events in Vienna that will lead to the Anschluss, and others are experiencing the premonition of impending confrontation in Spain, but for West it is Yugoslavia that is the potentially seismic country.

In considering her book, then, we must try to envisage that now-obliterated nation as she did. This is to say, we must begin by looking at it through the reverse end of the telescope. The murder of King Alexander puts her in mind, successively but not in order, of the assassination of Empress Elizabeth of Austria in 1898 (which had much discomposed her own mother); of the fervor of the schismatic Donatists of the fourth century; of the cruel butchery of King Alexander Obrenović of Serbia, together with his wife, Queen Draga, in the royal palace in Belgrade in 1903; and finally of the cataclysmic shooting of the Austrian archduke Franz Ferdinand and his consort in the capital of Bosnia in June 1914. Of this event, West notes ruefully that at the time she was too much absorbed in her own private concerns to pay the necessary attention. We know that West was a strong admirer of Marcel Proust and believed him to be one of the originators of modernism; and Janet Montefiore, one of the most deft and penetrating students of her work, is surely right in describing this bedridden moment of connected recollection as a Proustian “layering.”

Indeed, and without getting too much ahead of our story, the “madeleine” of June 28, 1914, in particular, prompts memories in many more minds than that of Rebecca West. It was on that same day in 1389—St. Vitus’s Day—that the Serbian armies of Prince Lazar had known the bitterness of utter vanquishment at the hands of the Turks on the Field of Kosovo: a permanent wound in the national heart that was to be cynically reopened by an anniversary speech given by Slobodan Milošević on the very same date in 1989. For West in 1934, it seemed more simply that “when I came to look back upon it my life had been punctuated by the slaughter of royalties, by the shouting of newsboys who have run down the streets to tell me that someone has used a lethal weapon to turn over a new leaf in the book of history.”

I shall have to do some interleaving and “layering” myself, in distinguishing and also separating these four books: Unschooled as she was, Rebecca West decided at once that the slaying of King Alexander was the work, at least by proxy, of the thuggish and covetous regime of Benito Mussolini. In the first few pages of the book, she offers an angry but mordant psychological profile of the mentality of Italian fascism, and of its Croatian and Macedonian clients:

This cancellation of process in government leaves it an empty violence that must perpetually and at any cost outdo itself, for it has no alternative idea and hence no alternative activity. The long servitude in the slums has left this kind of barbarian without any knowledge of what man does when he ceases to be violent, except for a few uncomprehending glimpses of material prosperity.... This aggressiveness leads obviously to the establishment of immense armed forces, and furtively to incessant experimentation with methods of injuring the outer world other than the traditional procedure of warfare.

The above passage can be taken as representative of many others in which West combines a near-patrician contempt for the baseness of fascism with her own political radicalism and her keen insight into motive. That this latter insight is essentially feminist is proved repeatedly by her choice of words and examples. Of the martyred Empress Elizabeth, for example, she writes that she

could not reconcile herself to a certain paradox which often appears in the lives of very feminine women. She knew that certain virtues are understood to be desirable in women: beauty, tenderness, grace, house-pride, the power to bear and rear children. She believed that she possessed some of these virtues and that her husband loved her for it. Indeed, he seemed to have given definite proof that he loved her by marrying her against the will of his mother, the Archduchess Sophie.

Against this latter woman West deploys a rhetorical skill that is perhaps too little associated with feminism: the ability to detect a pure bitch at twenty paces:

The Archduchess Sophie is a figure of universal significance. She was the kind of woman whom men respect for no other reason than that she is lethal, whom a male committee will appoint to the post of hospital matron. She had none of the womanly virtues. Especially did she lack tenderness.... She was also a great slut.

Incautious would be the man, but still more the woman, who incurred the fine wrath of Rebecca West. Her ability to appraise historical and global figures as if she had recently been personally oppressed or insulted by them was a great assistance in driving her narrative forward.

Speaking of narrative, she tells us very early on that her preferred analogy—her chosen means of connecting the past to the present—is that of “the sexual affairs of individuals”:

As we grow older and see the ends of stories as well as their beginnings, we realize that to the people who take part in them it is almost of greater significance that they should be stories, that they should form a recognizable pattern, than that they should be happy or tragic. The men and women who are withered by their fates, who go down to death reluctantly but without noticeable regrets for life, are not those who have lost their mates prematurely or by perfidy, or who have lost battles or fallen from early promise in circumstances of public shame, but those who have been jilted or were the victims of impotent lovers, who have never been summoned to command or been given any opportunity for success or failure.

She speculates that this is “possibly true not only of individuals, but of nations,” and this hypothesis becomes, in fact, the organizing principle of the book. Two other recurring notes are likewise introduced early on: West makes the first of innumerable cross-references to England (throughout her travels she compares towns, landscapes, historical events, and individuals to their English counterparts, as if to provide a familiar handhold both to her readers and to herself) and asks, immediately following the passage above: “What would England be like if it had not its immense Valhalla of kings and heroes?”

She also, in discussing Russia’s influence on the region, shows a defensive but definite sympathy for the Soviet system. Having been an early critic of Bolshevism, and sympathizer of its leftist and feminist victims, she appears like many to have postponed this reckoning until the more imperative menace of fascism had been confronted. “Those who fear Bolshevik Russia because of its interventions in the affairs of other countries,” she wrote, “which are so insignificant that they have never been rewarded with success, forget that Tsarist Russia carried foreign intervention to a pitch that has never been equaled by any other power, except the modern Fascist states.” In this, she reflected some of the left-liberal mentality of her day, and there is no doubt that this bias inflects a good deal of her Yugoslav analysis. “There is no man in the world,” she wrote, “not even Stalin, who would claim to be able to correct in our own time the insane dispensation which pays the food-producer worst of all workers.” To diagnose in so few words a problem that is still with us requires skill, but to portray Joseph Stalin as a friend of the peasant would have been eyebrow-raising even in 1937. (Should we allow that, in that year, the “story” of Russian communism was after all a little nearer to its inception than its end?) At any rate, at the beginning of her journey, we can identify an ardent woman who manifested a nice paradoxical sympathy for the honor, bravery, and pageantry of the past, and for the apparently more modern ideas of socialism and self-determination. She had stepped onto the perfect soil for one so quixotic.

She never chances to employ the word, but Serbo-Croat speech has an expression that depends for its effect not on the sex lives of humans, but of animals. A *vukojebina*—employed to describe a remote or barren or arduous place—means literally a “wolf-fuck,” or more exactly the sort of place where wolves retire to copulate. This combination of a noble and fearless creature with an essential activity might well have appealed to her. The term—which could have been invented to summarize Milovan Djilas’s harsh and loving portrayal of his native Montenegro, Land Without Justice—is easily adapted to encapsulate a place that is generally, so to say, fucked up. This is the commonest impression of the Balkans now, as it was then, and West considered it her task to uncover and to praise the nobility and culture that contradicted this patronizing impression.

Assisting her in this purpose, and sometimes contradicting her as well, is the near-ubiquitous figure of “Constantine.” He is supposed to speak for all those who have resisted the long, rival tyrannies of Austria-Hungary and Turkey, and who are now trying to teach the discordant peoples of Yugoslavia to speak with one voice. One’s

attitude to the book, and to West herself, depends to a very great extent on one's view of Constantine. A composite based on a real person named Stanislas Vinaver, he is at once a government bureaucrat and "official guide," a Serb, a Jew, a nationalist, and a cosmopolitan. To add to the jumble of this picture, he is also married to Gerda, a German woman of frightful aspect and demeanor who despises almost all foreigners—most especially Jews—and who is a clear prefiguration of a full-blown Nazi. (I happen to like Stanislas/Constantine. When dealing with an incensed young Bosnian who accused him of being a government stooge, he responds with some gravity by saying: "Yes. For the sake of my country, and perhaps a little for the sake of my soul, I have given up the deep peace of being in opposition." This is one of the more profoundly mature, and also among the most tragic, of the signals that West's ear was attuned to pick up.)

We meet Constantine early on, and we also encounter a method of Rebecca West's that has given rise to much criticism. Her nonfictional characters are conscripted more as *dramatis personae*—Montefiore likens her to Thucydides—and given long speeches, even soliloquies, in which to represent sets of ideas and prejudices. This is a privilege extended not only to the people she meets: Throughout the book both she and her husband make long and quite grammatical addresses that would be unthinkable in real life, if only because they would be interrupted if given in mixed company and walked out upon if they occurred at the domestic hearth. As a didactic tool, however, this has its uses in that people are permitted to be advocates and are given the room to make their case. (Paul Scott employs the same means in his historical fiction of the British Raj in India, often to great effect. The soliloquy is not to be despised as a means of elucidation.) The first use of it occurs when West and her husband are in the Croatian capital of Zagreb, and Constantine gets into fights and arguments with some local intellectuals who do not trust or respect the new national regime with its political headquarters in the Serbian capital of Belgrade. His rather emotional attempts to make them think and feel like "Slavs" are recorded sympathetically by West, but this is the stage at which we can first surmise that the Serbs will turn out to be her favorites.

Ambivalent as she was about Stalin, Rebecca West was acutely sensitive to the early warnings of fascism and very heartily repelled by all its manifestations. She identified it in the Yugoslav case with a general conspiracy by foreign powers to subvert and fragment the country (in which she was by no means mistaken), and she identified it in the Croatian case with the ambitions of the Vatican (in which she was not wrong, either). The world now knows about the Ustashe, the cruel and chauvinistic surrogate party that established a Nazi protectorate in Croatia, under military and clerical leadership, during the Second World War. West saw it coming, in the uniformed Catholic "youth movements" set up in Croatia in the 1930s, and in the persistent hostility of the Church to the Yugoslav idea in general, and to the allegiance of the Serbs to Eastern Orthodoxy in particular.

It deserves to be said that she tries to compensate for this partisanship by almost immediately writing a paean to Bishop Strossmayer, a Catholic Croatian eminence of

the preceding century who had been genuinely humane and ecumenical, but it is also at this point that one can begin to notice her distaste for chiaroscuro. In describing Strossmayer's life and habits and character, she supplies an almost devotional portrait of a man about whom she could have known only by hearsay. Of his supposed hospitality she writes: "After supper, at which the food and drink were again delicious, there were hours of conversation, exquisite in manner, stirring in matter." This approaches the gushing.

A writer who falls in love with a new and strange country will always find experience heightened in this way. The dawns are more noble, the crags loftier, the people more genuine, the food and wine more luscious.... Here might be the point to try to explicate the lamb and the falcon of West's title. About halfway through the narrative she is in Belgrade, and finding, as many lovers do, that her new innamorata is beginning to remind her just a little too much of her previous ones. The men in the hotel bar, and the hotel itself, are making Yugoslavia's capital into an emulation of some imagined bourgeois ideal, replete with modern architecture and up-to-date ideas of businesslike cleverness. Soon, she begins to feel, the food will become indistinguishable as well. The hotel will "repudiate its good fat risottos, its stews would be guiltless of the spreading red oil of paprika.... I felt a sudden abatement of my infatuation for Yugoslavia.... I had perhaps come a long way to see a sunset which was fading under my eyes before a night of dirty weather." Disillusionment and banality menace her on every hand, and the false jollity at the bar is mounting to a crescendo, when

the hotel doors [swung] open to admit, unhurried and at ease, a peasant holding a black lamb in his arms.... He was a well-built young man with straight fair hair, high cheekbones, and a look of clear sight. His suit was in the Western fashion, but he wore also a sheepskin jacket, a round black cap, and leather sandals with upturned toes, and to his ready-made shirt his mother had added some embroidery.

It is as if an Englishman, raised on the romance of the Western and pining in a phony tourist saloon in Wyoming, were to see the saloon doors swing open and hear the jingle of true cowboy spurs....

He stood still as a Byzantine king in a fresco, while the black lamb twisted and writhed in the firm cradle of his arms, its eyes sometimes catching the light as it turned and shining like small luminous plates.

So there is still hope that traditional, genuine, rural society continues to pulse away, under the gaudy patina of commerce and affectation. However, the next time we encounter a black lamb we are in Macedonia almost four hundred pages further on, and this time West is not at all so sure that she likes what she sees. The Muslim peasants are converging on a large rock in an open field, and the rock is coated with coagulating blood and littered with animal body parts:

I noticed that the man who had been settling the child on the rug was now walking round the rock with a black lamb struggling in his arms. He was a young gypsy, of the kind called Gunpowder gypsies, because they used to collect saltpeter for the Turkish army, who are famous for their beauty, their cleanliness, their fine clothes. This young

man had the features and bearing of an Indian prince, and a dark golden skin which was dull as if it had been powdered yet exhaled a soft light. His fine linen shirt was snow-white under his close-fitting jacket, his elegant breeches ended in soft leather boots, high to the knee, and he wore a round cap of fine fur.

Again, one notices West's keen eye for the finely featured man and for his apparel. But this time, the ambience strikes her as brutish and disgusting—even alarming.

Now the man who was holding the lamb took it to the edge of the rock and drew a knife across its throat. A jet of blood spurted out and fell red and shining on the browner blood that had been shed before. The gypsy had caught some on his fingers, and with this he made a circle on the child's forehead.... "He is doing this," a bearded Muslim standing by explained, "because his wife got this child by coming here and giving a lamb, and all children that are got from the rock must be brought back and marked with the sign of the rock." ... Under the opening glory of the morning the stench from the rock mounted more strongly and became sickening.

Sunset in Belgrade ... sunrise in Macedonia—and suddenly the evidence of "authenticity" seems to contradict itself. This is a difficulty that recurs to West throughout her explorations.

The gray falcon comes to her on another field of sacrifice: this time the plain of Kosovo on which Prince Lazar of Serbia saw his forces divided by betrayal and slaughtered by the Turks. An antique Serbian folk song, translated on the spot by Constantine, begins the story thus:

There flies a grey bird, a falcon,
From Jerusalem the holy,
And in his beak he bears a swallow.
That is no falcon, no grey bird,
But it is the Saint Elijah ...

This sky-borne messenger brings to Prince Lazar (or "Tsar Lazar," as the poem has him) a choice between an earthly kingdom and a heavenly one: a choice that he decides in a way that West comes to find contemptible. Her two chosen images, therefore, are neither symmetrical nor antagonistic but, rather, contain their own contradictions. It is important to know at the start what she registers throughout and at the conclusion: that feeling that some English people have always had for a patriotism other than their own. Byron in Greece had a comparable experience, of simultaneous exaltation and disillusionment, and even as West was making her way through the Balkans, English volunteers in Spain were uttering slogans about Madrid and Barcelona that they would have felt embarrassed to hear themselves echo for London or Manchester. Many of them were to return disappointed, too.

"The enormous condescension of posterity" was the magnificent phrase employed by E. P. Thompson to remind us that we must never belittle the past popular struggles and victories (as well as defeats) that we are inclined to take for granted. Two things are invariably present in Rebecca West's mind and, thanks to the lapse of time, not always available to our own. The first of these is the realization that an incident in

Sarajevo in June 1914 had irrevocably splintered the comfortable and civilized English world of which she had a real memory. When she says “The Great War,” she means the war of 1914–1918 because, though she can see a second war coming, there has as yet been no naming of the “First” World War. The next is her constant awareness that men decide and that women then live, or die, with the consequences of that decision making. The first assault on the Yugoslav idea had been made by the hairless demagogic Italian poet Gabriele D’Annunzio—the man who borrowed the phrase “the year of living dangerously” from Nietzsche, though West did not know this—and who had led the wresting of Trieste and Fiume from Yugoslav sovereignty in 1920. This piece of theater and bombast was the precursor to Mussolini’s March on Rome, and caused West to reflect:

All this is embittering history for a woman to contemplate. I will believe that the battle of feminism is over, and that the female has reached a position of equality with the male, when I hear that a country has allowed itself to be turned upside-down and led to the brink of war by a totally bald woman writer.

Useless for a male critic to interpose that Joan of Arc apparently had a full head of hair, or that Dolores Ibárruri (“La Pasionaria”) was even then making strong men shed hot tears for the ideals of Joseph Stalin—or that neither of these ladies was a writer or poet in the accepted sense. One simply sees what she means.

And, very often, one has exactly no choice but to see what she means, and to respect her intuitions as well as her better-reasoned insights. Her intuitions and generalizations are offered in no niggardly spirit and make no attempt to disguise themselves as objective let alone impartial. After a sweep along the Adriatic, with some animadversions about the decay and enfeeblement of the Venetian Empire, she stops at the island of Rab and declares that

these people of Dalmatia gave the bread out of their mouths to save us of Western Europe from Islam, and it is ironical that so successfully did they protect us that those among us who would be broad-minded, who will in pursuit of that end stretch their minds until they fall apart in idiocy, would blithely tell us that perhaps the Dalmatians need not have gone to that trouble, that an Islamized West could not have been worse than what we are today.... The West has done much that is ill, it is vulgar and superficial and economically sadist, but it has not known that death in life which was suffered by the Christian provinces under the Ottoman Empire.

An unintended element of posterity’s condescension may be apparent at the close of this passage, where West writes, “Impotent and embarrassed, I stood on the high mountain and looked down on the terraced island where my saviors, small and black as ants, ran here and there, attempting to repair their destiny.”

The difficulty, in crediting any group or state with delivering Europe from the Turks or from Islam, is that there are too many rival claimants for that honor and distinction. Austrians and Poles can boast of having defended the gates of Vienna; Venetians and Maltese to have hung on until the victory at Lepanto; Hungarians and Greeks to have fought to the last against Ottomanism. In Rebecca West’s own lifetime, the Sublime

Porte in Constantinople had staked everything on a declaration of jihad against the British Empire and on the side of the German one in 1914, and had ended up not just losing the war but its caliphate as well. She was always somewhat ambivalent about the British Empire, reserving the right both to admire it and to criticize it, but toward most of the other empires and nations I have just mentioned she was generally hostile. And this was because of her feeling that they had all, at different times, betrayed the people of the Balkans, most especially the people of Serbia.

It was not, after all, the arrogant Turks who had issued an ultimatum to Serbia in July 1914 (though Turkey was to take the side of Austria-Hungary and Germany in the ensuing combat). Yet perhaps the most sustainedly brilliant passage in the entire book is her reconstruction of the events that led up to, and away from, the assassination of the Austrian archduke Franz Ferdinand. When one scans these pages, one must continually bear in mind that for her, as for most educated English people, the events of June 28, 1914, were the moral and emotional equivalent of September 11, 2001, the terrible date on which everything had suddenly changed for the worse. I cannot possibly hope to summarize the intensity and scope of her effort in this regard. In its awareness of the grand consequences of the event, it manifests an almost vibrant sense of history and drama. In its minute attention to detail, it rivals some of the more obsessive and forensic retracings of what happened in Dealey Plaza in Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1963 (and shares with some of those studies a subliminal but unmistakable wish that the newsreel could be run again, and one turn of the car avoided or one wretched coincidence averted, so that the fatal bullet would not meet its target after all).

A little too much time and ink, perhaps, is expended in “proving” that the Austro-Hungarian staff must have at least covertly wished for the archduke to have been shot. For these frigid and cynical men, a mild heir with an embarrassing wife was thereby removed and an ideal provocation for war simultaneously furnished. It could well have been so. Certainly, the prowar forces in Vienna seemed a little more than ready for the excuse that was offered them, and hastened to force conditions on Serbia that they knew were both unjust and unacceptable. However, as West fails to mention, the socialist faction in the outraged Serbian Parliament, led by Dimitrije Tucovic, nonetheless refused to vote even for a war of “self-defense.” This was partly because of what they had seen of Serbian atrocities against Albanians and others in the Balkan War of 1912. These men were the equivalents of Jean Jaurès and Rosa Luxemburg in their own country: How disappointing that West’s evident sympathy for Marxist internationalism should have deserted her just when it might have done her some good.

There is another marvelous passage, also derived from her stay in Sarajevo, which is this time an eyewitness description, and which actually can be summarized by quotation. She chanced to be in the city on the day of a state visit from the Turkish prime minister İsmet İnönü: the first such courtesy call since the conclusion of hostilities in 1918 and the proclamation by Kemal Atatürk of a secular republic in place of the caliphate. The large Muslim middle class of the city turned out in force, the

bearded men donning fezes and the women wearing veils, and some hardy souls even bearing the old green flag with the crescent emblazoned upon it. Their consternation, on seeing clean-shaven high Turkish officials wearing Western suits and bowler hats, was palpable. Even worse was the shock they endured on hearing the speeches of İnönü's delegation, as translated from Turkish by the Yugoslav minister of war. The distinguished visitors from Ankara

stood still, their eyes set on the nearest roof, high enough to save them the sight of this monstrous retrograde profusion of fezes and veils, of red pates and black muzzles, while the General put back into Serbian their all too reasonable remarks. They had told the Muslims of Sarajevo, it seemed, that they felt the utmost enthusiasm for the Yugoslavian idea, and had pointed out that if the South Slavs did not form a unified state the will of the great powers could sweep over the Balkan peninsula as it chose. They had said not one word of the ancient tie that linked the Bosnian Muslims to the Turks, nor had they made any reference to Islam.

The crowd dispersed, West recorded: "Slowly and silently, as those who have been sent empty away. We had seen the end of a story that had taken five hundred years to tell. We had seen the final collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Under our eyes it had heeled over and fallen to the ground like a clay figure slipping off a chair." Once again, one is forced to note her innate prejudice in favor of the traditional and (somehow, therefore) the more "authentic," even if this involves a preference for the fez over the standard bowler hat and thus a slight revision of what has been said earlier about Ottoman slavery and torpor. Perhaps, as for Simone Weil, West's definition of justice was that of "a refugee from the camp of victory." If the corollary of this was to hold, and the defeated were to enjoy a closer natural relationship with justice, then much of her Serb-enthusiasm is, at least at that date, fairly easily explicable as well.

In any event, anybody with the least sympathy for the Balkan under-dogs would by then have been recruited to their side, with a high degree of militancy, by the extraordinary above-mentioned figure of Gerda. It is never explained how this appalling philistine German female—a character from whom Christopher Isherwood's ghastly Berlin landlady would have been a distinct relief—can possibly have married the Jewish intellectual Constantine (their true names were actually Stanislas and Elsa Vinaver), but married they are. And their grotesque partnership provides an ideal element of the farcical and the sinister, both increasing and lightening the solemn load that West and her husband must carry on their very serious trip. Gerda's presence is a torture to Constantine and a perpetual embarrassment to his English guests, but it affords some useful comic relief as well as a Bob Fosse-like premonition of the nature of the "new Germany." Informed at one point that the Wendish minority in Germany is in fact Slavic, she demands of West to be informed:

"If all the Wends are Slavs, why do we not send them out of Germany into the Slav countries, and give the land that they are taking up to true Germans?" "Then the Slavs," I said, "might begin to think about sending back into Germany all the German colonists that live in places like Franzstal." "Why, so they might," said Gerda, looking

miserable, since an obstacle had arisen in the way of her plan of making Europe clean and pure and Germanic by coercion and expulsion. She said in Serbian to her husband, "How this woman lacks tact." "I know, my dear," he answered gently, "but do not mind it, enjoy the scenery."

Gerda, then, as well as the gelder of her husband, is a racist both pure and simple, an "ethnic cleanser" *avant de la lettre*, and she is one of those Teutonic types who cannot forgive—who can in a way not even believe—the defeat and humiliation of her country in 1918. That a crew of worthless Slavs were among the apparent "victors" is to her an offense against nature. "Think of all these people dying for a lot of Slavs," as she puts it on visiting the French war cemetery. The local food disgusts her: When handed a dish at a picnic, "her face crumpled up with a hatred too irrational to find words." Most of the people West meets and likes in Sarajevo are Jewish, and she suddenly comes to understand that this is why Gerda has no time for them. Like most English liberals and radicals of that period, West was only too conscious of the injustices imposed upon Germany by the Treaty of Versailles, and at one point goes out of her way to remind us that "Gerda is, of course, not characteristically German," but her husband is less tender-minded and reduces the matter to the paradoxical statement that "nobody who is not like Gerda can imagine how bad Gerda is." (He often supplies quite shrewd and gnomic remarks: Noticing that a shrine to the Karageorgevićs dynasty is strictly Serbo-Byzantine in style and like most shrines is built "all on strictly Serb territory," he adds that "this building with its enormously costly mosaics can mean nothing whatsoever to any Croatians or Dalmatians or Slovenes. Yet it is the mausoleum of their King, and superbly appropriate to him. I see that though Yugoslavia is a necessity it is not a predestined harmony." This terse observation is worth more than many of West's own hyper-romantic excursions into the quasi-mythical history of Serbian royalty.)

A considerable and almost purple chapter of such romance and myth-making follows almost at once, as West visits the monastery at Vrdnik, where lies the coffin of Prince Lazar, the martyr of Kosovo. "There is no need to manufacture magic here," she writes, before proceeding to do just that:

When this man met defeat it was not only he whose will was frustrated, it was a whole people, a whole faith, a wide movement of the human spirit. This is told by the splendid rings on the Tsar Lazar's black and leathery hands; and the refinement of the pomp which presents him in his death, the beauty and gravity of the enfolding ritual, show the worth of what was destroyed with him. I put out a finger and stroked those hard dry hands, that had been nerveless for five hundred years.

To admire Rebecca West is to admire the toughness of her mind and the steadiness of her gaze: It is a little dispiriting to see her committing such an evident *non sequitur* between the first and second of her opening sentences, and a little more than dispiriting to see her caressing a relic like any silly old woman hoping for a cure for the scrofula.

She commits a more serious contradiction a little further along, this time after appearing to take at their face value the mad prophecies of a Serbian Nostradamus named Mata of Krema. In reprobating a later Serbian dynasty—the Obrenović line, of

Miloš and Milan—she first blames King Milan for allowing the Treaty of San Stefano in 1878, which gave almost the whole of Macedonia to Bulgaria, and then denounces the later Congress of Berlin, which undid the injustice she complains of, as “called for no other reason than to frame a treaty which should deprive the democratic Slavs of their freedom and thrust them into subjection under the imperialism of Turkey and Austria-Hungary.” That sequence already seems somewhat disordered, but then it is followed by this sentence:

It is not to be wondered at that in 1881 Milan signed a secret convention with Austria which handed over his country to be an Austrian dependency.

On the contrary, if any of West’s foregoing assumptions are sound, this action seems almost incomprehensible (as does her earlier use of the term “democratic”). She is beginning to regard Serbia as a country that, even if unable to do anything right, can yet never be said to be in the wrong. And again we encounter her preference, at least on first meeting, for anything that is raw and elemental over anything that is tame or domesticated:

Men like Miyatovich [King Milan’s favorite foreign minister, by the by] wanted the Serbians to lay aside this grandiose subject matter which their destiny had given them for their genius to work upon; and instead they offered them, as an alternative, to be clean and briskly bureaucratic and capitalist like the West. It was as if the Mayflower and Red Indians and George Washington and the pioneer West were taken from the United States, and there was nothing left but the Bronx and Park Avenue. [My italics.]

Before long, this admiration for the atavistic has led her to describe the vile Balkan War of 1912 as a “poem,” and to write that “there has been no fighting in our time that has had the romantic quality” of that conflict. (A useful corrective to this nonsense can be found in the Carnegie Endowment’s contemporary report on the war, and in Leon Trotsky’s firsthand reports of Serbian atrocities as printed in liberal Russian newspapers.)

Thus, at the almost exact midpoint of the book, West has arrived at a stage where she approves of King Alexander Karageorgevićs, who had hoped at the beginning of the First World War

not for a Yugoslavia, not for a union of all South Slavs, but for a Greater Serbia that should add to the Kingdom of Serbia all of the Austro-Hungarian territories in which the majority of the inhabitants were Serbs, that is Slavs who were members of the Orthodox Church. The school of thought to which he belonged rightly considered the difference between the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Churches so great that it transcended racial or linguistic unity. It cannot be doubted that this Greater Serbia would have been a far more convenient entity than Yugoslavia. [My italics.]

Something very like the blindness of love must again be involved here: West quite fails to see that her ideal Greater Serbia program is open to precisely the same objections as Gerda’s fantasy of a pure Germany that adjusts the populations of its neighbors to suit itself. Moreover, it is with a note of unmistakable rue that she notes the thwarting of King Alexander’s dream, which depended for its success on the continued

survival of Russian tsarism. This from the woman who credited Stalin's agricultural reforms and who has, only a few pages before this, used the term "Soviet" in a wholly positive sense.

I risk mentioning the blindness of love again because, in her assessment of Alexander's pro-tsarist policy, she makes mention of his wish to marry one of the tsar's daughters and asserts that "it is beyond doubt that this was for Alexander a real affair of the heart. He did not merely want to be the husband of one of the tsar's daughters. He wanted to have this particular daughter as his wife." Now, West does not even trouble to specify which Romanov daughter this was. (We are told only that she was a schoolgirl when Alexander met her.) And we are asked not only to overlook the self-evident interest of kingly statecraft in the matrimonial alliance, but to believe something that West cannot possibly have known herself. This is not history. It is not even journalism. It is passion.

As it happens, we know from Rebecca West's diaries of her trip (which were sequestered in the Beinecke Library at Yale, with instructions that they were not to be made available until after the death of her husband and her son) that she was highly distraught during her Balkan voyages. She had been unwell and in some pain since her operation (for a hysterectomy) in 1934, and she was also recovering from an unhappy affair with an English surgeon named Thomas Kilner, whom she describes with mingled disgust and desire as "that horrible cheating sadistic little creature." With Henry Andrews, her husband, she did have very occasional sexual relations on the journey, but these are usually written up as unsuccessful or unexciting. With Constantine (Stanislav Vinaver) she was necessarily uneasy, since on her previous solo trip he had attempted to possess her by force, if not actually to rape her. I dislike venturing even one step onto the territory of the psycho-historian, but some of her diary entries do seem to warrant a comparison with the finished book, and for one reason in particular: She tends to experience her few moments of repose or reflection when in churches or when visiting tombs, or at holy sites where the simple folk come for healing.

Thus we have a woman of powerful mind, recently sterilized at the difficult age of forty-two. It may be significant that her only allusion to her beloved Proust is to a passage where he reflects on how with age one's body ceases to be oneself and turns into an enemy. She is dissatisfied for discrepant reasons with all the men in her life. (The few references to H. G. Wells in the book proper, which usually take the form of comments on his work by Yugoslavs who do not know of her connection to him, are almost invariably of a rather belittling kind.) Nonetheless, she can be funny about men. (Macedonian Albanians have trousers that are always on the point of falling down, "and to make matters psychologically worse they are of white or biscuit homespun heavily embroidered in black wool in designs that make a stately reference to the essential points of male anatomy. The occasion could not seem more grave, especially as there is often a bunch of uncontrolled shirt bulging between the waistcoat and these trousers. Nothing, however, happens.") And though she is angry at the abysmal treatment of Balkan womanhood—in Kosovo she writes a few paragraphs of controlled rage at the

sight of an old peasant walking free while his wife carries a heavy iron-bladed plow—she can be tender about the male as well. When females become emancipated:

The young woman and the young man dash together out of adolescence into married life like a couple of colts. But presently the woman looks round and sees that the man is not with her. He is some considerable distance behind her, not feeling very well. There has been drained from him the strength which his forefathers derived from the subjection of women; and the woman is amazed, because tradition has taught her that to be a man is to be strong. There is no known remedy for this disharmony.

Perhaps suggestively, she several times resorts to the term “lechery,” and the then contemporary slang “letch,” to explain hidden motivations. An old abbot in Macedonia is given high marks for his “lechery for life,” in view of his continued survival “in a country where death devoured that which most deserved to live,” while on the aforementioned field of animal sacrifices West detects “a letch for cruelty.” The dialectic between Eros and Thanatos is continuous in these pages, as it was in their author’s conscious and unconscious mind. The most repeatedly pejorative word in her lexicon is “impotent,” as the reader will by now have spotted. Her detestation of homosexual or effeminate men is often vented.

I do not think it is any great exaggeration to say that, by the end of her travels, West had come to identify the Serbs with the nobler element of the masculine principle: those who were the least affected by hysteria and masochism and sickly introspection, those whose tradition made the least apologetic appeal to sacrifice and the martial virtues, and those who would be least inclined to let an invader warm his hands at their hearth. This conclusion was not reached without a number of ambiguities, not to mention excursions and digressions from the main path, but it led there in the end. Given the mind-concentrating prospect of imminent war with Nazi Germany, West sometimes remembered that she was a twentieth-century socialist and feminist, who had had, probably at one point, high hopes for the League of Nations. Two hundred pages after her lucubrations about “Greater Serbia” and its dubious dynasties, and before she has quite done with a long encomium to the Serb leader Stephen Dušan, who might or might not have contrived to restore the glory of Byzantium, she turns Fabian again and makes what amounts to a straightforward policy statement:

The Serbs are ... irritating when they regard their Tsar Dushan not only as an inspiration but as a map-maker, for his empire had fallen to pieces in the thirty-five years between his death and the defeat at Kosovo. The only considerations which should determine the drawing of Balkan frontiers are the rights of the peoples to self-government and the modifications of that right to which they must submit in order to keep the peninsula as a whole free from the banditry of the great powers. [My italics.]

Change “self-government” to “self-determination” in the above, and it is the voice of the principled bluestocking, come back to address the girls at her old school on the need for world order and punctilious diplomacy. The word “irritating” is especially well chosen for this effect.

However, the old world of commingled chivalry and superstition still exerts its hold on her and compels her to share what she has learned with those comfortable readers at home to whom politics is still a matter of party and welfare rather than warfare and sacrifice. And this desire produces two connected set pieces of extreme power. Recall the blood of the black lamb, spurting out to create fertility for the barren and ground-down Muslim women of Macedonia. In this primitive ritual, West does not at first wish to see the parallel with Christian doctrines of the atonement, or rather, of vicarious atonement by means of which a scapegoat can be gutted or sacrificed for the greater good of the tribe. But the sense of smell is an acute prompter, and the sheer reek and stench of that Sheep's Field, clotted with drying blood and dismembered carcasses, provokes in her a profound nausea:

The rite of the Sheep's Field was purely shameful. It was a huge and dirty lie.... Its rite, under various disguises, had been recommended to me since my infancy by various religious bodies, by Roman Catholicism, by Anglicanism, by Methodism, by the Salvation Army. Since its earliest days Christianity has been compelled to seem its opposite. This stone, the knife, the filth, the blood, is what many people desire beyond anything else, and they fight to obtain it.

If the grisly sacrifice of cocks and lambs, and the nasty blend of gore and grease, make her gag at the paganism and stupidity of millennial custom, this is nothing to the shock she experiences on the field of Kosovo, consecrated to the apparently willing and glorious self-sacrifice of human beings determined to uphold a great cause. As she approaches the center of the landscape, she is informed that it is often red with poppies to symbolize the fallen Serbian martyrs, and I find it odd that she does not observe any connection with the celebrated poppies of Flanders and Picardy, emblematic as these are of a slaughter on the Somme that would have been all too fresh and vivid in her own mind. It is when she arrives at the heart of the place, and has the "grey falcon" poem explained to her, that she undergoes a shock that exceeds anything that has come before.

It is characteristically preceded by another piece of paradoxical generosity. West has been brought to Kosovo—Kosovo Polje, or "the Field of the Blackbirds"—to see the place where Turkish imperialism crushed the Serbs, and all her sympathies have been engaged on the Serbian side, but she takes care to visit the mausoleum of Sultan Murad, one of the Turkish leaders who also lost his life there, to note the sad decrepitude of Muslim life in the Prishtina district and to set down the following:

It is impossible to have visited Sarajevo or Bitolj or even Skoplje, without learning that the Turks were in a real sense magnificent, that there was much of that in them which brings a man off his four feet into erectness, that they knew well that running waters, the shade of trees, a white minaret the more in a town, brocade and fine manners, have a usefulness greater than use, even to the most soldierly of men.

Once again, one notes the implicit compliment to virility.

And this helps set the stage for what follows. The poem about the gray falcon, as recited and adumbrated by Constantine and his more vigorous driver, Dragutin,

reveals to West that when Lazar was offered the choice between a military victory and a sacrificial but holy defeat, he chose the latter. He summoned the bishops, administered the Eucharist to his soldiers, and lost “seven and seventy thousand” of them. But nevertheless, as the poem concludes:

All was holy, all was honorable
And the goodness of God was fulfilled.

This immediately strikes West as even more horrible than the blood sacrifice and pseudo-atonement of the Sheep’s Field. Behind its bravado there lurks an awful death wish and an equally despicable abjection and fatalism. “So that was what happened,” she says abruptly when the recitation is completed. “Lazar was a member of the Peace Pledge Union.”

Some context may be needed here: The Peace Pledge Union (PPU) was a British organization of the mid-1930s founded by a genial but simpleminded Anglican clergyman named Dick Sheppard. Membership involved a commitment not unlike the earlier Christian “pledge” to swear off alcohol: the signing of a statement that “I renounce all war and will never support or sanction another.” Enormous numbers of people signed this pledge and did much to influence the already craven attitude of the British establishment toward the rise of fascism. And in fact, naively pacifist though the membership of the PPU was, its leadership contained several people who either sympathized with German war aims or who did not think that such aims should be opposed by force. (In the course of the eventual Second World War, it would be extensively lampooned and denounced by George Orwell, who was incidentally a great admirer of Rebecca West’s writing.) Making the rather strained analogy between Kosovo in 1389 and Europe in 1938, West decides that “this poem shows that the pacifist attitude does not depend on the horrors of warfare, for it never mentions them. It goes straight to the heart of the matter and betrays that what the pacifist really wants is to be defeated.” [My italics.]

She reflects on the “anti-war” meetings that she has attended back home and echoes Orwell’s famous attack on the vegetarians, fruit-juice drinkers, sandal wearers, “escaped Quakers,” and other radical cranks by remarking on the eccentric dress of the women at these events and the love of impotence that is evident there:

The speakers use all accents of sincerity and sweetness, and they continuously praise virtue; but they never speak as if power would be theirs tomorrow and they would use it for virtuous action. And their audiences also do not seem to regard themselves as predestined to rule; they clap as if in defiance, and laugh at their enemies behind their hands, with the shrill laughter of children. They want to be right, not to do right. They feel no obligation to be part of the main tide of life, and if that meant any degree of pollution they would prefer to divert themselves from it and form a standing pool of purity. In fact, they want to receive the Eucharist, be beaten by the Turks, and then go to heaven. [My italics.]

Amid these mocking but stern reflections on the attitudinizing and stagnancy of “the left-wing people among whom I had lived all my life,” she encounters an Albanian

carrying yet another black lamb in his arms, and the threads are drawn together: “The black lamb and the grey falcon had worked together here. In this crime, as in nearly all historic crimes and most personal crimes, they had been accomplices”:

And I had sinned in the same way, I and my kind, the liberals of Western Europe. We had regarded ourselves as far holier than our Tory opponents because we had exchanged the role of priest for the role of lamb, and therefore we forgot that we were not performing the chief moral obligation of humanity, which is to protect the works of love. We have done nothing to save our people, who have some little freedom and therefore some power to make their souls, from the trampling hate of the other peoples who are without the faculty of freedom and desire to root out the soul like a weed. It is possible that we have betrayed life and love for more than five hundred years on a field wider than Kosovo, as wide as Europe.

Thus on this stricken field, far from the England that will so soon be in a death grapple with Hitler, West makes her own form of “atonement” for the “progressive” illusions that have consoled her up until then.

Only two more episodes remain before this theme—of an impending confrontation that cannot and must not be shirked—becomes dominant and then conclusive. She spends some time at a large mine run by one of those Scottish engineers who were the backbone and the vertebrae of British enterprise all over the Empire: one of those gruff and decent and honest men who make us utter expressions like “salt of the earth” (West was herself somewhat proud of her Scots-Irish provenance). Old Mac has brought efficiency and improvement to his remote part of Kosovo and has taught many of the locals to work together despite their linguistic and confessional differences. This is a sort of oasis of modernity and rationality, involving perhaps a slight nostalgia on West’s part for the ordered gardens and settled routines of her homeland, before the journey is resumed. It takes her through Montenegro and then back to the coast, and is unusually full of her sprightly observations and aperçus. (“She was one of those widows whose majesty makes their husbands especially dead.” ... “Like all Montenegrin automobiles, it was a debauched piece of ironmongery.”) It also features a very sobering moment at a war memorial. This is a black obelisk covered in names, and these turn out not to be the dead of an entire town, as seems probable, but only of one local clan. Moreover, the dates of the war are given as 1912–1921, which at first astonishes West until she remembers that this mountain people had been “continually under arms” for that length of time. That is a splendid microcosmic observation of Montenegrin history and character, and it is matched by a tremendous description of the Cserna Gora, or “Black Mountains,” which give this lovely and forbidding and unique statelet its imposing name. (Montenegro may have been the setting for Ruritanian-style operettas, but there has been little of courtly polish and affectation in its grim history, unless one counts the old capital of Cetinje, still preserved as if in aspic or amber with the pre-1914 charms that an Anthony Hope or a Franz Lehár might have found diverting.)

The closing passages of the book are defiant rather than fatalistic, sketching in the background of a picture that is steadily darkening. West reflects on the virus of anti-

Semitism, shrewdly locating one of its causes in the fact that “many primitive peoples must receive their first intimation of the toxic quality of thought from Jews. They know only the fortifying idea of religion; they see in Jews the effect of the tormenting and disintegrating ideas of skepticism.” When her guide and friend Constantine moves from nervous illness to something more like a collapse, she records awkwardly that “I did not know how to say that he was dying of being a Jew in a world where there were certain ideas to which some new star was lending a strange strength,” and we feel chilled by the shadow of the encroaching swastika. Creepy old men in monasteries tell her that they look forward to receiving visits from eminent Nazis. Back on the seacoast she and her party notice, as in an Eric Ambler novel, German and Italian agents behaving with increasing confidence and arrogance. Mussolini is about to seize power in Albania, and his fascist proxies, according to Constantine, now “control the whole country; some day they will have their army there too, and it will be as a pistol pointed at Yugoslavia.” He shuddered violently and said, “Ils avancement toujours.” Before long, his worst anticipations are vindicated, and news is brought of a massacre of Albanian leftists that presages a full-fledged fascist coup. With this, West and her husband make ready to depart. But just before she comes to the end of her time in Yugoslavia, and is again contemplating the eclipse of the Turks while staring out of a window, she is visited by a kind of epiphany:

I said to myself, “My civilization must not die. It need not die. My national faith is valid, as the Ottoman faith was not. I know that the English are as unhealthy as lepers compared with perfect health. They do not give themselves up to feeling or to work as they should, they lack readiness to sacrifice their individual rights for the corporate good, they do not bid the right welcome to the other man’s soul. But they are on the side of life, they love justice, they hate violence, and they respect the truth. It is not always so when they deal with India or Burma; but that is not their fault, it is the fault of Empire, which makes a man own things outside his power to control. But among themselves, in dealing with things within their reach, they have learned some part of the Christian lesson that it is our disposition to crucify what is good, and that we must therefore circumvent our barbarity. This measure of wisdom makes it right that my civilization should not perish.”

This must count as one of the most halting and apologetic proclamations of patriotism ever uttered, yet it would be foolish to miss the power of its understatement.

Her way home took her through pre-Anschluss Vienna, recently the scene of a Nazi-inspired pogrom against the left and soon to become an enthusiastic place of self-abnegation that would give up even its nationality and throw itself eagerly at Hitler’s feet. This was in some sense a homecoming for the Führer: As West points out (and who was it who said that Austria’s twin achievement was to have persuaded the world that Hitler was a German and Beethoven a Viennese?), the great dictator was Austrian to the core “and nothing he has brought to postwar Germany had not its existence in pre-war Austria.” This could have led her into a discussion of how it is that nationalism and chauvinism are often strongest at their peripheries—Alexander the Macedonian,

Bonaparte the Corsican, Stalin the Georgian—but instead it prompted her to reflect on why it was that so many “progressive” types had so little sympathy for the smaller nations that lay in Hitler’s path. She concluded that “nationalism” had become a dirty word, much like “imperialism,” and that the grand plans of the rational and the logical did not allow for the eccentric and the anomalous. *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* closes with an impassioned account of the resistance to the Axis on the part of small nations like Albania, Serbia, and Greece—which actually inflicted the first military defeats on fascism—and with the hope that a similar spirit has been evinced by the British when facing the Blitz. It is dedicated “To my friends in Yugoslavia, who are now all dead or enslaved.”

* * *

As I mentioned at the opening of this essay, it is impossible today to read Rebecca West’s travelogue without retrospection, in the literal sense of reviewing her project through the lens or prism of the terrible events of the early 1990s. A new generation of readers hears the name “Sarajevo” and sees the pitiless Serbian bombardment of an undefended city. The stony face of Milošević in the dock is the symbol of ethnic cleansing—a term made real to us by the official Serbian propaganda that employed the word *ciste* (“clean”) for one of the devastated towns along the river Drina. Another term—Chetnik, or Serbian “chauvinist”—derives from a Serbian militia of the Second World War, led by General Draža Mihajlović, who at the time enjoyed Rebecca West’s strong support. The expression “Greater Serbia,” used by her almost as a positive, has become synonymous with the massacre at Srebrenica. The cultural treasures of Dubrovnik, on the Adriatic Coast, were shelled and looted by Montenegrin irregulars fighting on the Serbian side. (Actually, several of the most wanted war criminals from this period, from Radovan Karadžić to Ratko Mladić to Milošević himself, were Serbs of partly Montenegrin origin—which might lend point to my observation above, about nationalism being most intoxicating at its periphery.) The same, it must be said, held true of the fascists from western Herzegovina who united with some of their Croatian brothers to revive the Ustashe, who shattered and ruined the city of Mostar with its beautiful Ottoman bridge, and who made a cynical pact with Milošević and Karadžić to divide the territory of a defenseless Bosnia. About the Ustashe, West had warned us repeatedly. But she could not have pictured it acting in collusion with Serb irredentism. Milošević and his henchmen did dreadful damage to Croatia and to Bosnia, with their Gerda-like belief, much of it derived from the mythology of 1389, that all Serb populations outside Serbia proper should be united under a common flag and rhetoric. But the greatest harm was arguably inflicted upon the Serbs themselves, who eventually saw their people driven out of ancestral territory in the ancient Krajina region (more or less unmentioned by West) and in Kosovo itself. More poignant still, Serbia lost its national honor and became an international pariah, trading arms with Saddam Hussein and relying on Mafia-type militias to do its dirty work. The body of Ivan

Stambolić, Milošević's "disappeared" predecessor in office, was discovered in a shallow grave just as Milošević's trial for war crimes was getting under way in The Hague. The glory had departed: Serbia stood before the world as a blood-spattered, bankrupt, quasi-fascist banana republic. By the end, even the loyal Montenegrins voted to quit the rump "federation" that was all that remained of the Yugoslav idea.

Arguments against Western intervention to end the war were often derived from an image of Serbian bravery and intransigence that drew upon West's celebrated work, while very little in *Black Lamb* and *Grey Falcon* would have prepared the modern reader for the emergence of a secular Bosnian nationalism or for the long struggle of the Kosovar majority population against Serbian rule. I wrote to some of my more internationalist and liberal friends in the region, asking for their opinion of West and her book, and received answers like the following, from a Croatian academic who had strongly opposed the reactionary regime of Franjo Tuđman in his own country:

A good example is the chapter on Dubrovnik. She hated Whiggish England and "saw" her mum and dad in Dubrovnik. Hence, no sympathy for ol' Ragusa. All of this seasoned with suspect history. Pure caricature. Or, the reductionist connection of Croatia with Germany, as opposed to the Serb noble savagery, that is pro-Allied and free of awful Teutonic formalism. Or the title: the noncomprehending idiot look of the Muslim who sacrifices a lamb at the Sheep's Field vs the falcon of the Kosovo myth—Lazar's choice, which is her choice.

Or this, from a Slovenian dissident:

Concerning the "Black Lamb" book: all of us "Slavs" are used to the double-bind situation: if you are too Westernized you are a fake: if not then you are a brute, primitive, etc. Rebecca West seems to avoid it by seeing Slavs as something special and admirable, if they remain true to themselves. So there again is the catch: somehow we keep falling out of our real selves. She has done her homework and mostly well enough. Still, almost no introspection, not much reflection on the nature of her own impact though a strong conviction of being at least a privileged observer.

Interestingly, in view of the fact that both these correspondents had themselves had somewhat "Red" pasts, neither mentions the most obvious lacuna in West's book, which is her complete failure to anticipate the rise of Yugoslav communism during the Second World War. Whenever she mentions communist activity in the country—which is extremely seldom for a book of such length—it is in order to say things like this:

An English friend of mine once came on a tragic party of young men being sent down from a Bosnian manufacturing town to Sarajevo by a night train. All were in irons. The gendarmes told him that they were Communists. I expect that they were nothing of the sort. Real Marxian Communism is rare in Yugoslavia, for it is not attractive to a nation of peasant proprietors and the Comintern wastes little time and energy in this field.

While she was writing these words, a tough Croatian-Slovenian operator named Josip Broz Tito was rising through the apparatus of the Comintern and was to go on to create a Red "partisan" army whose legend has still not quite died. Perhaps the reason

for West's endorsement of the Serb Chetniks in the ensuing Second World War was connected to her feeling that chieftains and brigands are somehow more representative of local traditions.

If the book fails certain tests as a history, and even as a travelogue, and if it has little predictive value and if (as Janet Montefiore has also pointed out) it shows some "unreliable narrator" characteristics as between West's own private diary entries and the way in which the same events are set down on the page, then why does it, or why should it, remain a classic? I would tentatively offer three reasons, related to those that I gave at the outset. First, it shows the workings of a powerful and energetic mind, a mind both honed and dulled by anxieties that have only recently become intelligible to us. Second, it makes a sincere and admirable effort—often aspired to but seldom surpassed by later travel writers—to capture the texture and sinew of another civilization. (I find myself generally unmoved by religious architecture and devotional decoration, but I have made a visit to the church at Grachanitsa and found myself engrossed almost to the point of enchantment in her description of it almost six decades before. Writing on this level must be esteemed and shown to later generations, no matter what the subject.) Finally, I believe that West was one of those people, necessary in every epoch, who understand that there are things worth fighting for, and dying for, and killing for. As a modern woman she at first felt a need almost to apologize for this old-fashioned understanding, but then she shook herself awake and especially in her ice-cold but white-hot epilogue decided to defend it and advance it instead. If you like, she knew that the facing of death could be life affirming, and also that certain kinds of life are a version of death. Has anyone ever described the spirit of Munich, and its sudden evaporation, as finely or as tersely as this?

The instrument of our suicidal impetus, Neville Chamberlain, who had seemed as firmly entrenched in our Government as sugar in the kidneys of a diabetic patient, was gone.

Or this?

It was good to take up one's courage again, which had been laid aside so long, and to feel how comfortably it fitted into the hand.

In any time of sniggering relativism and overbred despair, such as we have known and may know again, it is good to know that some enduring virtues can be affirmed, even if the wrong people sometimes take the right line, and even if people of education and refinement are often a little reluctant to trust their guts. Rebecca West was not at all too ladylike to emphasize the viscera and was often agreeably surprised when her stomach and her heart were (like those of her heroine Queen Elizabeth I) in agreement with her intellect. These are the elements from which greatness comes—and might even come again.

Ezra Pound: A Revolutionary Simpleton

Review of Ezra Pound: Poet, Vol. I, 1885–1920, by A. David Moody.

THE IMPOSING FIRST VOLUME of A. David Moody's biography of Ezra Pound, which takes us up to the publication of "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" and the writing of the early Cantos, deserves to stand in its own right as a study of Pound's germinal years. But no sooner has one written the word germinal than one begins to experience the desire to peep ahead at the ending or, rather, to look in the beginnings for symptoms of the terminus. I found myself doing this even with the very impressive photographs that Moody has collected. In most of them, Pound looks like a highly well-made young man, with an ironic and quizzical expression. He's especially dashing in an extraordinary group shot taken in January 1914, where he stands in a cluster of talent (which includes W. B. Yeats and Richard Aldington) around the patriarchal figure of Wilfred Scawen Blunt. There's no apparent sign of the obsessive crank of the declining years, barking obscenities and gibberish over Mussolini's radio. Yet on the cover of the book, and reproduced inside, is a 1910 study from Paris, in which Pound confronts the camera with a hunched, autistic, haunted look, with a tinge of van Gogh to it.

Pound's early life story is in some respects not unlike that of T. S. Eliot, the man who in his dedication to *The Waste Land* called Pound "il miglior fabbro" (which can mean either "the better writer" or "the better craftsman"). They shared the same desire to escape from provincial gentility in America to Europe and perhaps especially to England, the same struggle to convince parents and family that the effort was one worth endorsing and financing, the same quixotic belief that poetry could be made to yield a living and that poets were a special class, and the same register of annihilating shock when in the summer of 1914 the roof of the over-admired European civilization simply fell in.

It is always impressive to read of the sheer dedication and conviction with which Pound approached poetry, and of the immense hopes he entertained for its regenerative powers. In a single season between 1912 and 1913 in London, we find him taking up the Bengali master Rabindranath Tagore and advising the Irish genius Yeats. Moody writes:

The measures, melodies and modulations of the songs in their original Bengali, which he had Tagore sing and explain to him, interested him as a seeker after "fundamental laws in word music," and seemed to correspond to the sort of metric he was working for in English. He went on to wax enthusiastic about the prospect of Bengali culture providing "the balance and corrective" to a Western humanism which had lost touch with "the whole and the flowing." "We have found our new Greece," he declared. "In the midst of our clangour of mechanisms."

But within a short time he had tired of all this wholeness and flowing, and suspected Tagore of being just another "theosophist," and was sitting up late with Yeats to help revise "The Two Kings" line by line. Yeats was urged to purge his verses of their "Miltonic generalizations," and he told Lady Gregory that Pound helped him

to get back to the definite and the concrete away from modern abstractions. To talk over a poem with him is like getting you to put a sentence into dialect. All becomes clear and natural.

It must be reckoned immensely to Pound's credit that he so early detected the vitality and importance of Eliot and of Yeats, going so far as to write that the latter "is the only living man whose work has more than a most temporary interest. I shall survive as a curiosity." That second observation has a curious prescience to it; meanwhile, one might note that he wasn't always such a sufferer from false modesty. It was at the same time that he composed his "Ballad of the Goodly Fere," telling his father that it was "probably about the strongest thing in English since 'Reading Gaol.'" In its evocation of the crucifixion (a little bizarre in view of Pound's general contempt for Christianity) the "Ballad of the Goodly Fere" is a strangely affecting and beautiful piece of work, but it doesn't place him in the same class as Wilde. It's incidentally interesting for being written in dialect and for hitting an early and clearer note of Pound's later dark obsession with usury:

I ha' seen him drive a hundred men
Wi' a bundle o' cords swung free
That they took the high and holy house
For their pawn and treasury.

Pound's mood swings, between feelings of unworthiness and grandeur, may nonetheless supply a clue. Just as he would ricochet from new enthusiasm to new influence—at different times Rudyard Kipling, James McNeill Whistler (on whose signature he modeled his own), Ernest Dowson, and Wilfred Owen—so his sail was rigged in such a way as to be swollen by any febrile gust of enthusiasm. Under the influence of T. E. Hulme and Wyndham Lewis, he made what was certainly the most extreme contribution to the inaugural issue of Lewis's Vorticist magazine, *BLAST*, published on the unintentionally momentous day of June 20, 1914, one week before the archduke's murder in Sarajevo. The same issue contained a story by Rebecca West and the first chapter of Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*, while Pound emitted a statement titled "THE TURBINE":

The vortex is the point of maximum energy. All experience rushes into this vortex. All the energized past, all the past that is living and worthy to live. All MOMENTUM, which is the past bearing upon us, RACE, RACE-MEMORY, instinct charging the PLACID, NON-ENERGIZED FUTURE. The DESIGN of the future in the grip of the human vortex. All the past that is vital, all the past that is capable of living into the future, is pregnant in the vortex, NOW.

Again, one can surely be forgiven for seeing a harbinger here, and not only of eventual mental unhingement. In fact, though strictly speaking it lies outside the scope of Moody's book, let me quote from what Wyndham Lewis was later to write about experiencing the energy-loving and race-memory-oriented fascism that he had at first welcomed so warmly:

The senseless bellicosity of the reactionary groups of the Action Française type may certainly result in far more violence, before long, than anyone is able to measure.

On another occasion he wrote, "Fascists have the word 'action' on their lips from morning to night." In the same book—*Time and Western Man*—he described his former BLAST colleague Ezra Pound as a "revolutionary simpleton." That could perhaps furnish a title for Moody's second volume.

Lewis of course turned against fascism, if only because he decided that it was ultimately just as mob-centered as democracy. Pound's contempt for democracy was of a more determinedly elevated and "artistic" type. It's rather charming to find him turning up at the United States Embassy in London in 1918, opposing the possible drafting of T. S. Eliot into the Army on the grounds that

if it was a war for civilization (not merely for democracy) it was folly to shoot, or have shot one of the six or seven Americans capable of contributing to civilization or understanding the word.

In a letter home to his father, discussing his own prospects as a conscript, Pound stated more tersely: "It is not however the habit of democracies to use my sort of intelligence." It's difficult to gauge how much this rather airy solipsism had to do with a version of survivor guilt, or an awareness that friends like Ford and Lewis either had endured the test of wartime experience or (like Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, creator of the brilliant statue of Pound that its subject happily considered "phallic") had not survived it.

And this must bring us to the writing of "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley," which was his farewell to England and his envoy, also, to both "democracy" and "civilization." I have never especially admired the bitch/botch echo in the poem, which speaks of the huge wartime sacrifice in which Pound himself played no part and then describes it as having been made for "an old bitch gone in the teeth / for a botched civilization." The whole thing reeks of trying too hard, and it anticipates the fanatical drone of "Canto XIV" in which Londoners are described as living in a place full of "financiers / lashing them with steel wires" and:

The slough of unamiable liars,
bog of stupidities,
malevolent stupidities, and stupidities,
the soil living pus, full of vermin,
dead maggots begetting live maggots,
slum owners,
usurers squeezing crab-lice ...

Sometimes credited with presaging or echoing *The Waste Land*, this stuff actually bodies forth and even exceeds the lowest of Eliot, and there can be small doubt, even on a brisk review of the lines, of the sordid direction in which things are tending.

Toward the close of this dense and clever and generally sympathetic study, Moody does cite an essay by Pound on "The Tribe of Judah" and "the pawnshop" where, as he deftly points out, there is a telltale confusion between Judaism and "the Jew." This

distinction would eventually become completely lost on Pound, whose eccentric article was written for A. R. Orage's *New Age*, in the offices of which (and what a life he lived for the small and obscure magazine) Pound was to meet Major C. H. Douglas, the crackpot Green-Shirt founder of the Social Credit movement. In Douglas's program, Pound had found his true muse: a blend of folkloric Celtic twilight with a paranoid hatred of the money economy and a dire suspicion about an ancient faith. Moody supplies two very telling examples. In April 1917, Pound had written to his friend John Quinn, urging him to impress on Theodore Roosevelt, of all people, the need for "some system of direct supply ... straight from the factory to the particular section of the front where stuff is wanted." But this amateur-planner megalomania was only a foretaste of the pathos to come. In 1921, just before his departure from England, Pound managed to corner Arthur Griffith, easily the most reactionary and ethereal of the Irish leaders, during the tortured negotiations for his nation's independence. He ranted at Griffith in an attempt to convince him to adopt Social Credit so as to use the infant Irish republic as its laboratory. According to Pound, Griffith eventually responded: "All you say is true. But I can't move 'em with a cold thing like economics."

Moody does not mention it, but this very phrase later recurs as a line in "Canto XIX," by which time Pound's poetry had become little more than a doctrinaire and propagandistic screed: a mechanical attempt to make poetry do what economics could not. That such an outcome was a tragedy no reader of this biography can doubt. If one seeks or desires to explain the tragedy, one might say that Shelley wanted poets to be "the unacknowledged legislators" of the world, while Pound sought hectically for acknowledgment, not just for poetry but for himself, and lost the sense of both in the process.

(*The Atlantic*, April 2008)

On *Animal Farm*

Introduction (2010) to *Animal Farm*, by George Orwell.

For all I know, by the time this book [*Animal Farm*] is published my view of the Soviet régime may be the generally-accepted one. But what use would that be in itself? To exchange one orthodoxy for another is not necessarily an advance.

—George Orwell, "The Freedom of the Press"

ANIMAL FARM, as its author later wrote, "was the first book in which I tried, with full consciousness of what I was doing, to fuse political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole." And indeed, its pages contain a synthesis of many of the themes that we have come to think of as "Orwellian." Among these are a hatred of tyranny, a love for animals and the English countryside, and a deep admiration for the satirical fables of Jonathan Swift. To this one might add Orwell's keen desire to see things from the viewpoint of childhood and innocence: He had long wished for fatherhood and, fearing that he was sterile, had adopted a small boy not long before the death of his first wife. The partly ironic subtitle of the novel is *A Fairy Story*, and Orwell was especially pleased when he heard from friends such as Malcolm Muggeridge and Sir Herbert Read that their own offspring had enjoyed reading the book.

Like much of his later work—most conspicuously the much grimmer *Nineteen Eighty-four*—*Animal Farm* was the product of Orwell’s engagement in the Spanish Civil War. During the course of that conflict, in which he had fought on the anti-Fascist side and been wounded and then chased out of Spain by supporters of Joseph Stalin, his experiences had persuaded him that the majority of “Left” opinion was wrong, and that the Soviet Union was a new form of hell and not an emerging utopia. He described the genesis of the idea in one of his two introductions to *Animal Farm*:

[F]or the past ten years I have been convinced that the destruction of the Soviet myth was essential if we wanted a revival of the Socialist movement.

On my return from Spain I thought of exposing the Soviet myth in a story that could be easily understood by almost anyone and which could be easily translated into other languages. However, the actual details of the story did not come to me for some time until one day (I was then living in a small village) I saw a little boy, perhaps ten years old, driving a huge cart-horse along a narrow path, whipping it whenever it tried to turn. It struck me that if only such animals became aware of their strength we should have no power over them, and that men exploit animals in much the same way as the rich exploit the proletariat.

I proceeded to analyse Marx’s theory from the animals’ point of view.¹

The apparently beautiful simplicity of this notion is in many ways deceptive. By undertaking such a task, Orwell was choosing to involve himself in an extremely complex and bitter argument about the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia: then a far more controversial issue than it is today. *Animal Farm* can be better understood if it is approached under three different headings: its historical context, the struggle over its publication and its subsequent adoption as an important cultural weapon in the Cold War, and its enduring relevance today.

Historical Background

The book was written at the height of the Second World War, and at a time when the pact between Stalin and Hitler had been replaced abruptly by an alliance between Stalin and the British Empire. London was under Nazi bombardment, and the original manuscript of the novel had to be rescued from the wreckage of Orwell’s blitzed home in North London.

The cynical way in which Stalin had switched sides had come as no surprise to Orwell, who was by then accustomed to the dishonesty and cruelty of the Soviet regime. This put him in a fairly small minority, both within official Britain and among the

¹ Orwell once wrote that all his happiest memories of boyhood were somehow connected to animals, yet his favorite word of disapproval for human behavior was “beastly.” He made his name with an almost self-hating essay about shooting an elephant. As an amateur farmer he came to detest pigs. In *Nineteen Eighty-four* the most horrifying moment involves the use of rats as instruments of torture. Yet he also loved the Thames Valley and was plainly influenced by *The Wind in the Willows*. One wants to read, or perhaps write, an essay on this subtext and its implications.

British Left. A considerable number of “progressive” persons still believed that Communist collectivization of Russian agriculture had benefited the peasants, and maintained that Stalin’s judicial murder of his former political comrades had constituted a fair trial. Orwell had not visited the USSR but he had seen the Spanish version of Stalinism at close quarters and broadly took the side of the Left Opposition or Trotskyist forces, whose perspective is expounded by a four-legged character in this book. With a few slight alterations to the sequence of events, the action approximates to the fate of the 1917 generation in Russia. Thus the grand revolutionary scheme of the veteran boar Old Major (Karl Marx) is at first enthusiastically adopted by almost all creatures, leading to the overthrow of Farmer Jones (the Tsar), the defeat of the other farmers who come to his aid (the now-forgotten Western invasions of Russia in 1918–19), and the setting up of a new model state. In a short time, the more ruthless and intelligent creatures—naturally enough the pigs—have the other animals under their dictatorship and are living like aristocrats. Inevitably, the pigs argue among themselves. The social forces represented by different animals are easily recognizable—Boxer the noble horse as the embodiment of the working class, Moses the raven as the Russian Orthodox Church—as are the identifiable individuals played by different pigs. The rivalry between Napoleon (Stalin) and Snowball (Trotsky) ends with Snowball’s exile and the subsequent attempt to erase him from the memory of the farm. Stalin had the exiled Trotsky murdered in Mexico less than three years before Orwell began work on the book.

Some of the smaller details are meticulously exact. Due to the exigencies of the war, Stalin had made various opportunistic compromises. He had recruited the Russian Orthodox Church to his side, the better to cloak himself in patriotic garb, and he was to abolish the old Socialist anthem “The Internationale” for being too provocative to his new capitalist allies in London and Washington. In *Animal Farm*, Moses the raven is allowed to come croaking back as the crisis deepens, and the poor exploited goats and horses and hens are told that their beloved song “Beasts of England” is no longer to be sung. Orwell’s rendition of those yearning and touching verses was one of the many ways in which he managed to keep the essentially tragic narration relatively light. This is also one of the very few of his works to contain any jokes: After the revolution the animals discover some hams hanging in Jones’s kitchen and take them outside for decent burial; the first time they take a vote on the rights of non-domestic animals the farm’s cat is found to have voted on both sides.

There is, however, one very salient omission. There is a Stalin pig and a Trotsky pig, but no Lenin pig. Similarly, in *Nineteen Eighty-four* we find only a Big Brother Stalin and an Emmanuel Goldstein Trotsky. Nobody appears to have pointed this out at the time (and if I may say so, nobody but myself has done so since; it took me years to notice what was staring me in the face). In the 1930s and the 1940s, and indeed for some decades afterward, there was a very hot dispute about whether or not Stalin’s terror was a direct consequence of Lenin’s revolution, and also speculation concerning the likelihood or otherwise that Trotsky would have been better than Stalin. Orwell

had broadly Trotskyist sympathies but did not necessarily believe that any one form of Russified Communism would have been superior to another. Uncharacteristically for him, then, and possibly for the sake of simplicity, he seems to have decided to let this evident contradiction remain unaddressed.² This didn't save him from the censure of those who could see the dangerously subversive possibilities that were latent in his apparently innocuous version of the pastoral.

The Story of Publication

It is sobering to consider how close this novel came to remaining unpublished. Having survived Hitler's bombing, the rather battered manuscript was sent to the office of T. S. Eliot, then an important editor at the leading firm of Faber & Faber. Eliot, a friendly acquaintance of Orwell's, was a political and cultural conservative, not to say reactionary. But, perhaps influenced by Britain's alliance with Moscow, he rejected the book on the grounds that it seemed too "Trotskyite." He also told Orwell that his choice of pigs as rulers was an unfortunate one, and that readers might draw the conclusion that what was needed was "more public-spirited pigs." This was not perhaps as fatuous as the turn-down that Orwell received from The Dial Press in New York, which solemnly informed him that stories about animals found no market in the United States. And this in the land of Disney ...

The wartime solidarity between British Tories and Soviet Communists found another counterpart in the work of Peter Smollett, a senior official in the Ministry of Information who was later exposed as a Soviet agent. Smollett made it his business to warn off certain publishers, as a consequence of which *Animal Farm* was further denied a home at the reputable firms of Victor Gollancz and Jonathan Cape. For a time Orwell considered producing the book privately with the help of his radical Canadian poet friend, Paul Potts, in what would have been a pioneering instance of anti-Soviet samizdat or self-publishing. He even wrote an angry essay, titled "The Freedom of the Press," to be included as an introduction: an essay which was not even unearthed and printed until 1972. Eventually the honor of the publishing business was saved by the small company Secker & Warburg, which in 1945 brought out an edition with a very limited print-run and paid Orwell forty-five pounds for it.

It is thinkable that the story could have ended in this damp-squib way, but two later developments were to give the novel its place in history. A group of Ukrainian and Polish socialists, living in refugee camps in postwar Europe, discovered a copy of the book in English and found it to be a near-perfect allegory of their own recent experience. Their self-taught English-speaking leader and translator, Ihor Ševčenko, found an address for Orwell and wrote to him asking permission to translate *Animal*

² In "The Freedom of the Press" he does make an approving reference to Rosa Luxemburg, the martyred Jewish German-Polish revolutionary, murdered in 1919 by the German right-wing, who was on the extreme Left but who had prophetically warned Lenin of the danger of making a habit of "emergency measures."

Farm into Ukrainian. He told him that many of Stalin's victims nonetheless still considered themselves to be socialists, and did not trust an intellectual of the Right to voice their feelings. "They were profoundly affected by such scenes as that of animals singing 'Beasts of England' on the hill ... They very vividly reacted to the 'absolute' values of the book." Orwell agreed to grant publication rights for free (he did this for subsequent editions in several other Eastern European languages) and to contribute the preface from which I quoted earlier. It is affecting to imagine battle-hardened ex-soldiers and prisoners of war, having survived all the privations of the Eastern Front, becoming stirred by the image of British farm animals singing their own version of the discarded "Internationale," but this was an early instance of the hold the book was to take on its readership. The emotions of the American military authorities in Europe were not so easily touched: They rounded up all the copies of *Animal Farm* that they could find and turned them over to the Red Army to be burned. The alliance between the farmers and the pigs, so hauntingly described in the final pages of the novel, was still in force.

But in the part-acrimonious closing scene, usually best-remembered for the way in which men and pigs have become indistinguishable, Orwell predicted, as on other occasions, that the ostensible friendship between East and West would not long outlast the defeat of Nazism. The Cold War, a phrase that Orwell himself was the first to use in print,³ soon created a very different ideological atmosphere. This in turn conditioned the reception of *Animal Farm* in the United States. At first rejected at Random House by the Communist sympathizer Angus Cameron (who had been sent the book by Arthur Schlesinger Jr.) and then by a succession of lesser publishers, it was rescued from oblivion by Frank Morley of Harcourt, Brace, who while visiting England had been impressed by a chance encounter with the novel in a bookshop in Cambridge. Publication was attended by two strokes of good fortune: Edmund Wilson wrote a highly favorable review for the *New Yorker* comparing Orwell's satirical talent to the work of Swift and Voltaire, and the Book-of-the-Month Club made it a main selection, which led to a printing of almost half a million copies. The stupidity of The Dial Press notwithstanding, the Walt Disney company came up with a proposal for a film version. This was never made, though the CIA did later produce and distribute an *Animal Farm* cartoon for propaganda purposes. By the time Orwell died in January 1950, having just succeeded in finishing *Nineteen Eighty-four*, he had at last achieved an international reputation and was having to issue repeated disclaimers of the use made of his work by the American right-wing.

The Afterlife of *Animal Farm*

Probably the best-known sentence from the novel is the negation by the pigs of the original slogan that "All Animals Are Equal" by the addition of the afterthought that "Some Animals Are More Equal Than Others." As communism in Russia and Eastern Europe took on more and more of the appearance of a "New Class" system, with

³ In an especially acute feuilleton entitled "You and the Atomic Bomb" in *Tribune* in October 1945.

grotesque privileges for the ruling elite and a grinding mediocrity of existence for the majority, the moral effect of Orwell's work—so simple to understand and to translate, precisely as he had hoped—became one of the many unquantifiable forces that eroded communism both as a system and as an ideology. Gradually, the same effect spread to Asia. I well remember a Communist friend of mine telephoning me from China when Deng Xiaoping announced the “reforms” that were ultimately to inaugurate what we now know as Chinese capitalism. “The peasants must get rich,” the leader of The Party announced, “and some will get richer than others.” My comrade was calling to say, with reluctance but with some generosity, that perhaps Orwell had had a point after all.

In Burma, one of the longest-lasting totalitarian systems in the world—an amalgam of military fascism, Buddhist dogma, and Communist-style rhetoric about collectivization—George Packer of the *New Yorker* not long ago heard a saying that had become popular among democratically minded Burmese. “We revere George Orwell very much,” they told him, “because he wrote three books about our country: *Burmese Days*, *Animal Farm*, and *Nineteen Eighty-four*.” Thus far, *Animal Farm* has not been legally published in China, Burma, or the moral wilderness of North Korea, but one day will see its appearance in all three societies, where it is sure to be greeted with the shock of recognition that it is still capable of inspiring.

In Zimbabwe, as the rule of Robert Mugabe's kleptocratic clique became ever more exorbitant, an opposition newspaper took the opportunity to reprint *Animal Farm* in serial form. It did so without comment, except that one of the accompanying illustrations showed Napoleon the dictator wearing the trademark black horn-rimmed spectacles of Zimbabwe's own “Dear Leader.” The offices of the newspaper were soon afterward blown up by a weapons-grade bomb, but before too long Zimbabwean children, also, will be able to appreciate the book in its own right.

In the Islamic world, many countries continue to ban *Animal Farm*, ostensibly because of its emphasis on pigs. Clearly this cannot be the whole reason—if only because the porcine faction is rendered in such an unfavorable light—and under the theocratic despotism of Iran it is obviously forbidden for reasons having to do with its message of “revolution betrayed.” I was recently approached by a group of Iranian exiles who are hoping to produce a pirate edition, and so one can hope for an Orwell revival in these latitudes as well.

Almost as an afterthought I will venture to predict a quite different renaissance for *Animal Farm*. Recent advances in the study of our genome have shown how much we possess in common with other primates and mammals, and perhaps especially with pigs (from whom we can receive skin and even organ transplants). In Orwell's own time the idea of “animal rights” let alone “animal liberation” would have seemed silly or fanciful, but these now form part of our ever-expanding concept of rights, and bring much thought-provoking scientific discovery to bear. We too are “animals,” whose claim to the “dominion” awarded us in the Book of Genesis looks increasingly dubious. In that grand discussion, this little book will probably earn itself an allegorical niche.

All the examples I have given are specific to time and place but I believe that there is a timeless, even transcendent, quality to this little story. It is caught when Old Major tells his quiet, sad audience of over-worked beasts about a time from long ago, when creatures knew of the possibility of a world without masters, and when he recalls in a dream the words and the tune of a half-forgotten freedom-song. Orwell had a liking for the tradition of the English Protestant revolution, and his favorite line of justification was taken from John Milton, who made his stand “by the known rules of ancient liberty.”⁴ In all minds, perhaps especially in those of children, there is a feeling that life need not always be this way, and those malnourished Ukrainian survivors, responding to the authenticity of the verses and to something “absolute” in the integrity of the book, were hearing the mighty line of Milton whether they fully understood it or not.

Jessica Mitford’s Poison Pen

Review of Decca: *The Letters of Jessica Mitford*, edited by Peter Y. Sussman.

IT IS SAID THAT, just before the Sino-Soviet split, Nikita Khrushchev had a tense meeting with Zhou Enlai at which he told the latter that he now understood the problem. “I am the son of coal miners,” he said. “You are the descendant of feudal mandarins. We have nothing in common.” “Perhaps we do,” murmured his Chinese antagonist. “What?” blustered Khrushchev. “We are,” responded Zhou, “both traitors to our class.”

For a true appreciation of the character and style of Jessica Mitford, it is necessary to picture Lady Bracknell not only abandoning the practice of arranging marriages for money but also aligning herself with the proletariat, while still managing to remain a character in a Wilde play. The carrying cut-glass voice; the raised eyebrow of disdain that could (like that of P. G. Wodehouse’s forbidding Roderick Spode) “open an oyster at sixty paces”; the stoicism born of stern ancestral discipline yet, withal, a lethal sense of the “ridic,” as Ms. Mitford was fond of putting it. Here she is, writing to her sister the Duchess of Devonshire in 1965, about a suitable present for her niece:

People are always asking me to join committees against the wicked toys they’ve got here (like model H-bombs, etc) but I can’t bear to join because I know I should have rather longed for a model H-bomb if they had been about when we were little. Anyway, the wickedest toy of all, and the one that has been written up and condemned bitterly all over the U.S., is a real guillotine (real model of, anyway) and a toy person with toy head that comes off when the knife drops, and a colouring set with red for blood etc. So be expecting it, but don’t tell Sophy for fear that the campaign has been successful and they’ve stopped selling them ...

⁴ This is from his Sonnet XII, in which he defends himself from various traducers. It attacks them as “owls and cuckoos, asses, apes and dogs.” One wonders if Orwell was fully aware of the animal element here.

Little Sophy was then about eight, but neither this consideration nor the solidity of the duchess's social position would have inhibited "Decca"—all the sisters stuck for life to their English-country-house girlhood nicknames—from proposing the perfect anti-aristo gift for all seasons.

Her many devotees will, I hope, excuse a précis here: Jessica Mitford was one of a clutch of children born to the uncontrollably eccentric Lord and Lady Redesdale and raised in an isolated mansion where neither formal education nor contact with outsiders was permitted. Only one of the sisters, Deborah, fulfilled parental expectation by marrying a duke. Of the remainder, Unity and Diana betrayed their country, if not their class, by falling in love with Adolf Hitler in the first instance and Sir Oswald Mosley—founder of the British Blackshirt movement (and the nonfiction model for Roderick Spode)—in the second. Another sister, Nancy, became a celebrated novelist and brittle social observer.

In bold contrast, so to say, Jessica eloped with a Communist nephew of Winston Churchill's named Esmond Romilly, fled to Spain to support the Republican cause, and immigrated to the United States as the Second World War was approaching. The couple had lost one child to illness, had a second one just after Romilly enlisted in the Canadian air force and returned to Europe to fight, and lost another to miscarriage just before his plane went down over the North Sea. Jessica's next child—by her second husband, Robert Treuhaft, a prominent "Red" labor lawyer in the Bay Area—was killed in a traffic accident. Her last-born child developed severe bipolar disorder. These themes—of kinship and class, flight from same, residual loyalties to same, commitment to revolution, and stiff-upper-lippery in the face of calamity—recur throughout this assemblage of Jessica's correspondence.

The best encapsulating anecdote might be this one: When Winston Churchill made his first wartime visit to Washington, D.C., only a few weeks after Pearl Harbor, he was charged by his own daughters to invite his nephew's widow to the White House. He had to tell Jessica that Romilly's plane had not been found. She, in turn, told him that he was grossly in error to have given her sister Diana Mosley, along with Diana's Fascist husband, special treatment in the prison in which they were interned. ("No!" she once told me emphatically when I asked if she had ever been in touch with Diana again. "Apart from darling Nancy's funeral, it's been absolute nonspeakers ever since Munich." Her second marriage, to a Communist Jew, was also emphatic, in its own way.)

Waugh-type debutante argot stayed in her speech and prose for life; it isn't difficult to master the combination of overstatement and understatement of which it consists. Anything faintly nice is "bliss"; anything vaguely clever is "brill." Anything below par is "ghastly." Work in progress is "dread" used adjectivally, as in "the dread manuscript." The absolutely worst thing to be is "boring," or "a bore." There are deliberate lapses into "common" speech, such as "me" for "my." This upper-crust style could be used to telling effect. Jessica was confronted once with a racist southern educator who, skeptical of what she told him about desegregation in Oakland schools, said, "It don't

seem possible, do it?" Jessica responded icily, "To me it do," and left him shriveled like a salted snail.

She shot to fame—finally impressing her sister Nancy, in whose shadow she had always felt herself to be—with her hilarious-but-serious exposé of the funeral industry, *The American Way of Death*. Almost perfect as a subject for her macabre humor, the book was in fact a by-product of her husband's work for labor unions, whose members' "death benefit" was being eaten up by unscrupulous morticians. It was followed by equally satirical mini-masterpieces, notably the demolition of the "Famous Writers" racket, in which supposed men of letters like Bennett Cerf put their names to a ripoff writing-school scheme, and by "Checks and Balances at the Sign of the Dove," certainly the finest revenge ever taken by a customer on a pretentious restaurant. In the letters currently under review, one can follow Jessica's talent for vendetta as it evolves, and see her extraordinary tenacity and persistence. Woe to the petty official or scam artist who crossed Ms. Mitford. Writing from an absurd beauty-restoration resort in Arizona whose false promises she was exposing, she tells her husband, "Then lunch, by far the most interesting part of the day so far. We repaired to a patio for it (by the way, paper napkins which I did think squalid)." Noblesse, yes. Oblige, no.

* * *

Because of Jessica's extraordinary manner, many people deceived themselves into thinking that she regarded everything as a huge joke. Not so. Her natural tough-mindedness was schooled and tempered by a fierce devotion to the Communist Party, and in particular to its work for civil rights and civil liberty. She was bouncing through Dixie in an old car long before the Freedom Riders, and when she took up a case it got taken up properly. She even persuaded William Faulkner to sign a petition against the execution of a wrongfully condemned black man.

Pursuing another case of injustice, in Arkansas in the early 1980s, she remembered that a young Hillary Rodham had once been an intern in her husband's law firm, and so she tracked Hillary all the way to Little Rock and the governor's mansion. These particular letters make for interesting reading: In the intervening years Mrs. Clinton had evidently become a bit more of a "realist." Jessica Mitford, in contrast, was one of those who get more radical as they get older. Her lampoon of the ghastliness of party-line jargon—a clever parody of Stephen Potter titled *Life Itselfmanship*—is the forerunner of all mockeries of "politically correct" sloganeering. But when she abandoned the Communist Party she made it absolutely clear that it was because it had become too conservative for her taste.

Her seriousness on this point is illustrated by another magnificent example of upper-class insouciance, when she writes to her friend Virginia Durr, a lifelong correspondent and doyenne of the early civil-rights movement:

I'm afraid I was a rather rotten mother to [the children], as I was totally preoccupied with CP politics when they were growing up; so while I was v.fond of them, I didn't pay too much attention to them when they were little.

The “v.fond” is nicely phrased. No doubt her own loveless childhood had something to do with it.

To her sister the duchess, she offhandedly writes to see if her own wayward son, Benjamin, has by any chance turned up at the former’s mansion, adding, “Don’t let him into the house if he’s too filthy, he can easily sleep in the car.” To the lad himself, she writes very sternly some years later, informing him that his bipolar disorder has become a bore and that he’d better buck up and pull himself together; the letter closes with an offer of maternal help “if you should ever tire of the manic condition.” (It must say something that Benjamin allowed this letter to be published; and indeed, in my memory his mother was fiercely devoted to him, in that, shall I say, understated way that she had.)

Alarminglly severe as her tone may appear, it makes for a bracing contrast to the therapeutic self-loving culture by which she was surrounded in northern California and for which—like anything else that was bourgeois—she could find no time.

She was great chums with many great hostesses—most notably Katharine Graham, with whom she formed a wartime friendship that lasted for life—and might have been a considerable one herself if she could have been bothered. One excellent letter advises against the huge mistake she once made of inviting to dinner two grandes dames (Edna O’Brien and Lillian Hellman) on the same evening. Her gift for comradeship illustrates the old Hugh Kingsmill maxim that friends are God’s apology for relations. But she was always willing to quarrel on a point of principle, nearly coming to a breach with her beloved Maya Angelou, for example, when the latter stuck up for the Supreme Court nomination of Clarence Thomas.

Covering the trial of Dr. Spock in Boston at the height of the anti-war movement in May 1968, she writes to a friend about her shortcomings as a court reporter and adds, “I even missed the riot yesterday, which was so sloppy of me.” But on the whole she was on time for the riot, and well turned out for it to boot. The cult of the Mitfords, which now features a shelf of books and several TV documentaries, threatens in itself to become a bore on an almost Bloomsbury scale.

But her mad father, when making dispositions of his property, wrote in his will the words “except Jessica.” And the bookstore at the Devonshire stately home in Chatsworth displays works by and about every Mitford sister but her. These paltry aristocratic gestures confirm, as do these letters, that it was Decca, exiled and intransigent, who was the exceptional one.

(The Atlantic, October 2006)

W. Somerset Maugham: Poor Old Willie

Review of Somerset Maugham: A Life, by Jeffrey Meyers.

HERE IS THE OPENING SENTENCE of Anthony Burgess’s *Earthly Powers* (1980)—incidentally, one of the most underrated English novels of the past century:

“It was the afternoon of my eighty-first birthday, and I was in bed with my catamite when Ali announced that the archbishop had come to see me.”

One knows at once who is the object of this pastiche. One knows it before “Geoffrey,” described tersely as “my Ganymede or male lover as well as my secretary,” is further described as responding to the intrusion by “pulling on his overtight summer slacks.” Yet one is tempted to continue quoting, about the Mediterranean villa and the goings-on there (“I lay a little while, naked, mottled, sallow, emaciated, smoking a cigarette that should have been postcoital but was not”). This is quite simply because the parody is so much better than anything that W. Somerset Maugham ever wrote himself. Poor old “Willie” was more given to openings like this: “I have never begun a novel with more misgiving. If I call it a novel it is only because I don’t know what else to call it.”

Thus the deadly kickoff to *The Razor’s Edge*, a story that furthermore turns out to be narrated by someone named Maugham. There was a time when many readers thought this kind of thing to be profound, and quite the cat’s meow when it came to the delineation of searing human emotion. Even at that time, however, one shrewd writer—and also near-perfect pasticheur—saw through it without too much difficulty. “How about old S. Maugham, do you think?” P. G. Wodehouse wrote to Evelyn Waugh.

I’ve been re-reading a lot of his stuff, and I’m wondering a bit about him. I mean, surely one simply can’t do that stuff about the district officer hearing there’s a white man dying in a Chinese slum and it turns out that it’s gay lighthearted Jack Almond, who disappeared and no-one knew what had become of [him] and he went right under, poor chap, because a woman in England had let him down.

Well, it turned out that one simply could do that stuff, and go on doing it. Sometimes, for the sake of variety, it’s the white woman who goes right under, or who succumbs in other ways to the lush madness of the tropics. Such is the case in “Before the Party,” “P&O,” and “The Force of Circumstance,” though with females there is usually the redemptive possibility of a return by steamship to dear old England. The best of the sweltering colonial stories, which I can remember re-reading for the sake of atmosphere in a Malayan hotel once patronized by Maugham, is “The Outstation.” Here we meet Warburton, a solitary middle-aged Englishman who is the resident administrator of a jungly area somewhere in the Malay archipelago. Rigid in respect of the upper lip, he sticks to a stern routine of exercises and always dresses in formal attire for dinner. His copy of the *London Times* arrives by sea mail six weeks late, and sometimes several successive days’ editions are delivered by the same post, but he disciplines himself to open them one at a time, in strict order. The greatest test of this practice comes during the faraway Battle of the Somme, when by opening some later editions he could easily discover the outcome. But Warburton forces himself to keep his nerve, and breaks the wrappers seriatim. The effect is that of Conrad in tweeds. Maugham’s overall debt to Conrad is so evident that one usually finishes by putting him down and picking up the real thing.

Just as he was a character in one of his best-known novels, so Maugham worked assiduously to create a persona for himself in life. And the life was, according to this

admirable biography, a good deal more exquisite, dramatic, torrid, and tragic than any of the works. Born and brought up in France, Maugham lost his parents when quite young and from then on was farmed out to mean relatives and cruel, monastic boarding schools. The traditional ration of bullying, beating, and buggery seems to have been unusually effective in his case, leaving him with a frightful lifelong speech impediment and a staunch commitment to homosexuality. (Ashenden—the name of his secret-agent character—was also the name of a comely youth at the King’s School in Canterbury, where Maugham served his term, so to speak.)

An ideal way to “lock in” homosexual disposition is probably to spend time as a gynecologist in a slum district of London—which, astonishingly enough, is what the fastidious young man did. Though he would ultimately abandon medicine, he passed considerable time delivering babies in the abysmal squalor of Lambeth, on the south bank of the River Thames. As part of his training he witnessed cesarean births in the hospital, where death was not uncommon. The experience gave him the raw material for *Liza of Lambeth*, his first novel, and also made him surprisingly radical in his infrequently expressed political views, which were strongly sympathetic to the Labour Party’s social-welfare proposals. The arbitrariness of death and suffering, moreover, persuaded him that religious belief was merely fatuous.

Throughout Jeffrey Meyers’s book one is reminded of the remarkable difference made to English letters by the Victorian-era law that prohibited homosexual conduct. Maugham was a young man during the Oscar Wilde scandal, and he developed all the habits of subterfuge that were necessary to his survival. It seems certain that he married Syrie Wellcome partly as “cover,” and thereby doomed himself to decades of misery and litigation. But Meyers allows us to speculate that he did this, and also embarked on a dismal exercise in fatherhood, in order to satisfy himself as a writer that he had done everything at least once. (My contribution to the gay-marriage debate would be this: Remember what vast unhappiness was generated in the days when homosexuals felt obliged to marry heterosexuals.) Syrie was a greedy and impossible bitch to begin with, and did not improve upon intimate acquaintance, or want of acquaintance, of that kind. If one scans the few and cringe-making attempts to describe man-woman sex in Maugham’s fiction, or if one attempts to infer anything of his conjugal relations, one is forced to picture him screwing his courage to the sticking place (or perhaps vice versa).

One of the many great appeals of war for men is that it allows and legitimizes flight from domestic entrapment. The year 1914—his own fortieth year—afforded Maugham just this chance of deliverance. He spoke French perfectly and he had a medical qualification, and before his only child, Elisabeth (naturally called “Liza” for most of her life), was born he had volunteered for the Western Front. The work of an ambulance man in wartime was the perfect counterpoint to gynecology—and has a vivid connection to gay iconography, as we know from the poetry of Walt Whitman and also the work of Wilfred Owen and Yukio Mishima. It’s not by coincidence that the pierced and bleeding nudity of Saint Sebastian (whose name is shared by Waugh’s epicene

hero in *Brideshead Revisited*, with the addition of “Flyte” to suggest arrows) is the supreme symbol here. Not long after his arrival in the trenches Maugham met a dashing young American named Gerald Haxton, and never slept with a woman again. He had found the great entanglement of his life, and though Haxton was every bit as bitchy and greedy as Syrie, and exhibited many other vices as well, he seems never—or at any rate seldom—to have been boring. For the next several decades it was part of Maugham’s job to look after the person whom he’d ostensibly hired to look after him, and to keep him out of jail.

The succeeding interlude in Maugham’s life was also ready-made for his purposes as a popular novelist. He was recruited by British intelligence. For some reason they wanted to send him to Western Samoa, which had been German-occupied until 1914. This was his introduction to the Pacific. In a subsequent letter unearthed by Meyers, Maugham explained his long connection with the region thus:

The exotic background was forced upon me accidentally by the fact that during the war I was employed in the Intelligence department, and so visited parts of the world which otherwise I might not have summoned up sufficient resolution to go to.

Note the slight clumsiness, which seems to have inflected everything Maugham ever wrote. Out of this episode, however, came *The Moon and Sixpence*, a rather prettily done fictionalization of that other great refugee from domesticity, Paul Gauguin.

The ludicrous failures of British and American intelligence during the Russian Revolution, retold many times through the biographies of Bruce Lockhart and Sidney Reilly, can be encapsulated in the single fact that in mid-1917 Somerset Maugham was dispatched from the Pacific to Saint Petersburg as chief agent. He had never visited the country before and had only a nodding acquaintance with the language. He made the trip by railway across Siberia, and in the preface to *Ashenden* he wrote about it in this manner:

I felt the lonely steppes and the interminable forests; the flow of the broad Russian rivers and all the toil of the countryside; the ploughing of the land and the reaping of the ripe wheat; the sighing of the wind in the birch trees; the long months of dark winter; and then the dancing of the women in the villages and the youths bathing in shallow streams on summer evenings.

Only the haunting strings of the balalaika, the warm scent of the samovar, and the glimpse of an onion dome would be required to make this the perfect summary of all clichés about Russia. Moreover, the ploughing and reaping bit was presumably “felt” secondhand, since the salient fact of the moment was that there was no bread. Indeed, the Bolshevik slogan “Peace, Bread, and Land” was enough in itself to negate the British aim of staving off revolution while continuing to insist on Russian participation in the war. It did not, to his credit, take Maugham very long to see that his task was an impossible one. He gave an account of a meeting with Kerensky, the preferred British candidate, that confirms the opinion later expressed in my hearing by Isaiah Berlin—that Kerensky was “one of the great wets of history.”

A latent connection has often been supposed to exist between homosexuality and espionage. This seems to “work” in the cases of Anthony Blunt and Guy Burgess, but it emphatically does not explain the (rather superior) performances of Kim Philby and Graham Greene. Elements of secrecy and disguise and “code” may be innate in the gay makeup, but they didn’t confer any advantage on Maugham when he was confronted with Lenin and Trotsky. It was simply a matter of drawing realistic conclusions, which he generally did. In any case, by that time he was leading enough of a double life already. And, as for so many of the homo duplex English literary queens of that epoch, the solution was—abroad.

Maugham’s splendid exile at the Villa Mauresque, on the coast between Nice and Monte Carlo, was the centerpiece of his reputation as well as the answer to his problems. No longer would he have to fear the deportation of Gerald Haxton, who as an American was constantly running that risk in his trawlings through the bars of London. France was Maugham’s birthplace, and the British tax inspectors couldn’t follow him there either. He could shelter his growing literary income and his private life at the same time. The villa had been built by the odious King Leopold II of Belgium, as a place to house his personal confessor. (Not even Anthony Burgess could have made that up.) It had a Moorish style, as the name implies, with some fake-Renaissance appurtenances, but Maugham removed the vulgar cupola, built a library, and began to assemble a collection of Oriental art and classical painting.

Comparable, I suppose, to Harold Acton’s celebrated retreat in Florence, and visited by critics such as Kenneth Clark and Raymond Mortimer, the villa managed to be at once a museum and a discreet place of resort for what was later to be called the Homintern. That aspect to one side, every page of description seems to contain a useful hint for one’s own retirement: the Bernini fountain, for instance, and the specially planted avocado trees, with a skilled resident cook to transform the luscious green fruit into an ice cream flavored with rum. (This contrasts with the rebarbative lobster ice cream served by Ribbentrop at a dinner recorded in “Chips”: The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon.) Quentin Crisp was entranced, and summed up Maugham as one of “the stately homos of England.” Christopher Isherwood and Don Bachardy were slightly aghast when the tireless staff unpacked and laid out all their belongings, including the tubes of lubricant and the powder for warding off crab lice. Edna St. Vincent Millay, making a stop at the villa at a time when Noël Coward and Cecil Beaton were of the party, exclaimed loudly, “ ‘Oh Mr. Maugham, it’s fairy land here!’ ... Noël and Cecil were just a bit taken aback.” This is all quite good fun (Maugham to Emerald Cunard, excusing himself for leaving early: “I have to keep my youth.” Cunard to Maugham: “Then why didn’t you bring him with you?”), but it does begin to pall after a bit, as it must have done in fact.

Things were not all brittle and witty and artistic, in any case. The Villa Mauresque exerted a magnetic force on spongers and toadies and climbers of all sorts, and poor Maugham was always finding his bookshelves and wine cellar and bric-a-brac subjected to shameless pilfering. Gerald Haxton, caught between the twin local lures of the Monte

Carlo casinos and the waterfront full of sailors, became mad, bad, and dangerous to know. Through it all, and even through the Second World War, which saw him expelled from Cap Ferrat, and during a long and more respectably senescent friendship with his contemporary Winston Churchill, Maugham kept to a rigorous regime at his desk, and turned out third-rate prose by the yard, or the furlong. If he put his genius into his life and property rather than his work, it was because the former were apter repositories for such talent as he possessed.

The main contradiction seems to be this: Maugham was gay, all right (he probably exaggerated when he said that he was one-quarter “normal”), but he wasn’t especially pleased about the fact. Pursuing a pet artistic theory of his, that the paintings of El Greco were revelations of the aesthetic of a repressed homosexual, he chose to phrase it like this:

It cannot be denied that the homosexual has a narrower outlook on the world than the normal man. In certain respects the natural responses of the species are denied him. Some at least of the broad and typical emotions he can never experience ... A distinctive trait of the homosexual is a lack of deep seriousness over certain things that normal men take seriously. This ranges from an inane flippancy to a sardonic humour.

Deciding that “the homosexual can never reach the supreme heights of genius,” as Maugham did, may be slightly preferable to the tiresome insistence of some gays that all great artists have been members of the club. However, if one merely keeps the name W. H. Auden in mind while reading the above passage, one sees that Maugham’s difficulty was not just a tinge of self-hatred but a real inability to see literary “genius” when he encountered it. (Though Auden, by the way, rather liked his stuff.) And this was not merely a question of his particular repression or guilt. He just got things wrong. One could hardly classify Kingsley Amis’s *Lucky Jim* as a gay novel, even subliminally, yet when it was published Maugham wrote a review praising Amis for his outright attack on the young barbarians (“they are scum”) who were then threatening English campuses with their beery, plebeian subversiveness. As a satire on the “Angry Young Men” this would have been delicious (and in the long run rather prescient), but it became painfully apparent that Maugham was being entirely and pedantically literal.

See for yourself: Pluck down *The Razor’s Edge* from the shelf. Elliot Templeton, in lieu of characterization, is described as “well-favored, bright, a good dancer, a fair shot, and a fine tennis player.” More effort is expended on describing the rugs and drawings that he owns. The sending of flowers and chocolates is alluded to as if it were a breathless social secret, and repeated in the first few pages. “Gregory Brabazon, notwithstanding his name, was not a romantic creature.” Come again? A girl enters a room during dinner and asks,

“Are we late? ... I’ve brought Larry back. Is there anything for him to eat?”

“I expect so,” smiled Mrs. Bradley. “Ring the bell and tell Eugene to put another place.”

“He opened the door for us. I’ve already told him.”

So that was a waste of dialogue, wasn't it? A little further on we learn of Gray Maturin that "though built on so large a scale he was finely proportioned, and stripped he must have been a fine figure of a man." Presumably this would also be true of him when unstripped.

I deliberately did not look up Edmund Wilson's once celebrated polemic against the terrifying banality of *The Razor's Edge* before revisiting the book myself, but I defy anyone to come to a different conclusion. Even Gore Vidal, himself no stranger to the Mediterranean-villa milieu, was compelled to agree that Maugham's success was, in effect, in writing for people who did not have a clue about English as a medium for either tragedy or comedy. I would add that mass wants class and always has, and that without the snobbery and the knowing references to fine chefs, splendid galleries, and refined houses, the enterprise wouldn't have stood a chance. But the old boy did show generosity and patience, and set up a prize in his name that encouraged many young writers, among them Kingsley Amis. Despite his exile and his increasingly distraught public and private life, Maugham eventually received an honor from the Crown—but it was for "services to literature," rather than for literature itself, and this distinction represents all the difference in the world.

(*The Atlantic*, May 2004)

Evelyn Waugh: The Permanent Adolescent

EVEN AS GEORGE ORWELL was dying, in 1949, he continued to wrestle with the last book review to which the life of the freelance hack had condemned him. Dogged to the final deadline, he also made some more-general notes about that novel's author. The book was *Brideshead Revisited*, and the author was Orwell's exact contemporary, whose centennial is also being observed this year. We now have Orwell's fragmented, unfinished comments on Evelyn Waugh, and they certainly infuse me with a strong wish to have been able to read the completed essay.

Within the last few decades, in countries like Britain or the United States, the literary intelligentsia has grown large enough to constitute a world in itself. One important result of this is that the opinions which a writer feels frightened of expressing are not those which are disapproved of by society as a whole. To a great extent, what is still loosely thought of as heterodoxy has become orthodoxy. It is nonsense to pretend, for instance, that at this date there is something daring and original in proclaiming yourself an anarchist, an atheist, a pacifist, etc. The daring thing, or at any rate the unfashionable thing, is to believe in God or to approve of the capitalist system. In 1895, when Oscar Wilde was jailed, it must have needed very considerable moral courage to defend homosexuality. Today it would need no courage at all: today the equivalent action would be, perhaps, to defend antisemitism. But this example that I have chosen immediately reminds one of something else—namely, that one cannot judge the value of an opinion simply by the amount of courage that is required in holding it.

This manuscript peters out after a few more shrewd paragraphs, and is succeeded by some cryptic notes on *Brideshead*:

Analyse “*Brideshead Revisited*.” (Note faults due to being written in first person.) Studiously detached attitude. Not puritanical. Priests not superhuman ... But. Last scene, where the unconscious man makes the sign of the Cross. Note that after all the veneer is bound to crack sooner or later. One cannot really be Catholic and grown-up.

Conclude. Waugh is about as good a novelist as one can be (i.e. as novelists go today) while holding untenable opinions.

Tantalizing as this may be, in conceding that moral courage may be shown by reactionaries or good prose produced by snobs, it does not make the leap of imagination that is required to state the obvious: that Waugh wrote as brilliantly as he did precisely because he loathed the modern world. Orwell identified “snobbery” and “Catholicism” as Waugh’s “driving forces,” and so they were. But the first of his miniature masterpieces, *Decline and Fall*, was composed before Waugh joined Holy Mother Church. It contains a piece of absolutely hilarious rudeness and bad taste, directed at one of the world’s most innocuous minorities—the Welsh.

“The Welsh character is an interesting study,” said Dr Fagan. “I have often considered writing a little monograph on the subject, but I was afraid it might make me unpopular in the village. The ignorant speak of them as Celts, which is of course wholly erroneous. They are of pure Iberian stock—the aboriginal inhabitants of Europe who survive only in Portugal and the Basque district Celts readily intermarry with their neighbors and absorb them. From the earliest times the Welsh have been looked upon as an unclean people. It is thus that they have preserved their racial integrity. Their sons and daughters rarely mate with humankind except their own blood relations. In Wales there was no need for legislation to prevent the conquering people intermarrying with the conquered ...”

Much of the remainder of Waugh’s iridescent first novel is imbued with the same breezy, heartless spirit, which recurs memorably in *Black Mischief*, *Scoop*, and *The Loved One*. And most of the delicious elements that were his hallmarks are present from the beginning. There is an innocent abroad; one might call him *Candide* if the Voltairean association were not obtuse. There are many ancillary characters who act without conscience and don’t mind admitting it, and who don’t seem to suffer in consequence. (The awful subtexts of *Decline and Fall* are pederasty and prostitution, and I remember being quite astounded when I was first introduced to the novel, at the age of twelve, by a boarding-school master who later had to be hastily taken away.) There is a fine English country house that is threatened with decay or demolition—in this instance the Tudor mansion King’s Thursday, to be ravaged by a Bauhaus barbarian.

That last observation prompts another—namely, Waugh’s familiarity with the outlines of the emerging modernity that he came to detest. Aesthetically he was one of the earliest to register the effect of T. S. Eliot and *The Waste Land*. In *Brideshead Revisited*, Anthony Blanche reads the *Tiresias* section of that poem through a megaphone;

the title of *A Handful of Dust* is annexed directly from one of Eliot's more ominous stanzas (the whole stanza appears on Waugh's title page).

This brings us eventually to the matter of Roman Catholicism. In *Decline and Fall*, Waugh treated all devotional matters as the raw material of farce. But the concept of a capricious cosmos was already jostling in his mind with the notion of original sin. Thus, in that book a little boy named Lord Tangent (the son of Lord and Lady Circumference: Waugh both ridiculed and revered the nomenclature of English nobility) is grazed by a bullet during a sporting event, is reported as having had his foot turn black, and is subsequently said to have suffered first amputation and then death. All this is deadpan, callous humor, most of it offstage, as if Waugh half believed in those Fates that animated Greek drama and did not stop to explain themselves. As his work progresses, however, dreadful outcomes seem to be connected to a warped idea of divine justice. Basil Seal, in *Black Mischief*, doesn't actually know that he is eating his old girlfriend at a cannibal repast, but it's in the ironic nature of things that he should be dining in this way. In *Brideshead*, Sebastian Flyte squanders his beauty and charm on alcohol and indigence, and eventually in masochistic self-sacrifice, because he has been rashly fleeing the vocation for the priesthood that his elder brother would have so humbly welcomed.

Waugh was not a mere propagandist, and we would not still be reading him if he had been. The ends that he reserves for the meek and the worthy and the innocent are condemnations of the worldly and the vain, as surely as in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, but they are also highly diverting for their own sake. William Boot, in *Scoop*, is given a thorough drubbing by reality the moment he risks leaving the shelter of Boot Magna Hall, his bucolic den. Tony Last, in *A Handful of Dust*, is a doomed man once he agrees to give up his country seat of Hetton and embark on a venture of overseas exploration. The element of what we glibly call noir is a fluctuating one: Both Boot and Last (cobbler's names) are treated with extraordinary cruelty by the women they love, but the outcomes are arranged along the spectrum between pity and terror. Waugh's mastery is most often shown by the light flick with which he could switch between the funny and the sinister. And the delicacy of this touch is shown by the breathtaking deftness with which he handled profane subjects. I have already mentioned that the gross pedophilia of *Decline and Fall* is so artfully suggested that an adolescent might read it unawares. And many adult reviewers of *Brideshead* have somehow managed to describe it as a languorous evocation of the "platonic" nature of English undergraduate affection.

But toying with his innocents, and showing how cleverly and suddenly their creator could bring them low, was for Waugh part of a serious mandate. He wanted to bring the Book of Job to life for those who had never read, or who feared, it. And he chose a time—the mid-twentieth century—when the Church he had joined was very plainly marked not just with a nostalgia for the days of Thomas More or even of Thomas Aquinas but by a reactionary modernity of its own. It is for this reason, I propose, that Waugh and Eliot still seem fresh while G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire

Belloc appear quaint and antique. The plain fact is that both felt and transmitted some of the mobilizing energy of fascism.

The tweedy, foggy types who make an affectation of Waugh are generally fondest of his almost camp social conservatism: his commitment to stuffy clubs, “home” rather than “abroad,” old clothes, traditional manners, ear trumpets, rural hierarchy, ancient liturgy, and the rest of it. Their master ministered very exactly to this taste in the undoubted self-parody that adorns *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* and is titled “Portrait of the Artist in Middle Age.”

His strongest tastes were negative. He abhorred plastics, Picasso, sunbathing, and jazz—everything in fact that had happened in his own lifetime. The tiny kindling of charity which came to him through his religion sufficed only to temper his disgust and change it to boredom. There was a phrase in the thirties: “It is later than you think,” which was designed to cause uneasiness. It was never later than Mr. Pinfold thought.

His face eventually grew to fit this mask, but Waugh had been very much “of” the Jazz Age, and brought it hectically to life, most notably in *Vile Bodies* and *Brideshead*. Sexual experiments, fast cars, modern steamships and airplanes—these, plus a touch of experience with modern warfare, gave him an edge that the simple, fusty reactionaries did not possess. Thus he celebrated Mussolini’s conquest of Abyssinia as in part a victory for progress and development, defended Franco’s invasion of Spain as a stand for tradition and property, and, in his travel book *Robbery Under Law*, denounced the Mexico of Cárdenas as an anti-clerical socialist kleptocracy. On some things he was conservative by instinct. (He always abominated, for example, the very idea of the United States of America.) But the dynamic element in modernism was not foreign to him, much as he later liked to pretend otherwise. And he made excellent use of this tension in his writing.

Another tension or contradiction also occurs in both the life and the work. Waugh was a celebrated misanthrope and an obvious misogynist, capable of alarming and hateful bouts of anger and cruelty toward friends, children, and colleagues. When his friend Clarissa Churchill married a divorced man, he wrote to her saying that she had deliberately intensified “the loneliness of Calvary.” During his wartime service—which, it must be said, was often conspicuous for its gallantry—he almost had to be protected from assassination at the hands of the soldiers under his command. Permanently injured by the flagrant adultery of his first wife, and almost certainly a badly repressed homosexual, he made a living example of Cyril Connolly’s “Theory of Permanent Adolescence,” whereby Englishmen of a certain caste are doomed to re-enact their school days. The vices of the boy are notably unappealing in the grown man, and Waugh was frequently upbraided for the apparent contrast between his extreme nastiness and his ostentatious religiosity. To this he famously replied (to Nancy Mitford) that nobody could imagine how horrible he would be if he were not a Catholic. A nice piece of casuistry, but not one that bears much scrutiny. In at least two cases—his support for the Croatian Fascist Party during his wartime stint in the Balkans, and his animosity toward Jews—there was a direct connection between his spleen and his faith. And in

at least two of the novels, *Helena* (which is based on the life of the early Christian empress of that name) and *Brideshead*, the narrative is made ridiculous by a sentimental and credulous approach to miracles or the supernatural. This is what Orwell meant by the incompatibility of faith with maturity.

A further proof of this point, from a somewhat different angle, might be Waugh's lamentable inability to write about sex, along with his insistence on trying to do so. A properly reticent traditionalist should have avoided the topic altogether, or dealt with it by the faintest possible allusion. Waugh once tried to take refuge in a Jamesian hideout, stating rather too finally that "our language took form during the centuries when the subject was not plainly handled with the result that we have no vocabulary for the sexual acts which is not quaintly antiquated, scientific or grossly colloquial." Never mind what Chaucer or Shakespeare or Swift or Burns or Byron might have made of that piece of evasion; the fact is that Waugh knew his readers and also knew that they employed pungent and emphatic and sometimes hilarious words for the obvious. Thus there is no conceivable excuse for passages like this one:

It was no time for the sweets of luxury; they would come, in their season, with the swallow and the lime-flowers. Now on the rough water there was a formality to be observed, no more. It was as though a deed of conveyance of her narrow loins had been drawn and sealed.

Or this one:

The silk rustled again as though falling to the ground. "It's best to make sure, isn't it, darling, before we decide anything? It may just be an idea of yours that you're in love with me. And you see, Paul, I like you so very much, it would be a pity to make a mistake, wouldn't it?"

Or this:

No sign or hint betrayed their distress but when the last wheels rolled away and they mounted to their final privacy, there was a sad gap between them, made by modesty and tenderness, which neither spoke of except in prayer. Later they joined a yacht at Naples and steamed slowly up the coast, putting in at unfrequented harbors. And there, one night in their state room, all at last came right between them and their love was joyfully completed.

The writhe-making aspects of these passages (drawn, respectively, from *Brideshead Revisited*, *Decline and Fall*, and *Men at Arms*) are in bold contrast to the somewhat swaggering and sniggering mentions of surreptitious sex in Waugh's posthumously published *Diaries*. Evidently, he distrusted either his readers or himself, or perhaps both, when it came to the fictional crux. I admit that I found the second passage powerfully erotic when I first read it—but I was then under monastic tutelage and worse, and was, as I have said, only twelve. It's somewhat confirming to read of Waugh's rather bizarre second marriage, to an odd woman who bore him numerous children with no great evidence of relish on her part or pride on his—as if, indeed, offspring were to be regarded as random gifts, wanted or unwanted, from the divine. (By what is perhaps an unconscious inversion of the same dispensation, Waugh makes most of

his protagonists into orphans or half orphans, missing at least one parent.) “Family values,” too tedious for straight depiction, nonetheless had to be upheld for reasons of propriety.

There is evidence that he knew not to push this kind of religiosity too far. In a conversation between Waugh and Graham Greene, recorded by Christopher Sykes, Greene described the plot of his then impending novel *The Quiet American*, and observed that it would be “a relief not to write about God for a change.” To which Waugh rejoined, “Oh, I wouldn’t drop God if I were you. Not at this stage anyway. It would be like P. G. Wodehouse dropping Jeeves halfway through the Wooster series.”

It is notable, for example, that none of Waugh’s fictional Catholic clergy are morally impressive. (The “priests,” as Orwell pointed out, are “not superhuman.”) They tend to be simple-minded or (in the case of *Men at Arms*) resentful Irishmen. In *Vile Bodies* there is a caricature of a scheming, socially smooth Jesuit, but he is given the distinctly un-Romish name of Father Rothschild. We meet him carrying a suitcase that contains a false beard and “six important new books in six languages,” and we learn that he has the precious gift of recalling “everything that could possibly be learned about everyone who could possibly be of any importance.” To this incarnation of venality is given an astonishingly solemn short speech as the frivolity of the 1930s dies away, and the jazz band starts to pack up, and the sounds of war begin to be heard.

I know very few young people, but it seems to me that they are all possessed with an almost fatal hunger for permanence ... We long for peace, and fill our newspapers with conferences about disarmament and arbitration, but there is a radical instability in our whole world-order, and soon we shall all be walking into the jaws of destruction again, protesting our pacific intentions.

For the generation that was young in the 1920s and 1930s, and for whom Waugh was in some ways the blithe spirit, the unresolved question was this: Were they living in a postwar world or a pre-war one? The suppressed hysteria of this time—the echo of the preceding bloodshed and the premonition of more impending—was never captured better, except perhaps by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

If one adopts Graham Greene’s distinction between “novels” and “entertainments” in his own fiction, and applies it experimentally to Waugh, then the two world wars become the crucial points of reference. *Brideshead* was published toward the end of the Second World War, but it evokes almost to perfection the atmosphere of Oxford just after the First World War, populated by young men who are acutely conscious of having barely missed the great test of combat. This type or “set”—Paul Pennyfeather, Adam Fenwick-Symes, Ambrose Silk, Basil Seal—provides the figures of the “entertainments.” Charles Ryder, in *Brideshead*, is no longer young and epicene when he becomes a junior officer and has to embrace responsibility. *Put Out More Flags* concludes with many callow and superficial former partygoers behaving better than might have been expected of them (if only to point up a contrast with W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, “Parsnip and Pimpernell,” who committed what was to Waugh a double offense by avoiding military service and emigrating to America). Dennis Barlow, the

cynical protagonist of *The Loved One*, has learned the craft of poetry in the British Army from 1939 to 1945. (I should add that Waugh's Catholicism, however lightly or invisibly worn, was obviously a stylistic and aesthetic advantage in that novel. It enabled him to confront the sheer wasteland of a Hollywood funeral industry that idiotically, hedonistically, denied death.)

Thus, the summa of Waugh's effort is probably rightly held to be the wartime trilogy that he began to compose in 1951 and completed a decade later. Collectively titled *Sword of Honour*, this consists of *Men at Arms*, *Officers and Gentlemen*, and *Unconditional Surrender* or (in the U.S. edition) *The End of the Battle*. Unlike many or most of Waugh's "entertainments" (to which I would add some of the imperishable "original sin" short stories, including "Mr. Loveday's Little Outing"), this trilogy cannot be read at a sitting. Nor do very many of its passages commit themselves virtually to memory, like the descriptions of William Boot's telegraphese in *Scoop*, or the Welsh silver band in *Decline and Fall*. I postponed re-reading it with definite anticipation, which wasn't enough by itself to account for my disappointment.

Of course there is an ancient English Catholic family, with an endangered English country house. The names—Crouchback for the family and Broome for the house—are well up to Waugh's standard. War is coming, and the young Crouchback hears the call of the bugle. But—and this makes him nearly unique in modern English writing—he is not really convinced of the justice of his country's cause. Britain is potentially allied with communism against not just Nazism but Christendom. Guy Crouchback, we learn, is quite reconciled to fascism in Italy, and indifferent to the fate of Czechoslovakia. He is only momentarily cheered by the news of the Nazi-Soviet pact: "The enemy at last was plain in view, huge and hateful, all disguise cast off. It was the Modern Age in arms. Whatever the outcome there was a place for him in that battle."

With these divided loyalties he prays at the shrine of a Crusader knight and sets off to enlist. ("Sometimes he imagined himself serving the last Mass for the last Pope in a catacomb at the end of the world.") Yet, starting out in well-trodden territory, we find ourselves kept within its bounds. The image of the desolate shrine is from the closing pages of *Brideshead*. Crouchback's disastrous choice of a wife, and her subsequent desertion of him, are very like Waugh's own experience—and reminiscent of the agony faced by Tony Last in *A Handful of Dust*. Arthur Box-Bender's fatuous complacency about the Nazis is lifted straight from Rex Mottram's in *Brideshead* ("The Germans are short of almost every industrial essential. As soon as they realize that Mr. Hitler's bluff has been called, we shan't hear much more of Mr. Hitler"), and in both cases the bluster is put into the mouth of a pro-Churchill Tory politician. Having joined his regiment, Guy begins to experience "something he had missed in boyhood, a happy adolescence," which is almost precisely what Charles Ryder says of his affair with Sebastian Flyte. Guy's fellow officer Sarum-Smith makes exactly the calculation about wartime service—that it will do him good when the time comes to return to life in business—that Hooper announces in *Brideshead*. Guy compares his love for and disillusionment with the army to a marriage, exactly as Ryder does. And this is all in

the first eighty pages or so of *Men at Arms*. In most of the instances I have cited, the preceding books phrased it better.

In *Brideshead*, Ryder reflects,

Here my last love died ... as I lay in that dark hour, I was aghast to realize that something within me, long sickening, had quietly died, and felt as a husband might feel, who, in the fourth year of his marriage, suddenly knew that he had no longer any desire, or tenderness, or esteem, for a once-beloved wife; no pleasure in her company, no wish to please, no curiosity about anything she might ever do or say or think; no hope of setting things right, no self-reproach for the disaster. I knew it all, the whole drab compass of marital disillusion; we had been through it together, the army and I, from the first importunate courtship until now, when nothing remained to us except the chill bonds of law and duty and custom.

In *Sword of Honour*, Crouchback broods,

Those days of lameness, he realized much later, were his honeymoon, the full consummation of his love of the Royal Corps of Halberdiers. After them came domestic routine, much loyalty and affection, many good things shared, but intervening and overlaying them all the multitudinous, sad little discoveries of marriage, familiarity, annoyance, imperfections noted, discord. Meanwhile it was sweet to wake and to lie on in bed; the spirit of the Corps lay on beside him: to ring the bell; it was in the service of his unseen bride.

The first of the dawn thoughts of these two English soldiers is latently tragic, whereas the second is mostly banal (and gives rise to the suspicion that Waugh did not truly recall the first even while he was carpentering the second).

The cause of this depression in the narrator, and perhaps of the routine and repetition in the author's prose, is disclosed quite early on. Guy sits in a warm officers' mess, far, "immeasurably far, from the frontier of Christendom where the great battle had been fought and lost; from those secret forests where the trains were, even then, while the Halberdiers and their guests sat bemused by wine and harmony, rolling east and west with their doomed loads." Waugh's meaning soon becomes clear: "England had declared war to defend the independence of Poland. Now that country had quite disappeared and the two strongest states in the world guaranteed her extinction." This is Waugh the Catholic pessimist as well as (not quite the same thing) Waugh the Catholic reactionary. Note also that the existence of the United States as a great power is not acknowledged even latently. Indeed, almost the only appearance made by America in this wartime trilogy is in the absurd and irritating person of "The Loot"—an opprobrious nickname for an affected and obsequious and somewhat shady American officer named Lieutenant Padfield—and of three disgusting Stateside reporters, Scab Dunz, Bum Schlum, and Joe Mulligan. The depiction of this vile trio is not a patch on the portrait of revolting journalists that appears in *Scoop*. And one might sadly observe that here Waugh's high facility for laughable yet plausible names seems to have deserted him in favor of rank crudity.

On re-reading, it also struck me as unwise for Waugh to include some of the same people and places and names—Julia Stitch, Marchmain House, the Daily Beast—that featured in his earlier, more fanciful works. *Sword of Honour* follows “real” historical events, from however idiosyncratic a perspective, and it is distracting to see stage characters winking from behind such imposing scenery. Indeed, it undermines the chief virtue of the trilogy, which is its rigorous portrayal of the splendors and miseries of the great calling of arms. Waugh’s account of the battle for Crete, with its stark and humiliating depiction of the British army in shabby, demoralized, cowardly retreat, is one of the great passages of wartime prose. This, one says to oneself, is what defeat and shame must really have felt like. Many whiskered veterans have told me that the following is exactly how the return to barracks and the report to duty appeared to them:

Guy saluted, turned about and departed only very slightly disconcerted. This was the classic pattern of army life as he had learned it, the vacuum, the spasm, the precipitation, and with it all the peculiar, impersonal, barely human geniality.

Nor did Waugh skimp on the farcical and capricious elements that are inseparable from warfare. Sometimes the humor is cruel; people die at random and in pointless ways. The figure of Guy’s brother officer Apthorpe, at once pompous and pitiable, is beautifully drawn, even if it follows the outline of Captain Grimes (in *Decline and Fall*) a little too faithfully. Then there are serio-comic set pieces. At a critical moment one of Guy’s soldiers asks for permission to go on leave, so that he can take part in a competition.

“Competition for what, Shanks?”

“The slow valse, sir. We’ve practiced together three years now. We won at Salford last year. We’ll win at Blackpool, sir, I know we will. And I’ll be back in the two days, honest, sir.”

“Shanks, do you realize that France has fallen? That there is every likelihood of the invasion of England? That the whole railway system of the country is disorganized for the Dunkirk men? That our brigade is on two hours’ notice for active service? Do you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then how can you come to me with this absurd application?”

“But, sir, we’ve been practicing three years. We got a first at Salford last year. I can’t give up now, sir.”

“Request dismissed, sergeant-major.”

In accordance with custom (sergeant-major) Rawkes had been waiting within view in case the applicant for a private interview attempted personal violence on his officer ... And Guy remained to wonder: was this the already-advertised spirit of Dunkirk? He rather thought it was.

In the “entertainments,” however often one reads them, there is always a detail that leaps out as if for the first time. (In *Decline and Fall* applicants to an agency that supplies prep-school teachers are instructed to furnish a photograph “if considered

advisable.” In *Scoop*, Lord Copper is searching for an example of the lowliest among his newspaper’s staff, and after a pause announces that he is “accessible to the humblest ... book reviewer.”) With *Sword of Honour*, despite its flashes (“Guy felt no resentment; he was a good loser—at any rate an experienced one”), there are slower buildups, larger tracts, and, it must be said, many *longueurs*. Graham Greene once wrote that the opening pages of *Brideshead* seem lengthy in the memory but are brilliantly brief when, so to speak, revisited. The reverse is the case here, and that is because the state of Guy Crouchback’s soul is insufficiently interesting to merit the introspection it receives. We may assume that he is Waugh (he is given the same day, month, and year of birth), and his sense of despair really does not take very long to elaborate. He believes that the Second World War has made his country into a corrupt, collectivized state at home and an accomplice in Bolshevism and atheism abroad. For him there has been no “Finest Hour.” The very title of the trilogy is sarcastic: The only sword in the story (apart from the ancient Crusader blade next to which Guy prays) is the one made on the orders of King George VI, to be presented to Stalin in recognition of the gallantry of Soviet resistance. This, and what it represents, is to Guy a sword of dishonor. He runs into Box-Bender and is told,

“Everything is going merrily on the eastern front.”

“Merrily?”

“Wait for the nine o’clock news. You’ll hear something then. Uncle Joe’s fairly got them on the run. I shouldn’t much care to be one of his prisoners.”

Here Waugh condenses a vast contempt into a small space. But his revenge on Box-Bender (whose prisoner-of-war son elects to become a Catholic monk) seems all the pettier for that. The conversion to Rome of Guy’s once and future wife, Virginia, is likewise mawkish and artificial, and the ludicrous character of his uncle Peregrine, obsessed with family genealogy and religious arcana, is a composite of many previous figures of fun. Only in the clever, lethal way in which he caricatured certain Anthony Blunt-like persons in the Foreign Office and the intelligence services did Waugh really succeed in landing a blow on the forces he hated.

In his private journal for February of 1944 Waugh wrote,

The battle at Nettuno looks unpromising. It is hard to be fighting against Rome. We bombed Castel Gandolfo. The Russians now propose a partition of East Prussia. It is a fact that the Germans now represent Europe against the world. [*Italics added*]

The long and didactic closing stages of *Sword of Honour* are amazingly blatant in the utterance they give to this rather unutterable thought. Guy Crouchback regards the Yugoslav partisans as mere ciphers for Stalin, sympathizes with the local Fascists, and admires the discipline of the German occupiers. We know from many published memoirs that Waugh himself was eventually removed from this theater of operations for precisely that sort of insubordination. We also know that his first writerly trip after the German surrender was to observe the Nuremberg trials in 1946. He left the city after only two days, “finding the reality tedious,” in the words of his biographer Selina Hastings. So it is slightly unsettling to find Guy Crouchback performing an

act of mercy and piety, which his creator never even attempted. In a protracted and sentimental episode at the close of *Sword of Honour* he devotes himself to the rescue of a group of displaced Jews, and persists in this quixotic policy despite every variety of British official discouragement. The Jews themselves are never represented except as extras—as Guy’s rather bedraggled objects of charity. There isn’t any color or life or dignity to them. Is it then mistaken for one to suggest that they are included as a makeweight, or as a clumsy atonement many years later for Waugh’s actual views at the time? Whatever may be the case, the passage is one of the most bogus and leaden things he ever wrote, fully materializing Orwell’s earlier misgivings. And in this instance it is the suspect politics that directly occasion and condition the bad writing—which is to say, they negate the whole genius of Waugh in the first place.

Many literary careers are doomed to go on slightly longer than they should, and to outlive the author’s original engrossing talent. Waugh himself lived to lament the Second Vatican Council and to deplore the abolition of the Latin Mass—which meant that he became not more Catholic than the Pope but more curmudgeonly than his own confessors and more conservative than the Church itself. This has the accidentally beautiful result of making *Sword of Honour* into a literary memorial not just for a lost world but for a lost faith. In Catholic doctrine one is supposed to hate the sin and love the sinner. This can be a distinction without a difference if the “sin” is to be something (a Jew, a homosexual, even a divorcée) rather than to do something. Non-Christian charity requires, however, that one forgive Waugh precisely because it was his innate—as well as his adopted—vices that made him a king of comedy and of tragedy for almost three decades.

(*The Atlantic*, May 2003)

P. G. Wodehouse: The Honorable Schoolboy

Review of *Wodehouse: A Life*, by Robert McCrum.

IDARESAY THAT ONE CAN CLAIM, without running overmuch risk of contradiction, to have been reading Frederick Taylor’s recent history of the obliteration of Dresden with no intention of looking for laughs. And yet when I reached page 46, I found myself open-mouthed with joy, and eager to share my mirth. Taylor carefully sets the scene of prewar Nazi Saxony, and devotes several paragraphs to the unpleasing figure of Martin Mutschmann, the party gauleiter. From these passages I learned that Herr Mutschmann had left school at fourteen and had taken “various management positions in lace and underwear companies.” I at once laid down the book and wondered whom I should call or e-mail with this precious page reference.

Some of you who are still with me will already have caught my drift. In the climactic scene of *The Code of the Woosters*, Bertie confronts Sir Roderick Spode, the sinister bully who is “founder and head of the Saviours of Britain, a Fascist organization better known as the Black Shorts.” He reduces Spode to a jelly by disclosing that he knows the

would-be dictator's ghastly secret—his ownership of Eulalie Soeurs, a female underwear consortium. Devotees of this incandescently funny novel may quarrel with my brief summary here. Bertie needs to fail hilariously at least once, and to enlist the help of the invaluable Jeeves before he can bring off the coup. However, I can confidently expect some fellow sufferers to write in, and to thank me in broken tones for this confirming serendipity.

Indeed, if anything could ever put one off being a Wodehouse fan, it would be the somewhat cultish element among his admirers and biographers. Such people have a tendency to allude to him as "The Master." They publish monographs about the exact geographical location of Blandings Castle, or the Drones Club. They hold dinners at which breadstuffs are thrown. Their English branch publishes the quarterly *Wooster Sauce*, and their American branch publishes the quarterly *Plum Lines*: two painfully unfunny titles. They materialize, in other words, Evelyn Waugh's view that Wodehouse created a delightful, self-contained world of his own. The only modern comparison I can think of is to the sterner "Irregulars" who have their shrine at 221b Baker Street.

Robert McCrum is by no means immune from the lure of all this, but his biography has a tendency to let in daylight upon the magic. Wodehouse was a rather beefy, hearty chap, with a lifelong interest in the sporting subculture of the English boarding school and a highly developed instinct for the main chance. He had no sex life or love life worth recording, and seemed to reserve his affections primarily for animals. He was so self-absorbed that he was duped into collaboration with the Nazis and had to plead the "bloody fool" defense. His subsequently wrecked reputation was redeemed only by an almost manic focus on work, and by an insistence on reproducing a lost and dreamy world of English innocence.

Well, to take these points in reverse order, there's no mystery about the continuing fascination of Blandings Castle and the universe of Jeeves, or their appeal for those who have never met a butler or received an invitation to an English country house. George Orwell pointed out long ago, in his penetrating essay on "Boys' Weeklies," that the children of the back streets would spend their scant pocket money in order to immerse themselves in stories about upper-crust life in ivy-covered "public" schools. And why should this astonish us, when we see today's American youngsters stating with confidence which "house" at Hogwarts School they would join if they only could? Fantasy worlds are so-called for good reason, and richly and rightly rewarded is the author who can truly create one.

As for the bizarre moment when the creator of Jeeves and Ukridge and Psmith appeared on Nazi radio after being trapped by the fall of France, McCrum is only the latest of many biographers to acquit his subject on the main charge. Here is one of the opening paragraphs of Wodehouse's first chat, broadcast on June 28, 1941:

Young men, starting out in life, have often asked me, "How can I become an Internee?" Well, there are several methods. My own was to buy a villa in Le Touquet on the coast of France and stay there till the Germans came along. This is probably the best and simplest system. You buy the villa and the Germans do the rest.

The genius of this, in my opinion, lies not merely in its deadpan intonation but in its essential truth. (There must have been, one likes to think, an editor in Berlin who vetted the transcript and said to himself, “That seems harmless enough.”) Wodehouse and his wife, Ethel, had in fact followed exactly that “system,” and had been too innocent and unworldly to try to run away until it was too late. They had also been unwilling to put their Pekingese in quarantine—which goes to show how far the stereotype of the English dog lover can be pushed. Fat-headed as he was for accepting the Germans’ invitation in the first place, Wodehouse was not actually working for Joseph Goebbels and his Ministry of Propaganda. He was, as McCrum shows, being used by the more civilized elements in the German Foreign Office, who disliked Goebbels. Unlikely as it is that he would have appreciated the difference, Wodehouse responded to the baited invitation with the genial attitude of one who says “When in Rome,” or “One must be civil.” It’s quite impossible that the man who had invented Sir Roderick Spode in 1938 was prey to any covert sympathy for fascism.

Prior to this moment of hideous embarrassment, Wodehouse had manifested the same almost childlike stoicism when deported from France and interned in a disused lunatic asylum in the town of Tost, Poland. As he was later to put it, “Tost is no beauty spot. It lies in the heart of sugar-beet country.... There is a flat dullness about the countryside which has led many a visitor to say, ‘If this is Upper Silesia, what must Lower Silesia be like?’ ”

McCrum and his fellow Wodehousian Anthony Lane, of the *New Yorker*, have both fractionally raised their eyebrows at this levity, given that Silesia was the site of Auschwitz. (McCrum also falls into error when he says that “by association” Wodehouse had put himself into “the company of genuine traitors like William Joyce.” Joyce—“Lord Haw Haw”—may have been a genuine fascist, but he was a U.S. citizen who owed no allegiance to the British crown. The British government’s decision to execute him after the war was a judicial scandal.) There is absolutely no reason to think that Wodehouse knew what was afoot in the East, and in any case the Final Solution did not begin until after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, which did not commence until after Wodehouse had done to Tost what Bertie did to Totleigh Towers: shaken its dust from his feet.

Innumerable English reminiscences of prison-camp life during the Second World War are devoted to making one point: It was all much easier to bear if you had the experience of an English boarding school under your belt. Nicknames for obnoxious guards, complaints about the food, jokes based on the absence of females, the lampooning of stupid routines—it was an invitation to re-create the lost world of boyhood, and Wodehouse actually finished *Money in the Bank*, to be ranked among his more amusing novels, while in the self-evidently absurd position of an internee. One might also add that during the process of deportation, a German soldier came up to shake his hand and to say “Thank you for Jeeves.” This helped confirm Wodehouse in his view that people were all basically good chaps underneath, when you got to know them.

There can be little doubt that Wodehouse was a very advanced case of arrested development. Born into a family of colonial merchants and civil servants, he was abandoned by his parents for long stretches and learned to find and maintain his equilibrium in (aha!) the servants' quarters and (aha! again) the comradeship of all-male boarding schools. In the comparable cases of Kipling and Saki this entailed the early realization that childhood was a place of terror, not innocence. In the case of Pelham Grenville Wodehouse (he disliked both his given names and rather grudgingly accepted the nickname "Plum" that resulted), the resolution was more like that of young Matzerath in *The Tin Drum*: He would simply stop growing up. McCrum takes too little account of the mumps that struck Wodehouse in adolescence. It seems fairly obvious that this early affliction had a gelding effect on him, stunting his libido and making him noticeable, even to his least curious friends, as a large, pink, plump, hairless, and somewhat neuter person for the rest of his life. This was the high price he paid for the protective Eden that he never escaped.

Two other boyhood deprivations might have become a source of resentment. Wodehouse, who had always assumed that he would "go up" to Oxford University, was abruptly told by his parents that the family funds would not run to it. He was told, further, that he would have to work in a menial position in the London branch of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank. Though not as demeaning as debtors' prison or an apprenticeship in a blacking factory, this combination of disappointment and tedium might have shriveled a lesser soul. Again, McCrum only skates over the evidence that Wodehouse took a keen interest in the street-corner speakers of the early British socialist movement. A number of his mature stories—most notably "Archibald and the Masses"—demonstrate that he picked up more than a passing knowledge of the leftist vernacular. In the earlier tales, most obviously Psmith in the City, we learn that young Psmith became a devotee of Marxist theory when he was taken away from Eton and robbed of the chance to play cricket for the most snobbish school team in the country. Writing about Henry Hyndman, the founder of the Social Democratic Federation and a contemporary of Karl Marx, Barbara Tuchman said that he "adopted socialism out of spite against the world because he was not included in the Cambridge eleven." Benny Green, an earlier Wodehouse biographer, encapsulates Psmith's ethos as "an irrefutable argument that most work is a distasteful necessity which nobody in his right mind would ever dream of performing unless he needed the money desperately." Actually, this is hardly less true of many of the later stories, wherein a shortage of ready money comes second only to blighted romance as an obstacle to felicity.

McCrum tends to stress Wodehouse's later conservatism—his aversion to the Hollywood Communists in the Screenwriters Guild, for example, and his long battle with the tax authorities in England and America. Some of the more Marxist Wodehousians, such as Alexander Cockburn and Francis Wheen, conversely emphasize the Spode satire, or the salient point that the upper classes in Wodehouse's world are helplessly dependent on their man-servants and pig keepers. The honors here can be divided more or less equally. What Wodehouse did discover, though, was that once he had cast off

the shackles of the proletarian condition and become self-employed, the long day was never done. This book depicts a man who eventually managed to live in grand and comfortable circumstances, but who never for a single moment forgot that he had an infinitely demanding and ruthless taskmaster—himself. Class be damned; but he was a worker all right. His chief skill lay in making the product of his labor look easy.

He toiled in three demanding vineyards: musical comedy, screenwriting, and fiction. And he would seem to have made the decision, quite early in life, to become an American. The two determinations were obviously related, because in the early decades of the twentieth century it was evident to any aspiring Brit that New York was (a) where the action was and (b) where the money was. Still, it comes as a slight surprise to find him writing, “in a perfect agony of boredom” with London in the 1920s, that “all I want to do is get back and hear the American language again.” This surprise, however, is soon overtaken by the realization that American idioms, especially the idioms of the Prohibition era—“rannygazoo,” “horn-swoggle,” “put on the dog,” “bum’s rush,” “dude”—pervade the speech of his characters. Indeed, it was as an American, or at any rate as a writer with a large American audience, that he was thought useful by the Germans during the long period of U.S. neutrality. However much people like to yoke him with the phrase “quintessentially English,” it was on American soil that he did much if not most of his best work. It’s nice to remember that at his formative Dulwich School he was a near contemporary of Raymond Chandler’s.

In Hollywood, where he didn’t do much memorable work but did make a considerable amount of money, he helped found the Hollywood Cricket Club, in 1931. Its members included Boris Karloff, Errol Flynn, and David Niven (who appears in the movie version of *Thank You, Jeeves*). To this we are indebted, clearly, for the marvelous opening scene of Evelyn Waugh’s *The Loved One*.

Jazz Age Wodehouse, as caught by McCrum, is out on Long Island with the Scott Fitzgeralds, staying at the Algonquin, sweeping up Broadway in triumph with Jerome Kern and Cole Porter, writing musical parts for William Randolph Hearst’s future sweetie Marion Davies, hobnobbing with Flo Ziegfeld, and getting hot reviews from George S. Kaufman and Dorothy Parker. Frank Crowninshield, of *Vanity Fair*, paid him top dollar. But all the time, in this world saturated with money and glamour and sex, he remained, in McCrum’s phrase, “the laureate of repression.” And he was, when he got home to his desk, slowly evolving the primal innocence of Lord Emsworth and Bertie Wooster—an attainment that would bring him fame far beyond the Great White Way.

Attempting to explain this dissonance between the knowing and the guileless, and between the cynical world of gay-dominated musical comedy and the blameless universe of Bertie and the Earl, I once proposed that Wodehouse must have seen or read *The Importance of Being Earnest* and somehow sublimated it. The theory is pathetically simple once you start to test it: Oscar Wilde’s play opens with some witty backchat between an idle young bachelor and his butler, proceeds to introduce a terrifying aunt in the shape of Lady Bracknell, and carries on with two intertwined and frivolous

engagements, which are resolved in a country house with the help of a silly rural clergyman. With Wodehouse as with Wilde, nobody has any father or mother, only aunts and uncles. (I can go on about this at length if challenged, mentioning the dates when Wodehouse began going to the theater and not omitting the fact that his father was named Ernest.) McCrum even makes a bow in my direction, asserting that although Wodehouse undoubtedly knew of Reginald Bunthorne, the “fleshy poet” satirized by Gilbert and Sullivan in *Patience*, he never included any Wildeisms in his widely scattered literary allusions.

Nor did he—by allusion, at any rate. But I’ve recently been unhorsed by Mark Grueter, a brilliant graduate student of mine, who came across the following in the story “Pigs Have Wings.” Set in Blandings Castle, as the title implies, it features the scapegrace Galahad Threepwood (“Gally”) and the mettlesome American girl Penny Donaldson. The ambition of this dangerous young woman is to keep an appointment with her unsuitable suitor, Jerry Vail, in London. Lord Emsworth’s forbidding sister Lady Constance, warns Galahad, will not hear of this.

“The expedition arrives in London tomorrow afternoon, so tomorrow night I shall be dining with my Jerry.”

Gally gazed at her in amazement. Her childish optimism gave him a pang.

“With Connie keeping her fishy eye on you? Not a hope.”

“Oh yes, because there’s an old friend of Father’s in London, and Father would never forgive me if I didn’t take this opportunity of slapping her on the back and saying hello. So I shall dine with her.”

“And she will bring your young man along?”

“Well, between us girls, Gally, she doesn’t really exist. I’m like the poet in Shakespeare, I’m giving to airy nothing a local habitation and a name. Did you ever see *The Importance of Being Earnest*?”

“Don’t wander from the point.”

“I’m not wandering from the point. Do you remember Bunbury, the friend the hero invented? This is his mother, Mrs. Bunbury. You can always arrange these things with a little tact.”

I devoutly wish, but not for the sake of my theory, that I had never had to read this passage. It does prove, after all, my original point that Wodehouse must have read or seen the play. But it makes the reference in such clunking, leaden tones that one would prefer to have been kept guessing. Most of Wodehouse’s beautifully timed literary nudges do not give chapter and verse. (And Algernon as “the hero”?) So I sadly propose that we have here a fusion of the workaholic and the self-conscious: a grisly combination that doesn’t recur until the groan-making moment, in *Aunts Aren’t Gentlemen* (1974), when Bertie Wooster goes out for a stroll and runs into an anti-war demonstration. (That’s what I mean by letting in daylight upon magic.)

I had once thought, rather simple-mindedly, that Wodehouse’s downplaying of Wilde might have to do with a revulsion from homosexuality. And his few references to the subject in his nonfictional life—he called it “homosexualism”—are generally mildly

disobliging. But I learned from McCrum that in the interwar years he used to thoroughly enjoy staying with a militantly gay cousin, usefully named Charles Le Strange, who owned an eccentric but well-appointed country house in East Anglia. The most Wodehouse could be induced to say of this relative was that he was “a weird bird.” Elements of his sojourns at Hunstanton Hall were pressed into service for the innumerable country-house episodes that, Wodehouse later admitted, he relied on so greatly because any scene set under such a roof seemed somehow credible.

His staunchest admirer would be hard put to deny that Wodehouse wrote too much, but that’s partly because he lived so long. And a biographer can’t decently quarrel with that, even though the declining years offer less and less by way of incident and amusement, and less still by way of humorous genius. McCrum is one of those who esteem the “Uncle Fred” stories, which detail the wry adventures of Lord Ickenham. One can’t quite allow this. The appeal is simply too broad; too general. If a volume of collected Wodehouse could be assembled, and could include no more than two full-length novels (The Code of the Woosters and Right Ho, Jeeves, the latter containing Gussie Fink-Nottle’s prize-giving at Market Snodsbury Grammar School); perhaps a dozen of the more finished Jeeves and Bertie short stories (to include “The Great Sermon Handicap,” “Jeeves and the Old School Chum,” and “Jeeves and the Song of Songs”); and a selection of the Mulliner tales (both stories about the cat named Webster, the “Buck-U-Uppo” reminiscences, and the accounts of Archibald and Sacheverell), one would have a real corker that could never, ever die. As it is, one so often bumps into lost souls who claim to have “tried” Wodehouse and not got the joke. These are the unfortunates who in early and impressionable youth were handed a duff anthology by a well-meaning but mirthless aunt (or, admittedly, uncle).

Wodehouse never really went back to England after the Second World War; he had been semi-officially “cleared” of any charge of treason or collaboration, but the authorities, in a nasty bit of petty sadism, did not actually tell him they had in fact concluded that the evidence was insufficient. So he continued to churn out Edwardian-era plots from a home on Long Island, and to help set up the revoltingly named “Bide-A-Wee” home for stray and abandoned pets. This slushiness, like his sporadic interest in spiritualism and the occult, is of exactly the sort that he was best at lampooning—most especially in the Princess Diana-like person of Madeleine Bassett, a ghastly girl who thinks that the stars are God’s daisy-chain. (“All rot, of course,” Bertie says of this. “They’re nothing of the sort.”) But it may have come in useful in his frequent descriptions of an almost ectoplasmic Jeeves, as he “shimmered” into a room, or sometimes “filtered” or “floated” out.

Simile and metaphor provide so much of the energy of Wodehouse’s narration: “He writhed like an electric fan”; “He wilted like a salted snail”; “Ice formed on the butler’s upper slopes”; “There came a sound like that of Mr. G. K. Chesterton falling onto a sheet of tin”; “He looked like a sheep with a secret sorrow”; “A lifetime of lunches had caused his chest to slip down to the mezzanine floor”; “Aunt calling to aunt, like mastodons bellowing across the primeval swamp.” I myself jumped like a pea on a hot

shovel only twice during the reading of this biography: first when I read of Wodehouse's referring to his youthful case of "clap," and second when, in his letters from prison, he twice employed the word "toilet" for "lavatory." It's important that his votaries be able to think of him as virtually disembodied. In a great and noble defense of Wodehouse against the wartime calumny that was spread about him, Orwell observed that the complete omission of the sex joke was an astonishing sacrifice for a comic writer to make. But for Wodehouse it seems to have been no sacrifice at all. His marriage to Ethel, though it led to a great stepfatherly love for her daughter, was a business arrangement, with pets—preferably Pekes—standing in for offspring. The nearest approach to even an innuendo comes in *Thank You, Jeeves*, when Bertie finds his former fiancée, the American Pauline Stoker, in his bed, wearing his "heliotrope pajamas with the old gold stripe." He phrases it thus: "The attitude of fellows toward finding girls in their bedroom shortly after midnight varies. Some like it. Some don't. I didn't."

One gasps at Wodehouse for going even as far as that. And given that he mentioned his "clap" only to his much more seasoned friend Guy Bolton, and late in life too, I prefer to believe that he was just trying to keep up, to appear to be one of the boys. He never found this easy, however. One of his editors, Christopher Maclehose, told me that he had once been to visit "Plum" on Long Island, and had found him shyly reading a copy of Alec Waugh's novel *A Spy in the Family*. This little effort was an extremely mild essay in erotic comedy, but Wodehouse found it profoundly shocking and asked Maclehose if everything in England had become so filthy in his absence. If not disgruntled, as Bertie Wooster once put it in another connection, he wasn't exactly grunted either. But this is just as one might have hoped it to be.

His admirers will desert P. G. Wodehouse for his archaic Upstairs Downstairs settings on the same day that people discard Oscar Wilde for being too fond of the drawing room or discover Charles Dickens to be anachronistic for writing about stagecoaches in an age of steam. His attention to language, his near faultless ability to come up with names that are at once ludicrous and credible, and the intricacy of his plotting are imperishable. Unlike Wilde, though, he put his genius into his work, not his life.

(*The Atlantic*, November 2004)

Anthony Powell: An Omnivorous Curiosity

Review of *To Keep the Ball Rolling: The Memoirs of Anthony Powell*.

TO GET ONE QUESTION out of the way before we begin:

At one of these public interrogations (I am not sure which college) a professor prefixed a question by saying—rather archly—that he was uncertain how to pronounce my name. As an inspiration of the moment I replied that like the Boston family of Lowell I rhymed it with Noël rather than towel.

Here Anthony Powell was describing an incident on his tour of New England in the early 1960s, and he gave some tincture of both period and place. In Boston,

The restaurant of our hotel ... was called The Hungry Pilgrim. Outside stood an exemplar of esurient puritanism dressed in a black-and-white Cromwellian costume with hair in a pigtail, which was a shade anachronistic and had not yet become at all chic for men. From time to time, looking as if he had just landed from The Mayflower and was in urgent need of a square meal, this gaunt figure would ring a bell. In general, however, Boston, a city of considerable charm, suggests a date later than the 17th century ... Boston does not disappoint. Even on the briefest visit one can detect layer upon layer of the Bostonianism celebrated in such a long American literary tradition. When I was there in 1961 Little, Brown's, with much other entertaining, gave me luncheon at that haunt of ancient peace, shrine of Boston brahminism, the Somerset Club. The party included Edwin O'Connor, an American novelist I had already come across in England.

The Somerset Club is deservedly famous. I doubt if any club in London could equal—certainly none surpass—the inspissated and enveloping club atmosphere of The Somerset. Ancient armchairs and sofas underpropped one or two equally antiquated members, ossified into states of Emersonian catalepsy in which shadow and sunlight were not only the same, but had long freed them from shame or fame. It was comforting to see so splendid a haunt from the past surviving intact in a widely disintegrating world.

And it is cheering to think of Powell, the pre-eminent novelist of English traits, discoursing there so happily with the author of *The Last Hurrah*.

Some of the supposed difficulty or intractability of Anthony Powell is on show in these passages—a slight fussiness about etiquette and detail, and an almost affected pleasure in the antique or the nearly expired. Moreover, why say “esurient” when “hungry-looking” would do, or “inspissated” instead of “stifling”? Perhaps because “esurient” may also suggest “greedy” or even “voracious,” and because “inspissated” denotes an atmosphere or an element that has been thickened or congealed by evaporation—the perfect term for clubland's residuum. In the context of commercialized puritanism in one case and brahminism in the other, we find an author who would rather be thought puritanical—or even stuffy—than use a lazy or obvious word. Look again, and you will see an observant prefiguration of the “theme” kitsch that we now all take for granted. Look one last time, and muse on the implications of “Emersonian catalepsy.” Look up the whole excerpt, and you will find that O'Connor told Powell a very amusing story about Evelyn Waugh, which story Powell subsequently tracked to its principals before finding it to be quite untrue but well worth repeating.

* * *

This is all part of the task for which I happily volunteer: recommending the reading of Anthony Powell. I say “happily” because I have never induced anyone to try him and been subsequently cursed for my pains. Indeed, I have been thanked in almost broken tones. Yet those of us who till this vineyard, on either side of the broad Atlantic,

occasionally adopt a pre-emptively defensive posture all the same. When Powell died, in March of last year, at the age of ninety-four, the New York Times Book Review devoted a “Bookend” column to the obsequy, written by Ferdinand Mount, the editor of the Times Literary Supplement and Powell’s nephew by marriage. (A revision of his piece serves as the foreword to this edition of the memoirs.) Not even Mount, though writing at such a moment, felt that he could avoid a long, throat-clearing refutation of charges of snobbery, elitism, and such-like. “As a matter of fact,” he asserted of his uncle-in-law, “his fiction was extraordinarily democratic.”

Oh, dear. I agree with this claim, but without feeling the slightest need to advance or defend it. (Can there be “undemocratic fiction”—the only discovery that would necessitate or imply its counterpoint?) Powell’s fiction is “democratic” because it is realistic and humane and somewhat given to the absurd. If you like, it also shows an acute awareness of a stable and long-settled society in transition. It confronts sex and death and unfairness, and brushes against love, poverty, and war.

To Keep the Ball Rolling (which is an abridgment of *Infants of the Spring*, *Messengers of Day*, *Faces in My Time*, and *The Strangers All Are Gone*, originally published as four separate volumes) is democratic in that it shows a great and omnivorous curiosity about the lives and motives of others. And if one chooses to read these memoirs from the standpoint of the New—or, indeed, the old—Criticism, they may stand as a Bildungs-memoir or palimpsest of Powell’s celebrated twelve-volume *A Dance to the Music of Time*. For example, as a small boy Powell was taken to watch the funeral of King Edward VII, in 1910 (an experience shared by many London children), and he knew enough about the need to please adults to claim that he had seen Caesar, the late King’s dog, which had padded along behind the royal coffin and thus became, as Powell dryly recorded, “a great tear-jerker.” From this distillation of childhood half memory he intuited the following:

I must, however, have glimpsed for a moment the officer of 2nd Life Guards commanding the escort riding a short way behind the gun-carriage. This was the 5th Earl of Longford, later killed at Gallipoli; father of my future wife. We possess a photograph which includes my father-in-law, as well as my father: Lieutenant-Colonel Lord Longford on his charger just behind Caesar’s kilted attendant; Captain Powell among the group of regular army adjutants standing at attention with drawn swords.

Powell’s novels appear to depend much on delicate threads of coincidence, and some readers have claimed to find the coincidences too dependent on the inbreeding of class. However, probably many English people could have discovered their future fathers-in-law in an early group shot, even if that shot was not taken at a royal interment. More indicative as a childhood memory is this one. The author reckoned that he was no more than six.

After the park and the street the interior of the building seemed very silent. A long beam of sunlight, in which small particles of dust swam about, all at once slanted through an upper window on the staircase, and struck the opaque glass panels of the door. On several occasions recently I had been conscious of approaching the brink of

some discovery; an awareness that nearly became manifest, then suddenly withdrew. Now the truth came flooding in with the dust infested sunlight. The revelation of self-identity was inescapable. There was no doubt about it. I was me.

This passage helps to introduce the oft-attempted comparison between Powell and Proust. There is, first and most obviously, that ability to evoke childhood which is, alas, lost to so many of us but still, somehow, recognizable when well done. Then occurs a possibly related thought: Does this capacity, in its literary expression, bear any relation to the existence of a secure and well-ordered society—the sort of predictable structure and placement that a curious and intelligent child could begin to puzzle out for himself? And then a succeeding thought: May not a self-awareness acquired so early be invaluable in both noticing and delineating the character of others?

Powell showed great familiarity with the work of Proust while avoiding much direct reference to him. The allusions are mostly oblique, as in this very laconic reflection on the art of memoir:

One of the most peculiar aspects of autobiography is the way in which some authors are acceptable in their sexual and suchlike intimacies (Proust masturbating in the lavatory), others are without great interest in these rôles, at worst only embarrassing. At first sight, the simple answer seems to be that some write “well,” others less well; but in the field of self-revelation the altogether uninstructed can produce a masterpiece of apt expression; the seasoned writer, at times a cliché. I can find no literary explanation other than that only certain personalities are appropriate to dissection; others not.

The words “others not” are quite superfluous to that sentence, and indeed to that passage; nonetheless, they form a coda that I would not be without. Like Proust, Powell was not exactly pithy (I can’t offhand recall any “quotations” from Powell, as one can from his great contemporaries Wodehouse and Waugh), but I hope I have conveyed something of the worthwhileness of hearing him out. One learns to trust certain raconteurs, even if they appear at first to be long of wind.

And Powell could be terse when he chose. During the early Nazi bombardment of Britain he was in uniform and received the news that his frail wife, after at least one miscarriage, had given birth to a son: “I found that becoming a father had a profound effect upon the manner in which one looked at the world.” That’s all he wrote about that. The clear implication is that those who understand will understand already, and those who do not either never will or will find out in their own good time. No waste of words.

This tone or style is often described as “typically English,” and though Powell was proudly and decidedly Welsh (and stressed the Welsh pronunciation of his family name), it is no more possible to picture him as, say, Russian than it is to imagine Proust’s hailing from Barcelona. Just like Nicholas Jenkins, the first-person narrator of *A Dance to the Music of Time*, Powell was born into the British military caste, educated at Eton and Oxford, “launched” in the world of literary London in the 1920s and 1930s, and gravely inconvenienced but also much matured by wartime; he attained seniority and status just as the old and solid Britain and its empire were undergoing

delinquency. Every page of both fiction and memoir bears the impress of these facts in one form or another.

The Duke of Wellington is still tirelessly quoted as having said that the Battle of Waterloo was really won “on the playing-fields of Eton”—a tribute to the values of the rigid upper lip and all that. One of the minor delights of these memoirs is that Powell, who took a particular interest in the aristocracy, met a later Duke of Wellington while serving in the British army. Among this duke’s “keenest convictions was that his ancestor had never uttered the opinion ... [and he offered] a standing remuneration of a hundred pounds to anyone who could prove its authenticity.” Nor is this the only example of Powell’s readiness to write against stereotype. In an early section on his first days at a boys’ school he recorded, “Teaching was good, though not at all intensive. Mr. Gibbs, an attractive personality, showed that it was perfectly possible for a headmaster to be also a nice man.” I reeled back as I read this betrayal of the canonical tradition; no self-respecting Brit can write about his early education without at least some reference to sadism and misery, and to my knowledge no author has tried it since Byron set the standard. So one is relieved to find that at his very next school Powell was starved and brow-beaten, and that by the time he was fourteen, he was able to make quite a brisk diagnosis of one of the masters, who “preferred goodlooking boys to plain ones, but not to excess, and one would suppose him a repressed bisexual.” Powell continued, “A touch of kinkiness was added by a fervid preoccupation with ladies’ shoes (a fancy said to presage masochism).” That’s more like it.

In point of his own political outlook Powell achieved some comparable understated effects. He seems at first glance to have been an axiomatic and inflexible young Tory. He described a contemporary as “given to singing the Internationale, a tune for which tone-deafness presented no handicap.” Visiting Spain in 1933, he recorded the impression that “administration was breaking down everywhere”—as if this were a law-and-order problem rather than the stirrings of a republic. He evinced no apparent interest either in the social questions or in those who were occupied with them; the radicals in his novels and in these pages are mainly clowns or hypocrites. Yet for several crucial years he was extremely close to George Orwell, whose flinty socialist principles—and persistence in trying to live up to them—might well have invited Powell’s gentle ridicule but (perhaps because they were not bogus) instead won his respect. The pages recollecting his friend are of interest and some beauty:

Goodness knows what Orwell would have been like in the army. I have no doubt whatever that he would have been brave, but bravery in the army is, on the whole, an ultimate rather than immediate requirement, demanded only at the end of a long and tedious apprenticeship.

Here again, reading that deceptively dense sentence, one is reminded of what it is to be molded by a very highly evolved and somewhat stratified society. In such a system courage is neither a sufficient nor even in the strict sense a necessary condition for the high calling of arms; a force that depended on mere bravery would be merely a militant rabble—subject to mood swings, perhaps, and indubitably depriving its officer

corps of opportunities for understatement. Such almost invisible writing about the most palpable of questions is a continual distinction of Powell's work and an unending reward for the reading of it.

Powell chose the hymns for Orwell's funeral, in 1950:

The Lesson was from Ecclesiastes, the grinders in the streets, the grasshopper a burden, the silver cord loosed, the wheel broken at the cistern. For some reason George Orwell's funeral service was one of the most harrowing I have ever attended.

As I say, Powell knew when and how to write sparsely. He also had some sense of the gold standard as applied to people. The fact of his having helped out liturgically at the funeral of that determined atheist calls attention to what I think is the inescapable conclusion that Powell, too, had no use for religion per se. He didn't flaunt the fact, but the absence of religion as a subject—an absence also very large in his fiction—eventually obtrudes itself. Consider this statement of his cherished values:

It is better to remain calm; try to remember that all epochs have had to suffer assaults on commonsense and common decency, art and letters, honor and wit, courage and order, good manners and free speech, privacy and scholarship; even if sworn enemies of these abstractions (quite often wearing the disguise of their friends) seem unduly numerous in contemporary society.

Hard to imagine leaving "faith" out of that taxonomy unless on purpose.

Writing of a close and admired wartime friend, Alexander Dru (a relative by marriage of Evelyn Waugh's), Powell wondered (as one so often does about newly made friends) how it was that he had never met Dru before. Later on he supplied a clue by observing in passing that Dru was "a Roman Catholic of profound—though incessantly searching—belief, he was on the whole inclined to frequent Catholic circles (no doubt one of the reasons we never met)." Something more was being said here than that Powell was not himself a Catholic. As the memoirs scrolled out in four "movements"—childhood, youth, maturity, and late middle age, mirroring the subdivision of *Dance* into the four seasons—Powell began to strike the note of "melancholy." (A word search—not that he would countenance such a thing—would disclose an increasing reliance on the term.) This is interesting in two respects: Nicholas Jenkins is represented as working on a biography of Robert Burton, the author of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, and Powell decided to face the problem head-on in, so to speak, real life.

Even after reaching one's early sixties letters start to arrive from insurance firms and the like opening with the words: "You will soon be sixty-five, etc., etc.," causing the recipient to reflect: "Well, it's been kind to allow me to stay so long." As the eighth decade gradually consumes itself, shadows lengthen, a masked and muffled figure loiters persistently at the back of every room as if waiting for a word at the most tactful moment; a presence more easily discernible than heretofore that exhales undoubted menace yet also extends persuasive charm of an enigmatic kind.

Death is the mother of beauty, hence from her,
Alone, shall come fulfilment of our dreams

And our desires

Anyway that was what Wallace Stevens thought; others too. Again—as with loudly decrying the world and its ways—a tranquil approach is probably to be preferred, rather than accept too readily either Death’s attractions or repulsions ... better that the dual countenances of the ubiquitous visitant should not cause too prolonged musings on either the potential relief or potential afflictions of departure. Better, certainly, not to bore other people with the subject.

Again, in this masterly harnessing of the stoic to the limpid, a brisk coda ensures against any languor or, indeed, *longueur*. Try reading it in combination with the arm-wavings of that other Welshman Dylan Thomas, all about rage and dying and light, and see which holds up best. And then, just as one thinks that must be the old boy’s final word (the term “bore” is designedly the most annihilating in the English vernacular), there is this:

All the same the presence in the corner—whose mask and domino never quite manage to keep out of sight the ivory glint of skull and bones beneath—seems to imply, even if silently, something of that once familiar cadence, harsh authoritarian knell of the drinker’s passing day ... “Last orders, please—time, gentlemen, time,” in this case the unspoken sanction: “Last conclusions, please.”

Such a nicely subliminal evocation of *The Waste Land* gives a polite nod, in passing, to the faithful while helping to demonstrate that Powell himself declined their invitation.

The reflections of successful writers on other writers, and on the craft of writing, can be astonishingly banal. On the whole, Powell preferred to make very vague and general and lenient remarks about his fellow authors, especially if they were contemporary. But many readers, I suspect, would be surprised by his lack of enthusiasm for P. G. Wodehouse—a lack that, although not elaborated, is explained in part by this mild but firm judgment on Evelyn Waugh.

He really did believe in entities like a “great nobleman,” “poor scholar,” “literary man of modest means.” Of course, in one sense, such stylized concepts may certainly exist, but at close range they usually require a good deal of modification ...

The “high-life” of *Decline and Fall* is mostly depicted from imagination, hearsay, newspaper gossip-columns. Later, when Waugh himself had enjoyed a certain amount of first-hand experience of such circles, he was on the whole not much interested in their contradictions and paradoxes. He wished the *beau monde* to remain in the image he had formed, usually showing himself unwilling to listen, if facts were offered that seemed to militate against that image.

In Powell’s understated terms, this ranks quite high on the scale of condemnation. (He was elsewhere at some pains to praise Waugh as a man, to sympathize with him in his troubles, and to defend him from some accusations of rudeness.) The position he was championing, it must be emphasized, was that of realism. Waugh may have fancied himself a Tory modernist, but Powell intuitively knew that the claim was somewhat

phony. He was also implicitly defending himself as the chief claimant while indirectly rebuking the critics who lazily arraigned his work for Waugh's sins of snobbery.

In his youth Powell spent some time in the Baltic and in Finland, where his father was en poste as a military attaché. (The experience led to one of his early experimental novels, *Venusberg*.) I do not know whether this conditioned him to an interest in Russian writing, but in a paragraph so brief that one might almost miss it he did say roundly that for him the chief author was Dostoyevsky, whose "characters and situations have one of the qualities I prize highest in a novelist, the ability to be at once grotesque yet classical, funny and at the same time terrifying."

This struck me forcibly when I read it again, because these memoirs do consent, every now and then and with a certain resignation, to identify certain minor characters in Powell's *Dance*, the detection or unmasking of whom is a long-established parlor game in English literary circles. Yet Powell never ventured the least discussion of his most finished and fearsome cast member, the Dostoyevskian Kenneth Widmerpool. There are multiple and variegated achievements in *Dance*, but this creation is Powell's certain ticket to literary immortality, an evil figure of fun whose crass, obtrusive, unstoppable visage we are all doomed to confront at some time or another. I apologize for quoting myself on Widmerpool, but the effort it cost me to summarize him when reviewing *Dance* is one I could not bear to attempt again.

The shortest way of capturing the essence of this grotesquely fascinating and repellent figure might be to say that he is a monster of arrogance and conceit, but entirely wanting in pride. Bullying to those below him, servile and fawning to those set in authority, entirely without wit or introspection, he is that type of tirelessly ambitious, sexless, and charmless mediocrity that poisons institutional life, family life, and political life. He is the perfected utilitarian and philistine.

You've met him, all right. He would be recognizable in any culture. But he has never been traced to any "model," and Powell disdained to play the game anyway in this instance—for the excellent reason that Widmerpool belongs with Falstaff and Raskolnikov and Uriah Heep, and not in the pages of *Who's Who*.

American readers inclined to regard Powell as too insular might be surprised, and not unpleasantly, by his selection of Hollywood and American encounters: F. Scott Fitzgerald, Erich von Stroheim, and Paul Robeson.

"Fitzgerald," he wrote, "—that rare phenomenon, a 'bad' writer who made himself into a 'good' writer—had lost much of his former appeal simply because he had begun to produce immeasurably better novels than his early work." The two men lunched at the MGM commissary during Powell's rather disappointing stint in Hollywood in 1937. His description of the meeting contains one of the best encapsulations of character on short acquaintance that I know of. It is rounded off, from the memoir point of view, by Powell's being acute enough to notice, from later reading, that the date of the lunch (July 20, 1937) was the day on which Fitzgerald had his fateful dinner meeting with Sheilah Graham.

Powell met Stroheim more glancingly, some years later, at a festival of Stroheim's films in London. Stroheim was evidently in a "profoundly melancholy" mood, from which he was roused only by Powell's recollection of the group of military attachés on Monteblando maneuvers in *The Merry Widow*. (During the war Powell had been a liaison officer with the exiled military staffs of Hitler's victim nations.) Stroheim kindled at this compliment to his sense of detail—or sense of realism—but lapsed back into melancholy, saying, "I no longer look like the Oberleutnant I once was."

As for Robeson, Powell met him during a KGB-supervised lunch for the hack Stalin-era novelist Mikhail Sholokhov. The following vignette gives one a sense of missed opportunity.

I mentioned to Paul Robeson that I had been fortunate enough to see his *Othello* which he had played in London a long time before. I would have liked to discuss with him the Black WPA *Macbeth* watched in Los Angeles [in 1937], but new introductions had begun to take place. In fact, Robeson's *Othello* had been interesting rather than impressive. He had seemed to tackle the role with a sense of grievance alien to Shakespeare's self-confident Moor. The Black WPA players had been infinitely less tense.

Again the dry sting in the tail; it would have been something to witness the scheme of this conversation as played out in a Soviet Embassy drawing room. (Powell passed on a tip from Gore Vidal about attending workers'-paradise writers' conferences in the old days: "I always sit next to a man in a turban. You get photographed more.")

As for the writerly life itself, Powell gave occasional guidance throughout, much of it rather conversational but none of it trite, and some of it, it seems to me, positively lapidary. There is more than meets the eye in this memory of adolescent reading:

One day in School Library I came across a magazine (I suppose *The Criterion*) which contained a long account of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. I was very interested by what was said, but this interest seemed quite separate in itself; causing, so to speak, no conversion or repentance as to middlebrow reading matter. Such forms of intellectual double-harness are perhaps characteristic of literary self-education.

When this boy was a bit older, he applied the same pragmatism to the design of an extraordinarily ambitious literary project:

I had been turning over in my mind the possibility of writing a novel composed of a fairly large number of volumes, just how many could not be decided at the outset. A long sequence seemed to offer all sorts of advantages, among them release from the re-engagement every year or so of the same actors and extras hanging about for employment at the stagedoor of one's creative fantasy. Instead of sacking the lot at the end of a brief run—with the moral certainty that at least one or two of the more tenacious will be back again seeking a job, if not this year or next, then in a decade's time—the production itself might be extended, the actors made to work longer and harder for much the same creative remuneration spread over an extended period; instead of being butchered at regular intervals to make a publisher's holiday.

There were many objections to setting out on such a hazardous road, chiefly the possibility of collapse, imaginatively speaking; simply dying (something bound to happen sooner or later) before completing the book.

These memoirs open with a very young man who began to frequent an antiquarian bookshop run by an indigent admirer of Oscar Wilde's. They conclude in Margaret Thatcher's Britain (the closing volume was published in 1982, when the author was indeed alive to see the vindication of his project), in a long meditation on the authenticity and the sexual character of William Shakespeare. The raw material of life interested Powell, as it had to; its slow refinement into the finished product of culture and society and language absorbed him far more. The suggestion in that last excerpt, of all the world's being a stage, contains a very bold insinuation: a parallel between this diffident and subtle novelist and that inspired, panoptic but ultra-practical Elizabethan actor-manager, who was always ready to write a new scene at need, or to raise an appreciative laugh from the cheaper seats, but who was able to capture both pity and terror in a delicate verbal noose. The implication strikes me as less profane than it might once have done. Powell (even by his choice of a Bardic title for the closing volume) wisely left it latent; but as I say, he did have a sense of the gold standard.

(The Atlantic, June 2001)

John Buchan: Spy Thriller's Father

Review of John Buchan: *The Presbyterian Cavalier*, by Andrew Lownie.

THERE IS A DRY WIND blowing through the East, and the parched grasses wait the spark." I can remember the frisson I felt when I first read that line, as I can recall the faint sense of absurdity that accompanied the thrill. People don't really talk like that, as I half understood when I was twelve, but then, they don't really talk like Kipling's believable soldiers either. The words—which occur in the opening pages of John Buchan's *Greenmantle*—are uttered in a secret office near Whitehall, in London, as Sir Walter Bullivant briefs Richard Hannay on the extreme hazard and implausibility of his upcoming mission to save the empire. Even at that age I preferred Bullivant's style to the affected gruffness of "M" as he summoned Commander James Bond to a confidential session on the newest Red Menace supervillain.

In several respects Buchan is as different from Fleming as chalk is from cheese. The hero Hannay is uninterested in sex, revolted by all forms of cruelty, and ill at ease in the modern world of cleverness and greed and deceit. He is a late-Edwardian version of the strong, silent type that upheld chivalric values while playing "The Great Game," and he is doomed to see most of his friends immolated in the trenches of the Western Front. But Buchan spanned the gap between Kipling and Fleming, and his stories furnished a crossover point for beginning readers between the straightforward "adventure" book and something resembling the adult novel. I like to think that they still do, and this in spite of their occasional preposterousness ("There are some things,"

Hannay reflects near the beginning of *Mr. Standfast*, “that no one has a right to ask of any white man”).

Buchan’s following in America probably derives chiefly from *The Thirty-nine Steps*—the first of the Hannay tales, and the one that was famously transferred to celluloid by Alfred Hitchcock. Here one has a very well-shaped thriller, with many vertiginous shifts of plot and scene, a dastardly set of foes, and a game played for exceedingly high stakes. The reliance on coincidence or the fortuitous is often questionable, but the results at the same time are never quite incredible. And the hero is, as I hinted before, more of an innocent abroad than a calculating agent. He is actuated principally by loyalty, either to friends or to country, and when he meets sheer evil, he is often baffled as well as repelled. This innocence may or may not be the counterpart of his creator’s rather alarming sense of integrity. What is a modern and wised-up reader to make, for example, of Hannay’s encounter (again in *Mr. Standfast*) with the lovely Mary Lamington: “I didn’t even think of her as pretty, any more than a man thinks of the good looks of the friend he worships”? Since Mary is also described as having a boylike grace of movement, even the least jaded attention is inevitably drawn to what is apparently being disowned. We do not nowadays think of the British Secret Service as a place where the polymorphously perverse was unknown.

One of the merits of Niall Ferguson’s recent work on the British Empire is the reminder it provides of how Scottish that empire was. Not only did the Scots provide a vast proportion of the soldiers and miners and ship’s engineers of the system (I have seen it argued that Scotty on *Star Trek* is a tribute to this grand tradition), but several colonies bore a distinctly Caledonian stamp. Even today a visitor to New Zealand or Canada is bound to notice the influence of Scottish architecture and of the Scottish educational and religious heritage; and in the Cameron Highlands of Malaysia, and the city of Blantyre, in Malawi, the imprint of Scotland is to be felt in numerous distinctive ways. The battle flag of the Confederacy, indeed, displayed the cross of Saint Andrew; and I recently read an account of the revolution in Texas in which one of the proclamations under discussion featured a stirring line from the poetry of Robert Burns—the more impressive because it was unattributed and assumed to be familiar in the context.

Scotland, Christianity, and empire were the air in which Buchan moved. Born to a struggling minister of the Free Church of Scotland (a congregation that had seceded from the established local church and stood for a flinty Calvinism), he revered the epic story of David Livingstone as a missionary in Africa, went out to serve as a member of Sir Alfred Milner’s governing team during and after the Boer War, was elected to Parliament as a Scottish member (on a liberal Conservative and Ulster Unionist platform), and ended his days in 1940 with the title of Lord Tweedsmuir and the office of governor-general of Canada. In his fiction Highland and Lowland dialects are employed in almost every chapter, and there are recurrent allusions to Scottish vernacular poetry and song.

The famous contrast in the Scottish character is between the dour, stoic, and economical and the romantic, passionate, and rebellious. Buchan was a salient instance of this contradiction, which expressed itself mainly in the contrast between his life and his writing. He was continent in all matters; punctilious as to time and bookkeeping; deeply attached to his national Church; and a tightly buttoned scholar, civil servant, politician, and diplomat. His every leisure moment was devoted to writing, with an output of novels, biographies, and histories that amounted to graphomania. His chief recreational outlets were riding, climbing, and walking. An ulcerated stomach compelled a strict dietary regime. No breath of scandal touched his public or private life. His attitude to authority and empire was trustful and loyal. But his writing shows an attraction first to the exotic and the numinous, and second to the underdog, the rebel, and the outsider. In many of his novels there are mysterious and evil women with hypnotic, magical properties—including the bewitching Hilda von Einem, in *Greenmantle*, and a female in *The Three Hostages* whose hands “were laid on the arms of the chair”; “hands more delicate and shapely I have never seen, though they had also the suggestion of a furious power, like the talons of a bird of prey.”

The occult, especially as it derives from the East or from Africa, provides a continual undertone of fascination, attractive and repulsive in almost equal degrees. In a remarkable short story, “The Grove of Ashtaroth,” the hero finds himself obliged to destroy the gorgeous little temple of a sensual cult, because he believes that by doing so he will salvage the health and sanity of a friend. But he simultaneously believes himself to be committing an unpardonable act of desecration, and the eerie voice that beseeches him to stay his hand is unmistakably feminine.

In a not dissimilar way Buchan found himself admiring the spirit of the defeated Boers, who with their stern Calvinism and equestrian tactics may have reminded him of clan fighters on the Scottish borders. One of his best-drawn fictional heroes is the Afrikaner tracker Peter Pienaar, Richard Hannay’s tough and self-sacrificing sidekick in three of the novels. Buchan wrote and rewrote a biography of the Marquis of Montrose, the seventeenth-century Scot who was perhaps best described as a Presbyterian Cavalier—the same coincidence of qualities that lends Andrew Lownie’s new biography its subtitle. And when put in charge of British propaganda during the First World War, he made space for something more than a footnote in history by recommending that the American journalist Lowell Thomas go and see T. E. Lawrence. Buchan and Lawrence became close after the war; they shared an interest in the classics and an admiration for Montrose. But their concepts of asceticism and mortification were more discrepant than Buchan can possibly have guessed.

Buchan used to be far more readily acknowledged as the father of the spy thriller than he is today. Reviewing his last novel, *Sick Heart River*, in 1940, Graham Greene wrote, “What is remarkable about these adventure-stories is the completeness of the world they describe.” He also pointed out that Buchan was the first to realize “the enormous dramatic value of adventure in familiar surroundings happening to unadventurous men ... the death that may come to us by the railings of the Park.” And

the impress of Buchan on Greene's early work is plain enough. However, when Greene came to write his memoir *Ways of Escape*, forty years later, he recorded that by the time he sat down to begin *This Gun for Hire*, he "could no longer get the same pleasure from the adventures of Richard Hannay."

More than the dialogue and the situation had dated: the moral climate was no longer that of my boyhood. Patriotism had lost its appeal, even for a schoolboy, at Passchendaele ... It was no longer a Buchan world.

This is a less persuasive account of disillusionment than it appears on the surface. Buchan's most celebrated thrillers were written and published during the awfulness of the First World War and the reaction to it that set in: *The Thirty-nine Steps* in 1915, *Greenmantle* in 1916, and *Mr. Standfast* in 1919. The conflict is not presented as straightforwardly Manichaeian: Gallantry is attributed to Germans and to Turks. Moreover, it was a fact of Buchan's life that he had many friends among the Red and anti-imperialist leaders on the proletarian Clydeside, and that he tried to do honor to these antagonists both in his novels and in his public speeches. Even when the spy genre itself became a near synonym for cynicism, John Le Carré had his George Smiley adopt the nom de guerre "Mr. Standfast"—and he would not, I think, take refuge in the claim that the name comes from *Pilgrim's Progress* in the first place. Buchan took Bunyan as a pattern in much of his writing and his fine autobiography, *Memory Hold-the-Door*, was published in North America under the title *Pilgrim's Way*. It has been almost forty years since the first biography, by the Scottish writer Janet Adam Smith, was published; this more recent effort, by another Scot, is intended to acquit Buchan of charges of bigotry and also of obsolescence. (Mr. Lownie is in some respects as straight-faced and innocent as his subject: He records with perfect gravity that in 1931 Buchan agreed to become president of the Federation of University Conservative and Unionist Associations, a body with initials that were not amended for some years.)

As Lownie points out, one respect in which this is more a "Buchan world" than the formerly up-to-date might be willing to credit is this: Buchan understood very early that the United States would become the decisive actor. The rather cardboard American who comes to Hannay's aid in *Greenmantle*, a fat and rich but nonetheless brave and humorous figure named John Scantlebury Blenkiron, is included for no other purpose than to make this point. As Canada's governor-general in the late 1930s, Buchan made every attempt to establish cordial relations with President Franklin Roosevelt. (It was a contradiction in this posture that he disliked Winston Churchill and tended to favor appeasement, but it's also clear that his dread of a second world war was conditioned above all by the shudder he experienced when contemplating the first one.)

* * *

Like Greene and Evelyn Waugh and many others of the period, Buchan has been accused of anti-Semitism. Two defenses have frequently been offered in these cases: that

the alleged anti-Semite harbored a prejudice no greater than was commonplace at the time, and that he had many Jewish friends. A third possibility—that the offending words are uttered by fictional characters and not by the author—is sometimes canvassed. None of these will quite do in Buchan's case. It's not merely that anti-Jewish clichés occur in his books; it's that they occur so frequently. The usual form they take is a reference to Judeo-Bolshevism—the sympathy of Jews, even rich ones, for the Russian Revolution. That, however, might be described as political anti-Semitism, just as Buchan's energetic support for the early Zionist movement might be called political philo-Semitism. Paradoxically, perhaps, Buchan greatly disliked as a person the most anti-Jewish and pro-Zionist figure of his day, Arthur Balfour. Indeed, Balfour was the basis for the villain Andrew Lumley in Buchan's first thriller, *The Power House*. I mention this for two reasons. First, the book describes an invisible, string-pulling, sinister secret government, but one run by English lords and financiers rather than exotic or cosmopolitan types. Second, Buchan openly admitted that his model in the writing of it (he called the novel “a tribute at the shrine of my master in fiction”) was E. Phillips Oppenheim, whom he further described—in an instance, perhaps, of trying too hard—as “the greatest Jewish writer since Isaiah.” In “The Grove of Ashtaroth” the friend for whom the purgative enterprise is undertaken is a man described by the narrator as a Jew trying to “pass,” who because of his ancestry is vulnerable to the delicious temptations of strange gods. This is excessive on Buchan's part, and arguably a “transferred” aspect of that very element in himself: the element of the mystical and the bizarre that the Scots call “fey.”

The same ambivalence can be detected in *Greenmantle*, which is certainly his masterpiece. Here the subject is jihad. As a wartime propaganda officer, Buchan was fascinated by the ability of Germany to use its Turkish allies to enlist Muslim sentiment against the British Empire. The words of Sir Walter Bullivant with which I opened occur in their context thus:

Though the Kaiser proclaims a Holy War and calls himself Hadji Mohammed Guiliamo, and says the Hohenzollerns are descended from the Prophet, that seems to have fallen pretty flat. The ordinary man again will answer that Islam in Turkey is becoming a back number, and that Krupp guns are the new gods. Yet—I don't know. I do not quite believe in Islam becoming a back number ... The Syrian army is as fanatical as the hordes of the Mahdi. The Senussi have taken a hand in the game. The Persian Moslems are threatening trouble. There is a dry wind blowing through the East, and the parched grasses wait the spark. And that wind is blowing toward the Indian border.

Despite this Whitehall Orientalism, when Hannay gets out into the field he is astonished to find his gallant friend Sandy Arbuthnot—the ideal blend of Scots daredevil and Gunga Din special agent—half convinced that the Muslim zealots are in the right.

The West knows nothing of the true Oriental. It pictures him as lapped in color and idleness and luxury and gorgeous dreams. But it is all wrong ... It is the austerity of the East that is its beauty and its terror ... They want to live face to face with God without a screen of ritual and images and priestcraft.

This capacity for vicarious identification—even imaginative sympathy—was Buchan’s most sterling quality as a man and as an author. And it was in order to ignite the spark of Islam pre-emptively, so to speak, and to set the parched Eastern grasses afire in a way that the Ottoman Empire did not expect, that Lawrence was sent to Arabia in the first place. So we do indeed inhabit a world partly shaped by a dogged Scots puritan, and we may even discover—or rediscover—that Buchan’s invocations of grit and pluck and hardihood are not as mockably retrograde as all that.

(The Atlantic, March 2004)

Graham Greene: I’ll Be Damned

Review of *The Life of Graham Greene, Vol. II 1955–1991*, by Norman Sherry.

GRAHAM GREENE ONCE WROTE a celebrated essay about a doppelgänger who cared enough to haunt and shadow him, even to masquerade as him. This “other” Greene appeared to have anterior knowledge of the movements of his model, sometimes showing up to grant an interview or fill a seat in a restaurant, so that Greene himself, when he arrived in some old haunt or new locale, would be asked why he had returned so soon. The other man was suitably nondescript yet camera-shy. He was caught once by a society photographer, and captioned in the press into the bargain, but a combination of flash and blur allowed him to escape unmasking. So who or what was he? Semblable? Frère? Or perhaps hypocrite lecteur?

This mode of imitation or emulation or substitution—at once a form of flattery and a species of threat, or at any rate of challenge—was and is analogous to the role that Greene himself played and still plays in the lives of many writers and readers. A journalist, most especially an Anglo-American travel writer, will run the risk of disappointing his editor if he visits Saigon and leaves out any reference to quiet Americans, or turns in a piece from Havana that fails to mention the hapless Wormold. As for Brighton, or Vienna, or Haiti—Greene was there just before you turned up. Leaving the Orient Express, you will glimpse the tail of a raincoat just at the moment when that intriguing and anonymous fellow passenger vanishes discreetly at the end of the platform. In Mexico or Sierra Leone some old veteran will mumble something about the stranger in the off-white suit who was asking the same questions only a while back. On one of my first ventures as a foreign correspondent, in 1975, I sat in the garden bar of a taverna in Nicosia, reading about the adventures of Dr. Saavedra in *The Honorary Consul*, visualizing what I had just seen along the haunted “Green Line” that slashed through the ruins of the city, and moaning with relief that Graham Greene had never been to Cyprus. Even so, as I crossed that same border in the broiling noon of the next day and heard only the cicadas and the click of the rifle bolts at the frontier, I was composing a letter to him in my mind.

It was a matter not just of place but of character. Disillusioned diplomat whose wife was drying up before his unseeing eyes? Snake-eyed cop? Priest to whom Eden was forever lost? Sentimental terrorist spokesman? All these went straight into the notebook. You could divide the eager freelances into roughly three types: those who had been influenced by *Scoop*, those who were stirred by *Homage to Catalonia*, and those who took their tune from *The Quiet American*. Overlap with *Le Carré* fans was frequent in the third instance: Their preferred quarry was the naive guy at the U.S. embassy, insufficiently comprehending of the ancient hatreds and millennial routines that had been so quickly mastered by the old/new hands.

Greene's centennial year, just now past, saw the reissue of many of his classics in beautiful new editions from Penguin Books, along with publication of the third and closing volume of Norman Sherry's biography. In an effort to isolate and identify the elusive and evasive figure who could so plausibly be impersonated—to lay his ghost, so to speak—I set myself to reading it all. I think that what surprised me the most, when I had finished, was his sheer conservatism.

Greene, after all, was nothing if not radical, even subversive, in his self-presentation. Always at odds with authority, not infrequently sued or censored or even banned, a bohemian and a truant, part exile and part émigré, a dissident Catholic and a sexual opportunist, he personified the fugitive from the public school, Foreign Office, rural and suburban British tradition in which he had been formed. By what means did this pinkish roué gradually mutate into a reactionary?

The first and easiest reply is: By means of the sameness of his plot formula. This tends to consist of a contrived dilemma, on the horns of which his characters arrange to impale themselves with near masochistic enthusiasm. Dear God, shall I give him/her up, for your sake? Or might it be more fun to wager my immortal soul? The staginess and creakiness of all this was well netted by George Orwell, himself no stranger to the sweltering locale and the agonies of moral choice, in his review of *The Heart of the Matter* for the *New Yorker* in 1948. Of the central character he asserted,

Scobie is incredible because the two halves of him do not fit together. If he were capable of getting into the kind of mess that is described, he would have got into it years earlier. If he really felt that adultery is mortal sin, he would stop committing it; if he persisted in it, his sense of sin would weaken. If he believed in hell, he would not risk going there merely to spare the feelings of a couple of neurotic women. And one might add that if he were the kind of man we are told he is—that is, a man whose chief characteristic is a horror of causing pain—he would not be an officer in a colonial police force.

I have always found *The End of the Affair* to be a sickly business in rather the same way, in that Sarah Miles, who might have continued being a perfectly good mistress as well as a more than adequate wife, decides to spoil everything for everybody—not by any means exempting herself—on the basis of an off-the-cuff promise to God. This resolution doesn't even result from an "answered prayer," since the crucial event on which she stakes everything (the sparing of her lover, Maurice Bendrix, during a Nazi

air raid on London) has actually taken place by the time she troubles deaf heaven with her bootless cries.

These and other quasi-morality tales are all informed, it is needless to say, by Greene's own Catholicism (though one notices that he never ventures far beyond adultery or murder or espionage, or confronts a really harsh topic such as abortion). There is every reason to think that he enjoyed playing a version of the game in his own life: He originally converted to the faith in order to wear down the long resistance of a woman—his first wife, Vivien—who essentially refused to sleep with him until he had been “received” into Holy Mother Church. (For some reason this reminds me of Jessica Mitford, who decided at the last minute not to say, when asked at her naturalization hearing why she wanted to become an American citizen, that the Communist Party of the USA would not otherwise allow her to join.) In a rather defensive manner Greene later in his life complained when reviewers laid any stress on the predominance of Catholic themes and characters in his work; any novel about English people and society that did not contain some Catholics, he wrote, would be to that extent lacking in “verisimilitude.” Notice that he did not choose to say “realism”; how likely is it, after all, as J. M. Coetzee inquires in a superb new introduction to *Brighton Rock*, that the depraved and deprived “Pinkie” and his wretched, slum-bred girl would both be so intimately familiar with the Latin forms? “Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi” ... the repetition throughout is like that other “toll,” of a continuous knell. But the dramatic convenience of such characters is this: They consign themselves to an eternity of torment while being fully aware that they are doing so. When Rose says to Pinkie, “We’re going to do a mortal sin,” she says it “with a mixture of fear and pride.” This, by the way, is how she knows that it is to be her wedding day.

For Pinkie, meanwhile (not otherwise detectable as a reflective type), the same counter-redemptive ceremony merely consummates the ephemeral matter of “his temporal safety” in return for “two immortalities of pain.” “He was filled with a kind of gloomy hilarity and pride. He saw himself now as a full-grown man for whom the angels wept.” But Pinkie is not left without consolation. He can take pleasure only from giving or receiving pain, and his mind constantly returns to the schoolroom dividers with which he learned, before graduating to razors at the racetrack, to be a torturer and a maimer. We know from his memoirs that Greene was lavishly and inventively bullied and tortured while he was at school, and if we did not know this we could certainly guess. In *The Heart of the Matter*, published a decade later, the comparatively conscience-stricken Major Scobie is having a bad moment with his scrawny and tedious mistress and notices that “she was like a child with a pair of dividers who knows her power to injure.” But by then, in the course of an equally bitter and arid moment with his wife, he has heard himself saying (this time in English, for some reason): “O Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world.” It must be said for Greene that he didn’t trouble his non-Catholic readers with any very complex renditions of the liturgy.

On the other hand, or as against that, he did trouble such readers with reflections like this. Scobie encounters a fellow colonialist named Perrot at a disaster-stricken border station that divides British-held Sierra Leone from its neighboring Vichy colony. Perrot hands him a drink and says, in an accent that is cartoonishly Scots, “Of course ye know I find it hard to think of the French as enemies. My family came over with the Huguenots. It makes a difference, ye know.” Greene continues,

His lean long yellow face cut in two by a nose like a wound was all the time arrogantly on the defensive: the importance of Perrot was an article of faith with Perrot—doubters would be repelled, persecuted if he had the chance ... the faith would never cease to be proclaimed.

So at last we meet a Graham Greene character who keeps up his faith despite a torrid Conradian setting, but he is openly jeered at—because he is of Protestant provenance. A ruined Irishman expiring among the empty flagons and exhaling an Ave Maria would be sympathetic. But a righteous, continent Huguenot, never. (Incidentally, since the Huguenots were driven from France to England after a shocking pogrom sponsored by both throne and clergy, the identification with France itself, let alone with Catholic vichy, seems a bit like blaming the victim.) Perrot is further scorned for speaking sarcastically about events in Freetown, the capital of humble Sierra Leone.

The words “big city” came out with a sneer—Perrot couldn’t bear the thought that there was a place where people considered themselves important and where he was not regarded. Like a Hugue not imagining Rome, he built up a picture of frivolity, viciousness and corruption.

This seems doubly ungenerous when considered in the light of the epigraph from Leon Bloy with which Greene opened *The End of the Affair*: “Man has places in his heart which do not yet exist, and into them enters suffering in order that they may have existence.” Is this creative agony available only to those who believe in transubstantiation?

* * *

To be fair to Greene, whose answer to that question was fairly obviously in the affirmative, one must admit that he extended the same indulgence to one other group: the Communists. His two best-drawn heroes in this category, both noble men facing insuperable odds, are Doctor Magiot, in *The Comedians*, and Dr. Czinner, in *Orient Express*. (Here might be the place to say that I contributed an introduction to the latter for the new Penguin series.) The theme of martyrdom is constant, even with these secular materialists. “For a moment, Dr. Czinner”—confronted in a railway compartment—“flattened himself against the wall of a steep street to let the armored men, the spears and the horses pass, and the tired tortured man. He had not died to make the poor contented, to bind the chains tighter; his words had been twisted.” This is the observation of what later became known as “liberation theology” (something that, incidentally, seems to have fallen from view lately), and one notes in passing that “Czinner” is a not very artful name for a fallen Everyman.

Greene had briefly been a Party member while at Oxford, and although he was too intelligent and too prudent to remain a true adherent for long, he kept up a residual form of Catholic fellow-traveling until the end of his life. In 1967 he wrote a celebrated letter to the London Times. Its ostensible purpose was to join the protest against the imprisonment of two Russian writers, but its main effect was to qualify that protest by stating the following: "If I had to choose between life in the Soviet Union and life in the United States of America, I would certainly choose the Soviet Union, just as I would choose life in Cuba to [sic] life in those southern American republics, like Bolivia, dominated by their northern neighbor, or life in North Vietnam to life in South Vietnam."

Greene never had to make this choice, if only because he was often refused a visa for the United States and never "chose" to spend much time in the Soviet Union. He did, however, keep up a lifelong friendship with a permanent resident of that latter state, Kim Philby. Perhaps the most ruthless and successful espionage agent of the entire Cold War, Philby had actually risen to be a senior British intelligence officer and a colleague trusted by James Angleton, of the CIA, while acting as a dedicated agent of the KGB. Greene contributed the introduction to Philby's Soviet-edited memoir, *My Silent War*, in which he wrote, "He betrayed his country—yes, perhaps he did, but who among us has not committed treason to something or someone more important than a country?" Leave aside that "perhaps." This, with its sanctimonious echo of "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone," also recalls E. M. Forster's hope that he would "have the courage" to betray his country before his friends. This itself was almost as morally slippery as the original "casting the first stone" injunction: In any case, Philby, who sold out the colleagues he had trained himself, certainly betrayed both. Norman Sherry records that Greene lost his temper only once in the course of all their interviews—when Sherry pointed this out.

If betrayal is the motif of so many Greene novels, then its cousin treason was the motif of Kim Philby's entire life. In that sense alone Philby might have made the ideal friend for Greene. But that still left open the question of whom he had betrayed. It was surely more Greene's gentle native England than the wicked, vulgar United States. But to this Greene had a sort of reply ready. In the English past it had been considered "treasonous" to be a Roman Catholic. Official persecution was the underside of Elizabethan England. Many fine men, like Father John Gerard, had been slandered and tortured for their disloyalty (which happened to take the form of working for Catholic potentates on the mainland in order to prepare for an invasion). So strongly did Greene identify with these reactionary subversives that he became a Shakespeare-hater, accusing the national bard of being an accomplice in repression, if only a silent one. In a public address in Hamburg, accepting a Shakespeare prize from some well-meaning but unknowing academics, he astonishingly referred to John of Gaunt's dying speech about "this England" as "complacent" and pointed out that it was first published in 1597: "Two years before, Shakespeare's fellow poet Southwell

had died on the scaffold after three years of torture. If only Shakespeare had shared his disloyalty, we could have loved him better as a man.”

That was bad history as well as bad literary criticism. If Shakespeare had become an agent of the Vatican and King Philip of Spain, he would not have been a successful playwright in a flourishing and relatively uncensored Protestant London. (The obtuseness of Greene is increased rather than diminished when we appreciate the considerable scholarship suggesting that Shakespeare probably came from a Catholic family that had decided to practice the religion in secret, and that it was this, if anything, that explained his reticence on the matter.) Greene was very fond of his own professed attachment to the underdog. In that same lecture he asserted that “[the writer] stands for the victims, and the victims change.” In *Our Man in Havana* we find that “there was always another side to a joke, the side of the victim.” Simplicity here demands simplicity in return. Simply put: Is someone an underdog who aligns himself with an absolutist papacy, or with the state security services of the USSR?

It was *The Quiet American*, far more than any other novel, that gave Greene his still-enduring reputation for prescience. Had he not, in the figure of Alden Pyle, encapsulated the combination of American arrogance and naiveté that eventuated in the “quagmire” of Vietnam? The novel was published in 1955, shortly after the shattering defeat of French arms at Dien Bien Phu, and this coincidence made its acuity appear almost uncanny. Yet who was it who had written this, in 1952?

The Indo-Chinese front is only one sector of a long line which crosses Korea, touches the limits of a still-peaceful Hong Kong, cuts across Tongking, avoids—for the moment—Siam, and continues into the jungles of Malaya. If Indo-China falls, Korea will be isolated, Siam can be invaded in twenty-four hours and Malaya may have to be abandoned.

This almost absurdly crude statement of the “domino theory” was published by Graham Greene in *Paris Match*. It can be found in his *Reflections*, under what I consider to be the suggestive title “Indo-China: France’s Crown of Thorns.” If you re-read *The Quiet American* today, you will see that it blames the blundering Americans largely for failing to understand or to emulate the sophisticated French style of colonialism in Vietnam. For many of us the original sin—if I may annex that term—of the American intervention was precisely its inheritance of a doomed French war. For Greene, rather, it was the failure to live up to that legacy. Whatever this was, it was not a revolutionary or radical position. And it seems to have been content to overlook quite a few “victims.”

But however frenziedly inconsistent he was on everything else, Greene was unwaveringly hostile to the United States. When, in the closing volume of his biography Norman Sherry gets to the publication of *The Comedians*, in 1966, he says of the Smith couple therein depicted: “At last, sympathetic Americans in a Greene novel.” Well, that Mr. and Mrs. Smith have some sterling qualities is beyond doubt. But they are represented as culpably and laughably unworldly, obsessed with vegetarianism and abstention from alcohol. (Protestants, in fact.) They are, further, quite unable to see

the horrors of the Duvalier regime, reluctant as they are to be too “judgmental” about anything for which black people can be blamed. This satire upon their innocence was rather clever of Greene, I always thought, because he was able to borrow the fatuous apologetics of the anti-American fellow-traveler and, so to speak, transfer it to an American target.

This element in Greene’s prose needs no guilt-sodden, sweat-stained policeman to hunt it out. In more than one published reminiscence and interview he told of the seminal influence of *The Pirate Aeroplane*, an adventure story written by Captain Charles Gilson and read by Greene in early boyhood, in which an avaricious American airman, cheroot between his teeth, violates and plunders a lost civilization. Even in *Travels with My Aunt*, one of his lightest and wittiest books, Greene’s narrator passes through Paris and achieves an understated masterpiece of condescension by saying, “I noticed a plaque which tells a visitor that here La Fayette signed some treaty or celebrated his return from the American revolution, I forget which.”

Sherry’s work is so replete with absurd and sinister remarks by Greene on his own un-Smith-like travels as a tourist of revolution in the Caribbean and Latin American zone that one could fill this page with balls-aching propagandistic remarks that impeached him out of his own mouth. It was unfortunate for “Papa Doc” Duvalier that he went so far as to be denounced for heresy by the Catholic Church: This licensed a full-out attack on him by Greene, even if the success or regime in Haiti, the “Baby Doc” nightmare, did receive the endorsement of the Holy See and of Mother Teresa. Of Fidel Castro, Greene would not hear an ill word spoken; he even differed with Kenneth Tynan and other sympathizers on the point and chose to celebrate (as I strongly suspect Tynan would not have) the then warm relations between Fidel and the papal nuncio. In 1987, with two years left to go in the life of Soviet communism, Greene turned up in Moscow and made the following speech at some “peace” conference or other:

We are fighting together against the death squads in El Salvador. We are fighting together against the Contras in Nicaragua. We are fighting together against General Pinochet in Chile. There is no division in our thoughts between Catholics—Roman Catholics—and Communists.

That may have been during the Gorbachev period, but he had been doing this sort of thing ever since the 1950s, when he indulged the Stalinist regime in Poland because it maintained a Catholic front organization called Pax Christi. Yet if we are charitable, and admit that there was a pulse of humanism under all this piffle (who, after all, except for some very dogmatic and often Catholic conservatives, will say a good word for the contras, or Pinochet, or the death squads?), this still leaves us empty-handed when it comes to General Manuel Noriega, of Panama. Greene obviously liked Panama as a country, and may have had some justification for his friendship with Omar Torrijos, a mediocre personality even as depicted in *Getting to Know the General* but quite possibly a man of some charm. Noriega, however, was purely and merely a sadist and a thief. He may not have instigated the murder of Torrijos (though Norman Sherry seems to implicate him in this crime), but he most certainly arranged the kidnapping, torture,

and killing of one of Panama's most distinguished dissidents, Dr. Hugo Spadafora. The good doctor might have been a Greene hero if he had occurred in a different political context, but as it was Greene took the side of the oppressor, even telling an interviewer after the dictator's deposition in 1989, "I hope General Noriega will harass the invaders from bases in the mountains." In one of his last novels, *Monsignor Quixote*, Greene has an old priest and an old Communist rambling around Spain in a beat-up car and exchanging likable platitudes about the nature of (and the similarity of) their faiths. But what is quixotic about wishing an extension of life and power to a fascistic zombie like Noriega?

The term "anti-American" is a loose one, and loosely employed. My own working definition of it, admittedly a slack one also, is that a person is anti-American if he or she is consistently contemptuous of American culture and furthermore supports any opponent of U.S. policy, whoever this may be. And if an author accuses America of being insufficiently colonial in Vietnam, and lives long enough to endorse a Noriega resistance in Panama, he meets the qualification. That such a position should also be so largely "faith-based" is not as much of an irony as it might seem—not in the age of globalized (but of course anti-"globalization" and anti-American) jihad.

It is an irony, however, that Greene should have spent so much of his career trying to adapt himself to that most singularly American of the arts, the cinema. The distinction he made in his fictions—between novels and "entertainments"—was one that he first evolved to excuse himself for writing an openly catchpenny movie script in the form of *Orient Express*. A few years later, in 1937, he composed an essay on the film industry in which he claimed, "The poetic cinema, it is worth remembering, can be built up on a few very simple ideas, as simple as the idea behind the poetic fictions of Conrad: the love of peace, a country, a feeling for fidelity." In the same essay he chose to laud the cinematic honesty of D. W. Griffith.

Even his rivals and critics grant him a facile "I am a camera" skill. Evelyn Waugh conceded that with Greene's prose "the affinity to the film is everywhere apparent ... it is the camera's eye which moves." J. M. Coetzee adds,

In *Brighton Rock* the influence of Howard Hawks can be felt in the handling of the violence at the racetrack; the ingenious use of the street photographer to advance the plot suggests Alfred Hitchcock. Chapters characteristically end with the focus being pulled back from human actors to the greater natural scene—the moon over city and beachfront, for instance.

These filmic qualities are, to put it not much higher, well-made clichés. So, for that matter, are the virtues "love of peace, a country, a feeling for fidelity." But Greene managed to betray all those, too. His many lost and exhausted and discredited causes need not evoke much nostalgia in us, but it is somehow fitting that his most lasting impression should be a celluloid one.

(*The Atlantic*, March 2005)

Death from a Salesman: Graham Greene's Bottled Ontology

Introduction (2007) to *Our Man in Havana*, by Graham Greene.

[In Havana] where every vice was permissible and every trade possible, lay the true background for my comedy.

—Graham Greene, *Ways of Escape*, 1980

GRAHAM GREENE FAMOUSLY subdivided his fictions into “novels” and “entertainments” (this present one falling with a slightly suppressed chuckle into the second category) as if to slyly warn his audience that an element of the ludic and the flippant would sometimes be permitted to him and should be forgiven by his readers. If, in his infrequent confessions, he might have mentally reclassified some offenses as venial rather than mortal, something of the same analogy holds throughout his work.

I should like to propose a third, or subcategory: the whisky (as opposed to the nonwhisky) fictions. Alcohol is seldom far from the reach of Greene's characters, and its influence was clearly some kind of daemon in his work and in his life. A stanza of that witty and beautiful poem “On the Circuit,” written in 1963, registers W. H. Auden's dread at the thought of lecturing on a booze-free American campus and asks, anxiously and in italics:

Is this my milieu where I must
How grahamgreeneish! How infra dig!
Snatch from the bottle in my bag
An analeptic swig?

Describing a visit to a 1987 conference of “intellectuals” in Moscow in the early Gorbachev years, both Gore Vidal and Fay Weldon were to record Greene making exactly this dive into his bottle-crammed briefcase. “Analeptic” literally means “healing,” and there was no doubt of a buried connection in Greene's mind between the restorative properties of holy water and the redeeming qualities of raw spirit. In at least three of his literary ventures Greene chose to make the subject a central one. The lost but resigned little fugitive cleric in *The Power and the Glory* (1940) is actually aching at all times for a shot of brandy, but the Mexican vernacular deems his type “the whisky priest.” The burned-out figures of British intelligence in *The Human Factor* (1978) seem at times to be engaged in some sort of contest to amass the greatest number of “blend” labels, from J&B to Johnnie Walker, and even to create a new pseudo-scotch by mixing White Label and Johnnie Walker on the grounds that “they're all blends anyway.”

The view that both sides in the Cold War were an admixture—at best—of each other's hangover-inducing ingredients was an abiding belief of Graham Greene and is never more on show than in this miniature drama, and drama of miniatures. The action commences in a bar, and almost every subsequent moment in the story is set in a place where alcohol is dominant. To speak generally, if not absolutely, one may

say that dependence on booze is a symptom of weakness, and although Jim Wormold (not a name to inspire immediate confidence) does turn out to possess a few latent strengths, he is presented from the first as a feeble man who is both a hostage—to his own poverty and inanition—and who has a hostage: his foal-like sixteen-year-old daughter, Milly. This girl, a combination of slight tart and vague Madonna striding through the worldly and corrupt streets of Havana, makes the hapless vacuum-cleaner salesman a prisoner of her childhood, and of his own. How wrenched yet charmed he is, having lost the wife to whom he promised that Milly would be educated as a Catholic, to hear the little girl solemnly praying “Hail Mary, quite contrary.” Yet how oppressed he is by the recollection of his own misery as a schoolboy:

Childhood was the germ of all mistrust. You were cruelly joked upon and then you cruelly joked. You lost the remembrance of pain through inflicting it.

(Many is the Greene novel and reminiscence, most conspicuously *Brighton Rock*, where this trope of sadistic bullying makes its twitchy appearance. The slightly older boy who so relentlessly tortured him in his public-school days—a boy named Lionel Carter, as it happens—has put us eternally and unintentionally in his debt. And let us not forget that, as both tormentor and victim would have been taught: “In the lost boyhood of Judas, Christ was betrayed.”)

Evidently resolving—for purposes of the “entertainment”—to not make all this too lugubrious, Greene introduces Milly rather as Evelyn Waugh presented the more ominously named Cordelia in *Brideshead Revisited*. That good/bad little girl once made a novena for her pet pig, and was mentioned in her convent school report as the naughtiest girl in the memory of the oldest nun. She ended up by volunteering to be a nurse for the forces of General Franco. Milly unknowingly gratifies her father by setting fire to a teasing schoolmate named Thomas Earl Parkman, Junior; shows her class the collected postcards of great aesthetic nudes; and gives artless yet casuistic replies to direct questions from her easily-baffled and highly-impooverished single parent. She also offers novenas in the hope of acquiring a horse, and allows herself to be escorted by the saturnine Captain Segura, a man who would have seemed exceptionally sadistic even in the ranks of Franco’s phalanx.

Thus it is made as clear as possible, within a few pages of the opening, that Wormold is living a life of quiet desperation. He cannot go on as he is, but he is set in his ways and wedded to mediocre respectability. This would be dire enough even if—like Henry Pulling in *Travels with My Aunt*—he was back in suburban Wimbledon. But in exotic Havana, with business going poorly and with a burgeoning daughter to boot, he is additionally expected to keep up appearances as an awkward Englishman abroad. Yet this is precisely what makes him attractive to Hawthorne, the relentlessly incompetent envoy of British Intelligence who decides to sign him up as a subagent and (within limits) “put him in the picture.” To us, Hawthorne seems like yet another English naïf in the tropics, concerned, like any harassed salesman, with giving a pleasing impression to his ultimate boss in London, but to the hunted and needy Wormold he belongs to “the cruel and inexplicable world of childhood,” and it thus feels like no more than natural

justice to exploit him and fleece him to the very hilt. The two men do, however, have an initial bond. When they meet in Sloppy Joe's bar, Hawthorne surveys the range of bottles on offer and says:

"Eighteen different kinds of Scotch ... including Black Label. And I haven't counted the Bourbons. It's a wonderful sight. Wonderful," he repeated, lowering his voice with respect. "Have you ever seen so many whiskies?"

"As a matter of fact I have. I collect miniatures and I have ninety-nine at home."

And this collection is about to be enhanced by the man with whom Wormold already has a bond, another lonely loser named Dr. Hasselbacher who divides his time between a few remaining patients and the rival Wonder Bar.

"There is always time for a Scotch." It was obvious from the way he pronounced Scotch that Dr Hasselbacher had already had time for a great many.... He took from his pocket two miniature bottles of whisky: one was Lord Calvert, the other Old Taylor. "Have you got them?" he asked with anxiety.

"I've got the Calvert, but not the Taylor. It was kind of you to remember my collection, Hasselbacher." It always seemed strange to Wormold that he continued to exist for others when he was not there.

This touching and abject allusion to Bishop Berkeley's famous question is followed immediately by a playful and half-drunken ontological interlude, this time in the Seville-Biltmore bar where Dr. Hasselbacher, flown with scotch, imagines that he has already won the next day's lottery and is awash in dollars. Addressing a stray American who doubts him, he says:

"I have won them as certainly as you exist, my almost unseen friend. You would not exist if I didn't believe you existed, nor would those dollars. I believe, therefore you are."

"What do you mean I wouldn't exist?"

"You exist only in my thoughts, my friend. If I left this room..."

"You're nuts."

"Prove you exist, then."

"What do you mean, prove? Of course I exist. I've got a first-class business in real estate: a wife and a couple of kids in Miami: I flew here this morning by Delta: I'm drinking this Scotch, aren't I?" The voice contained a hint of tears.

From Berkeley to Descartes in a few paragraphs: Greene's theological-philosophical subtext is always available to him. ("Like Milly, Dr. Hasselbacher had faith. He was controlled by numbers as she was by saints.") And interestingly, the innocent and faithful Hasselbacher offers the annoyed American the alternative existence of "a Secret Service agent"—the very career upon which Wormold is, all unaware, about to embark.

Before we leave this scene, we may notice that the American is like all the other Americans in the novel: banal and bourgeois and self-pitying. (He doesn't even consider claiming the words "I think" as proof of his existence: The real-estate business comes first.) Most of the Yanks are tourist cameos, worried about the wave of violence that is afflicting the island and tending to congregate in yet another bar at the Hotel Nacional.

Their days of treating Havana as a vacation and business backyard are about to be over, “for the President’s regime was creaking dangerously toward its end.”

Our Man in Havana was published on October 6, 1958. On New Year’s Day 1959 Fidel Castro’s luxuriantly bearded guerrillas emerged from the sierras and the villages and captured the city. As with his setting of *The Quiet American*—in Vietnam just before the critical battle of Dien Bien Phu—or with his decision to locate *The Comedians* in the midnight of “Papa Doc” Duvalier’s Haiti, Greene seemed to have an almost spooky prescience when it came to the suppurating political slums on the periphery of America’s Cold War empire. In 1958—the year that *Doctor No* was first published—Ian Fleming, from his own Caribbean home, had not yet captured the world’s attention with a British agent who carried a number as well as a gun (and a license to use it). Nor had humanity learned to associate Cuba with missiles, and with the possibility of thermonuclear annihilation. And Greene in any case was having fun, with his unarmed “Agent 59200/5,” and his wholly invented missile sites based on vacuum-cleaner blueprints.

Moreover, the eclipse of British power after the Suez catastrophe of 1956 had not quite then become self-evident. “I think we’ve got the Caribbean sewn up now, sir,” Hawthorne tells “The Chief” on his return to London. This black-monocled clubman and thwarted fiction writer—a distinctly non-“M”-like creation—also invents agents in his own mind, and is thus intrigued to learn more about “our man in Havana.”

“Doesn’t run after women, I hope?”

“Oh, nothing of that sort, sir. His wife left him. Went off with an American.”

“I suppose he’s not anti-American? Havana’s not the place for any prejudice like that. We have to work with them—only up to a point, of course.”

(“The Chief”—which was also the staff nickname given to Lord Copper in Evelyn Waugh’s *Scoop*—is fond of this “up to a point” mantra, which he inflicts on Hawthorne rather than, as with Lord Copper’s underling Salter, having it practiced on him.) His character occupies only a few brief scenes but is nonetheless one of the most finished and polished portrayals in the entire book. Like Lord Copper, he too is easy to delude or, as was said of President Coolidge, “once bamboozled, impossible to unbamboozle.” Greene’s own wartime relationship with British Intelligence, and his lifelong comradeship with its most famous traitor Kim Philby, evidently conditioned him to view “the Service” as a place of collapsing scenery and low comedy, populated by a cast of jaded misfits. Thus he presents Wormold’s fraud and dishonesty in a sympathetic light: The mandarins of M16 are eager to deceive themselves, and to be deceived, and they get no more than what they ask for.

I forget who it was who once updated the old moral couplet: “Oh what a tangled web we weave / When first we practice to deceive” by adding the lines:

But when we’ve practiced quite awhile

How vastly we improve our style!

That later version (which was entitled “A Word of Encouragement”) could have been composed with Wormold in mind. *Facilis descensus Averno!* How easily he takes to the

world of padded expenses, false reports, and fabricated salaries for non-existent staffers. But for Greene, the world of farce always has its bitter limitations. The inoffensive Dr. Hasselbacher is drawn into the net of Wormold's fantasy and suffers ruin and humiliation as a consequence. Now Wormold feels himself becoming coarsened:

Shut in his car Wormold felt guilt nibbling around him like a mouse in a prison-cell. Perhaps soon the two of them would grow accustomed to each other and guilt would come to eat out of his hand ... There was always another side to a joke, the side of the victim.

That this last insight had been dearly bought by Greene, from his boyhood onward, there can be no doubt. Its counterpart and corollary—"Sometimes it seems easier to run the risk of death than ridicule"—does not make its appearance until much nearer to the culmination of the story.

From the name of the "Atomic Pile" vacuum cleaner to the shock effect produced on "The Chief" by the outlines so deftly and falsely sketched by Wormold, Greene also indulges in the lighter side of "schoolboy" humor:

"Vacuum cleaner again. Hawthorne, I believe we may be on to something so big that the H-bomb will become a conventional weapon."

"Is that desirable, sir?"

"Of course it's desirable. Nobody worries about conventional weapons."

This could almost have come from a Peter Sellers script of the same epoch, and will inevitably remind some of today's readers of more recent fiascoes associated with paranoia about weapons of mass destruction. However, there is nothing flippant or innocent about Captain Segura. In the figure of this torturer and mutilator and sex maniac, evidently appropriated from the dictator Batista's dreaded "enforcer" Captain Ventura, Greene offers a foretaste of the "death squads," with their dark glasses and special unmarked automobiles, who were to terrorize Latin America and horrify the world in the succeeding decades. Once again, this character is not on stage very often or for very long, but he furnishes another well-etched and highly memorable "miniature." It would not, perhaps, be correct to see in him an instance of the banality of evil. His evil is too overt and too ingrained for that. But he does have a way of turning up in banal or even jovial settings, reminding me of what Greene wrote about the skill of John Buchan as a thriller writer: his ability to summon the specter of death right up against the railings of the leafy and relaxing park. It is over a routine game of "checkers"—accompanied this time by daiquiris rather than scotch—that Segura casually mentions his belief in the "torturable" and "non-torturable" classes. Wormold affects shock and may even feel it: At any rate he reacts as if he were a stuffy Englishman who is quite new and unused to native customs:

"I didn't know there were class distinctions in torture."

"Dear Mr. Wormold, surely you realize there are people who expect to be tortured and others who would be outraged by the idea. One never tortures except by a kind of mutual agreement ... Catholics are more torturable than Protestants, just as they are more criminal."

Greene is here showing us a third-rate Grand Inquisitor, in a church gone bad, who no longer applies the rack or the thumbscrew out of any exalted conviction. (Indeed, we later learn that Segura has been hoarding money in case he has to make a sudden opportunistic dash for Miami.) So perhaps banality and evil are not as much separated as all that ...

In the novel, Greene makes his creation Wormold behave in a manner that is absurdly out of character. (It is plainly outside the bounds of credibility, given his aching feelings for his vulnerable daughter, that he would permit her to continue an association with a policeman whose cigarette case is upholstered with human skin.) However, Wormold himself proves to be a man who can confect fictional personalities more or less at will. Having initially invented them in order to bluff his superiors, he finds that they have taken on an existence of their own:

It astonished Wormold how quickly he could reply to any questions about his characters; they seemed to live on the threshold of consciousness—he had only to turn a light on and there they were, frozen in some characteristic action.... Sometimes he was scared at the way these people grew in the dark without his knowledge.... There were moments when Wormold thought it might have been easier if he had recruited real agents.

However, this second ontological interlude—if I may so phrase it—comes to an abrupt end when the universe of rugged reality decides to claim Wormold for its own. His flesh-and-blood assistant Beatrice is a woman of unsettlingly keen intuition. “You talk like a novelist,” she observes—while still bamboozled—when he muses on the fate of one of his “agents.” “You’ve been writing his elegy like a bad novelist preparing an effect,” she adds, in a line that is altogether too improbable and self-referential. It is she, who has been cheerfully paying part of the price of Wormold’s irresponsibility, who signals the very harsh new tone and turn of events at just the moment when he himself is under pressure and about to “revert” to sheer puerility and denial. (To be exact, he is playing with a children’s cereal box after breakfast.) “I don’t want you murdered,” she sternly announces. “You see, you are real. You aren’t Boy’s Own Paper.” (Italics mine.) It is the palpable womanhood of Beatrice, combined with the increasing and alarming grown-upness of his beloved Milly, that compels Wormold to play the “real man” at last. In earlier and easier and happier scenes, the big weapons have been conjured from his imagination, and the small-bore weapon has been a soda siphon in a hotel garden, aimed playfully at Captain Segura but easily laughed off with the excuse that it was directed at a “Dimpled Haig” scotch. On that occasion, Captain Segura had resorted to an abrupt vernacular obscenity (all the indecent expressions in this novel are rendered in Spanish) and “squeezed out a smile. It seemed to come from the wrong place like toothpaste when the tube splits.” Greene’s gift for the sinister implication, and for the recurring analogy to booze, is further illustrated by the sentence: “You could not estimate his danger from his size any more than you could a hard drink.” And it is clear that the silly splash from the soda siphon has by no means diluted the Captain, or his venom. But by the time Segura takes off his gun-belt and lays it to one side, in

preparation for the climactic whisky-dominated game of checkers (or “droughts” if you prefer) it is as plain as the old maxim of Chekhov that a gun once displayed in plain sight will not be reholstered until it has been fired in anger. The “Wormold,” in other words, has turned. The meek little shopkeeper is ready to commit murder. This is to be death from a salesman.

His thirst to kill is supplied by a hideous, stuttering, impotent double-agent named—like Greene’s boyhood tormentor—Carter. If this odious and parodic Englishman had not offered Wormold poisoned scotch at the dreary, joyless business banquet into which he is lured and enticed (and at which different flasks and blends are continually offered and contrasted), and if the innocuous Dr. Hasselbacher had not been subsequently slain for trying to warn Wormold off, and if the whole callousness and cynicism of the spy-racket had not begun to sicken Wormold well beyond the point of disgust, I think that Greene meant us to understand that his salesman might yet have remained passive, and preferred to stay in the camp of the victim. But what Wormold is forced to realize is that he is in just as much danger from his “own” side. How quickly the tepid appeals to patriotism and Britishness and Lamb’s *Tales from Shakespeare*, proffered so smoothly by Hawthorne at their first meetings, mutate into their sordid opposite. It’s not unlike the blue movie that he and Beatrice find themselves viewing while sheltering in one of Havana’s celebrated nightclubs:

There was an odd intimacy between them as they watched together this blueprint of love. Similar movements of the body had once meant more to them than anything else the world had to offer. The act of lust and the act of love are the same; it cannot be falsified like a sentiment.

And so Wormold, determined to vindicate friendship and love over treachery and murder, finds it surprisingly easy to discover what he must do. In three sentences that might almost define the world we know as “Greenland”:

He stood on the frontier of violence, a strange land he had never visited before; he had his passport in his hand. “Profession: Spy.” “Characteristic Features: Friendlessness.” “Purpose of Visit: Murder.” No visa was required. His papers were in order.

At such a critical moment, no Greene character would refrain from at least some reflection on faith, however terse and bitter:

Vengeance was unnecessary when you believed in a heaven. But he had no such belief. Mercy and forgiveness were scarcely virtues in a Christian; they came too easily.

Even so, when it comes to the moment of truth—or “reality”—Wormold is almost unable to destroy another human being and has to rationalize his actions even as he is undertaking them. He is thankful that the decision is taken out of his hands by Carter’s vile conduct, and indeed is still rationalizing busily when the shock moment of actual crisis occurs, and the question of will or volition is snatched (unlike the fortunately purloined gun) out of his hands.

This stroke of impulsive decision does not succeed in dispelling the mist of moral ambiguity. Wormold still has to live in the world that he has—with his own lies and practical jokes—helped to make. Once again, a rationale is required of him, and he

chooses (as does Beatrice) a version of E. M. Forster's celebrated moral calculus. If one had the choice of betraying one's country or one's friends, said the author of *Howards End* and of that momentous phrase "the world of telegrams and anger," one should hope for the courage to betray one's country. Wormold's confected cables to London have some of the absurdity of William Boot's telegrams to Lord Copper's *Daily Beast*, but his anger takes a Forsterian form:

I don't give a damn about men who are loyal to the people who pay them, to organizations.... I don't think even my country means all that much. There are many countries in our blood, aren't there, but only one person. Would the world be in the mess it is if we were loyal to love and not to countries?

Many years later, in his rash introduction to Kim Philby's KGB-vetted autobiography *My Silent War*, Greene was to write, again with a question mark that asked rather a lot:

He betrayed his country—yes, perhaps he did, but who among us has not committed treason to something or someone more important than a country?

With or without its "perhaps," this is bound to strike many readers as a bit too glib and convenient (as indeed it is). And how many times, after all, does a choice between country and friends really come up? But, safely back in London, where admittedly there are no torturers or executioners, Wormold and Beatrice discover that their secret employers, too, are immersed in moral ambiguity and expert in the means of manipulating it. In essence, and in return for his silence about the whole fiasco, Wormold is offered a sinecure and an official decoration. In one of the weaker sections of the book, Beatrice then repeats at greater and less probable length everything that Wormold has just declaimed above. In retrospect, we can see that this Greene "entertainment" was in many ways the curtain-raiser for the bleak universe of Le Carré's *George Smiley*, and of the shadowland where any appeal to loyalty and the old decencies was little more than a rhetorical prelude to a stab in the back.

The conclusive end of the Cold War, and the implosion of one party to it, now makes some of Greene's own rhetoric seem even more facile. The revolution did indeed come to Cuba, and the Captain Seguras did indeed take themselves off to Miami, and for a while Greene himself was an honored guest of—and ardent apologist for—the Fidel Castro regime. (His admiring chronicler Norman Sherry gives some disquieting instances in Volume III of his immense biography.) Greene was not, in fact, neutral in the Cold War, nor a sincere practitioner of moral equivalence. He was by inclination a supporter of the "other" side and, above all culturally and politically hostile to the United States. In 1969 he delivered a lecture entitled "The Virtue of Disloyalty" in Hamburg, in which (never mind *Lamb's Tales*) he accused Shakespeare himself of having been too patriotic, and too reticent about Catholic dissidents sent to the gibbet. He was delighted when a Soviet cosmonaut took *Our Man in Havana* into outer space. But his audience and readership were in the "West," so the "shades of Greene" were adjusted accordingly. And this needful ambivalence was often useful in his novels, since it compelled him to

phrase his ethical dilemmas in liberal and individual, rather than Marxist or collective, terms.

Having already touched on Greene's debt to Waugh, and most especially to *Brideshead Revisited*, I ought to try to return the compliment, even if obliquely. Writing in praise of *Brideshead* many years after its first publication, Greene said that he had remembered the novel's beautiful opening chapter as very long, and was thus astonished to find, upon rereading, that it was as brief as it was. This he certainly intended as a compliment. One should say the same for his own swiftly-drawn but contemptuous portrait of the British ambassador to Cuba, whose appearance in the novel occupies no more than a page and a half. The desiccated and frigid envoy repeatedly insists that he knows nothing of what has been going on, and wishes for nothing more than to remain in this blessed state of unawareness. It is Greene, not the provincial and suburban Wormold, who is able to assemble a whole diplomatic biography from the objets d'art on view while he is being kept waiting by this dignitary:

Wormold thought he could detect a past in Tehran (an odd-shaped pipe, a tile), Athens (an icon or two), but he was momentarily puzzled by an African mask—perhaps Monrovia?

In "real" life, Greene was to greatly annoy the British Foreign Office by writing some devastating letters to the press a few weeks after the publication of *Our Man in Havana*. Announcing a post-revolution cancellation of the sale of weapons to Cuba, the Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd had claimed that, when the weapons contract had been signed, there had been no evidence of strife. Greene wrote at his withering best:

Any visitor to Cuba could have given Her Majesty's Government more information about conditions in the island than was apparently supplied by our official representatives: the mutilation and torture practiced by leading police officers ... the killing of hostages.

By one of those right-place-right-time occurrences that swelled his reputation as both journalist and novelist, Greene had stumbled into contact with rebels and lawyers—Armando Hart, Haydée Santamaria, Melba Hernandez—whose names are still totemic in the Cuban Revolution and some of whom are admired even by those who later underwent a painful rupture with Castro. Whether it is deliberate or not I cannot say, but Greene's description of the Havana Seville-Biltmore's upper rooms as being "built as prison cells round a rectangular balcony" is a near-analogy to the "Panopticon" jail in which Castro was held by Batista on the Isle of Pines after his legendary attack on the Moncada barracks in 1953. Greene was well ahead of the story, before he fell well behind it. His secular and personal religion, which always stressed "the side of the victim" and which ostensibly forbade him to "see no evil," did not safeguard him from letting both his Communism and his Catholicism get in the way of truth-telling about the rebel-turned-caudillo as the years went on.

By an irony of his beloved Cuban Revolution, which has left the island stranded in time and isolated from many recent currents of history and political economy (with

its still-bearded leader now paunchy and gray and the only remaining Latin American head of government always to be seen in a uniform), the city of Havana has been compelled to remain very much as Greene described it.* The more flamboyant and amoral nightclubs did undergo a period of eclipse, but the sex trade has rebounded with a vengeance as the regime has become more dependent on tourism than Batista ever was. Communism, though—"the highest stage of underdevelopment," as Hans Magnus Enzensberger once tautly summarized the case—has preserved (some might like to say "spared") the old harbor-front and its hinterland. Ernest Hemingway's old haunts at the Floridita and the Bodeguita del Medio, the Calle Obispo and the "pock-marked pillars on Avenida de Maceo"; all the little landmarks of Wormold's life, are still rather seedily there. Nor is this depiction valued only by nostalgic foreigners. Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, Cuba's great chronicler of low-life and the author of *Trilogía Sucia de La Habana* (Dirty Havana Trilogy), has devoted an entire novel to the imaginative reconstruction of Greene's visit, and titled it *Nuestro GG in Havana* (Our GG in Havana). Greene's ability to evoke a sense of place and time, as in his clever mention of Havana's "blistering October" are encoded in this book as in no other, and remain redolent and real. In some ways, indeed, the existence of an antique rather than a modern Havana, until the day when the dam breaks and the full tide of Americanization flows in, is part of his literary and political bestowal. As is, of course, the silhouette of the anomic and rumpled and disillusioned Englishman in a torrid zone, nursing a bottle of scotch and musing ineptly on Pascal while caught somewhere between the status of émigré and internal exile. The human condition seen through the bottom of a glass: darkly.

Writing to his mistress Catherine Walston in 1956, Greene told her that *Our Man in Havana* was potentially a "very funny plot which if it comes off will make a footnote to history." I feel almost as if I owe an apology for having taken so long to illustrate his elementary point.

-2007

* I completed this essay on the day before Fidel Castro fell ill and handed over power to the Cuban armed forces, in the shape of his brother Raúl, in August 2006.

Loving Philip Larkin

Review of *Letters to Monica*, by Philip Larkin, edited by Anthony Thwaite.

IN MAY 1941, Philip Larkin was the treasurer of the Oxford University English Club and in that capacity had to take the visiting speaker George Orwell out to dinner after he had addressed the membership on the subject of "Literature and Totalitarianism." Larkin's main recollection of the evening was that the meal was an indifferent one at a "not-so-good hotel," the club's hospitality funds having been hopelessly depleted by an incautious earlier invitation to Dylan Thomas.

Nudged and intrigued by this near-miss of a potential meeting of minds, I once attempted a comparison and contrast between Larkin and Orwell, as exemplars of a

certain style of “Englishness.” Both men had an abiding love for the English countryside and a haunting fear of its obliteration at the hands of “developers.” (Here I would cite Larkin’s poem *Going, Going* and Orwell’s novel *Coming Up for Air*.) Both were openly scornful of Christianity but maintained a profound respect for the scripture and the Anglican liturgy, as well as for the masterpieces of English ecclesiastical architecture. (See Larkin’s poem *Church Going* and the same Orwell novel, as well as numberless of his letters and reviews.) They each cherished the famous English affection for animals and were revolted by any instances of human cruelty to them. (Here consult Larkin’s poem *Myxamatois*, about the extirpation of the country’s rabbit population, as well as at least one Orwell source that’s too obvious to require mentioning.)

In somewhat different ways, Orwell and Larkin were phlegmatically pessimistic and at times almost misanthropic, not to say misogynistic. Both also originated from dire family backgrounds that inculcated prejudice against Jews, the colored subjects of the British Empire, and the working class. Orwell’s detested father was a servant of the Empire who specialized in the exceptionally nasty sub-division that traded opium between India and China, and Larkin’s detested father was a professional civil servant who came to admire the “New Germany” of the 1930s and supported the British Union of Fascists. But these similarities in trait and background produced radically different conclusions. Orwell educated himself, not without difficulty, out of racial prejudice and took a stalwart position on the side of the workers. Larkin energetically hated the Labour movement and was appalled at the arrival of emigrants from the Caribbean and Asia. Orwell traveled as widely as his health permitted and learned several foreign languages, while Larkin’s insularity and loathing for “abroad” was almost parodic. In consequence, Orwell has left us a memory which gets English decency rated as one of humanity’s versions of grace under pressure, whereas the publication of his *Selected Letters* in 1992, and a biography by Andrew Motion in 1993, posthumously drenched Larkin in a tide of cloacal filth and petty bigotry that was at least somewhat self-generated.

I now wish I had understood enough to push my earlier comparison a little further. For there is another aspect of “Englishness,” netted in discrepant ways by Harold Pinter and Monty Python, in which both men had a share. This is the world of wretched, tasteless food and watery drinks, dreary and crowded lodgings, outrageous plumbing, surly cynicism, long queues, shocking hygiene and dismal, rain-lashed holidays, continually punctuated by rudeness and philistinism. Orwell’s *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* is the most graphic distillation of all this in his early fiction, but it is an essential element of the texture of *Nineteen Eighty-four*, and was quarried from the “down and out” journalism of which he produced so much. A neglected aspect of the general misery, but very central once you come to notice it, is this: We are in a mean and chilly and cheerless place, where it is extraordinarily difficult to have sex, let alone to feel yourself in love. Orwell’s best shorthand for it was “the WC and dirty-handkerchief side of life.”

Philip Larkin’s own summary was if anything even more dank: He once described the sexual act as a futile attempt to “get someone else to blow your nose for you.”

These collected letters reflect his contribution to a distraught and barren four-decade relationship with Monica Jones, an evidently insufferable yet gifted woman who was a constant friend and intermittent partner (one can barely rise to saying “mistress” let alone “lover”) until Larkin’s death in 1985. During that time, he strove to keep her to himself while denying her the marriage that she so anxiously wanted, betrayed her with other women sexually, and eagerly helped Kingsley Amis to employ her as the model for the frigid, drab and hysterical Margaret Peel in *Lucky Jim*.

On an initial scrutiny, *Letters to Monica* struck me as rather thickening the squalid atmosphere of some of the preceding accounts. But so unalleviated—I almost wrote “artless”—is its tone that the material takes on a certain integrity and consistency. Not unlike Larkin’s paradoxical infatuation with jazz, also, it helps furnish a key to his muse. The key in both cases—which is why “artless” would be such a mistake—is that about suffering he was seldom wrong. The dismal paltriness of the suffering doesn’t really qualify this verdict.

One of his ways of keeping Monica while keeping her at bay—they did not co-habit until very near the end, forced into mutual dependence by decrepitude on his part and dementia on hers: perhaps the least romantic story ever told—was to make an over-full confession of his own inadequacies as a male. “I’m sorry our lovemaking fizzled out,” he writes after a disappointing provincial vacation in 1958. “I am not a highly-sexed person.” This comes just after a letter in which he invites her to consider their affair in the light of “a kind of homosexual relation, disguised: it wdn’t surprise me at all if someone else said so.” And even earlier—it is not as if this is the record of a hot thing cooling—he writes in December 1954 that “if it were announced that all sex would cease on 31 December, my way of life wouldn’t change at all.” This naturally prompts one to review one of his best-known poems, *Annus Mirabilis*:

Sexual intercourse began
In nineteen sixty-three
(Which was rather late for me)
Between the end of the Chatterley ban,
And the Beatles’ first LP.

The lines can easily be read as a non-literal satire on the exuberant 1960s in general. The less-quoted succeeding verse is arguably more revealing:

Up till then there’d only been
A sort of bargaining,
A wrangle for a ring,
A shame that started at sixteen
And spread to everything.

In Larkin’s mind, marriage was invariably a trap set by females; a ring in exchange for some perfunctory sex and then a lifetime of domestic servitude and—even more appalling—the rearing of children. Once again the poetry is unambiguous. *The Life with a Hole in It* conveys the cringe with greater complexity, but *Self’s the Man* is not unrepresentative:

He married a woman to stop her getting away.
Now she's here all day.
And the money he gets for wasting his life on work
She takes as her perk
To pay for the kiddies' clobber and the drier....

Even *The Whitsun Weddings*, in which he manages to write with some tendresse about a famous northern English nuptial tradition, closes with an extremely melancholy metaphor of energy mutated into futility, or possibly potency into liquefaction: "A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower / Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain." And as for the thought of parenthood, not just by or from oneself, but even of oneself, we need look no further than the celebrated poem that probably convinced his admirer Margaret Thatcher that he wasn't the family-values type. This *Be The Verse* opens by saying "They fuck you up, your mum and dad / They may not mean to, but they do," and closes by advising "Get out as early as you can / And don't have any kids yourself." There are virtually no references to children in Larkin that are not vivid with revulsion, the word "kiddies" being the customary form which the automatic shudder took.

No keen analyst is required to unravel this. Not only did Larkin have a bombastic fascist for a father, but he also had a simpering weakling for a mother. Sydney Larkin had the grace to die early but his widow Eva lingered on, querulous, demanding and hypochondriac (as well as extremely unwell) for decades. She may not have meant to make her son's life a nightmare of guilt and annoyance, but she did. This resulted in Monica Jones winning at least one round. On no account, she told her man, should he be blackmailed into living with Eva. "Don't be robbed!" she beseeched him. "Don't be robbed of your soul." If she couldn't have him, she at least wouldn't surrender him to that form of "the other woman."

To have read Larkin's *Letters and Motion's* biography is to be "in" on a rather dirty joke that surreptitiously permeates these pages. Larkin may not have been highly-sexed in the conventional sense, but he was a heroic consumer of pornography and amateur composer of sado-masochistic reveries, which he often shared with his worldly friends Robert Conquest and Kingsley Amis. He didn't much like the capital city but would never pass through London without spending good money, or paying through the nose as one might say, on the vendors of semi-licit glossies in the Soho quarter. Why Andrew Motion maintains that he didn't have specialized tastes I cannot think: On those dark and costly visits he was in constant search of material featuring schoolgirls, flagellation, and sodomy. (In 1958 to Conquest: "I agree Bamboo & Frolic are the tops, or rather bottoms: do pass on any that have ceased to stimulate.") This celebrated fixation, too, is thought by some to be "quintessentially English." At his death, along with many other private papers, the vast library of a hectically devoted masturbator had to be hastily burned. (He obviously had not mistaken his calling as an archivist.) Once one "knows" this, many of the letters to Monica become instantly intelligible. He comments slyly but learnedly on the buggery implications of the D. H. Lawrence

novel that was then on trial in the courts. “You and your bottom” he elsewhere writes fervently. “I lay in bed one morning last week remembering one after-breakfast time when you were looking out of my kitchen window ... You were wearing the black nylon panties with the small hole in!” Or “You must look a wonderful sight in fur hat and boots—nothing else? Holding a rawhide whip? (You see how naturally my imagination composes aesthetic montages for you.)” On and on his plaintively suggestive appeals recur and—this is somehow impressive—she never seems to take the hint. What Larkin wanted was a Nora Barnicle and what he got was—Margaret Peel. The sole exception seems to prove my rule: In late 1958 he plumbs the depth of abjectness by writing to her in apology for what clearly must have been a bungled episode of anal penetration. (“I am sorry too that our encounter had such unhappy results for you! I really didn’t expect such a thing, though I suppose it might have been predicted. I am sorry. It does rather spoil the incident, even at best, which was very exciting for me anyway. Let’s hope all rights itself soon.”)

Not since Hemingway so overdid the lapine pillow-talk in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* has any man referred to a woman as a rabbit with such regularity and intensity. Most of the letters are addressed to either “Bun” or “Bunny” and not a few are illustrated with drawings of rabbits, references to rabbits in literature, or condemnations of British government policy toward rabbits. The obsession did yield the fine poem *Myxamatois* that I mentioned earlier, but Larkin’s attempt to make a Beatrix Potter nursery story out of the standoff is often in jarring contrast to the content. The sad grovel I quoted from above is concluded by the sentence: “You sound as if you want comforting Fat rabbit lovely pretty rabbit,” which is a lot to bear for those of us who respect Larkin for his lack of sentimentality. And rabbits are above all philoprogenitive ... Incidentally all resemblances to Orwell break off at this point: The author of *Animal Farm* had a tough enough time with women but was eager for marriage and anxious for children, preferring to adopt rather than go without.

This collection is an accidental success as a period piece. The Britain of the immediate postwar was in many ways even more austere and impoverished than the Britain of the Depression, with bad and scarce housing, for example, made very much worse by aerial bombardment. Larkin, who once told an interviewer that “deprivation is for me what daffodils were to Wordsworth,” found his poetic promptings in the overcrowded, overworked, underfed society that he so much purported to resent. Not only that, but his chosen career as a librarian led him to live in Belfast, Britain’s (and Ireland’s) most immiserated and forbidding city, at the cusp of the 1940s and ’50s. His political sympathies can scarcely have been Republican, but a description of an Orange Day rally is one of the best short evocations of massed boorish fanaticism I have ever read. “It was a parade of staggering dullness (every face wore the same ‘taking himself seriously’ expression) & stupefying hypocrisy.”

Indeed, those of the Terry Eagleton crew, who have become so righteously fixated on the later “revelations” of Larkin’s racism and xenophobia, might be surprised at the absence of jingoism and nastiness in these letters. He is very strict with Kipling’s

excesses, for example, accusing him of betraying his talent in order to be a crowd-pleaser (“hunts with the pack”). Perhaps the uneasy memory of parental Nazism is too close, even though this makes it the more eerie to notice that he never, ever alludes to the then-recent horror of the Third Reich, either in these pages or any others. Alternative diagnoses include Motion’s opinion that he didn’t quite surrender to reactionary impulses until he became much older, and the high likelihood that much of what he did write in that vein was designed to amuse friends in private letters, by way of outraging the new forms of correctness. A thwarted and furtive sex-life, one may speculate, would have been no obstacle in the formation of a carapace of contempt for modernity and its hedonistic outriders.

And this returns us to the luckless Monica, whose possibly Aspergerish manners he strove in vain to correct. “I do want to urge you, with all love and kindness, to think about how much you say & how you say it ...” Deploying—in a different but surely conscious declension—the most deadly word in the English vernacular, he warned her that “you’re getting a habit of boring your face up or around into the features of your listener.” That was in 1952, with almost thirty years of on-again off-again stretching before the pair of them. But he must have caught something of value in her opinions, because he took seriously her part-grammatical objection to line four of the closing stanza of *Church Going*: today perhaps his best-loved poem. Ought it to have been “And so much never can be obsolete,” instead of “that much”? Look and see. Even if, like me, you cannot imagine changing a word, you notice that she was a shrewd and attentive reader. (Here might be the place to say that Anthony Thwaite’s meticulous footnoting and cross-referencing have made this book much more capacious and lively than it might have been, as well as affording us a unique view of some of Larkin’s most lapidary poems when they were still fluid and in formation.)

Rising above the low-level rancor and tedium that can make the scrutiny of private anomie so lowering to the spirit, *Letters to Monica* obliquely shows the civilizing effect that even the most trying woman can exert on even the most impossible man. With the exception of the occasional rather weak joke in passing, Larkin respected Miss Jones too much, it seems, to try any of his vulgar prejudices or cheaper doggerel on her. Most impressive of all, I found, was that even his anti-libidinous propaganda could yield its warm and poetic aspect. Take this stern epistle from 1951:

I think—though I am all for free love, advanced schools & so on—someone might do a little research

on some of the inherent qualities of sex—its cruelty, its bullyingness, for instance. It seems to me

that bending someone else to your will is the very stuff of sex, by force or neglect if you are male,

by spitefulness or nagging or scenes if you are female. And what’s more, both sides would sooner

have it that way than not at all. I wouldn’t.

Such an ostensibly repressive and limited view, with its unimaginative image of “both sides,” had been given the most starkly beautiful expression by a poem that Larkin wrote the preceding year. Deceptions, suggested by a harrowing anecdote of forced prostitution from Henry Mayhew’s history of the London poor, implicitly vindicated the ruined female victim by pleading indirectly that her foul client was also a pathetic loser and that she, the innocent sufferer, might even turn out to have been “the less deceived.” He by no means omitted to picture the raw, latent violence of her own trauma. (“All the unhurried day / Your mind lay open like a drawer of knives.”) Gem hard, it is also an immediately striking piece of imaginative sympathy. Reviewing it, D. J. Enright gave Larkin a rare moment of (almost) unmixed pleasure by saying, as he proudly reported to Monica, that “I persuade words into poetry & don’t bully them.” A critic could not have approached more nearly to the core of Larkin’s gift.

It is inescapable that we should wonder how and why poetry manages to transmute the dross of existence into magic or gold, and the contrast in Larkin’s case is a specially acute one. Having quit Belfast he removed himself forever to Hull, a rugged coastal city facing toward Scandinavia which may once have been represented in Parliament by Andrew Marvell but which in point of warmth and amenity runs Belfast pretty close. Here he brooded biliously and even spitefully on lack of privacy, the success of his happier friends Amis and Conquest, the decline of standards at the university he served, the general bloodiness of pub lunches and academic sherry-parties, the frumpy manipulativeness of womenfolk, and the petrifying imminence of death. (Might one say that Hull was other people?) He may have taken a sidelong swipe at the daffodils, but he did evolve his own sour strain and syncopation of Wordsworth’s “still, sad music of humanity.” And without that synthesis of gloom and angst we could never have had his *Aubade*, a waking meditation on extinction that unstrenuously contrives a tense, brilliant counterpoise between the stoic philosophy of Lucretius and David Hume, and his own frank terror of oblivion. Many of Larkin’s expeditions to churches were in fact an excuse to visit cemeteries or memorials in spite of his repudiation of the fantasy of immortality, and with another of the finest poetic results of these—*An Arundel Tomb*—it turns out he had taken Monica as a companion and later accepted some of her thoughtful proposals concerning its final form. We might agree to find it heartening that, in consequence of a dead-average Middle-England Sunday stroll, as the other half of an almost passionless relationship, Philip Larkin should notice the awkwardly conjoined couple on an ancient stone coffin-lid and, without forcing let alone bullying the language, still tentatively be able to find:

Our almost-instinct almost true:

What will survive of us is love.

(*The Atlantic*, May 2011)

Stephen Spender: A Nice Bloody Fool

Review of Stephen Spender: The Authorized Biography, by John Sutherland.

ONE OF THE EARLY POEMS with which Stephen Spender made his name opens like this: “My parents kept me from children who were rough.”

In 1957, in *The Sense of Movement*, Thom Gunn proclaimed: “I praise the overdogs from Alexander / To those who would not play with Stephen Spender.”

Not long afterward two distinguished Englishmen of letters decided that “Stephen” had earned his very own limerick, and wrote,

Then up spake the bold Stephen Spender

“You may think my conscience is tender.

You might think my heart

Was my sensitive part—

But you should see my poor old pudenda.”

In a long life Spender never quite succeeded in overcoming the widespread impression (which he may have privately shared) that there was something vaguely preposterous about him. His official biographer, John Sutherland, perhaps unwittingly and certainly unwillingly, provides armfuls of ammunition for this view. He does not cite either of the cracks I have just mentioned, but he does give the passage below, taken from Spender’s memoir *World Within World*. In 1930 T. S. Eliot had decided to publish four of the young man’s poems in the *Criterion*, and furthermore invited him to lunch.

At our first luncheon he asked me what I wanted to do. I said: “Be a poet.” “I can understand you wanting to write poems, but I don’t quite know what you mean by ‘being a poet,’ ” he objected.

I think this is quite funny on its own, but additionally so because it inverts what ought to be the proper Jamesian scenario—the stuffy English don admonishing the brash young American student. Be that as it may, Stephen Spender was to pass a great deal more of his life “being a poet” than he ever did writing poetry.

The thought lay about him in his infancy (which was marked by an awful father, a frightful elder brother, and a hideous torment of a boarding school education—so far, “on track” for English writing). At the age of nine he went to the Lake District on a family holiday and was exposed to “the simple ballad poems of Wordsworth,” which, as he further phrased it, “dropped into my mind like cool pebbles, so shining and so pure, and they brought with them the atmosphere of rain and sunsets, and a sense of the sacred cloaked vocation of the poet.” He was already, in other words, what Byron witheringly called “a Laker.” An early school poem sustains the same note of moist wonderment about the weather, yearning for the spring in Devonshire but opening, “The rain drops from the mist endless and slow / The trees are bare and black ...”

This culminates in the line “O God! ... would I were there.” Sutherland misses a trick, I think, in failing to point out the obvious debt to Rupert Brooke and his Grantchester, inspiration of drooping and sensitive versifiers at that time and since.

(Ten years later Geoffrey Grigson was dryly to say, in reviewing Spender's book *The Destructive Element*, "Stephen Spender is the Rupert Brooke of the Depression.")

Indeed, it was above all the sense of an epoch, and of a decade, that allowed Spender to get away with "being a poet." Crucial to this image were his friendships from Oxford days with W. H. Auden, Louis MacNeice, Christopher Isherwood, and Cecil Day-Lewis. This cabal provoked Roy Campbell's joke about the "MacSpaunday" school: a joke that was a source of embarrassment (and rage, given Campbell's open sympathy for fascism) while simultaneously furnishing a near guarantee of immortality.

Among this book's assembly of sometimes very striking unpublished photographs is a shot of Spender, Auden, and Isherwood on the beach at Fire Island in 1947. Spender stands commandingly erect in the center, with his arms around the shoulders of his two much shorter comrades. There would be no doubt in the mind of the untutored as to which of them was the senior (the photo is presumably from Spender's private trove). And yet, as Sutherland shows very skillfully, it was Auden who was the literary boss from the beginning, and Isherwood (sometimes with Auden, and sometimes without) who was the sexually tougher and more resourceful one. Auden demonstrated his mastery from the very first, demanding to know of Spender how often he wrote poetry.

Without reflecting, I replied that I wrote about four poems a day. He was astonished and exclaimed: "What energy!" I asked him how often he wrote a poem. He replied: "I write about one in three weeks." After this I started writing only one poem in three weeks.

So silly. Up until then, of course, Spender had been so impressed at attending the same Oxford college as Shelley that he had felt compelled to adopt yet another poetic pose: that of the agonized and alienated young dreamer.

Anyone who has seen *Cabaret* can read several of the succeeding chapters at speed. The three men pursued boys of various sorts and conditions (usually proletarian) all over Berlin and over much of Germany and Austria as well. (Auden ended up with a painful rectal fissure, which led him to write his wince-makingly titled *Letter to a Wound*.) They seem to have done most of it on borrowed money or on tiny publishing advances. Orwell's vicious remark, about the "nancy poets" who spent on sodomy what they had gained by sponging, was barely a match for the amazing narcissism revealed in these pages. However (and as Orwell was later to ruefully admit), there was a core of principle involved. Spender could feel fascism coming on, and was appalled by the premonitory symptoms of it. He may have made a complete fool of himself by going briefly to Spain. (The leader of the British Communist Party, the cynical Harry Pollitt, probably did say that he thought Spender's only usefulness would be to die the death of a Byronic martyr: another potential poetic "character" for him to have adopted, had he been less prudent than he was.) Spender may have written a fatuous book titled *Forward from Liberalism*, which among other things defended Stalin's show trials. But beneath all this playacting and conceit and gullibility was a pith of seriousness.

We can reconstruct this, not from *Goodbye to Berlin* but from the words of Isaiah. Dr. Berlin, whatever his many drawbacks, was an excellent judge of character. What

he saw in Spender was an open-faced, vulnerable, rather captivating readiness to take chances. Most bullied English public school boys with oppressive fathers would soon have learned how to wear a protective carapace of some sort; Spender remained a naïf in the best sense of that term, even as he remained something of an adolescent in matters of the pudendum. (The reason I don't name the authors of the above limerick, written by contemporaries of his, is that even now they regard it as accurate but unkind.)

The hinge moment, if I read Sutherland correctly, came with the outbreak of the Second World War. Spender had become an admirer of America, but it would not have occurred to him to take ship and leave England at that moment, as Auden and Isherwood both famously did. In the course of an earlier quarrel Spender had exclaimed to Isherwood, "If we're going to part, at least let's part like men." Isherwood had won that round, replying bitchily, "But Stephen, we aren't men." In some fashion or manner brittleness of that sort was to become *de trop* after Dunkirk. Spender "stayed on," tried to enlist and was rejected on health grounds (which ranged from tapeworm to varicose veins), joined the London Fire Brigade (not a soft option at that time), and also became a husband and father. Sutherland rightly doesn't speculate about this, but there appears to me to have been a latent connection between the advent of war and the triumph of Spender's heterosexual side. His disastrous earlier, "open" marriage, to the bohemian hell-minx Inez Pearn, had been a failure partly because of his reluctance to break things off with his lover Tony Hyndman, here depicted as sponger and sodomite on a majestic scale. By falling for Natasha Litvin, a gifted musician and a considerable beauty, Spender found himself not only able to hold on to a serious woman for the first time but also—and perhaps not without its own significance that year—to confirm and affirm the slightly suppressed Jewish element in his family background. (His mother, Violet Schuster, was from a long line of converted and assimilated English Jews originating in Frankfurt.)

The war also improved his poetry. In the thirties Spender had had to contend with the criticism—obviously wounding to an aspiring writer and poet—that he didn't write very well at all. Eliot noticed it. Auden noticed it. Cyril Connolly noticed it. To Connolly, Spender wrote in that disarming manner that Isaiah Berlin so adored: "You are quite right about the bad writing. I am very sorry. It disturbs me very much." Hilarious. Even his most famous poem, "I Think Continually of Those Who Were Truly Great," with its closing line, "And left the vivid air signed with their honor," had to be retouched by Isherwood before it "sang." Spender's readers often had to put up with things like *Hampstead Autumn* (1932), yet another rumination on the seasons: "In the fat autumn evening street / Hands from my childhood stretch out / And ring muffin bells."

Possibly. But in 1943 he published *Exercises/Explorations*, the third "exercise" of which read,

Since we are what we are, what shall we be
But what we are? We are, we have

Six feet and seventy years, to see
The light, and then release it for the grave.
We are not worlds, no, nor infinity,
We have no claims on stone, except to prove
In the invention of the city
Our hearts, our intellect, our love.

This is very fine, and Sutherland is not stretching too far in comparing it, with its “mortuary sonorosity,” to Donne’s Holy Sonnets.

Spender was more than six feet tall and lived on to be well over seventy. He easily outlived all his more famous contemporaries, and became in a sense their living witness as well as their official obituarist. I heard him give a rather beautiful address at Auden’s memorial in Oxford in the fall of 1973. His long, spare frame and his nimbus of white hair had by then become familiar at dozens of international conferences and seminars. Sutherland speaks of him as a pioneer version of what we now call “the public intellectual.” But Noël Annan went a bit further in terming him a “cultural statesman”: a concept with a trapdoor of absurdity built right into it. This trapdoor was soon to fall open with a dismaying bang.

Having stayed in wartime England while keeping lines open to America, Spender was ideally positioned after 1945 to become a figure in the Anglo-U.S. “special relationship” and in one of its aspects, the cultural Cold War. The flagship symbol of both was the magazine *Encounter*, published in London but financed from across the Atlantic. Spender was a distinguished member of the team of anti-communist liberals (Isaiah Berlin, Richard Wollheim) and not-so-liberals (Irving Kristol, Melvin Lasky) who characterized the magazine. His wife, Natasha, came up with the name.

Square miles of print have now been devoted to the scandal that occurred in the late 1960s when Conor Cruise O’Brien flatly accused *Encounter* of being a self- or at least semi-conscious organ of the Central Intelligence Agency. That it had long been receiving a thick-envelope CIA subvention was quickly established. But who among the editors had known all along? Lasky certainly had, and Berlin (in my opinion) equally certainly. Spender staked, and nearly lost, his reputation on the stubborn assertion that he had had absolutely no idea. It will be quickly seen that he was making it certain that he would look a fool. The English subdivide this title into categories, starting with plain fool, moving through damn fool to bloody fool, and ending with fucking fool—for which one has to be sinister as well as silly. By throwing wine over William Empson for even suggesting anything covert about *Encounter*’s finances, Spender qualified as at least a bloody fool. But a nice kind of fool for all that: the sort who could write, as he had in Germany many years before, “On the whole though I’ve decided that the best thing is to stick through thick and thin to the best one can find in one’s fellow creatures, even though one is humiliated by having one’s weakness and lack of pride exposed by one’s dependence on them.”

In the end, after dodging much collapsing scenery at *Encounter*, Spender announced that one was frightfully hurt to find that one’s colleagues had been deceiving one. I

don't doubt that this was largely genuine. But Sutherland provides a detail that was hitherto unknown to me. It seems that Spender had been unable to recruit the support of T. S. Eliot for the enterprise. The conservative sage of Faber had from the first been "chronically suspicious of the 'American auspices' of the magazine." Well then, how could Spender really maintain that the thought had never even occurred to him?

He managed, with that providence that sometimes protects the terminally innocent, to escape into a third act of his life. This period might be described as "Backward to Liberalism." There was always a threat of the farcical or the undignified in the interest Spender took in the young, but Sutherland makes a convincing case that he was kept young, in a sense, by the growth of his gifted children, Matthew and Lizzie. Thus his book about the events of 1968, with the potentially embarrassing title *Year of the Young Rebels*, did not go over the abyss into a glassy admiration of student revolt. And he became one of the first to see the moral importance of the dissident movement in the Soviet Union, with its synthesis of literary and ideological opposition. Having been an early defender of Boris Pasternak, he became an equally early patron of the exiled Joseph Brodsky and a vigorous organizer of petitions and support groups. This sympathy took institutional shape in the 1970s, with the imaginative inauguration of the magazine *Index on Censorship*. Devoted to the battle against repressive governments on all continents, this journal was and remains highly worthwhile. So over the long term Spender had had a part in launching *Horizon*, which for all Cyril Connolly's idiosyncrasies was indispensable to keeping alive a literary pulse in England during the war. Despite being despised by the true editor of *Encounter* and being kept on only as a "useful idiot" by the surreptitious moneymen, he ran a more than respectable "back half" of books pages for the magazine. This is a not altogether shabby record.

Attempts were made to smirch it all the same. Spender rather trustingly indulged a young opportunist named Hugh David, who then produced a scabrous "biography" titled *Spender: A Portrait With Background*. This gave infinite pain, both in its numerous falsifications and in its pitiless exposure of the old boy's days as a gay boy. The same trope was exploited without scruple by the forgettable American "gay writer" David Leavitt, who in 1993 extruded a novel called *While England Sleeps* and simply annexed some passages of *World Within World* in order to do so. Yet none of this seems to have prevented Spender from continuing to form friendships with writers younger than himself, of the generation of Peter Ackroyd and James Fenton (two rather acute choices). If his lifelong vice was that he could not stop himself from RSVPing to any old card of invitation, it can still be said of Spender that he continued to take the cheery chance of new encounters.

It may be that Sutherland felt a need to compensate for previous injustices in the writing of this biography, but one sometimes has the sense that his dutifulness became a chore to him. The word "idyllic" is employed so many times, even for scenes of relatively ordinary satisfaction at the seaside or in the countryside, that after a while I stopped circling it. Nothing excuses the use of "prevaricate" for "procrastinate," or "refute" for "repudiate." And Spender may well have been discharged from the Fire

Brigade on June 13, 1944, but it is an abuse of a crucial word to say “Ironically, it was the same day that the first of the V-1 buzz bombs fell on London.” That barely rises to the level of coincidence. An author has furthermore become far too close to his subject if he can write—this time unironically, and of a domestic row in the ski resort of Gstaad—that “the upheaval dwarfed the Suez crisis.”

Still, by the time of his much mourned death, in 1995 (which occurred just after his unprecedented last-minute decision to decline a social invitation from the Holroyd/Drabble household), Spender had managed to outlive the sorts of taunt and nickname (“Stainless Splendor,” “Stephen Savage”) that his parents had feared when they first forbade him—pointlessly, as it was to turn out—the company of “rough” boys.

(The Atlantic, January/February 2005)

Edward Upward: The Captive Mind

EARLY IN THE 1930s, when he was managing the Hogarth Press for Leonard and Virginia Woolf and preparing the anthology—*New Signatures*—that would be received as a species of generational manifesto, John Lehmann wrote that he had

heard with the tremor of excitement that an entomologist feels at the news of an unknown butterfly sighted in the depths of the forest, that behind Auden and Spender and Isherwood stood the even more legendary figure of ... Edward Upward.

In that reference to the literary-political celebrities of the thirties, Upward received his due. In a once-famous attempt to get the whole set into one portmanteau term, which was Roy Campbell’s coinage of *MacSpaunday* to comprehend the names of Louis MacNeice, Stephen Spender, W. H. Auden, and Cecil Day-Lewis, Upward was omitted altogether (as was his friend and closest collaborator, Christopher Isherwood). On the eve of Valentine’s Day this year, at the age of 105, the last British author to have been born in the Edwardian epoch died. If Upward is not better known than perhaps he ought to be, it is probably because he helped instill the Communist faith in his more notorious friends, and then not only outlived them and their various apostasies but continued to practice a version of that faith himself. (For purposes of comparison, MacNeice died in 1963, Day-Lewis in 1972, Auden in 1973, Isherwood in 1986, and Spender in 1995, so with Upward’s death, the last link to that era is truly snapped.)

His traces and spoor and fingerprints are to be found all over the work of those whom he so strongly mentored. Auden dedicated “The Exiles”—one of the Odes in *The Orators*—to Upward, and made him an executor of his will when he set off to take part in the Spanish Civil War. Upward also makes an appearance as a character in Auden’s charade, *Paid on Both Sides*, published in *T. S. Eliot’s Criterion* in 1930. In the same year, Auden sent Upward a copy of his *Poems* and wrote, “I shall never know how much in these poems is filched from you via Christopher.” With Isherwood, who fictionalized him in *Lions and Shadows* under the name of Allen Chalmers, Upward coinvented the weird dystopia of *Mortmere*, and co-authored the fantastic gothic tales—

surreal medievalism was Upward's term for the genre—that became grouped under that name. Isherwood dedicated *All the Conspirators* to him. Spender, in his 1935 study, *The Destructive Element*, presented Upward as an English Kafka. In 1938, the Hogarth Press published Upward's novel *Journey to the Border*, which was thought of by many as the only English effort at Marxist fiction that was likely to outlast the era in which it was written. And then ... silence. There was some rumor of a "nervous breakdown." Nothing was heard from Upward until the early 1960s, when he abruptly produced a trilogy of didactic and autobiographical novels, each illustrating in different ways what a commitment to a Communist life could do to an aspiring author. (When I read them, I was put in mind of something Doris Lessing once said to me about the Communist Party's "Writers' Group," of which she had once been a member: Everybody liked to talk about the "problems" of being a writer, and most of the "problems" came from being in the Communist Party in the first place.)

A decade or so ago, becoming aware that Upward was still alive and still writing—and bethinking myself that if I wanted to interview this soon-to-be centenarian and last survivor of his generation, I had better hurry up—I made a voyage to the Isle of Wight, that little diamond-shaped island off the southern coast of England that helps form the natural harbors of Portsmouth and Southampton. In this almost parodic picture-postcard miniature of deep England, Upward had chosen to literally "isolate" himself. The Isle of Wight is where Tennyson came to write *Crossing the Bar*. It is where Queen Victoria kept her favorite home, Osborne House, and it is where she died in 1901, two years before Upward was born.

In a vicarage-style house not far from the railway station in the small town of Sandown, Upward received me and led me to a side room. He explained without loss of time that the main rooms of the little home were out of bounds because his wife, Hilda, was in the process of dying there. "I shall miss Hilda," he said with the brisk matter-of-factness of the materialist, "but I have promised her that I shall go on writing." Attired in gray flannel trousers, a corduroy jacket, and a V-neck jersey, he reminded me of something so obvious that I didn't immediately recognize it. On a table lay the *Morning Star*, the daily newspaper of the Stalinist rump organization that survived the British Communist Party's decision to dissolve itself after the implosion of the Soviet Union. It is entirely possible that Upward was the paper's sole subscriber on this islet of thatched cottages and stained glass and theme-park rural Englishness. Seeing me notice the old rag, he said, rather defensively, "Yes I still take it, though there doesn't seem much hope these days." When I asked him if there was anyone on the left he still admired, he cited Arthur Scargill, the coal miners' thuggish leader, who was known to connoisseurs as the most *ouvriériste* and sectarian and demagogic of the anti-Blair forces in the Labour movement. Yet to this alarming opinion he appended the shy and disarming news that the last review he had had in the *Morning Star* had been a good one, precisely because it stressed that not all his work was strictly political. "It particularly mentioned my story 'The White-Pinafores Black Cat.'" I inquired if he was working on a story at that moment. "Yes I am." "And may one know the title?"

“It’s to be called ‘The World Revolution.’ ” At this point and in this context, I began to find the word surreal recurring to my mind.

As so often, this feeling was prompted by a banal detail. Upward, in his flannels and corduroy and jersey, looked exactly like what he was: a retired schoolteacher. And yet, of all the figures detested by his set in the thirties, the schoolmaster was perhaps the most reviled. Auden in particular wrote that he understood fascism because he had experienced an English public school, and in his letters home from Hitler’s Germany he described the place as being run “by a mixture of gangsters and the sort of school prefect who is good at [Cadet] Corps.” But Upward had volunteered for a lifetime of schoolmastering, and of activism in the teachers union. It was as if he had determined to turn away from the magic realism of *Mortmere*, and concentrate on the quotidian. Confirming this, and sounding very much the schoolteacher, he said to me, “Writing is not a pleasure. It’s a discipline.”

The beauty of *Mortmere* as a name is its evocation both of dead and stagnant water and of a slightly macabre name for a bucolic setting. (That it also evokes “dead mother” did not occur to me until I read Katherine Bucknell’s brilliant introduction to the most recent edition.) The *Mortmere* stories are fascinating because they take the classic English village and people it with psychopaths, revealed in titles like “The Leviathan of the Urinals.” The vicar is a sicko. The choirboy is far from innocent. And as for the squire in the moated country house, or the headmaster ... It seems to me that Upward took a conscious decision to rid himself of this hedonism and to become a fiction writer with a mission. In his contribution to Cecil Day-Lewis’s anthology *The Mind in Chains*, published in 1937, he wrote sternly:

A modern fantasy cannot tell the truth, cannot give a picture of life which will survive the test of experience; since fantasy implies in practice a retreat from the real world into the world of imagination.

This repudiation is expressed with equal severity in the trilogy of novels on which Upward worked after he dropped from view, before the Second World War. Collectively titled *The Spiral Ascent*, and individually titled *In the Thirties*, *The Rotten Elements*, and *No Home but the Struggle*, the novels tell of the distraught life of a Communist schoolteacher named Alan Sebrill, who discovers to his horror that the Communist Party has become insufficiently revolutionary. To give you an idea of how far away we are from the playfulness of *Mortmere*, the bleak, admonitory subtitle of the second volume is *A Novel of Fact*.

But Alan Sebrill has a secret. In addition to being a good Communist, he desires to be a good poet. (Upward had won a prize for poetry while at Cambridge University, but when Auden advised him to give up, he did so without demur.) There is even a desperate hope that Sebrill can fuse the two ambitions. Of the party, he tells himself:

It was the enemy of his enemies: it aimed at the overthrow of a society which was dominated by poshocrats and public school snobs and which had no use for the living poets. It demanded that its converts should believe not in the supernatural nor in

anti-scientific myths but in man. If he joined the Communist Party he might be able to write poetry again. [Emphasis mine.]

Yes, well of course you know what's going to happen, but Sebrill doesn't, and I am not even sure that Upward did. In his memorial poem for Yeats, Auden famously wrote, "Poetry makes nothing happen." In the world created by Upward for Sebrill, nothing makes poetry happen. And so fantasy keeps on breaking in again, in an unintended way, as the wretched protagonist suffers from hallucinations, nightmares, paranoia, thoughts of suicide, and despair. If Upward had himself hoped to be Maxim Gorky, he ended up vindicating Spender's comparison of him to Kafka.

In one respect of "realism," though, Upward deserves great praise. It is a deplorable fact that the English literature of the 1930s contains scarcely a mention of the phenomenon of fascism. Anthony Powell's long excursion through the upper crust doesn't turn up a single Blackshirt (something of a shortcoming in point of verisimilitude, as he might have phrased it). Evelyn Waugh avoids the subject. Graham Greene's fascists are not English. But for Upward, especially in his first volume of *The Spiral Ascent*, the miasma of fascism is in the very air that his characters breathe, and a direct clash with the Blackshirts conveys the intense and local reality that this force sometimes possessed in Britain. Upward at least faced what many shied away from.

I am not sure that this will excuse the *langue de bois* in which Sebrill's crisis of Communism is set down. I collect the dates and occasions on which various writers and intellectuals decided to "break" with "the Party," and these range from the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939 to the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. There are some specialized ones as well, such as Eric Hobsbawm's decision not to renew his party card after 1989. In these annals, Upward stands alone for resigning his membership in 1948, on the grounds that the British Communists were insufficiently Stalinist! It makes him quite a collector's item. The experience was evidently a shock to his system, as it was to that of his main character:

He found he could stop his trembling by thinking of Stalin and by speaking the name of Stalin, repeatedly but not quite aloud, much as a religious believer might have called on the name of God. Yet though this was an effective method of suppressing the physical symptoms of his anxiety it did not help him in the least with his writing.

Understandably. Upward may have been many things, but he was never an ironist.

Our conversation on politics was likewise arid, but things invariably improved when he discussed his relations with his departed comrades. He had, for instance, recently had a visit from Isherwood's longtime lover, Don Bachardy ("Yes, I keep in touch with Don"), and at first I had difficulty picturing a friendship between this austere provincial Englishman and a gay bohemian painter in Santa Monica. But then, Upward had been the first to spot Isherwood's quirky genius ("even though I didn't know or realize that he was homosexual"). With the others, the contacts (and eventual reconciliations) were conducted through the medium of ... fantasy. In a strange little story called "An Unmentionable Man," Upward's rather self-pitying character encounters a

former associate who is obviously Stephen Spender, and at first treats him with great bitterness:

I may not have read every article you've written or television talk you've given about the 'thirties, but I have read and heard more than a few, and there wasn't one of them that didn't completely ignore me.

Yet after a few sharp exchanges with "this copiously white-haired broad-shouldered ruddy-faced man," he abruptly comes to view him as "someone he must not die unfriendly with." Upward's accommodation with Auden was, alas, posthumous: He could never forgive him for having called the thirties "a low, dishonest decade," but carried on a conversation with him in his head, and eventually conceded,

I ought to have recognized that my indignation was less against the injuriousness of his opinions than against him for holding them. I could not dissociate him from himself as the young poet who for me and for other poets of his generation had been the only potential giant among us.

Our knowledge of the literary and ideological generation of the thirties is radically incomplete without some awareness of its founding father, or perhaps better say founding brother.

(The Atlantic, May 2009)

C. L. R. James: Mid Off, Not Right On

Review of C. L. R. James: *Cricket, the Caribbean and the World Revolution*, by Farrukh Dhondy.

IN V.S. NAIPAUL'S 1994 novel, *A Way in the World*, the reader is introduced to a charismatic revolutionary intellectual named Lebrun, who has written a history of a forgotten rebellion in the Caribbean basin, and whose critical powers are able to produce the following admiring response in the part-autobiographical narrator:

It was as though, from moving to ground level, where so much was obscured, I had been taken up some way, not only to be shown the pretty pattern of fields and roads and small settlements, but also, as an aspect of that high view, had been granted a vision of history speeded up, had seen as I might have seen the opening and dying of a flower, the destruction and shifting about of peoples, had seen all the strands that had gone into the creation of the agricultural colony, and had understood what simple purposes—after such activity—that colony served.

We rely not merely on internal evidence for the deduction that this is the fictionalized figure of Cyril Lionel Robert James, one of the few Marxist writers of the twentieth century whose work has survived it. In a personal reminiscence, Naipaul recalls meeting his fellow Trinidadian exile in London in 1962:

It was all immensely intelligent and gripping. He talked about music and the influence on composers of the instruments of their time. He talked about military matters. I had met no one like that from our region, no one who had given so much time to

reading and thought, no one who had organized so much information in this appetizing way ... it was rhetoric, of course. And of course it was loaded in his favour. He couldn't be interrupted, like royalty, he raised all the topics; and he would have been a master of all the topics he raised.

Naipaul is not celebrated for his generosity to fellow authors, especially those hailing from the West Indies, and it is, of course, to be expected that he might take back with one hand what he offered with the other. I myself met C. L. R. James twice, once when I helped to organize a meeting for him at Ruskin College, Oxford, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, and once by visiting him in retirement at his home in Brixton, and would certify that Naipaul captures both his extraordinary polymathic range and the slightly cultish aura that later came to surround him.

On the platform, he had no equal for unscripted pure eloquence; without any demagoguery, he spoke about the resistance of the Vietnamese and started hot tears of rage in his audience. In Brixton, he was attended in old age by a devoted group of admirers who seldom if ever argued with him and who treated him like a guru.

Farrukh Dhondy was himself a peripheral member of this circle, and his biography is in some part also a memoir. It is difficult to think of a better point of comparison and contrast than the one he offers between Naipaul and James. Both men left Trinidad in their youth, both men were magnetized by Britain and became masters of English prose. Naipaul showed little if any nostalgia for his roots, while James felt committed to the struggle for independence and was an early advocate of West Indian Federation. Naipaul evinced scant interest in the history of the region, while James's magnificent book *The Black Jacobins* (1938), a study of Toussaint L'Ouverture's slave republic, is still considered a founding document in the world of postcolonial studies. The chief resemblance between the two men lies (or lay—James died in 1989) in their shared suspicion of a self-pitying or “black power” or “Afrocentric” worldview. There is also a sense in which both managed to be plus anglais que les Anglais.

James had been formed in the striving Trinidadian world of the scholarship school and the cricket field. Before he ever saw England, he had developed an admiration for what might be called the public school or Arnoldian ethos. Dhondy has some fun with a moment in Manchester in 1956, when Aneurin Bevan and Michael Foot replied to the Labour leadership's charge of “not playing with the team.” They did so by making sneering references to “straight bats” and “stiff upper lips.” This seemed slightly profane to James, and his shocked reaction, in turn, seems somewhat quaint to Dhondy. However, it put me in mind of what Lionel Trilling once said about George Orwell—that “he must sometimes have wondered how it came about that he should be praising sportsmanship and gentlemanliness and dutifulness and physical courage. He seems to have thought, and very likely he was right, that they might come in handy as revolutionary virtues.” (Orwell, incidentally, was a fan of James's and praised his 1937 book *World Revolution*.)

The two men also had in common an affiliation with the old Independent Labour Party. In James's case, this arose partly from his cricketing connection. Adopted as a

ghostwriter by Sir Learie Constantine, he went to live with him in Lancashire, where the ILP was relatively strong, and soon became part of its Trotskyist wing. Adopted also by Neville Cardus, and composing cricket reports for the Manchester Guardian by day, he evolved into a semi-professional revolutionary by night. He campaigned for colonial freedom, for intervention against Mussolini in Ethiopia, and for workers' education. But the imperishable part of his writing in the 1930s and beyond concerns the struggle against Stalinism.

James had never had any illusions in the Communist Party to lose, and saw Stalin's Russia from the beginning as a grotesque new form of oppression and exploitation. He translated Boris Souvarine's seminal book *Stalin* from the French for Secker and Warburg, and in *World Revolution* showed how the Communist International had become a depraved apparatus in the service of a pitiless despot. The book reads rather creakily these days, because of its emphasis on Trotsky and the Left Opposition, but it contains the most wonderfully scornful review of the Webbs and their shameful Soviet Communism: *A new civilization?* (from the second edition of which the question mark was famously removed), and is both lucid and prescient about the famine and the treason trials. Again to suggest an Orwellian comparison, one notices time and again that James is moved to anger and contempt by the sheer ugliness and euphemism of the enemy's prose style. His training in English literature was as useful to him as his apprenticeship in dialectics.

He recrossed the Atlantic just before the outbreak of war, to visit Trotsky in Mexico and to make contact with his American epigones. This led to a long stay in the United States, a deep involvement with what was still called "the Negro question," and to more than one passionate attachment. (The tall and handsome James went through white women like an avenging flame, but there was none of the macho vulgarity that one finds described in Naipaul's narratives of black-white sex, and his former lovers are still loyal to him.) By the end of this deep engagement in sectarian politics, he had decided that the entire concept of a "vanguard party" was at fault, no matter who proclaimed it. The pamphlets and polemics of this period are still collector's items, though the most closely wrought of his political texts, *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways*, is actually an allegorical study of Herman Melville, written while awaiting deportation from the United States in 1953.

Indeed, Trotskyism's gain was in many respects literature's loss. James's only novel, *Minty Alley*, is a rather naive account of shanty-town or "barrackyard" life in Trinidad, but can bear comparison with some early Naipaul (both V. S. and Shiva). His literary capacity was immense; he knew Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* almost by heart and later in life prepared a masterly series of lectures on Shakespeare. At all times he upheld the great tradition and was famous for his denunciations of those callow scholars who referred to English literature as "Eurocentric." (Dhondy has some very telling anecdotes here, of James tossing and goring those young apostles of negritude who came to pay homage to the old revolutionary without troubling to register his attachment to high culture, or his conviction that the "Third World" had much to learn from the "First.")

None of this inhibited him from taking an active part in the battle for decolonization—one of his first essays was a dignified refutation of J. A. Froude’s quasi-eugenic defense of white rule—or from seeing the American civil rights revolution as a vindication of his own prophecies. Naipaul’s Lebrun is eventually disappointed by the pettiness and infighting of the anti-colonial forces, and James, too, was to become disillusioned by the place-seeking and frequent viciousness of his former comrades in Ghana, Trinidad, and Grenada. (He was especially offended when the thugs who seized power in Grenada in 1983 claimed to be Jamesians.) Visiting at about that time, I was deeply impressed by the way that every little village appeared to be fielding a game of cricket, played in immaculate white kit. James is a part of the folklore of this pastime, and has an audience quite distinct from the following he attracted as a Marxist. (He appears, as the character K. C. Lewis, in Ian Buruma’s splendid cricketing novel *Playing the Game*.) For him, cricket was not a sport so much as an art form, and also a reflection of social organization. It can be compared at once to a ballet, and to the Olympic ethic of Classical Greece. It is also, both as a game and as an entertainment, inherently democratic. And it teaches the values of equality and fairness. *Beyond a Boundary* (1963), his partly autobiographical study of the subject, is a lyrical account of both the aesthetics of batsmanship and the bonding and exemplary role played by cricket in the development of the West Indies. Astonishingly, it was rejected for publication by John Arlott, but soon found a home at Hutchinson’s, and was warmly reviewed by V. S. Naipaul in *Encounter* in 1961. Dhondy barely exaggerates when he says that this book is for cricket what *Death in the Afternoon* is for the bullfight.

In 1948, in his *Notes on Dialectics*, James claimed to have evolved a “Hegelian algebra” with which to understand the historical process. This rash boast was the final break between himself and the little world of postorthodox Trotskyists. One might, though, borrow a Hegelian phrase—“the cunning of history”—to describe the way in which the “dialectic” played out. In the early 1980s, James was one of those who unequivocally welcomed the flowering of the Polish Solidarity movement, both as a workers’ movement in its own right and as the fulfilment of his prophecy about the end of Communism. As with Martin Luther King’s movement in the United States, a real revolution was to be the creation of conscious and self-determined people, not professionalized cadres. CLR, as many called him, did not live to see the full promise of the year 1989, and the complete vindication of his dream. He died at the end of May, surrounded by his piles of beloved classics, in his modest Brixton flat, on the corner of Railton Road and Shakespeare Road.

(Times Literary Supplement, January 18, 2002)

J. G. Ballard: The Catastrophist

Review of *The Complete Stories* of J. G. Ballard.

IN THE SPRING OF 2006, at the Hay-on-Wye book festival, I was introduced at dinner to Sir Martin Rees, who is the professor of cosmology and astrophysics at Cambridge University and also holds the pleasingly archaic title of Astronomer Royal. He was to give a lecture that was later reprinted with the title “Dark Materials,” in honor of the late professor Joseph Rotblat. In the course of this astonishing talk, he voiced the following thought:

Most educated people are aware that we are the outcome of nearly 4 billion years of Darwinian selection, but many tend to think that humans are somehow the culmination. Our sun, however, is less than halfway through its lifespan. It will not be humans who watch the sun’s demise, 6 billion years from now. Any creatures that then exist will be as different from us as we are from bacteria or amoebae.

Among the several questions that jostled for the uppermost in my mind was this: Where is the fiction that can rise to the level of this stupefying reality? (Only one novelist, Julian Barnes, was sufficiently struck to include Rees’s passage in a book, but that was in his extended nonfiction memoir about death, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*.) I quite soon came to realize that there was indeed a writer who could have heard or read those words with equanimity, even satisfaction, and that this was J. G. Ballard. For him, the possibility of any mutation or metamorphosis was to be taken for granted, if not indeed welcomed, as was the contingency that, dead sun or no dead sun, the terrestrial globe could very readily be imagined after we’re gone.

As one who has always disliked and distrusted so-called science fiction (the votaries of this cult disagreeing pointlessly about whether to refer to it as “SF” or “sci-fi”), I was prepared to be unimpressed even after Kingsley Amis praised Ballard as “the most imaginative of H. G. Wells’s successors.” The natural universe is far too complex and frightening and impressive on its own to require the puerile add-ons of space aliens and super-weapons: The interplanetary genre made even C. S. Lewis write more falsely than he normally did. Hearing me drone on in this vein about thirty years ago, Amis fils (who contributes a highly lucid introduction to this collection) wordlessly handed me *The Drowned World*, *The Day of Forever*, and, for a shift in pace and rhythm, *Crash*. Any one of these would have done the trick.

For all that, Ballard is arguably best-known to a wide audience because of his relatively “straight” novel, *Empire of the Sun*, and the resulting movie by Steven Spielberg. Some of his devotees were depressed by the literalness of the subject matter, which is a quasi-autobiographical account of being thirteen years old and an inmate in a Japanese internment camp in Shanghai. It’s not possible to read that book, however, and fail to see the germinal effect that experience had on Ballard the man. To see a once-thriving city reduced to beggary and emptiness, to live one day at a time in point of food and medicine, to see an old European order brutally and efficiently overturned, to notice the utterly casual way in which human life can be snuffed out, and to see war machines wheeling and diving in the overcast sky: such an education! Don’t forget, either, that young Ballard was ecstatic at the news of the atomic obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, an emotion that makes him practically unique among postwar

literati. Included in this collection is a very strong 1977 story, “The Dead Time,” a sort of curtain-raiser to *Empire*—Ballard’s own preferred name for his book—in which a young man released from Japanese captivity drives a truckload of cadavers across a stricken landscape and ends up feeding a scrap of his own torn flesh to a ravenous child.

Readers of Ballard’s memoir, *Miracles of Life* (a book with a slightly but not entirely misleading title), will soon enough discern that he built on his wartime Shanghai traumas in three related ways. As a teenager in postwar England he came across first Freud, and second the surrealists. He describes the two encounters as devastating in that they taught him what he already knew: Religion is abject nonsense, human beings positively enjoy inflicting cruelty, and our species is prone to, and can coexist with, the most grotesque absurdities. What could have been more natural, then, than that Ballard the student should devote himself to classes in anatomy, spending quality time with corpses, some of whom, in life, had been dedicated professors in the department. An astonishing number of his shorter works follow the inspiration of *Crash*, also filmed, this time by David Cronenberg, in morbid and almost loving accounts of “wound profiles,” gashes, fractures, and other inflictions on the flesh and bones. Fascinated by the possibility of death in traffic, and rather riveted by the murder of John Kennedy, Ballard produced a themed series titled *The Atrocity Exhibition*, here partially collected, where collisions and ejaculations and celebrities are brought together in a vigorously stirred mix of Eros and Thanatos. His antic use of this never-failing formula got him briefly disowned by his American publisher and was claimed by Ballard as “pornographic science fiction,” but if you can read “The Assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy Considered As a Downhill Motor Race” or “Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan” in search of sexual gratification, you must be jaded by disorders undreamed-of by this reviewer. Both stories, however, succeed in being deadpan funny.

Another early story (though not represented here: The claim of this volume to be “complete” is somewhat deceptive) in something of the same style, “Plan for the Assassination of Jacqueline Kennedy,” ignited a ridiculous fuss in the very news rags whose ghoulish coverage of her life Ballard was intending to satirize. Randolph Churchill led the charge, demanding punishment for the tiny magazine that printed it. This “modest proposal” furnishes one of many clues to a spring of Ballard’s inspiration, which is fairly obviously the work of Jonathan Swift. In 1964 he even wrote an ultra-macabre story, “The Drowned Giant,” which tells of what happens when the corpse of a beautiful but gigantic man washes ashore on a beach “five miles to the northwest of the city.” The local Lilliputians find cheap but inventive ways of desecrating and disfiguring the body before cutting it up for souvenirs and finally rendering it down in big vats. One might characterize this as the microcosmically ideal Ballard fantasy, in that it partakes of the surreal—the “Gulliver” being represented as a huge flesh statue based on the work of Praxiteles—as well as of the Freudian: “as if the mutilation of this motionless colossus had released a sudden flood of repressed spite.” In the pattern of many other stories, the narrator adopts the tone of a pathologist dictating a detached report of gross anatomy.

A single phrase, colossal wreck, is a borrowing from Shelley's "Ozymandias," which may be the closest that Ballard ever came to a concession to the Romantic school.

Another and nearer literary source is provided by the name—Traven—of the solitary character in "The Terminal Beach." This is one of two tales—the other being "One Afternoon at Utah Beach"—in which Ballard makes an imaginarium out of the ruined scapes of the Second World War. Like his modern but vacant cities full of ghostly tower blocks (he is obsessed with towers of all sorts) and abandoned swimming pools, the Pacific and Atlantic beaches, still covered by concrete blocks and bunkers, furnish the ideal setting for a Ballardian wasteland. The beach in the first story has the additional advantage of having been the site of an annihilating nuclear test. The revenant shapes of long-dead Japanese and Germans are allowed a pitiless flicker before their extinction.

Ballard is not the most quotable of authors, because he takes quite a long time to set a scene and because his use of dialogue is more efficient than it is anything else. But he can produce arresting phrases and images. He is especially observant about eyes. On succeeding pages of "The Cloud-Sculptors of Coral D," we find that "memories, caravels without sails, crossed the shadowy deserts of her burned-out eyes" and that the dwarf, Petit Manuel, regards this same woman "with eyes like crushed flowers." This entire story is infused with an eerie beauty, as the wings of gliders carve marvels out of the cumulus, and one aesthetic pilot "soared around the cloud, cutting away its tissues. The soft fleece fell toward us in a cool rain." The cruel capricious beauty who becomes the wealthy patron of this art is careless of the human cost it may entail: "In her face the diagram of bones formed a geometry of murder."

Ballard wrote his heart out, especially after the random death of his beloved wife left him to raise three children, so I don't especially like to say that he wrote too much. (This book has almost 1,200 pages.) But some of the stories are in want of polish and finish. In "The Last World of Mr. Goddard," a department-store supervisor keeps a microcosm of his town, complete with live-action human figures, in a box in his safe at home. Each evening, he can watch what everybody is doing and use the knowledge the next day. At first I was surprised that he never exploited this advantage to observe anybody having sex, and then I noticed that Ballard had oddly deprived his minutely supervised miniatures of the power to be overheard, so that Mr. Goddard actually had no idea what was going on. Like a movie that is only part talkie, this scenario is leached of its initial power. In compensation, several of the stories are pure *jeu d'esprit*, where the charm of the conceit hardly requires any suggestion of the sinister or the doomed. Despite the menacing title of "Prima Belladonna," the first of the collection, one is immediately bewitched by the very idea of a flower shop where the gorgeously different blooms are all live stand-ins for musicians and opera singers (such as a "delicate soprano mimosa") and where the owner of this hard-to-manage "chloro florist" establishment eventually confronts "an audio-vegetative armageddon."

If this innocuous environment could not deflect Ballard from his insistence on apocalypse in familiar surroundings, it is hardly startling to find that his penultimate tale is titled "The Secret Autobiography of J. G. B." For most of his life, our great spe-

cialist in catastrophe made his home in the almost laughably tranquil London suburb of Shepperton, the sheltered home of the British movie studios. He obviously relished the idea of waking one day to find himself the only human being on the planet, to explore a deserted London and cross a traffic-free Thames, to pillage gas stations and supermarkets and then to drive contentedly home. “B was ready to begin his true work.”

(The Atlantic, January/February 2010)

Fraser’s Flashman: Scoundrel Time

IN THE LAST but one of his twelve novelistic gallops through history and imagination, *Flashman and the Tiger*, George MacDonald Fraser does something at least as daring as anything that his poltroonish hero has ever ventured. He inserts his main character smack-dab into the middle of a failed assassination attempt. Colonel John Sebastian Moran, a pitiless killer and big-game hunter, is drawing a bead from a window in London at a silhouette across the ghostly street. And just as old Flashy is drawing his own bead on Moran, there is a wild commotion when an austere, gaunt private detective, a bluff old physician, and a squad of bobbies come piling into the room.

Some of you will have seen this coming: It is the climactic moment of “The Adventure of the Empty House,” the momentous story in which Sir Arthur Conan Doyle recalled Sherlock Holmes from the dead and then saved him from the bullet of Professor Moriarty’s vile associate. In other words, Fraser has succeeded not just in making his creation the familiar Zelig of high-Victorian imperial history, but in giving him a cameo part in late-Victorian fiction as well. Flashman is everywhere. And why should this not be so? Tourists visit Baker Street every day to see where Sherlock Holmes “actually” lived and pondered, shooting cocaine and sharing rooms with a chap. (That was in 221B, which never existed.) George MacDonald Fraser has never claimed to be anything but the editor of the “Flashman papers,” discovered by luck during an auction at an English country house. When the first “packet” of papers was published, in 1969, several well-gulled reviewers genuinely hailed it as a grand literary discovery (one of them going as far as to say that there had been nothing like it since the unearthing of Boswell’s diaries). It is the deftest borrowing since Tom Stoppard helped himself to the walk-on parts of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

George MacDonald Fraser was eighty on his last birthday (“same day as Charlemagne, Casanova, Hans Christian Andersen, and Kenneth Tynan,” as he tells me) and is celebrating the publication of a round dozen of edited Flashman papers. I dip my colors in a solemn salute. It makes me whistle when I think how I grabbed the first of his published efforts right off the bat in 1969. Even now I can tell a fellow addict at ten paces. Those of us who have tried to cover the new “Great Game” as it has unfolded on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border have forgathered in Flashman’s Hotel,

situated in the Pakistani Army's post-colonial garrison town of Rawalpindi, and in the Flashman Restaurant of the Gandamak Lodge, in Kabul (Gandamak Lodge being old Flashy's ill-gotten mansion in rural Leicestershire). These are places where the borders are "porous," as the newspapers like to say, but where the boundary between fact and fiction is the most porous of all. It is Fraser's huge achievement to have smuggled his main man across that frontier, in both directions.

Victorian empire ("the greatest thing that ever happened to an undeserving world," Fraser asserts) was largely dedicated to Lord Macaulay's belief in progress and improvement: a civilizing mission that would gradually spread light into the dark places of the earth. It involved the Whig theory of history and was supposed to operate according to a near-providential plan. Well, that's all balls for a start, as Flashman stoutly observes: "In my experience the course of history is as often settled by someone's having a belly-ache, or not sleeping well, or a sailor getting drunk, or some aristocratic harlot wagging her backside."

In a way—and there's no shame in this—Fraser works according to a formula. There is, in every Flashman story, a horrific villain, a brush with an unthinkable agonizing death, and a bodacious female. Pure Ian Fleming, you might murmur, and indeed Fraser himself was a screenwriter for *Octopussy*. Why read the James Bond series if not for the certainty of being transported into a reliable parallel universe where there is no Goldfinger without a corresponding Pussy Galore? Ah, but the men Flashman vanquishes, and the women he tumbles, are for the most part "real." And so are the events depicted. Fleming on his best day would never have dared match James Bond with the modern equivalent of Otto von Bismarck or send him into the sack with Queen Ranavalona of Madagascar, let alone have succeeded in making it so believable that some readers still do truly believe it. (When Flashman sees Oscar Wilde at the theater, in the course of his authored but unauthorized invasion of that Sherlock Holmes story, and marvelously describes the poet of decadence as resembling "an over-fed trout in a toupe," we can hear his crusty, clubland grunt.)

But, on the other hand, James Bond did have a license to kill, and a thirst to employ it, whereas Flashman is a cowering impostor who prefers whoring and bullying to any risking of his skin on the thin red line. Thus, every novel must begin with a *mise-en-scène* that shows not just history as a chapter of screwups and screwings but also Flashman's own participation as an unlucky accident. The anti-hero doesn't begin by calling coolly on "M" to be briefed on his latest lethal assignment. He begins by running away in the wrong direction. So, to the drama of Bond, Fraser brilliantly adds the absurdity of Bertie Wooster. When Fraser first ushered his Homeric duffer onto the stage, P. G. Wodehouse was tempted into a rare comment, saying, "If ever there was a time when I felt that 'watcher-of-the-skies-when-a-new-planet' stuff, it was when I read the first Flashman."

Well, just as Wodehouse could have quoted the whole of that Keats poem with ease, one imagines that Flashman (or his creator) knows better in the twelfth and latest novel, *Flashman on the March*, when he remarks that the British government is

caught “between Scylla and t’other thing.” This is Wooster to the life, half remembering something from the schoolroom until corrected by Jeeves. As Bertie ruefully phrases it, never learning from his mistakes, it is just when you are stepping high and confident that Fate waits behind the door with a stuffed eelskin. And here goes old Flashy:

My spirits were rising as we set off down the bank, the birds were carolling, there was a perfumed breeze blowing from the water, we were within a few miles of journey’s end, I was absolutely humming “Drink, Puppy, Drink,” the larks and snails were no doubt on their respective wings and thorns, God was in his heaven, and on the verge of the jungle, not twenty yards away, a white-robed helmeted lancer was sitting his horse, watching us.

Or as Bertie inquires in *The Code of the Woosters*:

“But the larks, Jeeves? The snails? I’m pretty sure larks and snails entered into it.”

“I am coming to the larks and snails, sir. ‘The lark’s on the wing, the snail’s on the thorn—’ ”

“Now you’re talking. And the tab line?”

“ ‘God’s in His heaven, all’s right with the world.’ ”

“That’s it in a nutshell. I couldn’t have put it better myself.”

Instead of Aunt Agatha, Fraser has placed a sinister and armed horseman at the terminus of his idyll, but then, Raymond Chandler (an old schoolmate of Wodehouse’s at Dulwich College) made it a maxim that when action was flagging you could always have a man enter the room carrying a gun.

To say that Fraser can so easily juggle Conan Doyle and Holmes, Fleming and Bond, Wodehouse and Wooster, and Chandler and Marlowe is, I hope, to offer reasonably high praise. But just to pile on the admiration for a bit, I know some eminent historians who have pored over Fraser’s footnotes and appreciated details about, say, the Charge of the Light Brigade that are known to few. The battle scene at Balaklava is meticulously done, and if his own mad charge is started by Flashman himself, who panics his horse by farting so loudly with sheer hangover and pure fear, why then it’s hardly less of a fiasco and a shambles than the real thing turned out to be.

I am not looking for faults after all this drooling on my part, but there is one problem that needs to be faced squarely. In the earlier stories, Flashman is a sadist and a brute as well as a rascally coward and goof-off. He takes positive, gleeful pleasure in the misfortunes of others, especially if he can turn those misfortunes to his own account. In the very first book, he tells us, within months of joining his first regiment, “Myself, I liked a good flogging, and used to have bets with Bryant, my particular crony, on whether the man would cry out before the tenth stroke, or when he would faint. It was better sport than most, anyway.” Some volumes later, in *Flash for Freedom!*, he is on the Mississippi and running away with the beautiful slave girl Cassy, who has been his bedmate and his companion in adversity. The brutal slave-catchers corner them, and she is “quivering like a hunted beast.” Our hearts are in our mouths as he ponders what to do.

“Cassy!” I snapped. “Can you use a gun?”

She nodded. "Take this, then," says I. "Cover them—and if one of them stirs a finger, shoot the swine in the stomach! There—catch hold. Good girl, good girl—I'll be back in an instant!"

"What is it?" Her eyes were wild. "Where are you—"

"Don't ask questions! Trust me!" And with that I slipped out of the door, pulled it to, and was off like a stung whippet. I'd make quarter of a mile, maybe more, before she would twig, or they overpowered her.

This gave new significance to the old phrase "self-preservation." All you needed, in order to anticipate old Flashy's moves, was to guess at the lowest possible motive. And then, unaccountably, our hero started to go soft. In *Flashman and the Dragon*, he is the captive of the sinuous Chinese courtesan Yehonala:

When two of her eunuchs caught some crows and released them with firecrackers tied to their legs so that the birds were blown to bits in mid-air, Yehonala had the culprits' backsides cut to bloody pulp with bamboo whips, watching the infliction of the full hundred strokes with smiling enjoyment. You may say they deserved a drubbing, but you didn't see it.

The earlier Flashman would (a) not have thought the cruel eunuchs "deserved a drubbing" for their ingenuity, and (b) not have given a damn about their punishment. He would have relished both scenes. Deplorable signs of weakness were already evident in *Flashman's Lady*, where he burdened himself with a white woman while trying to escape the horrifying soldiers of Queen Ranavalona. On that occasion the inconvenient lady was also his wife, so conceivably an exception can be made. But by the time of *Flashman and the Tiger* the plain fact had to be faced: The old boy had gone positively mushy with emotion and was prepared to risk his own skin—his own skin, mark you—to save his granddaughter's honor. There was some muttering in the ranks of the fan base. One blushed to see the pitiful wreck of what had once been such an ignoble man. It is therefore a real pleasure to be able to record a corking return to form in the latest book. Flashman has been chivied all over Abyssinia and saved repeatedly by the exquisite Uliba, an African princess who has acted as his guide, protector, and lover. There comes the moment, however, when their canoe has been swamped, the deadly waterfall is just ahead, Flashman has contrived to catch hold of an overhanging bough, and she has managed to seize one of his legs. As he reflects,

There was only one thing to be done, so I did it, drawing up my free leg and driving my foot down with all my force at Uliba's face staring up at me open-mouthed, half-submerged as she clung to my other knee. I missed, but caught her full on the shoulder, jarring her grip free, and away she went, canoe and all, the gunwale rasping against my legs as it was whirled downstream. One glimpse I had of the white water foaming over those long beautiful legs, and then she was gone.

Now, that, you will have to admit, is a damn sight more like it. "Yes," sighs Fraser, "a lot of readers thought he was going soft, or even getting braver. In fact, he can only display the courage of a cornered rat. And my daughter Caro—she's also a novelist—told me how delighted she was that this time he'd definitely turned nasty again."

Historians and critics will never stop arguing about the worthwhileness of it all: that amazing conquest and settlement of the known globe by the aristocrats and peasants of a rain-sodden archipelago in the North Sea. Fraser makes Flashman face it in all its squalor and grandeur: the British-owned slave ships, and the British vessels that put down the slave trade; the destruction of dens of tyranny in India and Abyssinia, and the hideous vandalizing of the Summer Palace in Peking; the serf armies and pirate navies that needed crushing, and the magnificent peoples—Zulus, Sikhs, Afghans—who the British had finally to admit were unconquerable. The empire on which the sun never set was also the empire on which the gore never dried. Only a few decades ago, when the Flashman papers were first unwrapped from their oilskin, all this seemed to have vanished like blood off a bayonet. But now British and American soldiers are back in Afghanistan and Mesopotamia, and George MacDonald Fraser, who is known as a curmudgeonly Tory war veteran and staunch hater of Tony Blair, is not best pleased. “Tony Blair,” he snorts down the phone, “is not just the worst prime minister we’ve ever had, but by far the worst prime minister we’ve ever had. It makes my blood boil to think of the British soldiers who’ve died for that little liar.” Even so, in Flashman on the March, he ends his footnotes on the Abyssinian campaign ambiguously by noting that, although the British overthrew a crazed despot and then withdrew, “if Britain had stayed, revisionist historians would certainly have condemned it as another act of selfish imperialism.”

This is the morally fraught terrain, between the first sound of the bugle and the news of triumph or disgrace, which it takes a serious man to cover, whether saddled on a mettlesome charger or flourishing only a pen. And, since history is often recounted by the victors, why not have it related for once by one who is something worse than a loser? Imagine if King Hal had kept Falstaff on hand as his bosom chum until the eve of Agincourt and you have a sense of Flashy’s imperishable achievement.

(Vanity Fair, March 2006)

Fleet Street’s Finest: From Waugh to Frayn

JAMES BOND DOES NOT MAKE an appearance until Part Two of what is perhaps his most polished adventure, *From Russia with Love*. And when he has been briefed by “M” and outfitted by “Q,” and told what is expected of him, he suffers a mild mid-life crisis. What, he asks as the plane takes him toward the Golden Horn, would his younger self think of the man now so “tarnished with years of treachery and ruthlessness and fear,” sent off “to pimp for England”? Eventually dismissing this as an idle or feeble mood, he reflects further:

What-might-have-been was a waste of time. Follow your fate and be satisfied with it, and be glad not to be a second-hand motor salesman, or a yellow-press journalist, pickled in gin and nicotine, or a cripple—or dead.

Yes, well, that seems to put the profession nicely in its place, and indeed in its context. I read those words when I was a schoolboy in Cambridge in the early 1960s and had already decided that only journalism would do.

Not long afterward, I was strolling along Tenison Road and saw, I swear, a wheezing second- or even third-hand motor belching toward me. Behind its wheel sat a man of impossibly fly-blown and lugubrious appearance; his skin sallow and wrinkled, an unfiltered cigarette in his mouth; his eyes like piss-holes in the snow. Only one detail was required to complete the scene, and at first my disordered senses almost refused to register it. Stuck in the corner of his windscreen was a faint and tattered card that read "PRESS." It was yellow all right. It might as well have been stuck in the band of his hat. Christ knows where he had been—perhaps to a bad day at the Newmarket races—but it took little imagination to see where he was bound. And this was not a Giles cartoon but a glimpse of the future I thought I wanted. I cheered up immensely. Clichés and caricatures are there to be overcome, after all. And I had my Orwell books to go back to.

Not much later, I came across Orwell's essay "Confessions of a Book Reviewer." It opens thus, in case you may have forgotten:

In a cold but stuffy bed-sitting room littered with cigarette ends and half-empty cups of tea, a man in a moth-eaten dressing-gown sits at a rickety table, trying to find room for his typewriter among the piles of dusty papers that surround it. He cannot throw the papers away because the wastepaper basket is already overflowing, and besides, somewhere among the unanswered letters and unpaid bills it is possible that there is a cheque for two guineas which he is nearly certain he forgot to pay into the bank ... He is a man of thirty-five, but looks fifty. He is bald, has varicose veins and wears spectacles, or would wear them if his only pair were not chronically lost. If things are normal with him he will be suffering from malnutrition, but if he has recently had a lucky streak he will be suffering from a hangover.

Orwell of course could be discouragingly pessimistic at times. But for light relief there was always Evelyn Waugh, who in his *Decline and Fall* had taught me that even original sin could have its lighter side. What could be funnier than the school sports-day at Dr. Fagan's awful Molesworth-like establishment at Llanabba? The arrangements are being made:

Admirable! And then there is the Press. We must ring up the Flint and Denbigh Herald and get them to send a photographer. That means whisky. Will you see to that, Philbrick? I remember at one of our sports I omitted to offer whisky to the Press, and the result was a most unfortunate photograph. Boys do get into such indelicate positions during the obstacle race, don't they?

A picture appeared to be emerging here. In the opening pages of *Scoop*, as William Boot is still in the train from Somerset to London and as yet has no idea what awaits him at the offices of the *Daily Beast*, he recalls that:

He had once seen in Taunton a barely intelligible film about newspaper life in New York where neurotic men in shirt-sleeves and eye-shades had rushed from telephone to

tape-machines, insulting and betraying one another in circumstances of unredeemed squalor.

Could this squalor ever be redeemed? Perhaps not by one of my other favorite standbys, Graham Greene, who sent Hale of the Daily Messenger down to Brighton for the day, there to pass his time in hucksterism and fatuity, “drinking gins and tonics wherever his programme allowed”:

For he had to stick closely to a programme: from ten till eleven Queen’s Road and Castle Square, from eleven till twelve the Aquarium and Palace Pier, twelve till one the front between the Old Ship and West Pier, back for lunch between one and two in any restaurant he chose round the Castle Square, and after that he had to make his way all down the parade to the West Pier and then to the station by the Hove streets. These were the limits of his absurd and well-advertised sentry-go.

(And so much of journalism is the “sentry go”: the stake-out, the hand-out, the lobby correspondents attending on their “source” who knows as well as they do when the deadline is coming. Hale and the Daily Messenger are doomed to miss the only real story of the day, which is Hale murdered in broad daylight by having a stick of hard rock jammed down his throat: an apposite revenge upon the idle and the spoon-fed.)

Enough, perhaps, of the Catholic school of fiction. I graduated to the cool and elegant universe of Anthony Powell, in whose world the influence of the newspapers is relatively minimal. In fact, as it now seems to me, the absence of this influence is a limitation on his claim to have been describing English social reality. Surely Sir Magnus Donners, that tycoon of 1930s tycoons, should have been the ambitious and manipulative proprietor of at least one Fleet Street title? When Powell gets round to it, though, as he does in the tenth of his twelve-novel cycle, he does not stint. Here is the port-soaked “Books” Bagshaw, in *Books Do Furnish a Room*:

He possessed that opportune facility for turning out several thousand words on any subject whatever at the shortest possible notice: politics: sport: books: finance: science: art: fashion—as he himself said, “War, Famine, Pestilence or Death on a Pale Horse.” All were equal when it came to Bagshaw’s typewriter. He would take on anything, and—to be fair—what he produced, even off the cuff, was no worse than what was to be read most of the time. You never wondered how on earth the stuff had ever managed to be printed.

Bagshaw’s gift for non-specialization is further emphasized a little later on, when he hears a saloon-bar criticism of the Woman’s Page from an irate X Trapnel:

Don’t breathe a word against the Woman’s Page, Trappy. Many a time I’ve proffered advice on it myself under a female pseudonym.

And this only sent me back to Evelyn Waugh and *The Loved One*, in which the repulsive Jake Slump, wreathed in the fumes of a bar-fly and chain-smoker, is a veteran of the agony advice column “Aunt Lydia’s Post Bag.”

A few themes seem to be emerging from the way in which our novelists have treated our journalists: copious gin (or whisky, or port, or what you will), mediocrity, cynicism, sloth, and meanness of spirit. This is to say nothing of the greatest of all les

deformations professionnelles: shameless and indeed boastful fabrication. And I entirely forgot to mention the fiddling of expenses. All professions are deformed by this, of course, but only journalism has made a code out of it:

Mr. Salter saw he was not making his point clear. "Take a single example," he said. "Supposing you want to have dinner. Well, you go to a restaurant and do yourself proud, best of everything. Bill perhaps may be two pounds. Well, you put down five pounds for entertainment on your expenses. You've had a slap-up dinner, you're three pounds to the good, and everyone is satisfied.

(Evelyn Waugh: *Scoop*)

Various members of the staff emerged from Hand and Ball Passage during the last dark hour of the morning, walked with an air of sober responsibility toward the main entrance, greeted the commissionaire and vanished upstairs in the lift to telephone their friends and draw their expenses before going out again to have lunch.

(Michael Frayn: *Towards the End of the Morning*)

An absolutely brilliant deadpan account of the expenses racket is also given in Philip Norman's marvelous novel of the *Sunday Times* in the late sixties: *Everyone's Gone to the Moon*. This is the only rival to Frayn since Waugh.

Frayn's *Towards the End of the Morning*, first published in 1967, used to have the status of a cult book among the hacks (as we all agree to call ourselves). It does have more or less everything: the white-haired and burned-out old soak who can only reminisce about forgotten, bibulous trips with forgotten, bibulous stars of old Fleet Street; the bullying, self-loathing pictures editor who insists on how self-made he is; the dreamy assistant scribe who only wants to write book reviews for the *New Statesman* on the side (that dates it a bit: In those days the NS had a literary editor and was literate); the neurotic deputy editor who can't keep up the supply of pre-digested columns entitled "In Years Gone By," or hold his rural clergymen contributors to their deadlines. (In the latter respect, there is something of a lift from William Boot's "Lush Places" countryman column in *Scoop*.)

There was always, also, an interest in guessing whether Frayn had "set" it all at either the *Observer* or the *Guardian*, which in those days were separate institutions. (Malcolm Muggeridge's journalism novel *Picture Palace* had been too transparent in this regard, enraging his employers, the then-Manchester *Guardian* management, who obtained an injunction preventing its publication.) In the introduction to the new edition, Frayn says that it was a touch of both. The paper is never given a name, but it's in any case obviously not the *Observer* because it comes out every day. A possible clue, for addicts and cognoscenti, is contained on the very cover of the new edition which drops an entire word out of the title of the novel, and rather metaphysically offers it as *Towards the End of Morning*. The *Guardian* is no longer so celebrated for its misprints but there will always be those of us who are nostalgic for the days when it was, and when the opera critic Phillip Hope Wallace, for example, could wake up to find that he had reviewed last night's Covent Garden performance of Doris Godunov.

Admirers of Frayn's second novel are sneered at by those of us who are in the know, and who appreciate that it is his first novel about journalism that really demonstrates his genius. In *The Tin Men*, published in 1965, there are some boozers and louts and misfits, to be sure. But the brilliance of the thing lay in its attempt to reduce the business of hackery to an exact formula. At a demented research institute named for William Morris, eager eyes gaze at a computer that can handle UHL, or "Unit Headline Language." A survey is conducted, in which people are shown the random headlines:

ROW HOPE MOVE FLOP

LEAK DASH SHOCK

HATE BAN BID PROBE

A total of 86.4 percent of those responding say that they understand the headlines, though of this total a depressing number cannot quite say why. Thus the search must go on. Would people like to read about air-crashes with children's toys in the wreckage, or without children's toys in the wreckage? In the case of a murder of a woman, should the victim be naked or partially clad? Frayn re-summons the tones of old Fleet Street into this laboratory of shame, when the questing researcher Goldwasser is brusquely accosted by his vile assistant Nobbs: " 'Do you prefer a female corpse to be naked, or to be clad in underclothes?' he repeated to Goldwasser. 'That's what I call a good question, mate. That's what I call a good question.' "

How shall we know the cultural mayhem wrought by thinking in headlines? Philip Roth's Portnoy does it all the time, as he guiltily imagines how his foulness would be rendered on the front page. When a WASP girl will not administer him a blow-job for fear of suffocation, for example: JEW SMOTHERS DEB WITH COCK: Vassar Grad Georgetown Strangulation Victim; Mocky Lawyer Held.

The habit breaks out fairly mildly in *Scoop*, where all the genius goes into the reporter's cables that are now a thing of the past ("LOVELY SPRING WEATHER BUBONIC PLAGUE RAGING"). In *Decline and Fall*, a lazy journalist comes to interview the mad architect Dr. Silenus at Margot Beste-Chetwynde's country home, and "happily" visualizes as he talks: "Peer's Sister-in-Law Mansion Builder on Future of Architecture." In *Brideshead Revisited*, for that matter, debutantes shriek at the headline "Marquis's Son Unused to Wine."

In one movie version of Hecht and MacArthur's *The Front Page*, Walter Matthau sees the condemned man's distraught girlfriend launch herself from a window and barely breaks off to mutter: "Shady Lady Leaps for Love," thus anticipating the New York Post's "Headless Body in Topless Bar" by some two decades. But in Frayn's *Tin Men* the examples are barely even satirical, or self-satirizing. "Child Told Dress Unsuitable by Teacher"; "Paralyzed Girl Determined to Dance Again." And since the demure days in which he was originally writing, further defenses against satire have been erected at the lower end of the business. (Just try adding "bonk" to the list of four-letter headline words listed earlier, and begin your computer simulation.)

Martin Amis's *Yellow Dog* does its level best at parody (as can be proven by the mild name of his fictional rag, the *Morning Lark*, which is far less grotesque than the

Daily Beast or Daily Brute and could very easily be imagined on a newsstand right now). And yellow is the light in the newsroom, and in the eyes of the hacks, and in so many of the bodily fluids that they tirelessly seek to make their readers emit. The new modern skill is that of wildly overdone photo-caption-writing, where no groan-making multiple-entendre is off-limits, and again I wasn't absolutely sure that part of the yellowing Clint Smoker's effort, about royalty in a Chinese restaurant, couldn't have been at least partly stolen:

But sweet turned to sour when photographers had the sauce to storm their private room. Wan tun a bit of privacy, the couple fled with the lads in hot pursuit—we'll cashew!

("That bit was good," said a hard-bitten old Fleet-Streeter of my acquaintance, "but the bit about how we discuss the readers at editorial meetings was bloody uncanny.") In Kingsley Amis's *Girl, 20*, which is the second-funniest of his novels and the only one I can call to mind that features journalism—though I suppose Jim Dixon in a low moment does briefly impersonate a newspaper reporter on the telephone—the description of the editor Harold Meers is so thoroughly and worryingly accurate that I have met people who are certain that they must know who the bastard was. (" 'It's the way he keeps thinking up new ways of being a shit that you can't help taking your hat off to him for,' said Coates." Albert Coates, incidentally, exactly resembles Jake Slump in the tartarean depths of his smoker's cough—"Coates drew at his cigarette and coughed terribly. He seemed unaware of any link between these two actions"—while the hero of *Girl, 20* joins Slump, Boot, and the awful Reg Mounce of *Towards the End of the Morning*, in the notorious newspaper-industry bind of the hack who has been fired without knowing it.)

The Amises are the only ones of the authors I have mentioned who didn't serve time on a national newspaper. Fleming was a foreign editor for Kemsley when that family owned the *Sunday Times*, Waugh was a correspondent, and Greene had been a sub-editor as well. Powell toiled at the *Daily Telegraph*, and Frayn we all know about. They mostly did quite well out of it. Orwell never had a steady job, but he haunted Fleet Street in search of work and knew the argot. Yet they all unite in employing the figure of the journalist, or the setting of a newspaper, as the very pattern and mold of every type of squalor and venality. The sole exception I can call to mind is P. G. Wodehouse, who started out as a penny-a-liner on the *Globe* and seems to have found journalism to be innocent fun. Bertie Wooster never misses a chance to mention his article on "What the Well-Dressed Man Is Wearing," which appeared in his Aunt Dahlia's own magazine *Milady's Boudoir*, and to which he deprecatingly refers as "my 'piece,' as we journalists call it." Psmith, in *Psmith Journalist*, takes over a small magazine of domesticity in New York, named *Cosy Moments*, and transforms it briefly into a campaigning, reforming, and crime-fighting organ. His slogan when confronted by those who would intimidate him is: "Cosy Moments cannot be muzzled." This motto has been inscribed on the wall above my keyboard for many years.

Probably nothing is as boring as the reminiscences of an old Fleet Street hand, but I shall have to say that I pity those now in the trade who won't remember the atmosphere of that little enclave between Ludgate Circus and the Strand, with its byways and courts and alleys. Yes, the smell of printer's ink, the thunder of the presses like the engine-room of the Titanic. Yes, the lights blazing in the black-glass palace of the old Daily Express, and the vans swinging out on their way to catch the overnight trains with the first edition. Yes, the fog around Blackfriars Station. Yes, the exorbitant padding of the night-shift by printers with names like M Mouse.

Yes, the suicidal imbibing in the King and Keys, or the Punch, or El Vino. Yes, the demented whims of the latest proprietor. Yes, the overflowing ashtrays and the pounding of ancient upright typewriters. Yes, the callousness and gallows humor. ("Shumble, Whelper and Pigge knew Corker," as Waugh describes a hacks' reunion in *Scoop*. "They had loitered of old on many a doorstep and forced an entry into many a stricken home.") And yes, it's true that the most celebrated opening line of any Fleet Street war correspondent was that of the hack in the Congo who yelled: "Anyone here been raped and speaks English?"

The palm goes to Frayn, in the end, because well before it happened he could see that closing time was coming, to those pubs and those hot-metal presses both. Hackery and Grub Street had of course been lampooned before, from Pope to Gissing, but the real "age" of newspapers begins roughly with the Northcliffe press—"written by office-boys for office-boys," as someone loftily said—and the era of mass literacy. In other words, it opened with the twentieth century and may have closed with it.

In Frayn's two novels in the sixth decade of that century, the lure of television is already beginning to exert its anti-magic. The mindlessness of the opinion poll and the reader-survey is coming to replace news and analysis. The reporters and editors are beginning to think about mortgages and pensions. The editor is a cipher. I do not think that there will again be a major novel, flattering or unflattering, in which a reporter is the protagonist. Or if there is, he or she will be a blogger or some other species of cyber-artist, working from home and conjuring the big story from the vastness of electronic space.

In any case, the literature of old Fleet Street was to a very considerable extent written by journalists and for journalists. Most reporters I know regard *Scoop* as a work of pitiless realism rather than antic fantasy. The cap fitted, and they wore it, and with a lopsided grin of pride, at that. Perhaps this assists us in answering the age-old question: Why does the profession of journalism have such a low reputation? The answer: Because it has such a bad press.

(The Guardian [London], December 3, 2005)

Saki: Where the Wild Things Are

Review of *The Unbearable Saki*, by Sandie Byrne.

AT THE AGE of fifteen, Noël Coward was staying in an English country house and found a copy of *Beasts and Super-Beasts* on a table: "I took it up to my bedroom, opened it casually and was unable to go to sleep until I had finished it." I had a similar experience at about the same age, and I agree with Coward that H. H. Munro—or "Saki," the author of the book in question—is among those few writers, inspirational when read at an early age, who definitely retain their magic when revisited decades later. I have the impression that Saki is not very much appreciated in the United States. Good. That means I can put into my debt many of you who are reading these words. Go and get an edition of this Edwardian master of the short story. Begin with, say, "Sredni Vashtar" or "The Lumber-Room" or "The Open Window." Then see whether you can put the book down.

The spellbinding quality of the stories is almost too easy to analyze and looks mawkish when set down in plain words, because Saki's great gift was being able to write about children and animals. But consider: How many authors have ever been able to pull off these most difficult of tricks? Kipling, for sure, but then, Kipling would not have been able to render the languid young princes of the drawing room, such as the exquisite Clovis Sangrail, with whom Saki peopled so many a scene. The character of these lethal Narcissi is well netted in a phrase coined by Sandie Byrne, who refers to them as "feral ephebes."

If you want to incubate an author who will show lifelong sympathy for children and animals, it seems best to sequester him at an early age and then subject him to a long regime of domestic torture. This was the formula that worked so well for Kipling, as evidenced in his frightening autobiographical story, "Baa Baa, Black Sheep," and it is almost uncanny to see how closely Saki's early life followed the same course. Abandoned to the care of cold and neurotic aunts in England while his father performed colonial duties in India, he and his siblings had to learn how to do without affection, and how to resist and outpoint adult callousness and stupidity. But without those terrible women—and the villains in Saki's gem-like tales are almost always female—we might not have had the most-fearsome aunts in fiction, outdoing even Wodehouse's Aunt Agatha or Wilde's Lady Bracknell.

Wodehouse happily admitted to being influenced by Saki, and it would be interesting to know to what extent Saki was himself influenced by Wilde. There is a good deal of evidence to suggest that he was, because some of his epigrams ("Beauty is only sin deep") betray an obvious indebtedness, and one ("To lose an hotel and a cake of soap in one afternoon suggests willful carelessness") is an almost direct appropriation from *The Importance of Being Earnest*. But in that epoch, Wilde's name lay under a ban, and Saki would have been well advised to not challenge the unstated rules that underlay that prohibition. (I find the speculation about his own homosexuality pointless because there is nothing about which to speculate: He was self-evidently homosexual and, just as obviously, deeply repressed.)

As is by no means uncommon in such cases, Saki was of the extreme right, and even an admirer must concede that some of his witticisms were rather labored and

contrived as a consequence. Several of his less amusing stories are devoted to ridicule of the women's suffrage movement, which was cresting during his heyday, while a persistent subtext of his work is a satirical teasing of his contemporary and *bête noire*, the ponderously socialistic Bernard Shaw ("Sherard Blaw, the dramatist who had discovered himself, and who had given so ungrudgingly of his discovery to the world"). And, like another of his great contemporaries, Arthur Balfour, future author of a famous Declaration, Saki harbored a suspicion of Jews. One of his feral epebes, Reginald, tells a duchess while chatting at the theater that what she terms "the great Anglo-Saxon empire" is, in fact, "rapidly becoming a suburb of Jerusalem."

That same empire, and its survival, was at the center of the contradictions in Saki's personality. Byrne's insightful and sprightly book makes plain that his affectless poseurs and dandies may have reflected one half of the man, just as his repeated portrayals of lithe and lissome and amoral young men must have expressed his banked-down yearnings. But this other hemisphere of his character also admired wildness and risk and cruelty and warfare, and associated the concepts of empire and nation with manly virtue.

This point can be reinforced by some thoughts on his choice of *nom de plume*. I had not known, until I read Byrne's book, that there was any doubt about the provenance of this. She mentions almost casually that one of his obituarists claimed it was a shortened form of "Nagasaki," which seems unintelligible in more ways than one. Enormously more probable, given Munro's often expressed admiration for FitzGerald's version of Omar Khayyám, is that he saw himself in the cupbearer of the *Rubáiyát*:

And fear not lest Existence closing your
Account, and mine, should know the like no more;
The Eternal Sáki from that Bowl has pour'd
Millions of Bubbles like us, and will pour.
When You and I behind the Veil are past,
Oh, but the long, long while the World shall last,
Which of our Coming and Departure heeds
As the Sea's self should heed a pebblecast.

In a story called "The East Wing," a lazy young male creature named Lucien Wattleskeat expresses something of the same thought—not exempting the bubble metaphor—but with more focus on the paradoxical importance of his own ephemerality:

I don't think I can risk my life to save someone I've never met or even heard about. You see, my life is not only wonderful and beautiful to myself, but if my life goes, nothing else really matters—to me. Eva might be snatched from the flames and live to be the grandmother of brilliant and charming men and women, but as far as I should be concerned she and they would no more exist than a vanished puff of cigarette smoke or a dissolved soda-water bubble.

I think this clears up any dispute about the source of the pseudonym (which often appeared on book jackets alongside his true name), and I pause to note that Lucien

Wattleskeat is a poor register of Saki's generally brilliant and somewhat Wildean ability to devise memorable names. Like Wilde (and like Anthony Powell later on), he made good use of the atlas of Britain and Ireland to come up with surnames and titles that were at once believable and eccentric. Many of these were from his beloved West Country (Yeovil, Honiton, Cullompton), but he ranged far and wide in choosing names like Courtenay Youghal for a smoothly accomplished politician and, in a moment of sheer brilliance, Tobermory for one of his most outstanding characters, the house cat who learns to speak English (and also to eavesdrop). Of his selecting Clovis as the model par excellence of his breed of bored and elegant young men, I have heard it suggested that it was because he was so appallingly Frank.

Creatures that essentially can never be tamed—felines and wolves preeminently—were Saki's emotional favorites. In his best-known novella, *The Unbearable Bassington*, which contains in the figure of Comus Bassington one of the two most obviously homoerotic of his protagonists (the other being the boy-werewolf Gabriel-Ernest in the story of the same name), the hero is a man named Tom Keriway, whose daredevil nature is summed up in the echoing phrase "a man that wolves have sniffed at." But Keriway has become sickly and nearly destitute, and morosely recalls an observation about a crippled wild crane that became domesticated in a German park: "It was lame, that was why it was tame."

When he was in his early forties, Saki began to throw off some of the languor and ennui with which he had invested so many of his scenes and characters, and became extremely exercised about the empire that he had quite often lampooned. Perhaps as a result of his experiences in Russia and the Balkans as a correspondent for a High Tory newspaper, he emitted grave warnings about an imminent German invasion and even wrote an alarmist novel—*When William Came*—about how British life might feel under the Prussian heel of Kaiser Wilhelm. Its pages treat almost exclusively the outrage and dispossession that might be experienced by the humiliated gentry. (I can think of only one Saki tale that takes the side of egalitarianism or that views society from the perspective of the gutter rather than the balcony or the verandah, and that is the lovely and vindictive "Morlvera," in which a couple of proletarian children witness a delicious piece of malice and spite being inflicted on a grown-up by a hideous youngster of the upper crust.)

But in 1914, Saki surprised all his elite admirers. His reasons for insisting on signing up for the trenches, when he was easily old enough to evade that fate, were almost comically reactionary. Enraged by the anti-militarist left that thought socialism preferable to world war, he argued in effect that even world war was preferable to socialism. Yet he declined any offer of an officer's commission, insisted on serving in the ranks, appeared to forget all his previous affectations about hollandaise dressing and the loving preparations of wine and cheese, and was so reduced by front-line conditions of wounds and illness that he grew a mustache to conceal the loss of most of his top teeth. He carried on writing, though chiefly about the interesting survival of wildlife in the no-man's-land of the Western Front, and he repeatedly sought positions on the front line.

In November 1916, near the village of Beaumont-Hamel on the river Somme, he found what it is quite thinkable that he had been looking for all along. On the verge of a crater, during an interval of combat, he was heard to shout “Put that bloody cigarette out!” before succumbing to the bullet of a German sniper who had been trained to look for such tell-tale signals. In that “vanished puff of cigarette smoke” or, if you prefer, his image of a dissolved bubble of effervescence, there died someone who had finally come to decide that other people were worth fighting for after all.

(The Atlantic, June 2008)

Harry Potter: The Boy Who Lived

Review of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, by J. K. Rowling.

IN MARCH 1940, in the “midnight of the century” that marked the depth of the Hitler-Stalin Pact (or in other words, at a time when civilization was menaced by an alliance between two Voldemorts or “You-Know-Whos”), George Orwell took the time to examine the state of affairs in fantasy fiction for young people. And what he found (in an essay called “Boys’ Weeklies”) was an extraordinary level of addiction to the form of story that was set in English boarding schools. Every week, boys (and girls) from the poorer quarters of industrial towns and from the outer edges of the English-speaking Empire would invest some part of their pocket-money to keep up with the adventures of Billy Bunter, Harry Wharton, Bob Cherry, Jack Blake, and the other blazer-wearing denizens of Greyfriars and St. Jim’s. As he wrote:

It is quite clear that there are tens and scores of thousands of people to whom every detail of life at a “posh” public school is wildly thrilling and romantic. They happen to be outside that mystic world of quadrangles and house-colors, but they can yearn after it, daydream about it, live mentally in it for hours at a stretch. The question is, Who are these people?

I wish that the morose veteran of Eton and St. Cyprian’s had been able to join me on the publication night of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, when I went to a bookstore in Stanford, California, to collect my embargoed copy on behalf of the New York Times Book Review. Never mind the stall that said “Get Your House Colors Here” and was dealing with customers wise in the lore of Ravenclaw and Slytherin. On the floor of the shop, largely transformed into the Gryffindor common room for the occasion, sat dozens of small children listening raptly to a reading from a massively plausible Hagrid. Of the 2,000 or so people in the forecourt, perhaps one-third had taken the trouble to wear prefect gowns and other Hogwarts or quidditch impedimenta. Many wore a lightning-flash on their foreheads: Orwell would have recoiled at seeing the symbol of Sir Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists on otherwise unblemished brows, even if the emblem was tamed by its new white-magic associations. And this was a sideshow to the circus, all across the English-speaking and even non-English world, as the countdown to the witching hour began.

I would give a lot to understand this phenomenon better. Part of it must have to do with the extreme banality and conformity of school life as it is experienced today, with everything oriented toward safety on the one hand and correctness on the other. But this on its own would not explain my youngest daughter a few years ago, sitting for hours on end with her tiny elbow flattening the pages of a fat book, and occasionally laughing out loud at the appearance of Scabbers the rat. (One hears that not all children retain the affection for reading that the Harry Potter books have inculcated: This isn't true in my house at least.)

Scabbers turns out to mutate into something a bit worse than a rat, and the ancient charm of metamorphosis is one that J. K. Rowling has exploited to the uttermost. Another well-tested appeal, that of the orphan hero, has also been given an intensive workout with the Copperfield-like privations of the eponymous hero. For Orwell, the English school story from Tom Brown to Kipling's *Stalky and Co.* was intimately bound up with dreams of wealth and class and snobbery, yet Rowling has succeeded in unmooring it from these considerations and giving us a world of youthful democracy and diversity, in which the humble leading figure has a name that—though it was given to a Shakespearean martial hero and king—could as well belong to an English labor union official. Perhaps Anglophilia continues to play its part, but if I were one of the few surviving teachers of Anglo-Saxon I would rejoice at the way in which such terms as “muggle” and “Wizengamot,” and such names as Godric, Wulfric, and Dumbledore, had become common currency. At this rate, the teaching of Beowulf could be revived. The many Latin incantations and imprecations could also help rekindle interest in the study of a “dead” language.

In other respects, too, one recognizes the school story formula. If a French or German or other “foreign” character appears in the Harry Potter novels, it is always as a cliché: Fleur and Krum both speak as if to be from “the Continent” is a joke in itself. The ban on sexual matters is also observed fairly pedantically, though as time has elapsed Rowling has probably acquired male readers who find themselves having vaguely impure thoughts about Hermione Granger (if not, because the thing seems somehow impossible, about Ginny Weasley). Most interesting of all, perhaps, and as noted by Orwell, “religion is also taboo.” The schoolchildren appear to know nothing of Christianity; in this latest novel Harry and even Hermione are ignorant of two well-known biblical verses encountered in a churchyard. That the main characters nonetheless have a strong moral code and a solid ethical commitment will be a mystery to some—like His Holiness the Pope and other clerical authorities who have denounced the series—while seeming unexceptionable to many others. As Hermione phrases it, sounding convincingly Kantian or even Russellian about something called the Resurrection Stone:

How can I possibly prove it doesn't exist? Do you expect me to get hold of—of all the pebbles in the world and test them? I mean, you could claim that anything's real if the only basis for believing in it is that nobody's proved it doesn't exist.

For all this apparently staunch secularism, it is ontology that ultimately slackens the tension that ought to have kept these tales vivid and alive. Theologians have never been able to answer the challenge that contrasts God's claims to simultaneous omnipotence and benevolence: Whence then cometh evil? The question is the same if inverted in a Manichean form: How can Voldemort and his wicked forces have such power and yet be unable to destroy a mild-mannered and rather disorganized schoolboy? In a short story this discrepancy might be handled and also swiftly resolved in favor of one outcome or another, but over the course of seven full-length books the mystery, at least for this reader, loses its ability to compel, and in this culminating episode the enterprise actually becomes tedious. Is there really no Death Eater or dementor who is able to grasp the simple advantage of surprise?

The repeated tactic of *deus ex machina* (without a *deus*) has a deplorable effect on both the plot and the dialogue. The need for Rowling to play catch-up with her many convolutions infects her characters as well. Here is Harry trying to straighten things out with a servile house-elf:

"I don't understand you, Kreacher," he said finally. "Voldemort tried to kill you, Regulus died to bring Voldemort down, but you were still happy to betray Sirius to Voldemort? You were happy to go to Narcissa and Bellatrix, and pass information to Voldemort through them ..."

Yes, well, one sees why he is confused. The exchange takes place during an abysmally long period during which the threesome of Harry, Hermione, and Ron are flung together, with weeks of time to spend camping invisibly and only a few inexplicable escapes from death to alleviate the narrative. The grand context of Hogwarts School is removed, at least until the closing scenes, and Rowling also keeps forgetting that things are either magical or they are not: Hermione's family surely can't be any safer from the Dark Lord by moving to Australia, and Hagrid's corporeal bulk cannot make any difference to his ability, or otherwise, to mount a broomstick. A boring subtext, about the wisdom or otherwise of actually uttering Voldemort's name, meanwhile robs the apotropaic device of its force.

For some time now the novels have been attempting a kind of secular dramatization of the battle between good and evil. The Ministry of Magic (one of Rowling's better inventions) has been seeking to impose a version of the Nuremberg Laws on England, classifying its subjects according to blood and maintaining its own Gestapo as well as its own Azkaban gulag. But again, over time and over many, many pages this scenario fails to chill: Most of the "muggle" population goes about its ordinary existence, and every time the secret police close in, our heroes are able to "disapparate"—a term that always makes me think of an attempt at English by George W. Bush. The prejudice against bank-monopoly goblins is modeled more or less on anti-Semitism and the foul treatment of elves is meant to put us in mind of slavery, but the overall effect of this is somewhat thin and derivative, and subject to diminishing returns.

In this final volume there is a good deal of loose-end gathering to be done. Which side was Snape really on? Can Neville Longbottom rise above himself? Are the Mal-

foys as black as they have been painted? Unfortunately—and with the solid exception of Neville, whose gallantry is well evoked—these resolutions prove to possess all the excitement of an old-style Perry Mason–type summing-up, prompted by a stock character who says, “There’s just one thing I don’t understand...” Most of all this is true of Voldemort himself, who becomes more tiresome than an Ian Fleming villain, or the vicious but verbose Nicolae Carpathia in the *Left Behind* series, as he offers boastful explanations that are at once grandiose and vacuous. This bad and pedantic habit persists until the final duel, which at least sees us back in the old school precincts once again. “We must not let in daylight upon magic,” as Walter Bagehot remarked in another connection, and the wish to have everything clarified is eventually self-defeating in its own terms. In her correct determination to bring down the curtain decisively, Rowling has gone further than she should, and given us not so much a happy ending as an ending which suggests that evil has actually been defeated (you should forgive the expression) for good.

Greater authors—Arthur Conan Doyle most notably—have been in the same dilemma when seeking closure. And, like Conan Doyle, Rowling has won imperishable renown for giving us an identifiable hero and a fine caricature of a villain, and for making a fictional bit of King’s Cross station as luminous as a certain address on nearby Baker Street. It is given to few authors to create a world apart, and to populate it as well as illustrate it in the mind. As one who actually did once go to boarding school by steam train, at eight, I enjoyed reading aloud to children and coming across Diagon Alley and Grimmauld Place, and also shuddering at the memory of the sarcastic schoolmasters (and Privet Drives) I have known.

The distinctly slushy close of the story may seem to hold out the faint promise of a sequel, but I honestly think and sincerely hope that this will not occur. The toys have been put firmly back in the box, the wand has been folded up, and the conjuror is discreetly accepting payment while the children clamor for fresh entertainments. (I recommend that they graduate to Philip Pullman, whose daemon scheme is finer than any patronus.) It’s achievement enough that “19 years later,” as the last chapter-heading has it, and quite probably for many decades after that, there will still be millions of adults who recall their initiation to literature as a little touch of Harry in the night.

(The New York Times Book Review, August 12, 2007)

AMUSEMENTS, ANNOYANCES, AND DISAPPOINTMENTS

Why Women Aren't Funny

BE YOUR GENDER WHAT IT MAY, you will certainly have heard the following from a female friend who is enumerating the charms of a new (male) squeeze: "He's really quite cute, and he's kind to my friends, and he knows all kinds of stuff, and he's so funny ..." (If you yourself are a guy, and you know the man in question, you will often have said to yourself, "Funny? He wouldn't know a joke if it came served on a bed of lettuce with sauce bearnaise.") However, there is something that you absolutely never hear from a male friend who is hymning his latest (female) love interest: "She's a real honey, has a life of her own ... (interlude for attributes that are none of your business) ... and, man, does she ever make 'em laugh."

Now, why is this? Why is it the case?, I mean. Why are women, who have the whole male world at their mercy, not funny? Please do not pretend not to know what I am talking about. All right—try it the other way (as the bishop said to the barmaid). Why are men, taken on average and as a whole, funnier than women? Well, for one thing, they had damn well better be. The chief task in life that a man has to perform is that of impressing the opposite sex, and Mother Nature (as we laughingly call her) is not so kind to men. In fact, she equips many fellows with very little armament for the struggle. An average man has just one, outside chance: He had better be able to make the lady laugh. Making them laugh has been one of the crucial preoccupations of my life. If you can stimulate her to laughter—I am talking about that real, out-loud, head-back, mouth-open-to-expose-the-full-horseshoe-of-lovely-teeth, involuntary, full, and deep-throated mirth; the kind that is accompanied by a shocked surprise and a slight (no, make that a loud) peal of delight—well, then, you have at least caused her to loosen up and to change her expression. I shall not elaborate further.

Women have no corresponding need to appeal to men in this way. They already appeal to men, if you catch my drift. Indeed, we now have all the joy of a scientific study, which illuminates the difference. At the Stanford University School of Medicine (a place, as it happens, where I once underwent an absolutely hilarious procedure with a sigmoidoscope), the grim-faced researchers showed ten men and ten women a sample of seventy black-and-white cartoons and got them to rate the gags on a "funniness scale."

To annex for a moment the fall-about language of the report as it was summarized in Biotech Week:

The researchers found that men and women share much of the same humor-response system; both use to a similar degree the part of the brain responsible for semantic knowledge and juxtaposition and the part involved in language processing. But they also found that some brain regions were activated more in women. These included the left prefrontal cortex, suggesting a greater emphasis on language and executive processing in women, and the nucleus accumbens ... which is part of the mesolimbic reward center.

This has all the charm and address of the learned Professor Scully's attempt to define a smile, as cited by Richard Osborne in his treatise on P. G. Wodehouse: "the drawing back and slight lifting of the corners of the mouth, which partially uncover the teeth; the curving of the naso-labial furrows ..." But have no fear—it gets worse:

"Women appeared to have less expectation of a reward, which in this case was the punch line of the cartoon," said the report's author, Dr. Allan Reiss. "So when they got to the joke's punch line, they were more pleased about it." The report also found that "women were quicker at identifying material they considered unfunny."

Slower to get it, more pleased when they do, and swift to locate the unfunny—for this we need the Stanford University School of Medicine? And remember, this is women when confronted with humor. Is it any wonder that they are backward in generating it?

This is not to say that women are humorless, or cannot make great wits and comedians. And if they did not operate on the humor wavelength, there would be scant point in half killing oneself in the attempt to make them writhe and scream (uproariously). Wit, after all, is the unfailing symptom of intelligence. Men will laugh at almost anything, often precisely because it is—or they are—extremely stupid. Women aren't like that. And the wits and comics among them are formidable beyond compare: Dorothy Parker, Nora Ephron, Fran Lebowitz, Ellen DeGeneres. (Though ask yourself, was Dorothy Parker ever really funny?) Greatly daring—or so I thought—I resolved to call up Ms. Lebowitz and Ms. Ephron to try out my theories. Fran responded: "The cultural values are male; for a woman to say a man is funny is the equivalent of a man saying that a woman is pretty. Also, humor is largely aggressive and pre-emptive, and what's more male than that?" Ms. Ephron did not disagree. She did, however, in what I thought was a slightly feline way, accuse me of plagiarizing a rant by Jerry Lewis that said much the same thing. (I have only once seen Lewis in action, in *The King of Comedy*, where it was really Sandra Bernhard who was funny.)

In any case, my argument doesn't say that there are no decent women comedians. There are more terrible female comedians than there are terrible male comedians, but there are some impressive ladies out there. Most of them, though, when you come to review the situation, are hefty or dykey or Jewish, or some combo of the three. When Roseanne stands up and tells biker jokes and invites people who don't dig her shtick to suck her dick—know what I am saying? And the Sapphic faction may have its

own reasons for wanting what I want—the sweet surrender of female laughter. While Jewish humor, boiling as it is with angst and self-deprecation, is almost masculine by definition.

Substitute the term “self-defecation” (which I actually heard being used inadvertently once) and almost all men will laugh right away, if only to pass the time. Probe a little deeper, though, and you will see what Nietzsche meant when he described a witticism as an epitaph on the death of a feeling. Male humor prefers the laugh to be at someone’s expense, and understands that life is quite possibly a joke to begin with—and often a joke in extremely poor taste. Humor is part of the armor-plate with which to resist what is already farcical enough. (Perhaps not by coincidence, battered as they are by moth-erfucking nature, men tend to refer to life itself as a bitch.) Whereas women, bless their tender hearts, would prefer that life be fair, and even sweet, rather than the sordid mess it actually is. Jokes about calamitous visits to the doctor or the shrink or the bathroom, or the venting of sexual frustration on furry domestic animals, are a male province. It must have been a man who originated the phrase “funny like a heart attack.” In all the millions of cartoons that feature a patient listening glum-faced to a physician (“There’s no cure. There isn’t even a race for a cure”), do you remember even one where the patient is a woman? I thought as much.

Precisely because humor is a sign of intelligence (and many women believe, or were taught by their mothers, that they become threatening to men if they appear too bright), it could be that in some way men do not want women to be funny. They want them as an audience, not as rivals. And there is a huge, brimming reservoir of male unease, which it would be too easy for women to exploit. (Men can tell jokes about what happened to John Wayne Bobbitt, but they don’t want women doing so.) Men have prostate glands, hysterically enough, and these have a tendency to give out, along with their hearts and, it has to be said, their dicks. This is funny only in male company. For some reason, women do not find their own physical decay and absurdity to be so riotously amusing, which is why we admire Lucille Ball and Helen Fielding, who do see the funny side of it. But this is so rare as to be like Dr. Johnson’s comparison of a woman preaching to a dog walking on its hind legs: The surprise is that it is done at all.

The plain fact is that the physical structure of the human being is a joke in itself: a flat, crude, unanswerable disproof of any nonsense about “intelligent design.” The reproductive and eliminating functions (the closeness of which is the origin of all obscenity) were obviously wired together in hell by some subcommittee that was giggling cruelly as it went about its work. (“Think they’d wear this? Well, they’re gonna have to.”) The resulting confusion is the source of perhaps 50 percent of all humor. Filth. That’s what the customers want, as we occasional stand-up performers all know. Filth, and plenty of it. Filth in lavish, heaping quantities. And there’s another principle that helps exclude the fair sex. “Men obviously like gross stuff,” says Fran Lebowitz. “Why? Because it’s childish.” Keep your eye on that last word. Women’s appetite for talk about that fine product known as Depend is limited. So is their relish for gags

about premature ejaculation. (“Premature for whom?” as a friend of mine indignantly demands to know.) But “child” is the key word. For women, reproduction is, if not the only thing, certainly the main thing. Apart from giving them a very different attitude to filth and embarrassment, it also imbues them with the kind of seriousness and solemnity at which men can only goggle. This womanly seriousness was well caught by Rudyard Kipling in his poem “The Female of the Species.” After cleverly noticing that with the male “mirth obscene diverts his anger”—which is true of most work on that great masculine equivalent to childbirth, which is warfare—Kipling insists:

But the Woman that God gave him,
every fibre of her frame
Proves her launched for one sole issue,
armed and engined for the same,
And to serve that single issue,
lest the generations fail,
The female of the species must be
deadlier than the male.

The word “issue” there, which we so pathetically misuse, is restored to its proper meaning of childbirth. As Kipling continues:

She who faces Death by torture for
each life beneath her breast
May not deal in doubt or pity—must
not swerve for fact or jest.

Men are overawed, not to say terrified, by the ability of women to produce babies. (Asked by a lady intellectual to summarize the differences between the sexes, another bishop responded, “Madam, I cannot conceive.”) It gives women an unchallengeable authority. And one of the earliest origins of humor that we know about is its role in the mockery of authority. Irony itself has been called “the glory of slaves.” So you could argue that when men get together to be funny and do not expect women to be there, or in on the joke, they are really playing truant and implicitly conceding who is really the boss.

The ancient annual festivities of Saturnalia, where the slaves would play master, were a temporary release from bossdom. A whole tranche of subversive male humor likewise depends on the notion that women are not really the boss, but are mere objects and victims. Kipling saw through this:

So it comes that Man, the coward,
when he gathers to confer
With his fellow-braves in council,
dare not leave a place for her.

In other words, for women the question of funniness is essentially a secondary one. They are innately aware of a higher calling that is no laughing matter. Whereas with a man you may freely say of him that he is lousy in the sack, or a bad driver, or an

inefficient worker, and still wound him less deeply than you would if you accused him of being deficient in the humor department.

If I am correct about this, which I am, then the explanation for the superior funniness of men is much the same as for the inferior funniness of women. Men have to pretend, to themselves as well as to women, that they are not the servants and supplicants. Women, cunning minxes that they are, have to affect not to be the potentates. This is the unspoken compromise H. L. Mencken described as “the greatest single discovery ever made by man” the realization “that babies have human fathers, and are not put into their mother’s bodies by the gods.” You may well wonder what people were thinking before that realization hit, but we do know of a society in Melanesia where the connection was not made until quite recently. I suppose that the reasoning went: Everybody does that thing the entire time, there being little else to do, but not every woman becomes pregnant. Anyway, after a certain stage women came to the conclusion that men were actually necessary, and the old form of matriarchy came to a close. (Mencken speculates that this is why the first kings ascended the throne clutching their batons or scepters as if holding on for grim death.) People in this precarious position do not enjoy being laughed at, and it would not have taken women long to work out that female humor would be the most upsetting of all.

Childbearing and rearing are the double root of all this, as Kipling guessed. As every father knows, the placenta is made up of brain cells, which migrate southward during pregnancy and take the sense of humor along with them. And when the bundle is finally delivered, the funny side is not always immediately back in view. Is there anything so utterly lacking in humor as a mother discussing her new child? She is unborable on the subject. Even the mothers of other fledglings have to drive their fingernails into their palms and wiggle their toes, just to prevent themselves from fainting dead away at the sheer tedium of it. And as the little ones burgeon and thrive, do you find that their mothers enjoy jests at their expense? I thought not.

Humor, if we are to be serious about it, arises from the ineluctable fact that we are all born into a losing struggle. Those who risk agony and death to bring children into this fiasco simply can’t afford to be too frivolous. (And there just aren’t that many episiotomy jokes, even in the male repertoire.) I am certain that this is also partly why, in all cultures, it is females who are the rank-and-file mainstay of religion, which in turn is the official enemy of all humor. One tiny snuffle that turns into a wheeze, one little cut that goes septic, one pathetically small coffin, and the woman’s universe is left in ashes and ruin. Try being funny about that, if you like. Oscar Wilde was the only person ever to make a decent joke about the death of an infant, and that infant was fictional, and Wilde was (although twice a father) a queer. And because fear is the mother of superstition, and because they are partly ruled in any case by the moon and the tides, women also fall more heavily for dreams, for supposedly significant dates like birthdays and anniversaries, for romantic love, crystals and stones, lockets and relics, and other things that men know are fit mainly for mockery and limericks. Good grief ! Is there anything less funny than hearing a woman relate a dream she’s just had?

(“And then Quentin was there somehow. And so were you, in a strange sort of way. And it was all so peaceful.” Peaceful?)

For men, it is a tragedy that the two things they prize the most—women and humor—should be so antithetical. But without tragedy there could be no comedy. My beloved said to me, when I told her I was going to have to address this melancholy topic, that I should cheer up because “women get funnier as they get older.”

Observation suggests to me that this might indeed be true, but, excuse me, isn’t that rather a long time to have to wait?

(Vanity Fair, January 2007)

Stieg Larsson: The Author Who Played with Fire

ISUPPOSE IT’S JUSTIFIABLE TO DESCRIBE “best-selling” in quasi-tsunami terms because when it happens it’s partly a wall and partly a tide: first you see a towering, glistening rampart of books in Costco and the nation’s airports and then you are hit by a series of succeeding waves that deposit individual copies in the hands of people sitting right next to you. I was slightly wondering what might come crashing in after Hurricane Khaled. I didn’t guess that the next great inundation would originate not in the exotic kite-running spaces at the roof of the world but from an epicenter made almost banal for us by Volvo, Absolut, Saab, and IKEA.

Yet it is from this society, of reassuring brand names and womb-to-tomb national health care, that Stieg Larsson conjured a detective double act so incongruous that it makes Holmes and Watson seem like siblings. I say “conjured” because Mr. Larsson also drew upon the bloody, haunted old Sweden of trolls and elves and ogres, and I put it in the past tense because, just as the first book in his “Millennium” trilogy, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, was about to make his fortune, he very suddenly became a dead person. In the Larsson universe the nasty trolls and hulking ogres are bent Swedish capitalists, cold-faced Baltic sex traffickers, blue-eyed Viking Aryan Nazis, and other Nordic riffraff who might have had their reasons to whack him. But if he now dwells in that Valhalla of the hack writer who posthumously beat all the odds, it’s surely because of his elf. Picture a feral waif. All right, picture a four-foot-eleven-inch “doll” with Asperger’s syndrome and generous breast implants. This is not Pippi Longstocking (to whom a few gestures are made in the narrative). This is Miss Goth, intermittently disguised as la gamine.

Forget Miss Smilla’s sense of the snow and check out Lisbeth Salander’s taste in pussy rings, tattoos, girls, boys, motorcycles, and, above all, computer keyboards. (Once you accept that George MacDonald Fraser’s *Flashman* can pick up any known language in a few days, you have suspended enough disbelief to settle down and enjoy his adventures.) Miss Salander is so well accoutred with special features that she’s almost over-equipped. She is awarded a photographic memory, a chess mind to rival Bobby Fischer’s, a mathematical capacity that toys with Fermat’s last theorem as

a cat bats a mouse, and the ability to “hack”—I apologize for the repetition of that word—into the deep intestinal computers of all banks and police departments. At the end of *The Girl Who Played with Fire*, she is for good measure granted the ability to return from the grave.

With all these superheroine advantages, one wonders why she and her onand-off sidekick, the lumbering but unstoppable reporter Mikael Blomkvist, don't defeat the forces of Swedish Fascism and imperialism more effortlessly. But the other reason that Lisbeth Salander is such a source of fascination is this: The pint-size minxoid with the dragon tattoo is also a traumatized victim and doesn't work or play well with others. She has been raped and tortured and otherwise abused ever since she could think, and her private phrase for her coming-of-age is “All the Evil”: words that go unelucidated until near the end of *The Girl Who Played with Fire*. The actress Noomi Rapace has already played Salander in a Swedish film of the first novel, which enjoyed a worldwide release. (When Hollywood gets to the casting stage, I suppose Philip Seymour Hoffman will be offered the ursine Blomkvist role, and though the coloring is wrong I keep thinking of Winona Ryder for Lisbeth.) According to Larsson's father, the sympathy with which “the girl” is evoked is derived partly from the author's own beloved niece, Therese, who is tattooed and has suffered from anorexia and dyslexia but can fix your computer problems.

In life, Stieg Larsson described himself as, among other things, “a feminist,” and his character surrogate, Mikael Blomkvist, takes an ostentatiously severe line against the male domination of society and indeed of his own profession. (The original grim and Swedish title of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* is *Men Who Hate Women*, while the trilogy's third book bore the more fairy-tale-like name *The Castle in the Air That Blew Up*: The clever rebranding of the series with the word “girl” on every cover was obviously critical.) Blomkvist's moral righteousness comes in very useful for the action of the novels, because it allows the depiction of a great deal of cruelty to women, smuggled through customs under the disguise of a strong disapproval. Sweden used to be notorious, in the late 1960s, as the homeland of the film *I Am Curious (Yellow)*, which went all the way to the Supreme Court when distributed in the United States and gave Sweden a world reputation as a place of smiling nudity and guilt-free sex. What a world of nursery innocence that was, compared with the child slavery and exploitation that are evoked with perhaps slightly too much relish by the crusading Blomkvist.

His best excuse for his own prurience is that these serial killers and torture fanciers are practicing a form of capitalism and that their racket is protected by a pornographic alliance with a form of Fascism, its lower ranks made up of hideous bikers and meth runners. This is not just sex or crime—it's politics! Most of the time, Larsson hauls himself along with writing such as this:

The murder investigation was like a broken mosaic in which he could make out some pieces while others were simply missing. Somewhere there was a pattern. He could sense it, but he could not figure it out. Too many pieces were missing.

No doubt they were, or there would be no book. (The plot of the first story is so heavily convoluted that it requires a page reproducing the Vanger dynasty's family tree—the first time I can remember encountering such a *dramatis personae* since I read *War and Peace*.) But when he comes to the villain of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, a many-tentacled tycoon named Wennerström, Larsson's prose is suddenly much more spirited. Wennerström had consecrated himself to "fraud that was so extensive it was no longer merely criminal—it was business." That's actually one of the best-turned lines in the whole thousand pages. If it sounds a bit like Bertolt Brecht on an average day, it's because Larsson's own views were old-shoe Communist.

His background involved the unique bonding that comes from tough Red families and solid class loyalties. The hard-labor and factory and mining sector of Sweden is in the far and arduous North—this is also the home territory of most of the country's storytellers—and Grandpa was a proletarian Communist up toward the Arctic. This during the Second World War, when quite a few Swedes were volunteering to serve Hitler's New Order and join the SS. In a note the twenty-three-year-old Larsson wrote before setting out for Africa, he bequeathed everything to the Communist Party of his hometown, Umea. The ownership of the immense later fortune that he never saw went by law to his father and brother, leaving his partner of thirty years, Eva Gabriellson, with no legal claim, only a moral one that asserts she alone is fit to manage Larsson's very lucrative legacy. And this is not the only murk that hangs around his death, at the age of fifty, in 2004.

To be exact, Stieg Larsson died on November 9, 2004, which I can't help noticing was the anniversary of *Kristallnacht*. Is it plausible that Sweden's most public anti-Nazi just chanced to expire from natural causes on such a date? Larsson's magazine, *Expo*, which has a fairly clear fictional cousinhood with "*Millennium*," was an unceasing annoyance to the extreme right. He himself was the public figure most identified with the unmasking of white-supremacist and neo-Nazi organizations, many of them with a hard-earned reputation for homicidal violence. The Swedes are not the pacific herbivores that many people imagine: In the footnotes to his second novel Larsson reminds us that Prime Minister Olof Palme was gunned down in the street in 1986 and that the foreign minister Anna Lindh was stabbed to death (in a Stockholm department store) in 2003. The first crime is still unsolved, and the verdict in the second case has by no means satisfied everybody.

A report in the mainstream newspaper *Aftonbladet* describes the findings of another anti-Nazi researcher, named Bosse Schön, who unraveled a plot to murder Stieg Larsson that included a Swedish SS veteran. Another scheme misfired because on the night in question, twenty years ago, he saw skinheads with bats waiting outside his office and left by the rear exit. Web sites are devoted to further speculation: One blog is preoccupied with the theory that Prime Minister Palme's uncaught assassin was behind the death of Larsson too. Larsson's name and other details were found when the Swedish police searched the apartment of a Fascist arrested for a political murder. Larsson's address, telephone number, and photograph, along with threats to people identified as "enemies

of the white race,” were published in a neo-Nazi magazine: The authorities took it seriously enough to prosecute the editor.

But Larsson died of an apparent coronary thrombosis, not from any mayhem. So he would have had to be poisoned, say, or somehow medically murdered. Such a hypothesis would point to some involvement “high up,” and anyone who has read the novels will know that in Larsson’s world the forces of law and order in Sweden are fetidly complicit with organized crime. So did he wind up, in effect, a character in one of his own tales? The people who might have the most interest in keeping the speculation alive—his publishers and publicists—choose not to believe it. “Sixty cigarettes a day, plus tremendous amounts of junk food and coffee and an enormous workload,” said Christopher MacLehose, Larsson’s literary discoverer in English and by a nice coincidence a publisher of *Flashman*, “would be the culprit. I gather he’d even had a warning heart murmur. Still, I have attended demonstrations by these Swedish right-wing thugs, and they are truly frightening. I also know someone with excellent contacts in the Swedish police and security world who assures me that everything described in the ‘Millennium’ novels actually took place. And, apparently, Larsson planned to write as many as ten in all. So you can see how people could think that he might not have died but been ‘stopped.’ ”

He left behind him enough manuscript pages for three books, the last of which—due out in Europe this fall and in the U.S. next summer—is titled *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet’s Nest*, and the outlines and initial scribbles of a fourth. The market and appetite for them seems to be unappeasable, as does the demand for Henning Mankell’s “Detective Wallander” thrillers, the work of Peter (Smilla’s Sense of Snow) Høeg, and the stories of Arnaldur Indridason. These writers come from countries as diverse as Denmark and Iceland, but in Germany the genre already has a name: *Schwedenkrimi*, or “Swedish crime writing.” Christopher MacLehose told me that he knows of bookstores that now have special sections for the Scandinavian phenomenon. “When Roger Straus and I first published Peter Høeg,” he said, “we thought we were doing something of a favor for Danish literature, and then ‘Miss Smilla’ abruptly sold a million copies in both England and America. Look, in almost everyone there is a memory of the sagas and the Norse myths. A lot of our storytelling got started in those long, cold, dark nights.”

Perhaps. But Larsson is very much of our own time, setting himself to confront questions such as immigration, “gender,” white-collar crime, and, above all, the Internet. The plot of his first volume does involve a sort of excursion into antiquity—into the book of Leviticus, to be exact—but this is only for the purpose of encrypting a “Bible code.” And he is quite deliberately unromantic, giving us shopping lists, street directions, menus, and other details—often with their Swedish names—in full. The villains are evil, all right, but very stupid and self-thwartingly prone to spend more time (this always irritates me) telling their victims what they will do to them than actually doing it. There is much sex but absolutely no love, a great deal of violence but zero heroism. Reciprocal gestures are generally indicated by cliché: If a Larsson character

wants to show assent he or she will “nod”; if he or she wants to manifest distress, then it will usually be by biting the lower lip. The passionate world of the sagas and the myths is a very long way away. Bleakness is all. That could even be the secret—the emotionless efficiency of Swedish technology, paradoxically combined with the wicked allure of the pitiless elfin avenger, plus a dash of paranoia surrounding the author’s demise. If Larsson had died as a brave martyr to a cause, it would have been strangely out of keeping; it’s actually more satisfying that he succumbed to the natural causes that are symptoms of modern life.

(Vanity Fair, December 2009)

As American as Apple Pie

IS THERE ANYTHING more tragic than the last leave-taking between Humbert Humbert and Dolores Haze (his very own “Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins”)? They meet in the dreary shack where she has removed herself to become a ground-down baby machine for some prole. Not only does she tell Humbert that she will never see him again, but she also maddens him by describing the “weird, filthy, fancy things” to which she was exposed by his hated rival, Quilty. “What things exactly?” he asks, in a calm voice where the word “exactly” makes us hear his almost unutterably low growl of misery and rage: “Crazy things, filthy things. I said no, I’m just not going to (she used, in all insouciance really, a disgusting slang term which, in a literal French translation, would be *souffler*) your beastly boys ...”

Souffler is the verb “to blow.” In its past participle, it can describe a light but delicious dessert that, well, melts on the tongue. It has often been said, slightly suggestively, that “you cannot make a soufflé rise twice.” Vladimir Nabokov spoke perfect Russian and French before he became the unrivaled master of English prose, and his 1955 masterpiece, *Lolita*, was considered the most transgressive book ever published. (It may still be.) Why, then, could he not bring himself to write the words “blow” or “blowjob”?

It’s not as if Nabokov was squeamish. Try this, for example, when Humbert’s step-daughter is still within his power (and he is even more in hers):

Knowing the magic and might of her own soft mouth, she managed—during one school year!—to raise the bonus price of a fancy embrace to three, and even four bucks. O Reader! Laugh not, as you imagine me, on the very rack of joy noisily emitting dimes and quarters, and great big silver dollars like some sonorous, jingly and wholly demented machine vomiting riches ...

“The magic and might of her own soft mouth ...” Erotic poets have hymned it down the ages, though often substituting the word “his.” The menu of brothel offerings in ancient Pompeii, preserved through centuries of volcanic burial, features it in the frescoes. It was considered, as poor Humbert well knew, to be worth paying for. The temple carvings of India and the *Kamasutra* make rather a lavish point of it, and Sigmund

Freud wondered if a passage in Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks might not betray an early attachment to that "which in respectable society is considered a loathsome perversion." Da Vinci may have chosen to write in "code" and Nabokov may have chosen to dissolve into French, as he usually did when touching on the risqué, but the well-known word "fellatio" comes from the Latin verb "to suck."

Well, which is it—blow or suck? (Old joke: "No, darling. Suck it. 'Blow' is a mere figure of speech." Imagine the stress that gave rise to that gag.) Moreover, why has the blowjob had a dual existence for so long, sometimes subterranean and sometimes flaunted, before bursting into plain view as the specifically American sex act? My friend David Aaronovitch, a columnist in London, wrote of his embarrassment at being in the same room as his young daughter when the TV blared the news that the president of the United States had received oral sex in an Oval Office vestibule. He felt crucially better, but still shy, when the little girl asked him, "Daddy, what's a vestibule?"

Acey told me she was at a party and she said to a man, What do men really want from women, and he said, Blowjobs, and she said, You can get that from men.

—From "Cocksucker Blues," Part 4 of *Underworld*, by Don DeLillo

I admire the capitalization there, don't you? But I think Acey (who in the novel is also somewhat Deecey) furnishes a clue. For a considerable time, the humble blowjob was considered something rather abject, especially as regards the donor but also as regards the recipient. Too passive, each way. Too grungy—especially in the time before dental and other kinds of hygiene. Too risky—what about the reminder of the dreaded *vagina dentata* (fully materialized by the rending bite-off scene in *The World According to Garp*)? And also too queer. Ancient Greeks and Romans knew what was going on, all right, but they are reported to have avoided the over-keen fellators for fear of their breath alone. And a man in search of this consolation might be suspected of being ... unmanly. The crucial word "blowjob" doesn't come into the American idiom until the 1940s, when it was (a) part of the gay underworld and (b) possibly derived from the jazz scene and its oral instrumentation. But it has never lost its supposed Victorian origin, which was "below-job" (cognate, if you like, with the now archaic "going down"). This term from London's whoredom still has a faint whiff of contempt. On the other hand, it did have its advocates as the prototype of Erica Jong's "zipless fuck": at least in the sense of a quickie that need only involve the undoing of a few buttons. And then there's that nagging word, "job," which seems to hint at a play-for-pay task rather than a toothsome treat for all concerned.

Stay with me. I've been doing the hard thinking for you. The three-letter "job," with its can-do implications, also makes the term especially American. Perhaps forgotten as the London of Jack the Ripper receded into the past, the idea of an oral swiftie was re-exported to Europe and far beyond by a massive arrival of American soldiers. For these hearty guys, as many a French and English and German and Italian madam has testified, the blowjob was the beau ideal. It was a good and simple idea in itself. It was valued—not always correctly—as an insurance against the pox. And—this is my speculation—it put the occupied and the allied populations in their place. "You do

some work for a change, sister. I've had a hard time getting here." Certainly by the time of the war in Vietnam, the war-correspondent David Leitch recorded reporters swapping notes: "When you get to Da Nang ask for Mickey Mouth—she does the best blow job in South-East Asia."

At some point, though, there must have been a crossover in which a largely forbidden act of slightly gay character was imported into the heterosexual mainstream. If I have been correct up until now, this is not too difficult to explain (and it fits with the dates, as well). The queer monopoly on blowjobs was the result of male anatomy, obviously, and also of the wish of many gays to have sex with heterosexual men. It was widely believed that only men really knew how to get the "job" done, since they were tormented hostages of the very same organ on a round-the-clock basis. (W. H. Auden's New York underground poem titled "The Platonic Blow"—even though there is absolutely nothing platonic about it, and it lovingly deploys the word "job"—is the classic example here.) This was therefore an inducement the gay man could offer to the straight, who could in turn accept it without feeling that he had done anything too faggoty. For many a straight man, life's long tragedy is first disclosed in early youth, when he discovers that he cannot perform this simple suction on himself. (In his stand-up routines, Bill Hicks used to speak often and movingly of this dilemma.) Cursing god, the boy then falls to the hectic abuse of any viscous surface within reach. One day, he dreams, someone else will be on hand to help take care of this. When drafted into the army and sent overseas, according to numberless witnesses from Gore Vidal to Kingsley Amis, he may even find that oral sex is available in the next hammock. And then the word is out. There might come a day, he slowly but inexorably reasons, when even women might be induced to do this.

Through the 1950s, then, the burgeoning secret of the blowjob was still contained, like a spark of Promethean fire, inside a secret reed. (In France and Greece, to my certain knowledge, the slang term used to involve "pipe smoking" or "cigar action." I don't mind the association with incandescence, but for Christ's sake, sweetie, don't be smoking it. I would even rather that you just blew.) If you got hold of Henry Miller's *Sexus* or Pauline Reage's *Story of O* (both published by Maurice Girodias, the same Parisian daredevil who printed *Lolita*), you could read about oral and other engagements, but that was France for you.

The comics of R. Crumb used to have fellatio in many graphic frames, but then, this was the counterculture. No, the big breakthrough occurs in the great year of nineteen soixante-neuf, when Mario Puzo publishes *The Godfather* and Philip Roth brings out *Portnoy's Complaint*. Puzo's book was a smash not just because of the horse's head and the Sicilian fish-wrap technique and the offer that couldn't be refused. It achieved a huge word-of-mouth success because of a famous scene about vagina-enhancing plastic surgery that became widely known as "the Godfather tuck" (sorry to stray from my subject) and because of passages like this, featuring the Mobbed-up crooner "Johnny Fontane":

And the other guys were always talking about blow jobs, this and other variations, and he really didn't enjoy that stuff so much. He never liked a girl that much after they tried it that way, it just didn't satisfy him right. He and his second wife had finally not got along, because she preferred the old sixty-nine too much to a point where she didn't want anything else and he had to fight to stick it in. She began making fun of him and calling him a square and the word got around that he made love like a kid.

Earthquake! Sensation! Telephones trilled all over the English-speaking world. Never mind if Johnny Fontane likes it or not, what is that? And why on earth is it called a "blow job"? (The words were for some reason separate in those days: I like the way in which they have since eased more cozily together.) Most of all, notice that it is regular sex that has become obvious and childish, while oral sex is suddenly for real men. And here's Puzo again, describing the scene where the lady in need of a newly refreshed and elastic interior isn't quite ready to sleep with her persuasive doctor, and isn't quite inclined to gratify him any other way, either:

"Oh that" she said.

"Oh that" he mimicked her. "Nice girls don't do that, manly men don't do that. Even in the year 1948. Well, baby, I can take you to the house of a little old lady right here in Las Vegas who was the youngest madam of the most popular whorehouse in the wild west days. You know what she told me? That those gunslingers, those manly, virile, straight-shooting cowboys would always ask the girls for a 'French,' what we doctors call fellatio, what you call 'oh that.' "

Notice the date. Note also the cowboys, likewise deprived of female company for long stretches. Now that we know about Blowjob Mountain, or whatever the hell it's called, I think I can score one for my original theory.

Philip Roth took the same ball and ran with it, though he served up his guilt and angst with different seasonings. Imperishably associated with handjob as his name will always be, his Alexander Portnoy fights like a wounded puma, throughout his boyhood, to find a girl, however hideous, who will get her laughing-tackle around his thing. When he finally persuades the woman he calls "The Monkey" ("a girl with a passion for The Banana") to do it right, his whole system explodes into a symphony of praise. "What cock know-how!" he yells to himself (thus rather confirming the nature and essence of the word "job"). On the other hand, his blonde WASP chick won't do it at any price, partly from disgust but also from a lively fear of asphyxiation. Portnoy resentfully ponders the social unfairness of this: She kills ducks in rustic settings but she won't fellate him. "To shoot a gun at a little quack-quack is fine, to suck my cock is beyond her." He also visualizes the awful headline if he presses things too far: JEW STRANGLES DEB WITH COCK ... MOCKY LAWYER HELD.

Thus the sixties—the sixties!—ended with the blowjob still partly hyphenated and the whole subject still wreathed and muffled in husky whispers. The cast of Hair sang of "fellatio" under the list of things like "sodomy" that "sound so nasty," and oral sex was legally defined as sodomy by many states of the union until the Supreme Court struck down those laws only three years ago—Clarence Thomas dissenting. The colloquial

expression in those intermediate days was in my opinion the crudest of all: “giving head.” You can hear it in Leonard Cohen’s droning paean to Janis Joplin in “Chelsea Hotel #2,” and also in the lyrics of Lou Reed and David Bowie. It was a “knowing” and smirking term, but it managed somehow to fuse the mindless with the joyless. This state of affairs obviously could not last long, and the entire lid blew off in 1972, when some amateurs pulled together \$25,000 for a movie that eventually posted grosses of \$600 million. Is this a great country or what? This film, with performances by Harry Reems and Linda Lovelace, was one of the tawdriest and most unsatisfying screen gems ever made, but it changed the world and the culture for good, or at any rate forever. Interesting, too, that Deep Throat was financed and distributed by members of New York’s Colombo crime family, who kept the exorbitant bulk of the dough. Mario Puzo, then, had been prescient after all, and without his deep insight the Sopranos might still be sucking only their own thumbs.

The recent and highly amusing documentary *Inside Deep Throat* shows—by re-creating the paradoxically Nixonian times that re-baptized Deep Throat to mean source rather than donor—how America grabbed the Olympic scepter of the blowjob and held on tight. In the film, there is the preserved figure of Helen Gurley Brown, den mother of Cosmo-style journalism for young ladies and author of *Sex and the Single Girl*, demonstrating her application technique as she tells us how she evolved from knowing nothing about oral sex to the realization that semen could be a terrific facial cream. (“It’s full of babies,” she squeals, unclear on the concept to the very last.) In closing, Dick Cavett declares that we have gone from looking at a marquee that read DEEP THROAT, and hoping it didn’t mean what we thought it did, to “kids who don’t even consider it sex.” This would leave us with only one problem. Why do we still say, of something boring or obnoxious, that “it sucks”? Ought that not be a compliment?

There is another thinkable reason why this ancient form of lovemaking lost its association with the dubious and the low and became an American handshake and ideal. The United States is par excellence the country of beautiful dentistry. As one who was stretched on the grim rack of British “National Health” practice, with its gray-and-yellow fangs, its steely-wire “braces,” its dark and crumbly fillings, and its shriveled and bleeding gums, I can remember barely daring to smile when I first set foot in the New World. Whereas when any sweet American girl smiled at me, I was at once bewitched and slain by the warm, moist cave of her mouth, lined with faultless white teeth and immaculate pink gums and organized around a tenderly coiled yet innocent tongue. Good grief! What else was there to think about? In order to stay respectable here, I shall just say that it’s not always so enticing when the young ladies of Albania (say) shoot you a cheeky grin that puts you in mind of Deliverance.

The illusion of the tonsilized clitoris will probably never die (and gay men like to keep their tonsils for a reason that I would not dream of mentioning), but while the G-spot and other fantasies have dissipated, the iconic U.S. Prime blowjob is still on a throne, and is also kneeling at the foot of that throne. It has become, in the words of a book on its technique, *The Ultimate Kiss*. And such a kiss on the first date is not

now considered all that “fast.” America was not the land of birth for this lavish caress, but it is (if I may mix my anthems) white with foam from sea to shining sea. In other cultures, a girl will do “that” only when she gets to know and like you. In this one, she will offer it as a baiser as she is making up her mind. While this persists, and while America’s gay manhood is still sucking away as if for oxygen itself, who dares to say that true global leadership is not still within our grasp?

(Vanity Fair, July 2006)

So Many Men’s Rooms, So Little Time

IKNEW IT WAS all over for Senator Larry Craig when he appeared with his long-suffering wife to say that he wasn’t gay. Such moments are now steppingstones on the way to apology, counseling, and rehab, and a case could be made for cutting out the spousal stage of the ritual altogether. Along with a string of votes to establish “don’t ask, don’t tell” and to prohibit homosexual marriage, Craig leaves as his political legacy the telling phrase “wide stance,” which may or may not join “big tent” and “broad church” as an attempt to make the Republican Party seem more “inclusive” than it really is.

But there’s actually a chance—a 38 percent chance, to be more precise—that the senator can cop a plea on the charge of hypocrisy. In his study of men who frequent public restrooms in search of sex, Laud Humphreys discovered that 54 percent were married and living with their wives, 38 percent did not consider themselves homosexual or bisexual, and only 14 percent identified themselves as openly gay. *Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Personal Places*, a doctoral thesis which was published in 1970, detailed exactly the pattern—of foot-tapping in code, hand-gestures, and other tactics—which has lately been garishly publicized at a Minneapolis–St. Paul airport men’s room. The word tearoom seems to have become archaic, but in all other respects the fidelity to tradition is impressive.

The men interviewed by Humphreys wanted what many men want: a sexual encounter that was quick and easy and didn’t involve any wining and dining. Some of the heterosexuals among them had also evolved a tactic for dealing with the cognitive dissonance that was involved. They compensated for their conduct by adopting extreme conservative postures in public. Humphreys, a former Episcopalian priest, came up with the phrase “breastplate of righteousness” to describe this mixture of repression and denial. So, it is quite thinkable that when Senator Craig claims not to be gay, he is telling what he honestly believes to be the truth.

However, this still leaves a slight mystery. In the 1960s, homosexuality was illegal in general, and gay men were forced to cruise in places where (if I can phrase it like this) every man and boy in the world has to come sometime. Today, anyone wanting a swift male caress can book it online or go to a discreet resort. Yet people still persist in

haunting the tearoom, where they risk arrest not for their sexuality but for “disorderly conduct.” Why should this be?

In my youth, I was a friend of a man named Tom Driberg, a British politician who set the bar very high in these matters. In his memoir, *Ruling Passions*, he described his “chronic, lifelong, love-hate relationship with lavatories.” He could talk by the hour about the variety and marvel of these “public conveniences,” as Victorian euphemism had dubbed them. In Britain, they were called “cottages” in gay argot, instead of “tearooms,” and an experienced “cottager” knew all the ins and outs, if you will pardon the expression. There was the commodious underground loo in Leicester Square that specialized in those whose passion was for members of the armed forces. There was the one at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, much favored by aesthetes, where on the very foot of the partition, above the six-inch space, someone had scribbled “beware of limbo dancers.” (The graffiti in cottages was all part of the fun: On the toilet wall at Paddington Station was written: “I am 9 inches long and two inches thick. Interested?” Underneath, in different handwriting: “Fascinated, dear, but how big is your dick?”) On Clapham Common, the men’s toilet had acquired such a lavish reputation for the variety of lurid actions performed within its precincts that, as I once heard it said: “If someone comes in there for a good honest shit, it’s like a breath of fresh air.”

Perhaps I digress. What Driberg told me was this. The thrills were twofold. First came the exhilaration of danger: the permanent risk of being caught and exposed. Second was the sense of superiority that a double life could give. What bliss it was to enter the House of Commons, bow to the speaker, and take your seat amid the trappings of lawmaking, having five minutes earlier felled a guardsman (and on one unforgettable occasion, a policeman) in the crapper in St. James’ Park. Assuming the story about the men’s room in Union Station to be true, Senator Craig could have gone straight from that encounter to the Senate floor in about the same amount of time.

Driberg was a public campaigner for gay rights and carried on as such even after being elevated to the House of Lords (where I am pretty sure he told me there was more going on in the lavatory than most people would guess). But it was with a distinct hint of melancholy that he voted for the successful repeal of the laws criminalizing homosexuality. “I rather miss the old days,” he would say wistfully. Well, the law legalized homosexual behavior only “in private,” so he could (and did) continue to court danger in public places. The House of Lords actually debated the question of whether a stall in a public lavatory constituted “privacy,” the reason being that in Britain you have to put money in a slot in order to enter such a place, and this could be held to constitute rent. *Private Eye* printed a poem about the learned exchange on this between two elderly peers of the realm: “Said Lord Arran to Lord Dilhorne, a penny / should entitle me to any / thing I may choose privately to do. Except you.”

Thus, without overthinking it or attempting too much by way of amateur psychiatry, I think it’s safe to assume that many tearoom traders have a need, which they only imperfectly understand, to get caught. And this may be truest of all of those who are

armored with “the breastplate of righteousness.” Next time you hear some particularly moralizing speech, set your watch. You won’t have to wait long before the man who made it is found, crouched awkwardly yet ecstatically while the cistern drips and the roar of the flush maddens him like wine.

(Slate, September 1, 2007)

The New Commandments

WHAT DO WE SAY when we want to revisit a long-standing policy or scheme that no longer seems to be serving us or has ceased to produce useful results? We begin by saying tentatively, “Well, it’s not exactly written in stone.” (Sometimes this comes out as “not set in stone.”)

By that, people mean that it’s not one of the immutable Tablets of the Law. Thus, more recent fetishes such as the gold standard, or the supposedly holy laws of the free market, can be discarded as not being incised on granite or marble. But what if it is the original stone version that badly needs a re-write? Who will take up the revisionist chisel?

There is in fact a good biblical precedent for doing just that, since the giving of the divine Law by Moses appears in three or four wildly different scriptural versions. (When you hear people demanding that the Ten Commandments be displayed in courtrooms and schoolrooms, always be sure to ask which set. It works every time.) The first and most famous set comes in Exodus 20 but ends with Moses himself smashing the supposedly most sacred artifacts ever known to man: the original, God-dictated panels of Holy Writ. The second edition occurs in Exodus 34, where new but completely different tablets are presented after some heavenly re-write session and are for the first time called “the ten commandments.” In the fifth chapter of Deuteronomy, Moses once more calls his audience together and recites the original Sinai speech with one highly significant alteration (the Sabbath commandment’s justifications in each differ greatly). But plainly discontented with the effect of this, he musters the flock again twenty-two chapters further on, as the river Jordan is coming into view, and gives an additional set of orders—chiefly terse curses—which are also to be inscribed in stone. As with the gold plates on which Joseph Smith found the Book of Mormon in upstate New York, no trace of any of these original yet conflicting tablets survives.

Thus we are fully entitled to consider them as a work in progress. May there not be some old commandments that could be retired, as well as some new ones that might be adopted? Taking the most celebrated Top 10 in order, we find (I am using the King James, or “Authorized,” version of the text):

I and II

These commandments are in fact a mixture of related injunctions. I am the LORD thy God.... Thou shalt have no other gods before me. This use of capitalization and upper- and lowercase carries the intriguing implication that there perhaps are some other gods but not equally deserving of respect or awe. (Scholars differ about the epoch during which the Jewish people decided on monotheism.) Then comes the prohibition of “graven images” or indeed “any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.” This appears to forbid representational art, just as some Muslims interpret the Koran to forbid the depiction of any human form, let alone any sacred one. (It certainly seems to discourage Christian iconography, with its crucifixes, and statues of virgins and saints.) But the ban is obviously intended as a very emphatic one, since it comes with a reminder that I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation. The collective punishment of future children, for the sin of *lèse-majesté*, may not strike everyone as an especially moral promise.

III

Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain. A slightly querulous and repetitive note is struck here, as if of injured vanity. Nobody knows how to obey this commandment, or how to avoid blasphemy or profanity. For example, I say “God alone knows” when I sincerely intend to say “Nobody knows.” Is this ontologically dangerous? Ought not unalterable laws to be plain and unambiguous?

IV

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. This ostensibly brief commandment goes on for a long time—for four verses in fact—and stresses the importance of a day dedicated to the LORD, during which neither one’s children nor one’s servants or animals should be allowed to perform any tasks. (Query: Why is it specifically addressed to people who are assumed to have staff?)

Nobody is opposed to a day of rest. The international Communist movement got its start by proclaiming a strike for an eight-hour day on May 1, 1886, against Christian employers who used child labor seven days a week. But in Exodus 20:8-11, the reason given for the day off is that “in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day.” Yet in Deuteronomy 5:15 a different reason for the Sabbath observance is offered: “Remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the LORD thy God brought thee out thence through a mighty hand and by a stretched out arm: therefore the LORD thy God commanded

thee to keep the sabbath day.” Preferable though this may be, with its reminder of previous servitude, we again find mixed signals here. Why can’t rest be recommended for its own sake? Also, why can’t the infallible and omniscient and omnipotent one make up his mind what the real reason is?

V

Honor thy father and thy mother. Innocuous as this may seem, it is the only commandment that comes with an inducement instead of an implied threat. Both the Exodus and Deuteronomy versions urge it for the same reason: “that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.” This perhaps has the slight suggestion of being respectful to Father and Mother in order to come into an inheritance—the Israelites have already been promised the Canaanite territory that is currently occupied by other people, so the prospective legacy pickings are rather rich. Again, why not propose filial piety as a nice thing in itself?

VI

Thou shalt not kill. This very celebrated commandment quite obviously cannot mean what it seems to say in English translation. In the original Hebrew it comes across as something more equivalent to “Thou shalt do no murder.” We can be fairly sure that the “original intent” is not in any way pacifistic, because immediately after he breaks the original tablets in a fit of rage, Moses summons his Levite faction and says (Exodus 32:27-28):

Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, put every man his sword by his side, and go in and out from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbor. And the children of Levi did according to the word of Moses: and there fell of the people that day about three thousand men.

With its seven-word preface, that order, too, obviously constituted a “commandment” of some sort. The whole book of Exodus is a commandment-rich environment, littered with other fierce orders to slay people for numberless minor offenses (including violations of the Sabbath) and also includes the sinister, ominous verse “Thou shalt not suffer [permit] a witch to live,” which was taken as a divine instruction by Christians until relatively recently in human history. Some work is obviously needed here: What is first-degree or third-degree killing and what isn’t? Distinguishing killing from murder is not a job easily left to mortals: What are we to do if God himself can’t tell the difference?

VII

Thou shalt not commit adultery. For some reason, “the seventh” is the only one of the commandments that is still widely known by its actual number. Extramarital carnal knowledge was probably more of a threat to society when families and tribes were closer-knit, and more bound by stern codes of honor. Having provided the raw material for most of the plays and novels ever published in non–Middle Eastern languages, adultery continues to be a great source of misery and joy and fascination. Most criminal codes have long given up the attempt to make it a punishable offense in law: Its rewards and punishments are carefully administered by its practitioners and victims. It perhaps does not deserve to be classed with murder or theft or perjury, which brings us to:

VIII

Thou shalt not steal. Not much to query here. Those who have worked hard to acquire a bit of property are entitled to resent those who would rather steal than work, and when society evolves to the point where there is wealth that belongs to nobody—public or social property—those who plunder it for private gain are rightly regarded with hatred and contempt. Admittedly, the prosperity of some families and some states is also founded on original theft, but in that case the same principle of disapproval can apply.

IX

Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor. This is possibly the most sophisticated ruling in the whole Decalogue. Human society is inconceivable unless words are to some extent bonds, and in legal disputes we righteously demand the swearing of oaths that entail severe penalties for perjury. Until recently, much testimony before Congress was taken without witnesses being “sworn”: This allowed a great deal of official lying. Nothing focuses the attention more than a reminder that one is speaking on oath. The word “witness” expresses one of our noblest concepts. “Bearing witness” is a high moral responsibility.

Note, also, how relatively flexible this commandment is. Its fulcrum is the word “against.” If you are quite sure of somebody’s innocence and you shade the truth a little in the witness-box, you are no doubt technically guilty of perjury and may be privately troubled. But if you consciously lie in order to indict someone who is not guilty, you have done something irretrievably foul.

X

Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is

thy neighbor's. There are several details that make this perhaps the most questionable of the commandments. Leaving aside the many jokes about whether or not it's okay, or kosher to covet thy neighbor's wife's ass, you are bound to notice once again that, like the Sabbath order, it's addressed to the servant-owning and property-owning class. Moreover, it lumps the wife in with the rest of the chattel (and in that epoch could have been rendered as "thy neighbor's wives," to boot).

Notice also that no specific act is being pronounced as either compulsory (the Sabbath) or forbidden (perjury). Instead, this is the first but not the last introduction in the Bible of the totalitarian concept of "thought crime." You are being told, in effect, not even to think about it. (Jesus of Nazareth in the New Testament takes this a step further, announcing that those with lust in their heart have already committed the sin of adultery. In that case, you might as well be hung—or stoned—for a sheep as for a lamb, or for an ox or an ass if it cometh to that.) Wise lawmakers know that it is a mistake to promulgate legislation that is impossible to obey.

There are further objections to be made. From the "left" point of view, how is it moral to prohibit people from regarding the gains of the rich as ill-gotten, or from demanding a fairer distribution of wealth? From the "right" point of view, why is it wicked to be ambitious and acquisitive? And is not envy a great spur to emulation and competition? I once had a debate on these points with Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of that consoling text *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, and he told me that there is a scholarly Talmudic argument, or midrash, maintaining that "neighbor" in this context really does mean immediate next-door neighbor. For that matter, there is persuasive textual argument that "neighbor" in much of the Bible means only "fellow Jew." But it seems rather a waste of a commandment to confine it to either the Joneses or the Semites.

What emerges from the first review is this: The Ten Commandments were derived from situational ethics. They show every symptom of having been man-made and improvised under pressure. They are addressed to a nomadic tribe whose main economy is primitive agriculture and whose wealth is sometimes counted in people as well as animals. They are also addressed to a group that has been promised the land and flocks of other people: the Amalekites and Midianites and others whom God orders them to kill, rape, enslave, or exterminate. And this, too, is important because at every step of their arduous journey the Israelites are reminded to keep to the laws, not because they are right but just because they will lead them to become conquerors (of, as it happens, almost the only part of the Middle East that has no oil).

So, then: how to prune and how to amend? Numbers One through Three can simply go, since they have nothing to do with morality and are no more than a long, rasping throat clearing by an admittedly touchy dictator. Mere fear of unseen authority is not a sound basis for ethics. The associated ban on sculpture and pictorial art should also be lifted. Number Four can possibly stay, though rest periods are not exactly an ethical imperative and are mandated by practicality as much as by heaven. At least, if shorn of its first and third and fourth redundant verses (none of which can possibly

apply to non-Jews), Number Four does imply that there are rights as well as duties. For millions of people for thousands of years, the Sabbath was made a dreary burden of obligation and strict observance instead of a day of leisure or recreation. It also led to absurd hypocrisies that seem to treat God as a fool: He won't notice if we make the elevators stop on every floor so that no pious Jew needs to press a button. This is unwholesome and over-strenuous.

As for Number Five, by all means respect for the elders, but why is there nothing to forbid child abuse? (Insolence on the part of children is punishable by death, according to Leviticus 20:9, only a few verses before the stipulation of the death penalty for male homosexuals.) A cruel or rude child is a ghastly thing, but a cruel or brutal parent can do infinitely more harm. Yet even in a long and exhaustive list of prohibitions, parental sadism or neglect is never once condemned. Memo to Sinai: Rectify this omission.

Number Six: Note that mere human systems have done better subsequently in distinguishing different moral scales of homicide. Memo to Sinai: Are you morally absolute or aren't you? If so, what about the poor massacred Midianites?

Number Seven: Fair enough if you must, but is polygamy adultery? Also, could not permanent monogamy have been made slightly more consonant with human nature? Why create people with lust in their hearts? Then again, what about rape? It seems to be very strongly recommended, along with genocide, slavery, and infanticide, in Numbers 31:1-18, and surely constitutes a rather extreme version of sex outside marriage.

Numbers Eight and Nine: Admirable. Also brief and to the point, with one rather useful nuance in the keyword "against."

Number Ten: Does wrong to women by making them property and also necessitates continual celestial wiretapping of private thoughts. Sinister and despotic in that it cannot be obeyed and thus makes sinners even of quite thoughtful people.

I am trying my best not to view things through a smug later prism. Only the Almighty can scan matters sub specie aeternitatis: from the viewpoint of eternity. One must also avoid cultural and historical relativism: There's no point in retroactively ordering the Children of Israel to develop a germ theory of disease (so as to avoid mistaking plagues for divine punishments) or to understand astronomy (so as not to make foolish predictions and boasts based on the planets and stars). Still, if we think of the evils that afflict humanity today and that are man-made and not inflicted by nature, we would be morally numb if we did not feel strongly about genocide, slavery, rape, child abuse, sexual repression, white-collar crime, the wanton destruction of the natural world, and people who yak on cell phones in restaurants. (Also, people who commit simultaneous suicide and murder while screaming "God is great": Is that taking the Lord's name in vain or is it not?)

It's difficult to take oneself with sufficient seriousness to begin any sentence with the words "Thou shalt not." But who cannot summon the confidence to say: Do not condemn people on the basis of their ethnicity or color. Do not ever use people as private property. Despise those who use violence or the threat of it in sexual relations.

Hide your face and weep if you dare to harm a child. Do not condemn people for their inborn nature—why would God create so many homosexuals only in order to torture and destroy them? Be aware that you too are an animal and dependent on the web of nature, and think and act accordingly. Do not imagine that you can escape judgment if you rob people with a false prospectus rather than with a knife. Turn off that fucking cell phone—you have no idea how unimportant your call is to us. Denounce all jihad-ists and crusaders for what they are: psychopathic criminals with ugly delusions. Be willing to renounce any god or any religion if any holy commandments should contradict any of the above. In short: Do not swallow your moral code in tablet form.

(Vanity Fair, April 2010)

In Your Face

THE FRENCH LEGISLATORS who seek to repudiate the wearing of the veil or the burka—whether the garment covers “only” the face or the entire female body—are often described as seeking to impose a “ban.” To the contrary, they are attempting to lift a ban: a ban on the right of women to choose their own dress, a ban on the right of women to disagree with male and clerical authority, and a ban on the right of all citizens to look one another in the face. The proposed law is in the best traditions of the French republic, which declares all citizens equal before the law and—no less important—equal in the face of one another.

On the door of my bank in Washington, D.C., is a printed notice politely requesting me to remove any form of facial concealment before I enter the premises. The notice doesn't bore me or weary me by explaining its reasoning: A person barging through those doors with any sort of mask would incur the right and proper presumption of guilt. This presumption should operate in the rest of society. I would indignantly refuse to have any dealings with a nurse or doctor or teacher who hid his or her face, let alone a tax inspector or customs official. Where would we be without sayings like “What have you got to hide?” or “You dare not show your face?”

Ah, but the particular and special demand to consider the veil and the burka as an exemption applies only to women. And it also applies only to religious practice (and, unless we foolishly pretend otherwise, only to one religious practice). This at once tells you all you need to know: Society is being asked to abandon an immemorial tradition of equality and openness in order to gratify one faith, one faith that has a very questionable record in respect of females.

Let me ask a simple question to the pseudo-liberals who take a soft line on the veil and the burka. What about the Ku Klux Klan? Notorious for its hooded style and its reactionary history, this gang is and always was dedicated to upholding Protestant and Anglo-Saxon purity. I do not deny the right of the KKK to take this faith-based view, which is protected by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. I might even go so far as to say that, at a rally protected by police, they could lawfully hide their nasty

faces. But I am not going to have a hooded man or woman teach my children, or push their way into the bank ahead of me, or drive my taxi or bus, and there will never be a law that says I have to.

There are lesser objections to the covered face or the all-covering cloak. The latter has often been used by male criminals—not just religious terrorists but common thugs—to conceal themselves and make an escape. It has also been used to conceal horrible injuries inflicted on abused females. It is incompatible—because of its effect on peripheral vision—with activities such as driving a car or negotiating traffic. This removes it from the sphere of private decision-making and makes it a danger to others, as well as an offense to the ordinary democratic civility that depends on phrases like “Nice to see you.”

It might be objected that in some Muslim societies women are not allowed to drive in the first place. But that would absolutely emphasize my second point. All the above criticisms would be valid if Muslim women were as passionately committed to wearing a burka as a male Klansman is committed to donning a pointy-headed white shroud. But, in fact, we have no assurance that Muslim women put on the burka or don the veil as a matter of their own choice. A huge amount of evidence goes the other way. Mothers, wives, and daughters have been threatened with acid in the face, or honor-killing, or vicious beating, if they do not adopt the humiliating outer clothing that is mandated by their menfolk. This is why, in many Muslim societies, such as Tunisia and Turkey, the shrouded look is illegal in government buildings, schools, and universities. Why should Europeans and Americans, seeking perhaps to accommodate Muslim immigrants, adopt the standard only of the most backward and primitive Muslim states? The burka and the veil, surely, are the most aggressive sign of a refusal to integrate or accommodate. Even in Iran there is only a requirement for the covering of hair, and I defy anybody to find any authority in the Koran for the concealment of the face.

Not that it would matter in the least if the Koran said otherwise. Religion is the worst possible excuse for any exception to the common law. Mormons may not have polygamous marriage, female circumcision is a federal crime in this country, and in some states Christian Scientists face prosecution if they neglect their children by denying them medical care. Do we dare lecture the French for declaring simply that all citizens and residents, whatever their confessional allegiance, must be able to recognize one another in the clearest sense of that universal term?

So it's really quite simple. My right to see your face is the beginning of it, as is your right to see mine. Next but not least comes the right of women to show their faces, which easily trumps the right of their male relatives or their male imams to decide otherwise. The law must be decisively on the side of transparency. The French are striking a blow not just for liberty and equality and fraternity, but for sorority too.

(Slate, May 10, 2010)

Wine Drinkers of the World, Unite

THE OTHER NIGHT, I was having dinner with some friends in a fairly decent restaurant and was at the very peak of my form as a wit and raconteur. But just as, with infinite and exquisite tantalizations, I was approaching my punch line, the most incredible thing happened. A waiter appeared from nowhere, leaned right over my shoulder and into the middle of the conversation, seized my knife and fork, and started to cut up my food for me. Not content with this bizarre behavior, and without so much as a by-your-leave, he proceeded to distribute pieces of my entree onto the plates of the other diners.

No, he didn't, actually. What he did instead was to interrupt the feast of reason and flow of soul that was our chat, lean across me, pick up the bottle of wine that was in the middle of the table, and pour it into everyone's glass. And what I want to know is this: How did such a barbaric custom get itself established, and why on earth do we put up with it?

There are two main ways in which a restaurant can inflict bad service on a customer. The first is to keep you hanging about and make it hard to catch the eye of the staff. ("Why are they called waiters?" inquired my son when he was about five. "It's we who are doing all the waiting.") The second way is to be too intrusive, with overlong recitations of the "specials" and too many oversolicitous inquiries. A cartoon in the *New Yorker* once showed a couple getting ready for bed, with the husband taking a call and keeping his hand over the receiver. "It's the maitre d' from the place we had dinner. He wants to know if everything is still all right."

The vile practice of butting in and pouring wine without being asked is the very height of the second kind of bad manners. Not only is it a breathtaking act of rudeness in itself, but it conveys a none-too-subtle and mercenary message: Hurry up and order another bottle. Indeed, so dulled have we become to the shame and disgrace of all this that I have actually seen waiters, having broken into the private conversation and emptied the flagon, ask insolently whether they should now bring another one. Again, imagine this same tactic being applied to the food.

Not everybody likes wine as much as I do. Many females, for example, confine themselves to one glass per meal or even half a glass. It pains me to see good wine being sloshed into the glasses of those who have not asked for it and may not want it and then be left standing there barely tasted when the dinner is over. Mr. Coleman, it was said, made his fortune not from the mustard that was consumed but from the mustard that was left on the plate. Restaurants ought not to inflict waste and extravagance on their patrons for the sake of padding out the bill. This, too, is a very extreme form of rudeness.

The expense of the thing, in other words, is only an aspect of the presumption of it. It completely usurps my prerogative if I am a host. ("Can I refill your glass? Try this wine—I think you may care for it.") It also tends to undermine me as a guest, since at any moment when I try to sing for my supper, I may find an unwanted person

lunging carelessly into the middle of my sentence. If this person fills glasses unasked, he is a boor as described above. If he asks permission of each guest in turn—as he really ought to do, when you think about it—then he might as well pull up a chair and join the party. The nerve of it!

To return to the question of why we endure this: I think it must have something to do with the snobbery and insecurity that frequently accompany the wine business. A wine waiter is or can be a bit of a grandee, putting on considerable airs that may intimidate those who know little of the subject. If you go into a liquor store in a poor part of town, you will quite often notice that the wine is surprisingly expensive, because it is vaguely assumed that somehow it ought to cost more. And then there is simple force of custom and habit—people somehow grant restaurants the right to push their customers around in this outrageous way.

Well, all it takes is a bit of resistance. Until relatively recently in Washington, it was the custom at diplomatic and Georgetown dinners for the hostess to invite the ladies to withdraw, leaving the men to port and cigars and high matters of state. And then one evening in the 1970s, at the British Embassy, the late Katharine Graham refused to get up and go. There was nobody who felt like making her, and within a day, the news was all over town. Within a very short time, everybody had abandoned the silly practice. I am perfectly well aware that there are many graver problems facing civilization, and many grosser violations of human rights being perpetrated as we speak. But this is something that we can all change at a stroke. Next time anyone offers to interrupt your conversation and assist in the digestion of your meal and the inflation of your check, be very polite but very firm and say that you would really rather not.

(Slate, May 26, 2008)

Charles, Prince of Piffle

THIS IS WHAT YOU GET when you found a political system on the family values of Henry VIII. At a point in the not-too-remote future, the stout heart of Queen Elizabeth II will cease to beat. At that precise moment, her firstborn son will become head of state, head of the armed forces, and head of the Church of England. In strict constitutional terms, this ought not to matter much. The English monarchy, as has been said, reigns but does not rule. From the aesthetic point of view it will matter a bit, because the prospect of a morose bat-eared and chinless man, prematurely aged, and with the most abysmal taste in royal consorts, is a distinctly lowering one. And a king does have the ability to alter the atmosphere and to affect the ways in which important matters are discussed. (The queen herself proved that in subtle ways, by letting it be known that there were aspects of Margaret Thatcher’s foreign policy that she did not view with unmixed delight.)

So the speech made by Prince Charles at Oxford last week might bear a little scrutiny. Discussing one of his favorite topics, the “environment,” he announced that

the main problem arose from a “deep, inner crisis of the soul” and that the “de-souling” of humanity probably went back as far as Galileo. In his view, materialism and consumerism represented an imbalance, “where mechanistic thinking is so predominant,” and which “goes back at least to Galileo’s assertion that there is nothing in nature but quantity and motion.” He described the scientific worldview as an affront to all the world’s “sacred traditions.” Then for the climax:

As a result, Nature has been completely objectified—She has become an it—and we are persuaded to concentrate on the material aspect of reality that fits within Galileo’s scheme.

We have known for a long time that Prince Charles’s empty sails are so rigged as to be swelled by any passing waft or breeze of crankiness and cant. He fell for the fake anthropologist Laurens van der Post. He was bowled over by the charms of homeopathic medicine. He has been believably reported as saying that plants do better if you talk to them in a soothing and encouraging way. But this latest departure promotes him from an advocate of harmless nonsense to positively sinister nonsense.

We owe a huge debt to Galileo for emancipating us all from the stupid belief in an Earth-centered or man-centered (let alone God-centered) system. He quite literally taught us our place and allowed us to go on to make extraordinary advances in knowledge. None of these liberating undertakings have required any sort of assumption about a soul. That belief is at best optional. (Incidentally, nature is no more or less “objectified” whether we give it a gender name or a neuter one. Merely calling it Mummy will not, alas, alter this salient fact.)

In the controversy that followed the prince’s remarks, his most staunch defender was professor John Taylor, a scholar whose work I had last noticed when he gave good reviews to the psychokinetic (or whatever) capacities of the Israeli conjuror and fraud Uri Geller. The heir to the throne seems to possess the ability to surround himself—perhaps by some mysterious ultra-magnetic force?—with every moon-faced spoon-bender, shrub-flatterer, and water-diviner within range.

None of this might matter very much, until you notice the venue at which Charles delivered his farrago of nonsense. It was unleashed upon an audience at the Center for Islamic Studies at Oxford University, an institution of which he is the patron. Nor is this his only foray into Islamophilia. Together with the Saudi royal family, he supported the mosque in North London that acted as host and incubator to Richard “Shoe Bomber” Reid, the hook-handed Abu Hamza al-Masri, and several other unsavory customers. The prince’s official job description as king will be “defender of the faith,” which currently means the state-financed absurdity of the Anglican Church, but he has more than once said publicly that he wants to be anointed as defender of all faiths—another indication of the amazing conceit he has developed in six decades of performing the only job allowed him by the hereditary principle: that of waiting for his mother to expire.

A hereditary head of state, as Thomas Paine so crisply phrased it, is as absurd a proposition as a hereditary physician or a hereditary astronomer. To this innate

absurdity, Prince Charles manages to bring fatuities that are entirely his own. And, as he paged his way through his dreary wad of babble, there must have been some wolfish smiles among his Muslim audience. I quote from a recent document published by the Islamic Forum of Europe, a group dedicated to the restoration of the Islamic caliphate and the imposition of sharia, which has been very active in London mosques and in the infiltration of local political parties. “The primary work” in the establishment of a future Muslim empire, it announces, “is in Europe, because it is this continent, despite all the furore about its achievements, which has a moral and spiritual vacuum.”

So this is where all the vapid talk about the “soul” of the universe is actually headed. Once the hard-won principles of reason and science have been discredited, the world will not pass into the hands of credulous herbivores who keep crystals by their sides and swoon over the poems of Khalil Gibran. The “vacuum” will be invaded instead by determined fundamentalists of every stripe who already know the truth by means of revelation and who actually seek real and serious power in the here and now. One thinks of the painstaking, cloud-dispelling labor of British scientists from Isaac Newton to Joseph Priestley to Charles Darwin to Ernest Rutherford to Alan Turing and Francis Crick, much of it built upon the shoulders of Galileo and Copernicus, only to see it casually slandered by a moral and intellectual weakling from the usurping House of Hanover. An awful embarrassment awaits the British if they do not declare for a republic based on verifiable laws and principles, both political and scientific.

(Slate, June 14, 2010)

OFFSHORE ACCOUNTS

Afghanistan's Dangerous Bet

ISPENT MY ENTIRE TIME in Afghanistan, from dawn until dusk and then beyond, utterly and completely obsessed with women. You may ask why I am telling you this. What about the land mines, the lurking Taliban, the warlords, the malaria and the dysentery, the battling tribes, the beating sun, and the forbidding landscape? These are all, I will happily concede, quite compelling in their way. But they pale, each of them and every time, when contrasted with the absolutely Himalayan question of Afghan womanhood. I could not get the subject out of my mind for an instant, waking or sleeping. (Violence and drugs featured, too, I must say, but only in second and third place. I'm seriously thinking of going back, quite soon. For one thing, the future of democracy may be at stake.)

"I gather," I said to the official of the National Democratic Institute in Kabul, "that you are holding a mock election?" Down the cell phone came his cautious, Canadian-accented response. "We are," he said, "as part of our training, conducting an election simulation." I silently reproached myself for my thoughtless flippancy, and managed to get myself invited along nevertheless.

Under the shade of a large, cool, open-sided tent, in the courtyard of one of the many NGO (or "non-governmental organization") buildings that now occupy so much of Afghanistan's battered and filthy capital, a sample electorate had been assembled. More than half were women, of whom all had donned some kind of head covering, while none wore the all-enclosing burka. All, in other words, were showing the most ravishing part of the female form—the face—and almost all of them were displaying at least some of the second-most-hypnotizing feature—their hair. One had brought a daughter along and another a grandson (there are an awful lot of widows in Kabul). Good-humored, polite young men, most of them Afghan, were instructing them in how to cast a ballot. First, three "candidates" made ten-minute pitches for their hypothetical parties. Two of the candidates were women, and one an older man with a dark mustache that set off his whitening *en brosse* locks. Then the simulated electorate was invited to produce its voter-registration cards, to receive an indelible-ink stamp on the wrist, to show its punched voting paper to a man with Genghis Khan cheekbones, and to proceed into a curtained voting booth before emerging and modestly, proudly dropping the completed ballot into a locked box. The entire thing might have made a charming

episode on Scandinavian public television: the blessings of universal suffrage, as brought by well-intentioned secular missionaries.

But three years ago, you could not look an Afghan woman or girl in the eye. Half the population was chattel or other property: invisible, enveloped, and voiceless. The male members of their families could literally give them away as bargaining chips, or prizes. Arbitrary and lascivious punishments, usually totted up in lashes but sometimes in lethal stones, were the enforcement of this slavery. You can still read, quite often, of young women who set themselves on fire to avoid forced marriage and other types of bondage. My sex obsession was nothing to that of the Taliban and their bin Ladenist “guests,” who regarded the world of their mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters with plain contempt and even horror. (Of the men-only “martyrs” of this movement, the fascinating thing is not how many of them dreamed of virgins, but how many of them were virgins.) Yet, as I arrived in Kabul, the females of the country were in the process of astonishing all observers. Of those who had registered to vote, fully 41 percent were women. And this was in no mean turnout; there are even parts of the country where the number registered is higher than the supposed number of voters. President Hamid Karzai has joked publicly about this Chicago-like development, attributing it rather airily to an excess of democratic exuberance. But since estimates of Afghanistan’s population fluctuate between 21 and 29 million, some allowance probably has to be made for its people’s first-ever visit to the polls.

These people will not be casting their ballots in shaded tents in urban courtyards, before admiring international witnesses. They will be risking—and have already defied—acid in the face, mines on the road, bombs in the schools and even the mosques where voters gather, and every other imaginable kind of discouragement. The worst discouragement of all is the fear that the vote really will be “an election simulation,” and that Afghanistan will continue to be run by gender-crazed old mullahs and bandits. A photo op from the twenty-first century can easily be negated by the terrible weight of the centuries that have gone before. As William Faulkner said about the Deep South, the past is never dead. Here, it’s not even past.

The newspapers and television may have been telling you every day that the shrine of Imam Ali, cousin and son-in-law to the prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), lies beneath the Golden Dome in Najaf, in southern Iraq. But no pious Afghan entirely believes this version. After his killing in A.D. 661, according to the local story, Ali’s followers feared for the desecration of his corpse. They embalmed it, placed it on the back of a white female camel, and made the beast canter until it dropped. That spot would be the burial place. The camel gave up in northern Afghanistan, and the great imam is therefore interred in what is now the city of Mazar-i-Sharif, or “the tomb of the exalted one.” The shrine is still there, even though its original was pretty thoroughly trampled by Genghis Khan. One of President Hamid Karzai’s earlier actions, after the defeat and flight of the Taliban, was to journey to Mazar-i-Sharif and, in front of a huge nawroz, or “New Year,” crowd, unfurl Ali’s green flag. The Sunni Taliban had forbidden the pilgrimage because the origins of nawroz lie in Babylonian

and Zoroastrian antiquity, and were considered—like the shell-blasted statues of the Buddhas in Bamiyan—pre-Islamic and therefore profane.

Then again, the early chroniclers among the Afghans claimed that it was they, and no others, who were the lost tribe of the Jews: descendants of King Saul and the true survivors of the Babylonian captivity. This claim was examined and disputed in 1815 by the Honorable Mountstuart Elphinstone of the East India Company (later to cut a sorry figure in the “memoirs” of Harry Flashman). But the idea resurfaced in the famous 11th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, published in 1910, when imperial ethnography was at its zenith: “A respectable number of intelligent officers, well acquainted with the Afghans, have been strong in their belief of it; and though the customs alleged in proof will not bear the stress laid on them, undoubtedly a prevailing type of the Afghan physiognomy has a character strongly Jewish.”

Perhaps we have been fighting over the wrong Holy Land all along? I personally began to find consolation in the small victories of the profane over the sacred. It’s jolly to sit in “Flashman’s” restaurant, sipping scotch and wine in the restored Gandamak Lodge, and know that this house used to be the sheltered enclave of one of Osama bin Laden’s luckless wives. (No waitresses, yet, I had to notice: Only old men and young boys are trusted with the job.) It’s a treat to get your glossy copy of *Afghan Scene* and read of the films and plays and photographic exhibitions that are on offer in town. It’s heartening to see the female students at Kabul University, flaunting knockoffs of international fashion, and often earning enough as part-time translators to support their parents (and thus undermine patriarchal authority). It’s cheering to see groups clustered around flickering TV sets, riveted to videos of swimsuit contests. It was a delight to sit with Wais in his pizza restaurant—more than 3.4 million Afghan refugees have come home since the fall of the Taliban—and hear his cut-with-a-knife New Jersey accent as he described how things had improved. “Night and day, man. Fuckin’ night and day.”

I think of my inspiring but sedate interview with Dr. Masuda Jalal, the only woman candidate for the presidency and the only female to have challenged Karzai’s candidacy in the famous Loya Jirga, or Grand Council, which also prepared the new Afghan constitution. She’s a well-known physician, who ran a clinic and a secret school during the Taliban years and was briefly detained. She lives, like a number of Kabul’s educated middle class, in a hideous district of “People’s Republic”-type apartment blocks, built by Soviet “advisers” on the outskirts of the capital. Indeed, I think her secret is that she’s a former leftist, though of the pro-Chinese variety. Her rhetoric still bears traces of that “serve the people” idiom, and she speaks without embarrassment of a constituency of “progressive scholars, intellectuals, and democrats,” not omitting a few, newer terms about “civil society.” President Karzai, she says firmly, has “signed too many protocols” with warlords and mullahs. She herself would prefer a Cabinet of “technocrats,” including the “cleaner” supporters of President Karzai, and even of Zahir Shah, the returned king who is recognized not quite as monarch of the country but as “father of his people.”

In her anteroom, I met her three delightful daughters, ages nine, seven, and three, as well as her husband—a professor of law at the university—and her campaign manager, a grizzled old bear of a man from the border province of Khost, who looks like a retired chieftain. More men support the Masuda Jalal campaign than you might guess: They can at least be sure that they are not getting another warlord, possibly from the “wrong” ethnicity.

Before I said good-bye, my sex obsession got the better of me again. Throughout our conversation, Dr. Jalal had been toying with a headscarf that didn’t seem all that comfortable. “How long,” I made bold to inquire, “have you been wearing that? Have you always worn one?” Her downcast-eyed yet stirring reply was that, in her days as a medical student, she had worn what she liked. This was a nervous compromise. Even her revolutionary candidacy was, in a sense, being conducted with male permission.

You get the same sense, all the time, of a culture poised on a razor’s edge. People mock President Karzai for being too compromising and for being “only the mayor of Kabul,” but he’s been brave enough to drop a militia leader as his running mate and, if he were to be assassinated, the effect would be felt way beyond the capital. In other words, this is a society which is still only one bullet away from chaos. (Cheer up: The same is probably true of neighboring Pakistan, with its reliable General Musharraf and its nuclear weapons.)

I had my own exposure to abrupt, vertiginous change when I journeyed to the provincial capital of Herat, in the far west of the country. Herat abuts the border with Iran, and its main flavor is Persian. It boasts a marvelous blue mosque and a still-standing cluster of antique minarets, from the times of Tamerlane, or “Timur the Lame.” Its big-city boss was until recently a relatively jovial old warlord named Ismail Khan, who fought against the Red Army and the Taliban with equal gusto, but is said to be a bit twisted from his long imprisonment by the latter, and also a little distraught at the murder of his son last March. The killing was the result of a rivalry between Ismail and yet another local warlord, a representative of the Pashtun minority named Amanullah Khan. A few days before I arrived, Amanullah (or A.K.) had seized the old Russian-built airfield at Shindand, about sixty miles away, but this was thought to be mostly in the nature of a gesture. Herat itself continued to boom and bustle, prospering by the virtually open borders with Iran and Turkmenistan and from the trade in everything from opium to SUVs which results. Ismail Khan (I.K.) had been a political appointee of Karzai’s and legally recognized as governor of Herat, but he didn’t much relish passing on his portion of the revenues he raised. He preferred to distribute these locally, and thus be “a river to his people.” Hence the well-kept streets, the humming bazaar, and the preservation—very rare in Afghanistan—of the groves and avenues of trees that would otherwise have gone to charcoal. (I passed an eating place called Shame Restaurant, but it was modestly closed.)

At about one o’clock one baking afternoon, as I was mincing happily through the fragrant and laden flower stalls, and noticing that, though burkas had become rarer, no woman was “manning” any shop, a definite pulse or tremor ran through the town.

It was like watching a rumor take physical form: Suddenly there were clusters and clumps of people talking earnestly together, then the sound of shutters descending over windows, succeeded swiftly by the scamper of feet and then the arrival of pickup trucks, bearing bearded men with rocket-propelled grenades and Kalashnikov rifles. (Just what you don't want when taking in the local atmosphere in Afghanistan: to have your passport studied, unsmilingly and upside down, by some of these beauties.) In the course of the succeeding few hours, I was told by "the street" that A.K.'s men were at the edge of town, that A.K. and fifty of his followers had been killed by an American air strike, that the Americans were behind A.K. in an attempt to weaken I.K., and that the airport road had been closed. Only the last—and just possibly the second—of these stories turned out to be true. Kabul, about 600 miles distant by a road that was also closed, might as well have been on another planet: It suddenly began to seem to me like a shimmering metropolis.

"Street" opinion, as elsewhere in the region, is almost invariably deluded and distorted. And all the women, I noticed, were off the streets right away, which rather reduced the sample of viewpoints. But, during the hours of chaos, one could still get three strong and consistent impressions. The first is that the central government is not very highly regarded in the country's westernmost city. Hardly anyone had a good word for Karzai. The second is that pickup trucks with bearded gunmen are not popular, even when they seem to represent the winning side. (Applause from the sidewalk was perfunctory: Most people moved away and kept their counsel to themselves.) The third is that I.K. has a genuine following. "And he is a jihadi!" exclaimed one man as he finished reeling off a list of I.K.'s virtues. "Against whom?" I inquired. "You do not know what means 'jihad'?" "Well, yes I do, I think. That's why I asked, 'Against whom?'" I was still made to feel that I had asked a dumb question, which perhaps I had. Any war this guy fights is holy to some. An interlude of arduous phone-calling got me inside the "bubble" that is formed by the coalition forces, the United Nations teams, and the NGOs. I was able to spend a not-too-tense night inside the perimeter of the P.R.T., or Provisional Reconstruction Team: the system of decentralized mini-bases that some NATO contingents now wisely use to stay close to events. The HQ was right in the middle of town, and its compound contained several dozen armed Afghans. Many of them were awake and on guard while the bulk of the garrison was sleeping: a thing you would not see inside the equivalent American base in Iraq. ("Yeah, they're family," said a central-casting farm-boy soldier from Wisconsin. "Buddies for life.")

It was rather nice inside the bubble. I met some tough and smart guys, who had become good at collecting local intelligence and who mingle the job of collecting it with the job of distributing aid. One officer I met was carrying a briefcase with \$150,000 in cash—"for schools," as he put it. I got a briefing or two, and found opinion divided on whether it was wise for the central government to try to undermine old Ismail Khan before the elections. I found it generally to be true that American soldiers—especially the ones this "far from the flagpole" and way out on the western frontier—felt less valued and less noticed since the invasion of Iraq. Eventually, I got a hitchhike from

a Humvee, which took me to the airport, where I secured another hitchhike from a U.N. evacuation plane, flown by enormous bronzed South Africans. This international bubble, in theory, stretches protectively across the whole jagged country. But, boy, is it pulled thin and tight, and you don't want to be there when it punctures or leaks. Not many days after I had left, President Karzai did dismiss Ismail Khan as governor of Herat—which implied that perhaps the American Embassy had after all been behind the attacks on him—and at least nine of the bubble's offices were burned out.

What exactly is a warlord? The species clusters into two main groups: local pashas such as Ismail Khan, roughly content to harvest their own fiefdoms, and ethnic or confessional leaders with big ideas. Into the latter category would fall the grisly, sadistic figure of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, once a favorite of Pakistan and the CIA but now a wanted man who combines Taliban rhetoric with extreme corruption and opportunism. Yet we would also find the late Ahmed Shah Massoud, the brilliantly charismatic leader of the Northern Alliance, who was both a Tajik tribal commander and a devout Islamist. He it was who tried to warn the West that the Taliban were harboring Osama bin Laden, and he it was who was murdered by al-Qaeda suicide killers on September 9, 2001, to try to ensure that their upcoming assault on New York and Washington would be matched by the extinction of resistance within Afghanistan itself. I shall not forget those three days three years ago: It must have seemed to the fanatics that god was laughing along with them, and that everything was ordained in their favor. One must never again feel such defenseless shame.

Pictures of Massoud are now everywhere in Kabul, his brother is Karzai's vice-presidential pick, and a large monument is being built in his honor. But there is an older and surer definition of a warlord: He is someone who can control a piece of road and force you to pay a rent or a toll to pass along it. Roll a few rocks and oil drums onto the highway, place some gun-wielding desperadoes next to the barrier, and begin your extortion. It is the fear of this that keeps many Afghans ghettoized in their miserable villages, and that also keeps many humanitarians and diplomats penned up in the safety of the cities, or traveling only within the bubble. It is the same fear that Kipling called upon (you didn't think I was going to leave him out, did you?) in his extraordinary Afghan poem "Arithmetic on the Frontier":

A scrimmage in a Border Station—
A canter down some dark defile
Two thousand pounds of education
Drops to a ten-rupee jezail ...
Strike hard who cares—shoot straight who can
The odds are on the cheaper man.

You can still see homemade jezail rifles, along with fearsome daggers, in the front of shops along Chicken Street and Flower Street in Kabul—placed there mainly to give the handful of tourists a cheap thrill. But it takes only an inexpensive improvised roadside or handheld weapon to put fright into the aid workers and election supervisors who have to leave the compounds or venture through the arid rural communities where

70 percent of Afghans still try to exist. In the town of Ghazni, for example, a young Frenchwoman named Bettina Goisard was cut down in broad daylight last November while working for the U.N. high commissioner for refugees. Not far away, a bomb exploded in a mosque—a mosque!—while voters were attempting to register the names they could barely write.

I will venture a prediction: The Taliban/al-Qaeda riffraff, as we know them, will never come back to power. They were able to seize Kabul in the first place only because the country had been reduced to “Year Zero” conditions by civil war, and they are now so much hated, and so heavily outgunned, that they can’t expect to do any better than make life miserable in the more wretched areas of the South. Vicious though their tactics are, they don’t show any sign of having a plan, or a coordinated leadership, or a directing brain. (If Osama bin Laden is still alive, he has a very faint and unconvincing way of demonstrating it. He doesn’t even issue fiery sermons anymore. His deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, got the job of making the September-anniversary rant this year, and of issuing the false claim that Americans were cowering in their trenches in southern and eastern Afghanistan. And Osama used to be so voluble ...)

I selected Ghazni just now for a reason: I paid it a visit just as the registration of voters was being completed. My expedition from Kabul was remarkably swift and easy, because the place lies along the new highway from the capital to Kandahar: the southern city that may well have been named for Iskandar, local name for Alexander the Great. The South is still in the danger zone; it abuts the near ungovernable Pakistani tribal areas, and even in Kandahar itself the female registration for the election is little more than half the national average. But two years ago that journey would have been an extremely rugged and hazardous undertaking that could consume at least a whole day. Now you can drive from Kabul to Kandahar in six hours. (Pedal to the metal, I hit eighty miles per hour on the straight and level, than which the car itself could do no more.) Roadblocks become redundant or archaic in these conditions. People sometimes sneer at the Kabul-Kandahar highway, saying that it’s still unsafe and that, in order for it to be completed in time for President Bush to celebrate it in a speech, a couple of inches of blacktop had to be omitted from its surface. Well, I have now driven along a good bit of it, in daytime and darkness, and perhaps I was just lucky. It’s patchy in places, but backup gravel and Tarmac are both being heaped lavishly on the roadside. Even more noticeable is that enterprise is beginning to rise up along the way—from gas stations to the outlines of factories and construction sites.

It is mainly a superstition from our own past that can absolutely ruin the hopes of those who wait on line in the sun and hope against hope that their votes will count. We can still get a failed state or a rogue state in Afghanistan, if we really work at it. Nothing is crazier, when you see it up close, than the stupid “war on drugs.” Nobody believes in it for a second. The military specialists all think it is a waste of time, or at best (as the saying goes) a distraction from the hunt for al-Qaeda. The farmers all think it is an assault on their only viable crop. The warlords just can’t believe their luck. There are whole areas of the country, recovered from Taliban control, where the

“hearts and minds” battle is being lost every hour of every day, with dumb attempts to root out the only thing that grows, and the only thing that sells. After years of withering drought, and even more years of devastating crop burning and desolation, which would you plant: a vine that takes five years to grow to maturity—grapes used to be Afghanistan’s main crop export—or a poppy that yields pods in six months? It has been calculated that as much as a fourth of the country’s G.D.P. is opium-related, and that the crop gives a livelihood to millions in the countryside. Some of these are coerced into poppy farming, but until another economy has been created, or this one recognized, it’s futile to be emulating the Untouchables. Thirty years of experience have not yet taught us that Westerners will buy the fruit of this poppy at almost any price, and that therefore Easterners and Southerners will stolidly continue to cultivate it. Many people think that the Taliban did a better job of drug “interdiction,” which is a clue in itself to the madness of this calculus. In fact, the Taliban “banned” the trade in order to drive up the price of the existing tonnage that they held. The U.S. government actually grows opium in Turkey for our domestic painkiller market: Why not give Afghans a slice of the business?

Afghanistan is not in our past: Its astonishing inhabitants are our formerly abandoned and now half-adopted relations. And one can so easily fall for a place where everybody thinks about sex, where bombing has blasted a society out of the Stone Age, and where opium is the religion of the people.

(Vanity Fair, November 2004)

First, Silence the Whistle-Blower

IF THE TIME ever does come when we look back on our intervention in Afghanistan as a humiliating debacle, this past weekend may well be identified as one of the moments when the calamity became irreversible.

In the prelude to the 2004 elections in that country, I went around looking at the places where local people were being instructed in the principles as well as the mechanics of voting. It was like watching a very tightly furled bud beginning to burgeon and unfold. Officials of various international organizations had been hoping, for example, to attract a certain percentage of Afghan women to brave their former oppressors and come out to register; the facilities for this were overborne by the sheer number of women who spontaneously showed up. Minority groups that had been despised and butchered by the Taliban—such as the Hazara, a Shiite community with some cousinhood to Persia—were mobilizing to register. The press and television, entirely new to many Afghans, were showing some vivid scenes of democracy and some useful debates. On the actual day of voting, there was some complaint about the indelible ink for the fingertips being not so indelible as all that, but vast numbers of people braved the “night letters” from the Taliban and stood in line in the sun for the chance to cast a

ballot. No procedural imperfection could quite destroy the impression that Afghans were acquiring the all-important idea of a free and competitive election.

The dreary, nasty farce of August 20 has almost eclipsed that memory. A ridiculous, banana-republic style shenanigan produced, in its first round, an outcome that did not survive even the most cursory scrutiny. On the very first inspection of the polling stations and the ballots, it was laughably easy to discover polling stations that never opened but that recorded vast turnouts and ballots that had gone straight from the printing press into the pockets of President Hamid Karzai and his associates—one of whom, Azizullah Lodin, doubles as the chairman of the absurdly named Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan.

That would be bad enough, were it not for the craven complicity of the U.N. mission in Kabul. Perhaps as much as \$200 million of the international community's money was allotted to ensure that the Afghan people could vote, but when vast numbers of them did not or could not, and while many others of them managed to do so, in effect, five or six times, there was no alarm call from the responsible U.N. officers in Kabul. Or perhaps I should rephrase that: One officer did complain that there had been (a) widespread fraud, and (b) government collusion in same, and (c) U.N. indifference that amounted to complicity. This was Peter Galbraith, a senior American diplomat who was then the deputy special representative of the U.N. secretary-general, that scintillating figure known in song and story as Ban Ki-moon. Galbraith complained that Kai Eide, the Norwegian head of the U.N. mission, had been indifferent to the flagrant bias shown by the local Afghan officials who were in effect spending the United Nations' money to buy votes for their political boss. Eide in turn complained to Ban, who immediately obliged by firing Galbraith. Thus we cannot quite say that nobody involved in this fiasco and fiesta of corruption has yet lost his job—it would be almost true except that the main whistle-blower was fired as the first order of business.

It wouldn't now matter whether there was a runoff or not, or a "contested" election—there can't be any sentient Afghan who believes that the process is anything much more than a cynical fix. It is not as bad as the recent trampling on the voting rights of the people of neighboring Iran, but we are supposed to have a slightly more elevated standard than that (and the mere comparison, of course, goes to show how high the stakes are).

The Taliban, one imagines, can barely credit their luck. They are opposed to voting on principle, as something un-Islamic, and they are especially and viciously opposed to voting by women, but now they don't need to stress that. They can simply help swell the chorus of cynicism and contempt.

The panic measures proposed to redress this dreadful outcome have in some cases been as bad as the original disease. Admitting far too late and far too grudgingly that fraud had necessitated a second round, Kai Eide left us faced with a choice between a hasty second vote overseen by the same crooks or a postponement until after the brutal Afghan winter—another free gift to the forces of ruin and fanaticism. Some also proposed a ramshackle "interim" government or a face-saving cobble-up between

Karzai and his main rival, Abdullah Abdullah (so nice they named him twice). All this represents an attempt to avoid facing the obvious fact that for months of this year, and with our money, the Afghan people were cheated and betrayed in their hour of most urgent need.

What will the big friends of the morally infallible United Nations say now, I wonder? And how will Congress and the president and the leaderships of the other donor and sponsor states account for what happened to the funding they authorized? I have written dozens of times about how none of the so-called parallels with Vietnam are any good (al-Qaeda a foreign import to Afghanistan; no Vietcong threat to American cities; you know the rest), but there is one thing that did disfigure South Vietnam and is essential to avoid in any case: the commitment of American forces to a government that contrives to be both enriched and bankrupt at the same time and makes its own people want to spit.

(Slate, November 2, 2009)

Believe Me, It's Torture

HERE IS THE MOST CHILLING WAY I can find of stating the matter. Until recently, "waterboarding" was something that Americans did to other Americans. It was inflicted, and endured, by those members of the Special Forces who underwent the advanced form of training known as SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape). In these harsh exercises, brave men and women were introduced to the sorts of barbarism that they might expect to meet at the hands of a lawless foe who disregarded the Geneva Conventions. But it was something that Americans were being trained to resist, not to inflict.

Exploring this narrow but deep distinction, on a gorgeous day last May I found myself deep in the hill country of western North Carolina, preparing to be surprised by a team of extremely hardened veterans who had confronted their country's enemies in highly arduous terrain all over the world. They knew about everything from unarmed combat to enhanced interrogation and, in exchange for anonymity, were going to show me as nearly as possible what real waterboarding might be like.

It goes without saying that I knew I could stop the process at any time, and that when it was all over I would be released into happy daylight rather than returned to a darkened cell. But it's been well said that cowards die many times before their deaths, and it was difficult for me to completely forget the clause in the contract of indemnification that I had signed. This document (written by one who knew) stated revealingly:

"Water boarding" is a potentially dangerous activity in which the participant can receive serious and permanent (physical, emotional and psychological) injuries and even death, including injuries and death due to the respiratory and neurological systems of the body.

As the agreement went on to say, there would be safeguards provided “during the ‘water boarding’ process, however, these measures may fail and even if they work properly they may not prevent Hitchens from experiencing serious injury or death.”

On the night before the encounter I got to sleep with what I thought was creditable ease, but woke early and knew at once that I wasn’t going back to any sort of doze or snooze. The first specialist I had approached with the scheme had asked my age on the telephone and when told what it was (I am fifty-nine) had laughed out loud and told me to forget it. Waterboarding is for Green Berets in training, or wiry young jihad-ists whose teeth can bite through the gristle of an old goat. It’s not for wheezing, paunchy scribblers. For my current “handlers” I had had to produce a doctor’s certificate assuring them that I did not have asthma, but I wondered whether I should tell them about the 15,000 cigarettes I had inhaled every year for the last several decades. I was feeling apprehensive, in other words, and beginning to wish I hadn’t given myself so long to think about it.

I have to be opaque about exactly where I was later that day, but there came a moment when, sitting on a porch outside a remote house at the end of a winding country road, I was very gently yet firmly grabbed from behind, pulled to my feet, pinioned by my wrists (which were then cuffed to a belt), and cut off from the sunlight by having a black hood pulled over my face. I was then turned around a few times, I presume to assist in disorienting me, and led over some crunchy gravel into a darkened room. Well, mainly darkened: There were some oddly spaced bright lights that came as pinpoints through my hood. And some weird music assaulted my ears. (I’m no judge of these things, but I wouldn’t have expected former Special Forces types to be so fond of New Age techno-disco.) The outside world seemed very suddenly very distant indeed.

Arms already lost to me, I wasn’t able to flail as I was pushed onto a sloping board and positioned with my head lower than my heart. (That’s the main point: The angle can be slight or steep.) Then my legs were lashed together so that the board and I were one single and trussed unit. Not to bore you with my phobias, but if I don’t have at least two pillows I wake up with acid reflux and mild sleep apnea, so even a merely supine position makes me uneasy. And, to tell you something I had been keeping from myself as well as from my new experimental friends, I do have a fear of drowning that comes from a bad childhood moment on the Isle of Wight, when I got out of my depth. As a boy reading the climactic torture scene of *Nineteen Eighty-four*, where what is in Room 101 is the worst thing in the world, I realize that somewhere in my version of that hideous chamber comes the moment when the wave washes over me. Not that that makes me special: I don’t know anyone who likes the idea of drowning. As mammals we may have originated in the ocean, but water has many ways of reminding us that when we are in it we are out of our element. In brief, when it comes to breathing, give me good old air every time.

You may have read by now the official lie about this treatment, which is that it “simulates” the feeling of drowning. This is not the case. You feel that you are drowning because you are drowning—or, rather, being drowned, albeit slowly and

under controlled conditions and at the mercy (or otherwise) of those who are applying the pressure. The “board” is the instrument, not the method. You are not being boarded. You are being watered. This was very rapidly brought home to me when, on top of the hood, which still admitted a few flashes of random and worrying strobe light to my vision, three layers of enveloping towel were added. In this pregnant darkness, head downward, I waited for a while until I abruptly felt a slow cascade of water going up my nose. Determined to resist if only for the honor of my navy ancestors who had so often been in peril on the sea, I held my breath for a while and then had to exhale and—as you might expect—inhalation in turn. The inhalation brought the damp cloths tight against my nostrils, as if a huge, wet paw had been suddenly and annihilatingly clamped over my face. Unable to determine whether I was breathing in or out, and flooded more with sheer panic than with mere water, I triggered the pre-arranged signal and felt the unbelievable relief of being pulled upright and having the soaking and stifling layers pulled off me. I find I don’t want to tell you how little time I lasted.

This is because I had read that Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, invariably referred to as the “mastermind” of the atrocities of September 11, 2001, had impressed his interrogators by holding out for upward of two minutes before cracking. (By the way, this story is not confirmed. My North Carolina friends jeered at it. “Hell,” said one, “from what I heard they only washed his damn face before he babbled.”) But, hell, I thought in my turn, no Hitchens is going to do worse than that. Well, okay, I admit I didn’t outdo him. And so then I said, with slightly more bravado than was justified, that I’d like to try it one more time. There was a paramedic present who checked my racing pulse and warned me about adrenaline rush. An interval was ordered, and then I felt the mask come down again. Steeling myself to remember what it had been like last time, and to learn from the previous panic attack, I fought down the first, and some of the second, wave of nausea and terror but soon found that I was an abject prisoner of my gag reflex. The interrogators would hardly have had time to ask me any questions, and I knew that I would quite readily have agreed to supply any answer. I still feel ashamed when I think about it. Also, in case it’s of interest, I have since woken up trying to push the bedcovers off my face, and if I do anything that makes me short of breath I find myself clawing at the air with a horrible sensation of smothering and claustrophobia. No doubt this will pass. As if detecting my misery and shame, one of my interrogators comfortingly said, “Any time is a long time when you’re breathing water.” I could have hugged him for saying so, and just then I was hit with a ghastly sense of the sadomasochistic dimension that underlies the relationship between the torturer and the tortured. I apply the Abraham Lincoln test for moral casuistry: “If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong.” Well, then, if waterboarding does not constitute torture, then there is no such thing as torture.

I am somewhat proud of my ability to “keep my head,” as the saying goes, and to maintain presence of mind under trying circumstances. I was completely convinced that, when the water pressure had become intolerable, I had firmly uttered the pre-determined code word that would cause it to cease. But my interrogator told me that,

rather to his surprise, I had not spoken a word. I had activated the “dead man’s handle” that signaled the onset of unconsciousness. So now I have to wonder about the role of false memory and delusion. What I do recall clearly, though, is a hard finger feeling for my solar plexus as the water was being poured. What was that for? “That’s to find out if you are trying to cheat, and timing your breathing to the doses. If you try that, we can outsmart you. We have all kinds of enhancements.” I was briefly embarrassed that I hadn’t earned or warranted these refinements, but it hit me yet again that this is certainly the language of torture.

Maybe I am being premature in phrasing it thus. Among the SERE veterans there are at least two views on all this, which means in practice that there are two opinions on whether or not “waterboarding” constitutes torture. I have had some extremely serious conversations on the topic, with two groups of highly decent and serious men, and I think that both cases have to be stated at their strongest.

The team who agreed to give me a hard time in the woods of North Carolina belong to a highly honorable group. This group regards itself as out on the front line in defense of a society that is too spoiled and too ungrateful to appreciate those solid, underpaid volunteers who guard us while we sleep. These heroes stay on the ramparts at all hours and in all weather, and if they make a mistake they may be arraigned in order to scratch some domestic political itch. Faced with appalling enemies who make horror videos of torture and beheadings, they feel that they are the ones who confront denunciation in our press, and possible prosecution. As they have just tried to demonstrate to me, a man who has been waterboarded may well emerge from the experience a bit shaky, but he is in a mood to surrender the relevant information and is unmarked and undamaged and indeed ready for another bout in quite a short time. When contrasted to actual torture, waterboarding is more like foreplay. No thumbscrew, no pincers, no electrodes, no rack. Can one say this of those who have been captured by the tormentors and murderers of (say) Daniel Pearl? On this analysis, any call to indict the United States for torture is therefore a lame and diseased attempt to arrive at a moral equivalence between those who defend civilization and those who exploit its freedoms to hollow it out, and ultimately to bring it down. I myself do not trust anybody who does not clearly understand this viewpoint.

Against it, however, I call as my main witness Mr. Malcolm Nance. Mr. Nance is not what you call a bleeding heart. In fact, speaking of the coronary area, he has said that, in battlefield conditions, he “would personally cut bin Laden’s heart out with a plastic M.R.E. spoon.” He was to the fore on September 11, 2001, dealing with the burning nightmare in the debris of the Pentagon. He has been involved with the SERE program since 1997. He speaks Arabic and has been on al-Qaeda’s tail since the early 1990s. His most recent book, *The Terrorists of Iraq*, is a highly potent analysis both of the jihad-ist threat in Mesopotamia and of the ways in which we have made its life easier. I passed one of the most dramatic evenings of my life listening to his cold but enraged denunciation of the adoption of waterboarding by the United States. The argument goes like this:

- Waterboarding is a deliberate torture technique and has been prosecuted as such by our judicial arm when perpetrated by others.
- If we allow it and justify it, we cannot complain if it is employed in the future by other regimes on captive U.S. citizens. It is a method of putting American prisoners in harm's way.
- It may be a means of extracting information, but it is also a means of extracting junk information. (Mr. Nance told me that he had heard of someone's being compelled to confess that he was a hermaphrodite. I later had an awful twinge while wondering if I myself could have been "dunked" this far.) To put it briefly, even the CIA sources for the Washington Post story on waterboarding conceded that the information they got out of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed was "not all of it reliable." Just put a pencil line under that last phrase, or commit it to memory.
- It opens a door that cannot be closed. Once you have posed the notorious "ticking bomb" question, and once you assume that you are in the right, what will you not do? Waterboarding not getting results fast enough? The terrorist's clock still ticking? Well, then, bring on the thumbscrews and the pincers and the electrodes and the rack.

Masked by these arguments, there lurks another very penetrating point. Nance doubts very much that Khalid Sheikh Mohammed lasted that long under the water treatment (and I am pathetically pleased to hear it). It's also quite thinkable, if he did, that he was trying to attain martyrdom at our hands. But even if he endured so long, and since the United States has in any case bragged that in fact he did, one of our worst enemies has now become one of the founders of something that will someday disturb your sleep as well as mine. To quote Nance:

Torture advocates hide behind the argument that an open discussion about specific American interrogation techniques will aid the enemy. Yet, convicted al-Qaeda members and innocent captives who were released to their host nations have already debriefed the world through hundreds of interviews, movies and documentaries on exactly what methods they were subjected to and how they endured. Our own missteps have created a cadre of highly experienced lecturers for al-Qaeda's own virtual SERE school for terrorists.

Which returns us to my starting point, about the distinction between training for something and training to resist it. One used to be told—and surely with truth—that the lethal fanatics of al-Qaeda were schooled to lie, and instructed to claim that they had been tortured and maltreated whether they had been tortured and maltreated or not. Did we notice what a frontier we had crossed when we admitted and even proclaimed that their stories might in fact be true? I had only a very slight encounter on that frontier, but I still wish that my experience were the only way in which the

words “waterboard” and “American” could be mentioned in the same (gasping and sobbing) breath.

(Vanity Fair, August 2008)

Iran’s Waiting Game

DRIVING DOWN THROUGH THE DESERT, from Tehran to the holy city of Qom, I am following the path of so many who have made the pilgrimage before me. They either were seeking an audience with, or a glimpse of, Ayatollah Khomeini or, if they were journalistic pilgrims, were trying to test the temperature of Iran’s clerical capital. As I arrive, darkness is gently settling over the domes and spires of the mosque and the Shia theological seminary, the latter of which is demarcated by a kind of empty moat which doubles as a market. But I am not headed for these centers of spiritual and temporal power. My objective is an ill-paved backstreet where, after one confirming cell-phone call, a black-turbaned cleric is waiting outside his modest quarters. This is Hossein Khomeini. The black turban proclaims him a sayyid, or descendant of the prophet Muhammad. But it’s his more immediate ancestry that interests me. This man’s grandfather once shook the whole world. He tore down the throne of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in 1979 and humiliated the United States. His supporters seized the American Embassy and kept fifty-two members of its staff prisoner for 444 days. The seismic repercussions of this event led to the fall of Carter, the rise of Reagan, the invasion of Iran by Saddam Hussein, and quite possibly the occupation of Afghanistan by the Red Army. It moved us from the age of the Red Menace to the epoch of Holy War. It was, at one and the same time, a genuine revolution and an authentic counterrevolution. I have become almost averse to shaking hands in Iran by now, because it isn’t permitted for a man to shake a woman’s hand in public in this nerve-racked country, and if you unlearn the conditioned reflex in one way, you unlearn it in another. But as I feel young Khomeini’s polite grip, I fancifully experience a slight crackle from history.

Iranian hospitality is one of the most warming and embarrassing things it is possible to encounter. Before any conversation can begin on these grand questions, there must be fragrant tea, a plate of sohan, the addictive pistachio-and-saffron brittle that is the Qom specialty, and a pressing invitation to stay for dinner, and indeed for the night. The pressure is re-doubled on this occasion because the last time we met and talked I was the host.

Young Khomeini has been spending a good deal of his time in Iraq, where he has many friends among the Shia. He is a strong supporter of the United States intervention in that country, and takes a political line not dissimilar to that of Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani. In practice, this means the traditional Shia belief that clerics should not occupy posts of political power. In Iranian terms, what it means is that Khomeini (his father and elder brother died some years ago, so he is the most immediate descendant)

favors the removal of the regime established by his grandfather. "I stand," he tells me calmly, "for the complete separation of religion and the state." In terms that would make the heart of a neocon soar like a hawk, he goes on to praise President Bush's State of the Union speech, to warn that the mullahs cannot be trusted with nuclear weapons, and to use the term "Free World" without irony: "Only the Free World, led by America, can bring democracy to Iran."

Anyone visiting Iran today will quickly become used to hearing this version of street opinion, but there is something striking about hearing it from the lips of a turbaned Khomeini. Changing the emphasis slightly, he asks my opinion of the referendum movement. This is an initiative, by Iranians inside the country and outside it, to gather signatures calling for a U.N.-supervised vote on a new Iranian Constitution. One of the recent overseas signatories is Reza Pahlavi, the son of the fallen Shah. Khomeini surprises me even more by speaking warmly of this young man. "I have heard well of him. I would be happy to meet him and to cooperate with him, but on one condition. He must abandon any claim to the throne."

(The opportunity of delivering a message from the grandson of Khomeini to the son of the Shah seemed irresistible, and the first thing I did upon my return to Washington was to seek out Reza Pahlavi, who lives in Maryland, and put the question to him. We actually met in a basement kitchen in the nation's capital, where he was being careful to be as unmonarchical as it is feasible to be. His line on the restoration of kingship is one of "Don't ask, don't tell." He doesn't claim the throne—though he did at one point in our chat refer bizarrely to his father as "my predecessor"—nor does he renounce it. All he will say, and he says it with admirable persistence, is that the next Iran must be both secular and democratic. So, even if they remain at arm's length, it can be said at last that a Khomeini and a Pahlavi agree.)

Iran today exists in a state of dual power and split personality. The huge billboards and murals proclaim it an Islamic republic, under the eternal guidance of the immortal memory of Ayatollah Khomeini. A large force of Revolutionary Guards and a pervasive religious police stand ready to make good on this grim pledge. But directly underneath these forbidding posters and right under the noses of the morals enforcers, Iranians are buying and selling videos, making and consuming alcohol, tuning in to satellite TV stations, producing subversive films and plays and books, and defying the dress code. All women are supposed to cover all their hair at all times, and to wear a long jacket, or manteau, that covers them from neck to knee. But it's amazing how enticing the compulsory scarf can be when worn practically on the back of the head and held in place only by hair spray. As for the obligatory manteau, any woman with any fashion sense can cut it to mold an enviable silhouette. I found a bootlegger on my arrival at Tehran airport and was offered alcohol on principle in every home I entered—Khomeini's excepted—even by people who did not drink. Almost every Iranian has a relative overseas and is in regular touch with foreign news and trends. The country is an "as if" society. People live as if they were free, as if they were in the West, as if they had the right to an opinion, or a private life. And they don't do too badly at it. I

have now visited all three of the states that make up the so-called axis of evil. Rough as their regime can certainly be, the citizens of Iran live on a different planet from the wretched, frightened serfs of Saddam Hussein and Kim Jong-il.

Tehran is in fact more or less uncontrollable by anybody. It's the Mexico City or Calcutta of the region: a vast, unplanned, overpopulated nightmare of all-day traffic jams and eye-wringing pollution, tissue-paper building codes, and an earthquake coming like Christmas. It's also the original uptown-downtown city, built on the steep slopes of the snowy Elburz Mountains, which, on a good day, one can sometimes actually see. In the northern quarter, there are the discreet villas where the members of the upper crust keep their heads down and their wealth unostentatious. At the bottom of the hill, you can lose yourself in the vast bazaar, whose tough stall owners were the shock troops of the 1979 revolution. "Beware of north Tehran," one is invariably told. "Don't take its Westernized opinions at face value." So I didn't. Indeed, at one party, where the women by the interior swimming pool didn't have a scarf or a manteau among them, and where the butler handed me a card printed in English that advertised special caviar supplies, and where the bar went on for a furlong, I met a sleek banker who, full of loathing for the regime as he was, defended Iran's right to have nuclear weapons. In fact, his was the most vociferous defense that I heard. (Like all the others who ask so plaintively why Israel and Pakistan can have nukes and not Iran, he temporarily chose to forget that the mullahs keep denying that they have such weapons, or even seek them.)

Never mind Qom, which is an easy four-hour drive. I went as far from the north-Tehran suburbs as I could reasonably be expected to go. In the city of Mashhad, way up toward the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan border, the air is clearer and the traffic lighter. The place wears an aspect of prosperity and contentment, as befits the home of one of the most beautiful buildings in the world. This is the shrine of Imam Reza, the only one of the 12 Shia imams who is actually buried in Iran. The gold dome—not gold-leafed but gold—is at the center of a series of spacious courtyards and squares into which the Iraqi mosques of Karbala and Najaf could both easily fit. The main door is a continuously busy portal for groups of men bearing coffins either inward or outward, since all the devout dead must be taken as near as is feasible to the tomb of Imam Reza himself. I have to slightly muffle my next sentences, to protect some friends, but I had an introduction to a man who was a guardian of this holy place. Presenting myself, I was led wordlessly to what looked like a tapestry on an interior wall. This curtain was drawn aside to reveal an elevator door, and I was then, like some intruding raider of a lost ark, whisked upward. At the top level, I had a heart-stopping perspective on the gold dome: a view that I think few if any infidels have ever shared. I was as near as I could hope to be to an inner sanctum (to use the word properly for once) and also to something that I can only guess about: the pulsing and enduring and patient heart of Shiite Islam. Offered a cushion on the floor, and some tea and segmented oranges, I was, as usual, made more welcome than was easy for me. My host was a very serious man. Not by any means skipping the traditional questions about my health and my

journey and my needs, he soon drove to the point. "Do you suppose," he inquired, "that the West will ever come to our aid? Or is it all hypocrisy?" I asked him in return how he would know, or how he would define, success. An invasion? He seemed to think it a fair question and gravely replied, "The minimum would be to have an American Embassy back in Tehran."

This answer might strike you as rather oblique. (Welcome to Iran, in that case.) But it was also admirably straightforward. In September 2002, an editor and columnist in Tehran named Abbas Abdi was among those who helped conduct a Gallup poll that had been commissioned by the foreign-affairs committee of the Iranian Parliament, or Majlis. The finding of the poll was that nearly 75 percent of all Iranians were in favor of "dialogue" at the very least with the United States. The chairman of the relevant Majlis committee was named Mohsen Mirdamadi. Abbas Abdi was imprisoned simply for publishing those findings. Mohsen Mirdamadi has since been disqualified by the mullahs from running again for elected office, and in December 2003 was beaten and clubbed by state-sponsored Hezbollah goons while giving a speech in the provincial city of Yazd. You may not know the names of A.A. or M.M., but you might like to know that both of them were among the student group that vandalized the American Embassy in November 1979 and violated the diplomatic immunity of its staff. And A.A. had probably marked himself for even more trouble with the authorities for having a reconciliation meeting, in Paris in 1998, with his former American hostage Barry Rosen. Both were acting "as if" a decent relationship between the two peoples were already extant.

The Islamic republic actually counts all of its subjects as infants, and all of its bosses as their parents. It is based, in theory and in practice, on a Muslim concept known as *velayat-e faqih*, or "guardianship of the jurist." In its original phrasing, this can mean that the clergy assumes responsibility for orphans, for the insane, and for (aha!) abandoned or untenanted property. Here is the reason Ayatollah Khomeini became world-famous: In a treatise written while he was in exile in Najaf, in Iraq, in 1970, he argued that the *velayat* could and should be extended to the whole of society. A supreme religious authority should act as proxy father for everyone. His own charisma and bravery later convinced many people that Khomeini was entitled to claim the role of supreme leader (*faqih*) for himself.

But the theory has an obvious and lethal flaw, built into itself like a trapdoor. What if some lamebrained mediocrity assumes or inherits the title of supreme leader, with its god-given mantle? You might as well accept the slobbering and gibbering firstborn of some hereditary monarch who claims divine right. For this reason, several ayatollahs in Najaf and Qom and other spiritual centers rejected the Khomeini interpretation as soon as it was proposed. Among other things, they doubted that any human was fit for the post of supreme leader or guardian, at least until the twelfth and last of the Shia imams reveals himself again and concludes the long period of mourning and grief that is everyday human life. And this division between mullahs, dear reader, is why you have to concentrate with breathless interest on the difference between an

Iranian-born mullah who lives in Iraq (al-Sistani) and an Iranian mullah who went into exile in Iraq and came home (Khomeini). It is also the reason why several senior Iranian mullahs are in prison or have been in prison under what claims to be an Islamic republic. Get used to learning these names, too, while there is time. Grand Ayatollah Montazeri. Ayatollah Shabestari. These men, and their courageous disciples, say that Khomeini's version of the velayat has no Koranic justification. Hence my welcome in that small house in Qom. Hence, also, the present dictatorship by Ayatollah Khamenei: a semi-literate megalomaniac who presumes to regard his subjects as his pupils and his charges.

One almost wishes the "orphan" part of the theory were truer than it is. But Iran's problem is not a surplus of orphans. It is, rather, that the country is afflicted with a vast population of grieving parents and relatives, whose sons and daughters and nephews and nieces were thrown away in the ghastly eight-year war with Saddam Hussein, and who were forced to applaud the evil "human wave" tactics of shady clergymen who promised heaven to the credulous but never cared to risk martyrdom themselves.

The word "martyr," or shahid, is another expression that has become cheapened by overuse in Iran. Every ugly building and intersection seems to be named for one, and people are increasingly bored and sickened by the term. Still, I am bound to say that I was struck almost mute by the cemetery to the south of Tehran. I have made visits to the memorials of the Western Front, where headstones and arches bear the names of the unidentified dead of the First World War, and I have also been to the mass graves of Bosnia and Iraq. But this awful necropolis is of a different order. I don't think I met a family in Iran that didn't have a missing or "martyred" or mutilated relative from that era. The total butcher bill for the war was close to a million. Thus, even though the cemetery is placed right next to the hideous memorial to Ayatollah Khomeini (and "why the fuck," said the guard at the subway station when I asked directions, "would you want to go to that bastard's grave?"), I approached it with due respect. The Iranian expression for the war with Iraq is "the imposed war." The odd phrasing reflects the belief that Saddam Hussein was an ally of the West when he launched his aggression, and this time I knew that there was more truth than propaganda to the accusation. (Iranian physicians are the world's experts in treating those whose lungs have been corroded by poison gas, or whose skin has been agonizingly scalded by chemical bombardment. They have whole hospitals full of ruined patients.)

Despite the terrifying culling of its youth in the 1980s, Iran is once again a young country. Indeed, more than half of its population is under twenty-five. The mullahs, in an effort to make up the war deficit, provided large material incentives for women to bear great numbers of children. The consequence of this is a vast layer of frustrated young people who generally detest the clerics. You might call it a baby-boomerang. I am thinking of Jamshid, a clever young hustler whom I part-employed as a driver and fixer. Bright but only partially educated, energetic but effectively unemployed, he had been made to waste a lot of his time on compulsory military service and was continuing to waste time until he could think of a way of quitting the country.

“When I was a baby, my mother took me to have my head patted by Khomeini. My fucking hair has been falling out ever since,” he said. You want crack cocaine, hookers, pornography, hooch? This is the downside of the “as if” option. There are thousands of even younger Jamshids lining the polluted boulevards and intersections, trafficking in everything known to man and paying off the riffraff of the morals police. Everybody knows that the mullahs live in luxury, stash money overseas, deny themselves nothing, and indulge in the most blatant hypocrisy. Cynicism about the clergy is universal, but it is especially among the young that one encounters it. It’s also among the young that one most often hears calls for American troops to arrive and bring goodies with them. Yet, after a while, this repeated note began to strike me as childish also. It’s a confession of powerlessness, an avoidance of responsibility, a demand that change come from somewhere else.

A whole range of sincere Shia believers, from Grand Ayatollah Montazeri to the relatively lesser clerics such as the junior Khomeini, worry about this because they know that a whole generation is being alienated from religion. But I don’t think the regime much cares that so many of its talented young people have left or are leaving. The Iranian diaspora now runs into millions, from California to Canada and all across Western Europe. Let the smart ones go: all the easier for us to run a stultified and stalled society. And every now and then they make a move to show who is in charge. Last August, in the city of Neka, a sixteen-year-old girl named Atefeh Rajabi was hauled into a court for having had sex with a man. She might possibly have gotten away with one of the lesser punishments for offenses against chastity, such as a hundred lashes with a whip. (That’s what her partner received.) But from the dock she protested that she had been the object of advances from an older man, and she went as far as to tear off her hijab, or headscarf. The judge announced that she would hang for that, and that he would personally place the noose around her neck. And so, in the main square of Neka, after the Iranian Supreme Court had duly confirmed the ruling, poor Miss Rajabi was hanged from a crane for all to see.

Every now and then you can sit in on late-night discussions where young people wonder when the eruption will come. Perhaps the police or the Revolutionary Guards will make an irrevocable mistake and fire into a crowd? Perhaps, at a given hour, a million women will simply remove their hijabs and defy the authorities? (This discussion gets more intense every year as the summer approaches and women face the irritation and humiliation of wearing it in heat and dust.) But nobody wants to be the first to be blinded by acid, or to have their face lovingly slashed by some Hezbollah enthusiast. The student activists of the Tehran “spring” of 1999, and of the elections which seemed to bring a reformist promise, have been picked off one by one, their papers closed and their leadership jailed and beaten. What else to do, then, except tune in to the new Iranian underground “grunge” scene, or kick back in front of the Italian soft-porn channel or one of the sports and fashion and anti-clerical channels beamed in by satellite from exiles in Los Angeles? As if ...

For what was Persian culture famous? For poetry, for philosophy, for backgammon, for chess, for architecture, for polo, for gardens, and for wine. (The southern city of Shiraz, once a vineyard town, may have a better claim to the invention of sherry than the Spanish city of Jerez.) The special figure of all this ancient civilization was Omar Khayyám, whose name means “maker of tents” but who flourished as a scholar and poet in the city of Neyshabur in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. He is best known for his long, languorous poem *Rubáiyát*: a collection of quatrains, exquisitely rendered into English by Edward FitzGerald, among others. Khayyám was an astronomer and mathematician and was among those commissioned to reform the calendar. In his four-line stanzas, he praised wine, women, and song, found speculation on afterlife pointless, and ridiculed the mullahs of his day. He lived and wrote “as if” they didn’t count. I made a special journey to Neyshabur to see the tomb of this man, who had somewhat cheered up my boyhood. The study of his poetry is not exactly encouraged by members of the theocracy, but they know better than to denounce anything that touches on national pride, and you can visit the site without hindrance. My escort, a quiet man who was slow to commit himself, could quote several quatrains in Farsi, and I was delighted to hear that they sounded exactly the same way as their rhythm fell on an English ear. As we compared notes and recitations, he began to melt a little and accepted a swig from my bootleg flask, and soon I was hearing a familiar story: no prospects, a depraved government, the school friends thrown away in hysterical warfare.

The museum of Omar Khayyám stands a little way from the tomb and contains some beautiful scientific instruments, including an intricate astrolabe, from medieval times. At last, a public place that was not dominated by black-draped and forbidding superstition, and that cared for learning and for reason. Deciding to make a stab at the visitors’ book, I wrote out my favorite quatrain, from the Richard Le Gallienne translation, in which the poet speaks of the arrogance of the faithful:

And do you think that unto such as you
A maggot-minded, starved, fanatic crew
God gave a secret, and denied it me—
Well, well, what matters it? Believe that too.

A few visitors did look over my shoulder, but nobody seemed to mind.

Mashhad and Neyshabur are supremely worth seeing, and also well worth going to see, but nobody can claim to have tasted Iran without having seen Esfahan. It is well inland, so idle comparisons with Venice or Dubrovnik don’t quite work. It is small and modest, so it is not Rome or Prague either. It is a thing unto itself: an imposing miniature and a miracle of proportion. Many fine bridges span its river, one with thirty-three arches in which slits have been carved through three walls. When you stand back and view them from the right angle, they give the perfect outline of a candle, while allowing you to see through to the other side. This miracle of perspective—such ingenuity for such a slight but pleasing effect—is seconded, if you like, by the tower which will convey the merest whisper from one stone corner to another. As for the

symmetry of the azure Sheikh Lotfollah mosque on the grand but modest main square: The masons and decorators must have finished the job quite speechless with what they had achieved.

It is a few miles from this triumph of civilization and culture that the Islamic republic, hostile to every form of modernity except advanced weapons and surveillance techniques, has decided to dig a huge, ugly tunnel into a hillside, the better to conceal its ambitions to become a nuclear state. The tunnel, along with some other “facilities” at Natanz and Bushehr, has been laboriously exposed in the course of a long, dreary inspection that has caught the regime lying without conscience, and also lying without fear of reprisal. The Bushehr reactor was actually begun in the time of the Shah, and it’s a good thing that he slightly outlived his mad kingly ambitions, because if he’d completed the work then the mullahs would have inherited a nuclear capacity ready-made.

And it is unlikely that sanctions will be lifted while the regime also continues to harbor so many wanted criminals, not just on its territory but among its leadership. Consider the repellent figure of Ali Fallahian, a former minister of “intelligence,” who faces an arrest warrant from a court in Berlin for sending a death squad to murder Iranian Kurds in the Mykonos restaurant in 1992. We also have the names of those Iranian officials who are wanted for blowing up a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires in 1994 and the Khobar Towers housing complex in Saudi Arabia in 1996.

All of these crimes were committed, without conscience and (so far) without reprisal, during the presidency of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was also the local star of the Iran-Contra arms-for-hostages racket, the last time that an Iranian connection threatened to bring down an American president.

On the first occasion when I managed to breathe the same air as Rafsanjani, he was addressing a conference of Iranian women, who were made to sit swaddled in heavy clothing while he took his sweet time making some tedious observations about females and the Koran. One of the women’s magazines in Tehran is run by his daughter, but then, there is hardly an enterprise in the country, from the pistachio-nut monopoly to airlines and oil, in which Rafsanjani doesn’t hold an interest. The second time I was able to drink in his words was at “Friday prayers” at the university, the weekly grandstand from which the mullahs address the masses.

On this occasion, Rafsanjani was bursting with sound and fury and insult about imperialist threats to Iran, and swelling like a turkey-cock. (He’s a short guy, and is regularly lampooned on the street for his inability to grow a proper beard. In 2002, the last time he ran for election in Tehran, he came in below the bottom of the already fixed “list,” and some deft work was required to show him registering in the poll at all.) Demagogy aside, everybody knows that if a deal is to be done with Europe and the Americans, then it will probably be Rafsanjani who brokers it. He’s been on both sides of everything, all of his life, through war and revolution. He supported Khomeini in prolonging the war with Iraq, and then persuaded him to accept the U.N. resolution that ended it (and that may have killed the older man). He railed against the Great

Satan, yet welcomed Reagan's shamed envoys when they brought the cake and the Bible and offered to deal arms for hostages. He's what our lazy press means when it describes some opportunist torturer and murderer as a "moderate," or a "survivor." I even met Iranians, completely sickened and disillusioned and ready to boycott any sham vote, who wearily said that Rafsanjani would be an improvement.

In Esfahan I met a woman, one of the few I saw who wore the whole black chador. She was devout, and she listened for a long time while the family who hosted me exhausted all its frustration and argued about the best way of overthrowing or outliving the mullahs. After a pause, she broke in softly, even wistfully. "Do you think," she inquired, "that the West could come here and remove the rulers but only stay for a week and then leave?" I put out my hand reflexively, not to take her palm but just to touch it, as if to reassure her that what she said was not childish or naïve. As if ... And if only. And now I know that, until this is over, and until Iran recovers some of its Persian soul, I will never be able to see her, or Esfahan, again. Meanwhile, the trunk of the tree of the country simply rots, and millions of lives are being lived pointlessly while the state of suspended animation persists.

(Vanity Fair, July 2005)

Long Live Democratic Seismology

IN HIS DAYS on the staid old London Times of the 1930s, Claud Cockburn won an in-house competition for the most boring headline by coming up with "Small Earthquake in Chile: Not Many Dead." The shelf-life of this joke—which, I hasten to add, was at the expense of the Times, not the people of Chile—was so durable that when the anti-Allende and pro-Kissinger historian Alistair Horne came to write his book on the Unidad Popular government of the 1970s, he called it *Small Earthquake in Chile*. At approximately the same time, composing his memorable epitaph for Salvador Allende, Gabriel García Márquez spoke of the likable peculiarities of the Chileans and exaggerated his non-magical realism by only a few degrees when he said:

Chile has an earth tremor on the average of once every two days and a devastating earthquake every presidential term. The least apocalyptic of geologists think of Chile not as a country of the mainland, but as a cornice of the Andes in a misty sea, and believe that the whole of its national territory is condemned to disappear in some future cataclysm.

Seismology in this decade is already emerging as the most important new department of socioeconomics and politics. The simple recognition that nature is master and that the crust of our planet is highly volatile has been thrown into some relief by the staggering 250,000 butcher's bill exacted from the people of Haiti by a single terrestrial spasm, and by the relative survival capacity of Chileans even when hit by a quake of superior magnitude. Gone are the boring-headlined stories about the magnitude of the quake and the likely epicenter. The effects of upheavals of the earth can now

be quite expertly studied, and even predicted, along a series of intersecting graphs that measure them against demography, income level, and—this is a prediction on my part—the vitality of democratic institutions.

Professor Amartya Sen made a reputation some decades ago for pointing out that in the twentieth century no serious famine had occurred in an open or democratic society, however poor. In the classic case that he studied—that of Bengal under British colonial occupation in the 1940s—tens of thousands of people had starved to death in areas that had overflowing granaries. It was not a shortage of food, but of information and of proper administration, that had led to the disaster. The Ukrainian famine of the 1930s, as was pointed out by Robert Conquest in his book *The Harvest of Sorrow*, was the result of a dictatorial policy rather than any failure of the crops.

Taking this as an approximate analogy or metaphor, people are beginning to notice that the likelihood of perishing in an earthquake, or of being utterly dispossessed by it, is as much a function of the society in which one lives as it is of proximity to a fault. A most intriguing article in the *New York Times* of February 24, titled “Disaster Awaits Cities in Earthquake Zones,” pointed out that millions of people now live in unplanned and jerry-built mega-cities—such as Istanbul, Turkey; Karachi, Pakistan; Katmandu, Nepal; and Lima, Peru—that are earthquake-prone and could easily become the sites of mass extermination. The instruments of this would be what Dr. Roger Bilham, a seismologist at the University of Colorado, calls “an unrecognized weapon of mass destruction: houses.” Across the world, millions of people either live or work in structures that have been termed “rubble in waiting.”

The article told the story of increasing efforts by Turkish and Chinese authorities to “proof” their cities against future disasters. Turkey and China, while by no means perfect examples of democracy and transparency, have become much more responsive to popular awareness and protest in the recent past. Chileans have long expected their government to be prepared for seismic events, while Haitians are so ground-down and immiserated by repression and corruption that a democratic demand for such protection would seem an almost ethereal prospect.

This general point was specified in a dramatic way by a sentence buried in the middle of the *Times* article: “In Tehran, Iran’s capital, Dr. Bilham has calculated that one million people could die in a predicted quake similar in intensity to the one in Haiti.” (*Italics added.*) Tehran is built in “a nest of surrounding geologic faults,” and geologists there have long besought the government to consider moving the unprotected and crumbling capital, or at least some of its people, in anticipation of the inevitable disaster.

But the Iranian regime, as we know, has other priorities entirely, and it has worked very hard to insulate not its people from earthquakes, but itself from its people. I remember sitting in one of Tehran’s epic traffic snarls a few years ago and thinking, “What if a big one was to hit now?” This horrible thought was succeeded by two even more disturbing ones: What if the giant shudder came at night, when citizens were packed tightly into unregulated and code-free apartment buildings? And what would

happen to the secret nuclear facilities, both under the ground and above it? I know what the mullahs would say—that the will of Allah was immutable. But what would the survivors think when they looked around the (possibly irradiated) ruins and saw how disposable their leaders had considered them to be?

This outcome would be incomparably worse than the consequences of any intervention to arrest the Iranian nuclear program. I have droned on about this before, and I now drone on again. While the “negotiations” on Iran’s weaponry are being artificially protracted by an irrational and corrupt regime, it should become part of our humanitarianism and our public diplomacy to warn the Iranian people of the man-made reasons that the results of a natural calamity would be hideously multiplied in their case. This, together with the offer of immediate help in earthquake-proofing, enhanced from our experiences in California, is nothing less than a moral responsibility. Together with the cross-border implications of an earthquake plus ill-maintained covert nuclear facilities, it also drives home the point that the future of Iran is not the “internal affair” of a regime that dreams luridly of one apocalypse while inviting a cataclysm of a quite different sort. Down with the earthquake deniers! Long live democratic seismology!

(Slate, March 1, 2010)

Benazir Bhutto: Daughter of Destiny

THE STERNEST CRITIC of Benazir Bhutto would not have been able to deny that she possessed an extraordinary degree of physical courage. When her father was lying in prison under sentence of death from Pakistan’s military dictatorship in 1979, and other members of her family were trying to escape the country, she boldly flew back in. Her subsequent confrontation with the brutal General Zia-ul-Haq cost her five years of her life, spent in prison. She seemed merely to disdain the experience, as she did the vicious little man who had inflicted it upon her.

Benazir saw one of her brothers, Shahnawaz, die in mysterious circumstances in the south of France in 1985, and the other, Mir Murtaza, shot down outside the family home in Karachi by uniformed police in 1996. It was at that famous address—70 Clifton Road—that I went to meet her in November 1988, on the last night of the election campaign, and I found out firsthand how brave she was. Taking the wheel of a jeep and scorning all bodyguards, she set off with me on a hair-raising tour of the Karachi slums. Every now and then, she would get out, climb on the roof of the jeep with a bullhorn, and harangue the mob that pressed in close enough to turn the vehicle over. On the following day, her Pakistan Peoples Party won in a landslide, making her, at the age of thirty-five, the first woman to be elected the leader of a Muslim country.

Her tenure ended—as did her subsequent “comeback” tenure—in a sorry welter of corruption charges and political intrigue, and in a gilded exile in Dubai. But clearly she understood that exile would be its own form of political death. (She speaks well on this point in an excellent recent profile by Amy Wilentz in *More* magazine.) Like two

other leading Asian politicians, Benigno Aquino of the Philippines and Kim Dae-jung of South Korea, she seems to have decided that it was essential to run the risk of returning home. And now she has gone, as she must have known she might, the way of Aquino.

Who knows who did this deed? It is grotesque, of course, that the murder should have occurred in Rawalpindi, the garrison town of the Pakistani military elite and the site of Flashman's Hotel. It is as if she had been slain on a visit to West Point or Quantico. But it's hard to construct any *cui bono*—analysis on which General Pervez Musharraf is the beneficiary of her death. The likeliest culprit is the al-Qaeda/Taliban axis, perhaps with some assistance from its many covert and not-so-covert sympathizers in the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence. These were the people at whom she had been pointing the finger since the huge bomb that devastated her welcome-home motorcade on October 18.

She would have been in a good position to know about this connection, because when she was prime minister, she pursued a very active pro-Taliban policy, designed to extend and entrench Pakistani control over Afghanistan and to give Pakistan strategic depth in its long confrontation with India over Kashmir. The fact of the matter is that Benazir's undoubted courage had a certain fanaticism to it. She had the largest Electra complex of any female politician in modern history, entirely consecrated to the memory of her executed father, the charming and unscrupulous Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who had once boasted that the people of Pakistan would eat grass before they would give up the struggle to acquire a nuclear weapon. (He was rather prescient there—the country now does have nukes, and millions of its inhabitants can barely feed themselves.) A nominal socialist, Zulfikar Bhutto was an autocratic opportunist, and this family tradition was carried on by the PPP, a supposedly populist party that never had a genuine internal election and was in fact—like quite a lot else in Pakistan—Bhutto family property.

Daughter of Destiny is the title she gave to her autobiography. She always displayed the same unironic lack of embarrassment. How prettily she lied to me, I remember, and with such a level gaze from those topaz eyes, about how exclusively peaceful and civilian Pakistan's nuclear program was. How righteously indignant she always sounded when asked unwelcome questions about the vast corruption alleged against her and her playboy husband, Asif Ali Zardari. (The Swiss courts recently found against her in this matter; an excellent background piece was written by John Burns in the *New York Times* in 1998.) And now the two main legacies of Bhutto rule—the nukes and the empowered Islamists—have moved measurably closer together.

This is what makes her murder such a disaster. There is at least some reason to think that she had truly changed her mind, at least on the Taliban and al-Qaeda, and was willing to help lead a battle against them. She had, according to some reports, severed the connection with her rather questionable husband. She was attempting to make the connection between lack of democracy in Pakistan and the rise of mullah-manipulated fanaticism. Of those preparing to contest the highly dubious upcoming elections, she was the only candidate with anything approaching a mass appeal to

set against the siren calls of the fundamentalists. And, right to the end, she carried on without the fetish of “security” and with lofty disregard for her own safety. This courage could sometimes have been worthy of a finer cause, and many of the problems she claimed to solve were partly of her own making. Nonetheless, she perhaps did have a hint of destiny about her.

(Slate, December 27, 2007)

From Abbottabad to Worse

SALMAN RUSHDIE’S UPSETTINGLY BRILLIANT psychoprofile of Pakistan, in his 1983 novel, *Shame*, rightly laid emphasis on the crucial part played by sexual repression in the Islamic republic. And that was before the Talibanization of Afghanistan, and of much of Pakistan, too. Let me try to summarize and update the situation like this: Here is a society where rape is not a crime. It is a punishment. Women can be sentenced to be raped, by tribal and religious kangaroo courts, if even a rumor of their immodesty brings shame on their menfolk. In such an obscenely distorted context, the counterpart term to shame—which is the noble word “honor”—becomes most commonly associated with the word “killing.” Moral courage consists of the willingness to butcher your own daughter.

If the most elemental of human instincts becomes warped in this bizarre manner, other morbid symptoms will disclose themselves as well. Thus, President Asif Ali Zardari cringes daily in front of the forces who openly murdered his wife, Benazir Bhutto, and who then contemptuously ordered the crime scene cleansed with fire hoses, as if to spit even on the pretense of an investigation. A man so lacking in pride—indeed, lacking in manliness—will seek desperately to compensate in other ways. Swelling his puny chest even more, he promises to resist the mighty United States, and to defend Pakistan’s holy “sovereignty.” This puffery and posing might perhaps possess a rag of credibility if he and his fellow middlemen were not avidly ingesting \$3 billion worth of American subsidies every year.

There’s absolutely no mystery to the “Why do they hate us?” question, at least as it arises in Pakistan. They hate us because they owe us, and are dependent upon us. The two main symbols of Pakistan’s pride—its army and its nuclear program—are wholly parasitic on American indulgence and patronage. But, as I wrote for *Vanity Fair* in late 2001, in a long report from this degraded country, that army and those nukes are intended to be reserved for war against the neighboring democracy of India. Our bought-and-paid-for pretense that they have any other true purpose has led to a rancid, resentful official hypocrisy, and to a state policy of revenge, large and petty, on the big, rich, dumb Americans who foot the bill. If Pakistan were a character, it would resemble the one described by Alexander Pope in his *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*:

Willing to wound, and yet afraid to strike.

Just hint a fault, and hesitate dislike:

Alike reserved to blame, or to commend,
A timorous foe, and a suspicious friend ...
So well-bred Spaniels civilly delight
In mumbling of the game they dare not bite.

There's an old cliché in client-state relations, about the tail wagging the dog, but have we really considered what it means when we actually are the tail, and the dog is our goddam lapdog? The lapdog's surreptitious revenge has consisted in the provision of kennels for attack dogs. Everybody knew that the Taliban was originally an instrument for Pakistani colonization of Afghanistan. Everybody knew that al-Qaeda forces were being sheltered in the Pakistani frontier town of Quetta, and that Khalid Sheikh Muhammed was found hiding in Rawalpindi, the headquarters of the Pakistani Army. Bernard-Henri Lévy once even produced a damning time line showing that every Pakistani "capture" of a wanted jihad-ist had occurred the week immediately preceding a vote in Congress on subventions to the government in Islamabad. But not even I was cynical enough to believe that Osama bin Laden himself would be given a villa in a Pakistani garrison town on Islamabad's periphery. I quote below from a letter written by my Pakistani friend Irfan Khawaja, a teacher of philosophy at Felician College, in New Jersey. He sent it to me in anguish just after bin Laden, who claimed to love death more than life, had met his presumably desired rendezvous:

I find, however, that I can't quite share in the sense of jubilation. I never believed that bin Laden was living in some hideaway "in the tribal areas." But to learn that he was living in Abbottabad, after Khalid Sheikh Muhammed was discovered in Rawalpindi, is really too much for me. I don't feel jubilation. I feel a personal, ineradicable sense of betrayal. For ten years, I've watched members of my own family taking to the streets, protesting the U.S. military presence in northern Pakistan and the drone strikes etc. They stood there and prattled on and on about "Pakistan's sovereignty," and the supposed invasion of it by U.S. forces.

Well, what fucking sovereignty? What fucking sovereignty were these people "protecting"? It's bad enough that the Pakistani army lacks sovereignty over the tribal area and can't control it when the country's own life depends upon it. But that bin Laden was living in the Pakistani equivalent of Annapolis, MD ...

You will notice that Irfan is here registering genuine shame, in the sense of proper outrage and personal embarrassment, and not some vicarious parody of emotion where it is always others—usually powerless women—who are supposedly bringing the shame on you.

If the Pakistani authorities had admitted what they were doing, and claimed the right to offer safe haven to al-Qaeda and the Taliban on their own soil, then the boast of "sovereignty" might at least have had some grotesque validity to it. But they were too cowardly and duplicitous for that. And they also wanted to be paid, lavishly and regularly, for pretending to fight against those very forces. Has any state ever been, in the strict sense of the term, more shameless? Over the years, I have written many pages about the sick relationship between the United States and various Third

World client regimes, many of which turned out to be false friends as well as highly discreditable ones. General Pinochet, of Chile, had the unbelievable nerve to explode a car bomb in rush-hour traffic in Washington, D.C., in 1976, murdering a political rival and his American colleague. The South Vietnamese military junta made a private deal to sabotage the Paris peace talks in 1968, in order to benefit the electoral chances of Richard Nixon. Dirty money from the Shah of Iran and the Greek dictatorship made its way at different times into our electoral process. Israeli religious extremists demand American protection and then denounce us for “interference” if we demur politely about colonization of the West Bank. But our blatant manipulation by Pakistan is the most diseased and rotten thing in which the United States has ever involved itself. And it is also, in the grossest way, a violation of our sovereignty. Pakistan routinely—by the dispatch of barely deniable death squads across its borders, to such locations as the Taj Hotel in Mumbai—injures the sovereignty of India as well as Afghanistan. But you might call that a traditional form of violation. In our case, Pakistan ingratiatingly and silkily invites young Americans to one of the vilest and most dangerous regions on earth, there to fight and die as its allies, all the while sharpening a blade for their backs. “The smiler with the knife under the cloak,” as Chaucer phrased it so frigidly. (At our feet, and at our throat: Perfectly symbolic of the underhanded duality between the mercenary and the sycophant was the decision of the Pakistani intelligence services, in revenge for the Abbottabad raid, to disclose the name of the CIA station chief in Islamabad.)

This is well beyond humiliation. It makes us a prisoner of the shame, and co-responsible for it. The United States was shamed when it became the Cold War armorer of the Ayub Khan dictatorship in the 1950s and 1960s. It was shamed even more when it supported General Yahya Khan’s mass murder in Bangladesh in 1971: a Muslim-on-Muslim genocide that crashingly demonstrated the utter failure of a state based on a single religion. We were then played for suckers by yet another military boss in the form of General Ziaul-Haq, who leveraged anti-Communism in Afghanistan into a free pass for the acquisition of nuclear weapons and the open mockery of the non-proliferation treaty. By the start of the millennium, Pakistan had become home to a Wal-Mart of fissile material, traded as far away as Libya and North Korea by the state-subsidized nuclear entrepreneur A. Q. Khan, the country’s nearest approach (which in itself tells you something) to a national hero. Among the scientists working on the project were three named sympathizers of the Taliban. And that gigantic betrayal, too, was uncovered only by chance.

Again to quote myself from 2001, if Pakistan were a person, he (and it would have to be a he) would have to be completely humorless, paranoid, insecure, eager to take offense, and suffering from self-righteousness, self-pity, and self-hatred. That last triptych of vices is intimately connected. The self-righteousness comes from the claim to represent a religion: The very name “Pakistan” is an acronym of Punjab, Afghanistan, Kashmir, and so forth, the resulting word in the Urdu language meaning “Land of the Pure.” The self-pity derives from the sad fact that the country has almost nothing

else to be proud of: virtually barren of achievements and historically based on the amputation and mutilation of India in 1947 and its own self-mutilation in Bangladesh. The self-hatred is the consequence of being pathetically, permanently mendicant: an abject begging-bowl country that is nonetheless run by a super-rich and hyper-corrupt Punjabi elite. As for paranoia: This not so hypothetical Pakistani would also be a hardened anti-Semite, moaning with pleasure at the butchery of Daniel Pearl and addicted to blaming his self-inflicted woes on the all-powerful Jews.

This dreary story actually does have some bearing on the “sovereignty” issue. In the beginning, all that the Muslim League demanded from the British was “a state for Muslims.” Pakistan’s founder and first president, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, was a relatively secular man whose younger sister went around unveiled and whose second wife did not practice Islam at all. But there’s a world of difference between a state for Muslims and a full-on Muslim state. Under the rule of General Zia there began to be imposition of sharia and increased persecution of non-Muslims as well as of Muslim minorities such as the Shiites, Ismailis, and Ahmadis. In recent years these theocratic tendencies have intensified with appalling speed, to the point where the state contains not one but two secret statelets within itself: the first an impenetrable enclave of covert nuclear command and control and the second a private nexus of power at the disposal of the military intelligence services and—until recently—Osama bin Laden himself. It’s the sovereignty of these possessions that exercises General Ashfaq Kayani, head of the Pakistani Army, who five days after Abbottabad made the arrogant demand that the number of American forces in the country be reduced “to the minimum essential.” He even said that any similar American action ought to warrant a “review” of the whole relationship between the two countries. How pitiful it is that a Pakistani and not an American should have been the first (and so far the only) leader to say those necessary things.

If we ever ceased to swallow our pride, so I am incessantly told in Washington, then the Pakistani oligarchy might behave even more abysmally than it already does, and the situation deteriorate even further. This stale and superficial argument ignores the awful historical fact that, each time the Pakistani leadership did get worse, or behave worse, it was handsomely rewarded by the United States. We have been the enablers of every stage of that wretched state’s counter-evolution, to the point where it is a serious regional menace and an undisguised ally of our worst enemy, as well as the sworn enemy of some of our best allies. How could it be “worse” if we shifted our alliance and instead embraced India, our only rival in scale as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious democracy, and a nation that contains nearly as many Muslims as Pakistan? How could it be “worse” if we listened to the brave Afghans, like their former intelligence chief Amrullah Saleh, who have been telling us for years that we are fighting the war in the wrong country?

If we continue to deny or avoid this inescapable fact, then we really are dishonoring, as well as further endangering, our exemplary young volunteers. Why was the raid on Abbottabad so rightly called “daring”? Because it had to be conducted under the

radar of the Pakistani Air Force, which “scrambled” its jets and would have brought the Black Hawks down if it could. That this is true is bad enough in all conscience. That we should still be submitting ourselves to lectures and admonitions from General Kayani is beyond shameful.

(Vanity Fair, July 2011)

The Perils of Partition

THE PUBLIC, or “political,” poems of W. H. Auden, which stretch from his beautiful elegy for Spain and his imperishable reflections on September 1939 and conclude with a magnificent eight-line snarl about the Soviet assault on Czechoslovakia in 1968, are usually considered with only scant reference to his verses about the shameful end of empire in 1947. Edward Mendelson’s otherwise meticulous and sensitive biography allots one sentence to Auden’s “Partition.”

Unbiased at least he was when he arrived on his mission,
Having never set eyes on this land he was called to partition
Between two peoples fanatically at odds,
With their different diets and incompatible gods.
“Time,” they had briefed him in London, “is short. It’s too late
For mutual reconciliation or rational debate:
The only solution now lies in separation ...”

Dutifully pulling open my New York Times one day last December, I saw that most of page three was given over to an article on a possible solution to the Cyprus “problem.” The physical division of this tiny Mediterranean island has become a migraine simultaneously for the European Union (which cannot well allow the abridgment of free movement of people and capital within the borders of a potential member state), for NATO (which would look distinctly foolish if it underwent a huge expansion only to see two of its early members, Greece and Turkey, go to war), for the United Nations (whose own blue-helmeted soldiery has “mediated” the Cyprus dispute since 1964), and for the United States (which is the senior partner and chief armorer of Greece and Turkey, and which would prefer them to concentrate on other, more pressing regional matters).

Flipping through the rest of the press that day, I found the usual references to the Israeli-Palestinian quarrel, to the state of near war between India and Pakistan (and the state of actual if proxy war that obtains between them in the province of Kashmir), and to the febrile conditions that underlie the truce between Loyalists and Republicans—or “Protestants” and “Catholics”—in Northern Ireland. Casting aside the papers and switching on my e-mail, I received further bulletins from specialist Web sites that monitor the precarious state of affairs along the border between Iraq and Kuwait, between the hostile factions in Sri Lanka, and even among the citizens of Hong

Kong, who were anxiously debating a further attempt by Beijing to bring the former colony under closer control.

There wasn't much happening that day to call a reader's attention to the Falkland Islands, to the resentment between Guatemala and Belize, to the internal quarrels and collapses in Somalia and Eritrea, or to the parlous state of the kingdom of Jordan. However, there was some news concerning the defiance of the citizens of Gibraltar, who had embarrassed their patron or parent British government by in effect refusing the very idea of negotiations with Spain on the future of their tiny and enclaved territory. I have saved the word "British" for as long as I decently can.

In the modern world the "fault lines" and "flash points" of journalistic shorthand are astonishingly often the consequence of frontiers created ad hoc by British imperialism. In her own 1959 poem Marya Mannes wrote,

Borders are scratched across the hearts of men
By strangers with a calm, judicial pen,
And when the borders bleed we watch with dread
The lines of ink across the map turn red.

Her somewhat trite sanguinary image is considerably modified when one remembers that most of the lines or gashes would not have been there if the map hadn't been colored red in the first place. No sooner had the wider world discovered the Pashtun question, after September 11, 2001, than it became both natural and urgent to inquire why the Pashtun people appeared to live half in Afghanistan and half in Pakistan. Sir Henry Mortimer Durand had decreed so in 1893 with an imperious gesture, and his arbitrary demarcation is still known as the Durand Line. Sir Mark Sykes (with his French counterpart, Georges Picot) in 1916 concocted an apportionment of the Middle East that would separate Lebanon from Syria and Palestine from Jordan. Sir Percy Cox in 1922 fatefully determined that a portion of what had hitherto been notionally Iraqi territory would henceforth be known as Kuwait. The English half spy and half archaeologist Gertrude Bell in her letters described walking through the desert sands after the First World War, tracing the new boundary of Iraq and Saudi Arabia with her walking stick. The congested, hypertense crossing point of the River Jordan, between Jordan "proper" and the Israeli-held West Bank, is to this day known as the Allenby Bridge, after T. E. Lawrence's commander. And it fell to Sir Cyril Radcliffe to fix the frontiers of India and Pakistan—or, rather, to carve a Pakistani state out of what had formerly been known as India. Auden again:

The Viceroy thinks, as you will see from his letter,
That the less you are seen in his company the better,
So we've arranged to provide you with other accommodation.
We can give you four judges, two Moslem and two Hindu,
To consult with, but the final decision must rest with you.

Probably the best-known literary account of this grand historic irony is *Midnight's Children*, the panoptic novel that introduced Salman Rushdie to a global audience. One should never employ the word "irony" cheaply. But the subcontinent attained

self-government, and also suffered a deep and lasting wound, at precisely the moment that separated August 14 and 15 of 1947. Rushdie's conceit—of a nation as a child simultaneously born, disputed, and sundered—has Solomonic roots. Parturition and partition become almost synonymous. Was partition the price of independence, or was independence the price of partition?

It is this question, I believe, that lends the issue its enduring and agonizing fascination. Many important nations achieved their liberation, if we agree to use the terminology of the post-Woodrow Wilson era (or their statehood, to put it more neutrally), on what one might call gunpoint conditions. Thus the Irish, who were the first since 1776 to break out of the British Empire, were told in 1921 that they could have an independent state or a united state but not both. A few years earlier Arthur Balfour had made a declaration concerning Palestine that in effect promised its territory to two competing nationalities. In 1960 the British government informed the people of Cyprus that they must accept a conditional post-colonial independence or face an outright division of their island between Greece and Turkey (not, it is worth emphasizing, between the indigenous Greek and Turkish Cypriots). They sullenly signed the treaty, handing over a chunk of Cyprus to permanent and sovereign British bases, which made it a potentially tripartite partition but also inscribed all the future intercommunal misery in one instrument: a treaty to which no party had acceded in good faith.

But it seemed to be enough, at the time, to cover an inglorious British retreat. And here another irony forces itself upon us. The whole ostensible plan behind empire was long-term, and centripetal. From the eighteenth to the twentieth century the British sent out lawyers, architects, designers, doctors, and civil servants, not merely to help collect the revenues of exploitation but to embark on nation-building. Yet at the moment of crux it was suddenly remembered that the proud and patient mother country had more urgent business at home. To complete the Auden version:

Shut up in a lonely mansion, with police night and day
Patrolling the gardens to keep the assassins away,
He got down to work, to the task of settling the fate
Of millions. The maps at his disposal were out of date
And the Census Returns almost certainly incorrect,
But there was no time to check them, no time to inspect.

The true term for this is "betrayal," as Auden so strongly suggests, because the only thinkable justification for the occupation of someone else's territory and the displacement of someone else's culture is the testable, honorable intention of applying an impartial justice, a disinterested administration, and an even hand as regards bandits and sectarians. In the absence of such ambitions, or the resolve to complete them, the British would have done better to stay on their fog-girt island and not make such high-toned claims for themselves. The peoples of India would have found their own way, without tutelage and on a different timetable. Yet Marx and Mill and Macaulay, in their different fashions, felt that the encounter between England and India was fertile and dynamic and revolutionary, and now we have an entire Anglo-Indian literature

and cuisine and social fusion that seem to testify to the point. (Rushdie prefers the phrase “Indo-Anglian,” to express the tremendous influence of the English language on Indian authorship, and who would want to argue? There may well be almost as many adult speakers of English in India as there are in the United Kingdom, and at the upper and even middle levels they seem to speak and write it rather better.)

The element of tragedy here is arguably implicit in the whole imperial project. Even since Rome conquered and partitioned Gaul, the best-known colonial precept has been *divide et impera*—“divide and rule.” Yet after the initial subjugation the name of the task soon becomes the more soothing “civilizing mission,” and a high value is placed on lofty, balanced, unifying administration. Later comes the point at which the colonized outgrow the rule of the remote and chilly exploiters, and then it will often be found convenient for the governor or the district commissioner to play upon the tribal or confessional differences among his subjects. From proclaiming that withdrawal, let alone partition, is the very last thing they will do, the colonial authorities move to ensure that these are the very last things they do do. The contradiction is perfectly captured in the memoir of the marvelously named Sir Penderel Moon, one of the last British administrators in India, who mordantly titled his book *Divide and Quit*.

The events he records occurred beyond half a century ago. But in the more immediate past it was Lords Carrington and Owen—both senior graduates of the British Foreign Office—who advanced the ethnic cantonization of Bosnia-Herzegovina. It was Lord Carrington who (just before Nelson Mandela was released from prison) proposed that South Africa be split into a white Afrikaner reservation, a Zulu area, and a free-for-all among various other peoples. It was Sir Anthony Eden who helpfully suggested in 1954 that the United States might consider a division of Vietnam into “North” and “South” at the close of the French colonial fiasco. Cold War partitions or geopolitical partitions, such as those imposed in Germany, Vietnam, and Korea, are to be distinguished from those arising from the preconditions of empire. But there is a degree of overlap even here (especially in the case of Vietnam and also, later, of Cyprus). As a general rule it can be stated that all partitions except that of Germany have led to war or another partition or both. Or that they threaten to do so.

Pakistan had been an independent state for only a quarter century when its restive Bengali “east wing” broke away to become Bangladesh. And in the process of that separation a Muslim army put a Muslim people to the sword—rather discrediting and degrading the original concept of a “faith-based” nationality. Cyprus was attacked by Greece and invaded by Turkey within fourteen years of its quasi-partitioned independence, and a huge and costly international effort is now under way to redraw the resulting frontiers so that they bear some relation to local ethnic proportions. Every day brings tidings of a fresh effort to revise the 1947–1948 cease-fire lines in Palestine (sometimes known as the 1967 borders), which were originally the result of a clumsy partition of the initial British Mandate. In Northern Ireland the number of Catholic citizens now approaches the number of Protestant ones, so that the terms “minority” and “majority” will soon take on new meaning. When that time arrives, we can be sure

that demands will be renewed for a redivision of the Six Counties, roughly east and west of the Bann River. As for Kashmir, where local politics have been almost petrified since the arbitrary 1947 decision to become India's only Muslim-majority state, it is openly suggested that the outcome will be a three-way split into the part of Kashmir already occupied by Pakistan, the non-Muslim regions dominated by India, and the central valley where most Kashmiris actually dwell. In all the above cases there has been continuous strife, often spreading to neighboring countries, of the sort that partition was supposedly designed to prevent or solve. Harry Coomer (Hari Kumar), the Anglo-Indian protagonist of Paul Scott's *Raj Quartet*, sees it all coming when he writes to an English friend in 1940,

I think that there's no doubt that in the last twenty years—whether intentionally or not—the English have succeeded in dividing and ruling, and the kind of conversation I hear ... makes me realize the extent to which the English now seem to depend upon the divisions in Indian political opinion perpetuating their own rule at least until after the war, if not for some time beyond it. They are saying openly that it is “no good leaving the bloody country because there's no Indian party representative to hand it over to.” They prefer Muslims to Hindus (because of the closer affinity that exists between God and Allah than exists between God and the Brahma), are constitutionally predisposed to Indian princes, emotionally affected by the thought of untouchables, and mad keen about the peasants who look upon any Raj as God ...

This is the fictional equivalent of Anita Inder Singh's diagnosis, in *The Origins of the Partition of India 1936–1947*:

The Labour government's directive to the Cabinet Mission in March 1946 stressed that power would only be transferred to Indians if they agreed to a settlement which would safeguard British military and economic interests in India. But in February 1947, the Labour government announced that it would wind up the Raj by June 1948, even if no agreement had emerged. Less than four months later, Lord Mountbatten announced that the British would transfer power on 15 August 1947, suggesting that much happened before this interval which persuaded the British to bring forward the date for terminating the empire by almost one year. Also, the British have often claimed that they had to partition because the Indian parties failed to agree. But until the early 1940s the differences between them had been a pretext for the British to reject the Congress demand for independence ...

Sigmund Freud once wrote an essay concerning “the narcissism of the minor differences.” He pointed out that the most vicious and irreconcilable quarrels often arise between peoples who are to most outward appearances nearly identical. In Sri Lanka the distinction between Tamils and Sinhalese is barely noticeable to the visitor. But the Sinhalese can tell the difference, and the indigenous Tamils know as well the difference between themselves and the Tamils later imported from South India by the British to pick the tea. It is precisely the intimacy and inwardness of the partition impulse that makes it so tempting to demagogues and opportunists. The 1921 partition of Ireland was not just a division of the island but a division of the northeastern

province of Ulster. Historically this province contained nine counties. But only four—Antrim, Armagh, Derry, and Down—had anything like a stable Protestant majority. Three others—Monaghan, Cavan, and Donegal—were overwhelmingly Catholic. The line of pro-British partition attempted to annex the maximum amount of territory with the minimum number of Catholic and nationalist voters. Two largely Catholic counties, Fermanagh and Tyrone, petitioned to be excluded from the “Unionist” project. But a mere four counties were thought to be incompatible with a separate state; so the partition of Ireland, into twenty-six counties versus six, was also the fracturing of Ulster.

In a similar manner, the partition of India involved the subdivision of the ancient territories of Punjab and Bengal. The peoples here spoke the same language, shared the same ancestry, and had long inhabited the same territory. But they were abruptly forced to choose between one side of a frontier and the other, on the basis of religion alone. And then, with this durable scar of division fully established between them, they could fall to quarreling further about religion among themselves. The infinite and punishing consequences of this can be seen to the present day, through the secession of Bangladesh, the Sunni-Shia fratricide in Pakistan, the intra-Pashtun rivalry, and the sinister and dangerous recent attempt to define India (which still has more Muslims on its soil than Pakistan does) as a Hindu state. To say nothing of Kashmir. This “solution,” with its enormous military wastage and potentially catastrophic nuclear potential, must count as one of the great moral and political failures in recent human history. One of Paul Scott’s most admirable minor characters is Lady Ethel Manners, the widow of a former British governor, who exclaims about the “midnight” of 1947,

The creation of Pakistan is our crowning failure. I can’t bear it ... Our only justification for two hundred years of power was unification. But we’ve divided one composite nation into two and everyone at home goes round saying what a swell the new Viceroy is for getting it sorted out so quickly.

The year 1947 was obviously an unpropitious one for laying down your “confessional state” or “post-colonial partition” vintage. The Arabs of Palestine, who gave place to a half-promised British-sponsored state for Jews at the same time, are now subdivided into Israeli Arabs, West Bankers, Gazans, Jerusalemites, Jordanians, and the wider Palestinian-refugee diaspora. If at any moment a settlement looks possible between any one of these factions and the Israelis, the claims of another, more afflicted faction promptly arise to neutralize or negate the process. Anton Shammas and David Grossman have both written lucidly, from Arab-Israeli and Jewish-Israeli perspectives respectively, about this balkanization of a society that was fissile enough to begin with. And perhaps that splintering is why Osama bin Laden’s fantasy of a restored caliphate—an undivided Muslim empire, organic and hierarchic and centralized—now exerts its appeal (as did the Nasserite and later the Baath Party dream of a single Arab nation in which the old borders would be subsumed by one glorious whole).

In the preface to his 1904 play *John Bull’s Other Island*, George Bernard Shaw made highly vivid use of the metaphor of fracture or amputation.

A healthy nation is as unconscious of its nationality as a healthy man of his bones. But if you break a nation's nationality it will think of nothing else but getting it set again. It will listen to no reformer, to no philosopher, to no preacher, until the demand of the Nationalist is granted. It will attend to no business, however vital, except the business of unification and liberation.

This, mark you, was seventeen years before the issue of Irish "liberation" was forcibly counterposed to that of "unification." "Unionist," in British terminology, means someone who favors the "union" of the Six Counties of Northern Ireland with the United Kingdom—in other words, someone who favors the disunion of Ireland. Among Greeks the word "unionist" is rendered as enotist—someone who supports enosis, or union, between Greece and John Bull's other European colony, Cyprus. (This is why the Ulster Unionists in Parliament today are among the staunchest supporters of the ultra-nationalist Rauf Denktaş's breakaway Turkish colony on the island.) And Shaw might have done well to add that preachers can indeed get attention for their views, while the national question is being debated, as long as they take decided and fervent nationalist positions. Even he would have been startled, if he visited any of these territories today, to find how right he was—and how people discuss their injuries as if they had been inflicted yesterday.

It is the admixture of religion with the national question that has made the problem of partition so toxic. Whether consciously or not, British colonial authorities usually preferred to define and categorize their subjects according to confession. The whole concept of British dominion in Ireland was based on a Protestant ascendancy. In the subcontinent the empire tended to classify people as Muslim or non-Muslim, partly because the Muslims had been the last conquerors of the region and also because—as Paul Scott cleverly noticed—it found Islam to be at least recognizable in Christian-missionary terms (as opposed to the heathenish polytheism of the Hindus). In Palestine and Cyprus, both of which it took over from the Ottomans, London wrote similar categories into law. As a partially intended consequence, any secular or nonsectarian politician was at a peculiar disadvantage. Many historians tend to forget that the stoutest supporters of Irish independence, at least after the rebellion of 1798, were Protestants or agnostics, from Edward FitzGerald and Wolfe Tone to Charles Stewart Parnell and James Connolly. The leadership of the Indian Congress Party was avowedly nonconfessional, and a prominent part in the struggle for independence was played by Marxist forces that repudiated any definition of nationality by religion. Likewise in Cyprus: The largest political party on the island was Communist, with integrated trade unions and municipalities, and most Turkish Cypriots were secular in temper. The availability of a religious "wedge," added to the innate or latent appeal of chauvinism and tribalism, was always a godsend to the masters of divide and rule. Among other things, it allowed the authorities to pose as overworked mediators between irreconcilable passions.

Indeed, part of the trouble with partition is that it relies for its implementation on local partitionists. It may also rely on an unspoken symbiosis between them—a covert handshake between apparent enemies. The grand mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin

al-Husseini, was in many ways unrepresentative of the Palestinian peasantry of the 1930s and 1940s (and it does not do to forget that perhaps 20 percent of Palestinians are Christian). But his clerical authority made him a useful (if somewhat distasteful) “notable” from the viewpoint of the colonial power, and his virulent sectarianism was invaluable to the harder-line Zionists, who needed only to reprint his speeches. Many Indian Muslims refused their support to Mohammed Ali Jinnah, but once Britain became bent on partition, it automatically conferred authority on his Muslim League as being the “realistic” expression of the community. British policy also helped the emergence of Rauf Denktash, whose violence was principally directed at those Turkish Cypriots who did not want an apartheid solution. More recently, in Bosnia, the West (encouraged by Lords Carrington and Owen) made the fatal error of assuming that the hardest-line demagogues were the most authentic representatives of their communities. Thus men who could never win a truly democratic election—and have not won one since—were given the immense prestige of being invited as recognized delegates to the negotiating table. Interviewing the Serbian Orthodox fanatics who had proclaimed an artificial “Republica Srpska” on stolen and cleansed Bosnian soil, John Burns of the New York Times was surprised to find them citing the example of Denktash’s separate state in Cyprus as a precedent. (The usual colloquial curse word for “Muslim,” in Serb circles, is “Turk.” But there is such a thing as brotherhood under the skin, and even xenophobes can practice their own perverse form of internationalism.) Most of these men are now either in prison or on the run, but they lasted long enough to see Bosnia-Herzegovina subjected to an almost terminal experience of partition and subpartition, splitting like an amoeba among Serb, Croat, and (in the Bihac enclave) Muslim bandits. Now, under the paternal wing of Lord Ashdown, the governorship of Bosnia is based on centripetal rather than centrifugal principles. But his stewardship as commissioner originates with the European Union.

The straight capitalist and socialist rationality of the EU—where “Union” means what it says and where frontiers are bad for business as well as a reproach to the old left-internationalist ideal—is in bizarre contrast to the lived experience of partition. The time-zone difference between India and Pakistan, for example, is half an hour. That’s a nicely irrational and arbitrary slice out of daily life. In Cyprus, the difference between the clocks in the Greek and Turkish sectors is an hour—but it’s the only in-country north-south time change that I am aware of, and it operates on two sides of the same capital city. In my “time,” I have traversed the border post at the old Ledra Palace hotel in the center of Nicosia, where a whole stretch of the city is frozen at the precise moment of “cease-fire” in 1974, when everything went into suspended animation. I have been frisked at the Allenby Bridge and at the Gaza crossing between Israel and the “Palestinian authority.” I have looked at the Korean DMZ from both sides, been ordered from a car by British soldiers on the Donegal border of Northern Ireland, been pushed around at Checkpoint Charlie on the old Berlin Wall, and been held up for bribes by soldiers at the Atari crossing on Kipling’s old “Grand Trunk Road” between Lahore and Amritsar—the only stage at which the Indo-Pakistan frontier can

be legally negotiated on land. In no case was it possible to lose a sense of the surreal, as if the border was actually carved into the air rather than the roadway. Rushdie succeeds in weaving magical realism out of this in *Midnight's Children*: "Mr. Kemal, who wanted nothing to do with Partition, was fond of saying, 'Here's proof of the folly of the scheme! Those [Muslim] Leaguers plan to abscond with a whole thirty minutes! Time Without Partitions,' Mr. Kemal cried, 'That's the ticket!'"

There is a good deal of easy analysis on offer these days, to the effect that Islam was the big loser from colonialism, and is entitled to a measure of self-pity in consequence. The evidence doesn't quite bear this out. In India the British were openly partial to the Muslim side, and helped to midwife the first modern state consecrated to Islam. In Cyprus they favored the Turks. In the Middle East the Muslim Hashemite and Saudi dynasties—rivals for the guardianship of the holy places—benefited as much as anyone from the imperial carve-up. Had there been a British partition of Eritrea after 1945, as was proposed, the Muslims would have been the beneficiaries of it. No, the Muslim claim is better stated as resentment over the loss of the Islamic empire: an entirely distinct grievance. There were Muslim losers in Palestine and elsewhere, mostly among the powerless and landless, but the big losers were those of all creeds and of none who believed in modernity and had transcended tribalism.

The largely secular Muslims of Bosnia and Kosovo were, however, the main victims of the cave-in to partition in the former Yugoslavia, and are now the chief beneficiaries of that policy's reversal. They were also among the first to test the improvised but increasingly systematic world order, in which rescue operations are undertaken from the developed world, assisted by a nexus of nongovernmental organizations, and then mutate into semipermanent administrations. "Empire" is the word employed by some hubristic American intellectuals for this new dominion. A series of uncovenanted mandates, for failed states or former abattoir regimes, is more likely to be the real picture. And the relevant boundaries still descend from Sir Percy, Sir Henry, and Sir Cyril, who, as Auden phrased it, "quickly forgot the case, as a good lawyer must." However we confront this inheritance of responsibility (should it be called the global man's burden?), the British past is replete with lessons on how not to discharge it.

(*The Atlantic*, March 2003)

Algeria: A French Quarrel

Review of *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954–1962*, by Alistair Horne.

IT WAS ARGUABLY FAIR, when André Maurois finished his *Histoire de la France*, to permit him a small allowance of la gloire and to agree with his conclusion that "the history of France, a permanent miracle, has the singular privilege of impassioning the peoples of the earth to the point where they all take part in French quarrels." And it was certainly true, when Alistair Horne began his long study of the Algerian war (or the Algerian Revolution), that no sentient person could fail to share his conviction

that France in 1789, 1848, 1871 (the Paris Commune), 1916 (Verdun), and 1940 (the defeat and capitulation that led to Vichy) was in some sense both the mother and the daughter—and perhaps also the orphan—of modern history.

At all events, there is no doubt that the eight-year struggle for Algeria was momentous for le monde entier as well as for France herself. The intense and dramatic fighting marked the emergence of militant pan-Arab nationalism as well as, to some extent, the revival of Islam as a modern political force. It was one of the initial tests of the validity of the United Nations in bringing new states and countries to independence. It became an important early sideshow in the Cold War, with the United States this time attempting to play the role of an anti-colonial power. And it was a reprise, at some remove, of the fratricide between Gaullist and Vichyite forces that had ceased only a decade before the hostilities in Algeria broke out.

A history so intricately filiated will soon disclose the lineaments of tragedy, and Horne's achievement—in a book first published in 1977—was to speak with gruff respect of the might-have-beens without losing his concentration on the blunt and unavoidable facts. Had liberated France in 1945 begun to speak of the emancipation of its colonized peoples in the same tones that it demanded so peremptorily for itself (and had it realized that the world of European dominion was never coming back), the history of North Africa—and indeed, Indochina—might have been radically different. Horne's title is taken from Rudyard Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden," which was originally addressed to Henry Cabot Lodge, Theodore Roosevelt, and other Americans who were pondering what to do with the Philippine Islands after shattering the Spanish Empire in 1898. But Algeria in 1945 was a province of a foredoomed French empire, so no invocation of the old mission civilisatrice had even a prayer of working.

Least of all did the impossible scheme of keeping Algeria as an actual département of France have such a chance. Relatively sober steps had been taken, especially under the prime ministership of Pierre Mendès-France, to bring independence to Tunisia and Morocco, and to end the long misery and shame of France's nostalgia for a renovated empire in Vietnam, which ended all in one day at the battle of Dien Bien Phu. When it came to Algeria, Mendès-France borrowed from an old plan, for modest autonomy, first evolved by his predecessor Léon Blum. It isn't exaggerating by much to say that both of these Jewish Frenchmen—products of the campaign to vindicate Captain Dreyfus—were viciously thwarted by a white-settler movement whose allegiance was to Pétain and Poujade, and in some cases to Charles Maurras and the Action Française. Every move to reform Algeria even slightly was vetoed by a pied-noir lobby that was addicted to overplaying its own hand.

This grandiose primitivism was not shared, as Horne brilliantly and movingly demonstrates, by the military men upon whom the pieds-noirs depended. Many of these soldiers had fought against Vichy and its Nazi backers (in French Africa, in the Middle East, or in France itself), and they had a concept of republican virtue, as well as an esprit de corps, that commands respect even at this distance. The same can be said of Jacques Soustelle, the brilliant, passionate proconsul who was, in the

end, almost driven mad by the feeling of having been betrayed from Paris. When the pied-noir coup took place in Algiers, and was proclaimed from the balcony, it was announced—in a sort of perverse homage to a degenerated Jacobinism—by a “Committee of Public Safety.” In a comparable parody of anti-imperialism, the rightist mob in those days of May 1958 made one of its first acts the torching of the U.S. Cultural Center in Algiers.

By then, however, the curtain was already falling: The Anglo-French collusion in the 1956 invasion of Egypt, with its calamitous outcome, had not only written *finis* to European colonialism in the Arab world but impelled Washington to adopt a course that implicitly accepted independence as inevitable. Given the strong, if mainly rhetorical, support of the Soviet bloc for the Algerian Front de Libération Nationale (whose forerunner was founded on the day that Dien Bien Phu fell, and which had in its ranks hardened soldiers who had once fought under French colors in Indochina), all that was lacking was a French statesman who could see the need to disembarass his country of those who ostensibly were the most devoted to it. The man who would perform this brilliant political—and rhetorical and emotional—feat had, as we know, been waiting for the call for a long time, and Horne does well to keep him offstage until almost halfway through this lengthy book. Charles de Gaulle could not be outshone by anybody who wished to speak of the destiny of France and the French, and his contempt for the Algerian right went back all the way to the Vichy regime, which it had supported. (His disdain for treason cut both ways: He could never bring himself to utter a good word about the quarter of a million or so harkis, those Algerian Muslims who took the side of France and paid a dreadful cost for it.)

Like the good historian he is, Horne leaves open the question of whether all this was as inevitable as it now appears. He tends to assume the long-run victory of colonial insurgencies and the near impossibility of defeating them—using the IRA of the 1970s as an example that now seems anachronistic—but he concedes that there were several moments when the FLN was nearly crushed, illuminates the deep divisions within its ranks that at several points were almost lethal to it, and reminds us almost casually that oil was not found in Algeria until 1958 and that even while it was negotiating with the rebels, France was exploding its first nuclear devices in the Sahara. Yes, indeed it might have been otherwise, as de Gaulle was forced to admit when, himself besieged by strikes and riots ten years after the Algerian coup had provoked his own seizure of power, he was obliged to fly secretly to Germany and beg for the loyalty of the mutinous generals he had exiled to NATO.

This is not the only way in which Algeria continued to haunt France, and continues to do so. There are now some 5 million people of Algerian provenance living in France, many of them strongly attracted to Islamic fundamentalist ideas. Their presence is rejected by a large and growing neofascist party led by a brutish veteran of the *Algérie française* movement named Jean-Marie Le Pen. During the civil war in Algeria in the 1990s, when the FLN and the army were able to repress an Islamist insurgency only by employing the most pitiless measures, an Air France plane was hijacked by militants

who planned to crash it into the Eiffel Tower. (One wonders how different things might have been if that action had inaugurated our new age of transnational suicide-murder.)

In a much-too-brisk introduction to this new edition, Horne makes some rather facile comparisons with Iraq. The initial analogy does not hold at all: There is not a huge white-settler population in Mesopotamia; the United States does not consider Iraq to be a part of its metropole; the violence there is mainly between Arabs and Muslims, while the large Kurdish minority—loosely comparable perhaps to the Kabyle or Berber population of Algeria—fights stoutly on the American side. Moreover, it would be insulting to compare the forces of al-Qaeda and revanchiste Baathism to the FLN, which made consistent appeals to the discrepant ethnic groups in its country and which even asked for—and often got—support from the large Jewish community, whose members had suffered at the hands of the colonial right. Envoys from the al-Zarqawi school are furthermore unlikely to be received—as were the tough and often brilliant diplomats of the FLN—at the United Nations, whose headquarters and personnel in Baghdad they blew up. In Horne's bare and scrupulous account, it is the nihilistic tactics and propaganda of the colonialist Organisation de l'Armée Secrète that put one in mind of the bin-Ladenists. He emphasizes the problem of torture, which has indeed been allowed to work its poison on American policy in Iraq, but his own very exhaustive discussion of the way that this horror influenced Algeria makes it plain that official cruelty was a stern principle as well as a universal practice, and that this was not even denied, let alone punished. It would have been far more absorbing had he devoted his considerable expertise to answering the question, How was it that Algeria in the 1990s became the first country to defeat a full-scale jihad and takfir rebellion, which had at one point threatened to overwhelm the entire state and society? In other words, this is no longer a question of the world being privileged to observe French quarrels, and perhaps allowed to participate vicariously in them; it is more a matter of understanding one of the many origins of a current and permanent crisis.

Horne is a mild British Tory with a true feeling for France but a rather limited understanding of the “left.” However, one of his recurrent tropes did stay in this reviewer's mind. He writes often about the honorable role of the secular and democratic forces, in both France and Algeria, that attempted to prevent and then to alleviate a war of mutilation versus torture, and of gruesome mutual reprisal. The world chooses to remember Albert Camus as the foremost personality among these, but Horne gives us many important reminiscences of Messali Hadj and Ferhat Abbas, and other brave Algerian figures (not “moderates,” in the current patronizing argot) who might, if they could not have stopped the war entirely, have prevented it from taking a savage form that in some ways still persists. Must such people always lose? It is a question that this generation, too, will have to face—and have to answer.

(The Atlantic, November 2006)

The Case of Orientalism

Review of *Dangerous Knowledge: Orientalism and Its Discontents*, by Robert Irwin.
OF WHAT BOOK and author was the following sentence written, and by whom?

Rarely has an Oriental servant of a white-identified, imperial design managed to pack so many services to imperial hubris abroad and racist elitism at home—all in one act.

This was the quasi-articulate attack recently leveled, by a professor of comparative literature at Columbia University, on Reading *Lolita* in Tehran, Azar Nafisi's account of private seminars on Nabokov for young women in Iran. The professor described Nafisi's work as resembling "the most pestiferous colonial projects of the British in India," and its author as the moral equivalent of a sadistic torturer at Abu Ghraib. "To me there is no difference between Lynndie England and Azar Nafisi," Hamid Dabashi, who is himself of Iranian origin and believes that Nafisi's book is a conscious part of the softening-up for an American bombing campaign in Iran, has said.

I cannot imagine my late friend Edward Said, who was a professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia, either saying or believing anything so vulgar. And I know from experience that he was often dismayed by the views of people claiming to be his acolytes. But if there is a faction in the academy that now regards the acquisition of knowledge about "the East" as an essentially imperialist project, amounting to an "appropriation" and "subordination" of another culture, then it must be conceded that Said's 1978 book, *Orientalism*, was highly influential in forming this cast of mind.

Robert Irwin's new history of the field of Oriental studies is explicitly designed as a refutation of Said's thesis, and has an entire chapter devoted to a direct assault upon it. The author insists that he has no animus against Said personally or politically, that he tends to share his view of the injustice done to the people of Palestine, and that he regarded him as a man of taste and discernment. Irwin makes this disclaimer, perhaps, very slightly too fulsomely—at one point also recycling the discredited allegation that Said was not "really" a Palestinian from Jerusalem at all. But he is more lucid and reliable when he sets out to demonstrate the complexity and diversity of Orientalism, to defend his profession from the charge of being a conscious or unconscious accomplice of empire, and to decry the damage done by those whose reading even of *Orientalism* was probably superficial.

I still think that Said's book was useful if only in forcing people in "the West" to examine the assumptions that underlay their cosmology. If asked what I mean by that, I should cite Robert Hughes, who recalls how his parents' generation in Australia would refer to New Guinea or Indonesia, say, as "the Far East" when they were, in point of fact, their near North. The very term Middle East, I have recently learned from Michael Oren's absorbing history of American engagement in the region, was coined by Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, whose life's work was the creation of an American navy on the model of the British imperial fleet. I remember my own surprise when I realized, in New Delhi in the 1970s, that by the crisis in "Western Asia," the newspaper

article I was reading meant to refer to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. It can be said for Edward Said that he helped make us reconsider our perspectives a little.

“This book,” writes Irwin in his agreeably breezy introduction to it, “contains many sketches of individual Orientalists—dabblers, obsessives, evangelists, freethinkers, madmen, charlatans, pedants, romantics. (Even so, perhaps still not enough of them.)” Indeed, its chief strength lies precisely in showing the vagary and variety of the subject, and thus obliquely convicting any single unified critique of it as essentially reductionist—a neat *tu quoque* against the Said school.

Among Irwin’s initial points is one that should scarcely have needed to be made. The British proconsular class were for the most part not Orientalists at all. They were classicists. When they adapted old texts and languages to their task of dominion, they were looking to the grand precedents of Greece and Rome. And though it is true that the protracted Greek confrontation with the Persians created the first “East-West” division in the European mind, it is also true that the Greek word *barbaros*, with all its freight of later associations, was not a pejorative. It simply demarcated Greek-speaking from non-Greek-speaking peoples. So it was simplistic of Said to say that the roots of the problem lay with *The Iliad*: The Hellenes often looked down on uncouth northerners like the Scythians, while greatly admiring (and borrowing from) the Egyptians. As Irwin goes on to say:

Lord Curzon, Sir Ronald Storrs, T. E. Lawrence and most of the rest of them were steeped in the Greek and Roman classics. Readings of Thucydides, Herodotus and Tacitus guided those who governed the British. Lord Cromer, the proconsul in Egypt, was obsessed with the Roman empire and its decline and fall. Sir Ronald Storrs used to read the *Odyssey* before breakfast. T. E. Lawrence read the Greek poets during his time as an archaeologist at Carcemish and later translated the *Odyssey*. Colonial administrators were much more likely to be familiar with the campaigns of Caesar than those of Muhammad and the Quraysh.

In contradistinction, or at any rate by contrast, those whose passion was for the Orient were very often numbered among the anti-imperialists. This was true not only of English scholars like Edward Granville Browne—author of *A Year Among the Persians*, who became a strenuous partisan of the struggle of Eastern peoples against British and Russian tutelage—but also of many of the French enthusiasts, from the wildly eccentric Louis Massignon, who campaigned for the independence of French North Africa and took his anti-Zionism to the point of Judeophobia, to Marxisant professors like Maxime Rodinson. Nor was it at all uncommon for Orientalist pioneers to “go native,” if the expression can be allowed, and to adopt forms of Islam such as Sufism. This was not true of the Soviet and Nazi Orientalists, on whom Irwin gives us two tantalizingly brief sections; but the first group was concerned with negating and discrediting Islam, and the second was obsessed with bogus racist and pseudo-ethnological theories, which in their turn caused many of the finest German scholars to flee overseas and replant the discipline elsewhere. None of this makes a good “fit” with Said’s over- and under-drawn

picture of a discipline dedicated to the propagation of British and French imperial hegemony.

Though this book is an extraordinarily attractive short introduction to the different national schools of Orientalism, and to the various scholars who labored to make Eastern philology and philosophy more accessible, its chief interest to the lay reader lies in its consideration of Orientalism as a study of Islam. Irwin shows us the early Christian attempts to translate and understand the Koran, most of which were preoccupied with showing its heretical character. These make especially absorbing reading in the light of the pope's recent lecture at Regensburg University, and his revival of the medieval critique of the teachings of Muhammad. That tradition extends quite far into the modern epoch, with the consecrated work of Father Henri Lammens, a Belgian Jesuit who taught in Beirut in the early part of the twentieth century and made himself master of the suras and hadiths. Lammens's intention was to show that, to the extent that Muhammad could be said to have existed, the prophet was a sex-crazed brigand whose preachments were either plagiarized or falsified. The greatest Orientalist of them all, the Hungarian genius Ignaz Goldziher, asked ironically, "What would remain of the Gospels if [Lammens] applied to them the same methods he applies to the Qur'an?"

The same unwelcome implication of this excellent question may well have occurred to the Church itself: I can tell you that Lammens's books are now extremely hard to obtain. And though Irwin does not say so explicitly, the general academic reticence about Islam that he so much deplors may well have something to do with the potentially atheistic consequences of any unfettered inquiry. As he phrases it:

Because of the possible offense to Muslim susceptibilities, Western scholars who specialize in the early history of Islam have to be extremely careful what they say, and some of them have developed subtle forms of double-speak when discussing contentious matters.

This is to say the very least: "Western scholars" and authors like Karen Armstrong and Bruce Lawrence have adopted the strategy of taking Islam's claims more or less at face value, while non-Western critics who do not believe in revealed religion at all, such as Ibn Warraq, are now operating on the very margin of what is considered tactful or permissible. Even a relatively generous treatment of the life of the Prophet Muhammad, such as that composed by Rodinson, is considered too controversial on many campuses in the West, and as involving readers or distributors in real physical danger if offered for discussion even in Cairo, let alone Baghdad or Beirut. The splendid nineteenth-century Oxford Orientalist David Margoliouth (described by Irwin as having "the kind of beautiful mind that could see patterns where none existed") was perhaps not so eccentric when he claimed to notice analogies "between the founder of Islam and Brigham Young, the founder of the Mormon faith." The usefulness of polygamy in forming and cementing alliances, as well as in satisfying other requirements, is something that was indeed noticed by Joseph Smith—the actual "founder of the Mormon faith"—who furthermore announced himself as the man who would do for North America what Muhammad had done for the Arabian Peninsula. Irwin might

have done well to pursue this and other insights, rather than exhibiting a little of the very reluctance of which he claims to disapprove.

To return, then, to Said. It is, on reflection, a great mark against his book that it did not consider the work of Goldziher, whose preeminence Irwin has reasserted in a wonderfully readable thumbnail chapter that leaves one yearning for more. Even Said's friend Albert Hourani, who did so much to arouse interest in the neglected field of Arabic and Middle Eastern studies, could not pardon this omission. And Rodinson, that great Jewish foe of Zionism, felt constrained to remind his Palestinian comrade that it is a mistake to concentrate exclusively on the Arab world, since four-fifths of Muslims are not Arabs. Most of all, though, one must be ready to oppose any analysis that even slightly licenses the idea that "outsiders" are not welcome to study other cultures. So far from defending those cultures from depredation, such a stance actually permits them to fall under the dominance of stultified and conservative forces to whom everything depends on an affirmation of blind faith. This, and not the inquiry into its origins, might be described as the problem in the first place.

(The Atlantic, March 2007)

Edward Said: Where the Twain Should Have Met

Review of *Orientalism*, by Edward Said.

IFIRST MET EDWARD SAID in the summer of 1976, in the capital city of Cyprus. We had come to Nicosia to take part in a conference on the rights of small nations. The obscene civil war in Lebanon was just beginning to consume the whole society and to destroy the cosmopolitanism of Beirut; it was still just possible in those days to imagine that a right "side" could be discerned through the smoke of confessional conflagration. Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation was in its infancy (as was the messianic "settler" movement among Jews), and the occupation itself was less than a decade old. Egypt was still the Egypt of Anwar Sadat—a man who had placed most of his credit on the wager of "Westernization," however commercially conceived, and who was only two years away from the Camp David accords. It was becoming dimly apprehended in the West that the old narrative of "Israel" versus "the Arabs" was much too crude. The image of a frugal kibbutz state surrounded by a heaving ocean of ravening mullahs and demagogues was slowly yielding to a story of two peoples contesting a right to the same twice-promised land.

For all these "conjunctures," as we now tend to term them, Said was almost perfectly configured. He had come from an Anglican Palestinian family that divided its time and its property between Jerusalem and Cairo. He had spent years in the internationalist atmosphere of Beirut, and was as much at home in French and English as in Arabic. A favorite of Lionel Trilling's, he had won high distinction at Columbia University and was also up to concert standard as a pianist. Those Americans who subliminally associated the word "Palestinian" with swarthinness, bizarre headgear, and

strange irredentist rhetoric were in for a shock that was long overdue. And this is to say little enough about his wit, his curiosity, his care for the opinions of others.

Within two years he had published *Orientalism*: a book that has exerted a galvanizing influence throughout the quarter century separating its first from its most recent edition. In these pages Said characterized Western scholarship about the East as a conscious handmaiden of power and subordination. Explorers, missionaries, archaeologists, linguists—all had been part of a colonial enterprise. To the extent that American academics now speak about the “appropriation” of other cultures, and seldom fail to put ordinary words such as “the Other” between portentous quotation marks, and contest the very notion of objective inquiry, they are paying what they imagine is a debt to Edward Said’s work. It isn’t unfair to the book, I hope, to say that it also received a tremendous charge from the near simultaneous revolution in Iran and the later assassination of Anwar Sadat. The alleged “Westernization” or “modernization” of two ancient civilizations, Persia and Egypt, had proved to be founded upon, well ... sand. The word of the traditional policy intellectuals and Middle East “experts” turned out to be worth less than naught. Although this book said little on the subject of either Iran or Sadat, it burst on the knowledge-seeking general reader even as it threw down a challenge to the think tanks and professional institutes.

To be appraised properly, *Orientalism* ought to be read alongside three other books by Said: *Covering Islam* (1981), *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), and *Out of Place* (1999). The last of these is a memoir, which was the target of a number of scurrilous attacks essentially aimed at denying Said the right to call himself a Palestinian at all. The first is an assault on the generally lazy press coverage of the Iranian Revolution and of all matters concerned with Islam. *Culture and Imperialism* is a collection of essays showing that Said has a deep understanding, amounting at times to sympathy, for the work of writers such as Austen and Kipling and George Eliot, who—outward appearances notwithstanding—never did take “the Orient” for granted.

In scrutinizing instances of translation and interpretation, the inescapable question remains the same: Who is interpreting what and to whom? It is easy enough to say that Westerners had long been provided with an exotic, sumptuous, but largely misleading account of the Orient, whether supplied by Benjamin Disraeli’s Suez Canal share purchases, the celluloid phantasms of Rudolph Valentino, or the torrid episodes in T. E. Lawrence’s *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. But it is also true that Arab, Indian, Malay, and Iranian societies can operate on a false if not indeed deluded view of “the West.” This much became vividly evident very recently, with the circulation of bizarre libels about (say) a Jewish plot to destroy the World Trade Center. I, for one, do not speak or read Arabic, and have made only five, relatively short, visits to Iraq. But I am willing to bet that I know more about Mesopotamia than Saddam Hussein ever knew about England, France, or the United States. I also think that such knowledge as I have comes from more disinterested sources ... And I would add that Saddam Hussein was better able to force himself on my attention than I ever was to force myself on his. As Adonis, the great Syrian-Lebanese poet, has warned us, there exists

a danger in too wrong a counter- position between “East” and “West.” The “West” has its intellectual and social troughs, just as the “East” has its pinnacles. Not only is this true now (Silicon Valley could hardly run without the work of highly skilled Indians, for example), but it was true when Arab scholars in Baghdad and Córdoba recovered the lost work of Aristotle for medieval “Christendom.”

Cultural-political interaction, then, must be construed as dialectical. Edward Said was in a prime position to be a “negotiator” here. In retrospect, however, it can be argued that he chose a one-sided approach and employed rather a broad brush: “Without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period.” (“Produce,” as in “cultural production,” has become one of the key words of the post-Foucault academy.) In this analysis every instance of European curiosity about the East, from Flaubert to Marx, was part of a grand design to exploit and remake what Westerners saw as a passive, rich, but ultimately contemptible “Oriental” sphere.

That there is undeniable truth to this it would be idle to dispute. Lord Macaulay, for example, was a near perfect illustration of the sentence (which occurs in Disraeli’s novel *Tancred*) “The East is a career.” He viewed the region both as a barbarous source of potential riches and as a huge tract in pressing need of civilization. But in that latter respect he rather echoed the feeling of his fellow Victorian Karl Marx, who thought that the British had brought modernity to India in the form of printing presses, railways, the telegraph, and steamship contact with other cultures. Marx didn’t believe that they had done this out of the kindness of their hearts. “England, it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindustan was actuated only by the vilest interests,” he wrote, “... but that is not the question. The question is, can mankind fulfill its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia?” To the extent that empire licensed this, Marx reasoned, one was entitled to exclaim, with Goethe,

Should this torture then torment us
Since it brings us greater pleasure?
Were not through the rule of Timur
Souls devoured without measure?

Said spent a lot of time “puzzling” (his word) over Marx’s ironies here: How could a man of professed human feeling justify conquest and exploitation? The evident answer—that conquest furnished an alternative to the terrifying serfdom and stagnation of antiquity, and that creation can take a destructive form—need have nothing to do with what Said calls “the old inequality between East and West.” (The Roman invasion of Britain was also “progress,” if the word has any meaning.) Moreover, Marxism in India has often been a strong force for secular government and “nation building,” whereas Marxism in China has led by a bloody and contradictory route to a highly dynamic capitalist revolution. To discount all this, as Said did, as a “Romantic Orien-

talist vision” (and to simply omit the printing press, the railways, and the rest of it) is to miss the point in a near heroic way.

The lines from Goethe are taken from his *Westöstlicher Diwan*, one of the most meticulous and respectful considerations of the Orient we have. And Said’s critics from the conservative side, notably his archenemy Bernard Lewis, have reproached him for leaving German Orientalism out of his account. This is a telling omission, they charge, because Oriental scholarship in Germany, although of an unexampled breadth and splendor, was not put to the service of empire and conquest and annexation. That being so, they argue, what remains of Said’s general theory? His reply deals only with the academic aspect of the question: Goethe and Schlegel, he responds, relied on books and collections already made available by British and French imperial expeditions. It might be more exact to point out, as against both Lewis and Said, that Germany did have an imperial project. Kaiser Wilhelm II visited Damascus and paid for the restoration of the tomb of Saladin. A *Drang nach Osten* (“drive to the East”) was proposed, involving the stupendous scheme of a Berlin-to-Baghdad railway. German imperial explorers and agents were to be found all over the region in the late nineteenth century and up to 1914 and beyond. But of course they were doing all this work in the service of another, allied empire—a Turkish and Islamic one. And that same empire was to issue a call for jihad, against Britain and on the side of Germany, in 1914. (The best literary evocation of this extraordinary moment is still *Greenmantle*, written by that veteran empire-builder John Buchan.) However, the inclusion of this important episode would tell against both Said, who doesn’t really allow for Muslim or Turkish imperialism, and Lewis, who has always been rather an apologist for the Turks. Osama bin Laden, as we must always remember, began his jihad as an explicit attempt to restore the vanished caliphate that once ran the world of Islam from the shores of the Bosphorus. As we often forget, Prussian militarism was his co-sufferer in this pang of loss.

Among Edward Said’s considerable advantages are that he knows very well who John Buchan was and that he, Said, was educated at St. George’s, an Anglican establishment in Jerusalem, and also at a colonial mock-English private school, Victoria College, in Cairo. (One of the head boys was Omar Sharif.) There were some undoubtedly penitential aspects to this, recounted with dry humor in his memoir, but they have helped him to be an “outsider” and an exile in several different countries and cultures, including the Palestine of his birth. When he addresses the general Arab audience, he makes admirable use of this duality or multiplicity. In his columns in the Egyptian paper *Al-Ahram* he is scornful and caustic about the failures and disgraces of Arab and Muslim society, and was being so before the celebrated recent United Nations Development Programme report on self-imposed barriers to Arab development, which was written by, among others, his friend Clovis Maksoud. Every year more books are translated and published in Athens than in all the Arab capitals combined. Where is there a decent Arab university? Where is there a “transparent” Arab election? Why does Arab propaganda resort to such ugliness and hysteria?

Much of secular Arab nationalism was led and developed by Europeanized Christians, often Greek Orthodox, whereas much of atavistic Islamic jihad-ism relies on anti-Jewish fabrications produced in the lower reaches of the Tsarist Russian Orthodox police state. Said has a fairly exact idea of the traffic between the two worlds, and of what is and is not of value. He is a source of stern admonition to the uncritical, insulated Arab elites and intelligentsia. But for some reason—conceivably connected to his status as an exile—he cannot allow that direct Western engagement in the region is legitimate.

This might be a narrowly defensible position if direct Islamist interference in Western life and society had not become such a factor. When *Orientalism* was first published, the Shah was still a gendarme for American capital in Iran, and his rule was so exorbitantly cruel and corrupt that millions of secularists were willing to make what they hoped was a temporary alliance with Khomeini in order to get rid of it. Today Iranian mullahs are enriching uranium and harboring fugitive bin Ladenists (the slaughterers of their Shia co-religionists in Afghanistan and Pakistan) while students in Tehran risk their lives to demonstrate with pro-American slogans.

How does Said, in his introduction to the new edition of *Orientalism*, deal with this altered and still protean reality? He begins by admitting the self-evident, which is that “neither the term Orient nor the concept of the West has any ontological stability; each is made up of human effort, partly affirmation, partly identification of the Other.” Fair enough. He adds, “That these supreme fictions lend themselves easily to manipulation and the organization of collective passion has never been more evident than in our time, when the mobilizations of fear, hatred, disgust and resurgent self-pride and arrogance—much of it having to do with Islam and the Arabs on one side, ‘we’ Westerners on the other—are very large-scale enterprises.”

This is composed with a certain obliqueness, which may be accidental, but I can’t discover that it really means to say that there are delusions on “both” these ontologically nonexistent sides. A few sentences further on we read of “the events of September 11 and their aftermath in the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq.” Again, if criticism of both sides is intended (and I presume that it is), it comes served in highly discrepant portions. There’s no quarrel with the view that “events” occurred on September 11, 2001; but that the military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq were wars “against” either country is subject to debate. A professor of English appreciates the distinction, does he not? Or does he, like some puerile recent “activists” (and some less youthful essayists, including Gore Vidal), think that the United States could not wait for a chance to invade Afghanistan in order to build a pipeline across it? American *Orientalism* doesn’t seem that restless from where I sit; it asks only that Afghans leave it alone.

Misgivings on this point turn into serious doubts when one gets to the next paragraph: “In the U.S., the hardening of attitudes, the tightening of the grip of demeaning generalization and triumphalist cliché, the dominance of crude power allied with simplistic contempt for dissenters and ‘others,’ has found a fitting correlative in the looting, pillaging and destruction of Iraq’s libraries and museums.”

Here, for some reason, “other” is represented lowercase. But there can’t be much doubt as to meaning. The American forces in Baghdad set themselves to annihilate Iraq’s cultural patrimony. Can Said mean to say this? Well, he says it again a few lines further on, when he asserts that current Western policy amounts to “power acting through an expedient form of knowledge to assert that this is the Orient’s nature, and we must deal with it accordingly.”

In the process the uncountable sediments of history, which include innumerable histories and a dizzying variety of peoples, languages, experiences, and cultures, all these are swept aside or ignored, relegated to the sand heap along with the treasures ground into meaningless fragments that were taken out of Baghdad’s libraries and museums. My argument is that history is made by men and women, just as it can also be unmade and re-written, always with various silences and elisions, always with shapes imposed and disfigurements tolerated, so that “our” East, “our” Orient, becomes “ours” to possess and direct.

This passage is rescued from sheer vulgarity only by its incoherence. The sole testable proposition (or nontautology) is the fantastic allegation that American forces powdered the artifacts of the Iraq museum in order to show who was boss. And the essential emptiness of putting the “our” in quotation marks, with its related insistence on possession and appropriation, is nakedly revealed thereby. We can be empirically sure of four things: that by design the museums and libraries of Baghdad survived the earlier precision bombardment without a scratch or a splinter; that much of the looting and desecration occurred before coalition forces had complete control of the city; that no looting was committed by U.S. soldiers; and that the substantial reconstitution of the museum’s collection has been undertaken by the occupation authorities, and their allies among Iraqi dissidents, with considerable care and scruple. This leaves only two arguable questions: How much more swiftly might the coalition troops have moved to protect the galleries and shelves? And how are we to divide the responsibility for desecration and theft between Iraqi officials and Iraqi mobs? The depravity of both is, to be sure, partly to be blamed on the Saddam regime; would it be too “Orientalist” to go any further?

I said earlier that I wondered whether Said was affected, in this direly excessive rhetoric, by his role as an exile. I am moved to ask again by his repeated and venomous attacks on Ahmed Chalabi and Kanan Makiya, Iraqi oppositionists denounced by him, in effect, for living in the West and being expatriates. Never mind that this is a tactical trope of which Said should obviously beware. The existence of such men suggests to me, in contrast, that there is every hope of cultural and political cross-pollination between the Levant, the Orient, the Near East, the Middle East, Western Asia (whatever name you may choose to give it), and the citizens of the Occident, the North, the metropole. In recent arguments in Washington about democracy and self-determination and pluralism, it seemed to me that the visiting Iraqi and Kurdish activists had a lot more to teach than to learn.

At that same far-off and long-ago conference in Cyprus, so near to the old Crusader fortresses of Farnagusta, Kantara, and St. Hilarion, I also had the good fortune to encounter Sir Steven Runciman, whose history of the Crusades is an imperishable work, because it demonstrates that medieval Christian fundamentalism not only constituted a menace to Islamic civilization but also directly resulted in the sack of Byzantium, the retardation of Europe, and the massacre of the Jews. It is desirable that the opponents of today's fanaticisms be as cool and objective in their recognition of a common enemy, and it is calamitous that one who had that opportunity should have chosen to miss it.

(The Atlantic, September 2003)

The Swastika and the Cedar

AS ARAB THOROUGHFARES GO, Hamra Street in the center of Beirut is probably the most chic of them all. International in flavor, cosmopolitan in character, it boasts the sort of smart little café where a Lebanese sophisticate can pause between water-skiing in the Mediterranean in the morning and snow-skiing in the mountains just above the city in the afternoon. "The Paris of the Middle East" used to be the cliché about Beirut: By that exacting standard, I suppose, Hamra Street would be the Boulevard Saint-Germain.

Not at all the sort of place you would expect to find a spinning red swastika on prominent display. Yet, as I strolled in company along Hamra on a sunny Valentine's Day last February, in search of a trinket for the beloved and perhaps some stout shoes for myself, a swastika was just what I ran into. I recognized it as the logo of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, a Fascist organization (it would be more honest if it called itself "National Socialist") that yells for a "Greater Syria" comprising all of Lebanon, Israel/Palestine, Cyprus, Jordan, Kuwait, Iraq, and swaths of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt. It's one of the suicide-bomber front organizations—the other one being Hezbollah, or "the party of god"—through which Syria's Baathist dictatorship exerts overt and covert influence on Lebanese affairs.

Well, call me old-fashioned if you will, but I have always taken the view that swastika symbols exist for one purpose only—to be defaced. Telling my two companions to hold on for a second, I flourish my trusty felt-tip and begin to write some offensive words on the offending poster. I say "begin" because I have barely gotten to the letter k in a well-known transitive verb when I am grabbed by my shirt collar by a venomous little thug, his face glittering with hysterical malice. With his other hand, he is speed-dialing for backup on his cell phone. As always with episodes of violence, things seem to slow down and quicken up at the same time: the eruption of mayhem in broad daylight happening with the speed of lightning yet somehow held in freeze-frame. It becomes evident, as the backup arrives, that this gang wants to take me away.

I am as determined as I can be that I am not going to be stuffed into the trunk of some car and borne off to a private dungeon (as has happened to friends of mine

in Beirut in the past). With my two staunch comrades I approach a policeman whose indifference seems well-nigh perfect. We hail a cab and start to get in, but one of our assailants gets in also, and the driver seems to know intimidation only too well when he sees it. We retreat to a stretch of sidewalk outside a Costa café, and suddenly I am sprawled on the ground, having been hit from behind, and someone is putting the leather into my legs and flanks. At this point the crowd in the café begins to shout at the hoodlums, which unnerves them long enough for us to stop another cab and pull away. My shirt is spattered with blood, but I'm in no pain yet: The nastiest moment is just ahead of me. As the taxi accelerates, a face looms at the open window and a fist crashes through and connects with my cheekbone. The blow isn't so hard, but the contorted, glaring, fanatical face is a horror show, a vision from hell. It's like looking down a wobbling gun barrel, or into the eyes of a torturer. I can see it still.

And—though I suppose in a way that I did “ask for it”—this can happen on a sunny Saturday afternoon on the main avenue, on a block which I later learned has been living in fear of the S.S.N.P. for some time. In the morning, though, I had been given a look at a much more heartening version of “the Arab street.” Valentine's Day was the fourth anniversary of the assassination, by a car bomb of military-industrial grade and strength, of the immensely popular former prime minister Rafik Hariri. A hero to millions of Lebanese for his astonishing rebuilding of the country (admittedly by his own construction consortium) after fifteen years of civil war, he became a hero twice over when he resisted Syrian manipulation of Lebanese politics. (The statistical connection between that political position and the probability of death by car bomb is something I'll come to.)

Martyrs' Square, the huge open space in downtown Beirut, dominated by the finest imaginable Virgin Megastore and by a brand-new sandstone mosque in the Turkish style commissioned by Rafik Hariri, was absolutely thronged by a crowd of hundreds of thousands. Although it was a commemorative event, there were no signs of the phenomena that the media have taught us to expect when death is the subject in the Middle East. That is to say, there were no hoarse calls for martyrdom and revenge, no ululating women or children wearing suicide-bomber shrouds, no firing into the air or coffins tossing on a sea of hysterical zealotry. As I made my way through the packed crowd I wondered why it seemed somehow familiar. It came to me that the atmosphere of my hometown of Washington on the day of Obama's inauguration had been a bit like this: a huge and unwieldy but good-natured celebration of democracy and civil society.

Lebanon is the most plural society in the region, and the “March 14” coalition, the group of parties that leads the current government, essentially represents the Sunnis, the Christians, the Druze (a tribe and creed unique to the region), and the Left. Hezbollah has a partial stranglehold on the Shiite community but by no means a monopoly, and one of the speakers at the rally was a Shiite member of Parliament, Bassem Sabaa, who argued very strongly that Arab grievances against Israel should not excuse Arab-on-Arab oppression. Almost nobody displayed any religious emblem,

and even the few who did were usually careful to put it next to the ubiquitous cedar-symbol flag of Lebanon itself. Women with head covering were few; women with face covering were nowhere to be seen. Designer jeans were the predominant fashion theme. Eclectic musical choices came over the loudspeakers. The average age was low. Nobody had been bused in, at least not by the state. Nobody had been told to leave work and demonstrate his or her loyalty. You get my drift.

This is the way that Lebanon could be: a microcosm of the Middle East where ethnic and confessional differences are resolved by Federalism and by elections. But there is a dark, supervising power that keeps the process under surveillance, and then alters the odds by selecting some actors for abrupt removal. As Omar Khayyám unforgettably puts it in his *Rubáiyát*:

'Tis all a Checker-board of Nights and Days
Where Destiny with Men for Pieces plays:
Hither and thither moves, and mates, and slays,
And one by one back in the Closet lays.

If you want to replace the word “Destiny” with a more modern term, you might get a hint from a banner that was displayed after the murder of Rafik Hariri. SYRIAL KILLERS, it read, simply. The street reaction to the murder of Rafik Hariri was so intense that it led to the passage of a United Nations resolution mandating the withdrawal of the Syrian Army from Lebanon after almost three decades of occupation. However, it remains the case that those who inconvenience Syria by their criticisms are bad liabilities from the life-insurance point of view. Since somebody’s car bomb killed Hariri and twenty-two others, somebody has killed Samir Kassir and Gibran Tueni, two of the bravest journalists and editors at the independent newspaper *An-Nahar* (The Day). Somebody has killed Pierre Gemayel, a leader of the country’s Maronite Catholic community. Somebody has killed George Hawi, a former leader of the Lebanese Communist Party. Somebody has killed Captain Wissam Eid, a senior police intelligence officer in the investigation of the Hariri murder. The murders of these Lebanese patriots, and four others of nearly equal prominence, were all highly professional explosive-charge or hitsquad jobs, and their victims all had one, and only one, thing in common. In a highly unusual resolution, the United Nations has established a tribunal to inquire into the Hariri murder and its ramifications, four Lebanese former generals with ties to Syria have been arrested on suspicion, and an office in The Hague has already begun the preliminary proceedings. This investigation will condition the circumstances under which the next Middle East war—involving Israel, Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah—will take place on Lebanese soil.

Officially removed from that soil, Syria continues to manipulate by proxies and by surrogates. One of its projections of power is the S.S.N.P., the Christian Orthodox Fascist group with which I tangled (and which is thought to have provided the muscle in some of the above-mentioned assassinations). Another, which is also part of the shadow thrown on Lebanon by Iran, is Hezbollah. Two days after the anti-Syrian rally, I journeyed to the Dahiyeh area of southern Beirut, where the “party of god” was

commemorating its own martyrs. This is the distinctly less chic Shiite quarter of the city, rebuilt in part with Iranian money after Israel pounded it to rubble in the war of 2006, and it's the power base of Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, the brilliant politician who is Hezbollah's leader.

The contrast between the two rallies could not have been greater. Try picturing a Shiite-Muslim megachurch in a huge downtown tent, with separate entrances for men and women and separate seating (with the women all covered in black). A huge poster of a nuclear mushroom cloud surmounts the scene, with the inscription OH ZIONISTS, IF YOU WANT THIS TYPE OF WAR THEN SO BE IT! During the warm-up, an onstage Muslim Milli Vanilli orchestra and choir lipsynchs badly to a repetitive, robotic music video that shows lurid scenes of martyrdom and warfare. There is keening and wailing, while the aisles are patrolled by gray-uniformed male stewards and black-chador'd crones. Key words keep repeating themselves with thumping effect: shahid (martyr), jihad (holy war), yehud (Jew). In the special section for guests there sits a group of uniformed and bemedaled officials representing the Islamic Republic of Iran. I remember what Walid Jumblatt, the leader of the Progressive Socialist Party and also the leader of the Druze community—some of my best friends are Druze—said to me a day or so previously: "Hezbollah is not just a party. It is a state within our state." It is also the projection of another state.

This glum, dark, regimented, organized event is in the boldest possible contrast to the color and informality and spontaneity of the Valentine's Day rally. On that occasion, all the speakers limited themselves to about 10 minutes each. No such luck for the attendees of the Hezbollah phalanx: When Sheikh Nasrallah eventually appears in his black turban (via video link) he allows himself an oration of Castroesque length, and was still visible and going strong on Hezbollah's TV station by the time I'd tired of him and gotten all the way back to my hotel.

"Lebanon is the template and the cockpit of the region," said Saad Hariri, his father's successor, at a dinner the night before I left. "Anyone who wants to deliver a message in the Middle East sends it first to Beirut." He was right. The new and dearly bought independence of the country is being ground between the upper and nether millstones of the Iran-Syria-Hamas-Hezbollah axis and the stubborn, intransigent southern frontier of the Israeli-Palestinian quarrel: the stark contours of the next Middle East combat. The whole place has an ominously pre-war feeling to it, as if the dress rehearsals are almost over. But we have a tendency to use the term "Arab street" as if it meant the same as anti-Western religious frenzy. (I think of the brutes who nearly abducted me, but I also remember those passersby who protested at the thuggery.) What I learned from my three street encounters in Beirut was that there is more than one version of that "street," and that the street itself is not by any means one-way.

(Vanity Fair, May 2009)

Holiday in Iraq

LAST SUMMER, you may have been among the astonished viewers of American television who were treated to a series of commercials from a group calling itself “Kurdistan—The Other Iraq.” These rather touching and artless little spots (theotheriraq.com) urged you to consider investing in business, and even made you ponder taking your vacation, in the country’s three northern provinces. Mr. Jon Stewart, of *The Daily Show*, could hardly believe his luck. To lampoon the ads, and to say, in effect, “Yeah, right—holiday in Iraq,” was probably to summarize the reaction of much of the audience. Sure, baby, come to sunny Mesopotamia, and bring the family, and get your ass blown off while religious wack jobs ululate gleefully over your remains.

Well, as it happens, I decided to check this out, and did spend most of the Christmas holiday in Iraqi Kurdistan, bringing my son along with me, and had a perfectly swell time. We didn’t make any investments, though I would say that the hotel and tourism and oil sectors are wide open for enterprise, but we did visit the ancient citadel in Erbil, where Alexander the Great defeated the Persians—my son is a Greek-speaking classicist—and we did sample the lovely mountains and lakes and rivers that used to make this region the resort area for all Iraqis. Air and road travel were easy (you can now fly direct from several airports in Europe to one of two efficient airports in Iraqi Kurdistan), and walking anywhere at night in any Kurdish town is safer than it is in many American cities. The police and soldiers are all friendly locals, there isn’t a coalition soldier to be seen, and there hasn’t been a suicide attack since May of 2005.

It wasn’t my first trip. That took place in 1991, in the closing stages of the Gulf War. With a guerrilla escort, I crossed illegally into Iraq from Turkey and toured the shattered and burned and poisoned landscape on which Saddam Hussein had imprinted himself. In the town of Halabja, which has now earned its gruesome place in history, I met people whose hideous wounds from chemical bombardment were still suppurating. The city of Qala Diza had been thoroughly dynamited and bulldozed, and looked like an irretrievable wreck. Much of the area’s lavish tree cover had been deforested: The bare plains were dotted with forbidding concrete barracks into which Kurds had been forcibly “relocated” or (a more accurate word) “concentrated.” Nearly 200,000 people had been slaughtered, and millions more deported: huddling in ruins or packed into fetid camps on the Turkish and Iranian frontiers. To turn a spade was to risk uncovering a mass grave. All of Iraq suffered terribly during those years, but its Kurdish provinces were among the worst places in the entire world—a howling emptiness of misery where I could catch, for the first time in my life, the actual scent of evil as a real force on earth.

Thus, I confess to a slight lump in the throat at revisiting the area and seeing thriving, humming towns with multiplying construction sites, billboards for overseas companies, Internet cafés, and a choice of newspapers. It’s even reassuring to see the knockoff “MaDonal,” with pseudo-golden arches, in the eastern city of Sulaimaniya, soon to be the site of the American University of Iraq, which will be offering not only

an M.B.A. course but also, in the words of Azzam Alwash, one of its directors, “the ideas of Locke, the ideas and writings of Paine and Madison.” Everybody knows how to snigger when you mention Jeffersonian democracy and Iraq in the same breath; try sniggering when you meet someone who is trying to express these ideas in an atmosphere that only a few years ago was heavy with miasmatic decay and the reek of poison gas.

While I am confessing, I may as well make a clean breast of it. Thanks to the reluctant decision of the first President Bush and Secretary of State James Baker, those fresh princes of “realism,” the United States and Britain, placed an aerial umbrella over Iraqi Kurdistan in 1991 and detached it from the death grip of Saddam Hussein. Under the protective canopy of the no-fly zone—actually it was also called the “you-fly-you-die zone”—an embryonic free Iraq had a chance to grow. I was among those who thought and believed and argued that this example could, and should, be extended to the rest of the country; the cause became a consuming thing in my life. To describe the resulting shambles as a disappointment or a failure or even a defeat would be the weakest statement I could possibly make: It feels more like a sick, choking nightmare of betrayal from which there can be no awakening. Yet Kurdistan continues to demonstrate how things could have been different, and it isn’t a place from which the West can simply walk away.

In my hometown of Washington, D.C., it’s too easy to hear some expert hold forth about the essential character of any stricken or strategic country. (Larry McMurtry, in his novel *Cadillac Jack*, has a lovely pastiche of Joseph Alsop doing this very act about Yemen.) I had lived here for years and suffered through many Georgetown post-dinner orations until someone supplied me with the unfailing antidote to such punditry. It comes from Stephen Potter, the author of *Lifemanship*, *One-upmanship*, and other classics. Wait until the old bore has finished his exposition, advised Potter, then pounce forward and say in a plonking register, “Yes, but not in the South?” You will seldom if ever be wrong, and you will make the expert perspire. Different as matters certainly are in the South of Iraq, the thing to stress is how different, how very different, they are in the North.

In Kurdistan, to take a few salient examples, there is a memorial of gratitude being built for fallen American soldiers. “We are planning,” said the region’s prime minister, Nechirvan Barzani, in his smart new office in the Kurdish capital of Erbil, “to invite their relatives to the unveiling.” Speaking of unveiling, you see women with headscarfs on the streets and in offices (and on the judicial bench and in Parliament, which reserves a quarter of the seats for women by law), but you never see a face or body enveloped in a burka. The majority of Kurds are Sunni, and the minority are Shiite, with large groups belonging to other sects and confessions, but there is no intercommunal mayhem. Liquor stores and bars are easy to find, sometimes operated by members of the large and unmolested Christian community. On the university campuses, you may easily meet Arab Iraqis who have gladly fled Baghdad and Basra for this safe haven. I know of more than one intrepid Western reporter who has done the same. The approaches

from the south are patrolled by very effective and battle-hardened Kurdish militiamen, who still carry the proud title of their guerrilla days: the peshmerga, or, translated from the Kurdish language, “those who face death.” These men have a very brusque way with al-Qaeda and its local supporters, and have not just kept them at a distance but subjected them to very hot pursuit. (It was Kurdish intelligence that first exposed the direct link between the psychopathic Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and Osama bin Laden.) Of the few divisions of the Iraqi Army that are considered even remotely reliable, the bulk are made up of tough Kurdish volunteers.

Pause over that latter point for a second. Within recent memory, the Kurdish population of Iraq was being subjected to genocidal cleansing. Given the chance to leave the failed state altogether, why would they not take it? Yet today, the president of Iraq, Jalal Talabani, is a Kurd: a former guerrilla leader so genial and humane that he personally opposed the execution of Saddam Hussein. Of the very few successful or effective ministries in Baghdad, such as the Foreign Ministry, it is usually true that a Kurd, such as Hoshiyar Zebari, is at the head of it. The much-respected deputy prime minister (and moving spirit of the American University in Sulaimaniya), Dr. Barham Salih, is a Kurd. He put it to me very movingly when I flew down to Baghdad to talk to him: “We are willing to fight and sacrifice for a democratic Iraq. And we were the ones to suffer the most from the opposite case. If Iraq fails, it will not be our fault.”

President Talabani might only be the “president of the Green Zone,” as his friends sometimes teasingly say, but he disdains to live in that notorious enclave. He is now seventy-three years of age and has a rather Falstaffian appearance—everyone refers to him as “Mam Jalal” or “Uncle Jalal”—but this is nonetheless quite a presidential look, and he has spent much of his life on the run, or in exile, or in the mountains, and survived more dangerous times than these. You may choose to call today’s suicide murderers and video beheaders and power-drill torturers by the name “insurgents,” but he has the greater claim to have led an actual armed resistance that did not befoul itself by making war on civilians. In Baghdad, he invited me to an impressively heavy lunch in the house once occupied by Saddam Hussein’s detested, late half-brother Barzan al-Tikriti, where I shared the table with grizzled Kurdish tribal leaders, and as the car bombs thumped across the city I realized how he could afford to look so assured and confident, and to flourish a Churchill-size postprandial cigar. To be chosen by the Iraqi Parliament as the country’s first-ever elected president might be one thing, and perhaps a dubious blessing. But to be the first Kurd to be the head of an Arab state was quite another. When he was elected, spontaneous celebrations by Kurds in Iran and Syria broke out at once, and often had to be forcibly repressed by their respective dictators. To put it pungently, the Kurds have now stepped onto the stage of Middle Eastern history, and it will not be easy to push them off it again. You may easily murder a child, as the parties of god prove every single day, but you cannot make a living child grow smaller.

I got a whiff of this intoxicating “birth of a nation” emotion when I flew back with Talabani from Baghdad to his Kurdish home base of Sulaimaniya. Here, as in the other

Kurdish center, in Erbil, the airport gives the impression of belonging to an independent state. There are protocol officers, official limousines, and all the appurtenances of autonomy. Iraq's constitution specifies that Kurdistan is entitled to its own regional administration, and the inhabitants never miss a chance to underline what they have achieved. (The Iraqi flag, for example, is not much flown in these latitudes. Instead, the golden Kurdish sunburst emblem sits at the center of a banner of red, white, and green.) Most inspiring of all, perhaps, is Kurdish Airlines, which can take a pilgrim to the hajj or fly home a returning refugee without landing at another Iraqi airport. Who would have believed, viewing the moonscape of Kurdistan in 1991, that these ground-down people would soon have their own airline?

The Kurds are the largest nationality in the world without a state of their own. The King of Bahrain has, in effect, his own seat at the United Nations, but the 25 million or so Kurds do not. This is partly because they are cursed by geography, with their ancestral lands located at the point where the frontiers of Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria converge. It would be hard to imagine a less promising neighborhood for a political experiment. In Iraq, the more than four million Kurds make up just under a quarter of the population. The proportion in Turkey is more like 20 percent, in Iran 10 percent, and in Syria perhaps nine. For centuries, this people's existence was folkloric and marginal, and confined to what one anthropologist called "the Lands of Insolence": the inaccessible mountain ranges and high valleys that bred warriors and rebels. A fierce tribe named the Karduchoi makes an appearance in Xenophon's history of the events of 400 B.C. Then there is mainly silence until a brilliant Kurdish commander named Salah al-Din (Saladin to most) emerges in the twelfth century to unite the Muslim world against the Crusaders. He was born in Tikrit, later the hometown of Saddam Hussein. This is apt, because Saddam actually was the real father of Kurdish nationhood. By subjecting the Kurds to genocide he gave them a solidarity they had not known before, and compelled them to create a fierce and stubborn resistance, with its own discipline and army. By laying waste to their ancient villages and farms, furthermore, he forced them into urban slums and refugee centers where they became more integrated, close-knit, and socialized: historically always the most revolutionary point in the emergence of any nationalism.

"The state of Iraq is not sacred," remarked Dr. Mohammad Sadik as we drove through Erbil to his office at Salahaddin University, of which he is president. "It was not created by god. It was created by Winston Churchill." Cobbled together out of the post-1918 wreckage of the Ottoman Empire, Iraq as a state was always crippled by the fact that it contained a minority population that owed it little if any loyalty. And now this state has broken down, and is breaking up. The long but unstable and unjust post-Ottoman compromise has been irretrievably smashed by the American-led invasion. Of the three contending parties in Iraq, only the Kurds now have a serious Plan B. They had a head start, by escaping twelve years early from Saddam's festering prison state. They have done their utmost to be friendly brokers between the Sunni and Shiite Arabs, but if the country implodes, they can withdraw to their oil-rich enclave

and muster under their own flag. There is no need to romanticize the Kurds: They have their own history of clan violence and cruelty. But this flag at present represents the closest approximation to democracy and secularism that the neighborhood can boast.

Americans have more responsibility here than most of us are aware of. It was President Woodrow Wilson, after the First World War, who inscribed the idea of self-determination for the Kurds in the 1920 Treaty of Sevres, a document that all Kurds can readily cite. Later machinations by Britain and France and Turkey, all of them greedy for the oil in the Kurdish provinces, cheated the Kurds of their birthright and shoehorned them into Iraq. More recently, the Ford-Kissinger administration encouraged the Kurds to rebel against Baghdad, offering blandishments of greater autonomy, and then cynically abandoned them in 1975, provoking yet another refugee crisis and a terrible campaign of reprisal by Saddam Hussein. In 1991, George Bush Sr. went to war partly in the name of Kurdish rights and then chose to forget his own high-toned rhetoric. This, too, is a story that every Kurd can tell you. However the fate of Iraq is to be decided, we cannot permit another chapter in this record of betrayal. Meanwhile, you should certainly go and see it for yourself, and also shed a tear for what might have been.

(Vanity Fair, April 2007)

Tunisia: At the Desert's Edge

IF WE ALL INDEED come from Africa, then the very idea of Africa itself comes from the antique northern coast of that great landmass, where the cosmology is subtly different and where the inhabitants look north to Europe and southward at the Sahara. Here was the mighty civilization known as Carthage, which came as close as possible to reversing what we think of as the course of "history" and conquering Europe from Africa instead of the other way around. With its elephants and armies, and under the brilliant generalship of Hannibal, it penetrated all the way through Spain and France and down over the Alps onto the smiling northern plains of Italy. Not even the later Muslim conquests, which surged out of the Arabian Desert and along northern Africa and across the Strait of Gibraltar, ever got so far. After Rome took its revenge and deleted Carthage from the historical page a hundred and forty-six years before Christ—as I was told by the Tunisian archaeologist Nequib Ben Lazuz as we sat in the shadow of the magnificent Roman amphitheater of El Djem—it cast around for a name to call its new colony.

The most imposing local people were the Afri, a Berber tribe in the northeastern quarter of what is now Tunisia. And the new province of "Africa," or "Ifriqiyyah," as its later, Muslim rulers were to call it, was sophisticated enough to give its title to a continent. There were Roman emperors—such as Septimius Severus—of African descent. In the eighth book of his *Natural History*, written in the first century A.D.,

Pliny the Elder made the observation, possibly borrowed from Aristotle, “*Ex Africa semper aliquid novi*” (“There is always something new out of Africa”).

And so there is. If you look at the map now, you will see that Tunisia is like a little diamond-shaped keystone, its different facets constituting a front-line territory between Europe and Africa, North and South, East and West, the desert and the sea. It was from its gorgeous city of Kairouan—the oldest Muslim city in Africa—with its huge mosque built with the pillars of Roman and Carthaginian temples, that Islam was spread to the black sub-Saharan regions of Mali and Nigeria, and also northward to the Spanish region of Andalusia. And it is here that the crosscurrents between fundamentalism and cosmopolitanism, syncretism and puritanism, are being most acutely registered. From the northern tip of Tunisia on a clear day, you can see the shimmering Italian island of Pantelleria. Spanish and French and Italian coast guards regularly pick up Africans from as far south as Guinea who have traversed the interior to launch their craft across the Mediterranean. (One of these was picked up the other day, having attempted the perilous crossing with no more than an oil-drum raft and a G.P.S. navigation system. Give that man an entry permit! We require people with such initiative.)

On the other hand, so to speak, it was in Tunisia in April 2002 that an al-Qaeda suicide murderer drove a truckload of propane up to El Ghriba, the oldest synagogue in North Africa, a little gem of a building that has been the centerpiece of an ancient Jewish community—the largest in the Muslim world—that dates back two millennia. Nineteen people, mostly German tourists, were slaughtered.

I recently made my own visit to the place, which is on the island of Djerba, where Ulysses is said to have passed his time among the lotuseaters. I was walking through the old ghetto, in which Arabs and Jews mix freely, when a series of bombs tore through cities in neighboring Morocco and Algeria, apparently to mark the fifth anniversary of this revolting crime. In January, there had been a firefight between Tunisian security forces and the newly named al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, a gang formerly known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, which joined the bin Ladenists and has apparently been granted the bearded one’s franchise. This poses a fairly stark choice. Will the northern littoral of Africa become a zone of tension, uneasily demarcating a watery yet fiery line between Europe and the southern continent? Or will it evolve into a meeting place of cultures, trading freely and cross-fertilizing the civilizations, as it did once before?

Tunisian society contains some of the answers to these questions. On the face of it, the country is one of Africa’s most outstanding success stories. In the 2006–7 World Economic Forum Global Competitiveness Report, it was ranked No. 1 in Africa for economic competitiveness, even, incidentally, outpacing three European states (Italy, Greece, and Portugal). Home ownership is 80 percent. Life expectancy, the highest on the continent, is 72. Less than 4 percent of the population is below the poverty line, and the alleviation of misery by a “solidarity fund” has been adopted by the United Nations as a model program. Nine out of ten households are connected to electricity and clean water. Tunisia is the first African state to have been accepted as an associate member

of the European Union. Its Code of Personal Status was the first in the Arab world to abolish polygamy, and the veil and the burka are never seen. More than 40 percent of the judges and lawyers are female. The country makes delicious wine and even exports it to France. The Tunisian Jews make a potent grappa out of figs, which is available as a digestif in most restaurants. There were several moments, as I was loafing around the beautiful blue-and-white seaside towns or the exquisite classical museums and ruins, when the combination of stylish females, excellent food, clean streets, smart-looking traffic cops, and cheap and efficient taxis made me feel I was in a place more upscale than many European recreational resorts and spas. I remembered what my old friend the late Edward Said had told me: “You should go to Tunisia, Christopher. It’s the gentlest country in Africa. Even the Islamists are highly civilized!”

But before I could be seduced into abject boosterism, I had a lengthy, not to say lavish, dinner with some of the country’s academics and intellectuals and writers. The atmosphere in the restaurant was quasi-Left Bank Parisian, and I think I lulled them a bit by recounting some of the Davos statistics cited above. Then I added two more. Since its independence from France, in 1956, Tunisia has had exactly two presidents, the first of whom, Habib Bourguiba, became a “president for life” before being deposed for senility and megalomania. The current ruler, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, will celebrate his twentieth year of uninterrupted power this November. At election times, he has been known to win more than 90 percent of the vote: a figure that never fails to make me nervous. I have not met the man, but within hours of landing in the country I could have passed an exam in what he looks like, because his portrait is rather widely displayed.

Well, you can say for Tunisia that people do not lower their voices or look over their shoulders (another thing that has made me nervous in my time) before discussing these questions. But the conversation still took on a slightly pained tone. Was the West—that’s me—not judging the country by rather exacting standards? To the east lay the huge territory of Libya, underdeveloped and backward and Islamized even though floating on a lake of oil, and, furthermore, governed since 1969 by a flamboyantly violent nutcase. (“We are the same people as them,” said my friend Hamid, “but they are so much en retard.”) To the west lay the enormous country of Algeria, again artificially prosperous through oil and natural gas, but recently the scene of a heinous Islamist insurgency that—along with harsh and vigorous state repression—had killed perhaps 150,000 people. Looking farther away and to the south, Sudan’s fanatical and genocidal militia, not content with what they had done in Darfur, were spreading their jihad into neighboring Chad, extending a belt of violent Islamism across the sub-Saharan zone. Increasingly, Africa was becoming the newest site of confrontation not just between Islam and other religions (as in the battle between Christian Ethiopia and Islamist Somalia, or between Islamists and Christians in Nigeria, or Islamists and Christians and animists in Sudan), but between competing versions of Islam itself. Why pick on mild Tunisia, where the coup in 1987 had been bloodless, where religious parties are forbidden, where the population grows evenly because of the availability of

contraception, where you can see male and female students holding hands and wearing blue jeans, and where thousands of Americans and more than four million Europeans take their vacations every year?

When it's put like that, who wouldn't want the alternative of an African Titoism, or perhaps an African Gaullism, where presidential rule keeps a guiding but not tyrannical hand? A country where people discuss micro-credits for small business instead of "macro" schemes such as holy war? Mr. Ben Ali does not make lengthy speeches on TV every night, or appear in gorgeously barbaric uniforms, or live in a different palace for every day of the week. Tunisia has no grandiose armed forces, the curse of the rest of the continent, feeding parasitically off the national income and rewarding their own restlessness with the occasional coup. And the country is lucky in other ways as well. Its population is a smooth blend of black and Berber and Arab, and though it proudly defends its small minorities of Shiites, Christians (Saint Augustine spent time here), Baha'is, and Jews (there is a Jewish member of the Senate), it is otherwise uniformly Sunni. It has been spared the awful toxicity of ethnic and religious rivalry, which makes it very unusual in Africa. Its international airport is named Tunis-Carthage, evoking African roots without Afrocentric demagoguery. I still could not shake the feeling that its system of government is fractionally less intelligent and risk-taking than the majority of its citizens.

However, it is not every day that you can go downtown to a university that is attached to a mosque—in this case the Zitouna, or "Olive Tree," mosque, with an old library housing thousands of ancient texts—and sit with a female professor of theology. Mongia Souaihi cheerfully explained to me the many reasons why the veil is not authorized by the Koran and why she is in danger for drawing this conclusion in print. "The fundamentalists from overseas have declared me to be kuffar—an unbeliever." This I know to be dangerous, because a Muslim who has once been declared to be an apostate is also a person who can be sentenced to death. "Which fundamentalists? And from where overseas?" "Rachid Ghannouchi, from London." Oh no, not again. If you saw my "Londonistan" essay, in the June Vanity Fair, you will know that fanatics who are unwelcome in Africa and Arabia are allowed an astonishing freedom in the United Kingdom. The leader of Ennahda, the outlawed Tunisian Islamist group, the aforesaid Mr. Ghannouchi, was until September 11, 2001, allowed to broadcast his hysterical incitements into Tunisia from a London station. "Almost everything we have worked for in this country among the young," I was told by Mounir Khelifa, a highly polished professor of English, "can be undermined by any one of a hundred satellite stations beamed into our society." I thought perhaps he was exaggerating, or perhaps feeling insecure. The Tunisian authorities sometimes give the same impression by hovering around in Internet cafés trying to invigilate what sites people are clicking on. In a society where satellite dishes are everywhere, this looks crude and old-fashioned.

So Tunisia's achievements, though real enough, are fragile. When the terrorists target tourists, they pick the economy's most vulnerable spot. (The Djerba atrocity had a real effect on that year's overall figures.) But, of course, they also isolate themselves,

first by creating poverty and unemployment and second by violating the inflexible laws of Muslim hospitality. So this is the edge of uncertain awareness on which an outwardly happy and thriving society is poised. Some way to the south of that Roman amphitheater at El Djem, you begin to hit the Sahara. It was in this imposing dune landscape that *Star Wars*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and *The English Patient* were filmed. It is also here that the desert ceaselessly, mindlessly, but somehow deliberately tries to move northward. Its rate of progress is uneven, and varies from country to country, and when you do see the Tunisian Army it is often helping in measures—of planting and irrigation—to stave off the remorseless encroachment. An enclave of development, Tunisia is menaced by the harsh extremists of a desert religion, and ultimately by the desert itself. As with everything else in Africa, this is not a contest we can view with indifference.

(Vanity Fair, July 2007)

What Happened to the Suicide bombers of Jerusalem?

IT IS SOMETIMES IMPORTANT to write about the things that are not happening and the dogs that are not barking.

To do so, of course, can provide an easy hostage to fortune, which is why a lot of columnists prefer not to risk it. For all I know, some leering fanatic is preparing to make me look silly even as I write. But I ask anyway: Whatever happened to the suicide bombers of Jerusalem?

It's not that long since the combination of self-immolation and mass murder was a regular event on Israeli soil. Different people drew radically different conclusions from the campaign, which had a nerve-racking effect not just on Israeli Jews but on Israeli Arabs and Druze—who were often among the casualties—and on visiting tourists. It was widely said by liberals, including people as eminent as Tony Blair's wife, Cherie Blair, that the real cause of such a lurid and awful tactic was despair: the reaction of a people under occupation who had no other avenue of expression for their misery and frustration.

Well, surely nobody will be so callous as to say that there is less despair among Palestinians today—especially since the terrible events in the Gaza Strip and the return to power of the Israeli right wing as well as the expansion of Jewish-zealot settler activity. And yet there is no graph on which extra despair can be shown to have eventuated in more suicide. Indeed, if there is any correlation at all, it would seem to be in reverse. How can this be?

Of the various alternative explanations, one would be the success of the wall or “fence” that Israel has built or is building, approximating but not quite conforming to the “green line” of the 1967 frontier. Another would be the ruthless campaign of

“targeted assassinations,” whereby Israeli agents took out important leaders of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, the two organizations most committed to “martyrdom operations.” A third might be the temporary truces or cease-fires to which Hamas (but not Islamic Jihad) have from time to time agreed.

But, actually, none of these would explain why the suicide campaign went into remission. Or, at least, they would not explain why it went into remission if the original cause was despair. If despair is your feeling, then nothing can stop you from blowing yourself up against the wall as a last gesture against Israeli colonial architecture. If despair dominates your psyche, then targeted assassinations of others are not going to stop you from donning the shroud and the belt and aiming yourself at paradise, even if only at a roadblock. If despair is what has invaded your mind, why on earth would you care about this or that short-term truce?

Even before the assault died away, there were good reasons to doubt that despair had been the motive or the explanation. For one thing, almost all the suicide attacks were directed at civilians in pre-1967 Israel “proper”—in other words, in the Jewish part of Jerusalem or in towns along the Israeli coastline (in one case, a hotel in Netanya on Passover). It can probably be said with some degree of confidence that nobody blows themselves up for a half-a-loaf compromise solution. These cold-blooded attacks did not just avoid well-defended West Bank settlements or Israeli army bases; they also vividly expressed the demand that all Jews leave Palestine or risk being killed. Despair cannot so easily be channeled so as to underline a strictly political/ideological objective.

Another possible reason for the slump in suicide is that those who were orchestrating it came to find that the tactic was becoming subject to diminishing returns. Despair must have meant a roughly constant stream of potential volunteers, but the immediate needs of Hamas and Islamic Jihad may not have always required the tap of despair to be left turned on. Indeed, there must have been some quite intense private discussions about how to turn it off. Not every despairing person can make, at home, the necessary belts, fuses, and lethal charges. These things require a godfather. And this, in turn, prompts the question: What will be said if or when the tap is ever turned back on? Surely it won't quite do to say that despair must have broken out all over again, though I can easily think of some fools who will be ready to say it.

There were children among the last wave of suicide-murderers, some of whom lost their nerve and surrendered at the last moment. There were also young women, some of whom, it seems, would otherwise have been killed for “honor” reasons and who were offered the relatively painless alternative of a martyr's fate. Nasty, vicious, fanatical old men, not human emotions, were making the decisions and deciding the days and the hours of death. And the hysterical ululating street celebrations when such a mission was successful did not signify despair at all but a creepy form of religious exaltation in which relatives were encouraged to make a feast out of the death of their own children as well as those of other people. To have added the promise of paradise to this pogrom is to have made spiritual and mental sickness complete; to have made it a

sexual paradise is obscene into the bargain. (Women martyrs are obviously not offered the same level of bliss and promiscuity by the Koran.)

Meanwhile, the wall still stands and grows, ironically expressing the much more banal and worldly fact that there are two peoples in Palestine and that sooner or later there will be two states as well.

(Slate, July 13, 2009)

Childhood's End: An African Nightmare

IN WILLIAM FAULKNER'S STORY "Raid," set in Alabama and Mississippi in the closing years of the Civil War, a white family becomes aware of a sudden, vast, nighttime migration through the scorched countryside. They can hear it and even smell it before they can see it; it's the black population voting with its feet and heading, so it fervently believes, for the river Jordan: "We couldn't see them and they did not see us; maybe they didn't even look, just walking fast in the dark with that panting, hurrying murmuring, going on ..."

Northern Uganda is centered on the headstreams of the Nile rather than the Jordan, and is a strange place for me to find myself put in mind of Faulkner, but every evening at dusk the main town of Gulu starts to be inundated by a mass of frightened humanity, panting, hurrying, and murmuring as it moves urgently through the crepuscular hours. Most of the "night commuters," as they are known locally, are children. They leave their outlying villages and walk as many as eight kilometers to huddle for safety in the towns. And then, in the morning, often without breakfast and often without shoes, they walk all the way back again to get to their schools and their families. That's if the former have not been burned and the latter have not been butchered. These children are not running toward Jordan and the Lord; they are running for their lives from the "Lord's Resistance Army" (L.R.A.). This grotesque, zombie-like militia, which has abducted, enslaved, and brainwashed more than 20,000 children, is a kind of Christian Khmer Rouge and has for the past nineteen years set a standard of cruelty and ruthlessness that—even in a region with a living memory of Idi Amin—has the power to strike the most vivid terror right into the heart and the other viscera.

Here's what happens to the children who can't run fast enough, or who take the risk of sleeping in their huts in the bush. I am sitting in a rehab center, talking to young James, who is eleven and looks about nine. When he actually was nine and sleeping at home with his four brothers, the L.R.A. stormed his village and took the boys away. They were roped at the waist and menaced with bayonets to persuade them to confess what they could not know—the whereabouts of the Ugandan Army's soldiers. On the subsequent forced march, James underwent the twin forms of initiation practiced by the L.R.A. He was first savagely flogged with a wire lash and then made to take part in the murder of those children who had become too exhausted to walk any farther. "First we had to watch," he says. "Then we had to join in the beatings until they died."

He was spared from having to do this to a member of his family, which is the L.R.A.'s preferred method of what it calls "registration." And he was spared from being made into a concubine or a sex slave, because the L.R.A. doesn't tolerate that kind of thing for boys. It is, after all, "faith-based." Excuse me, but it does have its standards.

Talking to James about the unimaginable ruin of his childhood, I notice that when I am speaking he stays stock-still, with something a bit dead behind his eyes. But when it comes his turn to tell his story, he immediately starts twisting about in his chair, rubbing his eyes and making waving gestures with his arms. The leader of the L.R.A., a former Catholic acolyte in his forties named Joseph Kony, who now claims to be a spirit medium with a special mission to impose the Ten Commandments, knows what old Fagin knew: that little boys are nimble and malleable if you catch them young enough, and that they make good thieves and runners. Little James was marched all the way to Sudan, whose Muslim-extremist government offers shelter and aid—such an ecumenical spirit!—to the Christian fanatics. There he was put to work stealing food from neighboring villages, and digging and grinding cassava roots. Soon enough, he was given a submachine gun almost as big as himself. Had he not escaped during an ambush, he would have gotten big enough to be given a girl as well, to do with what he liked.

I drove out of Gulu—whose approach roads can be used only in the daytime—to a refugee camp nearer the Sudanese border. A few Ugandan shillings and a few packets of cigarettes procured me a Ugandan Army escort, who sat heavily armed in the back of the pickup truck. As I buckled my seat belt, the driver told me to unbuckle it in spite of the parlous condition of the road. "If you have to jump out," he said, "you will have to jump out very fast." That didn't make me feel much safer, but only days after I left, two Ugandan aid workers were murdered in daylight on these pitted, dusty highways. We bounced along until we hit Pabbo, where a collection of huts and shanties huddle together as if for protection. In this place are packed about 59,000 of the estimated 1.5 million "internally displaced persons" (I.D.P.'s) who have sought protection from the savagery of the L.R.A. Here, I had the slightly more awkward task of interviewing the female survivors of Joseph Kony's rolling Jonestown: a campaign of horror and superstition and indoctrination.

The women of Uganda are naturally modest and reserved, and it obviously involved an effort for them to tell their stories to a male European stranger. But they stood up as straight as spears and looked me right in the eye. Forced to carry heavy loads through the bush and viciously caned—up to 250 strokes—if they dropped anything. Given as gifts or prizes to men two or three times their age and compelled to bear children. Made to watch, and to join in, sessions of hideous punishment for those who tried to escape. Rose Atim, a young woman of bronze Nubian Nefertiti beauty, politely started her story by specifying her primary-school grade (grade five) at the time of her abduction. Her nostrils still flared with indignation when she spoke, whereas one of her fellow refugees, Jane Akello, a young lady with almost anthracite skin, was dull and dead-eyed and monotonous in her delivery. I was beginning to be able to distinguish

symptoms. I felt a strong sense of indecency during these interviews, but this was mere squeamish self-indulgence on my part, since the women were anxious to relate the stories of their stolen and maimed childhoods. It was as if they had emerged from some harrowing voyage on the Underground Railroad.

Very few people, apart from his victims, have ever met or even seen the enslaving and child-stealing Joseph Kony, and the few pictures and films of him are amateur and indistinct. This very imprecision probably helps him to maintain his version of charisma. Here is what we know and (with the help of former captives and a Scotland Yard criminal profiler) what we speculate. Kony grew up in a Gulu Province village called Odek. He appointed himself the Lord's anointed prophet for the Acholi people of northern Uganda in 1987, and by the mid-nineties was receiving arms and cash from Sudan. He probably suffers from multiple-personality disorder, and he takes his dreams for prophecies. He goes into trances in which he speaks into a tape recorder and plays back the resulting words as commands. He has helped himself to about 50 captives as "wives," claiming Old Testament authority for this (King Solomon had 700 spouses), often insisting—partly for biblical reasons and partly for the more banal reason of AIDS dread—that they be virgins. He used to anoint his followers with a holy oil mashed from indigenous shea-butter nuts, and now uses "holy water," which he tells his little disciples will make them invulnerable to bullets. He has claimed to be able to turn stones into hand grenades, and many of his devotees say that they have seen him do it. He warns any child tempted to run away that the baptismal fluids are visible to him forever and thus they can always be found again. (He can also identify many of his "children" by the pattern of lashes that they earned while under his tender care.) Signs of his disapproval include the cutting off of lips, noses, and breasts in the villages he raids and, to deter informers, a padlock driven through the upper and lower lips. This is the sort of deranged gang—flagellant, hysterical, fanatical, lethal, under-age—that an unfortunate traveler might have encountered on the roads of Europe during the Thirty Years' War or the last Crusade. "Yes," says Michael Oruni, director of the Gulu Children of War Rehabilitation Center, who works on deprogramming these feral kids, "children who have known pain know how to inflict it." We were sitting in a yard that contained, as well as some unreformed youngsters, four random babies crawling about in the dust. These had been found lying next to their panga-slashed mothers or else left behind when their mothers were marched away.

In October, the Lord of the Flies was hit, in his medieval redoubt, by a message from the twenty-first century. Joseph Kony and four other leaders of the L.R.A. were named in the first arrest warrants ever issued by the new International Criminal Court (I.C.C.). If that sounds like progress to you, then consider this. The whereabouts of Kony are already known: He openly uses a satellite phone from a base across the Ugandan border in southern Sudan. Like the United States, Sudan is not a signatory to the treaty that set up the I.C.C. And it has sponsored the L.R.A. because the Ugandan government—which is an I.C.C. signatory—has helped the people of southern Sudan fight against the theocracy in Khartoum, the same theocracy that has been sponsoring the genocide

against Muslim black Africans in Darfur. Arrest warrants look pretty flimsy when set against ruthless cynicism of this depth and intensity. Kony has evidently made some kind of peace with his Sudanese Islamist patrons: In addition to his proclamation of the Ten Commandments, he once banned alcohol and announced that all pigs were unclean and that those who farm them, let alone eat them, were subject to death. So, unless he has undergone a conversion to Judaism in the wilderness, we can probably assume that he is repaying his murderous armorers and protectors.

I had a faintly nerve-racking drink with Francis Ongom, one of Kony's ex-officers, who defected only recently and who would not agree to be questioned about his own past crimes. "Kony has refused Sudan's request that he allow his soldiers to convert to Islam," said this hardened-looking man as he imbibed a Red Bull through a straw, "but he has found Bible justifications for killing witches, for killing pigs because of the story of the Gadarene swine, and for killing people because god did the same with Noah's flood and Sodom and Gomorrah." Nice to know that he is immersed in the Good Book.

The terrifying thing about such violence and cruelty is that only a few dedicated practitioners are required in order to paralyze everyone else with fear. I had a long meeting with Betty Bigombe, one of those staunch and beautiful women—it is so often the women—who have helped restore Uganda's pulse after decades of war and famine and tyranny and Ebola and West Nile fever and AIDS. She has been yelled at by Joseph Kony, humiliated by corrupt and hypocritical Sudanese "intermediaries," dissed by the Ugandan political elite, and shamefully ignored by the international "human rights" community. She still believes that an amnesty for Kony's unindicted commanders is possible, which will bring the L.R.A. children back from the bush, but she and thousands like her can always be outvoted by one brutalized schoolboy with a machete. We are being forced to watch yet another Darfur, in which the time supposedly set aside for negotiations is used by the killers and cleansers to complete their work.

The Acholi people of northern Uganda, who are the chief sufferers in all this, have to suffer everything twice. Their children are murdered or abducted and enslaved and then come back to murder and abduct and enslave even more children. Yet if the Ugandan Army were allowed to use extreme measures to destroy the L.R.A., the victims would be ... Acholi children again. It must be nightmarish to know that any feral-child terrorist who is shot could be one of your own. "I and the public know," wrote W. H. Auden in perhaps his greatest poem, "September 1, 1939":

What all schoolchildren learn,
Those to whom evil is done
Do evil in return.

And that's what makes it so affecting and so upsetting to watch the "night commuter" children when they come scuttling and scampering into town as the sun departs from the sky. These schoolchildren have not yet had evil done to them, nor are they ready to inflict any evil. It's not too late for them, in other words.

I sat in the deepening gloom for a while with one small boy, Jimmy Opioh, whose age was fourteen. He spoke with an appalling gravity and realism about his mother's inability to pay school fees for himself and his brother both, about the fatigue and time-wasting of being constantly afraid and famished and continually on the run. In that absurd way that one does, I asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up. His unhesitating answer was that he wanted to be a politician—he had his party, the Forum for Democratic Change, all picked out as well. I shamefacedly arranged, along with the admirable John Prendergast of the International Crisis Group, to get him the meager sum that would pay for his schooling, tried not to notice the hundreds of other eyes that were hungrily turned toward me in the darkness, wondered what the hell the actual politicians, here or there, were doing about his plight, and managed to get out of the night encampment just before the equatorial rains hit and washed most of the tents and groundsheets away.

(Vanity Fair, January 2006)

The Vietnam Syndrome

TO BE WRITING THESE WORDS IS, for me, to undergo the severest test of my core belief—that sentences can be more powerful than pictures. A writer can hope to do what a photographer cannot: convey how things smelled and sounded as well as how things looked. I seriously doubt my ability to perform this task on this occasion. Unless you see the landscape of ecocide, or meet the eyes of its victims, you will quite simply have no idea. I am content, just for once—and especially since it is the work of the brave and tough and undeterrable James Nachtwey—to be occupying the space between pictures.

The very title of our joint subject is, I must tell you, a sick joke to begin with. Perhaps you remember the jaunty names of the callous brutes in *Reservoir Dogs*: “Mr. Pink,” “Mr. Blue,” and so on? Well, the tradition of giving pretty names to ugly things is as old as warfare. In Vietnam, between 1961 and 1971, the high command of the United States decided that, since a guerrilla struggle was apparently being protected by tree cover, a useful first step might be to “defoliate” those same trees. Famous corporations such as Dow and Monsanto were given the task of attacking and withering the natural order of a country. The resulting chemical weaponry was euphemistically graded by color: Agent Pink, Agent Green (yes, it's true), Agent Purple, Agent Blue, Agent White, and—spoken often in whispers—Agent Orange. This shady gang, or gang of shades, all deferred to its ruthless chief, who proudly bore the color of hectic madness. The key constituent of Agent Orange is dioxin: a horrifying chemical that makes total war not just on vegetation but also on the roots and essences of life itself. The orange, in other words, was clockwork from the start. If you wonder what the dioxin effect can look like, recall the ravaged features of Viktor Yushchenko—ironically, the leader of the Orange Revolution.

The full inventory of this historic atrocity is still being compiled: It's no exaggeration to say that about 12 million gallons of lethal toxin, in Orange form alone, were sprayed on Vietnam, on the Vietnamese, and on the American forces who were fighting in the same jungles. A prime use of the chemical was in the delta of the Mekong River, where the Swift Boats were vulnerable to attack from the luxuriant undergrowth at the water's edge. Very well, said Admiral Elmo Zumwalt Jr., we shall kill off this ambush-enabling greenery by poisoning it from the skies. Zumwalt believes his own son Elmo III, who was also serving in the delta, died from the effects of Agent Orange, leaving behind him a son with grave learning disabilities. The resulting three-generation memoir of the Zumwalt family—*My Father, My Son* (1986), written by the first and second Elmos about themselves and about the grandchild—is one of the most stoic and affecting family portraits in American history.

You have to go to Vietnam, though, to see such fallout at first hand. I had naïvely assumed that it would be relatively easy to speak to knowledgeable physicians and scientists, if only because a state that is still Communist (if only in name) would be eager to justify itself by the crimes of American imperialism. The contrary proved to be the case, and for two main reasons. The government is too poor to pay much compensation to victims, and prefers anyway to stress the heroic rather than the humiliating aspects of the war. And traditional Vietnamese culture has a tendency to frown on malformed children, whose existence is often attributed to the sins of a past life. Furthermore, Vietnamese in general set some store by pride and self-reliance, and do not like soliciting pity.

I am quite proud of what I did when I came to appreciate, in every sense of the word, these obstacles. The first time I ever gave blood was to a "Medical Aid for Vietnam" clinic, in 1967. That was also the moment when I discovered that I have a very rare blood type. So, decades later, seeing a small ad in a paper in Ho Chi Minh City (invariably still called Saigon in local conversation) that asked for blood donations for Agent Orange victims, I reported to the relevant address. I don't think they get many wheezing and perspiring Anglos at this joint, let alone wheezing and perspiring Anglos with such exclusive corpuscles; at any rate I was fussed over a good deal while two units were drawn off, was given a sustaining bowl of beef noodles and some sweet tea, and was then offered a tour of the facilities.

This privilege, after a while, I came almost to regret. In an earlier age the compassionate term for irredeemably deformed people was *lusus naturae*: "a sport of nature," or, if you prefer a more callous translation, a joke. It was bad enough, in that spare hospital, to meet the successful half of a Siamese-twin separation. This was a more or less functional human child, with some cognition and about half the usual complement of limbs and organs. But upstairs was the surplus half, which, I defy you not to have thought if you had been there, would have been more mercifully thrown away. It wasn't sufficient that this unsuccessful remnant had no real brain and was a thing of stumps and sutures. ("No ass!" murmured my stunned translator in that good-bad English that stays in your mind.) Extra torments had been thrown in. The little crea-

ture was not lying torpid and still. It was jerking and writhing in blinded, crippled, permanent epilepsy, tethered by one stump to the bedpost and given no release from endless, pointless, twitching misery. What nature indulges in such sport? What creator designs it?

But all evil thoughts about euthanasia dissolve as soon as you meet, first, the other children and, second, those who care for them. In the office of Dr. Nguyen Thi Phuong Tan, a wonderful lady who is in charge of the equally impossible idea of “rehabilitation,” I was taking notes when a lively, pretty, but armless ten-year-old girl ran in and sprang with great agility onto the table. Pham Thi Thuy Linh’s grandfather had been in the South Vietnamese Air Force, had helped to vent Agent Orange on his Communist foes, and had suddenly succumbed to leukemia at the age of forty-two. His curse has been transmitted down the generations, whether via the food chain or the chromosomes is unclear. While Pham Thi Thuy Linh deftly signed her name with her right foot—with which she also handled a biscuit from the fond nurses—I learned that she had been listed for some artificial arms, perhaps with modern synthetic flesh, from an organization in Japan. All this will take is a wait until she’s fully grown, and some \$300,000. Money well spent, I’d say. But there will be no “making whole” for these children—eerily combining complete innocence with the most sinister and frightening appearance, ridden and riddled with cleft palate and spina bifida. One should not run out of vocabulary to the point where one calls a child a monster, but the temptation is there. One sees, with an awful pang, why their terrified and shamed parents abandon them to this overworked clinic. One also realizes that it isn’t nature, or a creator, that is to blame. If only. This was not a dreadful accident, or a tragedy. It was inflicted, on purpose, by sophisticated human beings.

I am not an epidemiologist. And there are professionals who will still tell you that there is no absolutely proven connection between the spraying of this poison and the incidence of terrifying illnesses in one generation, or the persistence of appalling birth defects in the next one or the next one. Let us submit this to the arbitration of evidence and reason: What else can possibly explain the systematic convergence? I left Ho Chi Minh City/Saigon and went down the road and along the river, by boat, to the delta town of Ben Tre. This is the very place where Peter Arnett heard the American soldier say in 1968 that “we had to destroy the town to save it.” My ferry churned the big muddy waters that had once been cruised by the Swift Boats, and I stood out in the pre-monsoon rain to get a clear look at the riverbanks with vegetation that took so long to grow back. Ben Tre Province, then called Kien Hoa, was a kind of “ground zero” for this experiment on human beings and animals and trees.

Jungles can ostensibly rise again, but dioxin works its way down through the roots and into the soil and the water, where it can enter the food chain. The unforgivable truth is that nobody knew at the time they were spraying it how long it takes dioxin to leach out of the natural system. The muttered prayer of many Vietnamese villagers is that this generation will be the last to feel their grandparents’ war in their bones and their blood and their epidermis, but the fact is that the town of Ben Tre is home to

about 140,000 people, of whom, the Red Cross says, 58,000 are victims of Agent Orange. (I don't trust Vietnamese statistics, but these were supplied to me by a woman expert who is not uncritical of the Communist regime, and whose family had been subjected to forced "re-education" after the fall of Saigon.)

Once again, after a tour of some thatched hamlets and some local schools for the special cases, I experienced an urgent need to be elsewhere or alone. How many times can one pretend to "interview" the parents of a child born with bright-yellow skin? The cleft palates, the deafness, the muteness, the pretzel limbs and lolling heads ... and the terrible expressions on the faces of the parents, who believe that this horror can sometimes skip a generation. There is just enough knowledge for agony and remorse, in other words, but not enough for any "healing process." No answer, above all, to the inescapable question: When will it stop? A rain from hell began falling about forty years ago. Unto how many unborn generations? At a school full of children who made sign language to one another or who couldn't sit still (or who couldn't move much at all), or who couldn't see or couldn't hear, I took the tour of the workshops where trades such as fishnet weaving or car repair are taught, and was then asked if I would like to say a few words, through an interpreter, to the assembly. I quite like a captive audience, but I didn't trust myself to say a fucking thing. Several of the children in the front row were so wizened and shrunken that they looked as if they could be my seniors. I swear to you that Jim Nachtwey has taken photographs, as one of his few rivals, Philip Jones Griffiths, also took photographs, that simply cannot be printed in this magazine, because they would poison your sleep, as they have poisoned mine.

"After such knowledge," as T. S. Eliot asked in "Gerontion," "what forgiveness?" That's easy. The question of forgiveness just doesn't come up. The world had barely assimilated the new term "genocide," which was coined only in the 1940s, before the United States government added the fresh hell of "ecocide," or mass destruction of the web of nature that connects human and animal and herbal life. I think we may owe the word's distinction to my friend Orville Schell, who wrote a near-faultless essay of coolheaded and warmhearted prose in the old *Look* magazine in March 1971. At that time, even in a picture magazine, there weren't enough photographs of the crime, so his terse, mordant words had to suffice, which makes me faintly proud to be in the same profession. And at some points, being naturally scrupulous about the evidence, he could only speculate: "There are even reports of women giving birth to monsters, though most occurrences are not reported because of nonexistent procedures for compiling statistics."

Well, we know now, or at least we know better. Out of a population of perhaps 84 million Vietnamese, itself reduced by several million during the war, there are as many as one million cases of Agent Orange affliction still on the books. Of these, the hardest to look at are the monstrous births. But we agree to forgive ourselves for this, and to watch real monsters such as Robert McNamara and Henry Kissinger, who calmly gave the orders and the instructions, as they posture on chat shows and cash in with their "memoirs." But, hey, forget it. Forget it if you can.

No more Latin after this, I promise, but there is an old tag from the poet Horace that says, *Mutato nomine de te fabula narratur*. “Change only the name and this story is also about you.” The Vietnam War came home, and so did many men who had been exposed to Agent Orange, either from handling it and loading it or from being underneath it. If you desire even a faint idea of the distance between justice and a Vietnamese peasant family, take a look at how long it took for the American victims of this evil substance to get a hearing. The chemical assault on Vietnam began in 1961, in the early days of the Kennedy administration, and it kept on in spite of many protests for another ten years. The first effective legal proceeding brought in any American court was in 1984, in New York. This class action, settled out of court, was so broadly defined, in point of American victims and their stricken children, that almost nobody got more than \$5,000 out of it, and there was a sharp (or do I mean blunt?) cutoff point beyond which no claim could be asserted. Six million acres of Vietnam had been exposed to the deadly stuff, and, as is the way with protracted litigation, the statistics began to improve and harden. It was established that there was a “match” between those who had been exposed and those who were subject, or whose offspring were subject, to alarming disorders. Admiral Zumwalt, who had first used the phrase “wrong war, wrong place, wrong time” in connection with Vietnam, took a hand in forwarding the legal cause and might have added that his grandson should not be (or do I mean should be?) the last one to suffer for a mistake. More than a mistake. A crime.

Long after both senior male Zumwalts had died—or in 2003, to be precise—the Supreme Court ruled that the issue had not been completely put to rest by the 1984 settlement. The way now lies open for a full accounting of this nightmarish affair. A report, written by Professor Jeanne Stellman, of Columbia University, as part of a U.S. government study, has concluded that nearly two million more gallons of herbicide were disseminated than has yet been admitted, and that the dioxin content of each gallon was much higher than had been officially confessed. (It has been calculated from tests on some Vietnamese that their dioxin levels are 200 times higher than “normal.”) The implications are extraordinary, because it is now possible that thousands of Americans may join a million of their former Vietnamese adversaries in having a standing to sue.

“Doesn’t it ever end? When will Agent Orange become history?” These were the words of Kenneth Feinberg, who figured as the court’s “special master” in the 1984 suit, and who has more recently run the Victim Compensation Fund for the families of those who died in the attacks of September 11, 2001. One should not leave him to answer his own question all by himself. Agent Orange will “become history” in a different way from the trauma of September 11. Of that event, it’s fairly safe to say, there will be no lapse of memory at least until everybody who lived through it has died. Of this Vietnam syndrome, some of us have sworn, there will likewise be no forgetting, let alone forgiving, while we can still draw breath. But some of the victims of Agent Orange haven’t even been born yet, and if that reflection doesn’t shake you, then my words have been feeble and not even the photographs will do.

(Vanity Fair, August 2006)

Once Upon a Time in Germany

THE NUMBER OF COMMUNIST revolutionaries in the world has declined much faster than the number of gangsters and stickup artists, but at the movies it's still a fairly safe bet that such stories will be portrayed in such a way as to inspire at least a twinge of penis envy. You will know what I mean, even if you didn't actually bother to watch Benicio Del Toro playing Che, or Johnny Depp taking the part of John Dillinger. It's a trope that goes back at least as far as Viva Zapata!: the quasi-sexual charisma of the outlaw.

So don't miss the opportunity of seeing the year's best-made and most counter-romantic action thriller, *The Baader Meinhof Complex*. Unlike earlier depictions of the same events by German directors such as Volker Schlöndorff and Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Uli Edel's film interrogates and ultimately indicts (and convicts) the West German terrorists rather than the state and society which they sought to overthrow.

It does this in the most carefully objective way, by taking the young militants, at least in the first instance, at their own face value. It is Berlin on June 2, 1967, and the rather shabby and compromised authorities of the postwar Federal Republic are laying down a red carpet for the visiting Shah of Iran. A young journalist named Ulrike Meinhof has written a mordant essay, in the form of an open letter to the Shah's wife, about the misery and repression of the Iranian system. When students protest as the Shah's party arrives at the Berlin Opera, they are first attacked by hired Iranian goon squads and then savaged by paramilitary formations of brutish German cops. It's the best 1960s street-fighting footage ever staged, and the "police riot" element is done with electrifying skill. On the fringes of the unequal battle, a creepy-looking plainclothes pig named Karl-Heinz Kurras unholsters his revolver and shoots an unarmed student, named Benno Ohnesorg, in the head.

That is only the curtain-raiser, and the birth of "the Movement of 2 June." Not much later, the student leader Rudi Dutschke is also shot in the head, but in this instance by an unhinged neo-Nazi. Now the rioting begins in earnest as West German youth begin to see a pattern to events. The shaky postwar state built by their guilty parents is only a façade for the same old grim and evil faces; Germany has leased bases on its soil for another aggression, this time against the indomitable people of Vietnam; any genuine domestic dissent is met with ruthless violence. I can remember these events and these arguments and images in real time, and I can also remember some of those who slipped away from the edge of the demonstrations and went, as they liked to think of it, "underground." The title of the film announces it as an exploration of exactly that syndrome: the cult of the urban guerrilla.

There was a prevalent mystique in those days about the Cuban and Vietnamese and Mozambican Revolutions, as well as about various vague but supposedly glamorous

groups such as the Tupamaros in Uruguay. In the United States, the brief resort to violence by the Black Panthers and then by the Weather Underground was always imagined as an extension of “Third World” struggles onto the territory of imperialist North America. Other spasmodic attempts to raise armed insurrection—the so-called Front for the Liberation of Quebec, the I.R.A., and the Basque E.T.A.—were confined to national or ethnic minorities. But there were three officially democratic countries where for several years an actual weaponized and organized group was able to issue a challenge, however garbled and inarticulate, to the very legitimacy of the state. The first such group was the Japanese Red Army, the second (named partly in honor of the first) was West Germany’s Red Army Faction, led by Andreas Baader and Ulrike Meinhof, and the third was the Red Brigades in Italy.

You may notice that the three countries I have just mentioned were the very ones that made up the Axis during the Second World War. I am personally convinced that this is the main reason the phenomenon took the form it did: The propaganda of the terrorists, on the few occasions when they could be bothered to cobble together a manifesto, showed an almost neurotic need to “resist authority” in a way that their parents’ generation had so terribly failed to do. And this was also a brilliant way of placing the authorities on the defensive and luring them into a moral trap. West Germany in the late 1960s and 1970s is not actually holding any political prisoners. Very well then, we will commit violent crimes for political reasons and go to prison for them, and then there will be a special wing of the prison for us, and then the campaign to free the political prisoners by violence can get under way. This will strip the mask from the pseudo-democratic state and reveal the Nazi skull beneath its skin. (In a rather witty move that implicitly phrases all this in reverse, the makers of *The Baader Meinhof Complex* have cast Bruno Ganz as the mild but efficient head of West German “homeland security,” a man who tries to “understand” his opponents even as he weaves the net ever closer around them. It requires a conscious effort to remember Ganz’s eerie rendition of the part of the Führer in *Downfall* five years back.)

It doesn’t take long for the sinister ramifications of the “complex” to become plain. Consumerism is equated with Fascism so that the firebombing of department stores can be justified. Ecstatic violence and “action” become ends in themselves. One can perhaps picture Ulrike Meinhof as a “Red” resister of Nazism in the 1930s, but if the analogy to that decade is allowed, then it is very much easier to envisage her brutally handsome pal Andreas Baader as an enthusiastic member of the Brownshirts. (The gang bought its first consignment of weapons from a member of Germany’s neo-Nazi underworld: no need to be choosy when you are so obviously in the right.) There is, as with all such movements, an uneasy relationship between sexuality and cruelty, and between casual or cynical attitudes to both. As if curtain-raising a drama of brutality that has long since eclipsed their own, the young but hedonistic West German toughs take themselves off to the Middle East in search of the real thing and the real training camps, and discover to their dismay that their Arab hosts are somewhat ... puritanical.

This in turn raises another question, with its own therapeutic implications. Did it have to be the most extreme Palestinians to whom the Baader Meinhof gangsters gave their closest allegiance? Yes, it did, because the queasy postwar West German state had little choice but to be ostentatiously friendly with the new state of Israel, at whatever cost in hypocrisy, and this exposed a weakness on which any really cruel person could very easily play. You want to really, really taunt the grown-ups? Then say, when you have finished calling them Nazis, that their little Israeli friends are really Nazis, too. This always guarantees a hurt reaction and a lot of press.

Researching this in the late 1970s in Germany, I became convinced that the Baader Meinhof phenomenon actually was a form of psychosis. One of the main recruiting grounds for the gang was an institution at the University of Heidelberg called the Sozialistisches Patienten Kollektiv, or Socialist Patients Collective, an outfit that sought to persuade the pitifully insane that they needed no treatment save social revolution. (Such a reading of the work of R. D. Laing and others was one of the major “disorders” of the 1960s.) Among the star pupils of this cuckoo’s nest was Ralf Reinders, who was arrested after several violent “actions” and who had once planned to destroy the Jewish House in Berlin—a restoration of the one gutted by the Brownshirts—“in order to get rid of this thing about the Jews that we’ve all had to have since the Nazi time.” Yes, “had to have” is very good. Perhaps such a liberating act, had he brought it off, would have made some of the noises in his head go away.

The Baader Meinhof Complex, like the excellent book by Stefan Aust on which it is based, is highly acute in its portrayal of the way in which mania feeds upon itself and becomes hysterical. More arrests mean that more hostages must be taken, often in concert with international hijackers, so that ever more exorbitant “demands” can be made. This requires money, which in turn demands more robbery and extortion. If there are doubts or disagreements within the organization, these can always be attributed to betrayal or cowardice, resulting in mini-purges and micro-lynchings within the gang itself. (The bleakest sequence of the film shows Ulrike Meinhof and her once seductive comrade Gudrun Ensslin raving hatefully at each other in the women’s maximum-security wing.) And lurking behind all this neurotic energy, and not always very far behind at that, is the wish for death and extinction. The last desperate act of the gang—a *Götterdämmerung* of splatter action, including a botched plane hijacking by sympathetic Palestinians and the murder of a senior German hostage—was the staging of a collective suicide in a Stuttgart jail, with a crude and malicious attempt (echoed by some crude and malicious intellectuals) to make it look as if the German authorities had killed the prisoners. In these sequences, the film is completely unsparing, just as it was in focusing the camera on official brutality in the opening scenes of more than ten years before.

Two real-world developments have made this movie even more relevant, and helped to vindicate the critical attitude that it manifests. Of the surviving members of the Baader Meinhof circle, one or two went the whole distance and actually became full-blown neo-Nazis. The gang’s lawyer and co-conspirator, Horst Mahler, has been jailed

again, this time for distributing CD-roms inciting violence against Jews. Contempt for German democracy can't be taken any further than that. And Ulrike Meinhof's daughter Bettina Röhl has published files from the archives of the East German secret police, or Stasi, showing that subsidies and other forms of support flowed regularly to the group from the other side of the Berlin Wall.

Most astonishing of all, perhaps, in May of this year it was revealed from the same files that Karl-Heinz Kurras, the twitchy cop who shot Benno Ohnesorg on June 2, 1967, thus igniting the whole train of events, was all along an informer for the Stasi and a card-carrying member of the East German Communist Party. (Herr Kurras, now eighty-one, was interviewed and made no bones about it.) This doesn't necessarily prove that the whole sequence of events was part of a Stasi provocation, but it does make those who yelled about the "Nazi" state look rather foolish in retrospect. (Rudi Dutschke, it now turns out, left a posthumous letter to his family stating his fear that "the East" was behind his own shooting. Dutschke's family has called for an investigation.) What this means in short is that the Baader Meinhof milieu, so far from providing a critique of German society, was actually a sort of petri dish in which bacilli for the two worst forms of dictatorship on German soil—the National Socialist and the Stalinist—were grown. It's high time that the movie business outgrew some of the illusions of "radical" terrorism, and this film makes an admirably unsentimental contribution to that task.

(Vanity Fair online, August 17, 2009)

Worse Than Nineteen Eighty-four

HOW EXTRAORDINARY IT IS, when you give it a moment's thought, that it was only last week that an American president officially spoke the obvious truth about North Korea. In point of fact, Mr. Bush rather understated matters when he said that Kim Jong-il's government runs concentration camps. It would be truer to say that the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea, as it calls itself, is a concentration camp. It would be even more accurate to say, in American idiom, that North Korea is a slave state.

This way of phrasing it would not have the legal implication that the use of the word "genocide" has. To call a set of actions genocidal, as in the case of Darfur, is to invoke legal consequences that are entailed by the U.N.'s genocide convention, to which we are signatories. However, to call a country a slave state is to set another process in motion: that strange business that we might call the working of the American conscience.

It was rhetorically possible, in past epochs of ideological confrontation, for politicians to shout about the slavery of Nazism and of communism, and indeed of nations that were themselves captive. The element of exaggeration was pardonable, in that both systems used forced labor and also the threat of forced labor to coerce or to terrify others. But not even in the lowest moments of the Third Reich, or of the Gulag, or of Mao's Great Leap Forward, was there a time when all the subjects of the system were actually enslaved.

In North Korea, every person is property and is owned by a small and mad family with hereditary power. Every minute of every day, as far as regimentation can assure

the fact, is spent in absolute subjection and serfdom. The private life has been entirely abolished. One tries to avoid cliché, and I did my best on a visit to this terrifying country in the year 2000, but George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* was published at about the time that Kim Il Sung set up his system, and it really is as if he got hold of an early copy of the novel and used it as a blueprint. (Hmmm, good book. Let's see if we can make it work.)

Actually, North Korea is rather worse than Orwell's dystopia. There would be no way, in the capital city of Pyongyang, to wander off and get lost in the slums, let alone to rent an off-the-record love nest in a room over a shop. Everybody in the city has to be at home and in bed by curfew time, when all the lights go off (if they haven't already failed). A recent nighttime photograph of the Korean peninsula from outer space shows something that no free-world propaganda could invent: a blaze of electric light all over the southern half, stopping exactly at the demilitarized zone and becoming an area of darkness in the north.

Concealed in that pitch-black night is an imploding state where the only things that work are the police and the armed forces. The situation is actually slightly worse than indentured servitude. The slave owner historically promises, in effect, at least to keep his slaves fed. In North Korea, this compact has been broken. It is a famine state as well as a slave state. Partly because of the end of favorable trade relations with, and subsidies from, the former USSR, but mainly because of the lunacy of its command economy, North Korea broke down in the 1990s and lost an unguessable number of people to sheer starvation. The survivors, especially the children, have been stunted and malformed. Even on a tightly controlled tour of the place—"North Korea is almost as hard to visit as it is to leave"—my robotic guides couldn't prevent me from seeing people drinking from sewers and picking up individual grains of food from barren fields. (I was reduced to eating a dog, and I was a privileged guest.) Film shot from over the Chinese border shows whole towns ruined and abandoned, with their few factories idle and cannibalized. It seems that the mines in the north of the country have been flooded beyond repair.

In consequence of this, and for the first time since the founding of Kim Il Sung's state, large numbers of people have begun to take the appalling risk of running away. If they make it, they make it across the river into China, where there is a Korean-speaking area in the remote adjoining province. There they live under the constant threat of being forcibly repatriated. The fate of the fugitive slave is not pretty: North Korea does indeed operate a system of camps, most memorably described in a book, *The Aquariums of Pyongyang*, by Kang Chol-Hwan, that ought to be much more famous than it is. Given what everyday life in North Korea is like, I don't have sufficient imagination to guess what life in its prison system must be, but this book gives one a hint.

It seems to me imperative that the human rights movement, hitherto unpardonably tongue-tied about all this, should insistently take up the case of North Korea and demand that an underground railway, or perhaps even an overground one, be estab-

lished. Any Korean slave who can get out should be welcomed, fed, protected, and assisted to move to South Korea. Other countries, including our own, should announce that they will take specified numbers of refugees, in case the current steady trickle should suddenly become an inundation. The Chinese obviously cannot be expected to take millions of North Koreans all at once, which is why they engage in their otherwise criminal policy of propping up Kim Jong-il, but if international guarantees for runaway slaves could be established, this problem could be anticipated.

Kim Jong-il and his fellow slave masters are trying to dictate the pace of events by setting a timetable of nuclearization, based on a crash program wrung from their human property. But why should it be assumed that their failed state and society are permanent? Another timeline, oriented to liberation and regime change, is what the dynasty most fears. It should start to fear it more. Bravo to President Bush, anyway, for his bluntness.

(Slate, May 2, 2005)

North Korea: A Nation of Racist Dwarves

VISITING NORTH KOREA some years ago, I was lucky to have a fairly genial “minder” whom I’ll call Mr. Chae. He guided me patiently around the ruined and starving country, explaining things away by means of a sort of denial mechanism and never seeming to lose interest in the gargantuan monuments to the world’s most hysterical and operatic leader-cult. One evening, as we tried to dine on some gristly bits of duck, he mentioned yet another reason why the day should not long be postponed when the whole peninsula was united under the beaming rule of the Dear Leader. The people of South Korea, he pointed out, were becoming mongrelized. They wedded foreigners—even black American soldiers, or so he’d heard to his evident disgust—and were losing their purity and distinction. Not for Mr. Chae the charm of the ethnic mosaic, but rather a rigid and unpolluted uniformity.

I was struck at the time by how matter-of-factly he said this, as if he took it for granted that I would find it uncontroversial. And I did briefly wonder whether this form of totalitarianism, too (because nothing is more “total” than racist nationalism), was part of the pitch made to its subjects by the North Korean state. But I was preoccupied, as are most of the country’s few visitors, by the more imposing and exotic forms of totalitarianism on offer: by the giant mausoleums and parades that seemed to fuse classical Stalinism with a contorted form of the deferential, patriarchal Confucian ethos.

Karl Marx in his Eighteenth Brumaire wrote that those trying to master a new language always begin by translating it back into the tongue they already know. And I was limiting myself (and ill-serving my readers) in using the preexisting imagery of Stalinism and Eastern deference. I have recently donned the bifocals provided by B. R. Myers in his electrifying new book *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See*

Themselves and Why It Matters, and I understand now that I got the picture either upside down or inside out. The whole idea of communism is dead in North Korea, and its most recent “Constitution,” “ratified” last April, has dropped all mention of the word. The analogies to Confucianism are glib, and such parallels with it as can be drawn are intended by the regime only for the consumption of outsiders. Myers makes a persuasive case that we should instead regard the Kim Jong-il system as a phenomenon of the very extreme and pathological right. It is based on totalitarian “military first” mobilization, is maintained by slave labor, and instills an ideology of the most unapologetic racism and xenophobia.

These conclusions of his, in a finely argued and brilliantly written book, carry the worrisome implication that the propaganda of the regime may actually mean exactly what it says, which in turn would mean that peace and disarmament negotiations with it are a waste of time—and perhaps a dangerous waste at that.

Consider: Even in the days of communism, there were reports from Eastern Bloc and Cuban diplomats about the paranoid character of the system (which had no concept of deterrence and told its own people that it had signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty in bad faith) and also about its intense hatred of foreigners. A black Cuban diplomat was almost lynched when he tried to show his family the sights of Pyongyang. North Korean women who return pregnant from China—the regime’s main ally and protector—are forced to submit to abortions. Wall posters and banners depicting all Japanese as barbarians are only equaled by the ways in which Americans are caricatured as hook-nosed monsters. (The illustrations in this book are an education in themselves.) The United States and its partners make up in aid for the huge shortfall in North Korea’s food production, but there is not a hint of acknowledgment of this by the authorities, who tell their captive subjects that the bags of grain stenciled with the Stars and Stripes are tribute paid by a frightened America to the Dear Leader.

Myers also points out that many of the slogans employed and displayed by the North Korean state are borrowed directly—this really does count as some kind of irony—from the kamikaze ideology of Japanese imperialism. Every child is told every day of the wonderful possibility of death by immolation in the service of the motherland and taught not to fear the idea of war, not even a nuclear one.

The regime cannot rule by terror alone, and now all it has left is its race-based military ideology. Small wonder that each “negotiation” with it is more humiliating than the previous one. As Myers points out, we cannot expect it to bargain away its very *raison d’être*.

All of us who scrutinize North Korean affairs are preoccupied with one question. Do these slaves really love their chains? The conundrum has several obscene corollaries. The people of that tiny and nightmarish state are not, of course, allowed to make comparisons with the lives of others, and if they complain or offend, they are shunted off to camps that—to judge by the standard of care and nutrition in the “wider” society—must be a living hell excusable only by the brevity of its duration. But race arrogance and nationalist hysteria are powerful cements for the most odious systems, as Euro-

peans and Americans have good reason to remember. Even in South Korea there are those who feel the Kim Jong-il regime, under which they themselves could not live for a single day, to be somehow more “authentically” Korean.

Here are the two most shattering facts about North Korea. First, when viewed by satellite photography at night, it is an area of unrelieved darkness. Barely a scintilla of light is visible even in the capital city. Second, a North Korean is on average six inches shorter than a South Korean. You may care to imagine how much surplus value has been wrung out of such a slave, and for how long, in order to feed and sustain the militarized crime family that completely owns both the country and its people.

But this is what proves Myers right. Unlike previous racist dictatorships, the North Korean one has actually succeeded in producing a sort of new species. Starving and stunted dwarves, living in the dark, kept in perpetual ignorance and fear, brainwashed into the hatred of others, regimented and coerced and inculcated with a death cult: This horror show is in our future, and is so ghastly that our own darling leaders dare not face it and can only peep through their fingers at what is coming.

(Slate, February 1, 2010)

The Eighteenth Brumaire of the Castro Dynasty

IF THERE HAD BEEN a military coup in any other Latin American or Caribbean country, even a fairly small or obscure one, I think it safe to say that it would have made the front page of the newspapers. But the military coup in Cuba—a nation linked to ours in many vital and historic ways—has not been reported at all. Indeed, in “Castro’s Younger Brother Is Focus of Attention Now,” by Anthony DePalma and James C. McKinley Jr., on page 8 of the New York Times of August 3, the very possibility of such an event was even denied:

[O]ne of the most telling aspects of his career is that in the nearly five decades that Raúl Castro has led the Cuban armed forces, there has never been a coup attempt or an uprising of rank-and-file soldiers against their officers.

Thus did the newspaper of record digest the interesting novelty that the new head of government in Cuba was, in fact, the five-decade leader of the Cuban armed forces! In other words, an overt military takeover was the main evidence that these things don’t happen in Havana. Perhaps Raúl Castro’s accession doesn’t count as a “coup attempt” (since it was successful), let alone a “rank-and-file” mutiny, but the plain fact remains that, for the first time in a Communist state since General Jaruzelski seized power in Poland in 1981, the army has replaced the party as the source of authority.

The even more grotesque fact that power has passed from one seventy-nine-year-old brother to a “younger” one who is only seventy-five may have assisted in obscuring the obvious. So may the fact that—continuous babble about his “charisma” notwithstanding—Fidel Castro has never taken off his uniform (except for the tailored suits he dons for appearances at international conferences) since the day he took power.

Even my distinction between the army and the party may be a distinction without much of a difference. Cuba has been a garrison state run by a military caudillo for most of the past half-century. More than anything, the maximum leader always based his legitimacy on his status as commander in chief. The dynastic succession of his brother only formalizes the situation. As was once said of Prussia, Cuba is not a country that has an army but an army that has a country.

Nor does this army confine itself to the stern questions of political and military power. Under the stewardship of Raúl Castro, it has extended itself to become a large stakeholder in the few areas of the Cuban economy that actually make money. A military holding company known as “La Gaviota” oversees perhaps as much as 60 percent of Cuban tourist revenues. Large farms and resorts are operated by serving and retired officers reporting to Raúl, and according to the DePalma/McKinley story, he has also “sent officers to business schools in Europe to learn capitalist management techniques.”

Awareness of all this makes it the more surprising that everyone seems to have forgotten the highly charged moment in 1989 when there did appear to be an important rift within the Cuban armed forces. On June 12 of that year, General Arnaldo Ochoa Sanchez was placed under arrest and accused of extreme corruption, dereliction of duty, and narcotics trafficking. Ochoa was no small fry. He had belonged to the original band of guerrillas in the Sierra Maestra, was a member of the 26th of July Movement that formed the inner core of the revolution, had been among those Cuban internationalists who tried to raise the flag of revolt in Venezuela and the Congo in the 1960s, and had headed the Cuban military missions to Angola, Ethiopia, and Nicaragua. (To mention something of which Cubans can be proud, I should add that he was prominent in the military defeat of South African forces at the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale in 1987, which contributed handily to the independence of Namibia and the ultimate defeat of apartheid itself.) Perhaps he had seen too much of the outside world. Perhaps, in that year of 1989, he was one of many Cubans who saw promise in Mikhail Gorbachev’s program of glasnost and perestroika. Or perhaps he was simply guilty as charged of colluding with the Colombian drug cartels in order to enrich himself and others. We shall never really know (or then again, we may be just on the verge of finding out), because the entire interval between his arrest and his death, and those of his associates, was a matter of four short weeks. His execution by firing squad was announced after a special court martial on July 13, 1989.

The man who made the long, rambling speech justifying the arrest and prejudging the verdict was Raúl Castro. Awarded the sort of TV time that was normally reserved for his brother, the head of the Cuban armed forces addressed the nation for two and a half hours instead of the allotted forty-five minutes (one hopes he does not now fall into the habit of doing this) and amazed many Cubans who had been brought up to think of Ochoa as “sea-green incorruptible.”

The moment was a significant one, because, in general, Cuba had been able to avoid the spectacle of the Communist “show trial” that had been inaugurated by Stalin in

Moscow in the 1930s and pursued in even more grotesque form in Prague, Budapest, and Sofia after the Second World War. The only arraignment of a “factional” group in Havana had been in the mid-1960s, and it was paradoxically directed at a bunch of Moscow-line Stalinists allegedly led by Aníbal Escalante. However, the show trial of Ochoa in 1989 was not a protracted ideological inquisition. It was a swift, ruthless business that produced immediate confessions, was conducted by a military “honor court,” and concluded with an expeditious death sentence. All was decided within the framework of the military high command. Perhaps that should have been a warning of what was to come.

On the “new calendar” date of 18 Brumaire in 1799, Napoleon Bonaparte used his troops to seize power in Paris, proclaimed himself the nation’s first consul, and soon after announced that the French Revolution had come to its end. (Karl Marx’s celebrated essay on The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon, lampooning a much later and lesser French monarch than Bonaparte, gave us the overused jest about the relationship between tragedy and farce.) Now the 26th of July Movement has arrived at its own belated historical terminus. The new pretender, once again, is much less flamboyant and impressive. If we cannot yet say that Castro is dead and we cannot decently say “long live” to the new-but-old Castro, we can certainly say that the Castro era is effectively finished and that a uniformed and secretive and highly commercial dictatorship is the final form that it will take.

(Slate, August 7, 2006)

Hugo Boss

RECENT ACCOUNTS of Hugo Chávez’s politicized necrophilia may seem almost too lurid to believe, but I can testify from personal experience that they may well be an understatement. In the early hours of July 16—just at the midnight hour, to be precise—Venezuela’s capo officiated at a grisly ceremony. This involved the exhumation of the mortal remains of Simón Bolívar, leader of Latin America’s rebellion against Spain, who died in 1830. According to a vividly written article by Thor Halvorsen in the July 25 Washington Post, the skeleton was picked apart—even as Chávez tweeted the proceedings for his audience—and some teeth and bone fragments were taken away for testing. The residual pieces were placed in a coffin stamped with the Chávez government’s seal. In one of the rather free-associating speeches for which he has become celebrated, Chávez appealed to Jesus Christ to restage the raising of Lazarus and reanimate Bolívar’s constituent parts. He went on:

I had some doubts, but after seeing his remains, my heart said, “Yes, it is me.” Father, is that you, or who are you? The answer: “It is me, but I awaken every hundred years when the people awaken.”

As if “channeling” this none-too-subtle identification of Chávez with the national hero, Venezuelan television was compelled to run images of Bolívar, followed by footage

of the remains, and then pictures of the boss. The national anthem provided the soundtrack. Not since North Korean media declared Kim Jong-il to be the reincarnation of Kim Il Sung has there been such a blatant attempt to create a necrocracy, or perhaps mausolocacy, in which a living claimant assumes the fleshly mantle of the departed.

Simón Bolívar's cadaver is like any other cadaver, but his legacy is a great deal more worth stealing than that of Kim Il Sung. Gabriel García Márquez's novel *The General in His Labyrinth* is one place to begin, if you want to understand the combination of heroic and tragic qualities that keep his memory alive to this day. (In New York, his equestrian statue still dominates the intersection of the Avenue of the Americas and Central Park South.) The idea of a United States of South America will always be a tenuous dream, but in his bloody struggle for its realization, Bolívar cut a considerable figure, as he did in his other capacities as double-dealer, war criminal, and serial fornicator, also lovingly portrayed by Márquez.

In the fall of 2008, I went to Venezuela as a guest of Sean Penn's, whose friendship with Chávez is warm. The third member of our party was the excellent historian Douglas Brinkley, and we spent some quality time flying around the country on Chávez's presidential jet and bouncing with him from rally to rally at ground level, as well. The boss loves to talk and has clocked up speeches of Castro-like length. Bolívar is the theme of which he never tires. His early uniformed movement of mutineers—which failed to bring off a military coup in 1992—was named for Bolívar. Turning belatedly but successfully to electoral politics, he called his followers the Bolivarian Movement. Since he became president, the country's official name has been the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. (Chávez must sometimes wish that he had been born in Bolivia in the first place.) At Cabinet meetings, he has been known to leave an empty chair, in case the shade of Bolívar might choose to attend the otherwise rather Chávez-dominated proceedings.

It did not take long for this hero-obsession to disclose itself in bizarre forms. One evening, as we were jetting through the skies, Brinkley mildly asked whether Chávez's large purchases of Russian warships might not be interpreted by Washington as a violation of the Monroe Doctrine. The boss's response was impressively immediate. He did not know for sure, he said, but he very much hoped so. "The United States was born with an imperialist impulse. There has been a long confrontation between Monroe and Bolívar.... It is necessary that the Monroe Doctrine be broken." As his tirade against evil America mounted, Penn broke in to say that surely Chávez would be happy to see the arrest of Osama bin Laden.

I was hugely impressed by the way that the boss scorned this overture. He essentially doubted the existence of al-Qaeda, let alone reports of its attacks on the enemy to the north. "I don't know anything about Osama bin Laden that doesn't come to me through the filter of the West and its propaganda." To this, Penn replied that surely bin Laden had provided quite a number of his very own broadcasts and videos. I was again impressed by the way that Chávez rejected this proffered lucid-interval lifeline. All of this so-called evidence, too, was a mere product of imperialist television. After

all, “there is film of the Americans landing on the moon,” he scoffed. “Does that mean the moon shot really happened? In the film, the Yanqui flag is flying straight out. So, is there wind on the moon?” As Chávez beamed with triumph at this logic, an awkwardness descended on my comrades, and on the conversation.

Chávez, in other words, is very close to the climactic moment when he will announce that he is a poached egg and that he requires a very large piece of buttered toast so that he can lie down and take a soothing nap. Even his macabre foraging in the coffin of Simón Bolívar was initially prompted by his theory that an autopsy would prove that The Liberator had been poisoned—most probably by dastardly Colombians. This would perhaps provide a posthumous license for Venezuela’s continuing hospitality to the narco-criminal gang FARC, a cross-border activity that does little to foster regional brotherhood.

Many people laughed when Chávez appeared at the podium of the United Nations in September 2006 and declared that he smelled sulfur from the devil himself because of the presence of George W. Bush. But the evidence is that he does have an idiotic weakness for spells and incantations, as well as many of the symptoms of paranoia and megalomania. After the failure of Bolívar’s attempted Gran Colombia federation—which briefly united Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, and other nations—the U.S. minister in Bogotá, future president William Henry Harrison, said of him that “[u]nder the mask of patriotism and attachment to liberty, he has really been preparing the means of investing himself with arbitrary power.” The first time was tragedy; this time is also tragedy but mixed with a strong element of farce.

(Slate, August 2, 2010)

Is the Euro Doomed?

SOMETIMES, sheer immodesty compels me to ask, of my long record of prescience, what did I know, and when and how did I know it? In the summer of 2005, Foreign Policy magazine asked its contributors to name one taken-for-granted thing that they thought was overrated or would not last. After a brief interval of reflection, I chose the euro.

I can be absolutely certain that I did not do this because I wanted to be right. On the contrary, I would much have preferred to be mistaken. When I still lived in Europe, I was one of the few on the left to advocate an enlargement of the community and to identify it with the progressive element in politics. This was mainly because I had seen the positive effect that Europeanism had exerted on the periphery of the continent, especially in Spain, Portugal, and Greece. Until the middle of the 1970s, these countries had been ruled by backward-looking dictatorships, generally religious and military in character and dependent on military aid from the more conservative circles in the United States. Because the European community allowed only parliamentary

democracies to join, the exclusion from the continent's heartland gave a huge incentive to the middle class in these countries to support the overthrow of despotism.

The same attraction had a solvent effect on other countries, too. Once the Irish Republic became a member and was thus part of the same customs union as the United Kingdom, the border with Northern Ireland became an irrelevance, and it was only a matter of time before the sectarian war would begin to seem irrelevant. In Cyprus, the wish of both Greek and Turkish Cypriots to become European was a potent element in setting the stage for negotiations to end that post-colonial partition. The modernization and opening of Turkey, highly uneven as it is, has a great deal to do with the same pull toward a common European system. And it goes without saying that the people of Eastern Europe, even while the Berlin Wall still stood, measured their aspirations by how swiftly they, too, could meet the criteria for membership and escape the dreary, wasteful Comecon system that was the Soviet Union's own parody of a supranational agreement.

The logic of this seemed to necessitate a single currency, which in turn meant that a unified Germany, instead of dominating Europe, as the British and French reactionaries had always feared, would become a Europeanized Germany. The decision to give up the deutsche mark in 2002 must rank as one of the most mature and generous decisions ever taken by a modern state, full confirmation of the country's long transition from Nazism and Stalinism and partition, Europe's three great modern enemies.

As it happens, though, it was a German-speaking fascist who awoke my misgivings. I was interviewing Jörg Haider, the late leader of Austria's Freedom Party, just as the euro notes and coins were coming into circulation almost everywhere between Finland and Greece. With a disagreeable sneer, he asked me if I really liked "the new Esperanto money."

This was actually a rather clever psychological thrust. The old dream of a world language called Esperanto that would abolish the Babel of competing tongues is considered a quixotic one for obvious reasons. Nobody is going to learn a language that hardly anybody speaks. There is a further quixotry involved: The invention of Esperanto ended up doing no more than adding another minor language to the mix. Now consider the euro: What if it ends up being one European currency among many instead of the money equivalent of a *lingua franca*?

How tragic it is that the euro system has already, in effect, become a two-tier one and that the bottom tier is occupied by the very countries—Greece, Portugal, Spain, and Ireland—that benefited most from their accession to the European Union. The shady way in which Greece behaved in concealing its debts, and the drunken-sailor manner in which other smaller states managed their budgets, has, of course, offended the Germans. It is openly said in Germany now that it would be better to bring back the deutsche mark than to be bailing out quasi-indigent and thriftless banana republics. Talk of that kind doesn't take long to evoke a biting response: Soon enough, Greek Foreign Minister Theodoros Pangalos was reminding nationalist audiences at home of the wartime German occupation of Greece and the carrying-off of the country's gold

reserves. “Don’t talk about the war” is a strong unspoken principle of European fraternity, and it didn’t require very much strain to produce a major fraying of this etiquette. You can count on this atmosphere getting much worse as second-tier countries are requested by Berlin to haul in their waistlines and as Germans grumble about having to tighten their own belts to subsidize less efficient regimes.

The problem is endlessly reported as one of “bailout” terms and “packages” for “debt relief.” These are all euphemisms, and they are also all short-term. The fact is that default has entered the European vocabulary on a national scale and therefore that this First World club has its own Third World to contend with. In any case, the great justification for the European Union was always political and not economic, and if the symbol of the second-order dimension becomes tarnished, then the first ideal will not escape great damage, either.

“PIGS” is the unlovely acronym for the nations—Portugal, Ireland, Greece and Spain—that constitute the shiftless out-group within the in-group. (Italy is sometimes included in the club.) It’s very improbable that nations that haven’t yet signed up to the euro—Britain and many Scandinavian states among them—will now do so. And that being the case, with the euro just another bill you have to exchange when moving around within Europe—then what becomes of the dream? I wish I could have ignored the croakings of an obscure Austrian fascist, but there’s something about European history that makes this seem rash.

(Slate, April 26, 2010)

Overstating Jewish Power

IT’S SLIGHTLY HARD to understand the fuss generated by the article on the Israeli lobby produced by the joint labors of John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt that was published in the *London Review of Books*. My guess is that the Harvard logo has something to do with it, but then I don’t understand why the doings of that campus get so much media attention, either. The essay itself, mostly a very average “realist” and centrist critique of the influence of Israel, contains much that is true and a little that is original. But what is original is not true and what is true is not original.

Everybody knows that the American Israel Public Affairs Committee and other Jewish organizations exert a vast influence over Middle East policy, especially on Capitol Hill. The influence is not as total, perhaps, as that exerted by Cuban exiles over Cuba policy, but it is an impressive demonstration of strength by an ethnic minority. Almost everybody also concedes that the Israeli occupation has been a moral and political catastrophe and has implicated the United States in a sordid and costly morass. I would have gone further than Mearsheimer and Walt and pointed up the role of Israel in supporting apartheid in South Africa, in providing arms and training for dictators in Congo and Guatemala, and helping reactionary circles in America do their dirty work—most notably during the Iran-Contra assault on the Constitution

and in the emergence of the alliance between Likud and the Christian right. Counter-arguments concerning Israel's help in the Cold War and in the region do not really outweigh these points.

However, Mearsheimer and Walt present the situation as one where the Jewish tail wags the American dog, and where the United States has gone to war in Iraq to gratify Ariel Sharon, and where the alliance between the two countries has brought down on us the wrath of Osama bin Laden. This is partly misleading and partly creepy. If the Jewish stranglehold on policy has been so absolute since the days of Harry Truman, then what was General Eisenhower thinking when, on the eve of an election fifty years ago, he peremptorily ordered Ben Gurion out of Sinai and Gaza on pain of canceling the sale of Israeli bonds? On the next occasion when Israel went to war with its neighbors, eleven years later, President Lyndon Johnson was much more lenient, but a strong motive of his policy (undetermined by Israel) was to win Jewish support for the war the "realists" were then waging in Vietnam. (He didn't get the support, except from Rabbi Meir Kahane.)

If it is Israel that decides on the deployment of American force, it seems odd that the first President Bush had to order them to stay out of the coalition to free Kuwait, and it is even more odd that the first order of neocon business has not been an attack on Iran, as Israeli hawks have been urging. Mearsheimer and Walt are especially weak on this point: They speak darkly about neocon and Israeli maneuvers in respect to Tehran today, but they entirely fail to explain why the main initiative against the mullahs has come from the European Union and the International Atomic Energy Agency, two organizations where the voice of the Jewish lobby is, to say the least, distinctly muted. Their theory does nothing to explain why it was French President Jacques Chirac who took the lead in isolating the death-squad regime of Assad's Syria (a government that Mearsheimer and Walt regard, for reasons of their own, as a force for stability).

As for the idea that Israel is the root cause of the emergence of al-Qaeda: Where have these two gentlemen been? Bin Laden's gang emerged from a whole series of tough and reactionary battles in Central and Eastern Asia, from the war for a separate Muslim state in the Philippines to the fighting in Kashmir, the Uighur territories in China, and of course Afghanistan. There are hardly any Palestinians in its ranks, and its communiqués have been notable for how little they say about the Palestinian struggle. Bin Laden does not favor a Palestinian state; he simply regards the whole area of the former British Mandate as a part of the future caliphate. The right of the Palestinians to a state is a just demand in its own right, but anyone who imagines that its emergence would appease—or would have appeased—the forces of jihad is quite simply a fool. Is al-Qaeda fomenting civil war in Nigeria or demanding the return of East Timor to Indonesia because its heart bleeds for the West Bank?

For purposes of contrast, let us look at two other regional allies of the United States. Both Turkey and Pakistan have been joined to the Pentagon hip since approximately the time of the emergence of the state of Israel, which coincided with the Truman Doctrine. Pakistan was, like Israel, cleaved from a former British territory. Since that

time, both states have carried out appalling internal repression and even more appalling external aggression. Pakistan attempted a genocide in Bangladesh, with the support of Nixon and Kissinger, in 1971. It imposed the Taliban as its client in a quasi-occupation of Afghanistan. It continues to arm and train bin Ladenists to infiltrate Indian-held Kashmir, and its promiscuity with nuclear materials exceeds anything Israel has tried with its stockpile at Dimona. Turkey invaded Cyprus in 1974 and continues in illegal occupation of the northern third of the island, which has been forcibly cleansed of its Greek inhabitants. It continues to lie about its massacre of the Armenians. U.N. resolutions have had no impact on these instances of state terror and illegality in which the United States is also partially implicated.

But here's the thing: There is no Turkish or Pakistani ethnic "lobby" in America. And here's the other thing: There is no call for "disinvestment" in Turkey or Pakistan. We are not incessantly told that with these two friends we are partners in crime. Perhaps the Greek Cypriots and Indians are in error in refusing to fly civilian aircraft into skyscrapers. That might get the attention of the "realists." Or perhaps the affairs of two states, one secular Muslim and one created specifically in the name of Islam, do not possess the eternal fascination that attaches to the Jewish question.

There has been some disquiet expressed about Mearsheimer and Walt's overfondness for Jewish name-dropping: their reiteration of the names Wolfowitz, Perle, Feith, etc., as the neocon inner circle. Well, it would be stupid not to notice that a group of high-energy Jews has been playing a role in our foreign-policy debate for some time. The first occasion on which it had any significant influence (because, despite its tentacular influence, it lost the argument over removing Saddam Hussein in 1991) was in pressing the Clinton administration to intervene in Bosnia and Kosovo. These are the territories of Europe's oldest and largest Muslim minorities; they are oil-free and they do not in the least involve the state interest of Israel. Indeed, Sharon publicly opposed the intervention. One could not explain any of this from Mearsheimer and Walt's rhetoric about "the lobby."

Mearsheimer and Walt belong to that vapid school that essentially wishes that the war with jihad-ism had never started. Their wish is father to the thought that there must be some way, short of a fight, to get around this confrontation. Wishfulness has led them to seriously mischaracterize the origins of the problem and to produce an article that is redeemed from complete dullness and mediocrity only by being slightly but unmistakably smelly.

(Slate, March 27, 2006)

The Case for Humanitarian Intervention

Review of *Freedom's Battle: The Origins of Humanitarian Intervention*, by Gary J. Bass.

DEBATES AND DISCUSSIONS about humanitarian intervention tend (for good reasons) to be about American intervention. They also tend to share the assumption that the United States can afford, or at any rate has the power, to take or leave the option to get involved. On some occasions, there may seem to be overwhelming moral grounds to quit the sidelines and intervene. On others, the imperatives are less clear-cut. In all instances, nothing exceptional should be contemplated unless it has at least some congruence with the national interest. This interest can be interpreted widely: Is it not to the United States' advantage that, say, the charter of the United Nations be generally respected? Or the notion can be interpreted narrowly: If the United States had intervened in 1994 in the Francophone central African context of the genocide in Rwanda, then where would it not be asked to intervene?

In common with all such questions is the unspoken assumption that Washington can make all the difference if it chooses to do so and needs merely to be prudent and thoughtful before embarking on some redemptive project in another country. But, as I read Gary Bass's absorbing, well-researched, and frequently amusing book, I found myself rotating a seldom-asked question in my head: What about the days when the United States was the recipient, not the donor, of humanitarian solidarity?

When one places in context all those sapient presidential remarks about the danger of "entangling alliances" (Thomas Jefferson) or the reluctance to go abroad "in search of monsters to destroy" (John Quincy Adams), as Bass helps readers do, it becomes clear that they belonged to a time when America and Americans were in a poor position to conduct any intervention at all. It was no more than common sense to exercise restraint and concentrate on building up the homeland—while exploiting the quarrels between the British, French, and Spanish empires to do so. This constraint must have been felt very keenly at least until the closing third of the nineteenth century, after which it was possible to begin thinking of the United States as a global power.

But then remember what most people forget: how much international humanitarian intervention the United States had required in order to get that far. Not all of the aid to the fledgling thirteen colonies was entirely disinterested—the French monarchy's revenge for its earlier defeats in North America being an obvious motive. But the French did not overstay their welcome, and they did supply, in the form of Lafayette in particular, the model of the latter-day "international brigade" volunteer, often symbolized by Lord Byron or, more contentiously perhaps, those English literati who fought in defense of the Spanish republic between 1808 and 1809.

Many also forget that the international campaign in solidarity with the Union under the Lincoln presidency rallied at a time when it was entirely possible that the United Kingdom might have thrown its whole weight behind the Confederacy and even moved troops from Canada to hasten the partition of a country half slave and half free. This is often forgotten, I suggest, because the movement of solidarity was partly led by Karl Marx and his European allies (as was gratefully acknowledged by Henry Adams in his *Education*) and because the boycott of Confederate goods, the blocking of ship-building orders for the Confederate fleet, and other such actions were to some degree

orchestrated by the founders of the communist movement—not the sort of thing that is taught in school when Abraham Lincoln is the patriotic subject. Marx and Friedrich Engels hugely admired Lincoln and felt that just as Russia was the great arsenal of backwardness, reaction, and superstition, the United States was the land of potential freedom and equality.

Now that all other examples of political revolution have become obsolete or have been discredited, the issue is whether the United States is indeed a different sort of country or nation, one that has a creed or an ethic that imposes special duties on it. One way I like to answer this question is by pointing out that if the United States had not been its host and patron in 1945, there would have been no United Nations. The original principles of the organization had to do almost entirely with war and peace, law and (through the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank) finance. But all its new members also found themselves invited to sign the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, originally drafted by Eleanor Roosevelt, and there is no question that U.S. influence lay behind this suggestion. By means of this and a number of other incremental steps, the United States has found itself becoming inexorably committed to upholding a certain standard of what its critics would call idealism.

The Rights of Men

Bass reaches a considerable distance into the past in order to demonstrate that this argument is not at all new and that idealism and realism are not as diametrically opposed as some would have one think; indeed, very often they complement each other. Bass opens by expending a lot of ink on the prototype of the “just cause” and of the Romantic movement: the struggle of the Greeks to be free of the Ottoman Empire. As an old philhellene myself (I have served on two active committees for the liberation of Cyprus and the return of the so-called Elgin Marbles), I thought I knew this subject well, but Bass provides a trove of fresh material, as well as fresh insight, concerning this exciting period of the early 1820s and the neglected topic of the United States’ involvement in it. Let me try to do justice to his presentation.

First of all, and not merely judging with the benefit of hindsight, one should consider how likely it was that the Greeks would have continued as subjects of the Ottoman Empire—in other words, as a bastard form of Christian Turks. Not at all likely, really, which is to say that there was a *prima facie* case to be made that outsiders had a shrewd interest in supporting a cause that was probably going to be ultimately victorious. Second, if the Greeks did not win, then the Turks would, and this in turn would be a victory for the Turkophile Metternich-Castlereagh-Wellington forces in the rest of Europe. In other words, in this case, as in others, failing to help one side was the same thing, strategically as well as morally, as helping the other. (It is not as if famous American “realists” theoretically opposed to intervention have not also embroiled the United States in some grave foreign quarrels in their time, from Cambodia to Chile to, indeed, Cyprus.) Third, there were some “balance of power” questions that, even

though they arose out of what the otherwise philhellenic Jefferson called “the broils of Europe,” still had implications for the United States. Only the fear of entanglement in such “broils,” Jefferson wrote to a Greek correspondent in 1823, “could restrain our generous youth from taking some part in this holy cause.” James Madison was more affirmative, writing that year to President James Monroe and Jefferson that he favored an American declaration, in concert with other countries, such as the United Kingdom, in support of the Greeks. And the ethnologist, American diplomat, and former U.S. Treasury secretary Albert Gallatin proposed what Bass writes “would have been the United States’ first humanitarian intervention.” He did so in distinctly ironic tones, suggesting that Greece be aided by the United States’ “naval force in the Mediterranean—one frigate, one corvette, and one schooner.” This was even less of a navy than the Greek rebels could call on, but the point—not dwelled on by Bass, alas—is that only a few years previously, Jefferson had sent the navy, as well as the newly created U.S. Marine Corps, to shatter the Ottoman fleets that were both enslaving American crews and passengers and denying free trade through the Strait of Gibraltar. The move had led to a huge increase in American prestige as well as to vastly enhanced maritime commerce. Why should the two thoughts not occur again at the same time in the same minds?

In the end, then Secretary of State Adams carried the day (against that improbable champion of liberty: the slavery apologist John Calhoun, who was then secretary of war), and the United States did not go abroad in search of a chance to destroy the monster of Turkish imperialism. As if in compensation, however, the White House proclaimed the Monroe Doctrine, which denounced the “odious and criminal” slave trade, and freely issued warm expressions for the future of Greek statehood.

It is very often by these sorts of crabwise steps and political tradeoffs that the United States finds that it has—perhaps in a fit of absence of mind—avoided one humanitarian commitment by implicitly adopting other ones. These days, this happens every time someone who wants to leave, say, a Saddam Hussein alone is rash enough to wonder out loud what should be done about Darfur, Myanmar (also known as Burma), Tibet, or Zimbabwe. History has a way of adopting such taunts or at least of playing them back to their originators. And this, as Bass shows, is how the international community has gradually moved from double or multiple standards to something like a more intelligible and single one.

Sovereign Sovereignties

It is either unfortunate or significant—and probably both—that so many of Bass’s early examples have to do with confrontations between a Christian (or liberal) West and a Muslim (or imperial) Turkey. In addition to the Greek case, there is the European powers’ protracted intervention in Syria between 1841 and 1861 to underwrite and guarantee the lives and freedoms of the Christian minority there, which resulted in the country’s partition—or, if one prefers, the emergence of a quasi-independent Lebanon.

This was followed in depressingly swift succession by British prime minister William Gladstone's campaign for the cause of the martyred Bulgarians in the 1870s and U.S. ambassador Henry Morgenthau's extraordinary dispatches in the early months of the First World War about what Morgenthau called the "race murder" of the Armenians by the Ottomans. (Even though I do not really believe in the category of "race," I find this term more dramatic and urgent than the legal scholar Raphael Lemkin's "genocide.") At any rate, an amateur reader—or perhaps a resentful Muslim one—could be pardoned for taking away the idea that the West's views of human rights and humanitarian intervention were formed in opposition to the manifest cruelties and depredations of "the Turk," or, as he was sometimes called, "the Mussulman." In fact, the fight over Jerusalem and its status seems to have gone on for longer than most people know, the 1853–56 Crimean War that opposed the Russian Empire to the British, French, and Ottoman Empires being only one of many occasions when Christian states have fought one another for control over the holy sites of Palestine.

The argument over sovereignty and legitimacy, or the argument from the Peace of Westphalia, as it has come to be known by post-Metternichians such as Henry Kissinger, was very familiar in the mid-nineteenth century. In the United Kingdom, which was the fount of most of these claims and their transmitter to the United States, the difference between those who invoked sovereignty and those who scorned it as a cloak for despotism and aggression was very nearly a stand-in for the difference between Tory and Whig. There is not, in most of Europe, any equivalent of the American tradition of right-wing isolationists, from Charles Lindbergh to Pat Buchanan: Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, and British prime minister Benjamin Disraeli, who despised the philhellenes as poetry-sodden subversives, were robustly unhypocritical about wanting the Turks to win, and especially enthusiastic about this should it inconvenience the Russians. Not everyone was an Islamophobe.

Bass is most often but not always fair to those who do not share his view. In citing British prime minister Neville Chamberlain's notorious description of events in Czechoslovakia in 1938 as "a quarrel in a faraway country between people of whom we know nothing," Bass argues that Chamberlain "shrugged off" Hitler's invasion of the Sudetenland. In fact, Chamberlain was trying for a tragic note, saying how ghastly it was that Britons should be digging air-raid trenches for such an arcane reason. And this same man was later to issue a military guarantee to Poland that was much more quixotic than any stand taken on the Sudetenland might have been. Neither he nor any other Tory of the 1930s would have hesitated for a second to dispatch British troops to any part of Africa or Asia, however "faraway" or unknown, if doing so would have served the needs of empire. It is mainly the retrospective guilt of the Final Solution, and the shared failure of the Allied powers to do anything to prevent it, that invests arguments such as Bass's with the tension and anxiety that surround them today. I think that many rational people would applaud the defeat of German imperialism in 1945 on grounds more than merely humanitarian.

Yet here is the journalist Robert Kaplan, cited by Bass, in the immediate aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001: “Foreign policy must return to what it traditionally has been: the diplomatic aspect of national security rather than a branch of Holocaust studies.” Kaplan was arguing, by means of this rather jarring contrast, that the humanitarian interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo had been “luxuries.” But this runs the risk of making a distinction without much, if any, difference. Did the United States not have a national security interest, and NATO an interest of its own, in forcibly repressing the idea that ethnic cleansing, within sight of Hungary and Romania and Greece and Turkey and many other combustible local rivals, could be rewarded and that its perpetrators might go unpunished? Was not some valuable combat experience—and, indeed, nation-building experience—thereby gained? Were not some flaws and weaknesses in the post-Cold War international system, most notably those of the United Nations, rather usefully exposed? And then, a few years later, were the United States’ hardheaded interests in Afghanistan not to be considered connected to the liberation of the Afghans themselves from medieval tyranny? These and other questions are not novel. They have a long and honorable pedigree, as Bass’s book demonstrates.

Bass rightly points out that interventions are not invariably mere simulacra of, or surrogates for, superpower or imperial rivalries. (Thinking that they are is the mistake currently being made by the vulgar apologists for China, Iran, and Russia, three countries that opportunistically are seeking to ally themselves in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization but that denounce all human rights initiatives taken by others as colonial.) I wish Bass had found more space to debate the pros and cons of smaller-scale, nonsuper-power interventions: Tanzania’s invasion of Idi Amin’s Uganda, for instance, or the Vietnamese overthrow of the Khmer Rouge, both in 1979. But he does mention what he calls the role of the regional “middleweight” in more modern times, such as the part played by Australia in East Timor’s transition to independence.

Regarding the Pain of Others

Bass has a considerable gift of phrase—even though one might not rush to adopt his term “atrocitarian” as a nickname for those revolted by acts of genocide. He also has a jaunty flair for recognizing such cynicism in others: It is not without relish that he cites Disraeli’s dismissal of “merciless humanitarians.” And he is no Mrs. Jellyby, fretting only about the miseries of Borrioboola-Gha while ignoring shrieks for mercy from under his own window. On the whole, he makes a sensible case that everyone has a self-interest in the strivings and sufferings of others because the borders between societies are necessarily porous and contingent and are, when one factors in considerations such as the velocity of modern travel, easy access to weaponry, and the spread of disease, becoming ever more so. Americans may not have known or cared about Rwanda in 1994, for instance, but the effect of its crisis on the Democratic Republic of the Congo could have been even more calamitous. Afghanistan’s internal affairs are now the United

States’—in fact, they were already so before Americans understood that. A failed state may not trouble Americans’ sleep, but a rogue one can, and the transition from failed to rogue can be alarmingly abrupt.

Taking a Stand

The lines from which the title of Bass’s book is taken are drawn from Byron:
For Freedom’s battle once begun,
Bequeathed by bleeding Sire to Son,
Though baffled oft is ever won.

These were posted by a militant of Solidarity in the Lenin Shipyard in Gdansk in 1980. Could the West’s rational interest in defeating Soviet imperialism have been accomplished without the unquantifiable element represented by such gestures?

At the same time, I think that Bass occasionally says the right thing just because it sounds good. “The value of stability is that it saves lives,” he writes, and quotes Woodrow Wilson in support: “Social reform can take place only when there is peace.” Yet much of the evidence of his book shows that war and conflict are absolutely needful engines for progress and that arguments about human rights, humanitarian intervention, and the evolution of international laws and standards are all, in the last resort, part of a clash over what constitutes civilization, if not invariably a clash between civilizations.

Especially chilling to me, whether it is intentional or not, is the appearance of new foes in old forms. In 1831, after Tsarist Russia had crushed an independent Poland, the poet Aleksandr Pushkin wrote a minatory “Hands off!” verse, essentially warning the Western powers to stay out of eastern Europe. This thuggish literary effort was revived in 1999 by Russia’s then foreign minister, Igor Ivanov, who loudly cited Pushkin as he cautioned NATO against intervening in Kosovo. Bass argues, I think rather dangerously, that the first occasion was a tragedy and the second one a farce—in other words, that there are times when despotisms are too strong to be stood up to and others when their bluff can be called. Surely, identifying the situation that is appropriate for intervention is both an art and a science, but history has taught us that tyranny often looks stronger than it really is, that it has unexpected vulnerabilities (very often to do with the blunt fact that tyranny, as such, is incapable of self-analysis), and that taking a stand on principle, even if not immediately rewarded with pragmatic results, can be an excellent dress rehearsal for the real thing.

(Foreign Affairs, September/October 2008)

LEGACIES OF TOTALITARIANISM

Victor Serge: Pictures from an Inquisition

Review of *The Case of Comrade Tulayev* and *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, by Victor Serge.

IN MIDDLEMARCH the desiccated pedant Casaubon wastes his life, and the life of another, in a futile search for “the Key to all Mythologies.” In *Bleak House* the wearisome and convoluted case of *Jarndyce v. Jarndyce* eventually exhausts all the resources of the contending parties in the sheer costs of the suit. In *The Case of Comrade Tulayev* a random political murder becomes the excuse for a gigantic, hysterical, all-enveloping bureaucratic investigation, and also the talisman for an ideological witch-hunt that intends to lay bare the most imposing of all conspiracies and convinces the last doubter of the existence of a grand design.

After Dostoyevsky and slightly before Arthur Koestler, but contemporary with Orwell and Kafka and somewhat anticipating Solzhenitsyn, there was Victor Serge. His novels and poems and memoirs, most of them directed at the exposure of Stalinism, were mainly composed in jail or on the run. Some of the manuscripts were confiscated or destroyed by the Soviet secret police; in the matter of poetry Serge was able to outwit them by rewriting from memory the verses he had composed in the Orenburg camp, deep in the Ural Mountain section of the Gulag Archipelago.

For many years Serge was almost lost to view. He was one of those intellectual misfits (I intend no disrespect by the term) who were ground to powder between the upper and nether millstones of Stalin and Hitler. One of his novels was aptly titled *Midnight in the Century* (1939)—the phrase used by old “Left” oppositionists to sum up the nightmare years that culminated in the Hitler-Stalin Pact. He died in penurious exile in Mexico, in 1947. His scattered works were later reassembled and translated and kept alive by a small group of radical devotees, most notably Peter Sedgwick and Richard Greeman, whose work is both summarized and exceeded in *Victor Serge: The Course Is Set on Hope*, a tough-minded and well-written biography produced by Susan Weissman in 2001. Otherwise, Serge studies have been confined somewhere on the margins delineated by *Dissent* magazine and the now defunct *Partisan Review*. Not even Trotskyist sects were always willing to give this veteran revolutionary the respect

that was his due: Serge had quarreled with “The Old Man,” on matters of principle, several times.

So hunted and so cosmopolitan and so factional was Serge’s life that it comes almost as a surprise that he was not Jewish. (When asked if he was—and he was asked fairly frequently—he would respond politely, “It happens that I am not.” Among his many noms de guerre was Victor Klein.) He was born Victor Kibalchich in Belgium in 1890 to a family of commingled Russian, Polish, and Montenegrin ancestry, and a relative on his father’s side had been hanged after the murder of Tsar Alexander II, in 1881. Young Victor soon gravitated to the world of proletarian rebellion, qualifying as a printer and a proofreader and living in the sort of mining village that might have been described by Zola. He took a leading part in denouncing the atrocious rule of King Leopold II of Belgium in the Congo. Impatient with gradualism, and obviously drawn in some way to the depths of society, he removed to Paris, became an anarchist militant with a vagabond streak, and was sentenced to a five-year stretch in solitary confinement in a French jail for his connection to the then-celebrated Bonnot gang. Interestingly, he drew this harsh penalty for refusing to testify against his former comrades. Released in 1917, he went to Barcelona to take part in a brief but intense anarchist revolt, was interned in a gruesome French camp after recrossing the Spanish border, and was exchanged for some French prisoners taken by the Bolsheviks as the First World War ground to its appalling conclusion. He thus involuntarily but not reluctantly made his way to Saint Petersburg, or Petrograd, where it looked as if the genuine article of revolution was at last on offer. By the time of his arrival, in 1919, he had begun to use the name Serge. So before he was thirty he had served some hard time behind bars and behind wire, had been on the losing side a good deal, had gotten to know insurgent Catalonia, and had made a good number of friends on the French intellectual left. All of this hard-won experience was to be pressed into service repeatedly in the even more testing years that lay ahead.

Serge had a gift for transferring experience to the page with graphic immediacy, and for doing so by rapid alternation between journalism and fiction. His jail time produced a novel titled *Men in Prison* (1930), and his presence in Barcelona another named *Birth of Our Power* (1931). His years in Saint Petersburg generated a freshet of on-the-spot reportage that is much superior to the more widely known work of John Reed. Serge was as convinced as Reed of the need for revolution, but he had fewer illusions. It can be claimed for him that he was the first person to recognize and comprehend the roots of the emerging Stalinist regime, or at least to do so from the inside.

It was perhaps a happy chance, if the phrase can be allowed, that the Bolsheviks put Serge in charge of the captured files of the Okhrana—the tsarist secret police. He gave minute attention to these papers, and published a pamphlet detailing the web of repression and surveillance and provocation that he thus uncovered. (It is to the Okhrana that we owe the creation and propagation of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, sometimes mistakenly described as a “forgery”—a forgery, after all, must be of something original or authentic—but perhaps better defined as a cynical yet paranoid

concoction: the key of keys to the greatest conspiracy theory of them all.) To have such a redaction supervised by a former prisoner, internee, and deportee was an intelligent move by the Party, but Serge, unlike others, did not thereby become a neresy hunter or an interrogator manqué. Where some might sniff for the presence of subversive or treasonous dissent, his nostrils were attuned to the stench of the secret policeman—a stench he regarded as far more indicative of decay.

One of the earliest actions of Leninism in power was the establishment of the CHEKA—first of the many, many police acronyms that would include GPU, NKVD, and KGB. Serge was a militant opponent of the Jew-baiting and homicidal White reactionaries, and fought against them with some physical bravery, but he saw at once that the permanence of such a secret apparatus on the Red side was a lethal menace of a different kind. His campaign against it, and against the death penalty (briefly abolished in the early years and then reinstated), marked the beginning of his losing battle against a more ruthless form of tyranny. Of the human type attracted to “CHEKIST” work he wrote in his memoirs, “Long-standing social inferiority-complexes and memories of humiliations and suffering in the Tsar’s jails rendered them intractable, and since professional degeneration has rapid effects, the CHEKAs inevitably consisted of perverted men tending to see conspiracy everywhere and to live in the midst of perpetual conspiracy themselves.”

For example, on the night of January 17, 1920, as the decree abolishing the death penalty was being printed, the CHEKA seized the opportunity to execute as many as 500 suspects—or, as Susan Weissman phrases it so caustically, to liquidate their stock. Serge had an instant intuitive understanding of what this portended. The death of the revolution, he was later to write, was a self-inflicted one.

Nonetheless, and fortunately for us if not for him, he resolved to stay on within the Party and to do what he could. Dispatched to Berlin to help with the Communist International, he discovered that Bolshevism was becoming as bureaucratic and intolerant beyond the borders of the USSR as it was within them. But he also learned about the mounting threat of the madness of fascism, and this produced in him a sort of dual consciousness: First, this new enemy needed to be defeated; second, it needed to be understood. The apparatchiks of communism, however, both underestimated the danger and helped to provoke it. Indeed, it could be said of fascism, as Serge was to write with an acuity that makes one almost dizzy, that “[this] new variety of counterrevolution had taken the Russian Revolution as its schoolmaster in matters of repression and mass-manipulation through propaganda ... [and] had succeeded in recruiting a host of disillusioned, power-hungry ex-revolutionaries; consequently, its rule would last for years.”

Attempting to synthesize these apparent opposites but latent collaborators, Serge came up with the word “totalitarian.” He believed that he had originated it himself; there are some rival claimants from the period of what was then called “war communism,” but it is of interest that the term has its origins within the Marxist left, just as the term “Cold War” was first used by George Orwell in analyzing a then looming

collision of super-powers in 1945. Incidentally, when Serge was later seeking to have his *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (1951) published in English, it was to Orwell that he wrote asking for help.

Indeed (not that it did him much good), Serge had a knack for nosing out the right acquaintances. He met Antonio Gramsci and Georg Lukacs during his years outside Russia, and received a warning from Lukacs not to go back. He later not only escorted Nikos Kazantzakis and Panaït Istrati around the USSR but also was present when Istrati let fall the remark that made him famous: To the old saw “One can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs,” Istrati mordantly retorted, “All right, I can see the broken eggs. Where’s this omelet of yours?” When the honest old Bolshevik diplomat Adolf Joffe committed suicide in 1927, to call attention to the “Thermidor” that was engulfing the revolution, Serge assisted in organizing a mass turnout for Joffe’s funeral; he later realized that he had helped to lead the last legal anti-government protest to be held in Moscow. Within a short time he himself was in one of Stalin’s prisons.

Released after some grueling experiences, he remained—despite his misgivings about the personality of Leon Trotsky—a partisan of the left opposition. Had he not been re-arrested in 1933 and deported to internal exile in Orenburg, he might well have been swept up and discarded forever in the period of even more hysterical persecution that followed the assassination of Sergei Kirov, on December 1, 1934. Kirov had been a popular leader of the Party in Leningrad; most historians now agree that his murder was the signal for the true frenzy of the purges to begin. It was the Soviet equivalent of the Reichstag fire.

Most historians also now agree on another important point: that the murder was organized by Stalin himself, either to remove a well-liked man who could have become a rival, or simply to help justify the political pogrom that he had long had in mind. (See in particular Robert Conquest’s *Stalin and the Kirov Murder* [1989] and Amy Knight’s *Who Killed Kirov?* [1999].) Some time before the assassination Serge had been overheard to say that what he most feared was the killing of some high Party satrap and the consequent licensing of a more comprehensive terror. Thus what is most interesting about his novel on the subject is that it begins by apparently exculpating Stalin from the main charge.

The *Case of Comrade Tulayev* (1948), which opens with the murder of a high Communist official by that name, makes an enormous sacrifice as a work of suspense by giving away the ostensible “plot” almost at once. We see a righteous and somewhat disturbed young man as he acquires a weapon by chance, takes to carrying it with him everywhere, and to his immense surprise runs into a senior “target of opportunity” on a darkened street. Pulling the trigger on impulse, to relieve his general feelings of alienation, he makes an easy escape, because there is absolutely nothing to connect him to the crime and he did nothing to prepare for it. But this apparently naive device actually imparts a considerable tensile strength to the ensuing chapters, as we see from the reaction of the Party and its leader that nothing in the Soviet Union can be admitted to happen by accident.

The papers briefly announced “the premature death of Comrade Tulayev.” The first secret investigation produced sixty-seven arrests in three days. Suspicion at first fell on Tulayev’s secretary, who was also the mistress of a student who was not a Party member. Then it shifted to the chauffeur who had brought Tulayev to his door—a Security man with a good record, not a drinker, no questionable relations, a former soldier in the special troops, and a member of the Bureau of his garage cell. Why had he not waited until Tulayev had entered the house, before driving off? Why, instead of going in immediately, had Tulayev walked a few paces down the sidewalk?

(The subsequent fate of the chauffeur is more than you want to contemplate.) We all now understand that dictatorship depends to an unusual degree on sheer caprice rather than predictable or systematic enforcement, but it was Serge’s early insight that those Marxists who had prided themselves above all on their cold and objective lucidity had become “fuddled with a theoretical intoxication bordering on delusion ... enclosed within all the tricks and tomfooleries of servility.” (This remark is from his *Memoirs*.)

The best novel of the postwar Stalinist purges—the ones that spread to Eastern Europe—is Eric Ambler’s *Judgment on Deltchev* (1951). Here, the purge takes the form of isolating an inconvenient dissident (or potential dissident) and destroying his reputation before framing him. There’s nothing of this glacial cynicism in Serge’s novel. The post-1934 spy fever may have had a core of rationality when it began, or was inaugurated, but its special feature was the sheer mania and panic in which it engulfed society, becoming an exhausting, unstoppable thing in itself. At one point (Doris Lessing describes it somewhere in her account of abandoning communism) medieval instruments of torture were taken from Russian museums and deployed in the cellars and interrogation pits of Stalin’s police. The image is perfect for evoking the choking medieval nightmare of plague-dread, xenophobia, and persecution that enveloped the Soviet Union and destroyed the last remnants of its internationalism. If the characters and automatons of *The Case of Comrade Tulayev* understand any one thing, it is the idea that the enemy is everywhere, and everyone. Poor old Makeyev, one of Serge’s better-drawn minor characters, is a plebeian mediocrity with some physical courage who becomes a regional commissar by dint of brute force and sterling loyalty. He is the negation of the Bolshevik cosmopolitan—a figure from Chekhov. He at first feels himself “integrated into the dictatorship of the proletariat like a good steel screw set into its proper place in some admirable, supple, and complex machine.” But Stalin—“the man of steel”—was at the helm of a locomotive determined to go off the rails, and who can redeem a Makeyev from a catastrophe like that?

As in the most intricate and sadistic courts of antique Oriental despotism, the thing to be feared almost as much as being “out of favor” was the special terror of sudden advancement. (Many later personal reminiscences of Stalin were to record that it was in genial mood that he was most to be feared.) I shall have to be forgiven for quoting at length here, since Serge captured this mental and moral atmosphere so faultlessly.

Erchov, recalled from the Far East, where he had thought himself happily forgotten by the Personnel Service, had been offered an unparalleled promotion: High Commissar for Security in conjunction with Commissar of the People for Internal Affairs, which practically carried with it the rank of marshal—the sixth marshal—or was it the third, since three of the five had disappeared? “Comrade Erchov, the Party puts its confidence in you! I congratulate you!” The words were spoken, his hand shaken, the office (it was one of the Central Committee offices, on the same floor as the General Secretariat) was full of smiles. Unannounced, the Chief entered quickly, looked him up and down for a split second—a superior studying an inferior; then, so simply, so cordially, smiling like the others and perfectly at ease, the Chief shook Maxim Andreyevich Erchov’s hand and looked into his eyes with perfect friendliness. “A heavy responsibility, Comrade Erchov. Bear it well.” The press photographer flashed his magnesium lightning over all the smiles ... Erchov had reached the pinnacle of his life, and he was afraid.

In the ensuing sentences, Serge transcends Gogol and anticipates Nineteen Eighty-four:

Three thousand dossiers, of capital importance because they called for capital punishment, three thousand nests of hissing vipers, suddenly descended like an avalanche upon his life, to remain with him every instant. For a moment the greatness of the Chief reassured him. The Chief, addressing him as “Maxim Andreyevich” in a cordial tone, paternally advised him “to go easy with personnel, keeping the past in mind yet never failing in vigilance, to put a stop to abuses.”—“Men have been executed whom I loved, whom I trusted, men precious to the Party and the State!” he exclaimed bitterly. “Yet the Political Bureau cannot possibly review every sentence! It is up to you,” he concluded. “You have my entire confidence.” The power that emanated from him was spontaneous, human, and perfectly simple; the kindly smile, in which the russet eyes and the bushy mustache joined, attested it; it made you love him.

Erchov, as you will have intuited from the above passage, doesn’t last long in the job and is soon humiliated and purged in his turn. But by then he has helped to set in motion a machinery of inquisition, supported by a Borgesian labyrinth of bureaucratic incrimination, that assumes a horrific autonomy. Men who were miles away at the time, or who had already been exiled or jailed, are put through the mill again and compelled to answer impossible questions. In faraway Spain, in the death throes of the republic and the last gasp of the Catalan Revolution, with Franco’s and Hitler’s forces at the very gates, random Trotskyists are kidnapped and forced to confess their part in the murder of Comrade Tulayev.

Or not to confess it. Serge was a friend to Andrés Nin, the leader of Catalonia’s left-opposition POUM (and the translator of Dostoyevsky into Catalan), and he always had a special regard for the old revolutionaries who never “broke.” In many ways, placed next to *Midnight in the Century*, this novel is their memorial. There’s inevitable speculation about the influence exerted, by means of both title and subject matter, on Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*. It is certainly true that in *Tulayev* we meet the figure of Kiril Rublev, an old Bolshevik who is strenuously (and eloquently) pressed to

admit to inconceivable offenses because he can perform a last service to the Party by abasing himself in this way. But unlike Koestler's Rubashov, many of Serge's characters stubbornly decline the logic of the grand inquisitor.

Serge himself was one of the few to refuse it, and this probably saved his life. There came a time when the agitation abroad in his behalf became too much to overlook, and when a campaign for his release—led by Romain Rolland—had embarrassed even the intellectual prostitutes of the French fellow-traveling classes. Stalin decided to examine the case in person, but before doing so he asked his police chiefs what crimes Serge had confessed to while in the Orenburg camp. He must have been somewhat startled to be told that the prisoner had confessed to nothing at all (a distinct rarity in those times), and this made it easier to release and deport Serge without too much loss of face.

Given this standard of fortitude, and given the contempt Serge always felt for Stalin's collaborators, a remarkable feature of *The Case of Comrade Tulayev* is its chiaroscuro. In one passage the monstrous figure of "The Chief" is represented as a prisoner of fate, only pretending to arbitrate the destiny of a sixth of the earth's surface and of every one of its inhabitants. That Serge intended no lenience here we may be sure, but we may likewise be sure that he would never have swallowed the later euphemisms and half-truths of Khrushchev, putting blame for all the enormities of an epoch on the evil of a single individual. One of the most despicable engineers of the Tulayev witch-hunt, a creepy old time-server named Popov who trades on a reputation for staunch service, is limned not like an Iago but like a modern Polonius, full of pathetic advice and mumbling rhetoric. And this old wreck has his Ophelia—a daughter in Paris whose spontaneity and generosity will not allow her to take part in the lie. The freshness and honesty of Xenia Popov are eventually suicidal, but deadly also to her father's sordid compromise with the usurper's court. In its remorseless emphasis on the ineluctable along with its insistence on the vitality of individual human nature, *The Case of Comrade Tulayev* is one of the most Marxist novels ever written—as it is also one of the least.

(The Atlantic, December 2002)

André Malraux: One Man's Fate

Review of Malraux: A Life, by Olivier Todd.

ISAIAH BERLIN once described someone whom I will not name as "that very rare thing: a perfect charlatan." Admit that this ostensibly lethal criticism contains a note of reluctant admiration, and you have the tone of Olivier Todd's newest biography, *Malraux: A Life* (which has been translated from the French by Joseph West). André Malraux was one of the most prolific self-inventors of the twentieth century, and it is "the Malrucian legend," as much as the life itself, that is Todd's subject.

This is perhaps a pity, since it causes Todd to devote more space to the succeeding stages of Malraux's dazzling metamorphoses—from marginal arriviste to major cultural impresario of Charles de Gaulle's Fifth Republic—than to the novels by which he is chiefly remembered. One might make that “the novel”: *La Condition Humaine*, or *Man's Fate*. Published in 1933, it did for fiction what Harold Isaacs's *Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution* did for scholarship. It pointed up the increasing weight of Asia in world affairs; it described epic moments of suffering and upheaval, in Shanghai especially (it was nearly filmed by Sergei Eisenstein); and it demonstrated a huge respect for Communism and for Communists while simultaneously evoking the tragedy of a revolution betrayed by Moscow. Somewhat lushly Orientalist in its manner, the novel was ridiculed for its affectation by Vladimir Nabokov and hailed as prescient by Arthur Koestler.

For Todd, the author of several works, including a biography of Camus, all this is of less importance than the knowledge that Malraux had spent almost no time in China itself. Toward the end of this book, he hits on a near-perfect Left Bank encapsulation for his subject. Malraux was, we learn, “autonomous in relation to facts.” That is to phrase it mildly. One of the characters in Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* is described as being so corrupt that he would happily have paid for the pleasure of selling himself. Malraux was such a fantasist that he would have paid handsomely for a forged narrative that was designed to deceive himself. He invented a relationship with Mao. He exaggerated his role in the Spanish Civil War. He fabricated a glorious past in the French Resistance.

Like all supreme con artists, he did possess the knack of being in the right place at the right time, and of scraping acquaintance with the great. As I turned the pages, I was put in mind of a Gallic version of Harry Flashman: fast-talking and protean, covered with unearned glory and full of embellished traveler's tales from many plundered colonies. (Malraux preferred to imagine himself as T. E. Lawrence. Either analogy would be imperfect in one respect: Malraux was a heterosexual but seems often to have preferred food and drink to sex.)

He was born in 1901 in Paris, the son of a small-time stockbroker. His first overseas adventure was the one that made him notorious: an expedition in 1923 to French-ruled Cambodia, during which he amputated priceless bits of sculpture and statuary from some ancient temples. Arrested and charged for this, he managed to induce quite a number of Parisian intellectuals and aesthetes, including André Gide and André Maurois, to take up his case as if it were an injustice being committed by the colonial authorities. Going even further than his fellow Andrés on behalf of another André, the Surrealist André Breton added, with magnificent condescension to the Cambodians, “Who in their homeland really cares about the preservation of these works of art?” The price for all this chutzpah was that Malraux then had to take up the cause of the colonial indigenes as if it really mattered to him. Moving to Saigon in the mid-1920s, he helped to produce a troublemaking newspaper, *L'Indochine*, which ventilated the

many complaints of the Vietnamese about forced labor, land expropriation, and police brutality.

It was at this point, Todd dryly notes, that Malraux began to speak of his admiration for Gabriele D'Annunzio. As a model for emulation, this freebooting soldier and aviator might not seem so obvious. His freelance attack on Fiume at the end of the First World War was the inspiration for the thuggish Mussolini and his later march on Rome. Why or how should it have appealed to the sensitive Malraux, with his delicate features and his nervous facial tic—diagnosed by Todd as a symptom of Tourette's syndrome? But the later development of the Malraux myth makes it clear that D'Annunzio was in fact the near-perfect emblem for his vicariousness and ambition. Above all, he wished to be a hero, and the price in bombast and pretension and attitude-striking was one that he thought well worth paying. D'Annunzio was essentially a Nietzschean rhetorician who tried to dissolve the difference between word and deed. Malraux was to become a writer of fiction, and of quasi-fictional memoirs that he hoped would be taken literally.

One of those who stood aside from this division—Raymond Aron—regarded himself as prose and Malraux as poetry. In the meltdown and ferment of culture and civilization that succeeded the First World War, how banal it must have seemed to favor mere liberal democracy. But Aron's later judgment of Malraux ("one third genius, one third false, one third incomprehensible") would be remarkably useful in evaluating the novels with which Malraux made his reputation. These adaptations of his Asian travels, *Les Conquerants* (1928), *La Voie Royale* (1930), and *La Condition Humaine* (1993), amounted to a trilogy on the Chinese Revolution. In tone, they swung awkwardly between a sort of vulgar Marxism and a Bonapartist invocation of *la gloire*. Indeed, Malraux never lost his admiration for Napoleon, and produced a potboiling biography of him at the same time.

By this stage, Malraux had been compelled to confront the figure of Trotsky, who was a special synthesis of the cosmopolitan intellectual, man of action, and wielder of power. His expulsion from Stalin's Soviet Union in the late twenties had been partly the result of a furious debate on the future of the Chinese Revolution. (The first edition of Isaacs's *Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution* actually bore Trotsky's preface.) Todd devotes a brief chapter to Malraux's fascination with this epic figure. As ever, the Frenchman was torn between an admiration for a historic personality and a queasy consciousness that he himself had debts to pay and credit to keep in the Parisian leftist milieu. He did not waste all that much time in making up his mind. After an absurd, melodramatic proposal to mount a rescue team of intellectuals to snatch Trotsky from his place of exile in Alma-Ata, Malraux simmered down a bit and later read Trotsky's rather flattering critique of *Les Conquerants* in *La Nouvelle Revue Française*. When Trotsky's long exile wanderings brought him through France in the 1930s, Malraux went to call upon him and the two men discussed everything from Celine to cinema. But by then, the cultural ascendancy of the French Communist Party was making life distinctly tough for dissenters on the left, and Malraux seems to have decided that the old Bolshevik was just another loser. He began to pitch his tent with that

most tiresome of the intellectual factions of the 1930s: the regulars at international conferences of writers and scholars.

Trotsky's own later verdict on this exhibition—"Malraux is organically incapable of moral independence; he was born biddable"—now appears quite restrained. Many Western intellectuals had to find their way through illusions about 1917, and make their own painful accommodations with the awful truths they discovered about Stalin. Malraux, who knew about the persecution and murder of Stalin's opponents well before most people had learned the facts, made a conscious decision to join what he must have thought was the winning side. Nothing else can explain his appalling, flatulent verbiage about the heroic continuity of 1789 and 1917, or his dogged attendance at sham events that were openly and cynically controlled by the Soviet cultural commissars.

But his chief excuse for this behavior became, paradoxically, his finest hour. General Franco's invasion of Republican Spain, as the surrogate of the Axis powers, provided our hero with the opportunity to become a sort of impresario of the left. Annexing some of the prestige of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, and trading on a very slight experience as an airman himself, Malraux flamboyantly decided to provide the Spanish Republic with air cover.

Todd is bent on puncturing most of the balloons that Malraux sent aloft in his long and boastful career, but even he cannot forbear to applaud once or twice in this account. Of course Malraux's flying circus was made up of aerial coffins, frequently piloted by unscrupulous mercenaries or crazed idealists. Of course Malraux himself claimed to have been on expeditions where he never flew, and to have sustained an honorable combat wound that was actually the result of an ignominious crash on takeoff. *Mais que voulez-vous?* A bit of dash, and an element of resistance, were added to the desperate struggle for the defense of Madrid. Yet Malraux was not quite the French Hemingway. He seconded all the falsehoods of Stalinism in Spain and excused all of its crimes and went back to Paris to try to persuade André Gide to bury or postpone his classic of anti-Soviet disillusionment: *Retour de l'URSS*. Todd himself, here, is somewhat hard to follow. He introduces the later French Resistance hero Jean Moulin as if we should already know who he was and what he was to become (which we doubtless should, but still), and he makes a confusion between the poet John Cornford and the philosopher Maurice Cornforth that, even given French disdain for the mere empiricism of British Marxists, shakes one's confidence in his grasp of the subject.

Malraux wrote, in *La Voie Royale*, that "every adventurer is born a mythomaniac." This could serve as a decoding of his next phase: the Nazi occupation of France. Most of the story is one long profile in prudence. Until well into 1944, he rebuffed all efforts to recruit him into the Resistance. Once again seeing a turn in the tide, he signed up just before the Allied landings in Normandy. His hero Napoleon used to ask, of any new general, "Is he lucky?" Malraux had the luck of the devil. He made some useful friends in British Intelligence and managed briefly to cut a figure during the siege of Strasbourg. Every single claim he subsequently made can be demonstrated as false by Todd, but there was a general need to pretend that the Resistance had been more

epic than it really was. At the close of hostilities, Malraux was even approached by de Gaulle, who had heard garbled accounts of his record, and from then on Malraux was able to stick like a limpet to an authentic man of destiny.

It deserves to be said that he stuck through thick and thin, remaining at the general's side even during the years of political exile. He became the public intellectual of the R.P.F. (*Rassemblement du Peuple Francais*), the slightly shady populist projection of the Gaullist personality. His genius for publicity, and for the making of windy rhetorical presentations, served him well. When de Gaulle took power again in 1958, Malraux at first took charge of state broadcasting and information (in which capacity he told a number of cheerful lies about the collapsing French position in Algeria). But it wasn't long before he found himself in the position of inventing a Ministry of Culture for an otherwise rather prosaic government.

At this point, and given a certain recent *froideur* on the international front, some American readers may be thinking of Malraux as a typical French combination of pseudo-intellectual and *valet du pouvoir*. So it's of interest to note that he was always drawn to the United States. At the outbreak of the Second World War he had prophesied that America would be the decisive country in ending the conflict, and he was fond of saying that the United States was the first nation to rise to international pre-eminence without having sought the role. As minister of culture, he made tremendous overtures to the newly elected Kennedy administration, charming the former Miss Bouvier in particular and arranging to have the "Mona Lisa" brought for a special showing in Washington.

All his life, he was able to parlay one meeting or acquaintance into another, and to stay one jump ahead of his reputation. This, combined with his fascination for the superman, allowed him to bring off the following coup. As de Gaulle's minister, he was able to visit China in 1965 and to persuade the rather baffled Chinese authorities to grant him an audience with Mao. Todd's account of the interview is by turns hilarious—Malraux claimed to have led "peasant units" during the war against Germany—and revolting: Malraux's abject sycophancy tired even the ailing despot. The meeting was brief and platitudinous, but in later accounts, including his gloriously mendacious *Antimemoires*, Malraux turned it into a major summit of great minds. In consequence, and also because he had been seen so often with the Kennedys, he was invited to brief Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger before they set off on their visit to Beijing. Malraux must have known he was on very thin ice here, and could have been exposed as an impostor at any moment, but he carried off the bluff with considerable aplomb. It is even possible that by this stage he had come to believe his own story.

Malraux's favorite symbol was the cat, and he would often inscribe his letters with an image of a feline. Todd admirably resists the temptation to make a cliché out of this metaphor, but I shall not. The man really did have nine lives, and he almost always landed on his feet. The upheaval in Paris in 1968, with which he may have felt a small sympathy, nonetheless allowed him to combat the street theater of the student

revolutionaries with some histrionic gestures of his own, and he survived the eclipse of his hero de Gaulle with some credit still left.

The end was not glorious. Malraux's facial tic was accompanied by a black dog of depression, and he became dependent first on alcohol and then on a succession of medications. His family life deteriorated horribly. When the end came, in November 1976, two sprays of red flowers were delivered to the cemetery. One was from the French Communist Party, which he had fawned upon in the 1930s and turned upon in the 1940s. The other was from the restaurant Lasserre: grand scene of many of his dinner-table revolutions. On his bedside table, after his death, it was found that he had scrawled the words: "It should have been otherwise." A more apt, if lenient, epitaph might be located in *La Condition Humaine*: "Ce n'était ni vrai ni faux, c'était vécu." "It was neither true nor false, but what was experienced."

(The New York Times Book Review, April 10, 2005)

Arthur Koestler: The Zealot

Review of Koestler: *The Literary and Political Odyssey of a Twentieth-Century Skeptic*, by Michael Scammell.

ICANNOT RECALL a book title that was less well-shaped to its subject. Far from being a "skeptic," Arthur Koestler was a man not merely convinced but actively enthused by practically any intellectual or political or mental scheme that came his way. When he was in the throes of an allegiance, he positively abhorred doubt, which he sometimes called "bellyaching." If he was ever dubious about anything, one could say in his defense, it was at least about himself. He was periodically paralyzed by self-reproach and insecurity, and once wrote a defensive third-person preface to one of his later novels (*The Age of Longing*) in which he described its style as modeled on that of a certain "A. Koestler," whose writing, "lacking in ornament and distinction, is easy to imitate." The author himself was written off as "a much afflicted scribe of his time, greedy for pleasure, haunted by guilt, who enjoyed a short vogue and was then forgotten, like the rest of them."

In fact, Koestler succeeded in achieving several things that transcended his own time and made him into what Danilo Kiš called the prototypical Central European intellectual. He was enabled to do them because he believed that the intellectual ought also to be a man of action. He took part in the anti-fascist struggles of the 1930s and '40s first as a true-believing Communist and then as an ex-Communist, and out of this synthesis he generated at least one work of nonfiction (*Spanish Testament*) and one novel (*Darkness at Noon*), which between them helped redefine the essential struggle as the one against totalitarianism tout court. No other single individual, with the exception of George Orwell—upon whom Koestler had a marked influence—could claim as much. Second, he managed to register practically every phase, emotional and ideological, of diasporic engagement with Zionism. Third, he was able to demonstrate that

an individual could make a difference in the battle of the behemoths that constituted the Cold War.

To be born Hungarian and Jewish and German-speaking is to start at a slightly odd angle to the world. For instance, Koestler was unusual in retaining what Michael Scammell calls “fond memories” of the 1919 Communist putsch in Hungary, a botched and bloody business that led many people to actually welcome the advent of the vengeful right as a deliverance. This right was organically hostile to Jewry, but not even that explains Koestler’s nostalgia for Béla Kun, which in any case makes an odd fit with his decision, as a refugee and student in Vienna, to join a nationalist dueling-and-drinking club that effectively molded young Jews into ersatz Germans. Once more his formation and evolution were against the traditional grain: Most European Jews were drawn to Palestine by labor and socialist groups, but when Koestler set off for the Holy Land he did so as a consecrated follower of Vladimir Jabotinsky and the so-called Revisionists. Parlaying his fierce journalism from the Middle East into a job with a German newspaper syndicate in Berlin, Koestler was able to interview Einstein and begin a lifelong amateur engagement with science, while keeping up a keen interest in the subject of eugenics: a field that (in 1930s Germany, of all times and all places) he regarded as promising.

The word one might choose to describe this riot of enthusiasms and contradictions would be promiscuous. It would certainly sit very well with Koestler’s private life, which was a hectic, alarming, and sometimes violent blend of alcoholism and satyriasis. Scammell holds retrospective psychology to a minimum but cannot escape noticing Koestler’s flight from an overprotective mother or his keen awareness of his short stature. We have Koestler’s own word for it—in *Arrow in the Blue*, which I think is the best of his volumes of memoirs—that he habitually felt awkward and uneasy and sometimes an impostor. This book provides persuasive evidence of acute manic depression, combated in one way by sex and booze and in another by devotion to a series of causes. Otto Katz once said to him, “We all have inferiority complexes of various sizes, but yours isn’t a complex—it’s a cathedral.” Koestler liked this remark so much that he included it in his autobiography, thus attaining the status of one who could actually brag about his inferiority complex as if size mattered.

It was often believed in those days that absorption into the historic movement of the working class was the cure for the angst of the petit bourgeois and the deracinated intellectual. This could help explain the utterness of Koestler’s surrender to Communism. Not even a visit to the famine-racked USSR—where he traveled around with a completely credulous Langston Hughes—was enough to unpersuade him. He set off for Spain and the civil war as a dedicated agent of the Comintern, and if the Spanish Fascists who arrested him had guessed his true identity, they would have shot him out of hand. Had they done so, they would have unknowingly dealt anti-Communism a frightful blow. Koestler’s experience of Franco’s cells in Málaga, with victims dragged to execution almost every night, helped furnish the stark raw material for *Darkness at*

Noon: certainly the best jail book since Victor Serge's *Men in Prison* and almost as influential in combating Stalinism as *Nineteen Eighty-four*.

Koestler's decision to abandon Communism almost as soon as he had been freed from Spain—because of the hysterical faking of the Moscow purge trials in 1938—was expressed in such brilliantly diagnostic and dialectical terms that it bears quoting:

It is a logical contradiction when with uncanny regularity the leadership sees itself obliged to undertake more and more bloody operations within the movement, and in the same breath insists that the movement is healthy. Such an accumulation of grave surgical interventions points with much greater likelihood to the existence of a much more serious illness.

To say that Koestler's zeal replicated itself in the anti-Communist cause would be to say the least of it. Scammell takes us once again through the story of the Congress for Cultural Freedom and the CIA, but spends time illustrating what few people understand even now: The CIA's hold on the financing of intellectual warfare was actually used as a brake on volunteers like Koestler, who were regarded as too vitriolically anti-Soviet and temperamentally hostile to compromise.

Having temporarily abandoned Zionism for Communism, he resumed his engagement by covering (and participating in) the violent birth of Israel, initially taking the side of the Menachem Begin ultra-nationalists but eventually becoming sickened by the violence of the Zionist right and finally worrying whether there should be a Jewish state at all. Scammell is not quite in his depth here: He conflates the Stern gang and the Irgun and gives superficial treatment (as he also does, bizarrely, to Koestler's part in producing *The God That Failed*) to a subsequent book, *The Thirteenth Tribe*. In this, his last semi-serious work, Koestler suggested that Ashkenazi Jews were actually descended from the lost people of Khazaria, who before vanishing from the northern Caucasus a thousand years ago had somehow opted to Judaize themselves. One implication of that theory was that no authentic Ashkenazi Jewish tie to Palestine could ever be established. "Arthur just rather enjoys betraying his former friends," I remember Patricia Cockburn snorting when this effort was published in the 1970s.

That might have been unfair—she remembered how her husband, Claud, had sweated to get Koestler out of jail in Spain, only to be rewarded with apostasy—but in his last two decades Koestler abandoned every kind of scruple and objectivity and became successively bewitched by "theories" of levitation, ESP, telepathy, and UFOs. He was enthralled by Timothy Leary and played for a sucker by the paranormal spoon-bender Uri Geller. The sleep of his reason did not even bring forth monsters: Poor Koestler simply gave a fair wind and his once-valued imprimatur to a succession of pathetic quacks and mountebanks.

In a noble if melodramatic way, Koestler had once held a sort of dress rehearsal for suicide with Walter Benjamin, as both contemplated being taken alive by the Gestapo. (He kept the pills Benjamin gave him, while the latter swallowed his on the Spanish border a few days later.) By comparison, his own suicide in 1983 was an affair very much lacking in grandeur. His mind and his body were certainly both giving way, but

he seems to have allowed or perhaps encouraged his healthy wife, Cynthia, to join him in the extinction. An earlier study by David Cesarani was lurid to the point of sensationalism about Koestler's callousness toward his wives and other women (to say nothing of other people's wives). It has been plausibly alleged that in his compulsive seductions—of Simone de Beauvoir, for one—he did not always stop quite short of physical coercion. Scammell does his best to plead extenuation here, but is obviously uncomfortable. Just as many of the people who believe in numinous coincidence and supernatural intervention are secretly hoping to prove that it is they themselves who are the pet of the universe, so many of those who overcompensate for inferiority are possessed of titanic egos and regard other people as necessary but incidental. At least this case is a tragic one when considered as a life story, because it shows us what a noble mind was there o'erthrown.

(The Atlantic, December 2009)

Isabel Allende: Chile Redux

Introduction (2005) to *The House of the Spirits*, by Isabel Allende.

IT IS WHILE SPEAKING of the island of Crete, in Saki's story *The Jesting of Arlington Stringham*, that the eponymous character says that the place "produces more history than it can consume locally." We all know of certain distinctive countries on the map of which this seems to be true. For some reason, a lot of them also begin with the letter C: Czechoslovakia (which now exists only in memory), Cuba, Cyprus—and Chile. And there is also a literary surplus that often comes with these territories: Think only of Kafka, Kundera, Yglesias, and Neruda.

For people of a certain generation (my own, to be exact: those of us sometimes vulgarly described as the baby-boomers), the imagery and cosmology of Chile are a part of ourselves. A country shaped like a long, thin, jagged blade, forming the littoral of almost an entire continent, and poised to crumble into the ocean leaving only the Andes behind. A place of earthquakes and wine and poets, like some Antarctic Aegean. And a place of arms: the scene of the grand twentieth-century confrontation between Allende and Pinochet. The nation's territory includes the Atacama desert, an expanse of rain forest, a huge deposit of copper, a great valley full of vines, and the mysteriously-stated Polynesian outpost of Easter Island, known to the indigenous as Rapanui, or "the navel of the world." (The navel, or omphalos, was also the name given by the ancients to the oracular cave at Delphi.)

The voices and portents in *La Casa de los Espiritus* are also somewhat cryptic at times, as befits the school of "magical realism." This style, or manner, was actually pioneered somewhat earlier than most people think, by Jorge Luis Borges in neighboring Argentina. In 1926 he published an essay, "Tales of Turkestan," in which he hymned the sort of story where "the marvelous and the everyday are entwined ... there are angels as there are trees." In 1931, in *The Postulation of Reality*, he announced

that fiction was “an autonomous sphere of corroborations, omens and monuments,” as bodied forth in the “predestined” Ulysses of James Joyce.

From the very beginning of Isabel Allende’s narration, disbelief is suspensible in the most natural way, and (if you pay attention) the premonitions begin to register. Rather cleverly—and subversively—the action begins in a church. Bored by the blackmailing liturgy, and by the devotional decorations which make an everyday trade out of the officially supernatural, the Trueba family is preoccupied with the truly extraordinary developments within its own ranks. Effortlessly, we find ourselves conscripted into the truth of this tale; from green hair to the gift of prophecy and divination and the taken-for-granted ability to fly. Just off the center of the stage, in carefully placed hints and allusions to the Prussian goose-step, to the future burning of the books and to the Marxist gentleman referred to as “the candidate,” we can also pick up the faint drum-taps of the far-off tragic denouement.

Children and animals are often the conveyors of the magical: innocence and experience being in their cases less immediately distinguishable. Clara and the dog Barrabás would make an almost cartoonish filmic double-act for anyone with the necessary entrepreneurial imagination: a sort of Scooby-Doo with the facts of life thrown in. Here it is Isabel Allende’s brilliantly dead-pan and dry humor, concerning such things as the beast Barrabás’s murderous penis, that draws us into the story and makes us surrender. In counterpoint to this highly bearable lightness, her notes of seriousness are correspondingly weighty. (Why does nobody ever believe Clara’s prophecies? Because nobody ever believed Cassandra.) By the time we reach chapter five (“The Lovers”) we are suddenly aware that we are watching a parody of *Animal Farm* in reverse, with a song about chickens organizing to defeat a fox heard by a wealthy landowner who wants to put a stop to such romantic nonsense.

The romance between the rich man’s daughter and the penniless son of the peasant is such a folkloric cliché that one has to become wary for an instant, even with an author who has already won one’s trust. However, *The House of the Spirits* depends for its ingenuity on the blending of the microcosmic with the macrocosmic: the little society of the family and the wider society of Chile. Lineage is important in the unfolding of this, and the Truebas all have one dynastic name, while the “Pedros”—like the nameless French serfs who were all called “Jacques”—mark their descent by numbers: Secundo, Tercero ... just like monarchs in fact. Isabel Allende herself bears a great name that has become imperishable for nonhereditary reasons, and so it is rather generous of her, in the circumstances, to invert what is traditional and to make a hero out of what Marxism might normally prefer to cast as a villain. Esteban Trueba is a patriarch in every sense: a self-made man of property and a seigneur who haughtily insists on exercising every droit, libidinous or financial. His appetites are gigantic, and no peasant girl is safe from him, but he feels himself bound nonetheless by a *contrat social* and a sense of noblesse oblige. (If I lapse into French instead of Spanish at this point, it is because all metaphors of the *lutte de classe* are ultimately French ones.)

My own family is not the only one where there exists an extraordinary bond between grandfather and granddaughter. The emotional strength of this phenomenon has been noted many times (some people even joke that such alliances are so durable and intense because they are based upon a common enemy). At any rate, we know from the highly candid and affecting memoirs of Isabel Allende that her own grandfather, Agustín Llona, was in many ways the “main man” in her early life: the representative of the masculine virtues. Indeed, he is the *raison d’être* of this novel. One day, in exile from her martyred country, Isabel Allende heard the awful news:

that my grandfather was dying, and that he had told the family he had decided to die. He had stopped eating and drinking, and he sat in his chair to wait for death. At that moment I wanted so badly to write and tell him that he was never going to die, that somehow he would always be present in my life, because he had a theory that death didn’t exist, only forgetfulness did. He believed that if you can keep people in your memory, they will live forever. That’s what he did with my grandmother. So I began to write him a long letter, elaborated from the awful thought that he was going to die.

Esteban Trueba, the fictional memorial of this grand old gentleman, is life-affirming. He builds a grand estate at Tres Marías out of his own unremitting struggle with adversity, and accepts the responsibility for his tenants even as he declines to listen to any whining or subversive back-chat from them. He also becomes a distinguished senator, and leads the charge against the party of Allende, even irritating the more conciliatory conservatives who dislike making a fuss:

“The day we can’t get our hands on the ballot boxes before the vote is counted we’re done for,” Trueba argued.

“The Marxists haven’t won by popular vote anywhere in the world,” his confreres replied. “At the very least it takes a revolution, and that kind of thing doesn’t happen in this country.”

“Until it happens!” Trueba answered furiously.

“Relax, hombre. We’re not going to let that happen,” they consoled him. “Marxism doesn’t stand a chance in Latin America. Don’t you know it doesn’t allow for the magical side of things?”

In the context, that’s rather a clever question. And, in her grandpa’s quoted opinion that forgetfulness is the equivalent of death, isn’t there an echo of the author, much admired by Isabel Allende, who has most attempted to fuse Marxism with magic? Gabriel García Márquez, in his epic *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, describes a village which suffers an epidemic of insomnia. After an interval of chaotic and protracted wakefulness, the increasingly deranged inhabitants begin to forget the names of common objects. Their solution is to write labels and affix them to the said objects, which serves to keep the crisis at bay for a while. But then the insomnia mutates into radical amnesia, and they begin to forget what letters stand for, and how words are written or read.... Esteban Trueba’s wife, Clara, the mistress of his other grand home in the capital city, experiences a similar difficulty, managing “to keep that immense covered

wagon of a house rolling with its population of eccentrics, even though she had no domestic talent and disdained the basic operations of arithmetic to the point of forgetting how to add.” By the way, in the same chapter we learn that “the presence of his granddaughter sweetened Esteban Trueba’s character. The change was imperceptible, but Clara noticed it. Slight symptoms gave him away: the sparkle in his eyes when he saw the little girl, the expensive presents he bought her, the anguish he felt if he heard her cry. Still, it was not enough to bring him closer to Blanca. His relationship with his daughter had never been good ...”

The class war is fought not just between the siblings of the Trueba dynasty and the humble Tercero family, but among them as well. Like many mighty patriarchs, Esteban Trueba is fated to be disappointed by his sons as well as his daughter. One of the boys, Nicolás, becomes somewhat futile and vapid, wasting his time on aeronautical fantasies and difficult women. Another, Jaime, becomes a conscience-stricken medical student who rejects his privileged upbringing in order to minister to the poor, or at least to make them the objects of his charity in the aptly-named Misericordia District. (Ever since Graham Greene, I sometimes think, the Socialist physician—Dr. Magiot, Dr. Czinner—has been an especially serious character. And of course, Salvador Allende himself was a doctor.)

In the discussions and encounters between the two young men—and during the acute crisis over Amanda’s pregnancy and ghastly abortion—we are meeting people to whom the notion, at least, of cruelty and bloodshed is repugnant. But in Esteban García, the crafty youth who is also an illegitimate by-blow of old man Trueba, we are finally introduced to evil. Again spurning the ideal-types of radical romanticism, Isabel Allende portrays this cold, plebeian, ambitious type as the instrument of death foretold. Here is the sort of person, found in every society, who becomes a torturer and executioner when the state is taken over by sadists. By way of an ironic wrinkle in the genealogical plot, he gets his great opportunity from his unaware grandfather, who despises the surreptitious and whose combats have always been in the open. The patriarch wants the honest military gentlemen to seize power, to scatter the subversives, and to restore decency and tradition and order. But he wants them then to return to the barracks and supervise new elections. Esteban García, no aristocrat, desires the day when police rule will be permanent, and he himself can have endless official permission to humiliate his betters as well as his inferiors.

The House of the Spirits is, or rather retrospectively it became, the last of a trilogy that is comprised of itself, preceded by *Daughter of Fortune* and *Portrait in Sepia*. The “subject” is assuredly family life, which is also the tempestuous subtext of much of Isabel Allende’s nonfiction. But the story is about Chile. For millions of people across the world, this very name took on the same resonance as had “Spain” forty years before. On one side, the landlords, the clerical hierarchy, the army, and the Fascists. On the other, “the people” in their various gnarled, exploited, neglected and semi-upright postures. Arbitrating and manipulating things were far-off superpowers and vested interests. My little summary does, admittedly, possess all the subtlety of

a Brecht play put on in Berkeley. But sometimes things are quite simple, and even Brecht might have turned down the idea of multinational corporations instructing Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger to use murderous force to protect their dividends. Given the starkness of this, as it appeared at the time, it is greatly to Señora Allende's credit that she contrived so much wit, grace, and chiaroscuro.

The Spanish Civil War is remembered today as having been a writers' and poets' war, among other things, and Chile in the 1970s exhibited some of that quality also. In these pages one can re-encounter at least a couple of the relevant figures. Pablo Neruda, one of the greatest love-poets of all time (and the hero of that gem of a movie *Il Postino*) appears as The Poet: someone almost too numinous and distinguished to be named. Victor Jara, the radical balladeer of Allende's Unidad Popular movement, is to be found in the strumming and singing of Pedro Tercero. Both real lives ended at the time of the military coup in 1973: Neruda died of natural causes—perhaps exacerbated by the violence of events—and his marvelous library was trashed by marauding soldiers. Victor Jara was dragged away in a roundup and murdered, but not before his sniggering captors had recognized him and gone to all the trouble of smashing his guitar-playing fingers. (Both of these men had dull and sometimes sinister Communist politics, and after all it is George Orwell whose writing on Spain survives the burblings and mendacities of the Popular Front, but the face of Fascism is still much the same whether it murders Lorca or pillages Neruda.)

So the last third of the novel is really a palimpsest for those who experienced those years, or who wish to profit by studying them. Sex and love and family drama persist, of course, as they have to (and sometimes ecstatically in the first case). But everything is enacted in the shadow thrown by the first pages of the book: the great confrontation that has long been doomed to occur within the Chilean family as a whole. These pages are, to the Chilean revolution and counterrevolution, what *A Tale of Two Cities* once was to their French equivalents.

They also capture—if I may be permitted this—the best of times and the worst of times. Again, it is Isabel Allende's nuance, combined with her fair-mindedness, that astonishes. We watch the festival of the oppressed as it takes place on the old feudal estate at Tres Marías, but we also see the element of riot and Saturnalia as the peasants up-end the vintage wine-bottles, eat the seed-corn, and slaughter the animals that were intended for husbandry. We meet the single-minded and zealous revolutionary Miguel but we also learn (and this through Jaime, who admires him too) that he could be “one of those fatal men possessed by a dangerous idealism and an intransigent purity that color everything they touch with disaster, especially the women who have the misfortune to fall in love with them.” (This, by the way, is almost exactly what Komarovski says of Antipov in the Robert Bolt dramatization of *Doctor Zhivago*.) What I want to say is that, though I know that Isabel Allende was at the time heart and brain and soul a supporter of the Chilean Left, she does not present us with a politicized morality play. She understands how it came to be that many middling and even poor Chileans eventually welcomed the Pinochet moment, as a respite from

disorder and dogma. Indeed, in her much later memoir *My Invented Country*, published thirty years after the coup, she freely says that the economic program adopted by her famous uncle was a calamitous one.

Nonetheless, there was a point at which family and honor and politics converged, in a kind of redemption of all the wreckage and intolerance. The leaders of the French Revolution, with the exception of Lafayette, went to the bad and consumed each other as well as many rivals. The leaders of the Russian Revolution—with the arguable exception of Leon Trotsky—went the same way. There are numerous other examples of Jacobin and Bolshevik cannibalism and fratricide, or the analogues of same. The Cuban Revolution, even as I write, is expiring in banana-republic futility (its most prescient chronicler having been the Chilean diplomat Jorge Edwards, posted by Allende to resume relations with Fidel Castro and subsequently expelled.) But Salvador Allende never murdered or tortured anyone, and faced his own death with unexampled fortitude, and that has made all the difference.

When I first met Isabel Allende, at the point when this novel was first published, she ended our conversation by recalling her uncle's last words, spoken over a hissing and howling static from an improvised radio-station, as the Western-supplied warplanes were wheeling and diving over the dignified old presidential palace of La Moneda: named for its former office as the Chilean mint. Here is what he said, as cited word-for-word in *The House of the Spirits*:

I speak to all those who will be persecuted to tell you that I am not going to resign: I will repay the people's loyalty with my life. I will always be with you. I have faith in our nation and its destiny. Other men will prevail, and soon the great avenues will be open again, where free men will walk, to build a better society.

Our interview concluded with her saying that her ambition was to see this come true, and to one day walk those avenues herself, "along with everybody else." I recall saying rather feebly that I hoped I could join her. At the time, Chile was in a grip of adamantine rule, as I had seen for myself, and the prospect of any liberated stroll or saunter or paseo looked distinctly faint. I was too pessimistic.

On my next visit to Chile, in May 2002, a public statue of Salvador Allende had been restored. The former home of Pablo Neruda at Isla Negra had become a place of literary pilgrimage. I was given a tour of Santiago by the man, Pedro Alejandro Matta, who had helped turn the place of his own torture—the jauntily-named Villa Grimaldi—into a museum of the horrors of junta rule. In the public cemetery there was a plaque for Victor Jara and a whole section given over to the commemoration of the fallen members of Unidad Popular. An extremely conservative judge, Juan Guzman Tapia, had reopened an entire dossier about the death-squads and "the missing," and I was invited by him to testify about the complicity of Henry Kissinger in the coup and in its sickening aftermath. The judge's inquiry was only one aspect of a clarification that has now reached to the bottom of society and to the top of the state. On November 5, 2004, just as I was completing this little essay, the commander of the Chilean army, General Juan Emilio Cheyre, made a formal and public statement acknowledging "institutional"

responsibility for “punishable and morally unacceptable acts in the past.” An official commission, chaired by the bishop of Santiago, presented harrowing evidence of a republic of fear between 1973 and 1989. To have seen any of this was like seeing justice done, or in other words like watching water run uphill, or a fire burning underwater, as I slightly strained to say to Isabel Allende when I next saw her, in the lovely house she has now built in Marin County, California, and named La Casa de los Espiritus.

So that I suppose this is one of the very few “magical” fictions ever to have its wish come true. (I can only think of one other such case: Theodor Herzl’s *Altneuland*, a utopian novel about a once-and-future Jewish state in Palestine, written by the founder of Zionism.) Herzl never lived to see his dream vindicated, and one rather wonders what he would make of the result as we know it today. But it was not only the veterans of the Chilean Left, emerging from torture-chambers and frigid far-off camps on island prisons in the South Atlantic, who celebrated when Ricardo Lagos was elected president of Chile at the turn of the twentieth century. It was understood by all who gathered for his inauguration—the first member of Allende’s old party to be chosen by unhindered ballot since 1970—that he would have to leave the balcony of the palace, and walk down the “great avenues” without a bodyguard, to be among the people. And so he did, amid a great hush and also a great rejoicing.

Well, I thought, I have lived to see it. I have also lived to see General Pinochet arraigned in his own country, providing in his person one of the great individual benchmarks (Slobodan Milošević, Saddam Hussein) by which it is established that those who trample on law and justice will some day have to face a court. One trial cannot of course do duty for all the crimes and all the murders and “disappearances” and corruptions, but only those who believe in vicarious redemption and human sacrifice can expect all sins to be taken away in this manner, and though The House of the Spirits opens and closes with exactly the same sentence (“Barrabás came to us by sea”), it doesn’t do to forget that this Barrabás was only a large and randy dog.

In a conversation of some years ago, Isabel Allende went back yet again to the subject of her magnificent and maddening maternal grandfather, and described her lifelong and posthumous connection to him as one of “enraged intimacy.” One Balzac, as Karl Marx is supposed to have said, is worth a hundred Zolas, but this Zola fan can see that “enraged intimacy” is what makes the Balzacian narrative imperishable.

The Persian Version

Review of *Strange Times, My Dear: The PEN Anthology of Contemporary Iranian Literature*, edited by Nahid Mozaffari.

IN THE CAPTIVE MIND, his brilliantly lucid reflection on totalitarianism and its temptations, Czeslaw Milosz devoted most of his essays to the problem of communism and the intellectuals. In one chapter, however, he turned aside to view another man-

ifestation of tyranny, and also to examine the verbal and literary means by which it could be thwarted.

The essay is called “Ketman.” The term was first introduced to the West by Arthur de Gobineau, a rather sinister ethnologist who in the mid- nineteenth century served two tours as a French diplomat in Tehran. It means the art and science of dissimulation, particularly in matters of religion. The ferocious orthodoxy of the Shia mullahs of Iran, Gobineau wrote, could be circumvented by, say, a heretical disciple of Avicenna, as long as the man was careful to make every outward show of conformity. With this done, he could begin to introduce all manner of subversive philosophy into his sermons and addresses:

Ketman fills the man who practices it with pride. Thanks to it, a believer raises himself to a permanent state of superiority over the man he deceives, be he a minister of state or a powerful king: to him who uses ketman, the other is a miserable blind man whom one shuts off from the true path whose existence he does not suspect; while you, tattered and dying of hunger, trembling externally at the feet of duped force, your eyes are filled with light, you walk in brightness before your enemies. It is an unintelligent being that you make sport of; it is a dangerous beast that you disarm. What a wealth of pleasures!

Milosz immediately saw the application of this to the double life that was being lived by so many writers and intellectuals under Stalin’s imperium. The Soviet regime to some extent “needed” culture, but also needed to contain it. Milosz was not to foresee that this state of affairs—deemed “Absurdistan” by one Czech author—would one day satirize itself out of existence.

Today’s Iran is also an Absurdistan in one sense, though the term should not be misused so as to mask the tragic element of the comic: Under the reign of the Shah, the country emulated almost everything Western except democracy; under the rule of the imams, it rejects almost every aspect of modernity except nuclearism. That this fate should have befallen such a sophisticated and energetic people is a catastrophe piled upon a disaster. Yet the clerics now ruling the country have fallen into the very error that their communist enemies used to commit. They claim to legislate for every aspect of life, and they claim the right to scrutinize everything that is said and even thought. In this they attempt the impossible. If they emulated the Taliban and simply forbade all forms of music and film and all forms of writing except the Koranic, they would fail. Instead, they try to permit these things while also controlling them. That will eventually fail even more miserably. This is because before there was any Iran or any Islam, there was a Persian civilization and a Persian language, neither of which the Turbaned Ones dare disown. Iranians may have been conquered and Islamized by Arabs, but they are proud of retaining their ancient tongue and their literary and cultural memories. And Persia was known for love poetry, for the anti-clerical satires of Omar Khayyam, for polo and for chess and for the wine of Shiraz. These ancient and lovely springs continue to bubble under the caked grime and muck of theocracy. Every March great numbers of Iranians laughingly celebrate the nowruz, or New Year

holiday—a fire ceremony with dances long pre-dating Islam. The mullahs do not like the festival but do not feel strong enough to prohibit anything so old and so popular.

Milosz subdivided ketman under communism into various types—“professional,” “aesthetic,” “skeptical,” and “ethical.” During a very enlightening visit to Iran last year, I found it was possible to distinguish some other individual forms of it. These range from the low to the sublime. An example of the low would be alcoholic ketman, whereby even those Iranians who do not touch the bottle make sure to have wine or liquor, often home-brewed, in their houses, for the benefit of guests—a small etiquette of defiance by the abstemious. More elevated is fashion ketman. The ayatollahs’ law demands that all females in public must wear a hijab to cover the hair, and a long jacket to cover the area between the upper chest and the mid-thigh. (It’s always useful to know what the pious are really thinking about.) In practice, there are not enough religious police to enforce this strictly. A woman without a hijab would certainly be beaten (and perhaps blinded or maimed with acid), but it is impressive to see the huge number who manage to conform to the letter of the law by sporting a colorful scarf, well back on the head and held in place by hair spray, as well as a coat so deftly cut as to make the very most of what it is intended to de-emphasize.

But Iranian culture and vivacity is kept going most of all by the country’s writers and filmmakers (who are sometimes, like the director-poet Abbas Kiarostami, the same people). A continuous pressure leads to invention—to finding the cracks and gaps in the system, to testing its limits and transcending them. Once again, it must be remembered that when the Calibans of theocracy see their own faces in the glass, which they do not like to do, they are not always able to recognize their own features. (One thinks of the mirthless Bourbons when they first saw the faultless way that Goya had rendered them.) They dimly know that they are supposed to have a movie industry, publishing houses, newspapers, and such. An excerpt of a short story by Ghazi Rabihavi gives an account of what it’s like to have to deal, after a thirteen-month wait, with the Ministry of Islamic Guidance:

Unfortunately, your book has some small problems which cannot be corrected. I am certain you will agree with me. Take these first few sentences ... nowhere in our noble culture will you find any woman who would allow herself to stand waiting for her husband to bring her a cup of coffee. OK? Well, the next problem is the image of the wind sliding over the naked arms, which is provocative and has sexual overtones. Finally, nowhere in any noble culture will you find a sunrise that is like a sunset. Maybe it is a misprint. Here you are then. Here is your book. I hope you will write another book soon. We support you. Support you.

This extract is taken from the recent *Strange Times, My Dear*, an admirable PEN anthology of Iranian fiction and poetry released in paperback this spring. (The title echoes the refrain with which Ahmad Shamlu ends every stanza of “In This Blind Alley,” his famous poem about the revolution.) Anyone wanting to sample the range and depth of the country’s contemporary writing would do well to begin here. The authors not only deal with every “transgressive” subject, from booze to sex, but also illustrate

something that is often overlooked in the monochrome presentation of their country in the West: the diversity of Armenians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Azeris that helps characterize Iranian society. (The collection is rather silent on the Kurds, a minority from whom we can expect to be hearing more, but it does contain a contribution from Roya Hakakian, whose molten yet tender memoir of growing up Jewish in the years of revolution, *Journey from the Land of No*, is itself one of the jewels of the exile literary renaissance.)

Some older readers of this essay will remember Reza Baraheni, whose 1977 book, *The Crowned Cannibals*, did much to alert the West to the sheer exorbitance and cruelty of the Pahlavi pseudo-dynasty. Baraheni is a Turkish speaker from Tabriz, and his poems, which lay a heavy emphasis on the material and the earthy, contain allusions to Ezra Pound, Walter Benjamin, and Charles Baudelaire. In one of the book's poems, "In The New Place, or Exile, A Simple Matter," he reminds us that Napoleon thought of mud as a fifth element. Baraheni's life experience is not unrepresentative: prison under the Shah, participation in the revolution of 1979, swift disillusionment with the rise of Khomeini's despotism, horror at the terrifying war subsequently unleashed by Saddam Hussein, a further spell in prison under the clerics, and then exile. A great number of Iran's best minds and voices are compelled to live at least partly in diaspora in Europe and North America, and although this is greatly to our benefit and pleasure (vide the work of Azar Nafisi on her *Tehran Nabokoviennes*), we cannot forget what a price it exacts from Iran itself. Meanwhile, for those who bear the heat and burden of the day in the country itself, we can guess the weight of the atmosphere from another line of Ahmad Shamlu's poem: "They smell your breath lest you have said: I love you."

Mention of Napoleon brings me to the work of Iraj Pezeshkzad. How is one to convey the extraordinary charm and power of this author? A little preface is needed. Iranian intellectuals are nostalgic (I do not think this use of the term is improper) for two moments in their nation's agonized history. The first is the 1906 constitutional revolution, when the liberal and cosmopolitan elements of the society, though eventually suppressed by Russian imperial gunnery, managed to establish a precedent for a modern and outward-looking system. The second is the atrocity of August 19, 1953, when the elected nationalist government of Mohammed Mossadegh was forcibly removed by an Anglo-American intrigue that instated the Shah as a dictator and returned the country's main natural resource to foreign control. These two external interventions gravely stultified Iran's development and had a retarding effect on the national psyche. It became almost customary and automatic, in a land that is so naturally internationalist, to attribute literally everything to the machinations of designing outsiders. (The Khomeinist regime, needless to add, exploits this plebeian tendency to this day. It also avails itself of the antique Shia concept of *taqqiya*, or the religious permission to dissemble in dealings with infidels. One might call this the top-down version of *ketman*.) As an Englishman I found it almost flattering to encounter the number of people in Tehran who—culturally rather despising Americans—believed that the British government determined absolutely all matters. Why, had they not even installed the mullahs

in 1979 as a revenge for the way that the United States had taken the lion's share of oil after 1953? The British ambassador, whose official dominion includes two especially nice walled garden estates in upper and lower Tehran, confessed to me that he sometimes found this paranoia useful, since it meant that nobody would decline to meet him.

In 1973, Pezeshkzad published *My Uncle Napoleon*, a cheerful satire of this very mentality, and it became the best-loved work of fiction in Iran before it was banned by the clerics during the revolution. Likewise set in an enclosed garden house that contains several branches of an extended family, it could be summarized as a love story enfolded in a bildungsroman and wrapped in a conspiracy theory. Except that it cannot be summarized. Not even Azar Nafisi, who contributes a sparkling introduction to the new American edition, can accomplish that. Uncle Napoleon, the micro-megalomaniac who dominates the little world of the family, is convinced that the British imperialists really care about him and mean to get him by fair means or foul. A beautiful counterpoint to his fantastic solipsism is the appalling verbosity of his manservant, Mash Qasem. Some have claimed to see a Bertie-and-Jeeves duo in the setup; I think this is misleading, except with respect to the amazingly complex and farcical love affairs that form the subtext. Rabelais and Cervantes are in there somewhere as well. To return to my Caliban metaphor, we might remember that it was Swift who defined satire as a looking glass in which people discerned every face but their own. In the vanity and stupidity of Uncle Napoleon, the religious things of Qum must have glimpsed at least something but the joke is on them, because in today's widespread Iranian samizdat the book—and a now-banned television series that was once made of it—is a blockbuster.

Pezeshkzad also makes a contribution to *Strange Times, My Dear*, in the form of a gem-like story titled "Delayed Consequences of the Revolution." Now an exile himself, he makes gentle but deadly fun of those émigrés who forgather, like the White Russians of old, in a café society devoted to toasting the ancien régime. In this context—sometimes to be found in today's Los Angeles—old men forget, as well as remember, or remember "with advantages," what deeds they did. In what I like to think of as a homage to ketman, Pezeshkzad illuminates the private codes and allusions in which the participants convey discrepant meanings to one another, and also perpetuate the mythology of foreign conspiracy. ("If you want to explain something to your compatriot in your own language you can use five or six words and get the meaning across, but to explain the same thing to a foreigner in another language, you'll need to employ at least fifty or sixty words." This is offered as an account of the difficulty of elucidating simple property deals in the days of "His Highness the Shah.")

Half of Iran's citizens are regarded by the state as chattel, so it is not startling to find so many women writers in the most exposed positions of dissent. Azadeh Moaveni's memoir, *Lipstick Jihad* (a perfect title for the practice of fashion ketman and the struggle for femininity, as well as feminism), was a salient effort in this regard, and it is good to see her helping to coauthor *Iran Awakening*, the autobiography of Shirin Ebadi, the country's most recent Nobel laureate. Ebadi was the first woman to be

appointed a judge in Iran, in the waning days of the Shah, and she lost that job almost as soon as the revolution (which she supported) had taken place. She opens her book with a commonplace and uninteresting testimony to her enduring religious faith, the sincerity of which is impossible to gauge. If this is ketman—the apparent sharing of a belief with those who despise and oppress her—it is the price of her ticket. Without such protestations of faith she would almost certainly be dead. As it is, she was on a death-squad list drawn up by allegedly “rogue” elements in the Ministry of Intelligence, which debated only on the propriety of assassinating her before the end of the month of Ramadan. Her extraordinary fortitude in pressing on with her legal inquiry into the murders that had already taken place is not only a testimony in itself but also a window into the almost unrivaled sordidness and cynicism of the Islamic Republic. Here is a state that holds that a father cannot be convicted for murdering his own daughter; a state in which teenage girls are hanged in public for immorality, and virgins raped before execution because the Koran forbids the execution of virgins.

In Persepolis, Marjane Satrapi views matters from still another perspective: the special ketman of ironic cartooning. In smart and confident strokes she draws a history of the Khomeini revolution as seen by a girl who was nine when the old fanatic returned from exile. The whole chaotic world of parents and other adults, faced with crises that are wholly new and frightening to them, is affectionately and ironically caught by a girl who has a real talent for overhearing. Marxist relatives keep up false hopes that the people have not been fooled; Saddam Hussein’s planes disgorge bombs over the city; veils are imposed on small children; the Jewish neighbors get into a spot of bother; and, yes, a young friend is legally raped by a Revolutionary Guard before being shot. Most stark are the growing girl’s encounters with the komiteh, the brutish and depraved louts who are employed as the enforcers of morality and who take a special pleasure in the taunting and bullying of women. But there is low farce as well: The bastards who come looking for the homemade wine are actually seeking only a bribe, which becomes clear only after the precious fluid has been hastily poured away for nothing. The solidarity of the little family and its friends turns out to be less fragile than it looks. Yes, the bearded sadists do stop women in the street and harshly smell their breath for telltale traces of love, but, as in the resolution of Uncle Napoleon’s madly hermetic domestic despotism, *amor vincit omnia*.

May it be so. The PEN anthology, as well as the work of Shirin Ebadi, was for a time treated as mere matter that could not be viewed by Americans. Reflecting a level of stupidity that would not disgrace the dumbest authoritarian state, the U.S. Treasury Department believed that unless Ebadi applied for a special license, the book’s publication in this country would amount to trading with the enemy. A possible penalty of up to a million dollars or ten years imprisonment was mentioned. Prompt litigation held off the official notion that the words of Iranian writers can be forfeit as a “foreign asset.” American readers have a special duty, in view of the distraught history between our two countries, to take an interest in this “asset.” Whatever the outcome of the current confrontation, we have the right and the duty of engagement with a people

and a culture very much imbricated with our own. How agreeable to be able to report that this is also a tremendous pleasure.

(The Atlantic, July/August 2006)

Martin Amis: Lightness at Midnight

Review of *Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million*, by Martin Amis.

IN HIS SUPERB MEMOIR, *Experience* (2000), Martin Amis almost casually expends a terrific line in a minor footnote. Batting away a critic he describes as “humorless,” he adds, “And by calling him humorless I mean to impugn his seriousness, categorically: such a man must rig up his probity *ex nihilo*.” A book in which such an observation can occur in passing is a very rich and dense one. Amis has won and held the attention of an audience eager for something very like this in reverse—a synthesis of astonishing wit and moral assiduity. Even the farcical episodes of his fiction are set on the bristling frontiers of love and death and sex. With his other hand, so to speak, he has raised the standard of essayistic reviewing, mounting guard over our muscular but vulnerable English language and registering fastidious pain whenever it is hurt or insulted. It is no accident, because he intuits the strong connection between linguistic and political atrocity, that he has also composed short but concentrated meditations on the three great collapses of twentieth-century modernism and civilization. With *Einstein’s Monsters* (1987), and its accompanying flight of articles and polemics, he investigated the diseased relationship between suicide and genocide that is disclosed by the preparation of thermonuclear extinction. In *Time’s Arrow* (1991) he made a very assured attempt to find a new literary mode for the subject of genocide tout court, and for the Nazi-generated race murder in particular. *Koba the Dread* aims to complete this triptych by interrogating the subject of Stalinism and the Great Terror.

Amis’s two previous undertakings of this kind were reviewed ungenerously in some quarters, either because they seemed presumptuous in taking a familiar subject and presenting it as if for the first time, or because they relied a little too much on a senior source (Jonathan Schell in the first case, and Primo Levi in the second). To this I would respond rather as Winston Smith does when he has finished reading the occult “inner-party” book in *Nineteen Eighty-four*: “The best books ... are those that tell you what you know already.” Amis understands that cliché and banality constitute a menace to even the most apparently self-evident truths. “Holocaust” can become a tired synecdoche for war crimes in general. Before one knows it, one is employing terms like “nuclear exchange” and even “nuclear umbrella,” and committing the mental and moral offense of euphemism. One must always seek for new means of keeping familiar subjects fresh, and raw.

Stalinism was, among other things, a triumph of the torturing of language. And, unlike Nazism or fascism or nuclear warfare, it secured at least the respect, and sometimes the admiration, of liberal intellectuals. Thus Amis’s achievement in these pages

is to make us wince again at things that we already “knew” while barely wasting a word or missing the implications of a phrase. Here is a short section titled “Rhythms of Thought”:

Stalin’s two most memorable utterances are “Death solves all problems. No man, no problem” and (he was advising his interrogators on how best to elicit a particular confession) “Beat, beat and beat again.”

Both come in slightly different versions. “There is a man, there is a problem. No man, no problem.” This is less epigrammatic, and more catechistic—more typical of Stalin’s seminarian style (one thinks of his oration at Lenin’s funeral and its liturgical back-and-forth).

The variant on number two is: “Beat, beat, and, once again, beat.” Another clear improvement, if we want a sense of Stalin’s rhythms of thought.

To that second paragraph Amis appends a footnote, saying:

If Stalin had been a modern American he would not have used the word “problem” but the less defeatist and judgmental “issue.” Actually, when you consider what Stalin tended to do to his enemies’ descendants, the substitution works well enough.

That is excellent: dry without being too detached. Next I would instance Amis’s citations from the various cruelties and torments documented by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.

This reader has endured none of them; and I will proceed with caution and unease. It feels necessary because torture, among its other applications, was part of Stalin’s war against the truth. He tortured, not to force you to reveal a fact, but to force you to collude in a fiction.

Here is his close reading of the last paragraph of Trotsky’s *History of the Russian Revolution*. Trotsky’s closing stave reads,

The language of the civilised nations has clearly marked off two epochs in the development of Russia. Where the aristocratic culture introduced into the world parlance such barbarisms as *tsar*, *pogrom*, *knout*, October has internationalized such words as *Bolshevik*, *soviet*, and *piatiletka*. This alone justifies the proletarian revolution, if you imagine that it needs justification.

Amis’s first comment on this ensues directly. He adds to Trotsky’s bombast the words “Which leaves you wondering if *piatiletka* is Russian for ‘summary execution,’ perhaps, or ‘slave camp.’” There follows a footnote. (Like Gibbon, Amis seems to like to reserve the best for the footnotes.)

I searched without success for *piatiletka* in five end-of-monograph glossaries. Its clinching “internationalisation,” then, didn’t last (although Hitler, and later Mao, took it up). *Piatiletka* means “five-year plan.”

There is a very slight waste of words here, because the mordancy of Amis’s second observation makes the first one seem merely taunting and sarcastic. But lapses of this kind are infrequent. When Amis summarizes a crux, it stays summarized. One doesn’t have to have suffered torture and solitary confinement to get the point that is being made here:

The confession was in any case merely part of a more or less inevitable process. When it was their turn to be purged, former interrogators (and all other Chekists) immediately called with a flourish for the pen and the dotted line.

One also wouldn't absolutely have to know which regime was under discussion: The potency of that aperçu derives from its disclosing of our animal nature. Indeed, and as in his other work on murder and tyranny, Amis has a better than approximate idea of what we as a species might get up to if given a chance. "Arma virumque cano, and Hitler-Stalin tells us this, among other things: given total power over another, the human being will find that his thoughts turn to torture."

This is an insight of extreme, frigid bleakness, amounting almost to despair, but it also involves a minor waste of words. We knew this, after all, before we knew of Hitler or Stalin. Again to cite Orwell, there is a tendency for all stories of cruelty and atrocity to resemble one another. For this reason some overfamiliar or recycled accounts provoke boredom or disbelief, and can be made to seem propagandistic. (The classic example is the way the British fabrication of German outrages during the First World War had the paradoxical effect of turning skeptics into cynics when they heard the initially incredible news of Nazi innovations in that terrible sphere.) Orwell was on guard against this blunting tendency. He thought it probable that given moral breakdown, the same hellish desires would replicate and repeat themselves. He also believed the worst about Stalin's system, and much earlier than most "enlightened" people, precisely because he found its public language so crude and brutal.

In a particularly luminous and funny passage on the correspondence between Vladimir Nabokov and Edmund Wilson, Amis puts his entire trust in Nabokov's ability to employ language with care and discrimination, and shows that Wilson's journeyman prose practically rigged itself to trap him, and others, into a more comforting "explanation" of the titanic misery and failure of the Stalin years. (Amis doesn't make as much as he might of the fact that Nabokov produced his diamond-hard phrases in English, whereas his first language was Russian, while Wilson offered in return some thoughts about Russia that were trudging even in English.)

Stalin was no fool when he said that the death of one person is a tragedy, whereas the death of a million people is a statistic. Marx and Engels had always shuddered at the gross, enormous crudity of the steppe and the taiga, the illimitable reserves of primeval backwardness that they contained; and European liberalism had long been mesmerized by the Asiatic horror of Russian autocracy. This howling wilderness and boundless hinterland were themselves factors of "historical materialism." So, "in the execution of the broad brushstrokes of his hate," as Amis phrases it, Stalin "had weapons that Hitler did not have":

He had cold: the burning cold of the Arctic. "At Oimyakon [in the Kolyma] a temperature has been recorded of -97.8 F. In far lesser cold, steel splits, tires explode and larch trees shower sparks at the touch of an axe ..."

He had darkness: the Bolshevik sequestration, the shockingly bitter and unappeasable self-exclusion from the planet, with its fear of comparison, its fear of ridicule, its fear of truth.

He had space: the great imperium with its eleven time zones, the distances that gave their blessing to exile and isolation ...

And, most crucially, Stalin had time.

In making the inescapable comparison with Hitler, who killed many fewer people (and even killed many fewer Communists) than Stalin, Amis is guided mostly by the view of Robert Conquest. He also relies, in varying degrees, on Martin Malia, Richard Pipes, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. In Conquest's opinion, the visceral reaction to Nazism entails a verdict that it was morally worse than Stalinism, even if its eventual hecatomb was a less colossal one. This distinction rests on the sheer intentionality and obscenity of the Shoah, or Final Solution. Those who were killed in Ukraine, by a state-sponsored famine, were not killed as Ukrainians in quite the same way as the Ukrainian Jews of Babi Yar were later killed as Jews. The slave system of the Gulag did not have as its primary objective the turning of living people into corpses. The huge callousness of the system simply allowed vast numbers to be treated as expendable.

The distinction is certainly worth preserving. As Amis phrases it, "When I read about the Holocaust I experience something that I do not experience when I read about the Twenty Million: a sense of physical infestation. This is species shame." To this one might add that Germany was a literate, democratic, and advanced civilization before the Nazis got to it, whereas Russia at the time of the 1905 revolution was in a condition more like that of Turkey, or Iran, or even (in some areas) Afghanistan today. It did have a "Westernized" industrial and intellectual element, but it was from exactly this stratum that Marxism drew most of its followers. And many of them regarded the mass of the Russian people in much the way that a British official in early colonial Bengal might have viewed the benighted natives. Probably, if we look for explanations for the indulgence shown toward Stalinism by men like George Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells, we will find part of the answer in the quasi-eugenic and quasi-anthropological approach they took to most questions. (Fabian socialism, in the same period, emphasized the progressive aspects of social engineering in the British Empire.) But Amis, who briefly mocks the gullibility of the Bloomsbury and New Statesman tradition, also forgets that the grand prix for prescience here belongs to the atheist, socialist, and anti-imperialist Bertrand Russell, whose *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* (1920) was the first and in many ways the most penetrating critique.

I don't know if it was at this point or a slightly later one that I realized that Amis was exhibiting a tendency to flail. There is certainly merit in restating Stalin's exorbitant and lustful criminality, which stands comparison to that of the most paranoid and sanguinary moments of antiquity as well as of modernity. (The title *Koba the Dread* is an amalgam of Stalin's nickname and the more straightforward Russian meaning of "the Terrible," as in Ivan.) But we have grown up reading Solzhenitsyn, Joseph Berger, Eugenia Ginzburg, Lev Kopelev, Roy Medvedev, and many other firsthand chroniclers

of the nightmare. Names like Vorkuta and Kolyma are not as familiar to most people as Treblinka or Birkenau, but the word “Gulag” (one of the many hateful acronyms of the system) does duty for the whole, and is known to everybody. Amis appears to deny this when he says that a general recognition of the toll of Stalinist slavery and murder “hasn’t happened,” and that “in the general consciousness the Russian dead sleep on.” He should have hesitated longer before taking the whole weight of responsibility for this memory, and our memory, on his shoulders.

The clue to this hubris comes in the second part of his title, with its allusion to mirth. Amis is acutely, vibrantly sensitive to the different registers of laughter. He knows that it can be the most affirming and uniquely human sound, and also the most sinister and animalistic one. He understands every note of every octave that separates the liberating shout of mirth from the cackle of a bully or the snigger of a sadist. (Nabokov’s title *Laughter in the Dark* provides a perfect pitch here.) So he’s in confident form when he describes the servile laughter that greeted Stalin when he was “forcibly” induced to take the stage at the Bolshoi Theater in 1937, and modestly agreed to be a candidate in the upcoming “election.” Here is some of the transcript, according to Dmitri Volkogonov:

Of course, I could have said something light about anything and everything. [laughter] ... I understand there are masters of that sort of thing not just in the capitalist countries, but here, too, in our Soviet country. [laughter, applause]

Many surviving eyewitnesses of many tyrannical courts have told us that the most exacting and nerve-straining moments come when the despot is in a good mood. Stalin had perhaps the most depraved and limited humor of the lot. In addition to being a grand-opera widow-and-orphan manufacturer, and widow-and-orphan slayer, he was a sniggerer and a bad chuckler. Amis observes of the foul scene above:

Ground zero of the Great Terror—and here was the Party, joined in a panic attack of collusion in yet another enormous lie. They clapped, they laughed. Did he laugh? Do we hear it—the “soft, dull, sly laugh,” the “grim, dark laughter, which comes up from the depths”?

However, Amis also refers to laughter of a somewhat different sort, and here, having called attention to the splendors of this little book, I am compelled to say where I think it fails. And by “compelled” I suppose I must mean “obliged,” since it appears on the author’s own warrant that the book’s shortcomings are mostly my fault. In the fall of 1999 Amis attended a meeting in London where I spoke from the platform. The hall was one of those venues (Cooper Union, in New York, might be an analogy) where the rafters had once echoed with the rhetoric of the left. I made an allusion to past evenings with old comrades, and the audience responded with what Amis at first generously terms “affectionate laughter.” But then he gives way to the self-righteousness and superficiality that let him down.

Why is it? Why is it? If Christopher had referred to his many evenings with many “an old blackshirt,” the audience would have.... Well, with such an affiliation in his past, Christopher would not be Christopher—or anyone else of the slightest distinction

whatsoever. Is that the difference between the little mustache and the big mustache, between Satan and Beelzebub? One elicits spontaneous fury, and the other elicits spontaneous laughter? And what kind of laughter is it? It is, of course, the laughter of universal fondness for that old, old idea about the perfect society. It is also the laughter of forgetting. It forgets the demonic energy unconsciously embedded in that hope. It forgets the Twenty Million.

This isn't right:

Everybody knows of Auschwitz and Belsen. Nobody knows of Vorkuta and Solovetsky.

Everybody knows of Himmler and Eichmann. Nobody knows of Yezhov and Dzerzhinsky.

Everybody knows of the six million of the Holocaust. Nobody knows of the six million of the Terror-Famine.

George Orwell once remarked that certain terrible things in Spain had really happened, and "they did not happen any the less because the Daily Telegraph has suddenly found out about them when it is five years too late." Martin Amis can be excused for coming across some of the above names and numbers rather late in life, but he cannot hope to get away with accusing others of keeping these facts and names from him, or from themselves. He tells me that this fairly unimportant evening was what kick-started his book, and in an open letter to me on the preceding pages he contemptuously, even proudly, asserts his refusal even to glance at Isaac Deutscher's biographical trilogy on Leon Trotsky. Well, I have my own, large differences with Deutscher. But nobody who read his *Prophet Outcast*, which was published more than three decades ago, could possibly be uninstructed about Vorkuta or Yezhov. In other words, having demanded to know "Why is it?" in such an insistent tone, he doesn't stay to answer his own question, instead replacing it with a vaguely peevish and "shocked, shocked" version of "How long has this been going on?" The answer there is, longer than he thinks.

With infinitely more distress I have to add that Amis's newly acquired zeal forbids him to see a joke even when (as Bertie Wooster puts it) it is handed to him on a skewer with béarnaise sauce. The laughter in that hall was slightly shabby, I am quite prepared to agree. But it was the resigned laughter that "sees" a poor jest, and recognizes the fellow sufferer. In related anecdotes that are too obviously designed to place himself in a good light, Amis also recounts some aggressive questions allegedly put by him to me and to James Fenton in our (James's and my) Trotskyist years, when all three of us were colleagues at the *New Statesman*. The questions are so plainly wife-beating questions, and the answers so clearly intended to pacify the aggressor by offering a mocking agreement, that I have to set down a judgment I would once have thought unutterable. Amis's want of wit here, even about a feeble joke, compromises his seriousness.

I would be as solipsistic as he is if I persisted too long with this, so I redirect attention. In the excerpt above has he made up his mind about the moral equivalence between Stalin and Hitler? Or has he reserved the right to use the cudgel according to need? When he speaks of Ivan the Terrible and Joseph Stalin, does he mean to

say that there was something comparable in their “Great Russian” ancestry? When he dilates upon torture and forced confessions, or upon the practice of eliminating even the families of opponents, is he suggesting that such terror was unknown to humanity before 1917? He states at one point, “Until I read *Man Is Wolf to Man: Surviving Stalin’s Gulag* I had never heard of a prisoner, en route, lying crushed and ground on a section of rough wood and receiving a succession of monstrous splinters up and down his back.” One would not need to refer him to the Nazi transports from Salonika or Vichy. An allusion to the Middle Passage, or to the hell ships that populated Australia’s “Fatal Shore,” would be enough. Moral equivalence is not intended here. But moral uniqueness requires a bit more justification.

I do not mean these to sound like commissar questions, or wife-beating questions either. On the first and perhaps most important one posed by Amis, for example, I find that I never quite know what I think myself about this moral equivalence. Nor did I quite know when I was still a member of a Marxist/post-Trotskyist group, when such matters were debated from dawn until dusk, often with furious or thuggish Communists. However, I do know from that experience, which was both liberating and confining, that the crucial questions about the Gulag were being asked by left oppositionists, from Boris Souvarine to Victor Serge to C. L. R. James, in real time and at great peril. Those courageous and prescient heretics have been somewhat written out of history (they expected far worse than that, and often received it), but I can’t bring myself to write as if they never existed, or to forgive anyone who slights them. If they seem too Marxist in tendency, one might also mention the more heterodox work of John Dewey, Sidney Hook, David Rousset, or Max Shachtman in exposing “Koba’s” hideous visage. The “Nobody” at the beginning of Amis’s sentences above is an insult, pure and simple, and an insult to history, too.

History is more of a tragedy than it is a morality tale. The will to power, the will to use human beings in social experiments, is to be distrusted at all times. The impulse to create, or even to propose, what Amis calls “the perfect society” is likewise to be suspected. At several points he states with near perfect simplicity that ideology is hostile to human nature, and implies that teleological socialism was uniquely or particularly so. I would no longer disagree with him about this. *Corruptio optimi pessima*: No greater cruelty will be devised than by those who are sure, or are assured, that they are doing good. However, one may come to such a conclusion by a complacent route or by what I would still dare to call a dialectical one. Does anybody believe that had the 1905 Russian Revolution succeeded, it would have led straight to the Gulag, and to forced collectivization? Obviously not. Such a revolution might even have forestalled the Balkan wars and the First World War. Yet that revolution’s moving spirits were Lenin and Trotsky, defeated by the forces of autocracy, Orthodoxy, and militarism. Excuse me, but nobody can be bothered to argue much about whether fascism might have turned out better, given more propitious circumstances. And there were no dissidents in the Nazi Party, risking their lives on the proposition that the

Führer had betrayed the true essence of National Socialism. As Amis half recognizes, in his en passant compliment to me, the question just doesn't come up.

Amis says he doesn't wish that the Second World War had gone the other way, which is good of him (though there were many Ukrainians and Russians who took their anti-Stalinism to the extent of enlistment on the Nazi side). However, it would be nice to know if he wishes that the Russian civil war, and the wars of intervention, had gone the other way. There are some reasons to think that had that been the case, the common word for fascism would have been a Russian one, not an Italian one. The Protocols of the Elders of Zion was brought to the West by the White emigration; even Boris Pasternak, in *Doctor Zhivago*, wrote with a shudder about life in the White-dominated regions. Major General William Graves, who commanded the American Expeditionary Force during the 1918 invasion of Siberia (an event thoroughly airbrushed from all American textbooks), wrote in his memoirs about the pervasive, lethal anti-Semitism that dominated the Russian right wing and added, "I doubt if history will show any country in the world during the last fifty years where murder could be committed so safely, and with less danger of punishment, than in Siberia during the reign of Admiral Kolchak." Thus "the collapse in the value of human life," as Amis describes the situation in post-revolutionary Russia, had begun some time before, perhaps in the marshes of Tannenberg, and was to make itself felt in other post-First World War societies as well.

Some confrontation with this line of thinking—I hesitate to use the word "context"—is essential if one is to avoid the merely one-dimensional or propagandistic. It might be concluded that upon reflection and analysis, the Bolshevik Revolution was the worst possible of the many available postwar outcomes, none of which (unlike Germany in 1933) included the prospect of parliamentary pluralism. It might also be concluded that Stalinism was the ineluctable and even the intended outcome of 1917, though this would involve some careful reasoning about whether things are or are not products of "historical inevitability." Yet Amis simply evades the question with a couple of sneers, saying that my argument "would have more weight behind it if (a) there had been a similar collapse (i.e., total, and lasting thirty-five years) in any other combatant country, and if (b) a single Old Bolshevik had spent a single day at the front, or indeed in the army." Well, even the collapse of postwar Germany into the arms of first the Freikorps and then their successors doesn't seem to meet his first exacting condition, at least in point of duration (though the enforced shortening of the Nazi period did involve some fairly harsh decisions about the value of human life). As for the second sneer, is Amis telling us that he hasn't read, for example, Isaac Babel's *Red Cavalry*? Bolshevism was in some ways a product of the hard-line front fighters. Indeed, its very militarization was one of the several reasons for its ugliness.

Hard work is involved in the study of history. Hard moral work, too. We don't get much assistance in that task from mushy secondhand observations like this one:

Accounting, as a Catholic, for his belief in evil as a living force, the novelist Anthony Burgess once said, “There is no A. J. P. Taylor-ish explanation for what happened in Eastern Europe during the war.” Nor is there.

Oh, yes. And what might the Catholic explanation be? The Church is still trying to find new ways of apologizing for its role in these events, and for things like the Nazi puppet regime in Slovakia, which was actually headed by a priest. Of course, original sin would be just as persuasive a verdict as any other the Church might offer. But tautology is the enemy of historical inquiry: If we are all evil, then everything becomes a matter of degree. Amis for some reason has a special horror of Bolshevik anti-clericalism, and writes as if the Tsarist Russian Orthodox Church was some kind of relief organization run by nuns. If he would look even at the recent performance of state-sponsored militant Orthodoxy in Bosnia ... Incidentally, do not the Churches also insist on trying to perfect the imperfectible, and on forcing the human shape into unnatural attitudes? Surely the “totalitarian” impulse has a common root with the proselytizing one. The “internal organs,” as the CHEKA and the GPU and the KGB used to style themselves, were asked to police the mind for heresy as much as to torture kulaks to relinquish the food they withheld from the cities. If there turns out to be a connection between the utilitarian and the totalitarian, then we wretched mammals are in even worse straits than we suspect.

Amis might have profited from studying the novelistic gold standard here, which is Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*. Koestler’s theory of Stalin’s grim success, which was that some of his old Bolshevik victims half feared that “Koba” might be correct after all, is only partly superseded by the “beat, beat and beat again” account, which itself is an insufficient explanation for the actual capitulation of the defendants. (A handful of the old comrades, after all, never cracked.) But his theory allowed for a very illuminating fictional dramatization of the relationship of ideas to outcomes. And Koestler put such persuasive words into the mouth of the interrogator Gletkin—his version of the Grand Inquisitor—that some English and French readers (John Strachey most notably) were actually persuaded by them. That unintended consequence was obviously limited. But it points to an essential difference. Koestler exposed the ghastliness of Stalinism by means of a sophisticated deployment of historical irony, whereas Amis—and again I startle myself by saying this—has decided to dispense with irony altogether. (He mentions, with all the gravity of one returning from a voyage of discovery, that the sailors of Kronstadt fought against the Bolsheviks under red flags and with revolutionary slogans. He even italicizes the word “revolutionaries,” as if this point were at the expense of the left opposition. As Daniel Bell pointed out decades ago, the only real argument among members of the old left was about the point at which their own personal “Kronstadt” had occurred. Bell was proud to say that Kronstadt itself had been his “Kronstadt.”)

Writing toward the very end of his life, a life that had included surprising Stalin himself by a refusal to confess, and the authorship of a novel—*The Case of Comrade Tulayev*—that somewhat anticipated *Darkness at Noon*, Victor Serge could still speak

a bit defensively about the bankruptcy of socialism in the “midnight of the century” represented by the Hitler-Stalin Pact. But he added,

Have you forgotten the other bankruptcies? What was Christianity doing in the various catastrophes of society? What became of Liberalism? What has Conservatism produced, in either its enlightened or its reactionary form? ... If we are indeed honestly to weigh out the bankruptcies of ideology, we shall have a long task ahead of us.

In the best sections of this book Amis makes the extraordinary demand that, in effect, the human species should give up on teleology and on all forms of “experiment” on fellow creatures. He is being much more revolutionary here than perhaps he appreciates. Had he allowed himself to ponder the implications, he might have engaged fruitfully with some of his own earlier work on fascism and on thermonuclear gamesmanship—two absolutist theories and practices that had in common the view that Leninism was the main enemy. If it matters, I now agree with him that perfectionism and messianism are the chief and most lethal of our foes. But I can’t quite write as if a major twentieth-century tragedy had been enacted to prove that I was correct in the first place. And I don’t say this just because I wasn’t correct. After all, the most valiant of the historians and the resisters in our own time was undoubtedly Solzhenitsyn, who has now descended into a sort of “Great Russian” spiritual and political quackery, replete with nostrums about the national “soul” and euphemisms about pogroms and anti-Semitism. Amis should be self-aware enough to admit that this is an “ideology” too.

His is a short work, and one cannot ask for a complete theory of modern ideology and the various deathtraps it sets for the body and the mind. However, much of the space that could have been devoted to a little inquiry is instead given over to some rather odd reflections on Amis’s family life, featuring some vignettes about his offspring and a meditation on the sadly short term that was set to the life of his younger sister. Few people could be more sympathetic to his children than I am (one of those children is my godson). But what is this doing? A baby daughter screams inconsolably one night and forces her father to summon the nanny.

“The sounds she was making,” I said unsmilingly to my wife on her return, “would not have been out of place in the deepest cellars of the Butyrki Prison in Moscow during the Great Terror. That’s why I cracked and called Caterina.”

From darkness at noon to ... lightness at midnight. There’s quite a lot more in the same vein. I find it inexplicable, partly because I can easily imagine the scorn with which Amis would write about anyone else who employed the Terror for purposes of relativism. His own purpose, presumably, is to refute Stalin’s foul inhumanity by showing that an individual, too, can be a considerable “statistic.” But the transition from macro- to micro-humanity is uneasy at its best.

Slightly easier to take is his letter to his late father, who was a believing Communist for many of the Stalin years, and whose irrational dogmatism is set down, probably rightly, to a series of emotional and attitudinal and familial complexes. In Experience, in contrast, we saw old Kingsley as he declined into a sort of choleric, empurpled

Blimpishness, culminating in his denunciation of Nelson Mandela as a practitioner of Red Terror. The lessons here ought to have been plain: Be very choosy about what kind of anti- communist you are, and be careful not to confuse the state of the world with that of your family, or your own “internal organs.”

(The Atlantic, September 2002)

Imagining Hitler

Review of *Hitler 1889–1936: Hubris*, by Ian Kershaw.

WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN!” says the Prince of Denmark. “How noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!” Well said, but where, as Ron Rosenbaum so intelligently asks in his recent book, *Explaining Hitler*, do all the Jeffrey Dahmers come from? This is sometimes put, by nervous theologians, as “the problem of evil.” We often phrase it, colloquially, as the problem of Hitler. “His face in those early years,” wrote Arthur Koestler in 1942, “an unshaped pudding with a black horizontal dot, came to life as the lights of obsession were switched on behind the eyeballs.” And then those paragons of animals, those with the godlike and angelic faculties of reason and understanding, flung themselves down by the millions and groaned great noises of worship and adoration. And this in the country of Beethoven and Goethe, where, to continue with Koestler for a moment, “the features of it retained their crankish ridiculousness, with the black dot under the upturned nose and the second black dot pasted on the forefront, but it now assumed the grotesque horror of a totem-mask worn at ritual dances where human sacrifices are performed.” A piece of work—no question about that.

I treasure one episode, in the clotted pages of *Mein Kampf*, above all others. As a young, resentful loser hanging around in the Austro-Hungarian empire, Adolf Hitler was forced to seek employment on a construction site. He thought the labor beneath him, and he very much resented being pressed to join a union. The lunchtime chat of his fellows was even more repugnant to his nature: “Some of the men went into the nearest public house,” while “I drank my bottle of milk and ate my piece of bread somewhere on the side.” And when they talked politics,

everything was rejected: the nation as an invention of the “capitalistic” classes—how often was I to hear just this word!—; the country as the instrument of the bourgeoisie for the exploitation of the workers; the authority of the law as a means of suppressing the proletariat; the school as an institution for bringing up slaves as well as slave-drivers; religion as a means for doping the people destined for exploitation; morality as a sign of sheepish patience, and so forth. Nothing remained that was not dragged down into the dirt and the filth of the lowest depths.

It was this, said the young Hitler, which first persuaded him to study “book after book, pamphlet after pamphlet,” and to begin fighting back for race and nation and

decency. “I argued till finally one day they applied the one means that wins the easiest victory over reason: terror and force. Some of the leaders of the other side gave me the choice of either leaving the job at once or of being thrown from the scaffold.” He sloped wolfishly away, later to notice the beards and caftans of the Viennese Jews and to discover another source of lifelong resentment. (One has to admire, also, his early revulsion against “terror and force.”)

The passage always sends me into a reverie. I think, first, of those solid Viennese workers who, by the ill luck of the draw, found themselves dealing with the staring eyes of Adolf Hitler at every lunch break. Austrian social democracy was not created by intimidation, so one imagines their patience being sorely tested before they finally told him he could either clear off or be dropped over the side. Then, in 1914, they and millions like them were dragooned into war by their Emperor and found—among others at the front—Corporal Adolf Hitler, the gung-ho enthusiast! All that having turned into a bloody nightmare for civilization, the few survivors got home and found ... Adolf Hitler demanding revenge for the same war he had wanted in the first place! (He had meanwhile been exposed to poison gas, which I don’t think can have brought out the best in him.) Then the annexation of Austria, the creation of a new, thousand-year Reich, and, after a mere twelve years of that, hardly one brick standing upon another from one end of Germany and Austria to the next. Plenty of opportunities for construction workers. Was there one, I wonder, who ever made the connection and sometimes thought of the chance he had missed, to send that little bastard over the edge and right onto the brick pile below?

A foe of political correctness in one way, Hitler was its friend in another. Recall the bottle of milk he swilled while the others were boozing? (The frightful mustache was grown partly to distract attention from his rotting fangs and suppurating gums.) In the same way, he abhorred smoking, was a fanatical vegetarian, and would never allow jokes about sex in his presence. His tedious hypochondria and health-cultishness found expression in hysteria about “bacilli” and “vermin,” and were, eventually, something more than crankish. He was, like most of his gang leaders, morbidly pious about religion and the family.

Is it the insult to one’s integrity and intelligence—the shame of having still to cringe at the thought of such a person—that partly accounts for our continued fascination with der Führer? The maddening thought that, in other circumstances, he could have been such an ordinary bore and nuisance? The man’s opinions are trite and bigoted and deferential, and the prose in *Mein Kampf* is simply laughable in its pomposity. (When mutiny and rebellion broke out in Munich after the First World War, Hitler could not get over the shock. He burst into floods of tears, moaning in print that “the loyalty toward the honorable House of Wittelsbach [had] seemed to me to be stronger than the will of a few Jews.”) Yet attempts to make him absurd by caricature and contempt are always, somehow, failures. Charlie Chaplin’s 1940 farce, *The Great Dictator*, was in many ways a masterpiece, and Bertolt Brecht’s 1941 play, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, was a workmanlike attempt to cut Hitler down to size by depicting him

as a cheap crook and a tool of the rackets. P. G. Wodehouse introduced one of his Mulliner stories, published in 1937, with a heated pub discussion about “the situation in Germany.” Hitler must soon decide one way or another, says a thoughtful customer. There’s no dodging the issue. “He’ll have to let it grow or shave it off.” But if this style of subversive or mocking wit could do the job, there wouldn’t be a “problem of evil,” or such a Hitler conundrum, in the first place.

It hurts and nags, above all, that we never got his mug in court. The British officer Airey Neave, an ex-prisoner of the Gestapo who was one of the military lawyers at Nuremberg, went from cell to cell and thought: We were frightened for years by this? This gaggle of sniggering, talentless, self-pitying picknoses? Hitler’s foreign minister, the half-weeping Joachim von Ribbentrop, gave him, with shaking hands, a list of titled character witnesses, “chiefly members of the British aristocracy.” Hitler’s cashier, Walther Funk, on inspection, turned out to be a “depressing hypochondriac.” Robert Ley, organizer of slave labor, was “a slobbering creature.” Julius Streicher, purveyor of Jew-baiting pornography, was actually doing his second stretch in a Nuremberg jail. He’d been convicted of sadistic pederasty and resembled, as Rebecca West put it to Neave, the “sort of old man who gives trouble in parks.” Yet Hitler was never reduced to “human” scale in such fashion; never had to hire a lawyer and try to cop a plea. He only affected to be fond of Wagner—his favorite film was the Disney version of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, his actress of choice was Shirley Temple, and in music he preferred the kitsch operetta—but he did arrange a *Götterdämmerung* ending to his rule. As a consequence, there is a recurrent fantasy of retrieving him, and of making him talk.

It’s important to remember that many people, before the war, could look at Hitler and see a man with whom business could be done. Winston Churchill, in a 1935 essay from his book *Great Contemporaries*, had this to say:

It is not possible to form a just judgment of a public figure who has attained the enormous dimensions of Adolf Hitler until his life work as a whole is before us. Although no subsequent political action can condone wrong deeds, history is replete with examples of men who have risen to power by employing stern, grim, and even frightful methods, but who, nevertheless, when their life is revealed as a whole, have been regarded as great figures whose lives have enriched the story of mankind. So may it be with Hitler.

I’ve always thought that—coming as it did two years after Hitler’s seizure of power—this was a bit lenient. Churchill raised his eyebrows all right at the maltreatment of the German Jews, and at the pace of German re-armament, but (as he had done earlier with Mussolini) could not withhold admiration for Hitler’s *Kampf* itself: “The story of that struggle cannot be read without admiration for the courage, the perseverance, and the vital force which enabled him to challenge, defy, conciliate, or overcome all the authorities or resistances which barred his path.”

Look up H. L. Mencken’s review of *Mein Kampf*, as it appeared in *The American Mercury* of December 1933. Greatly to the distress of his old friend and publisher

Alfred A. Knopf, among others, Mencken felt it his job to explain that the new Führer was potentially on to something good. Not only did he describe as “sensible enough” the idea that “Germany’s first big task is to collar Austria and so consolidate the German people,” but he went on to state that anti-Semitism was more or less to be expected. (“The disadvantage of the Jew is that, to simple men, he always seems a kind of foreigner.”) Though he tried to soften the blow by comparing Hitler to fundamentalist Democrat William Jennings Bryan—harsh dispraise in the Mencken universe—he too found that there was a Jewish-Bolshevik threat to be combated: “The bloody Räterepublik at Munich—long forgotten elsewhere, but only too well remembered in Germany—had been set up and bossed by a Jew, and there were other Jews high in the councils of the Communist party, which proposed openly to repeat the Munich pillages and butcheries all over the country.”

Munich, Munich, always Munich. It was there in 1919, just eighty years ago, that the essential catalyst was found. After all, had Hitler not redeemed Germany from the awful moment when, as Winston Churchill himself put it, “the pride and will-power of the Prussian race broke into surrender and revolution behind the fighting lines”? In his new book, *Hitler 1889–1936: Hubris*, Professor Ian Kershaw has hit upon the very moment that is suggested by the earlier passage in *Mein Kampf*, and the—let’s be charitable—unintended compliments paid by Churchill and Mencken.

Do you recall the moment in *The Silence of the Lambs* when a moth chrysalis is discovered in the throat of a mutilated woman, and taken for examination? The entomologists at the Smithsonian lose no time in establishing that this sinister insect was present by design and had been carefully nurtured. “Somebody,” says the man with the tweezers, “grew this guy. Fed him honey and nightshade. Kept him warm. Somebody loved him.” The roach Hitler was just a drifter and a loser and a fantasist, but he was incubated all right, and shoved down the throats of the German people at the perfect psychological moment.

In Munich in late 1918 and 1919, Hitler’s two greatest enemies made common cause. The Räterepublik, or “republic of councils,” was a radical and improvised regime that deposed the monarchy and denounced the war. (Its leader, the Jewish journalist and leftist Kurt Eisner, published the secret documents that showed how the Kaiser had pushed Austria into making a bullying ultimatum after the Sarajevo incident in 1914.) What horror that in Bavaria, Jews and mechanics and longhairs should rule! And that they should expose the war guilt of Imperial Germany! Mencken is right that there was pillage and butchery as a result, but in fact the bloodbath began when Eisner was murdered by a fanatical right-wing officer, and it did not stop until hundreds of Jewish and other “suspect” elements had been lynched by the predecessors of the Brownshirts, and “order” had been restored. In the course of this sanguinary ferment, according to documents unearthed by Professor Kershaw, Hitler found his patrons. A cabal of extreme nationalist and conservative officers in the army hired him as a spy, gave him some walking-around money, and noticed his talent for demagoguery. The leader of this group, Captain Karl Mayr, wrote a year or so later to one of his Fascist-minded

civilian friends: “I’ve set up very capable young people. A Herr Hitler, for example, has become a motive force, a popular speaker of the first rank.”

“The drummer,” his windup inventors called him. He was proud of the title. Later, it was the army that bought Hitler his first newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*, on which he was to found a career as the first modern politician to enjoy absolute mastery of the mass media. The brass also gave him arms and uniforms on the side to set up the Brownshirts. Somebody grew him. You can chuck out your Alan Bullock and Joachim Fest and Hugh Trevor-Roper biographies, in my opinion, and read only one relatively short book: *The Meaning of Hitler*, by the brave, brilliant former German exile Sebastian Haffner. In one dense paragraph, written in 1978, before the Kershaw disclosures, he guessed correctly that Hitler’s maniacal reaction to the Munich revolution in 1918–19 was the key that unlocked everything. Read it carefully, because it leaves nothing out:

“There must never again be and there will never again be a November 1918 in Germany,” was his first political resolution after a great many political ponderings and speculations. It was the first specific objective the young private politician set himself and incidentally the only one he truly accomplished. There was certainly no November 1918 in the Second World War—neither a timely termination of a lost war nor a revolution. Hitler prevented both.

Let us be clear about what this “never again a November 1918” implied. It implied quite a lot. First of all the determination to make impossible any future revolution in a situation analogous to November 1918. Secondly—since otherwise the first point would be left in the air—the determination to bring about once more a similar situation. And this implied, thirdly, the resumption of the war that was lost or believed to be lost. Fourthly, the war had to be resumed on the basis of a domestic constitution in which there were no potentially revolutionary forces. From here it was not far to the fifth point, the abolition of all Left-wing parties, and indeed why not, while one was about it, of all parties. Since, however, one could not abolish the people behind the Left-wing parties, the workers, they would have to be politically won over to nationalism, and this implied, sixth, that one had to offer them socialism, or at least a kind of socialism, in fact National Socialism. Seventh, their former faith, Marxism, had to be uprooted and that meant—eighth—the physical annihilation of the Marxist politicians and intellectuals who, fortunately, included quite a lot of Jews so that—ninth, and Hitler’s oldest wish—one could also, at the same time, exterminate all the Jews.

It becomes impossible to overstate the germinal importance of the 1918 collapse. The German army had fought, brilliantly and barbarously, against France, Britain, Russia, and later the United States. It had defeated Russia and, in the purely militarist sense, held the other Allies to a standoff. But it had, without noticing the fact, also ruined and beggared Germany. Either this calamity was the fault of the Imperial leadership (the view of the Marxist left) or it was the work of an “enemy within.” The crazy, intoxicating one-word Nazi slogan for the latter was *Dolchstoß*, or the “stab in the back.” Such a deluded fantasy required fantasists for its promotion.

The high intelligence of Haffner's analysis explains both Hitler's appeal to the lowest common denominator and the appeal of such a type to those who imagined they were using him. Hitler's inventors and backers, from the obscure Captain Mayr up to Field Marshal von Hindenburg (the dense military man) and Fritz Thyssen (the greedy and cynical tycoon) and Franz von Papen (the Establishment wheeler-dealer), could have been taken as caricatures from some Monopoly board game. They neither wanted nor needed an all-out war with Russia and Britain and America, with a Final Solution thrown in. They desired an insurance policy against Communism. But for that they needed Hitler. And Hitler did need all of the foregoing. But he didn't let on until it was too late. Professor Kershaw makes the same point in a different but equally chilling way. After the constitutional coup which brought Hitler to power in January 1933, the unscrupulous conservative von Papen, who had helped broker the deal, exclaimed, "We've hired him!" At the same moment, the senile President Hindenburg received a letter from his old comrade-in-arms Erich Ludendorff, who had led Germany's armies on the Western Front, had helped originate the myth of the "stab in the back," and had flirted often with Hitler in right-wing politics in Munich after 1919. "You have delivered up our holy German Fatherland to one of the greatest demagogues of all time," wrote the ultra-reactionary Ludendorff to his onetime commanding officer. "I solemnly prophesy that this accursed man will cast our Reich into the abyss and bring our nation to inconceivable misery. Future generations will damn you in your grave for what you have done."

This means that, as early as 1933, a brutish and conceited militarist was more farseeing than, say, Winston Churchill. (Actually, the only person in Europe apart from Ludendorff who saw that there was something entirely new and completely hideous about Hitler was Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky, about whom Churchill in his *Great Contemporaries* was much ruder than about Hitler himself. Trotsky also realized, unlike Ludendorff, that Hitlerism would be dire not just for the "holy German Fatherland." As he wrote, at the eleventh hour, "today, not only in peasant homes but also in the city sky-scrapers, there lives alongside the twentieth century the tenth or thirteenth. A hundred million people use electricity and still believe in the magic power of signs and exorcisms.... What inexhaustible reserves they possess of darkness, ignorance and savagery!")

Between Haffner's incisive analysis and Kershaw's meticulous historiography, it may be possible to give reason a small retrospective victory. Chroniclers of Hitlerism have tended to divide between those who stress the "subjective" personality, the man's ravings and delusions and sexual inversions, and those who emphasize the "objective" conditions, the resentment of millions of Germans at national humiliation and general penury. Some other scholars have simply pointed out, as if on a blackboard, that Hitler loudly proposed to "cure" the second condition by railing at an "enemy within," the Jews, and "an enemy without," the Bolsheviks, with their Jewish characteristics. But that's only to state the same problem in a different way. Obviously, there would have been nationalistic and anti-Semitic reaction to defeat on the battlefield, to the Com-

munist threat, and to the Treaty of Versailles. W. H. Auden grasped this pathology, with a poet's insight, in his "September 1, 1939":

Accurate scholarship can
Unearth the whole offense
From Luther until now
That has driven a culture mad,
Find what occurred at Linz,
What huge imago made
A psychopathic god ...

So, what did occur at Linz, and in the other scenes of Hitler's enchanting boyhood? It's known that he had a brutal father and a doting mother, but as Kershaw carefully shows, there is no serious foundation to the rumors of hidden Jewish ancestry, deformity of the genitals, the incompetence or greed of a Jewish doctor at his mother's deathbed, or any of the other whispers. His sex life managed to be both meager and distraught, but that just won't do as a theory. Nor is it possible, on the evidence, to believe that Hitler didn't really dislike the Jews and simply made a cynical, vote-getting "pitch" to those who did. (A surprising number of scholars have allowed themselves to think this.) For one thing—this is an observation of my own—Mein Kampf was published as an initially unsuccessful vote-getter in 1925, and at that time social democracy was very strong and popular, and the German Jews were still quite secure. To describe either as the work of Satan was to show what you really thought. ("There is no making pacts with Jews," he tells us he decided back in 1918 when he had recovered from his nervous collapse. "There can only be the hard either-or. I, however, resolved to become a politician.")

"To become a politician." Hitler got bad grades and spent several years mooching and brooding. He wanted to be an artist, and believed in his own distinctly slender genius as a painter. Aesthetic circles in Vienna boasted a strong Jewish presence, and envious mediocre bums throughout history have blamed their own lack of recognition on exclusion by such sophisticated cabals. Moreover, idle mediocre bums from the lower middle class have always detested trade unions and cosmopolitans in about equal measure. Young Adolf's prejudices were completely banal until, having identified his shriveled little self with the Kaiser and the Emperor and the army, he saw all his old foes exploiting the moment of defeat by trying to seize power and mock his values. That—and don't forget the gas with which he had been hit—drove him over the edge. (When he got power himself—Führer being the first actual job he had ever held—he at once shut down the unions and then viciously pillaged the galleries of a once civilized nation to hang most of the best modern paintings in Germany in a wildly philistine 1937 exhibition—in Munich—entitled "Degenerate Art.")

In those and other details, his military and business backers let him have his way. They really had overstated, for "opportunist" reasons, the Jewish and Marxist threat. But they thought they owned a marionette. I did not know until I read Kershaw that the proposal for all German soldiers to take their "oath of unconditional loyalty" to

the Führer himself actually came from the High Command. They thought this clever move would detach him from the vulgar Nazi Party and confirm him as their creature. A mistake. Arguably a very big mistake. They helped nationalize the concept of the lowest common denominator.

Yet deep within himself, Haffner argues, Hitler did not trust the German people, or think them worthy of his leadership. With outright military catastrophe threatening in 1944, he ordered the arrest of 5,000 leading German politicians, from minister to mayor (including the highly conservative politician Konrad Adenauer, later to become the first West German chancellor), because he thought they might go soft, and even sue for peace, and perhaps allow another November 1918 defeat. He kept his Final Solution a state secret, to be conducted well away from German soil—a compliment to public opinion in its way—and, at the end, coldly decided that Germany itself should be laid waste as a punishment for its weakness.

But then what is one to say of his overseas “enablers”? Two decades after his Munich “incubation,” Hitler must have goggled with incredulity in the fall of 1938 when the prime minister of Great Britain landed at the Munich airport and asked him if there was anything else, after Austria and the Rhineland, that he especially wanted. Hardly daring to hope, as we now know, Hitler replied in effect that Czechoslovakia would be nice. My own contribution to the anniversaries of 1919 and 1939, if I may mention it, is a foreword to a splendid book called *In Our Time: The Chamberlain-Hitler Collusion*, by Professors Clement Leibovitz and Alvin Finkel. This volume establishes conclusively that British prime minister Neville Chamberlain was no duped “appeaser,” with a silly mustache of his own. He had made a cold calculation that Hitler should be re-armed, and be allowed—if not, indeed, encouraged—to expand his Reich. This was partly to keep his marauding hands off the British Empire, and partly to encourage his “tough-minded” solution to the Bolshevik problem in the East. Chamberlain and his foreign secretary, Lord Halifax, refused even to meet with senior German officers who belatedly implored their help, at the last available moment, in overthrowing the madman. The German people, said these brave men, had been partly duped by Hitler because he had apparently restored full employment and overturned the unpopular and humiliating Treaty of Versailles, without resorting to war. A credible threat of resistance by Britain would destroy this illusion, and there were several generals ready to move against their former protégé. Go away, said His Majesty’s Government. (This story is also told in *The Unnecessary War: Whitehall and the German Resistance to Hitler*, by Patricia Meehan.) Hard to read about this, even now. Hard to remember, too, that in civilized France the reactionaries of 1936, appalled at the election of a Dreyfusard socialist Jew as premier, yelled “Better Hitler than Blum.” M. Léon Blum was deported to Buchenwald.

Of the countless blood-freezing facts about Adolf Hitler that several historians have established independently, there is one that keeps me awake more than any other. Not only did he “time” everything in anticipation of his own early death (he had always had morbid fantasies of illness and suicide), but, at different moments, he actually told

close associates that this was his explicit motive. We must invade Russia now because I have not much time left to me ... The transports to the East must begin because I am becoming frail and must see the task completed ... Even some of his most toughened and cretinous underlings went pale when they heard this and suddenly realized its staggering import. This howling nihilist didn't just need to destroy the Jews. He didn't care if nobody outlived him. In other words, there was no time at which a stiff political or diplomatic resistance, or an assassination backed by the High Command, or even the toe of an Austrian construction worker's cleated boot, might not have made all the difference. Any of these could have fucked him, and the apocalyptic horses he rode in on. He was a homicidal maniac in a hurry, and terribly afraid that he might not make it. Yet respectable circles in Germany, and in Britain and France (and, as we have recently learned from the files of Ford and General Motors, in these United States), decided that he was, on balance, a case of "the lesser evil." Indeed, that was the only use of the word "evil" that they ever permitted themselves.

(Vanity Fair, February 1999)

Victor Klemperer: Survivor

Review of *The Lesser Evil: Diaries 1945–1959*, by Victor Klemperer.

THE LITERATURE of twentieth-century totalitarianism, whether in prefiguring the epoch of Nazism and Stalinism or in drawing on it, often relied on un homme moyen sensuel—the luckless particle swept up in the process, or the worm from whose eye the titanic, forbidding edifice could be squintingly, even cringingly, scrutinized. Kafka's Joseph K was a prototype; Orwell's Winston Smith was given autonomy as a character only to have it very annihilatingly taken away from him. (Rubashov, in *Darkness at Noon*, was more of a Miltonian figure, flung from the heights of power yet still pitilessly judged by the standards of his former comrades.)

Almost a decade ago, in Germany, the diaries of Victor Klemperer were published. It became evident at once that this was a nonfiction event that quite eclipsed the journals of Anne Frank. Here was a middle-aged academic, converted from Judaism to Protestantism, who had decided in full maturity to keep a record of every feasible day (and some inconceivable ones) of the "thousand-year Reich": an enterprise that occupied him from 1933 to 1945 and filled two large volumes titled *I Will Bear Witness*. Superbly translated by Martin Chalmers, these appeared in English in 1998 and 1999, and gave rise to a very widespread critical and historical discussion about the Hitler period. Reading them, I noticed that at the end of the war—and after narrowly surviving the obliteration of Dresden—Klemperer had opted to stay in "East" Germany, and to identify himself with what became the German Democratic Republic. Given the attachment to liberalism and skepticism that he had demonstrated throughout his diaries of the Nazi years, and given also his addiction to journal keeping, I felt sure that he would have kept up his solitary labor on the other side of the Iron Curtain, and

that this work would one day surface. And now it has, in the form of *The Lesser Evil*, a fourteen-year personal journey through the academic bureaucracy and party-state institutions of the GDR. It ends a few months short of Klemperer's death, in 1960.

It is a disgrace that this book has not so far found a publisher in the United States, and I hope that readers will be able to bypass the bookstores and publishers and acquire copies by other means. (Phoenix Books is based in London; Trafalgar Square Books, of Vermont, is the U.S. distributor.) With this third volume we now have what is almost unique—a firsthand and intimate account by somebody who “survived” both versions of ideological dictatorship at close quarters, and who was in an unusually strong position to take, and to compare, notes. If American book publishers wish to give the impression that they cash in on Holocaust-related books before allowing their interest in Central Europe to lapse, then by this act of negligence they are well on their way to succeeding.

For all that, it is effectively impossible to begin a discussion of *The Lesser Evil* without reviewing some of the context and character of the preceding volumes. Klemperer was born in 1881, to the family of a rabbi in what was then Brandenburg and is now part of Poland. (To anticipate a question: The conductor Otto Klemperer was a cousin.) The father, an Orthodox Jew, switched allegiance to Reform Judaism when he moved to Berlin, and his sons “completed” this trajectory, it might be said, by converting to Protestantism. Victor took up the study of French Enlightenment literature, was an energetic literary journalist, married a Protestant musicologist named Eva Schlemmer, served in the German Army in the First World War with pride but without great distinction, and in 1920 secured a post teaching Romance languages and literature at Dresden Technical University. Thus when National Socialism came to power, in 1933, he had some reason to hope that his conversion, his academic position, his marriage, and his war record would give him a degree of immunity.

I should add, in all fairness and objectivity, that Klemperer also decided that nothing would induce him to emigrate: He would remain a German at any hazard. But the consuming interest of the hundreds of entries that he was later to set down is this: It took him quite awhile to appreciate just how futile this trust in partial immunity would prove. Not that he had any illusions about the nature of the Nazi Party, for whose propaganda and bombast he invariably expressed loathing and contempt. It was more that he had difficulty crediting the ghastly, inexorable fashion in which everything was taken from him, and from his wife. His marriage, position, and war record did, in fact, confer some rights on him: Even the Nuremberg “race” laws made some grudging exceptions for those married to “Aryans.” But this postponement only made him feel more keenly the deep-seated and protracted sadism of the “cleansing” of Germany. One day it would be that he could not ride at the front of the tram or use the university library, the next a ban on Jewish ownership of typewriters or automobiles. Then it would be the imposition of the Yellow Star, or the forced use of “Israel” as a patronymic on official cards and papers. Then Jews were kicked off the tram altogether, and always there was fresh trouble about the shops that could be used or the rations that could be

claimed. Eventually came expulsion from his university post and from his home, and a confinement in ghetto housing that became more and more obviously the anteroom to deportation; and then the only terminus of deportation. There is a horrid fascination in reading this day-by-day chronicle as it unfolds, along with each cuff on the head and gob of spittle, because we know what's coming, and he is only beginning to guess.

I'll select an ostensibly trivial instance that is somehow appallingly eloquent. The Klemperers were childless (thank heaven, one thinks—as they must sometimes have thought), and Victor and especially Eva had become devoted cat lovers. A time came when the magazine *The German Feline* began to publish articles exalting the authentic German cat over the suspect and degenerate “breeds” that had been allowed to creep in. Then Klemperer was informed that he could no longer make donations to the fund for the prevention of cruelty to German cats. Then all Jews in the Reich, and all those married to them, were told that they would have to surrender all pets, because dogs and cats and birds should live only in pure Aryan homes. Of this, in May of 1942, Klemperer writes, about the couple's beloved tomcat, Muschel,

I feel very bitter for Eva's sake. We have so often said to each other: The tomcat's raised tail is our flag, we shall not strike it ... and at the victory celebrations Muschel will get a “schnitzel from Kamm's” (the fanciest butcher here) ...

Unless the regime collapsed by the very next morning, we would expose the cat to an even crueler death or put me in even greater danger. (Even having him killed today is a little dangerous for me.) I left the decision to Eva. She took the animal away in the familiar cardboard catbox, she was present when he was put to sleep by an anaesthetic.

Banish your sentimentality (and I have left out the most heart-touching passages): Is there not something fabulously grotesque about a regime that in the midst of total war will pedantically insist that Jews and their spouses either euthanize their own pets or surrender them to the state for extermination?

But even as the book is a bitter rebuke to all those who doubt or deny the methodical nature of the Nazi elimination policy, it is also a reproach to some of the more facile elements of the Goldhagen thesis, as put forth in *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1996). Far from being made the object of hatred or violence by his fellow citizens, Klemperer is constantly being brought up short by astonishment at random—or even planned—acts of generosity or solidarity. Cuts of meat or fish are offered to him in rationed stores. Tram drivers abuse the Führer for his benefit. The man supposed to supervise the forced labor of elderly Jews gives repeated work breaks and takes every opportunity to express sympathy for the conscripts and disgust for the authorities. A worker passes by and says, “Chin up—the scoundrels will soon be finished.” This persists even into the heavy Allied bombardments. Klemperer's friend Jacobi is invited into an air-raid shelter that's off limits to wearers of the Star with the words “Come on in, mate.” When Jacobi says, “But you mustn't say that,” the worker responds loudly, “We're all mates—and soon we'll be able to say it out loud again.” If there is hope, it lies in the proles ... Klemperer awards credit for this, and often mentions the exemplary behavior

of communists and socialists, but nonetheless retains a certain reserve. Where are all the other Germans? Are they, as he suspects, in hiding somewhere?

Never much—or at all—interested in Marxism, he also manifests an abiding distrust of the Zionism to which so many of his fellows are drawn. To him, the point is to maintain his right to be a liberal German. He abuses Theodor Herzl in the roundest of terms, as a mirror-image race theorist and nationalist who would deny this same right in another insidious way. And he shrinks, as a good Voltairean should, from Martin Buber's religiosity ("makes me downright ill"). There cannot have been many victims in 1942 who told their diaries that they planned an essay titled "Pro Germania, contra Zion from the contemporary standpoint of the German Jew."

Most arresting of all, however, is Klemperer's decision to compile a lexicon of what he calls *Lingua tertii imperii* ("the language of the Third Reich"), in which he notes and analyzes the rhetorical giveaways of the regime. This LTI notation becomes a subtext of the book, and puts one in mind even more forcibly of the diary kept by Winston Smith. As in *Nineteen Eighty-four*, it often involves noticing propaganda claims, about production at home or victories on far-off fronts, that are simply too loud and too immense to be believed. Then there is the Nazi habit of collectivizing races or nationalities, so that it's always "the Jew" or "the Englishman," with individuality doing duty for a mass. To say nothing of the use of words—"fanatical," for instance—as extra-strong positives. Klemperer develops a way of reading the newspapers so as to notice that when slightly tepid terms are employed, things must be going really badly for German armies in North Africa or Russia. (His guesses are usually correct.) With some satisfaction he examines the death notices in the press and counts up how many of them are accompanied by a swastika or some other Nazi rune, and how many simply announce a fallen son. After the war was over, Klemperer published his essays on LTI as a separate book, which had considerable success in both Germanys.

The Klemperer we come to know is a shrewd man, somewhat impatient with others and somewhat insecure, and fairly honest with and about himself. In one of his entries about the death of the cat, for example, he confesses that he resents his wife's giving a lavish piece of veal (the meat ration for some days) to the condemned Muschel as a farewell treat. By the time this third volume opens, we are accustomed to the sharp insights into motivation and character, and to the equally acute ear for falsity and pretension, that have helped him survive. We have also been introduced to an absolutely magnificent woman in Eva, herself a one-person refutation of the Goldhagen slur on the German character. It seems never even to have occurred to her that she could have saved herself by divorce; she had been condemned to join one of the last trains rumbling east toward the killing fields with her husband when the skies opened over Dresden, in 1945, and the Nazi authority went up in smoke. (She had loved the city, as had Victor, but said that her heart had hardened after the murder of little Muschel.)

In one of his diatribes against Herzl, Klemperer says that the man had an almost Bolshevik arrogance. From this and many other asides and observations it is quite

clear that he was not in any sense a Communist; indeed, it's fairly plain that he was a relatively apolitical supporter of the old Social-Democratic Party. Yet his decision to take out a party card with the Communist Party (KPD) follows very shortly after the collapse of Hitler and the arrival of the Red Army. The Klemperers get their old house back, are offered compensation and many apologies (there are some mordant entries on the latter), and are able to have a tomcat again. But Party membership was not required for any of this.

A mixture of motives can be discerned. First, Klemperer feels that the most valiant anti-Nazis were the KPD and the Soviet Union. (That this conclusion involves some rewriting of history goes without saying.) And the VVN—the official association of victims of Nazi persecution, which he wishes to join—is quite clearly a Party front. But there is more to it than that. Deep down, and despite some memorable experiences to the contrary, he has ceased to trust the German people. In his mind, only a very strong regime will prevent the resurgence of anti-Jewish hatred that he regards as inevitable. This thought poisons even his better moments.

Historical context apart, Klemperer's journals can be read for their own sake as a gnawing meditation on the disappointments of life and the irrevocability of choices. He is intensely aware at all moments, perhaps because of his consciousness of being a "survivor," that death is only a breath away. He is one of the great kvetches of all time, endlessly recording aches and pains, bad dreams, shortages of food and medicine, snubs and humiliations. And, like everyone else, he wants everything both ways. In particular, he wants East Germany to be an open democracy with a real intellectual life, while insisting that all manifestations of reactionary and racist spirit be pitilessly crushed. This double-entry bookkeeping is something that he usually has the courage to confess ("between two stools" becomes his preferred cliché) even when he knows that the contradiction is not resolvable. Thus, while hailing the Red Army and the intransigent Party even in the earliest post-Nazi days, he is beginning to take notes for a successor study of lethal jargon, to be called LQI, or The Language of the Fourth Reich. Here's an example, from a commissar-type critique he receives of one of his books—which, he is informed, must, "taking account of all objectivity, of all devotion to scholarship, nevertheless above all be couched in such a way that it meets all the demands of our new democratic educational reform, which of course *mutatis mutandis* also applies to the universities." It continues, "Revolutionary times must on occasion make do with considerable abridgements in order to accentuate the political line more strongly." To that gem of what the French call *la langue du bois* Klemperer appends the single instinctive word "Revolt!" He adds that "class-consciousness" in this form is the counterpart to race-consciousness under the previous regime before reflecting, "Not quite as poisonous."

Oscar Wilde's objection to the socialism he professed—that it would take up far too many evenings—has never been better materialized than by Klemperer's record of soul-smashing monotony and conformity. He dares not refuse to attend meetings of the Kulturbund, because this deadening outfit is a meal ticket. But once you are on one

committee ... His acute sense of time wasted is intensified by his no-less-acute sense that he hasn't much time left.

The page-turning quality of the first two volumes isn't as urgent in *The Lesser Evil*, because although we know what is coming, we also know, at least, that it can and will be survived. When the workers of Berlin mount a revolt in 1953, Klemperer is only peripherally involved and gives the regime the benefit of the doubt while distrusting its propagandized explanation. One can feel the erection of the Wall coming on, even as one notices that Klemperer both does and does not want the segregation of Germany and the absorption of the east by the Soviet bloc. He died in February of 1960, just before that consummation of the Cold War forced so many of his compatriots to flee or go into internal opposition. It's doubtful that he could have nerved himself to do either thing; indeed, by then his nerve had gone. But toward the very last of the entries he says something that he hasn't said to himself before—namely, that the conduct of the East German security services is of a “Gestapo” type. For a childless man, also, he shows special insight in noticing how gruesome is regime propaganda when directed at infants. This is an LQI entry from May of 1959, taken from an East German newspaper interview, in which “Colleague Schubert, day nursery teacher at the 12th Primary School,” said,

With some groups in our nursery we have got to the point that the children are already working independently and learning leadership ... From lunchtime, under the supervision of a nursery teacher, the children themselves take over. Thus we try to teach leadership to our worker and peasant children; because one day they will be in charge of the state.

Without pausing over the accidental absurdity of the second sentence, Klemperer simply notes that this is “purest Nazism, in even worse German!”

My Winston Smith analogy is obviously inexact in one way, in that during the Nazi period Klemperer was an axiomatically identified public enemy with no hope of concealing himself, and during the Communist years he was a man trying to convince himself not that the system was wrong but that it was right. His utter failure in this attempt is eloquent nonetheless, and amounts to a very strong and useful condemnation at a time when a movie of fatuous nostalgia for the GDR—*Good Bye, Lenin!*—can exert extensive box-office and critical appeal in the United States, and when former Stalinists and neo-Nazis are competing with each other to make a statist “One Nation” appeal in the eastern Lander of the Federal Republic.

In 1951 Eva Klemperer died; one is happy to know that she was to the last consoled by her new cat. Within a short time Victor had taken up with another woman, named Hadwig Kirchner, who likewise agreed to share his disappointments and struggles—and to put up with his evidently difficult personality—but whose deepest desire was that he agree to marry her within the Catholic Church and thus prevent her having to choose between him and holy communion. This he eventually agreed to do, so long as it could be arranged that nobody would know of it. One has the feeling that he would have made this a condition even in a state system that did not frown on religion.

These journals are not the diary of a nobody, even though they were composed by a man who greatly feared that verdict. They are, rather, the life story of a man who in a time of diseased delusions tried—and failed—to live as if even comforting illusions were unnecessary.

(The Atlantic, December 2004)

A War Worth Fighting

Review of Churchill, Hitler and the Unnecessary War, by Pat Buchanan.

IS THERE ANY ONE SHARED PRINCIPLE or assumption on which our political consensus rests, any value judgment on which we are all essentially agreed? Apart from abstractions such as a general belief in democracy, one would probably get the widest measure of agreement for the proposition that the Second World War was a “good war” and one well worth fighting. And if we possess one indelible image of political immorality and cowardice, it is surely the dismal tap-tap-tap of Neville Chamberlain’s umbrella as he turned from signing the Czechs away to Adolf Hitler at Munich. He hoped by this humiliation to avert war, but he was fated to bring his countrymen war on top of humiliation. To the conventional wisdom add the titanic figure of Winston Churchill as the emblem of oratorical defiance and the Horatius who, until American power could be mobilized and deployed, alone barred the bridge to the forces of unalloyed evil. When those forces lay finally defeated, their ghastly handiwork was uncovered to a world that mistakenly thought it had already “supped full of horrors.” The stark evidence of the Final Solution has ever since been enough to dispel most doubts about, say, the wisdom or morality of carpet-bombing German cities.

Historical scholarship has nevertheless offered various sorts of revisionist interpretation of all this. Niall Ferguson, for one, has proposed looking at the two World Wars as a single conflict, punctuated only by a long and ominous armistice. British conservative historians like Alan Clark and John Charmley have criticized Churchill for building his career on war, for ignoring openings to peace, and for eventually allowing the British Empire to be squandered and broken up. But Pat Buchanan, twice a candidate for the Republican nomination and in 2000 the standard-bearer for the Reform Party who ignited a memorable “chad” row in Florida, has now condensed all the anti-war arguments into one. His case, made in his recently released Churchill, Hitler and the Unnecessary War, is as follows:

- That Germany was faced with encirclement and injustice in both 1914 and 1939.
- Britain in both years ought to have stayed out of quarrels on the European mainland.
- That Winston Churchill was the principal British warmonger on both occasions.
- The United States was needlessly dragged into war on both occasions.

- That the principal beneficiaries of this were Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong.
- That the Holocaust of European Jewry was as much the consequence of an avoidable war as it was of Nazi racism.

Buchanan does not need to close his book with an invocation of a dying West, as if to summarize this long recital of Spenglerian doomsaying. He's already opened with the statement, "All about us we can see clearly now that the West is passing away." The tropes are familiar—a loss of will and confidence, a collapse of the desire to reproduce with sufficient vigor, a preference for hedonism over the stern tasks of rulership and dominion and pre-eminence. It all sounds oddly ... Churchillian. The old lion himself never tired of striking notes like these, and was quite unembarrassed by invocations of race and nation and blood. Yet he is the object of Buchanan's especial dislike and contempt, because he had a fondness for "wars of choice."

This term has enjoyed a recent vogue because of the opposition to the war in Iraq, an opposition in which Buchanan has played a vigorous role. Descending as he does from the tradition of Charles Lindbergh's America First movement, which looked for (and claimed to have found) a certain cosmopolitan lobby behind FDR's willingness to involve the United States in global war, Buchanan is the most trenchant critic of what he considers our fondest national illusion, and his book has the feel and stamp of a work that he has been readying all his life.

But he faces an insuperable difficulty, or rather difficulties. If you want to demonstrate that Germany was more the victim than the aggressor in 1914, then you must confine your account (as Buchanan does) to the very minor legal question of Belgian neutrality and of whether Britain absolutely had to go to war on the Belgian side. (For what it may be worth, I think that Britain wasn't obliged to do so and should not have done.) But the rest of the Kaiser's policy, most of it completely omitted by Buchanan, shows that Germany was looking for a chance for war all over the globe, and was increasingly the prisoner of a militaristic ruling caste at home. The Kaiser picked a fight with Britain by backing the white Dutch Afrikaner rebels in South Africa and by butchering the Ovambo people of what is now Namibia. He looked for trouble with the French by abruptly sending warships to Agadir in French Morocco, which nearly started the First World War in 1905, and with Russia by backing Austria-Hungary's insane ultimatum to the Serbs after the June 1914 assassinations in Sarajevo. Moreover, and never mentioned by Buchanan at all, the Kaiser visited Damascus and paid for the rebuilding of the tomb of Saladin, announced himself a sympathizer of Islam and a friend of jihad, commissioned a Berlin-to-Baghdad railroad for the projection of German arms into the Middle East and Asia, and generally ranged himself on the side of an aggressive Ottoman imperialism, which later declared a "holy war" against Britain. To suggest that he felt unjustly hemmed in by the Royal Navy's domination of the North Sea while he was conducting such statecraft is absurd.

And maybe a little worse than absurd, as when Buchanan writes: "From 1871 to 1914, the Germans under Bismarck and the Kaiser did not fight a single war. While

Britain, Russia, Italy, Turkey, Japan, Spain, and the United States were all involved in wars, Germany and Austria had clean records.” I am bound to say that I find this creepy. The start of the “clean record” has to be in 1871, because that’s the year that Prussia humbled France in the hideous Franco-Prussian War that actually annexed two French provinces to Germany. In the intervening time until 1914, Germany was seizing colonies in Africa and the Pacific, cementing secret alliances with Austria and trying to build up a naval fleet that could take on the British one. No wonder the Kaiser wanted a breathing space.

Now, this is not to say that Buchanan doesn’t make some sound points about the secret diplomacy of Old Europe that was so much to offend Woodrow Wilson. And he is excellent on the calamitous Treaty of Versailles that succeeded only—as was noted by John Maynard Keynes at the time—in creating the conditions for another world war, or for part two of the first one. He wears his isolationism proudly: “The Senate never did a better day’s work than when it rejected the Treaty of Versailles and refused to enter a League of Nations where American soldiers would be required to give their lives enforcing the terms of so dishonorable and disastrous a peace.”

Actually, no soldier of any nation ever lost so much as a fingernail in the service of the League, which was in any case doomed by American abstention, and it’s exactly that consideration which invalidates the second half of Buchanan’s argument, which is that a conflict with Hitler’s Germany both could and should have been averted. (There is a third Buchanan sub-argument, mostly made by implication, which is that the democratic West should have allied itself with Hitler, at least passively, until he had destroyed the Soviet Union.) Again, in order to believe his thesis one has to be prepared to argue that Hitler was a rational actor with intelligible and negotiable demands, whose declared, demented ambitions in *Mein Kampf* were presumably to be disregarded as mere propaganda. In case after case Buchanan shows the abysmal bungling of British and French diplomacy—making promises to Czechoslovakia that could never have been kept and then, adding injury to insult, breaking those promises at the first opportunity. Or offering a guarantee to Poland (a country that had gleefully taken part in the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia) that Hitler well knew was not backed by any credible military force.

Buchanan is at his best here, often causing one to whistle at the sheer cynicism and stupidity of the British Tories. In the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of June 1935, for example, they astounded the French and Italians and Russians by unilaterally agreeing to permit Hitler to build a fleet one third the size of the Royal Navy and a submarine fleet of the same size as the British! Not only was this handing the Third Reich the weapon it would soon press to Britain’s throat, it was convincing all Britain’s potential allies that they would be much better off making their own bilateral deals with Berlin. Which is essentially what happened.

But Buchanan keeps forgetting that this criminal foolishness is exactly the sort of policy that he elsewhere recommends. In his view, after all, Germany had been terribly wronged by Versailles and it would have been correct to redraw the frontiers in

Germany's favor and soothe its hurt feelings (which is what the word "appeasement" originally meant). Meanwhile we should have encouraged Hitler's hostility to Bolshevism and discreetly re-armed in case he should also need to be contained. This might perhaps have worked if Germany had been governed by a right-wing nationalist party that had won a democratic vote. However, in point of fact Germany was governed by an ultra-rightist, homicidal, paranoid maniac who had begun by demolishing democracy in Germany itself, who believed that his fellow countrymen were a superior race and who attributed all the evils in the world to a Jewish conspiracy. It is possible to read whole chapters of Buchanan's book without having to bear these salient points in mind. (I should say that I intend this observation as a criticism.) As with his discussion of pre-1914 Germany, he commits important sins of omission that can only be the outcome of an ideological bias. Barely mentioned except in passing is the Spanish Civil War, for example, where for three whole years between 1936 and 1939 Germany and Italy lent troops and weapons in a Fascist invasion of a sovereign European nation that had never threatened or "encircled" them in any way. Buchanan's own political past includes overt sympathy with General Franco, which makes this skating-over even less forgivable than it might otherwise be.

On the one occasion where Spain does get a serious mention, it illustrates the opposite point to the one Buchanan thinks he's making. The British ambassador in Berlin, Sir Neville Henderson, is explaining why Hitler didn't believe that Britain and France would fight over Prague: "[Hitler] argued as follows: Would the German nation willingly go to war for General Franco in Spain, if France intervened on the side of the Republican government? The answer that he gave himself is that it would not, and he was consequently convinced that no democratic French government would be strong enough to lead the French nation to war for the Czechs."

In this instance, it must be admitted, Hitler was being a rational actor. And his admission—which Buchanan in his haste to indict Anglo-French policy completely fails to notice—is that if he himself had been resisted earlier and more determinedly, he would have been compelled to give ground. Thus the whole and complete lesson is not that the Second World War was an avoidable "war of choice." It is that the Nazis could and should have been confronted before they had fully re-armed and had begun to steal the factories and oilfields and coal mines and workers of neighboring countries. As General Douglas MacArthur once put it, all military defeats can be summarized in two words: "Too late." The same goes for political disasters.

As the book develops, Buchanan begins to unmask his true colors more and more. It is one thing to make the case that Germany was ill-used, and German minorities harshly maltreated, as a consequence of the 1914 war of which Germany's grim emperor was one of the prime instigators. It's quite another thing to say that the Nazi decision to embark on a Holocaust of European Jewry was "not a cause of the war but an awful consequence of the war." Not only is Buchanan claiming that Hitler's fanatical racism did not hugely increase the likelihood of war, but he is also making the insinuation that those who wanted to resist him are the ones who are equally if not indeed mainly responsible for

the murder of the Jews! This absolutely will not do. He adduces several quotations from Hitler and Goebbels, starting only in 1939 and ending in 1942, screaming that any outbreak of war to counter Nazi ambitions would lead to a terrible vengeance on the Jews. He forgets—at least I hope it's only forgetfulness—that such murderous incitement began long, long before Hitler had even been a lunatic-fringe candidate in the 1920s. This “timeline” is as spurious, and as sinister, as the earlier dates, so carefully selected by Buchanan, that tried to make Prussian imperialism look like a victim rather than a bully.

One closing example will demonstrate the corruption and prejudice of Buchanan's historical “method.” He repeatedly argues that Churchill did not appreciate Hitler's deep-seated and respectful Anglophilia, and he continually blames the war on several missed opportunities to take the Führer's genially outstretched hand. Indeed, he approvingly quotes several academic sources who agree with him that Hitler invaded the Soviet Union only in order to change Britain's mind. Suppose that Buchanan is in fact correct about this. Could we have a better definition of derangement and megalomania than the case of a dictator who overrules his own generals and invades Russia in wintertime, mainly to impress the British House of Commons? (Incidentally, or rather not incidentally, it was precisely that hysterical aggression that curtain-raised the organized deportation and slaughter of the Jews. But it's fatuous to suppose that, without that occasion, the Nazis would not have found another one.)

It is of course true that millions of other people lost their lives in this conflict, often in unprecedentedly horrible ways, and that new tyrannies were imposed on the countries—Poland, Czechoslovakia, and China most notably—that had been the pretexts for a war against fascism. But is this not to think in the short term? Unless or until Nazism had been vanquished, millions of people were most certainly going to be either massacred or enslaved in any case. Whereas today, all the way from Portugal to the Urals, the principle of human rights and popular sovereignty is at least the norm, and the ideas of racism and totalitarianism have been fairly conclusively and historically discredited. Would a frightened compromise with racist totalitarianism have produced a better result?

Winston Churchill may well have been on the wrong side about India, about the gold standard, about the rights of labor, and many other things, and he may have had a lust for war, but we may also be grateful that there was one politician in the 1930s who found it intolerable even to breathe the same air, or share the same continent or planet, as the Nazis. (Buchanan of course makes plain that he rather sympathizes with Churchill about the colonies, and quarrels only with his “finest hour.” This is grotesque.) As he closes his argument, Buchanan again refuses to disguise his allegiance. “Though derided as isolationists,” he writes, “the America First patriots kept the United States out of the war until six months after Hitler had invaded Russia.” If you know anything at all about what happened to the population of those territories in those six months, it is rather hard to be proud that America was neutral. But this is a price that Buchanan is quite willing to pay.

I myself have written several criticisms of the cult of Churchill, and of the uncritical way that it has been used to stifle or cudgel those with misgivings. (“Adlai,” said John F. Kennedy of his outstanding U.N. ambassador during the Bay of Pigs crisis, “wanted a Munich.”) Yet the more the record is scrutinized and re-examined, the more creditable it seems that at least two Western statesmen, for widely different reasons, regarded coexistence with Nazism as undesirable as well as impossible. History may judge whether the undesirability or the impossibility was the more salient objection, but any attempt to separate the two considerations is likely to result in a book that stinks, as this one unmistakably does.

(Newsweek, June 23, 2008)

Just Give Peace a Chance?

Review of *Human Smoke*, by Nicholson Baker.

THE VERY TITLE OF THIS BOOK, *Human Smoke*, is either very courageous or very tasteless (or conceivably both), and Nicholson Baker waits until his very last page to give us the origin of it. It is taken from the postwar interrogation of General Franz Halder, a mutinous German officer who was incarcerated in Dachau late in the war and “saw flakes of smoke blow into his cell. Human smoke, he called it.” To use the ashes of Nazism’s victims as the name of a polemic that says that the Second World War was not worth fighting takes a certain kind of nerve.

But of course if there had been no war it is at least thinkable that there would have been no Final Solution. It’s not as if the treatment of European Jewry was in any sense part of the original *casus belli*, or even formed any part of the propaganda for the war while it was actually being fought. Instead, the opening of the camps has furnished a retrospective justification for the war: a conflict the outcome of which is probably one of the few elements of consensus still left to us.

Follow Baker’s logic just a little further, and it becomes possible to imply that the war might actually have helped facilitate the Holocaust. This in turn would help make all participants in the Second World War into morally equivalent forces. And that in fact is Baker’s view, as is the view not just that all wars are essentially the same, but that they are also all essentially part of the same war. What we call the Second World War was only an extension of the long struggle for mastery between the various European powers, all of which were all the time also wreaking indiscriminate cruelty on colonial peoples.

That there is some truth to all this is what gives pacifism its enduring appeal. Baker’s narrative method is one that approximates collage. He builds up a heap of contemporary newspaper clippings, reports, and speeches, taking us at a brisk pace through the “First” World War and the volatile twenties and thirties and then slowing down as the great confrontation begins to unfold. He concludes the book on December 31, 1941, when the conflict has become truly global with Pearl Harbor, and when, as

he rather tellingly puts it, “most of the people who died in the Second World War were at that moment still alive.”

The ones who were to die at the hands of British and American bomber pilots are the ones who receive the greater part of Baker’s compassion. If there is a villain in this book, it is certainly the Royal Air Force. Hardly a page goes by without Baker selecting a report of the British bombing of Iraq, or India, or Sudan in some colonial punitive expedition. And this, it becomes clear, is a curtain-raiser for the concept of “area bombing” and Hamburg and Dresden, with all restraint on the inflicting of civilian casualties thrown to the wind.

Some reviewers have expressed shock or even disbelief at evidence that Baker has adduced, from Winston Churchill’s early anti-Semitism to the internment of anti-Nazi Jewish and German refugees in camps in Britain; from the cold decision to massacre German workers by concentrating bombs on their more closely packed housing to the open proclamation of imperialist British war aims. I myself, however, grew increasingly impatient with Baker’s assumption of his own daring transgressiveness. I have mentioned all those above points in print myself, and attacked the Churchill cult from many angles, and defended the right of David Irving to publish his own revisionist screeds, but I still detect something smug and vacant in the superior attitudes struck by the peace-lover. By all means let us stipulate or concede (say) that Churchill was just as ruthless as Hitler about violating the neutrality of small European states and nations. The deformities of the anti-war faction are nonetheless threefold: They underestimate and understate the radical evil of Nazism and fascism, they forget that many “peace-loving” forces did the same at the time, and they are absolutist in their ahistoricism. A war is a war is a war, in their moral universe, and anyone engaging in one is as bad as anyone else.

Taking my above criticisms in reverse order, this would mean that if the warmonger Churchill had been in a position to intervene to save the Spanish Republic in 1936, perhaps exaggerating the threat of Franco to British interests in order to persuade Parliament and the press to endorse the use of force (as he would have had to do), he would be just as culpable. That in turn would involve regarding the old left slogan “Fascism Means War” as meaningless, either in the sense that fascism necessitated war or in the sense that fascism both desired and intended it. So I do hope that some current “anti-war” types don’t find themselves tempted by Baker to abandon one of the left’s finer traditions.

To the second point, Baker can’t seem to get enough of the wisdom of Gandhi and cites at length an open letter he wrote to the British people on July 3, 1940. “Your soldiers are doing the same work of destruction as the Germans,” wrote the Mahatma. “I want you to fight Nazism without arms.” He went on to say: “Let them take possession of your beautiful island, with your many beautiful buildings. You will give all these, but neither your souls, nor your minds. If these gentlemen choose to occupy your homes, you will vacate them. If they do not give you free passage out, you will allow yourself,

man, woman and child, to be slaughtered, but you will refuse to owe allegiance to them.”

I must say that everything in me declines to be addressed in that tone of voice, but Baker contentedly adds the additional heart-warming observation that this very “method” of resistance, according to Gandhi, “had had considerable success in India.” This is not the book’s only reminder of how fatuous the pacifist position can sound, or indeed can be.

Finally one must mention the most damaging criticism of the peace-at-any-price view, which was the one noticed at the time by George Orwell. Behind all the “war never pays” rhetoric could often be detected the insinuation that the Nazis and fascists weren’t really as bad as all that. On two pages to which I call your attention—pages 204 and 233—Nicholson Baker leaves the distinct impression that Hitler would have been content to ship all Europe’s Jews to somewhere like Madagascar and would have done so were it not for Churchill’s awful belligerence. You are perfectly free to believe this yourself, should you choose. As the book proceeds, the emollient and slightly sinister tone becomes more and more evident. A New York Times report of an Anglo-Soviet air raid on Berlin in late 1941, for example, is followed by Baker’s comment: “These bombings immediately followed the endorsement of the peace-loving language of the Atlantic Charter.” Oooh, the irony! But the Atlantic Charter—in many ways the founding document of the United Nations—was explicitly predicated on the idea that totalitarian fascism must first be destroyed.

Indeed, the little matter of democracy is entirely ignored by the self-satisfied Baker analysis. Not only are Britain and America discussed as if they were little if any better than the dictatorships of the time, but we are never even faced with the question of how much force would ever be justifiable in a war to the finish between the pluralist and the absolutist principle (in which the absolutist principle was, lest we forget, rather convincingly vanquished). In much the same way, London and Washington are reprobated for missing chances for negotiation before 1940 but Berlin doesn’t draw the same standard of criticism for its decision to fight on (and to intensify genocide in the east as well as to prolong the misery of Germany) when all was obviously lost. Nor is Japanese imperialism pictured as anything much more than an island regime goaded into war by the exorbitant demands of Franklin Roosevelt. This will not do.

Baker and I share an admiration for the extraordinary courage of the German anti-war movement both civil and military, but he either doesn’t know or completely forgets something that one is not entitled to overlook. When the envoys of the anti-Nazi officer corps visited London at the eleventh hour, they came to tell Chamberlain and Halifax that they could overthrow and imprison their demented Führer, as long as Britain could be counted on to say, and to mean, that it could and would fight for Prague. If you want to avoid a very big and very bad war later, be prepared to fight a small and principled war now. Who would not rather have removed Saddam Hussein from power in 1991, before the ruinous sanctions and during his genocide, and while he was red-handed with WMDs? Baker’s book should have a contradictory effect on readers

of leftist and/or anti-militarist bent: In hindsight it makes the white flag appear very dirty and the red flag look relatively clean.

(New Statesman, May 19, 2008)

W. G. Sebald: Requiem for Germany

Review of *On the Natural History of Destruction*, by W. G. Sebald.

THE NARRATOR of Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* (1947) is relating his story against the clock, as the German homeland finds itself pulverized and encircled in the spring of 1945. He punctuates almost every chapter with contemporary tidings of apocalypse:

This earth-shaking plummeting havoc has come breathtakingly close to my refuge several times now. The dreadful bombardment of the city of Dürer and Willibald Pirckheimer was no longer some distant event; and as the Last Judgment fell upon Munich as well, I sat here in my study, turning ashen, shaking like the walls, doors, and windowpanes of my house.

A little later comes Leipzig's turn:

Its famous publishing district is, I sadly hear, only a heap of rubble and an immeasurable wealth of literary and educational material is now the spoil of destruction—a heavy loss not only for us Germans, but also for a whole world that cares about culture. That world, however, is apparently willing—whether blindly or correctly, I dare not decide—to take the loss into the bargain.

Almost a hundred pages later comes a thought to balance the preceding one:

Granted, the destruction of our cities from the air has long since turned Germany into an arena of war; and yet we find it inconceivable, impermissible, to think that Germany could ever become such an arena in the true sense, and our propaganda has a curious way of warning the foe against incursion upon our soil, our sacred German soil, as if that would be some grisly atrocity ... Our sacred German soil! As if anything were still sacred about it, as if it had not long ago been desecrated again and again by the immensity of our rape of justice and did not lie naked, both morally and in fact, before the power of divine judgment. Let it come!

Reeling nonetheless from the scarcely bearable consequences of his own wish, he trembles for his hometown once more:

Awaiting our fate, beyond whose calamity no man can surmise, I have withdrawn into my hermit's cell in Freising and avoid the sight of our hideously battered Munich—the toppled statues, the façades that gaze from vacant eye sockets to disguise the yawning void behind, and yet seem inclined to reveal it, too, by supplying more of the rubble already strewn over the cobblestones.

By the opening of the penultimate chapter Mann has synthesized the two themes—first the crashing chords of *Götterdämmerung*, and second the awareness of nemesis:

There is no stopping it: surrender on all sides, everyone scattering. Our shattered and devastated cities fall like ripe plums. Darmstadt, Würzburg, Frankfurt have succumbed. Mannheim and Kassel, even Münster, Leipzig—they all obey strangers now ... Among the regime's great men, who wallowed in power, riches, and injustice, suicide rages, passing its sentence ... Whatever lived as German stands now as an abomination and the epitome of evil. What will it be like to belong to a nation whose history bore this gruesome fiasco within it, a nation that has driven itself mad, gone psychologically bankrupt, that admittedly despairs of governing itself and thinks it best that it become a colony of foreign powers, a nation that will have to live in isolated confinement, like the Jews of the ghetto, because the dreadfully swollen hatred all around it will not permit it to step outside its borders—a nation that cannot show its face? [*Italics added.*]

The slightly glib analogy to Jewish ghetto life might have been forgiven by Victor Klemperer, who had been wearing a yellow star since the early 1940s in the doomed city of Dresden, and who had been gradually and humiliatingly stripped of his right to teach, to publish, to travel, to own a car, to own a cat, and to receive standard rations. On January 15, 1945, awaiting with dread the last roundup of Jews like himself, who had “Aryan” spouses, he heard of an anti-Nazi broadcast made by Thomas Mann from America. The fellow sufferer who described the broadcast, as they cowered together in a cellar, told Klemperer, “[It was] splendid—it gave my spirits such a lift!” Klemperer himself was more skeptical, admiring Mann as he always had, but suspecting him of having taken sides only when the outcome was clear. He also took some dry pleasure in informing his interlocutor that Mann was not a Jew, even though he was wed to one.

How to describe the experience of reading Klemperer's two-volume diary, *I Will Bear Witness* (1998 and 1999), and, so to speak, knowing what is going to happen before he does? He registered every premonition, both of the aerial destruction of Germany and of the simultaneous extirpation of the Jews, an extirpation that became more frenzied and more cold-blooded as the Hitler regime imploded. Klemperer clearly desired that the latter calamity might be forestalled—but without the necessity for the former. In a reckoning so ironic and fateful that even Faustus himself might have gasped at it, he and his wife were saved by the immolation of Dresden, on February 13 and 14, 1945, beginning just a few hours after they had been informed that all remaining Jewish spouses must report for deportation, which they both understood to be the end. The now overworked word “holocaust” means literally “destruction by fire”: The old Klemperer couple escaped holocaust in one sense by passing through it in another. On the smoldering morrow they took advantage of the utter havoc, removed Victor's yellow star, and set off on foot toward survival and, ultimately, liberation.

Klemperer's journals have in common with Mann's writing an extraordinary and admirable quality: the blunt refusal to concede a particle of German pride to the gangrenous rabble of the Nazi Party. This is why both writers lend such emphasis to the magnificence of German civilization, whether expressed in architecture or painting

or philosophy, and it is also why neither does so uncritically. Mann argued with himself in California, in what must have been exceedingly dark nights of the soul, by balancing his horror of a German defeat against his loathing for a German victory. Klemperer, for all his liberalism and all his rooted distrust for the similarity between Nazi slogans and Communist ones, eventually opted for East Germany as the inheritor of the “better” tradition. For those of us who never had to face such appalling choices, the question to be resolved at a distance and after a lengthy pause is, Can the survival of the Klemperers, weighed on a scale of ultimate judgment, balance or cancel the mass killing in Dresden? This is, without its being defined quite so strenuously, the question confronted by the author of *On the Natural History of Destruction*.

W. G. Sebald, whose premature death, in December of 2001, is still being mourned by all who love writing for its own sake, was quite willing to face the quasi-biblical implications that are involved here. And he could not avoid references to Teutonic antiquity and the ghastly, sanguinary struggles with Roman imperialism. Here is Sebald in *On the Natural History of Destruction*:

And while [Fritz] Lang, in *Babelsberg*, turned Thea von Harbou’s visions into images capable of reproduction for German cinema audiences, a decade before Hitler seized power the logisticians of the Wehrmacht were already working on their own Cheruscan fantasy, a truly terrifying script which provided for the annihilation of the French army on German soil, the devastation of whole areas of the country, and high losses among the civilian population. Even the originator and chief advocate of strategic extremism, General von Stülpnagel, could probably not have envisaged the ultimate outcome of this new battle of the Teutoburger Wald, which left great expanses of the German cities in ruins. Later, our vague feelings of shared guilt prevented anyone, including the writers whose task it was to keep the nation’s collective memory alive, from being permitted to remind us of such humiliating images as the incident in the Altmarkt in Dresden, where 6,865 corpses were burned on pyres in February 1945 by an SS detachment which had gained its experience at Treblinka.

But even as Sebald underlines a very direct moral connection between the charnel house of Dresden and the revolting crimes of Nazism, he appears to be making his own subtle challenge to the official and unofficial “script.” What is meant, for example, by “vague feelings of shared guilt”? Postwar Germans were approximately divided between those who indignantly disowned “guilt”—which ought surely to be placed on the active rather than the passive citizenry—and those who steadily accepted “responsibility.” The crucial word here may be the rather weak and compromising “shared.” Willy Brandt, who had worn the uniform of another army in combating Hitler (and who was never forgiven for it by the German right), proposed that although not all Germans could or should be held to collective guilt, there was nonetheless a general or collective responsibility. In stating this he was both brave and generous. But then look at Sebald’s other weak qualifier. I certainly can’t picture Herr Brandt describing this emotion or conviction as “vague.” Vague? Remember what we are talking about. And Sebald isn’t at all vague when he assigns to “writers” the “task” of keeping “the nation’s collective

memory alive.” Suppose we agree that writers have national “tasks” in the first place, and that we further concede that a battle against amnesia forms a portion of such a task. Vagueness on certain points would then become an enemy to be contested with some vigor.

Quite by accident, the rather prosaic Chancellor Helmut Kohl came up with a sonorous phrase during the 1980s. Weathering one of the many periodic tempests that bring the terrible past to life in his country (it may well have been after his clumsy suggestion that Ronald Reagan lay a wreath at a cemetery where SS members had been interred [“Ich bin ein Bitburger”]), he ingenuously referred to himself as protected by “the grace of late birth.” The element of luck, it might be said, was more conspicuous than that of grace. But everybody knew what Kohl meant. As if to demonstrate the burden of history and the uneven distribution of its weight, a huge success has recently attended Antony Beevor’s heart-freezing account (*The Fall of Berlin 1945*) of the rape and murder and humiliation that fell on Germans in the territory taken by the Soviet army in 1945. The book’s publication in Germany provoked an uprush of repressed memory and shame that filled pages of news-print: One of the girls battered and defiled by Stalin’s soldiers had been, it turned out, Hannelore Kohl, the late wife of the ex-Chancellor. In common with a rather large number of German women and girls, she had evidently realized in the postwar period that nobody was likely to be very much moved by her story.

Not only was W. G. Sebald protected by “the grace of late birth”—he was born in 1944—but he chose to spend the greater part of his life in England. Indeed, he spent thirty years at the University of East Anglia, in the city of Norwich. The flatness of the East Anglian landscape, and its proximity to the North Sea, made it an ideal launching ground for the Royal Air Force during the war, as it does for the USAF today. As Sebald phrases it,

Many of the more than seventy airfields from which the war of annihilation was waged against Germany were in the county of Norfolk. Some ten of them are still military bases, and a few others are now used by flying clubs, but most were abandoned after the war. Grass has grown over the runways, and the dilapidated control towers, bunkers, and corrugated iron huts stand in an often eerie landscape where you sense the dead souls of the men who never came back from their missions, and of those who perished in the vast fires. I live very close to Seething airfield. I sometimes walk my dog there, and imagine what the place was like when the aircraft took off with their heavy freight and flew out over the sea, making for Germany. Two years before these flights began, a Luftwaffe Dornier plane crashed in a field not far from my house during a raid on Norwich. One of the four crew members who lost their lives, Lieutenant Bollert, shared a birthday with me and was the same age as my father.

So much for the few points at which my own life touches the history of the air war. Entirely insignificant in themselves, they have none the less haunted my mind, and finally impelled me to go at least a little way into the question of why German

writers would not or could not describe the destruction of the German cities as millions experienced it.

I feel a tug of empathy when I read this melancholy account, complete with its Dickensian place-name of “Seething.” I was born only five years after Sebald, and was brought up on and around British naval and air bases, and spent much time playing on disused airfields. The cities of my boyhood—most notably Portsmouth and Plymouth, but also Valletta, in Malta—still exhibited enormous scars from the Nazi blitzkrieg. Yet for me and for my cohort, all of this was a cause for pride, and excitement, and made us ready to listen to our fathers as they—with sometimes feigned reluctance—unfolded their war stories. What must it be like to have this in one’s immediate past, yet with no cause for affirmation, let alone celebration? And why should my German contemporaries feel inhibited about discussing the erasure of great cities and churches and monuments in their country, to say nothing of the killing of numberless civilians? There are many British people who feel that needless harm was done, and cruelty inflicted; and the unveiling in London a decade ago of a statue to Air Chief Marshal Arthur “Bomber” Harris, the architect of the air campaign against Germany, was attended by some forceful protests in print and on the streets.

Looking over Sebald’s evocative paragraphs, though, I find that I pause immediately at the terse way in which he says “war of annihilation.” I also wince a bit at the way he mourns the Luftwaffe crew slightly more than he regrets the “raid” on Norwich. I don’t do this, I trust, for any insular or tribal reason. In a letter left for his sons, the late Heinrich Böll told them that they would always be able to tell everything about another German by noticing whether this fellow citizen, in conversation, described April 1945 as “the defeat” or as “the liberation.” Thomas Mann and Victor Klemperer were quite decided on this point, and they really did write about—and in the latter case endure—the very calamity that Sebald says is somehow unmentionable. (Böll’s novel *The Silent Angel*, a book that unflinchingly discusses the ruins and the corpses, was written at the end of the 1940s but, as Sebald points out, not published until 1992.) Still, if one takes as one’s standard the work and thought of the German oppositionists and dissidents, one is employing a measure that does nothing but give credit to German culture and tradition.

More recently another book, which seemingly seeks to reopen the same question in a different way, has been published in Germany. *Der Brand* (*The Fire*), by the historian Jörg Friedrich, accuses Winston Churchill of a conscious policy of airborne terrorism against civilians. The right-wing mass-circulation tabloid *Das Bild* has called Churchill a war criminal in its editorial pages and, in serializing Friedrich’s work, has demanded recognition of German suffering. The word “brand” in English, of course, carries a distinctly different vernacular meaning.

At times Sebald seems to want to have this both ways. He invites us to read the letters he received from German readers after he first broached this subject, in a series of public lectures in Zurich in 1997, and thus we discover that a certain combination of arrogance and self-pity, of the kind Christopher Isherwood noticed in his landlady in

Goodbye to Berlin, is still around, and still tinged with anti-Semitism. Sebald stipulates what otherwise I would find myself pedantically pointing out: that the Nazi regime had its own plans for the destruction of other people's cities. (Even in 1945, when all was lost, the wretches amid the rubble of Germany were officially cheered up by the news that the Führer's ultimate "wonder-weapons"—the guided V1 and V2 missiles—were falling on London.) Indeed, it is possible to imagine that if anti-Jewish paranoia had not deprived the Third Reich of so many gifted physicists, the unthinkable might have occurred. Thus most people outside Germany itself still tend to shrug at the horror, if they agree to discuss it at all, as if to say, Well, what goes around comes around. And those non-Germans who have drawn attention to the promiscuously inflicted devastation are suspected of a covert sympathy for the other side.

This doesn't relieve the rest of us of some responsibility. After all, the fire-bombing of Dresden was so appallingly total that it might just as easily have killed Victor Klemperer (who was injured in the eye and for a while separated from his wife by the chaos) as rescued him. Few historians or strategists now argue that the bombing made much if any difference to the outcome of the war, and it may have been conducted partly to reassure Joseph Stalin, who always feared that the British and the Americans might conclude a separate peace. The opening of official papers long ago permitted us to read Lord Cherwell's advice to Churchill that bombs should be concentrated on working-class housing, to maximize casualties; and one objects not just to the studied deliberation of this but also to the fact that these districts were the heart of anti-Nazi resistance in anti-Nazi cities like Hamburg. (So that was where all the "good Germans" went—into the firestorms of the RAF.)

Then one has to face the fact that Henry Morgenthau nearly achieved the adoption of his plan, which was to consummate the violent, dramatic depopulation of Germany and a subsequent reduction of its survivors to a servile or peasant status. The Churchill-Roosevelt papers tell the story of how, at the Quebec and Hyde Park conferences of 1944, Churchill accepted this idea (preferring to call it a "pastoral" solution to the German problem) after having initially described it as "unnatural, unChristian and unnecessary." He and Roosevelt then turned their attention to the deployment of nuclear weaponry, first directly against Japan and then—at least in Churchill's mind—as a means of impressing the Soviet Union. Thanks to Cordell Hull and Henry Stimson, the Morgenthau plan was not adopted in the postwar American and British zones, though the USSR did denude eastern Germany of much of its productive industrial capacity. And it might now be admitted that the Cold War's half acceptance of "two Germanys"—a policy that left a new generation of East Germans to grow up without any experience of democracy—was paradoxically conditioned by the same feeling of "woe to the conquered." (Interesting that we still employ the German word *Schadenfreude* when speaking of a cruel sense of satisfaction, as if nationalizing an emotion that is common to all.) However, it can be pointed out without too much defensiveness that American and British soldiers did not, upon their arrival in Germany, commit atrocities against civilians on the ground. This is much more than can be said for

the legions of either Hitler or Stalin, and it must qualify any suggestion that the war against Nazism was allowed to become a war of “annihilation.”

It is probably the creditably peaceful and democratic reunification of Germany that has impelled—or perhaps permitted—Sebald and other writers to revisit the half-buried past. Even Günter Grass, who opposed what he absurdly called the 1989 “Anschluss” with the eastern lander, and who could never utter a public word on local politics without emphasizing Auschwitz, has now published a novel (*Crabwalk*) about the suffering of German refugees in the closing moments of the war. I have already mentioned the terrible atrocities committed by the Red Army; the mass expulsion, dispossession, and killing of German-speaking minorities in the Czech lands and Hungary after 1945 has also recently become an issue that respectable people may mention without incurring suspicion. Sebald approaches this thicket very deftly, making good use of his long residence in England. He describes how in the 1980s he went to see Solly Zuckerman, who had been one of Churchill’s circle of military-intellectual advisers on “area bombing.” After the war Zuckerman had hastened to Cologne, to indulge his professional interest by viewing the results. He found that he was unable to summon any adequate words for what he saw. (“All that remained in his mind was the image of the blackened cathedral rising from the stony desert around it, and the memory of a severed finger that he had found on a heap of rubble.”) It had been his intention, Zuckerman told Sebald, to compose an essay for Cyril Connolly’s magazine *Horizon*. But he was unable to produce it. The working title of the never-written article was “On the Natural History of Destruction” ...

In *Doctor Faustus*, Mann stated the problem that Sebald confronts: “It is not far from capitulation to pure abdication and the offer to let the victor go right ahead and govern the affairs of the fallen nation just as he pleases, since for its part that nation no longer knows up from down.” Hans Magnus Enzensberger, the most astute and mordant of the German critics, phrased it more dialectically when he argued that this very docility was a source of strength. “The mysterious energy of the Germans” could not be understood, he wrote, “if we refuse to realize that they have made a virtue of their deficiencies. Insensibility was the condition of their success.” The British liked to put this in an unworthily scornful tone. The Germans, one used to hear it said in my father’s circles, are either at your throat or at your feet ... But Sebald’s well-chosen excerpts from Janet Flanner’s reportage, and from the Swedish writer Stig Dagerman, suggest a missing element of German stoicism. Dagerman noticed that he could easily be identified as a foreigner on a train passing through the leveled city of Hamburg because he was the only one staring out the window.

With a part of themselves, thinking Germans obviously understood that their late Führer not only brought this devastation on them but actually wished it on them. He had preferred an immolated nation to a surrendered one. So the surrender was, in an admittedly less than glorious way, a double defeat for the madman. Even though no Western reporter worth his salt has since neglected any story, however trivial, that suggests a stirring of neo-Nazism, no German constituency worth its salt has ever

shown any real interest in endorsing such a thing. In European discussions the most punctilious internationalists are the Germans, whose government even surrendered the special symbol of its deutsch mark to the idea of a Europeanized Germany. The large majority of refugees from the recent Balkan wars found hospitality on German soil. Nobody except the left-Green Joschka Fischer has really ever been able to commit or persuade Germans to send their troops overseas. Even the provincial-minded campaign run by Gerhard Schröder a few months ago illustrated this same point, in a different if less noble way.

In the past few years I have spent time with courageous Serbian dissidents, including veteran partisans for wartime Yugoslavia, who came to the point at which they welcomed and supported the NATO bombing of Belgrade and the military defeat of Milošević's "willing executioners." These days I have been talking to a number of Iraqi exiles and oppositionists who, with infinite pain but impressive honesty, have taken a similar position. These patriots do not want their country to humiliate or murder others, and neither do they wish their country to be humiliated or destroyed. (One has not just to hope but to demand that our war planners bear this in mind.) Germany suffered both those disgraces to the fullest possible extent, and Sebald registers that contradiction to the limit of his ability. His opening bid deserves criticism, as I hope I have shown. But how depressing it is to reflect that he did not live to take part in the discussion that his book ought still to inaugurate.

(The Atlantic, January/February 2003)

WORDS' WORTH

When the King Saved God

AFTER SHE WAS elected the first female governor of Texas, in 1924, and got herself promptly embroiled in an argument about whether Spanish should be used in Lone Star schools, it is possible that Miriam A. "Ma" Ferguson did not say, "If the King's English was good enough for Jesus Christ, it's good enough for the children of Texas." I still rather hope that she did. But then, verification of quotations and sources is a tricky and sensitive thing. Abraham Lincoln lay dying in a room full of educated and literate men, in the age of the wireless telegraph, and not far from the offices of several newspapers, and we still do not know for sure, at the moment when his great pulse ceased to beat, whether his secretary of war, Edwin Stanton, said, "Now he belongs to the ages" or "Now he belongs to the angels."

Such questions of authenticity become even more fraught when they involve the word itself becoming flesh; the fulfillment of prophecy; the witnessing of miracles; the detection of the finger of God. Guesswork and approximation will not do: The resurrection cannot be half true or questionably attested. For the first 1,500 years of the Christian epoch, this problem of "authority," in both senses of that term, was solved by having the divine mandate wrapped up in languages that the majority of the congregation could not understand, and by having it presented to them by a special caste or class who alone possessed the mystery of celestial decoding.

Four hundred years ago, just as William Shakespeare was reaching the height of his powers and showing the new scope and variety of the English language, and just as "England" itself was becoming more of a nation-state and less an offshore dependency of Europe, an extraordinary committee of clergymen and scholars completed the task of rendering the Old and New Testaments into English, and claimed that the result was the "Authorized" or "King James" version. This was a fairly conservative attempt to stabilize the Crown and the kingdom, heal the breach between competing English and Scottish Christian sects, and bind the majesty of the King to his devout people. "The powers that be," it had Saint Paul saying in his Epistle to the Romans, "are ordained of God." This and other phrasings, not all of them so authoritarian and conformist, continue to echo in our language: "When I was a child, I spake as a child"; "Eat, drink, and be merry"; "From strength to strength"; "Grind the faces of the poor"; "salt of the earth"; "Our Father, which art in heaven." It's near impossible to imagine our idiom

and vernacular, let alone our liturgy, without them. Not many committees in history have come up with such crystalline prose.

King James I, who brought the throne of Scotland along with him, was the son of Mary, Queen of Scots, and knew that his predecessor, Queen Elizabeth I, had been his mother's executioner. In Scotland, he had had to contend with extreme Puritans who were suspicious of monarchy and hated all Catholics. In England, he was faced with worldly bishops who were hostile to Puritans and jealous of their own privileges. Optimism, prosperity, and culture struck one note—Henry Hudson was setting off to the Northwest Passage, and Shakespeare's Globe Theatre was drawing thoughtful crowds to see those dramas of power and legitimacy Othello, King Lear, and The Tempest—but terror and insecurity kept pace. Guy Fawkes and his fellow plotters, believed to be in league with the Pope, nearly succeeded in blowing up Parliament in 1605. Much of London was stricken with visitations of the bubonic plague, which, as Bishop Lancelot Andrewes (head of the committee of translators) noted with unease, appeared to strike the godly quite as often as it smote the sinner. The need was for a tempered version of God's word that engendered compromise and a sense of protection.

Bishop Andrewes and his colleagues, a mixture of clergymen and classicists, were charged with revisiting the original Hebrew and Greek editions of the Old and New Testaments, along with the fragments of Aramaic that had found their way into the text. Understanding that their task was a patriotic and "nation-building" one (and impressed by the nascent idea of English Manifest Destiny, whereby the English people had replaced the Hebrews as God's chosen), whenever they could translate any ancient word for "people" or "tribe" as "nation," they elected to do so. The term appears 454 times in this confident form of "the King's English." Meeting in Oxford and Cambridge college libraries for the most part, they often kept their notes in Latin. Their conservative and consensual project was politically short-lived: In a few years the land was to be convulsed with civil war, and the Puritan and parliamentary forces under Oliver Cromwell would sweep the head of King Charles I from his shoulders. But the translators' legacy remains, and it is paradoxically a revolutionary one, as well as a giant step in the maturing of English literature.

Imagining the most extreme form of totalitarianism in his Nineteen Eighty-four dystopia, George Orwell depicted a secret class of occult power holders (the Inner Party clustered around Big Brother) that would cement its eternal authority by recasting the entire language. In the tongue of "Newspeak," certain concepts of liberty and conscience would be literally impossible to formulate. And only within the most restricted circles of the regime would certain heretical texts, like Emmanuel Goldstein's manifesto, still be legible and available. I believe that Orwell, a strong admirer of the Protestant Reformation and the poetry of its hero John Milton, was using as his original allegory the long struggle of English dissenters to have the Bible made available in a language that the people could read.

Until the early middle years of the sixteenth century, when King Henry VIII began to quarrel with Rome about the dialectics of divorce and decapitation, a short and swift

route to torture and death was the attempt to print the Bible in English. It's a long and stirring story, and its crux is the head-to-head battle between Sir Thomas More and William Tyndale (whose name in early life, I am proud to say, was William Hychyns). Their combat fully merits the term "fundamental." Infuriating More, Tyndale whenever possible was loyal to the Protestant spirit by correctly translating the word *ecclesia* to mean "the congregation" as an autonomous body, rather than "the church" as a sacrosanct institution above human law. In English churches, state-selected priests would merely incant the liturgy. Upon hearing the words "Hoc" and "corpus" (in the "For this is my body" passage), newly literate and impatient artisans in the pews would mockingly whisper, "Hocus-pocus," finding a tough slang term for the religious obfuscation at which they were beginning to chafe. The cold and righteous More, backed by his "Big Brother" the Pope and leading an inner party of spies and inquisitors, watched the Channel ports for smugglers risking everything to import sheets produced by Tyndale, who was forced to do his translating and printing from exile. The rack and the rope were not stinted with dissenters, and eventually Tyndale himself was tracked down, strangled, and publicly burned. (Hilary Mantel's masterpiece historical novel, *Wolf Hall*, tells this exciting and gruesome story in such a way as to revise the shining image of "Saint" Thomas More, the "man for all seasons," almost out of existence. High time, in my view. The martyrdoms he inflicted upon others were more cruel and irrational than the one he sought and found for himself.)

Other translations into other languages, by Martin Luther himself, among others, slowly entered circulation. One of them, the so-called Geneva Bible, was a more Calvinist and Puritan English version than the book that King James commissioned, and was the edition which the Pilgrim Fathers, fleeing the cultural and religious war altogether, took with them to Plymouth Rock. Thus Governor Ma Ferguson was right in one respect: America was the first and only Christian society that could take an English Bible for granted, and never had to struggle for a popular translation of "the good book." The question, rather, became that of exactly which English version was to be accepted as the correct one. After many false starts and unsatisfactory printings, back in England, the Anglican conclave in 1611 adopted William Tyndale's beautiful rendering almost wholesale, and out of their zeal for compromise and stability ironically made a posthumous hero out of one of the greatest literary dissidents and subversives who ever lived.

Writing about his own fascination with cadence and rhythm in *Notes of a Native Son*, James Baldwin said, "I hazard that the King James Bible, the rhetoric of the store-front church, something ironic and violent and perpetually understated in Negro speech ... have something to do with me today; but I wouldn't stake my life on it." As a child of the black pulpit and chronicler of the Bible's huge role in the American oral tradition, Baldwin probably was "understating" at that very moment. And, as he very well knew, there had been times when biblical verses did involve, quite literally, the staking of one's life. This is why the nuances and details of translation were (and still are) of such huge moment. For example, in Isaiah 7:14 it is stated that "behold, a virgin

shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” This is the scriptural warrant and prophecy for the impregnation of the Virgin Mary by the Holy Ghost. But the original Hebrew wording refers only to the pregnancy of an *almah*, or young woman. If the Hebrew language wants to identify virginity, it has other terms in which to do so. The implications are not merely textual. To translate is also to interpret; or, indeed, to lay down the law. (Incidentally, the American “Revised Standard Version” of 1952 replaced the word “virgin” with “young woman.” It took the Fundamentalists until 1978 to restore the original misreading, in the now dominant “New International Version.”)

Take an even more momentous example, cited by Adam Nicolson in his very fine book on the process, *God’s Secretaries*. In the First Epistle to the Corinthians, Saint Paul reminds his readers of the fate that befell many back-sliding pre-Christian Jews. He describes their dreadful punishments as having “happened unto them for ensamples,” which in 1611 was a plain way of conveying the word “example” or “illustrative instance,” or perhaps “lesson.”

However, the original Greek term was *typoi*, which by contrast may be rendered as “types” or “archetypes” and suggests that Jews were to be eternally punished for their special traits. This had been Saint Augustine’s harsh reading, followed by successive Roman Catholic editions. At least one of King James’s translators wanted to impose that same collective punishment on the people of Moses, but was overruled. In the main existing text, the lenient word “ensamples” is given, with a marginal note in the original editions saying that “types” may also be meant. The English spirit of compromise at its best.

Then there are seemingly small but vital matters of emphasis, in which Tyndale did not win every round. Here is a famous verse which one might say was central to Christian teaching: “This is my Commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you. / Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” That’s the King James version, which has echoed in the heads of many churchgoers until their last hour. Here is how the verse read when first translated by Tyndale: “This is my Commandment, that you love together as I have loved you. / Greater love than this hath no man, than that a man bestow his life for his friends.”

I do not find that the “King’s English” team improved much on the lovely simplicity of what they found. Tyndale has Jesus groping rather appealingly to make a general precept or principle out of a common bond, whereas the bishops and scholars are aiming to make an iron law out of love. In doing so they suggest strenuous martyrdom (“lay down,” as if Jesus had been a sacrifice to his immediate circle only). Far more human and attractive, surely, is Tyndale’s warm “bestow,” which suggests that a life devoted to friendship is a noble thing in itself.

Tyndale, incidentally, was generally good on the love question. Take that same Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, a few chapters later. For years, I would listen to it in chapel and wonder how an insipid, neuter word like “charity” could have gained such moral prestige. The King James version enjoins us that “now abideth faith, hope and charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.” Tyndale had put “love”

throughout, and even if your Greek is as poor as mine you will have to admit that it is a greatly superior capture of the meaning of that all-important original word *agape*. It was actually the frigid clerical bureaucrat Thomas More who had made this into one of the many disputations between himself and Tyndale, and in opting to accept his ruling it seems as if King James's committee also hoped to damp down the risky, ardent spontaneity of unconditional love and replace it with an idea of stern duty. Does not the notion of compulsory love, in any form, have something grotesque and fanatical about it?

Most recent English translations have finally dropped More and the King and gone with Tyndale on this central question, but often at the cost of making "love" appear too husky and sentimental. Thus the "Good News Bible" for American churches, first published in 1966: "Love never gives up; and its faith, hope and patience never fail." This doesn't read at all like the outcome of a struggle to discern the essential meaning of what is perhaps our most numinous word. It more resembles a smiley-face Dale Carnegie reassurance. And, as with everything else that's designed to be instant, modern, and "accessible," it goes out of date (and out of time) faster than Wisconsin cheddar.

Though I am sometimes reluctant to admit it, there really is something "timeless" in the Tyndale/King James synthesis. For generations, it provided a common stock of references and allusions, rivaled only by Shakespeare in this respect. It resounded in the minds and memories of literate people, as well as of those who acquired it only by listening. From the stricken beach of Dunkirk in 1940, faced with a devil's choice between annihilation and surrender, a British officer sent a cable back home. It contained the three words "but if not ..." All of those who received it were at once aware of what it signified. In the Book of Daniel, the Babylonian tyrant Nebuchadnezzar tells the three Jewish heretics Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that if they refuse to bow to his sacred idol they will be flung into a "burning fiery furnace." They made him an answer: "If it be so, our god whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thy hand, O King. / But if not, be it known unto thee, o king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up."

A culture that does not possess this common store of image and allegory will be a perilously thin one. To seek restlessly to update it or make it "relevant" is to miss the point, like yearning for a hip-hop Shakespeare. "Man is born unto trouble as the sparks fly upward," says the Book of Job. Want to try to improve that for Twitter? And so bleak and spare and fatalistic—almost non-religious—are the closing verses of Ecclesiastes that they were read at the Church of England funeral service the unbeliever George Orwell had requested in his will: "Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home.... Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher

be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern. / Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was.”

At my father’s funeral I chose to read a similarly non-sermonizing part of the New Testament, this time an injunction from Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians: “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.”

As much philosophical as spiritual, with its conditional and speculative “ifs” and its closing advice—always italicized in my mind since first I heard it—to think and reflect on such matters: This passage was the labor of men who had wrought deeply with ideas and concepts. I now pluck down from my shelf the American Bible Society’s “Contemporary English Version,” which I picked up at an evangelical “Promise Keepers” rally on the Mall in Washington in 1997. Claiming to be faithful to the spirit of the King James translation, it keeps its promise in this way: “Finally, my friends, keep your minds on whatever is true, pure, right, holy, friendly and proper. Don’t ever stop thinking about what is truly worthwhile and worthy of praise.”

Pancake-flat: Suited perhaps to a basement meeting of A.A., these words could not hope to penetrate the torpid, resistant fog in the mind of a sixteen-year-old boy, as their original had done for me. There’s perhaps a slightly ingratiating obeisance to gender neutrality in the substitution of “my friends” for “brethren,” but to suggest that Saint Paul, of all people, was gender-neutral is to re-write the history as well as to rinse out the prose. When the Church of England effectively dropped King James, in the 1960s, and issued what would become the “New English Bible,” T. S. Eliot commented that the result was astonishing “in its combination of the vulgar, the trivial and the pedantic.” (Not surprising from the author of *For Lancelot Andrewes*.) This has been true of every other stilted, patronizing, literal-minded attempt to shift the translation’s emphasis from plangent poetry to utilitarian prose.

T. S. Eliot left America (and his annoyingly colorless Unitarian family) to seek the traditionalist roots of liturgical and literary tradition in England. Coming in the opposite direction across the broad Atlantic, the King James Bible slowly overhauled and overtook the Geneva version, and, as the Pilgrim-type mini-theocracies of New England withered away, became one of the very few books from which almost any American could quote something. Paradoxically, this made it easy to counterfeit. When Joseph Smith began to fabricate his Book of Mormon, in the late 1820s, “translating” it from no known language, his copy of King James was never far from his side. He plagiarized 27,000 words more or less straight from the original, including several biblical stories lifted almost in their entirety, and the throat-clearing but vaguely impressive phrase “and it came to pass” is used at least 2,000 times. Such “borrowing” was a way of lending much-needed “tone” to the racket. Not long afterward, William Miller excited gigantic crowds with the news that the Second Coming of Jesus would occur in 1843. An associate followed up with an 1844 due date. These disappointed prophecies were worked

out from marginal notes in Miller's copy of the King James edition, which he quarried for apocalyptic evidence. (There had always been those, from the earliest days, when it was being decided which parts of the Bible were divinely inspired and which were not, who had striven to leave out the Book of Revelation. Martin Luther himself declined to believe that it was the work of the Holy Spirit. But there Christianity still is, well and truly stuck with it.) So, of the many Christian heresies which were born in the New World and not imported from Europe, at least three—the Mormons, or Latter-Day Saints; the Millerites, or Seventh-Day Adventists; and their schismatic product the Jehovah's Witnesses—are indirectly mutated from a pious attempt to bring religious consensus to Jacobean England.

Not to over-prize consensus, it does possess certain advantages over randomness and chaos. Since the appearance of the so-called "Good News Bible," there have been no fewer than forty-eight English translations published in the United States. And the rate shows no sign of slackening. Indeed, the trend today is toward what the trade calls "niche Bibles." These include the "Couples Bible," "One Year New Testament for Busy Moms," "Extreme Teen Study Bible," "Policeman's Bible," and—somehow unavoidably—the "Celebrate Recovery Bible." (Give them credit for one thing: The biblical sales force knows how to "be fruitful and multiply.") In this cut-price spiritual cafeteria, interest groups and even individuals can have their own customized version of God's word. But there will no longer be a culture of the kind which instantly recognized what Lincoln meant when he spoke of "a house divided." The gradual eclipse of a single structure has led, not to a new clarity, but to a new Babel.

Those who opposed the translation of the Bible into the vernacular—rather like those Catholics who wish the Mass were still recited in Latin, or those Muslims who regard it as profane to render the Koran out of Arabic—were afraid that the mystic potency of incantation and ritual would be lost, and that daylight would be let in upon magic. They also feared that if God's word became too everyday and commonplace it would become less impressive, or less able to inspire awe. But the reverse turns out to have been the case, at least in this instance. The Tyndale/King James translation, even if all its copies were to be burned, would still live on in our language through its transmission by way of Shakespeare and Milton and Bunyan and Coleridge, and also by way of beloved popular idioms such as "fatted calf" and "pearls before swine." It turned out to be rather more than the sum of its ancient predecessors, as well as a repository and edifice of language which towers above its successors. Its abandonment by the Church of England establishment, which hoped to refill its churches and ended up denuding them, is yet another demonstration that religion is man-made, with inky human fingerprints all over its supposedly inspired and unalterable texts. Ma Ferguson was right in her way. She just didn't know how many Englishmen and how many Englishes, and how many Jesus stories and Jesuses, there were to choose from.

(Vanity Fair, May 2011)

Let Them Eat Pork Rinds

And even in Atlantis
of the legend
The night the seas
rushed in:
The drowning men
still bellowed
for their slaves.

These lines are taken from Bertolt Brecht's magnificent poem "A Worker Reads History." These days, people associate Brecht with old Red cartoons in which men in shiny top hats spit on the poor while wielding truncheon-size cigars and flourishing gold watch chains across their distended bow-window waistcoats. And surely that epoch of ruling-class arrogance is in our past? Of course it is, but that doesn't mean that certain instincts and attitudes just evaporate. Here was the American president's mother, speaking grandly from Texas as the descendants of slaves took refuge in the Astrodome after the seas had rushed in upon their city:

What I'm hearing, which is sort of scary, is they all want to stay in Texas. Everyone is so overwhelmed by the hospitality. And so many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this, this is working very well for them.

The White House was later to qualify these gorgeously phrased insults as "personal observation," which indeed they were. The unmediated personal observation, that is, of a very much overprivileged person. They made a good "fit" with the performance of her son on his visit to the submerged region. Meeting two sisters who had only the clothes on their backs, the president of the United States directed them to a Salvation Army shelter down the road. The shelter itself, as an embarrassed aide was quick to whisper, had been swept away. But the point was the same and contains the tone of the workhouse master down the ages: "You appear to be distinctly poor and fucked up. Do you not have a church basement to go to?" Even at such critical moments, the "faith-based initiative" takes priority. The poor we have always with us. And the rich we have always with us, too. Various benign arrangements will take care of the latter, while the former are better off on their knees and should pray as hard as they can. Perhaps a tract on "intelligent design" to go with that bowl of nourishing gruel?

The subconscious mentality of the uncontrollably well-off was deftly caught by the novelist Joyce Cary (a chap, despite his name), who evolved the phrase "tumbril remark" to catch the essence of polite upper-class incredulity at the sheer inconvenience of having to put up with other people. My preferred example of the remark was once given by the late British Tory politician Julian Amery, who described an acquaintance of his (was it Lady Diana Cooper?—there's an element of the apocryphal to some of these tales) as she waited under an umbrella outside the Dorchester hotel in the 1930s and tapped her foot with impatience as the Rolls was brought round to the front. Seizing his chance, a ragged man approached her without the courtesy of an introduction and

announced that he had not eaten anything for three days. The outraged Lady Diana drew herself up. “Foolish man that you are,” she instructed him. “You must try. If need be, you must force yourself.”

Wilde’s Lady Bracknell could hardly have bettered this. (“Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever,” she says. “If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square.”) Yet it’s easy to cull non-apocryphal tumbrilisms. Let me introduce George Orwell, who was writing a wartime diary in 1940 as London braced for the Blitz. He noted:

From a letter from Lady Oxford to the Daily Telegraph, on the subject of war economies:

“Since most London houses are deserted there is little entertaining ... In any case, most people have to part with their cooks and live in hotels.”

Commenting on these perfectly wonderful uses of “most,” Orwell noted, “Apparently nothing will ever teach these people that the other 99% of the population exists.” Lady Oxford, by the way, was the title of the great social-ite and memoirist Margot Asquith. And the decade then just closing—the 1930s—was the scene of some splendid tumbril stuff. The diaries of Sir Henry “Chips” Channon provide an especially rich seam, as he describes toddling off to Savile Row to spend a king’s ransom on socks and scarves, before lunching at the German Embassy with the divine Herr and Frau Ribbentrop—the dessert consisting on one occasion of lobster ice cream. What a nuisance, though, to have to step over dirty and unwholesome people as one makes one’s rounds.

“I see no point at all in being poor,” the late Queen Mother is supposed to have said while being driven through some slum. “Mind you, that was a lot of money in those days,” an English duke once told an interviewer known to me, while recalling the loss of some [GBP] 150 million by one of his ancestors in the goldfields of South Africa. These are the real thing: the failure of the upper crust and the cream of society to have the remotest glimmer of an idea of what life is like for others. (The “cream” was described by Samuel Beckett as “thick and rich,” while nobody seems to know who defined the “upper crust” as “a lot of crumbs held together by dough.”) Sometimes you can make an educated guess that the speaker is joking at his own expense. “I would not have The Times,” remarked the late Duke of Devonshire in speaking of the decline of that newspaper, “in any of my houses.” While making a documentary in Liverpool about how the other half lived, Auberon Waugh addressed a group of proles and breezily told them that his own manor in Somerset “probably costs more to heat than most of you people earn.” Mark Boxer, that effortlessly superior and dandyish cartoonist, once drew a scene of two people in a restaurant during a coal miners’ strike. “Do you mind the carafe wine?” says the host, looking up over a hugely ornate and tasseled menu. “I’m faintly unhappy when the bill gets too close to the miners’ take-home pay.” Mr. Humphry Berkeley, an Englishman whose ancestors came over with the Norman conquerors, left the Conservative Party partly in protest at its Africa policy and eventually ran for Parliament as a Labour candidate. Asked what

was different about the experience, he replied with apparently perfect gravity that “I’ve been meeting the working class and I simply must say that it’s absolutely the nicest class I’ve so far met.”

But then there are old jokes—most of them also English for a reason that barely needs explaining—that are based more on Schadenfreude. Example: Two extremely rich men are sitting in companionable silence in their over-stuffed armchairs in the upstairs window of the Carlton Club, in London. The silence is broken when the first man calls attention to the situation outside and says, “It’s raining.” “Good,” replies the second man without looking up from his newspaper. “It’ll wet the people.”

Auberon Waugh’s father, Evelyn, was a tremendous snob in many ways, but was generally rather careful to avoid such direct class combat. Indeed, in his masterpiece *Scoop* he gives a tumbril character to a radical type—Mr. Pappenhacker of the *Daily Twopence*, who is rude to waiters at a restaurant that must be the Savoy Grill. “He seems to be in a very bad temper,” the shy William Boot observes of Pappenhacker to his host, Mr. Salter:

Not really. He’s always like that to waiters. You see he’s a communist. Most of the staff at the *Twopence* are—they’re University men, you see. Pappenhacker says that every time you are polite to a proletarian you are helping bolster up the capitalist system. He’s very clever of course, but he gets rather unpopular.

In Kingsley Amis’s *Girl, 20*, the radical-chic Sir Roy Vandervane tries for the same effect by plastering reactionary bumper stickers all over his limousine and driving as arrogantly as he can, honking the horn like Mr. Toad and seeking to create resentment among lesser drivers and humble pedestrians. That didn’t work. A tumbril remark doesn’t work if it’s conscious or deliberate. (Indeed, one definition of a gentleman is that of someone who is never rude by accident.) But what does work is an unmistakable, revealing, unfakable reminder of how superiors really view inferiors. The wife of a British diplomat in Saigon in the 1960s, a certain Lady So-and-So, once considered the surrounding carnage and observed soothingly that it wasn’t as bad as it might look, since one had to bear in mind that “Orientals” had a different attitude to death. My friend the poet and journalist James Fenton noted as calmly as he dared that from this you could tell one thing for certain—namely that Lady So-and-So had a different attitude toward the death of Asians.

For some reason, the Bush family excels at this kind of thing. I remember George senior, having come in third (after Pat Robertson, of all people) in a 1987 Iowa straw poll, being asked why his own supporters apparently hadn’t bothered to turn out. Oh well, he replied, there was more to life than politics, and his sort of people “were at their daughters’ coming-out parties, or teeing up at the golf course for that all-important last round.” To be absolutely honest with you, I do not know to this day exactly what a “comingout party” is, but it has a nice debutante, Marie Antoinette ring to it when uttered amid the corn-infested fields and pig-strewn farms of Iowa. (A bit like the distribution of free gateau to the masses, which somehow failed to occur in the inundated states of the Gulf of Mexico in September.) At a later stage, offended by

the very idea that he lacked the common touch, George H. W. Bush put himself to the fatiguing effort of declaring in public his love for pork rinds and country music, and of guising himself in pleb-like clothing as if to the manner born. This is worse, in a way, because “slumming” on the part of the elite is a carefully graded insult—to the intelligence, among other things. (I knew that John Kerry was through when a friend of mine looked up from the New York Times and said, “Oh dear. He’s gone goose hunting again.”) Oddly enough, and for all the Versailles teasing that she herself had to endure, Nancy Reagan had more “class” when she turned up in rags to sing the parodic “Secondhand Clothes” at the Gridiron Club and “pre-empted” the media tumbrils that had been rumbling around the Pennsylvania Avenue district in the early 1980s.

“Because it turns on a sixpence, whatever that is.” Thus remarked the Armenian tycoon Nubar Gulbenkian when asked why he modeled his custom town car on a London taxi. One can be reasonably certain that this is a rich man’s joke. But “The levees broke? Who knew they could do that?” is not funny for one thing, and doesn’t demonstrate any sense of noblesse oblige, either. It shows in a blinding flash what someone really thinks of you. It is not self-satirizing, or deflecting. It is myopic, and arrogant. It reminds one that “levee” was the word used by King Louis XVI himself, in his royal bedchamber upon rising, for the reception of his courtiers. The word “tumbрил” is in our language and in our minds because of the imperishable passage in *A Tale of Two Cities* where the carts full of those same, now fallen, haggard courtiers come grinding their way to the Place de la Revolution, and where Madame Defarge sits knitting with her fellow tricoteuses, coldly and contentedly marking each crashing slice of the blade. But, for me, the most chilling mention is the very first one, where Dickens recalls a particularly hideous torture-execution ordered by France’s “Christian pastors” in defense of the old king’s regime:

It is likely enough that in the rough out-houses of some tillers of the heavy lands adjacent to Paris, there were sheltered from the weather that very day, rude carts, bespattered with rustic mire, snuffed about by pigs, and roosted in by poultry, which the Farmer, Death, had already set apart to be his tumbrils of the Revolution.

You can feel it coming ... “like the stillness in the wind / ’Fore the hurricane begins.” The reference to “mire,” incidentally, isn’t Dickens’s only euphemism. A tumbрил really means a cart for the carrying away of excrement. Don’t tempt me ...

Other expressions are in our language, also. We still use the adjectives “noble” as positive and “base” as negative: terms that derive their original meaning from the Anglo-French feudal order, where every person knew their divinely ordained position. We employ the word “chivalrous” to mean honorable and gallant, when all it denotes is a noble who owns a horse, or horses, and can thus ride over the unmounted—rather as if a specialist in Arabian equines was to be appointed the head of FEMA, and raise his eyebrows politely at the distasteful news that lesser breeds were sweltering in a dome. Another expression less “commonly” used—and there I go again with another instance of the same linguistic bias—is “below the salt.” This refers to the long table in the

baron's hall, when seating was by social gradation all the way to the bottom, where sat the greasiest serfs and scullions. The precious condiment could not be passed below a certain place about halfway down. How we smile now to think of such primitive social and class prejudices. And then there came a day in New Orleans, a town named for a scion of French feudalism, when the salt-water rose up and didn't just wet the people but drowned them, and nobody was above that salt except those who could fly over it and look down de haut en bas, while a lot of lowly people were suddenly well below it. Whatever is that distant rumble that I dimly hear?

(Vanity Fair, December 2005)

Stand Up for Denmark!

PUT THE CASE that we knew of a highly paranoid religious cult organization with a secretive leader. Now put the case that this cult, if criticized in the press, would take immediate revenge by kidnapping a child. Put the case that, if the secretive leader were also to be lampooned, two further children would be killed at random. Would the press be guilty of "self-censorship" if it declined to publish anything that would inflame the said cult? Well, yes it would be guilty, but very few people would insist on the full exertion of the First Amendment right. However, the consequences for the cult and its leader would be severe as well. All civilized people would regard it as hateful and dangerous, and steps would be taken to circumscribe its influence, and to ensure that no precedent was set.

The incredible thing about the ongoing Kristallnacht against Denmark (and in some places, against the embassies and citizens of any Scandinavian or even European Union nation) is that it has resulted in, not opprobrium for the religion that perpetrates and excuses it, but increased respectability! A small democratic country with an open society, a system of confessional pluralism, and a free press has been subjected to a fantastic, incredible, organized campaign of lies and hatred and violence, extending to one of the gravest imaginable breaches of international law and civility: the violation of diplomatic immunity. And nobody in authority can be found to state the obvious and the necessary: That we stand with the Danes against this defamation and blackmail and sabotage. Instead, all compassion and concern is apparently to be expended upon those who lit the powder trail, and who yell and scream for joy as the embassies of democracies are put to the torch in the capital cities of miserable, fly-blown dictatorships. Let's be sure we haven't hurt the vandals' feelings.

You wish to say that it was instead a small newspaper in Copenhagen that lit the trail? What abject masochism and nonsense. It was the arrogant Danish mullahs who patiently hawked those cartoons around the world (yes, don't worry, they are allowed to exhibit them as much as they like), until they finally provoked a vicious response against the economy and society of their host country. For good measure, they included a cartoon that had never been published in Denmark or anywhere else. It showed the

Prophet Mohammed as a pig, and may or may not have been sent to a Danish mullah by an anonymous ill-wisher. The hypocrisy here is shameful, nauseating, unpardonable. The original proscription against any portrayal of the prophet, not that this appears to be absolute, was superficially praiseworthy because it was intended as a safeguard against idolatry and the worship of images. But now see how this principle is negated. A rumor of a cartoon in a faraway country is enough to turn the very name Mohammed into a fetish-object and an excuse for barbaric conduct. As I write this, the death toll is well over thirty and—guess what?—a mullah in Pakistan has offered \$1 million and a car as a bribe for the murder of “the cartoonist.” This incitement will go unpunished and most probably unrebuked.

Could things become any more sordid and cynical? By all means. In a mindless attempt at a *tu quoque*, various Islamist groups and regimes have dug deep into their sense of wit and irony and proposed a trade-off. You make fun of “our” prophet and we will deny “your” Holocaust. Even if there were any equivalence, and Jewish mobs were now engaged in trashing Muslim shops and embassies, it would feel degrading even to engage with such a low and cheap stunt. I suppose that one should be grateful that the Shoah is only to be denied rather than, as in some Islamist propaganda, enthusiastically affirmed and set out as a model for emulation. But only a moral cretin thinks that anti-Semitism is a threat only to Jews. The memory of the Third Reich is very vivid in Europe precisely because a racist German regime also succeeded in slaughtering millions of non-Jews, including countless Germans, under the demented pretext of extirpating a nonexistent Jewish conspiracy. As it happens, I am one of the few people to have publicly defended David Irving’s right to publish, and I think it outrageous that he is in prison in Austria for expressing his opinions. But my attachment to free speech is at least absolute and consistent. Those who incite murder and arson, or who silkily justify it, are incapable of rising above the childish glee that culminates in the assertion that two wrongs make a right.

The silky ones may be more of a problem in the long term than the flagrantly vicious and crazy ones. Within a short while—this is a warning—the shady term “Islamophobia” is going to be smuggled through our customs. Anyone accused of it will be politely but firmly instructed to shut up, and to forfeit the constitutional right to criticize religion. By definition, anyone accused in this way will also be implicitly guilty. Thus the “soft” censorship will triumph, not from any merit in its argument, but from its association with the “hard” censorship that we have seen being imposed over the past weeks. A report in the *New York Times* of February 13 was as carefully neutral as could be but nonetheless conveyed the sense of menace. “American Muslim leaders,” we were told, are more canny. They have “managed to build effective organizations and achieve greater integration, acceptance and economic success than their brethren in Europe have. They portray the cartoons as a part of a wave of global Islamophobia and have encouraged Muslim groups in Europe to use the same term.” In other words, they are leveraging worldwide Islamic violence to drop a discreet message into the American discourse.

You may have noticed the recurrence of the term “One point two billion Muslims.” A few years ago, I became used to the charge that in defending Salman Rushdie, say, I had “offended a billion Muslims.” Evidently, the number has gone up since I first heard this ridiculous complaint. But observe the implied threat. There is not just safety in numbers, but danger in numbers. How many Danes or Jews or freethinkers are there? You can see what the “spokesmen” are insinuating by this tactic of mass psychology and mobbishness.

And not without immediate success, either. The preposterous person of Karen Hughes is quoted in the same New York Times article, under her risible title of “Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy.” She tittered outside the store she was happily giving away: “The voices of Muslim Americans have more credibility in the Muslim world frankly than my voice as a government official, because they can speak the language of their faith and can share their experience of practicing their faith freely in the West, and they can help explain why the cartoons are so offensive.” Well, let’s concede that almost any voice in any world has more credibility on any subject than this braying Bush-crony ignoramus, but is the State Department now saying that we shall be represented in the Muslim world only by Muslims? I think we need a debate on that, and also a vote. Meanwhile, not a dollar of Wahhabi money should be allowed to be spent on opening madrassas in this country, or in distributing fundamentalist revisions of the Koran in our prison system. Not until, at the very least, churches and synagogues and free-thought libraries are permitted in every country whose ambassador has bullied the Danes. If we have to accept this sickly babble about “respect,” we must at least demand that it is fully reciprocal.

And there remains the question of Denmark: a small democracy, which resisted Hitler bravely and protected its Jews as well as itself. Denmark is a fellow member of NATO and a country that sends its soldiers to help in the defense and reconstruction of Iraq and Afghanistan. And what is its reward from Washington? Not a word of solidarity, but instead some creepy words of apology to those who have attacked its freedom, its trade, its citizens, and its embassies. For shame. Surely here is a case that can be taken up by those who worry that America is too casual and arrogant with its allies. I feel terrible that I have taken so long to get around to this, but I wonder if anyone might feel like joining me in gathering outside the Danish Embassy in Washington, in a quiet and composed manner, to affirm some elementary friendship. Those who like the idea might contact me at christopher.hitchens@yahoo.com, and those who live in other cities with Danish consulates might wish to initiate a stand for decency on their own account.

Update, February 22: Thank you all who’ve written. Please be outside the Embassy of Denmark, 3200 Whitehaven Street (off Massachusetts Avenue) between noon and 1 p.m. this Friday, February 24. Quietness and calm are the necessities, plus cheerful conversation. Danish flags are good, or posters reading “Stand By Denmark” and any variation on this theme (such as “Buy Carlsberg/Havarti/Lego”) The response has been astonishing and I know that the Danes are appreciative. But they are an embassy and

thus do not of course endorse or comment on any demonstration. Let us hope, however, to set a precedent for other cities and countries. Please pass on this message to friends and colleagues.

(Slate, February 21, 2006)

Eschew the Taboo

ONE EFFECT of the witless racist tirade mounted by Michael Richards has been a call, made by Reverend Jesse Jackson and Representative Maxine Waters and endorsed by black comedian Paul Mooney, for a moratorium on the use of the word “nigger” by those in the entertainment industry. If successful, this might, I suppose, put an end to the pathetic complaint made by some white people that it’s unfair that blacks can use the word while they cannot. In fact, no question of “double standards” arises here. If white people call black people niggers, they are doing their very best to hurt and insult them, as well as to remind them that their ancestors used to be property. If black people use the word, they are either uttering an obscenity or trying to detoxify a word and rob it of its power to wound them. Not quite the same thing.

There is a third category here, which is the use of the word in what I can only call an objective way. Thus, Professor Randall Kennedy not long ago became the second black American to publish a book called *Nigger*. (The first was Dick Gregory, who told his mother that henceforth whenever she heard the word, she could think of it as a promotion of her son’s bestseller.) Kennedy’s milder justification, with which I agreed, was that he was writing a history of the word’s power and pathology, and it did not need a mealy-mouthed title.

However, in mentioning Kennedy’s book in its treatment of the Richards affair, the article in the *Washington Post*’s “Style” section did not give its title at all, referring to it instead as “a controversial book about the word” and to the word itself as “the N-word.” Indeed, the *Post* has a policy of not printing the word at all, as do many other media outlets.

I found this out myself recently, when I went on *Hardball* with Chris Matthews. It was just after John Kerry had (I thought unintentionally) given the impression that young people joining the armed forces were stupid. Chris asked me where liberals got the idea that conservatives were dumb. I said that it all went back to John Stuart Mill referring to the Tories as “the stupid party.” After a while, the Tories themselves began to use this expression to describe themselves. I added that the word “Tory” was originally an insult. It means something like “brigand” in Gaelic, and it had also been adopted, by those at whom it was directed, as a badge of pride. In this respect, I went on to say, it anticipated other such appropriations—impressionist, suffragette—by which the target group inverted the taunt thrown at it and, by a kind of verbal jujitsu, turned it back on its originators. In more recent times, I finished with what I

thought was a flourish, the words “nigger” and “queer” (and I may have added “faggot”) had undergone some of the same transmutation.

Very suddenly, we went to a break, and the studio filled with unsmiling people who detached my microphone and announced that the segment was extremely over. My protests were futile. Should I have remembered to cover myself and say “the N-word” instead? It would have seemed somehow inauthentic. Did MSNBC think that anything I had uttered was inflected with the smallest tinge of bigotry? Presumably not. So, what we now have is a taboo, which is something quite different from an agreement on etiquette.

The next day, I was teaching a class on Mark Twain at the New School in New York, explaining why it was that there had always been attempts to ban Huckleberry Finn. In the old days, this was because of its rough manners and alleged lack of refinement and moral uplift. But now, as I went on to say, it is because of the name of the character for whom Huck is willing to risk going to hell. Excuse me, but I did not refer to this character as “N-word Jim.” I have more respect for my graduate students than that. I suppose I could have just called him “Jim,” but that would somehow have been untrue to the spirit and shade of Samuel Clemens. And I would have thought of myself as a coward.

I did, once, decide to be a coward anyway. It was while giving a speech in Washington, to a very international audience, about the British theft of the Elgin Marbles from the Parthenon. I described the attitude of the current British authorities as “niggardly.” Nobody said anything, but I privately resolved—having felt the word hanging in the air a bit—to say “parsimonious” from then on. That’s up to me, though.

Not long afterward, a senior member of the Washington, D.C., government used the word “niggardly” in a budget memo and was forced to resign, even though Mayor Anthony Williams said publicly that he knew the term was both harmless and precise. At this point, we see the effect of taboo. It got even worse a short while later, when a local teacher praised her class for being so “discriminating” and provoked floods of tears and much anguish. Now, the word “niggardly” can pass out of the language and leave us not much poorer. But the meaning of the verb “to discriminate” is of some importance and seems to me to be worth fighting over. It is odd, when you think about it, that we accuse racists of “discrimination.” This is the very thing of which they are by definition incapable: They think all members of certain groups are the same. (The late Richard Pryor dropped the word “nigger” after he went to Africa, saying that he didn’t meet anyone on that continent who answered to the description. Doubtless true, but when the Hutu militias in Rwanda referred to all Tutsis as “cockroaches,” you can be sure they intended something more than a “stereotype.”) Hatred will always find a way, and will certainly always be able to outpace linguistic correctness.

(Slate, December 4, 2006)

She's No Fundamentalist

W.H. AUDEN, WHOSE CENTENARY fell late last month, had an extraordinary capacity to summon despair but in such a way as to simultaneously inspire resistance to fatalism. His most beloved poem is probably "September 1, 1939," in which he sees Europe toppling into a chasm of darkness. Reflecting on how this catastrophe for civilization had come about, he wrote:

Exiled Thucydides knew
All that a speech can say
About Democracy,
And what dictators do,
The elderly rubbish they talk
To an apathetic grave;
Analyzed all in his book,
The enlightenment driven away,
The habit-forming pain,
Mismanagement and grief:
We must suffer them all again.

"The enlightenment driven away ..." This very strong and bitter line came back to me when I saw the hostile, sneaky reviews that have been dogging the success of Ayaan Hirsi Ali's bestseller *Infidel*, which describes the escape of a young Somali woman from sexual chattelhood to a new life in Holland and then (after the slaying of her friend Theo van Gogh) to a fresh exile in the United States. Two of our leading intellectual commentators, Timothy Garton Ash (in the *New York Review of Books*) and Ian Buruma, described Hirsi Ali, or those who defend her, as "Enlightenment fundamentalist[s]." In Sunday's *New York Times Book Review*, Buruma made a further borrowing from the language of tyranny and intolerance and described her view as an "absolutist" one.

Now, I know both Garton Ash and Buruma, and I remember what fun they used to have, in the days of the Cold War, with people who proposed a spurious "moral equivalence" between the Soviet and American sides. Much of this critique involved attention to language. Buruma was very mordant about those German leftists who referred to the "consumer terrorism" of the federal republic. You can fill in your own preferred example here; the most egregious were (and, come to think of it, still are) those who would survey the U.S. prison system and compare it to the Gulag.

In her book, Ayaan Hirsi Ali says the following: "I left the world of faith, of genital cutting and forced marriage for the world of reason and sexual emancipation. After making this voyage I know that one of these two worlds is simply better than the other. Not for its gaudy gadgetry, but for its fundamental values." This is a fairly representative quotation. She has her criticisms of the West, but she prefers it to a society where women are subordinate, censorship is pervasive, and violence is officially

preached against unbelievers. As an African victim of, and escapee from, this system, she feels she has acquired the right to say so. What is “fundamentalist” about that?

The February 26 edition of Newsweek takes up where Garton Ash and Buruma leave off and says, in an article by Lorraine Ali, that “it’s ironic that this would-be ‘infidel’ often sounds as single-minded and reactionary as the zealots she’s worked so hard to oppose.” I would challenge the author to give her definition of irony and also to produce a single statement from Hirsi Ali that would come close to materializing that claim. Accompanying the article is a typically superficial Newsweek Q&A sidebar, which is almost unbelievably headed: “A Bombthrower’s Life.” The subject of this absurd headline is a woman who has been threatened with horrific violence, by Muslims varying from moderate to extreme, ever since she was a little girl. She has more recently had to see a Dutch friend butchered in the street, been told that she is next, and now has to live with bodyguards in Washington, D.C. She has never used or advocated violence. Yet to whom does Newsweek refer as the “Bombthrower”? It’s always the same with these bogus equivalences: They start by pretending loftily to find no difference between aggressor and victim, and they end up by saying that it’s the victim of violence who is “really” inciting it.

Garton Ash and Buruma would once have made short work of any apologist who accused the critics of the USSR or the People’s Republic of China of “heating up the Cold War” if they made any points about human rights. Why, then, do they grant an exception to Islam, which is simultaneously the ideology of insurgent violence and of certain inflexible dictatorships? Is it because Islam is a “faith”? Or is it because it is the faith in Europe at least of some ethnic minorities? In neither case would any special protection from criticism be justified. Faith makes huge claims, including huge claims to temporal authority over the citizen, which therefore cannot be exempt from scrutiny. And within these “minorities,” there are other minorities who want to escape from the control of their ghetto leaders. (This was also the position of the Dutch Jews in the time of Spinoza.) This is a very complex question, which will require a lot of ingenuity in its handling. The pathetic oversimplification, which describes skepticism, agnosticism, and atheism as equally “fundamentalist,” is of no help here. And notice what happens when Newsweek takes up the cry: The enemy of fundamentalism is defined as someone on the fringe while, before you have had time to notice the sleight of hand, the aggrieved, self-pitying Muslim has become the uncontested tenant of the middle ground.

Let me give another example of linguistic slippage. In ACLU circles, we often refer to ourselves as “First Amendment absolutists.” By this we mean, ironically enough, that we prefer to interpret the words of the Founders, if you insist, literally. The literal meaning in this case seems (to us) to be that Congress cannot inhibit any speech or establish any state religion. This means that we defend all expressions of opinion including those that revolt us, and that we say that nobody can be forced to practice, or forced to fore-swear, any faith. I suppose I would say that this is an inflexible principle, or even a dogma, with me. But who dares to say that’s the same as the

belief that criticism of religion should be censored or the belief that faith should be imposed? To flirt with this equivalence is to give in to the demagogues and to hear, underneath their yells of triumph, the dismal moan of the trahison des clerics and “the enlightenment driven away.” Perhaps, though, if I said that my principles were a matter of unalterable divine revelation and that I was prepared to use random violence in order to get “respect” for them, I could hope for a more sympathetic audience from some of our intellectuals.

(Slate, March 5, 2007)

Burned Out

FUEL. WHAT A NICE, reassuring word. Our remotest ancestors began to become civilized when they learned how to gather it from kindling wood and how to keep it burning. Cars and jets are powered, at one remove of refinement, from fossil fuels. Quite often in literature, it is used as a synonym for food or drink. Those who condescended to help the deserving poor at holiday times are often represented as donating winter fuel, in the form of a log or two, to the homes of the humble. Varying the metaphor a bit in his *Bright Lights, Big City*, Jay MacInerney described those who went to the men’s room for a snort of Bolivian marching powder as having gone to the toilet to take on fuel. Further on the downside, a crisis of fuel would be a crisis of energy, or power.

This is “fuel” as a noun, if you like. As a verb, however, it has become a positive menace. Almost anything can be fueled by anything else, in a passive voice that bestows energy and power on anything you like, without any concomitant responsibility or attribution. “Fuel” is also a nice, handy, short word, which means that it can almost always be slotted into a headline.

This is the only possible excuse for a pull-quote that appeared in bold type inside the *New York Times* on March 2: “U.N. report could fuel American fears of weapons duplicity” (note that the Web version of the article does not include this quote). This was perhaps an attempt to clarify an overly complex sentence by Richard Bernstein concerning a report by the International Atomic Energy Agency, which provided clear evidence of Iranian concealment in the matter of inspections.

But the agency’s report is virtually certain to be seized upon by the United States as further evidence of what Washington characterizes as Iranian duplicity in concealing what the United States believes to be a nuclear weapons program. The same report, on a news page and not bodyguarded by any news analysis warning, goes on to say that repeated discoveries of cheating and covert activity mean that the credibility of Iran has been harmed. Just look at the syntax. Plain and uncontroverted evidence is seized upon by those who characterize as true something that nobody has the nerve to deny. The slack and neutral language of the headline reinforces the pseudo-objectivity of the article, whereby things that are only latent or deductive (the fears, by no means all of

them American, that Iran might be up to something nasty) are fueled by something that is real and measurable. Since the critical matter here happens to be the enrichment of uranium for fuel, one can see that words are becoming separated from their meaning with alarming speed. The same goes, as it happens, for the lame word “credibility.” In this instance, it is assumed without any evasive or qualifying words that the Iranian mullahs do possess a stock of it and that this mysterious store of credibility could be harmed, presumably by such corrosive and toxic agents as mendacity. (Could undeniable mendacity fuel a perception of the entire absence of credibility? Not in any article on the subject that I have so far read.)

However, and on the opposite side of the page or ledger, it is repeatedly asserted that some things do indeed fuel a perception of other things or, sometimes, the thing itself as well as the perception of it. For example, I would like to have a dollar for every time I have read that the American presence in Iraq or Afghanistan fuels the insurgency. There must obviously be some self-evident truth to this proposition. If coalition forces were not present in these countries, then nobody would or could be shooting at them. Still, if this is self-evident one way then it must be self-evident in another. Islamic jihad-ism is also fueled by the disgrace and shame of the unveiled woman, or by the existence of Jews and Christians and Hindus and atheists, or by the publication of novels by apostates. The Syrian death squads must be fueled by the appearance of opposition politicians in Lebanon or indeed Syria. The janjaweed militia (if we must call them a militia) in Sudan must be fueled by the inconvenience of African villagers who stand in their way.

This confusion between the active and the passive mode is an indicator of a wider and deeper reticence, not to say cowardice. I wrote last week about the way that the phrase “Arab Street” had been dropped, without any apology, when it ceased to apply in the phony way in which it had first been adopted. But extend this a little. Can you imagine reading that the American street had had its way last November? In all the discussion about the danger of offending religious and national sensibilities in the Muslim world, have you ever been invited to consider whether Iranians might be annoyed by Russian support for their dictators? Or whether Chinese cynicism about its North Korean protectorate is an interference in Korean internal affairs? There is a masochistic cultural cringe somewhere in our discourse, which was first evidenced by those who felt guilty at being assaulted in September 2001, or who felt ashamed by any countermeasures. Though it will take a much more profound discussion before all of this mental surrender is clarified and uprooted, a brisk war on the weasel word “fuel” is needed in any case.

(Slate, March 7, 2005)

Easter Charade

THE IMMEDIATE CRISIS has apparently passed. But all through Easter Sunday, one had to be alert to the possibility that, at any moment, the late and long-dead Terri Schiavo would receive the stigmata on both palms and both feet and be wafted across the Florida strait, borne up by wonder-working dolphins, to be united in eternal bliss with the man-child Elián González.

I had sincerely intended to be the only scribbler in America who stayed out of this most stupid and degrading argument. I ought to have left that phone call from Hardball unreturned. Not a single toe should have been dipped into the water. But, once you engage for even an instant, you are drawn into a vortex of irrationality and nastiness that generates its own energy. A family lawyer appears before an American court and solemnly proposes that his client's client might have to spend extra time in Purgatory, or even in Hell, if the feeding-tube decision is adjudicated the wrong way. One Catholic fanatic, Patrick Buchanan, argues that federal marshals ought to burst in and preserve a corpse. Another Catholic fundamentalist, William Donahue, says that this would be unwise, but only because it might set a precedent for the rescue of living people on Death Row. Presiding from a distance is a nodding, senile pope whose church may possibly want to change the subject from its indulgence of the rape and torture of real-life children.

Wearied of this, I return to my e-mail and discover a letter from someone who signs himself as Dr. but who turns out to have a degree in something other than medicine. If I am correct in describing Terri Schiavo as dead, says this indignant correspondent, then how can I object to her receiving nourishment through a tube? It surely cannot do her any harm. I admit that I am caught out by this fallacy in my own position, and I briefly ponder the image of rows and rows of deceased Americans, all connected to life-support until the crack of doom. Dead? Yes, absolutely. But first do no harm. The mind reels.

My own bias is very strongly for the choose life position. I used to have horrible and exhausting arguments with supposedly pro-choice militants who only reluctantly conceded that the fetus was alive but who then demanded to know if this truly was a human life. I know casuistry when I see it, and I would respond by asking what other kind of life it could conceivably be. Down the years, there has been an unacknowledged evolution of the argument. Serious Catholics no longer insist that contraception is genocide, and pro-choice advocates have become quite squeamish about late-term abortions. Sensitive about consistency in the life ethic, the church has also moved to condemn if not to anathematize the death penalty. Things were improving slowly. Until now.

There is also a secular analogue of this debate. In the late eighteenth century, Jefferson and Madison had a serious argument about whether the earth belonged only to the living. Thomas Paine, proposing that man has no property in man, had condemned some traditional attitudes for, in effect, enfranchising the dead. Jefferson was inclined

to agree, writing that past generations could be allowed no veto. Madison riposted that the deceased did have some rights and should be accorded some respect, since they had labored to create many of the benefits that the living actually enjoyed. But for this argument to be conducted reasonably, there had to be an agreement that the dead had actually died. Nothing can be done if the case is held in a permanent state of suspended animation.

If there was the least reason to believe that the late Terri Schiavo was not the ex-wife of her husband, I should say that he owed her a duty. But as it is—and here is my reply to the man who demanded that we ignore all responsible medical evidence yet still treat her as if she were alive—I think it is obscene that she is held in absentia to exert power from beyond the grave. As for the idea that this assumed power can be arrogantly ventriloquized by clerical demagogues and self-appointed witch doctors, one quivers at the sheer indecency of the thing. The end of the brain, or the replacement of the brain by a liquefied and shrunken void, is (to return to my earlier point) if not the absolute end of life, the unarguable conclusion of human life. It disqualifies the victim from any further say in human affairs. Tragic, perhaps, unless you believe in a better life to come (as, oddly enough, the parents of this now non-human entity claim that they do).

Meanwhile, the rest of us also have lives to live. And I hope and believe that we shall say, as politely and compassionately as we can, that we do not intend to pass our remaining days listening to any hysteria from the morbid and the superstitious. It is an abuse of our courts and our Constitution to have judges and congressmen and governors bullied by those who believe in resurrection but not in physical death. Which post-terminal patient could not now be employed, regardless of his or her expressed wish, to convene a midnight court or assemble a hasty nocturnal presidency? Not content with telling us that we once used to share the earth with dinosaurs and that we should grimly instruct our children in this falsehood, religious fanatics now present their cult of death as if it were a joyous celebration of the only life we have. They have gone too far, and they should be made to regret it most bitterly.

(Slate, March 28, 2005)

Don't Mince Words

WHY ON EARTH do people keep saying, “There but for the grace of God”? If matters had been very slightly different over the past weekend, the streets of London and the airport check-in area in Glasgow, Scotland, would have been strewn with charred body parts. And this would have been, according to the would-be perpetrators, because of the grace of God. Whatever our own private theology or theodicy, we might at least agree to take this vile belief seriously.

Instead, almost every other conceivable explanation was canvassed. The June 30 New York Times report managed to quote three people, one of whom attributed the

aborted atrocity in London to Tony Blair's foreign policy; one of whom (a New Zealand diplomat, at that) felt "surprisingly all right about it"; and one of whom, described as "a Briton of Indian descent," was worried that "if I walk up that road, they're going to suspect me." The "they" there was clearly the British authorities, rather than the Muslim gangsters who have declared open season on all Hindus as well as all Jews, Christians, secularists, and other kuffar—or infidel—filth.

On the following day, July 1, the same newspaper informed us that Britain contained a "disenfranchised South Asian population." How this was true was never explained. There are several Muslim parliamentarians in both houses, often allowed to make the most absurdly inflammatory and euphemistic statements where acts of criminal violence are concerned, as well as several districts in which the Islamic vote keeps candidates of all parties uneasily aware of what may and may not be said. True, the Muslim extremist groups boycott elections and denounce democracy itself as profane, but this does not really count as disenfranchisement.

Only at the tail end of the coverage was it admitted that a car bomb might have been parked outside a club in Piccadilly because it was "ladies night" and that this explosion might have been designed to lure people into the street, the better to be burned and shredded by the succeeding explosion from the second car-borne cargo of gasoline and nails. Since we have known since 2004 that a near-identical attack on a club called the Ministry of Sound was proposed in just these terms, on the grounds that dead "slags" or "sluts" would be regretted by nobody, a certain amount of trouble might have been saved by assuming the obvious. The murderers did not just want body parts in general but female body parts in particular.

I suppose that some people might want to shy away from this conclusion for whatever reason, but they cannot have been among the viewers of British Channel 4's recent Undercover Mosque, or among those who watched Sunday's report from Christiane Amanpour on CNN's Special Investigations Unit. On these shows, the British Muslim fanatics came right out with their program. Straight into the camera, leading figures like Anjem Choudary spoke of their love for Osama bin Laden and their explicit rejection of any definition of Islam as a religion of peace. On tape or in person, mullahs in prominent British mosques called for the killing of Indians and Jews.

Liberal reluctance to confront this sheer horror is the result, I think, of a deep reticence about some furtive concept of "race." It is subconsciously assumed that a critique of political Islam is an attack on people with brown skins. One notes in passing that any such concession implicitly denies or negates Islam's claim to be a universal religion. Indeed, some of its own exponents certainly do speak as if they think of it as a tribal property. And, at any rate, in practice, so it is. The fascistic subculture that has taken root in Britain and that lives by violence and hatred is composed of two main elements. One is a refugee phenomenon, made up of shady exiles from the Middle East and Asia who are exploiting London's traditional hospitality, and one is the projection of an immigrant group that has its origins in a particularly backward and reactionary part of Pakistan.

To the shame-faced white-liberal refusal to confront these facts, one might counterpose a few observations. The first is that we were warned for years of the danger, by Britons also of Asian descent such as Hanif Kureishi, Monica Ali, and Salman Rushdie. They knew what the village mullahs looked like and sounded like, and they said as much. Not long ago, I was introduced to Nadeem Aslam, whose book *Maps for Lost Lovers* is highly recommended.

He understands the awful price of arranged marriages, dowry, veiling, and the other means by which the feudal arrangements of rural Pakistan have been transplanted to parts of London and Yorkshire. “In some families in my street,” he writes to me, “the grandparents, parents, and the children are all first cousins—it’s been going on for generations and so the effects of the inbreeding are quite pronounced by now.” By his estimate and others, a minority of no more than 11 percent is responsible for more than 70 percent of the birth defects in Yorkshire. When a leading socialist member of Parliament, Ann Cryer, drew attention to this appalling state of affairs in her own constituency, she was promptly accused of—well, you can guess what she was accused of. The dumb word *Islamophobia*, uncritically employed by Christiane Amanpour in her otherwise powerful documentary, was the least of it. Meanwhile, an extreme self-destructive clannishness, which is itself “phobic” in respect to all outsiders, becomes the constituency for the preachings of a cult of death. I mention this because, if there is an “ethnic” dimension to the Islamist question, then in this case at least it is the responsibility of the Islamists themselves.

The most noticeable thing about all theocracies is their sexual repression and their directly related determination to exert absolute control over women. In Britain, in the twenty-first century, there are now honor killings, forced marriages, clerically mandated wife-beatings, incest in all but name, and the adoption of apparel for females that one cannot be sure is chosen by them but which is claimed as an issue of (of all things) free expression. This would be bad enough on its own and if it were confined to the Muslim “community” alone. But, of course, such a toxin cannot be confined, and the votaries of theocracy now claim the God-given right to slaughter females at random for nothing more than their perceived immodesty. The least we can do, confronted by such radical evil, is to look it in the eye (something it strives to avoid) and call it by its right name. For a start, it is the female victims of this tyranny who are “disenfranchised,” while something rather worse than “disenfranchisement” awaits those who dare to disagree.

(Slate, July 2, 2007)

History and Mystery

WHEN THE NEW YORK TIMES scratches its head, get ready for total baldness as you tear out your hair. A doozy classic led the “Week in Review” section on Sunday. Portentously headed “The Mystery of the Insurgency,” the article rubbed its eyes at the sheer lunacy and sadism of the Iraqi car bombers and random murderers. At a time

when new mass graves are being filled, and old ones are still being dug up, writer James Bennet practically pleaded with the authors of both to come up with an intelligible (or defensible?) reason for his paper to go on calling them insurgents.

I don't think the New York Times ever referred to those who devastated its hometown's downtown as insurgents. But it does employ this title every day for the gang headed by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. With pedantic exactitude, and unless anyone should miss the point, this man has named his organization al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia and sought (and apparently received) Osama bin Laden's permission for the franchise. Did al-Qaeda show interest in winning hearts and minds in building international legitimacy in articulating a governing program or even a unified ideology, or any of the other things plaintively mentioned as lacking by Mr. Bennet?

The answer, if we remember our ABC, is yes and no, with yes at least to the third part of the question. The bin Ladenists did have a sort of governing program, expressed in part by their Taliban allies and patrons. This in turn reflected a unified ideology. It can be quite easily summarized: the return of the Ottoman Empire under a caliphate and a return to the desert religious purity of the seventh century (not quite the same things, but that's not our fault). In the meantime, anyway, war to the end against Jews, Hindus, Christians, unbelievers, and Shiites. None of the experts quoted in the article appeared to have remembered these essentials of the al-Qaeda program, but had they done so, they might not be so astounded at the promiscuous way in which the Iraqi gangsters pump out toxic anti-Semitism, slaughter Nepalese and other Asian guest-workers on video and gloat over the death of Hindus, burn out and blow up the Iraqi Christian minority, kidnap any Westerner who catches their eye, and regularly inflict massacres and bombings on Shiite mosques, funerals, and assemblies.

A letter from Zarqawi to bin Laden more than a year ago, intercepted by Kurdish intelligence and since then well-authenticated, spoke of Shiism as a repulsive heresy and the ignition of a Sunni-Shiite civil war as the best and easiest way to thwart the Crusader-Zionist coalition. The actions since then have precisely followed the design, but the design has been forgotten by the journal of record. The bin Laden and Zarqawi organizations, and their co-thinkers in other countries, have gone to great pains to announce, on several occasions, that they will win because they love death, while their enemies are so soft and degenerate that they prefer life. Are we supposed to think that they were just boasting when they said this? Their actions demonstrate it every day, and there are burned-out school buses and clinics and hospitals to prove it, as well as mosques (the incineration of which one might think to be a better subject for Islamic protest than a possibly desecrated Koran, in a prison where every inmate is automatically issued with one).

Then we might find a little space for the small question of democracy. The Baath Party's opinion of this can be easily gauged, not just from its record in power but from the rancid prose of its founding fascist fathers. As for the bin Ladenists, they have taken extraordinary pains to say, through the direct statements of Osama and of Zarqawi, that democracy is a vile heresy, a Greek fabrication, and a source of

profanity. For the last several weeks, however, the Times has been opining every day that the latest hysterical murder campaign is a result of the time it has taken the newly elected Iraqi Assembly to come up with a representative government. The corollary of this mush-headed coverage must be that, if a more representative government were available in these terrible conditions (conditions supplied by the gangsters themselves), the homicide and sabotage would thereby decline. Is there a serious person in the known world who can be brought to believe such self-evident rubbish?

On many occasions, the jihad-ists in Iraq have been very specific as well as very general. When they murdered Sergio Vieira de Mello, the brilliant and brave U.N. representative assigned to Baghdad by Kofi Annan, the terrorists' communiqué hailed the death of the man who had so criminally helped Christian East Timor to become independent of Muslim Indonesia. (This was also among the reasons given for the bombing of the bar in Bali.) I think I begin to sense the frustration of the insurgents. They keep telling us what they are like and what they want. But do we ever listen? Nah. For them, it must be like talking to the wall. Bennet even complains that it's difficult for reporters to get close to the insurgents: He forgets that his own paper has published a conversation with one of them, in which the man praises the invasion of Kuwait, supports the cleansing of the Kurds, and says that we cannot accept to live with infidels.

Ah, but why would the secular former Baathists join in such theocratic mayhem? Let me see if I can guess. Leaving aside the formation of another well-named group, "the Fedayeen Saddam," to perform state-sponsored jihad before the intervention, how did the Baath Party actually rule? Yes, it's coming back to me. By putting every Iraqi citizen in daily fear of his or her life, by random and capricious torture and murder, and by cynical divide-and-rule among Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds. Does this remind you of anything?

That's not to say that the paper doesn't have a long memory. Having once read in high school that violence is produced by underlying social conditions, the author of this appalling article refers in lenient terms to the goal of ridding Iraq of an American presence, a goal that may find sympathy among Iraqis angry about poor electricity and water service and high unemployment. Bet you hadn't thought of that: The water and power are intermittent, so let's go and blow up the generating stations and the oil pipelines. No job? Shoot up the people waiting to register for employment. To the insult of flattering the psychopaths, Bennet adds his condescension to the suffering of ordinary Iraqis, who are murdered every day while trying to keep essential services running. (Baathism, by the way, comes in very handy in crippling these, because the secret police of the old regime know how things operate, as well as where everybody lives. Or perhaps you think that the attacks are so deadly because the bombers get lucky seven days a week?)

This campaign of horror began before Baghdad fell, with the execution and mutilation of those who dared to greet American and British troops. It continued with the looting of the Baghdad museum and other sites, long before there could have been any

complaint about the failure to restore power or security. It is an attempt to put Iraqi Arabs and Kurds, many of them still traumatized by decades of well-founded fear, back under the heel of the Baath Party or under a home-grown Taliban, or the combination of both that would also have been the Odai/Qusai final solution. Half-conceding the usefulness of chaos and misery in bringing this about, Bennet in his closing paragraph compares jihad-ism to nineteenth-century anarchism, which shows that he hasn't read Proudhon or Bakunin or Kropotkin either.

In my ears, "insurgent" is a bit like "rebel" or even "revolutionary." There's nothing axiomatically pejorative about it, and some passages of history have made it a term of honor. At a minimum, though, it must mean rising up. These fascists and hirelings are not rising up, they are stamping back down. It's time for respectable outlets to drop the word, to call things by their right names (Baathist or bin Ladenist or jihad-ist would all do in this case), and to stop inventing mysteries where none exist.

(Slate, May 16, 2005)

Words Matter

ONE OF THE GREAT MOMENTS among many in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* is when we find the young Albert Brooks manning the phones in the campaign office of the man we know (and he does not) to be a double-dyed phony. On behalf of the empty and grinning Senator Palantine, he is complaining to a manufacturer of lapel buttons. "We asked for buttons that said, 'We Are the People.' These say, 'We Are the People.' ... Oh, you don't think there's a difference? Well, we will not pay for the buttons. We will throw the buttons away." Part of the joke here is that the joke itself is also at the expense of Brooks's character and his "candidate"—there really and truly isn't much, if any, difference. Fan of Jerry Brown as I had been, I still winced when he ran on his lame "We the People" slogan against Clinton as late as 1992.

Of course, in 1992, Clinton borrowed from an old slogan of John F. Kennedy's: "Change Is the Law of Life." Now, why did he annex that questionable truism, and why in that year? First of all, because he wanted to plagiarize the entire Kennedy effect for himself, and second, because he was the challenger and not the incumbent. When you are the incumbent, it is harder (but not impossible) to demand "change." Senator Hillary Clinton, who wants to run as the "change" candidate—because, well, because you can't so easily run as a status quo candidate—also wants to run as a stability-and-experience candidate. Hence the repeated alterations (or "changes") in her half-baked slogans. By the time the plagiarism row had been started by her very ill-advised advisers, she had run through: "Big Challenges, Real Solutions"; "Working for Change, Working for You"; "Ready for Change, Ready to Lead"; and "Solutions for America." Senator Obama, meanwhile, had picked the slightly less banal and more cryptic mantra "Change We Can Believe In," which I call cryptic only because at least it makes one ask what it can conceivably be intended to mean.

It is cliché, not plagiarism, that is the problem with our stilted, room-temperature political discourse. It used to be that thinking people would say, with at least a shred of pride, that their own convictions would not shrink to fit on a label or on a bumper sticker. But now it seems that the more vapid and vacuous the logo, the more charm (or should that be “charisma?”) it exerts. Take “Yes We Can,” for example. It’s the sort of thing parents might chant encouragingly to a child slow on the potty-training uptake. As for “We Are the People We Have Been Waiting For” (in which case, one can only suppose that now that we have arrived, we can all go home), I didn’t think much of it when Representative Dennis Kucinich used it at an anti-war rally in 2004 (“We Are the People We Are Waiting For” being his version) or when Thomas Friedman came across it at an MIT student event last December. He wrote, by the way, that just hearing it gave him—well, you guess what it gave him. Hope? That’s exactly right.

Pretty soon, we should be able to get electoral politics down to a basic newspeak that contains perhaps ten keywords: Dream, Fear, Hope, New, People, We, Change, America, Future, Together. Fishing exclusively from this tiny and stagnant pool of stock expressions, it ought to be possible to drive all thinking people away from the arena and leave matters in the gnarled but capable hands of the professional word-smiths and manipulators. In the new jargon, certain intelligible ideas would become inexpressible. (How could one state, for example, the famous Burkean principle that many sorts of change ought to be regarded with skepticism?) In a rather poor trade-off for this veto on complexity, many views that are expressible (and “We the People Together Dream of and Hope for New Change in America” would be really quite a long sentence in the latest junk language) will, in turn, be entirely and indeed almost beautifully unintelligible.

And it’s not as if anybody is looking for coded language in which to say: “Health care—who needs it?” or “Special interests and lobbyists—give them a break,” let alone “Dr. King’s dream—what a snooze.” It’s more that the prevailing drivel assumes that every adult in the country is a completely illiterate jerk who would rather feel than think and who must furthermore be assumed, for a special season every four years, to imagine that everyone else “in America” or in “this country” is unemployed or starving or sleeping under a bridge. The next assumption made by the drivel is that only a new president (or perhaps a sitting president who is somehow eager to run against Washington and everything else in his hometown) can possibly cure all these ills. The non sequitur is breathtaking. The more I could be brought to believe in a stupid incantation such as “Washington Is Broken,” the less inclined I would be to pay the moving expenses to bring a failed Mormon crowd-pleaser and flip-flopper to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. And this was the best that a supposed “full-spectrum conservative” could come up with by way of rhetoric. At this rate, Senator John McCain will have to campaign as a radical post-Castroite to deal with the perceptions that (a) he’s too old and (b) the Republicans are too WASP-dominated.

How well I remember Sidney Blumenthal waking me up all those years ago to read me the speech by Senator Biden, which, by borrowing the biography as well as the

words of another candidate's campaign, put an end to Biden's own. The same glee didn't work this time when he (it must have been he) came up with "Change You Can Xerox" as a riposte to Senator Obama's hand from Governor Deval Patrick. All that Obama had lifted from Patrick was the old-fashioned idea that "words matter," and all that one can say, reviewing the present empty landscape of slogan and cliché, is that one only wishes that this could once again be true.

(Slate, March 3, 2008)

This Was Not Looting

ONCE AGAIN, a major story gets top billing in a "mainstream paper"—and is printed upside down. "Looting at Weapons Plants Was Systematic, Iraqi Says." This was how the New York Times led its front page on Sunday. According to the supporting story, Dr. Sami al-Araji, the deputy minister of industry, says that after the fall of Baghdad in April 2003, "looters systematically dismantled and removed tons of machinery from Saddam Hussein's most important weapons installations, including some with high-precision equipment capable of making parts for nuclear arms."

As printed, the implication of the story was not dissimilar from the al-Qaeda disclosures, which featured so much in the closing days of the presidential election last fall. In that case, a huge stock of conventional high-explosives had been allowed to go missing and was presumably in the hands of those who were massacring Iraqi civilians and killing coalition troops. At least one comment from the Bush campaign surrogate appeared to blame this negligence on the troops themselves. Followed to one possible conclusion, the implication was clear: The invasion of Iraq had made the world a more dangerous place by randomly scattering all sorts of weaponry, including mass-destruction weaponry, to destinations unknown.

It was eye-rubbing to read of the scale of this potential new nightmare. There in cold print was the Al Hatteen "munitions production plant that international inspectors called a complete potential nuclear weapons laboratory." And what of the Al Adwan facility, which "produced equipment used for uranium enrichment, necessary to make some kinds of nuclear weapons"? The overall pattern of the plundered sites was summarized thus, by reporters James Glanz and William J. Broad:

The kinds of machinery at the various sites included equipment that could be used to make missile parts, chemical weapons or centrifuges essential for enriching uranium for atom bombs.

My first question is this: How can it be that, on every page of every other edition for months now, the New York Times has been stating categorically that Iraq harbored no weapons of mass destruction? And there can hardly be a comedy-club third-rater or MoveOn.org activist in the entire country who hasn't stated with sarcastic certainty that the whole WMD fuss was a way of lying the American people into war.

So now what? Maybe we should have taken Saddam's propaganda seriously, when his newspaper proudly described Iraq's physicists as "our nuclear mujahideen."

My second question is: What's all this about "looting"? The word is used throughout the long report, but here's what it's used to describe. "In four weeks from mid-April to mid-May of 2003 ... teams with flatbed trucks and other heavy equipment moved systematically from site to site. 'The first wave came for the machines,' Dr. Araji said. 'The second wave, cables and cranes.' " Perhaps hedging the bet, the Times authors at this point refer to "organized looting."

But obviously, what we are reading about is a carefully planned military operation. The participants were not panicked or greedy civilians helping themselves, which is the customary definition of a "looter," especially in wartime. They were mechanized and mobile and under orders, and acting in a concerted fashion. Thus, if the story is factually correct—which we have no reason at all to doubt—then Saddam's Iraq was a fairly highly evolved WMD state, with a contingency plan for further concealment and distribution of the weaponry in case of attack or discovery.

Before the war began, several of the administration's critics argued that an intervention would be too dangerous, either because Saddam Hussein would actually unleash his arsenal of WMD, or because he would divert it to third parties. That case at least had the merit of being serious (though I would want to argue that a regime capable of doing either thing was a regime that urgently needed to be removed). Since then, however, the scene has dissolved into one long taunt and jeer: "There were no WMD in Iraq. Liar, liar, pants on fire."

The U.N. inspectors, who are solemnly quoted by Glanz and Broad as having "monitored" the alarming developments at Al Hatteen and elsewhere, don't come out looking too professional, either. If by scanning satellite pictures now they can tell us that potentially thermonuclear stuff is on the loose, how come they couldn't come up with this important data when they were supposedly "on the ground"?

Even in the worst interpretation, it seems unlikely that the material is more dangerous now than it was two years ago. Some of the elements—centrifuges, for example, and chemical mixtures—require stable and controlled conditions for effectiveness. They can't simply be transferred to some kitchen or tent. They are less risky than they were in early 2003, in other words. If they went to a neighboring state, though.... Some chemical vats have apparently turned up on a scrap heap in Jordan, even if this does argue more for a panicky concealment than a plan of transfer. But anyway, this only returns us to the main point: If Saddam's people could have made such a transfer after his fall, then they could have made it much more easily during his reign. (We know, for example, that the Baathists were discussing the acquisition of long-range missiles from North Korea as late as March 2003, and at that time, the nuclear Wal-Mart of the A. Q. Khan network was still in business. Iraq would have had plenty to trade in this WMD underworld.)

Supporters of the overdue disarmament and liberation of Iraq, all the same, can't be complacent about this story. It seems flabbergasting that any of these sites were

unsecured after the occupation, let alone for so long. Did the CIA yet again lack “human intelligence” as well as every other kind? The Bush administration staked the reputation of the United States on the matter. It won’t do to say that “mistakes were made.”

(Slate, March 15, 2005)

The Other L-Word

WHEN CAROLINE KENNEDY managed to say “you know” more than 200 times in an interview with the New York Daily News, and on 130 occasions while talking to the New York Times during her uninspired attempt to become a hereditary senator, she proved, among other things, that she was (a) middle-aged and (b) middle class. If she had been a generation younger and a bit more *déclassé*, she would have been saying “like.” When asked if the Bush tax cuts should be repealed, she responded: “Well, you know, that’s something, obviously, that, you know, in principle and in the campaign, you know, I think that, um, the tax cuts, you know, were expiring and needed to be repealed.”

This is an example of “filler” words being used as props, to try to shore up a lame sentence. People who can’t get along without “um” or “er” or “basically” (or, in England, “actually”) or “et cetera et cetera” are of two types: the chronically modest and inarticulate, such as Ms. Kennedy, and the mildly authoritarian who want to make themselves un-interruptible. Saul Bellow’s character Ravelstein is a good example of the latter: In order to deny any opening to a rival, he says “the-uh, the-uh” while searching for the noun or concept that is eluding him.

Many parents and teachers have become irritated to the point of distraction at the way the weed-style growth of “like” has spread through the idiom of the young. And it’s true that in some cases the term has become simultaneously a crutch and a tic, driving out the rest of the vocabulary as candy expels vegetables. But it didn’t start off that way, and might possibly be worth saving in a modified form.

Its antecedents are not as ignoble as those of “you know.” It was used by the leader of the awesome Droogs in the 1962 novel *A Clockwork Orange*, by Anthony Burgess, who had possibly annexed it from the Beatnik Maynard G. Krebs, of *Dobie Gillis*. It was quasi-ironic in *Scooby Doo* by 1969, and self-satirizing by the time that Frank Zappa and Moon Unit deployed it (“Like, totally”) in their “Valley Girl” song in the early 1980s. It was then a part of the Californianization of American youth-speak. In an analysis drawing upon the wonderfully named Sonoma College linguist Birch Moonwomon’s findings, Penelope Eckert and Norma Mendoza-Denton phrase matters this way: “One of the innovative developments in the white English of Californians is the use of the discourse-marker ‘I’m like’ or ‘she’s like’ to introduce quoted speech, as in ‘I’m like, where have you been?’” This quotative is particularly useful because it

does not require the quote to be of actual speech (as ‘she said’ would, for instance). A shrug, a sigh, or any of a number of expressive sounds as well as speech can follow it.”

So it can be of use to a natural raconteur. Ian McEwan rather surprised me when I asked him about “like,” telling me that “it can be used as a pause or a colon: very handy for spinning out a mere anecdote into a playlet that’s full of parody and speculation.” And also of hyperbole, as in “She’s been out with, like, a million guys.”

Its other main use is principally social, and defensive. You will have noticed the way in which “uptalk” has also been spreading among the young. “Uptalk” can be defined as an ostensibly declarative sentence that is uttered on a rising note of apology and that ends with an implied question mark. An example: the statement “I go to Columbia University?” which seems to say, “If that’s all right with you.” Just as the humble, unassuming, assenting “Okay” has deposed the more affirmative “Yes,” so the little cringe and hesitation and approximation of “like” are a help to young people who are struggling to negotiate the shoals and rapids of ethnic identity, the street, and general correctness. To report that “he was like, Yeah, whatever” is to struggle to say “He said” while minimizing the risk of commitment. (This could be why young black people don’t seem to employ “like” quite as often, having more challenging vernaculars such as “Nome sane?”—which looks almost Latin.)

The actual grammatical battle was probably lost as far back as 1954, when Winston announced that its latest smoke “tasted good, like a cigarette should.” Complaints from sticklers that this should have been “as a cigarette should” (or, in my view, “as a cigarette ought to do”) were met by a second ad in which a gray-bunned schoolmarm type was taunted by cheery consumers asking, “What do you want, good grammar or good taste?” Usage of “like” has now almost completely replaced “as,” except in the case of that other quite infectious youth expression “as if,” which would now be in danger of being rendered “Like, as if.”

How could one preserve what’s useful about “like” without allowing it to reduce everyday vocabulary and without having it weaken the two strong senses of the word, which are: to be fond of something or somebody (As You, Like, Like It) or to resemble something or somebody (“Like, Like a Virgin”)? Believe me when I say I have tried to combat it when teaching my class, and with some success (you have to talk well in order to write well, and you can’t write while using “like” as punctuation). But I realize that it can’t be expelled altogether. It can, however, be pruned and rationed, and made the object of mockery for those who have surrendered to it altogether. The restoration of the word “as,” which isn’t that hard a word to master, along with “such as,” would also be a help in varying the national lingo. A speech idiosyncrasy, in the same way as an air quote, is really justifiable only if it’s employed very sparingly and if the user consciously intends to be using it. Just to try to set an example—comparing “like” to “like,” as you might say—I have managed to write all the above without using the word once, except in inverted commas. Why not try it? You might, like, like it.

(Vanity Fair online, January 13, 2010)

The You Decade

ISUPPOSE I STARTED to notice it about two or three years ago, when the salespeople at Rite-Aid began wearing dish-sized lapel buttons stating that “YOU are the most important customer I will serve today.” It was all wrong, in the same way that a sign hung on a door saying “Back in five minutes” is out of time as soon as it is put in place. It was wrong in other ways, too, since it could be read from some distance (say, from ten spaces back in a slow-moving line) and thus became an irritant to anyone who could grasp that “they” or the “we” of this putative “you” were not really important at all. As in “Your call is important to us” but not important enough for us to supply enough operators to get you out of the holding pattern and the elevator or fasten-your-seat-belt music that comes with it.

The annoying lapel button was soon discontinued, and the bright consultant who came up with it was no doubt promoted to higher things, but “You” retained its centrality. A room-service menu, for example, now almost always offers “your choice” of oatmeal versus cornflakes or fruit juice as opposed to vegetable juice. Well, who else’s choice could it be? Except perhaps that of the people who decide that this is the range of what the menu will feature. Fox TV famously and fatuously claims, “We report. You decide.” Decide on what? On what Fox reports? Online polls promise to register what “you” think about the pressing issues of the moment, whereas what’s being presented is an operation whereby someone says, “Let’s give them the idea that they are a part of the decision-making process.”

The next time you see an ad, the odds are increasingly high that it will put “you” in the driver’s seat. “Ask your doctor if Prozac/Lipitor/Cialis is right for you” almost as if these medications could be custom made for each individual consumer. A lawyer or real-estate agent will promise you to address “your” concerns. Probably the most famous propaganda effort of the twentieth century, a recruiting poster with Lord Kitchener pointing directly outward and stating, “Your Country Needs YOU,” was only rushed onto the billboards when it suddenly became plain that the country concerned needed several hundred thousand recruits in a big hurry and couldn’t afford to be too choosy about who it was signing up.

Tourist posters are even more absurd. I saw one once for Cyprus, showing an empty beach with the slogan, “Keep It to Yourself.” Probably at least a million of these were printed and distributed, with the result that the hotels on the island blocked out the sun on those unspoiled beaches. (Have you ever seen an inducement for a holiday that showed more than two people on the beach? Jamaica welcomes you but isn’t dumb enough to show you alone on the sand without a girlfriend/boyfriend. It just omits all the other “you” targets who would otherwise mutate rather swiftly and disconcertingly into “them.”)

I can clearly remember the first time I heard the expression “y’all,” which was at a Greyhound bus stop in Georgia more than thirty years ago. A young black man, hearing my English accent but mistaking my age, told me with exquisite courtesy and

solemnity that he greatly admired “the stand y’all”—he actually spun it out all the way to “you all”—“took in 1940.” Stirred as I was then, I was stirred and baffled, later, when others in Dixie used “y’all” to mean just myself and not anything plural. But then I heard someone say “all of y’all,” which restored the plural to its throne. And that’s where I want it to be. As in “you fools,” or “you lot,” or “you the targets of our latest marketing campaign to make you think it’s all about you.”

I have just been sent a link to an Internet site that shows me delivering a speech some years ago. This is my quite unsolicited introduction to the now-inescapable phenomenon of YouTube. It comes with another link, enabling me to see other movies of myself all over the place. What’s “You” about this? It’s a MeTube, for me. And I can only suppose that, for my friends and foes alike, it’s a HimTube. It reminds me of the exasperation I used to feel, years ago, when one could be accused of regarding others as “sex objects.” Well, one can only really be a proper “subject” to oneself. A sentence that begins with I will be highly solipsistic if it ends only with me, and if the subject is sexual, then the object of the sentence will be an object. Would people rather be called “sex subjects”? (A good question for another time, perhaps.) Or “sex predicates”? Let us not go there.

Perhaps global-scale problems and mass-society populism somehow necessitate this unctuous appeal to the utter specialness of the supposed individual. What you can do to stop planetary warming. How the maximum leader is on your side. The ways in which the corporation has your needs in mind as it makes its dispositions. The candidate who wants to hear your views. Or, a little farther down the scale of flattery and hucksterism, come to our completely uniform and standardized food outlet and create your own salad and dessert, from our own pre-selected range of freshly prepared and tasteless ingredients!

So, whatever happened to the Me Decade? The answer is that nothing happened to it. It mutated quite easily and smoothly into a decade centered on another narcissistic pronoun. Which pronoun is that? You be the judge.

(Slate, April 9, 2007)

Suck It Up

WHEN PEOPLE IN AMERICA say “no man is an island,” as Joan Didion once put it, they think they are quoting Ernest Hemingway. But when Hemingway annexed the seductive words from John Donne’s Devotions, quoting the whole paragraph on his title page and borrowing from it one of the twentieth century’s most resonant titles, he did not literally mean to say that all funerals are the same or that all deaths are to be regretted equally. He meant that if the Spanish republic went under to fascism, we should all be the losers. It was a matter both of solidarity and of self-interest: Stand by your friends now, or be shamed (and deserted in your turn) later on.

The grisly events at Virginia Tech involved no struggle, no sacrifice, no great principle. They were random and pointless. Those who died were not soldiers in any cause. They were not murdered by our enemies. They were not martyrs. But—just to take one example from the exhausting national sob fest of the past few days—here is how the bells were tolled for them at another national seat of learning. The president of Cornell University, David J. Skorton, ordered the chimes on his campus to be rung thirty-three times before addressing a memorial gathering. Thirty-three times? Yes. “We are here,” announced the head of an institution of higher learning,

for all of those who are gone, for all 33. We are here for the 32 who have passed from the immediate to another place, not by their own choice. We are also here for the one who has also passed. We are one.

For an academic president to have equated thirty-two of his fellow humans with their murderer in an orgy of “one-ness” was probably the stupidest thing that happened last week, but not by a very wide margin. Almost everybody in the country seems to have taken this non-event as permission to talk the starkest nonsense. And why not? Since the slaughter raised no real issues, it was a blank slate on which anyone could doodle. Try this, from the eighth straight day of breathless coverage in the New York Times. The person being quoted is the Reverend Susan Verbrugge of Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, addressing her congregation in an attempt, in the silly argot of the day, “to make sense of the senseless”:

Ms. Verbrugge recounted breaking through the previous week’s numbness as she stopped on a morning walk and found herself yelling at the mountains and at God. Though her shouts were initially met with silence, she said, she soon was reassured by the simplest of things, the chirping of birds.

“God was doing something about the world,” she said. “Starting with my own heart, I could see good.”

Yes, it’s always about you, isn’t it? (By the way, I’d watch that habit of yelling at mountains and God in the greater Blacksburg area if I were you. Some idiot might take it for a “warning sign.”) When piffle like this gets respectful treatment from the media, we can guess that it’s not because of the profundity of the emotion but rather because of its extreme shallowness. Those birds were singing just as loudly and just as sweetly when the bullets were finding their targets.

But the quest for greater “meaning” was unstoppable. Will Korean-Americans be “targeted”? (Thanks for putting the idea into the head of some nutcase, but really, what an insulting question!) Last week, I noticed from my window in Washington, D.C., that the Russian trade mission had lowered its flag. President Putin’s commercial envoys, too, want to be a part of it all: surely proof in itself of how utterly painless all this vicarious “pain” really is. (And now, what are they going to do for Boris Yeltsin?)

On Saturday night, I watched disgustedly as the president of the United States declined to give his speech to the White House Correspondents’ Dinner on the grounds that this was no time to be swapping jokes and satires. (What? No words of courage? No urging us to put on a brave face and go shopping or visit Disneyland?) Everyone in

the room knew that this was a dismal cop-out, but then everyone in the room also knew that our own profession was co-responsible. If the president actually had performed his annual duty, there were people in the press corps who would have affected shock and accused him of “insensitivity.” So, this was indeed a moment of unity—everyone united in mawkishness and sloppiness and false sentiment. From now on, any president who wants to duck the occasion need only employ a staffer on permanent weepy-watch. In any given week, there is sure to be some maimed orphan, or splattered home, or bus plunge, or bunch of pilgrims put to the sword. Best to be ready in advance to surrender all critical faculties and whip out the national hankie.

It was my friend Adolph Reed who first pointed out this tendency to what he called “vicarious identification.” At the time of the murder of Lisa Steinberg in New York in 1987, he was struck by the tendency of crowds to show up for funerals of people they didn’t know, often throwing teddy bears over the railings and in other ways showing that (as well as needing to get a life) they in some bizarre way seemed to need to get a death. The hysteria that followed a traffic accident in Paris involving a disco princess—surely the most hyped non-event of all time—seemed to suggest an even wider surrender to the overwhelming need to emote: The less at stake, the greater the grieving.

And surrender may be the keyword here. What, for instance, is this dismal rush to lower the national colors all the damned time? At times of real crisis and genuine emergency, such as the assault on our society that was mounted almost six years ago, some emotion could be pardoned. But even then, the signs of sickliness and foolishness were incipient (as in Billy Graham’s disgusting sermon at the National Cathedral where he spoke of the victims being “called into eternity”). If we did this every time, the flag would spend its entire time drooping. One should express a decent sympathy for the families and friends of the murdered, a decent sympathy that ought to be accompanied by a decent reticence. Because Virginia Tech—alas for poor humanity—was a calamity with no implications beyond itself. In the meantime, and in expectation of rather stiffer challenges to our composure, we might practice nailing the colors to the mast rather than engaging in a permanent dress rehearsal for masochism and the lachrymose.

(Slate, April 26, 2007)

A Very, Very Dirty Word

THE FOLLOWING ANECDOTE appears in one of Niall Ferguson’s absorbing studies of the British Empire. On the eve of independence for the colony of South Yemen, the last British governor hosted a dinner party attended by Denis Healey, then the minister for defense. Over the final sundown cocktail, as the flag was about to be lowered over the capital of Aden, the governor turned to Healey and said, “You know, Minister, I believe that in the long view of history, the British Empire will be

remembered only for two things.” What, Healey was interested to know, were these imperishable aspects? “The game of soccer. And the expression ‘fuck off.’ ”

This prediction, made almost forty years ago, now looks alarmingly prescient. Soccer enthusiasm is sweeping the globe, and both Senator John Kerry and Vice President Dick Cheney have resorted to the “fuck” word in the recent past—Kerry to say “fucked up” in connection with postwar planning in Iraq and Cheney to recommend that Senator Patrick Leahy go and attempt an anatomical impossibility. The latter advice received the signal honor of being printed in full, without asterisks, in the *Washington Post*, thus provoking some ombudsmanlike soul-searching on its own account by the paper’s editor, Len Downie.

At some media-pol event in Washington after the invasion of Afghanistan, I was told by an eyewitness that Al Franken attempted an ironic congratulation of Paul Wolfowitz, saying that Bush had won by using Clinton’s armed forces. “Fuck off,” was the considered riposte of the deputy defense secretary.

If things go on like this—which in a way I sometimes hope they do—we will reach the point where newspapers will report exchanges deadpan, like this:

“ ‘Fuck off,’ he shot back.”

“ ‘Fuck off,’ he suggested.”

“ ‘Fuck off,’ he opined.”

“ ‘Fuck off,’ he advised.”

“ ‘Fuck off,’ he averred.”

“ ‘Fuck off,’ he joked.”

Or even, “ ‘Fuck off,’ he quipped.”

The spreading of this tremendous rejoinder by means of the British Empire or its surrogates cannot be doubted. In London, older men of Greek Cypriot descent can be heard to say, as they rise from the card game or the restaurant table, “Thakono fuck off,” by which they mean, “I shall now take my leave”; or, “It really is high time that I returned to the bosom of my family”; or perhaps, phrased more tersely and in the modern vernacular, “I am out of here.”

A friend of mine was once a junior officer in Her Majesty’s forces in the Egyptian Suez Canal Zone. One of his duties was the procuring of fresh fruit for those under his command. On a certain morning, an Egyptian merchant called upon him and announced that he could furnish a regular supply of bananas. “Just the thing,” replied my friend, “that we are looking for.” The man then spoiled the whole effect by stating, in poor but unmistakable English, that of course in the event of an agreement Captain Lewis could expect 5 percent on top. Peter—I call him this because it is his name—thereupon became incensed. He stated that such a suggestion was an unpardonable one and added that he was sure he could find another banana merchant and that, whatever the case might be, such a banana supplier would emphatically not be the man who had just made such an outrageous proposition to a British serving officer. Sensing his own lapse in taste, the Egyptian made a courteous bow and replied with

perfect gravity: “Okay, effendi. I fuck off now.” It was plain that he had acquired his basic English from loitering around the barracks gate.

Let us not forget, in other words, the implied etiquette of the term. If shouted at a follower or supporter of another soccer team, in a moment of heat, it may connote “please go away” or even “go away in any case.” But if used of oneself—dare one say passively—it may simply express the settled determination to be elsewhere. (I once heard the late Sir Kingsley Amis, describing the end of an evening of revelry, saying, “So then—off I fucked.”)

“Fuck you” or “Go fuck yourself”—the popular American form—lacks this transitive/intransitive element to some degree. At points, it even seems to confuse the act of sexual intercourse with an act of aggression: a regrettable overlap to be sure. Anglo-Americanism in Iraq may turn out to be the crucible of this difference. I know from experience that older Iraqis, who remember the British period with mingled affection and resentment, are aware of the full declensions of the “fuck” verb. But to judge by their gestures, some of the younger Iraqis are a bit coarser. “Fuck off,” some of them seem to be yelling at coalition forces. A lot hinges on the appropriate military response. “Fuck you” might be risky. “Okay, off we fuck, then” might buy some valuable time.

(Slate, July 6, 2004)

Prisoner of Shelves

IN BRUCE CHATWIN’S NOVEL *UTZ*, the eponymous character becomes the captive of his porcelain collection—and eventually loses his life because he cannot move without it. From this book, I learned that a word actually exists—*Porzellankrankheit*—for the mania for porcelain acquisition. I also learned that the root of the word is the same as that for “pig,” because poured trays of molten porcelain looked so pink and fat and shiny.

I’m pretty sure of my facts here. And if I could only put my hands on the book, I could be absolutely sure. But is it shelved under U for *Utz*, or perhaps under C for Chatwin? Or is it in that unsorted pile on top of the radiator? Or the heap of volumes that migrated from the living room to the dining room? I am certain that I didn’t lend it to anyone: I am utterly miserly about letting any of my books out of my sight. Yet my books don’t seem to reciprocate by remaining within view, let alone within easy reach.

I live in a fairly spacious apartment in Washington, D.C. True, the apartment is also my office (though that’s no excuse for piling books on the stove). But for some reason, the available shelf space, which is considerable, continues to be outrun by the appearance of new books. It used to be such a pleasure to get one of those padded envelopes in the mail, containing a brand-new book with the publisher’s compliments. Now, as I collect my daily heap of these packages from my building’s concierge, I receive a pitying look.

It ought to be easy to deal with this excess, at least with the superfluous new arrivals: Give them away to friends or take them to a secondhand bookseller. But the thing is, you never know. Two new histories of the Crusades have appeared in the past year, for instance, and I already have several books on those momentous events. How often, really, do I need to mention the Crusades in a column or a review? Not that often—but then, it suddenly occurs to me, not that seldom either. Best be on the safe side. Should all these books sit on the same shelf? Or should they be indexed by author? (“Index” is good: It suggests that I have a system.) Currently, I pile the Crusades books near titles on the Middle East—an unsatisfactory arrangement, but I have no “History” section as such, because then I would have to decide whether to arrange it chronologically or geographically.

Bibliomania cripples my social life. In order to have a dinner party, I must clear all the so-far-unsorted books off the dining-room table. Either that, or invite half the originally planned number of people and just push the books temporarily down to one end of it. In the spring, my wife and I host the Vanity Fair party that follows the White House Correspondents’ Dinner, and this means that I can get professional help with rearranging the furniture and the books. This past year, the magazine’s omniscient social organizer, Sara Marks, gave me some ingenious vertical shelf units, allowing me to stack books on their sides. Alas, there wasn’t time before the festivities to sort these useful display units by author or subject, so I’ve only been able to alter the shape of my problem, not solve it.

The units also make it easier to read the titles on the spines and thus to suffer reproach for their randomness. And let’s say I did decide to organize these books: Should I start with A for Kingsley Amis? But wait, here’s a non-fiction work by Amis, on language. Shouldn’t it go on the reference shelf with the lexicons and dictionaries? And what about the new biography, and the correspondence between Kingsley and Philip Larkin?

Some kind friends argue for a cull, to create more space and to provide an incentive to organize. All right, but I can’t throw out a book that has been with me for any length of time and thus acquired sentimental value, or that has been written by a friend, or that has been signed or inscribed by its author. I also can’t part with one that might conceivably come in handy as a work of reference, however obscure. All of which provokes newfound sympathy for poor Kaspar Utz.

(City Journal, Winter 2008)

Acknowledgments

The thanking of friends and colleagues and co-conspirators ought to be the most enjoyable part of the completion of any work. However, the accumulation of decades of debt now forces a choice between the invidious and the ingratiating. To give their proper due to all whom I owe would now be impossible, resulting in one of those

catalogs, so redolent of the name-drop and the back-scratch, that burden so many books these days. I am therefore restricting myself to those with whom work and life have become seamless: the close comrades who have become co-workers and vice versa.

In more than three decades of knowing Steve Wasserman, he has been my editor for publishing houses and for magazines, my closest reader, and now my agent. To have a literary intellect as my man of business is a privilege: Our work together has constituted truly unalienated labor.

It is twenty years since Graydon Carter asked me to join his enterprise at Vanity Fair, on the promise that I would try to find all topics interesting and, in return for much travel and instruction and variety, would agree to take on any subject. Managing only to exempt competitive sports, I have tried to be true to this. Every time an essay of mine has reached the office, it has passed through the meticulous care of Aimee Bell, Walter Owen, and Peter Devine, who conceive their task as putting the highest possible finish on my drafts. (In Aimee's case, I have to call the attention "loving," in the hope that she will notice, and perhaps blush.)

At the Atlantic, David Bradley, Benjamin Schwarz, and James Bennett give me the unique chance to take regular notice of serious new books, and a wide latitude in which to operate my choices. Again, and with further thanks to Yvonne Rolzhausen, there follows an effort to make the printed result the superior in tone of the original version.

It was a fair day that brought me close to Jake Weisberg, David Plotz, and June Thomas at Slate magazine, who suggested that the need to unburden a weekly polemic or feuilleton could be painlessly met by a column called "Fighting Words." Can there be any writer in America who has had three regular outlets as perfectly synchronous and complementary as these?

This book is the third of mine to be brought to you by Twelve: a house that exists to disprove rumors and alarms about the continued combination of serious publishing with flair and panache. The devoted individual attention received by each author and text is rightly the subject of widespread admiration and envy. Cary Goldstein, Colin Shepherd, and Bob Castillo have wrought invisible but palpable improvements in everything I have ever brought them.

Over a rather grueling past twelve months, those mentioned above have also been invaluable in helping me to stay alive, and to give me—it's not too much to say—persuasive reasons for doing so. This increases the bond, and makes it indissoluble. In that connection, while I cannot begin to thank everybody, I must mention Dr. Fred Smith of Bethesda, Maryland, Drs. James Cox and Jaffer Ajani of the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston (home of the world's most emancipating form of radiation); and Dr. Francis Collins of the National Institutes of Health. Without the persuasive powers of my exceptional wife, Carol Blue, I might well not have had the fortitude or the patience to enter some of these treatments, or to persist with them. That recognition and acknowledgment lies somewhere beyond gratitude: Any surrender to fatalism or despair would have been as rank a betrayal of what I hope to stand for as any capitulation to magical or wishful schemes would have been. Then not lastly

but at last to my tough, smart, brave, humorous children—Alexander, Sophia, and Antonia—who are a living marvel in themselves but who also represent all I can ever hope to claim by way of futurity.

About the Author

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS was born in 1949 in England and is a graduate of Balliol College at Oxford University. He is the father of three children and the author of more than twenty books and pamphlets, including collections of essays, criticism, and reportage. His book, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, was a finalist for the 2007 National Book Award and an international bestseller. His bestselling memoir, *Hitch-22*, was a finalist for the 2010 National Book Critics Circle Award for autobiography. A visiting professor of liberal studies at the New School in New York City, he has also been the I.F. Stone professor at the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California, Berkeley. He has been a columnist, literary critic, and contributing editor at *Vanity Fair*, *The Atlantic*, *Slate*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *The Nation*, *New Statesman*, *World Affairs*, *Free Inquiry*, among other publications.

HITCH-22

A MEMOIR

Christopher Hitchens

HITCH-22

Christopher Hitchens is a contributing editor to *Vanity Fair* and Visiting Professor in liberal studies at the New School in New York. He is the author of numerous books, including works on Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, George Orwell, Mother Theresa, Henry Kissinger and Bill and Hillary Clinton, as well as his international bestseller and National Book Award nominee, *god Is Not Great*.

ALSO BY CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS

Books

Hostage to History: Cyprus from the Ottomans to Kissinger

Blood, Class, and Empire: The Enduring Anglo-American Relationship

Imperial Spoils: The Curious Case of the Elgin Marbles

Why Orwell Matters

No One Left to Lie To: The Triangulations of William Jefferson Clinton

Letters to a Young Contrarian

The Trial of Henry Kissinger

Thomas Jefferson: Author of America

Thomas Paine's "Rights of Man": A Biography

god Is Not Great: The Case Against Religion

Pamphlets

Karl Marx and the Paris Commune

The Monarchy: A Critique of Britain's Favorite Fetish

The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice

A Long Short War: The Postponed Liberation of Iraq

Collected Eassys

Prepared for the Worst: Selected Essays and Minority Reports

For the Sake of Argument: Essays and Minority Reports

Unacknowledged Legislation: Writers in the Public Sphere

Love, Poverty, and War: Journeys and Essays

Collaborations

Vanity Fair's Hollywood (with Graydon Carter and David Friend)

James Callaghan: The Road to Number Ten (with Peter Kellner)

Blaming the Victims (edited with Edward Said)

When the Borders Bleed: The Struggle of the Kurds (photographs by Ed Kashi)

International Territory: The United Nations (photographs by Adam Bartos)

The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Nonbeliever (edited)

For James Fenton

Caute

I can claim copyright only in myself, and occasionally in those who are either dead or have written about the same events, or who have a decent expectation of anonymity, or who are such appalling public shits that they have forfeited their right to bitch.

For those I have loved, or who have been so lenient and gracious as to have loved me, I have not words enough here, and I remember with gratitude how they have made me speechless in return.

Contents

- Foreword
- Prologue with Premonitions
- Yvonne
- The Commander
- Fragments from an Education
- Cambridge
- The Sixties: Revolution in the Revolution
- Chris or Christopher?
- Havana versus Prague
- The Fenton Factor
- Martin
- Portugal to Poland
- A Second Identity: On Becoming an (Anglo) American
- Changing Places
- Salman
- Mesopotamia from Both Sides
- Something of Myself
- Thinking Thrice about the Jewish Question . . .
- Edward Said in Light and Shade (and Saul)
- Decline, Mutation, or Metamorphosis?
- Acknowledgments

- Index

The desires of the heart are as crooked as corkscrews
Not to be born is the best for man
The second best is a formal order
The dance's pattern, dance while you can.
Dance, dance, for the figure is easy
The tune is catching and will not stop
Dance till the stars come down with the rafters
Dance, dance, dance till you drop.

W.H. Auden, "Death's Echo"

We are going to die, and that makes us the lucky ones. Most people are never going to die because they are never going to be born. The potential people who could have been here in my place but who will in fact never see the light of day outnumber the sand grains of the Sahara. Certainly those unborn ghosts include greater poets than Keats, scientists greater than Newton. We know this because the set of possible people allowed by our DNA so massively outnumbers the set of actual people. In the teeth of these stupefying odds it is you and I, in our ordinariness, that are here.

Richard Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow*

Ah, words are poor receipts for what time hath stole away . . .

John Clare, "Remembrances"

Foreword

“Do not aspire to immortal life but exhaust the limits of the possible.”

— Pindar Pythian III

I hope it will not seem presumptuous to assume that anybody likely to have got as far as acquiring this paperback re-edition of my memoir will know that it was written by someone who, without appreciating it at the time, had become seriously and perhaps mortally ill.

In any case, I believe that it might strike some readers (as it now very forcibly strikes the author) that the first three chapters, as well as many of the ensuing passages, show a strong preoccupation with impending death, or with deaths in my family. To some extent this is natural and proper in any work of autobiography. I took on the job of writing it when I was approaching and crossing the small but noticeable frontier of my sixth decade: a time when one has begun to notice the names of contemporaries on the obituary pages. When the book was published, I had just turned sixty-one. I am writing this at a moment when, according to my doctors, I cannot be certain of celebrating another birthday.

On the other hand, so to say, and thanks to the brilliance and skill of these same physicians, I could hope to live for several more years and even to find them enjoyable and profitable. How different is this, in the last analysis, from the life I was living before? One always knows that there is a term-limit to the lifespan, just as one always knows that illness or accident or incapacity, physical and mental, are never more than a single breath away.

To take this up in narrative form, and to resume the story regardless, I had been becoming aware, as the book neared completion, that I was becoming increasingly easily tired. Once or twice, people who had seen me on television wrote to express concern about my appearance. But I invariably recuperated from exhaustion without much trouble, and all my routine medical examinations found me in exceptional health for someone of my age. In any case my life is my work, and vice versa, and I have always arranged it so as to be deliberately overstretched. I positively enjoyed traveling to writing assignments or speaking engagements, on the average of about once a week, while meeting a series of columnar deadlines. And I never lacked for friends or company, and continued to seek out both voraciously. Like the man in the old story, I sometimes laughed that if I'd known I was going to live this long I would have taken better care of myself. Stories about my Bohemian “life-style” have been exaggerated, as I go on to discuss in these pages, but perhaps not by all that much. I had evolved a very productive and, to me, satisfying regime. If some of it depended a bit on cocktails and

late nights of reading or argument or even (in the course of writing this book) a lapse back into the smoking habit, I thought the wager was worth it.

Thus was my state of relative insouciance until the spring of 2010, when I received the advance schedule of the upcoming publicity tour for this book. It was to be a brilliant and lavish thing, extending from Australia to Britain to the United States and Canada. I take no stock in precognition (it's very obvious to me now that my body was trying to tell me something) but merely set down the fact that I read through the schedule and quite calmly thought: "I shall never get to the end of it." Mentally, I was preparing myself to take several months "off" (something I have never wanted before) and book a serious appointment with a doctor. The tour began well but my system soon asserted itself: I was felled first in New York, where I learned that I should seek a cancer biopsy, and then – having had the biopsy and deciding to keep as many engagements as possible while I waited for the result – in Boston. My dear friend Cary Goldstein, who was with me on both occasions, is the reason why these paragraphs can be written. Ever since, I have lived from one chemotherapy application to another and, in some periods, from one painkiller to the next, while awaiting the possibility of a treatment that is specific to my own genes and my own malignancy. (I suffer from Stage Four esophageal cancer. There is no Stage Five.)

A continuous theme in *Hitch-22* is the requirement, exacted by a life of repeated contradictions, to keep two sets of books. My present condition intensifies this rather than otherwise. I am forced to make simultaneous preparations to die, and to go on living. Lawyers in the morning, as I once put it, and doctors in the afternoon. One of the happier dimensions of my life, that of travel, has been foreclosed to me: a great misery. But I have found that I still possess the will to write, as well as the indispensable thing for any writer, the avid need to read. Even when attenuated by the shorter amount of time that I am conscious during each day, and circumscribed by the thought of an eventual loss of consciousness altogether, this is only a little less than I used to be quietly grateful for: the ability to earn a living by doing the two things that mean most to me.

Another element of my memoir – the stupendous importance of love, friendship, and solidarity – has been made immensely more vivid to me by recent experience. I can't hope to convey the full effect of the embraces and avowals, but I can perhaps offer a crumb of counsel. If there is anybody known to you who might benefit from a letter or a visit, do not on any account postpone the writing or the making of it. The difference made will almost certainly be more than you have calculated.

The cause of my life has been that of combating superstition, which among other things means confronting the dreads upon which it feeds. For some inexplicable reason, our culture regards it as normal, even creditable, for the godly to admonish those who they believe to be expiring. A whole tawdry edifice – of fabricated "deathbed conversions" and moist devotional literature – has arisen on this highly questionable assumption. Though I could have chosen to take offense (at being silkily invited to jettison my convictions when in extremis: what an insult and what a non-sequitur too)

I was actually grateful for the heavy attention I received from the faithful. It gave my atheism, if you like, a new lease on life. It also helped me keep open a long debate to which I am proud to have contributed a little. To say that this debate will outlast me would have been true at any time.

Instead of attending “prayer breakfasts” in my own honor on what was actually designated on the Web as “Pray for Hitchens Day,” I have spent much of the past year registering myself as an experimental subject for various clinical trials and “protocols,” mainly genome-based and aimed at enlarging human knowledge and at shrinking the area of darkness and terror where cancer holds dominion. My aim here is obviously not quite disinterested, but many of the experiments are at a stage where any result will be too far in the future to be of help to me. In this book I cite Horace Mann’s injunction: “Until you have done something for humanity you should be ashamed to die.” So this is a modest and slight response to his challenge, to be sure, but my own. The irruption of death into my life has enabled me to express a trifle more concretely my contempt for the false consolation of religion, and belief in the centrality of science and reason.

Not all my views have been vindicated, even to me. I see that I write that “I personally want to ‘do’ death in the active and not the passive, and to be there to look it in the eye and be doing something when it comes for me.” I cannot quite sustain this jauntiness in light of what I now know. Should the best efforts of my physician friends be unavailing, I possess a fairly clear idea of how Stage Four esophageal cancer harvests its victims. The terminal process doesn’t allow for much in the way of “activity,” or even of composed farewells let alone Stoic or Socratic departures. This is why I am so grateful to have had, already, a lucid interval of some length, and to have filled it with the same elements, of friendship and love, and literature and the dialectic, with which I hope some of this book is also animated. I wasn’t born to do any of the things I set down here, but I was born to die and this coda must be my attempt to assimilate the narrative to its conclusion.

Christopher Hitchens

Washington, D.C., January 20, 2011

Prologue with Premonitions

What can the England of 1940 have in common with the England of 1840? But then, what have you in common with the child of five whose photograph your mother keeps on the mantelpiece? Nothing, except that you happen to be the same person.

— George Orwell: “England Your England: Socialism and the English Genius” [1941]

Read your own obituary notice; they say you live longer. Gives you second wind. New lease of life.

— Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*

BEFORE ME IS a handsome edition of *Face to Face*, the smart magazine that goes out to the supporters of London’s National Portrait Gallery. It contains the usual notices of future events and exhibitions. The page that has caught and held my eye is the one which calls attention to a show that starts on 10 January 2009, titled “Martin Amis and Friends.” The event is to feature the work of a gifted photographer named Angela Gorgas, who was Martin’s lover between 1977 and 1979. On the page is a photograph taken in Paris in 1979. It shows, from left to right, myself and James Fenton and Martin, ranged along a balustrade that overlooks the city of Paris. I remember the occasion well: it was after a decent lunch somewhere in Montmartre and we would have been looking over Angela’s shapely shoulders at the horrible wedding-cake architecture of Sacre Coeur. (Perhaps this explains the faintly dyspeptic expression on my features.) In the accompanying prose, apparently written by Angela, is the following sentence about the time she first met the bewitching young Amis:

Martin was literary editor of the *New Statesman*, working with the late Christopher Hitchens and Julian Barnes, who was married to Pat Kavanagh, Martin’s then literary agent.

So there it is in cold print, the plain unadorned phrase that will one day become unarguably true. It is not given to everyone to read of his own death, let alone when announced in passing in such a matter-of-fact way. As I write, in the dying months of the year 2008, having just received this reminder-note from the future, that future still contains the opening of the exhibition and the publication of this memoir. But the exhibition, and its catalogue references, also exemplify still-vital elements of my past. And now, rather abruptly:

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act

Falls the Shadow.

T.S. Eliot's "Hollow Men" do not constitute my cohort, or so I hope, even though one might sometimes wish to be among the stoics "who have crossed, with direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom." The fact is that all attempts to imagine one's own extinction are futile by definition. One can only picture the banal aspects of this event: not in my case the mourners at the funeral (again excluded by the very rules of the game itself) but the steady thunk of emails into my inbox on the day of my demise, and the way in which my terrestrial mailbox will also become congested, until somebody does something to arrest the robotic electronic stupidity, or until failure to pay up leads to an abrupt cancellation of the bills and checks and solicitations, none of them ever in my lifetime arriving in the right proportions on the right day. (May it be that I gain a lifetime subscription to Face to Face, and that this goes on forever, or do I mean to say for all eternity?)

The director of the National Portrait Gallery, the excellent Sandy Nairne, has written me an anguished letter in which he not only apologizes for having me killed off but tries to offer both explanation and restitution. "The display," he writes, "also includes a photograph of Pat Kavanagh with Kingsley Amis. A last minute change was made to the text, and instead of it reading 'the late Pat Kavanagh' it refers to yourself."

This kindly meant missive makes things more poignant and more eerie rather than less. I have just opened a letter from Pat Kavanagh's husband, Julian Barnes, in which he thanks me for my note of condolence on her sudden death from cancer of the brain. I had also congratulated him on the vast critical success of his recent meditation on death, sardonically titled *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, which constituted an extended reflection on that "undiscover'd country." In my letter to Julian, I praised his balance of contrast between Lucretius, who said that since you won't know you are dead you need not fear the condition of death, and Philip Larkin, who observes in his imperishable "Aubade" that this is exactly the thing about the postmortem condition that actually does, and must, make one afraid (emphasis mine):

The sure extinction that we travel to
And shall be lost in always.
Not to be here, Not to be anywhere,
And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true . . .
And specious stuff that says no rational being
Can fear a thing it will not feel, not seeing
That this is what we fear . . .

So it is at once a small thing and a big thing that I should have earned those transposed words "the late," which had belonged editorially to Julian's adored wife and then became accidentally adhered to myself. When I first formed the idea of writing some memoirs, I had the customary reservations about the whole conception being perhaps "too soon." Nothing dissolves this fusion of false modesty and natural reticence more swiftly than the blunt realization that the project could become, at any moment, ruled out of the question as having been undertaken too "late."

But we are all “dead men on leave,” as Eugene Levine said at his trial in Munich for being a revolutionary after the counter-revolution of 1919. There are still those, often in India for some reason, who make a living claiming land-rents from the deceased. From Gogol to Google; if one now looks up the sodality of those who have lived to read of their own demise, one strikes across the relatively good cheer of Mark Twain, who famously declared the report to be an exaggeration, to Ernest Hemingway, whose biographer tells us that he read the obituaries every morning with a glass of champagne (eventually wearing out the cheery novelty of this and unshipping his shotgun), to the black nationalist Marcus Garvey who, according to some reports, was felled by a stroke while reading his own death-notice. Robert Graves lived robustly for almost seven decades after being declared dead on the Somme. Bob Hope was twice pronounced deceased by the news media: on the second occasion I was called by some network to confirm or deny the report and now wish I had not so jauntily said, having just glimpsed him at the British embassy in Washington, that the last time I saw him he had certainly seemed dead enough. Paul McCartney, Pope John Paul, Harold Pinter, Gabriel García Márquez . . . the roll of honor and embarrassment persists but there is one striking instance that is more than whimsical. Alfred Nobel, celebrated manufacturer of explosives, is alleged to have been so upset by the “merchant of death” emphasis that followed mistaken reports of his own extinction that he decided to over-compensate and to endow an award for peace and for services to humanity (that, I would add, has been a huge bore and fraud ever since). “Until you have done something for humanity,” said the great American educator Horace Mann, “you should be ashamed to die.” Well, how is one to stand that test?

In some ways, the photograph of me with Martin and James is of “the late Christopher Hitchens.” At any rate, it is of someone else, or someone who doesn’t really exist in the same corporeal form. The cells and molecules of my body and brain have replaced themselves and diminished (respectively). The relatively slender young man with an eye to the future has metamorphosed into a rather stout person who is ruefully but resignedly aware that every day represents more and more subtracted from less and less. As I write these words, I am exactly twice the age of the boy in the frame. The occasional pleasure of advancing years — that of looking back and reflecting upon how far one has come — is swiftly modified by the immediately succeeding thought of how relatively little time there is left to run. I always knew I was born into a losing struggle but I now “know” this in a more objective and more subjective way than I did then. When that shutter clicked in Paris I was working and hoping for the overthrow of capitalism. As I sat down to set this down, having done somewhat better out of capitalism than I had ever expected to do, the financial markets had just crashed on almost the precise day on which I became fifty-nine and one-half years of age, and thus eligible to make use of my Wall Street-managed “retirement fund.” My old Marxism came back to me as I contemplated the “dead labor” that had been hoarded in that account, saw it being squandered in a victory for finance capital over industrial capital, noticed the ancient dichotomy between use value and exchange value, and saw again the victory

of those monopolists who “make” money over those who only have the power to earn it. It was decidedly interesting to have become actuarially extinct in the last quarter of the very same year that saw me “written off” in the more aesthetic and literary sense as well.

I now possess another photograph from that same visit to Paris, and it proves to be even more of a Proustian prompter. Taken by Martin Amis, it shows me standing with the ravissant Angela, outside a patisserie that seems to be quite close to the Rue Mouffetard, praise for which appears on the first page of *A Moveable Feast*. (Or could it be that that box of confections in my hand contains a madeleine?) Again, the person shown is no longer myself. And until a short while ago I would not have been able to notice this, but I now see very clearly what my wife discerns as soon as I show it to her. “You look,” she exclaims, “just like your daughter.” And so I do, or rather, to be fair, so now does she look like me, at least as I was then. The very next observation is again more evident to the observer than it is to me. “What you really look,” she says, after a pause, “is Jewish.” And so in some ways I am—even though the concept of a Jewish “look” makes me bridle a bit—as I shall be explaining. (I shall also be explaining why it was that the boy in the frame did not know of his Jewish provenance.) All this, too, is an intimation of mortality, because nothing reminds one of impending extinction more than the growth of one’s children, for whom room must be made, and who are in fact one’s only hint of even a tincture of a hope of immortality.

And yet here I still am, and resolved to trudge on. Of the many once handsome and beautiful visages in the catalogue a distressing number belong to former friends (the marvelous illustrator and cartoonist Mark Boxer, the charming but fragile Amschel Rothschild, the lovable socialite and wastrel — and half-brother to Princess Diana — Adam Shand-Kydd) who died well before they attained my present age. Of some other departures, the news had not yet reached me. “I had not thought death had undone so many.” In my career, I have managed to undertake almost every task that the hack journalist can be asked to perform, from being an amateur foreign correspondent to acting as stand-in cinema critic, to knocking out pieces of polemical editorial against the clock. Yet perhaps I have misused the word “undertake” above, because two jobs only I could not manage: covering a sporting event and writing an obituary of a still-living person. The former failing is because I neither know nor care anything about sports, and the second is because — in spite of my firm conviction that I am not superstitious — I cannot, not even for ready money, write about the demise of a friend or colleague until Minerva’s owl has taken wing, and I know that the darkness has actually come. I dare say that somebody, somewhere, has already written my provisional death-notice. (Stephen Spender was staying with W.H. Auden when the latter received an invitation from the Times asking him to write Spender’s obituary. He told him as much at the breakfast table, asking roguishly, “Should you like anything said?” Spender judged that this would not be the moment to tell Auden that he had already written his obituary for the same editor at the same paper.) Various death-watch desk managers at various times entreated me to do the same for Edward Said

and Norman Mailer and Gore Vidal — to drop some names that will recur if you stay with me — and I always had to decline. Yet now you find me, trying to build my own bridge from, if not the middle of the river, at least some distance from the far side.

Today's newspaper brings news of the death of Edwin Shneidman, who spent all his life in the study and prevention of suicide. He referred to himself as a "thanatologist." The obituary, which is replete with the pseudo-irony so beloved by the near-moribund profession of daily print journalism, closes by saying: " 'Dying is the one thing — perhaps the only thing — in life that you don't have to do,' Shneidman once wrote. 'Stick around for long enough and it will be done for you.' " A more polished obituarist might have noticed the connection to a celebrated piece of doggerel by Kingsley Amis:

Death has this much to be said for it:

You don't have to get out of bed for it.

Wherever you happen to be

They bring it to you — free.

And yet I can't quite applaud this admirable fatalism. I personally want to "do" death in the active and not the passive, and to be there to look it in the eye and be doing something when it comes for me.

Surveying the list of all his friends as they were snatched up in turn by the reaper, the great Scottish bard William Dunbar wrote his "Lament for the Makers" in the early sixteenth century, and ended each stave of bereavement with the words *Timor Mortis conturbat me*. It's a near-liturgical refrain — "the fear of death distresses me" — and I would not trust anyone who had not felt something like it. Yet imagine how nauseating life would become, and how swiftly at that, if we were told that there would be no end to it . . . For one thing, I should have no incentive to write down these remembrances. They will include some account of the several times that I could already have been dead, and very nearly was.

Mention of some of the earlier names above makes me wonder if, without having known it at the time, I have now become retrospectively part of a literary or intellectual "set." The answer seems to be yes, and so I promise to give some account of how it is that "sets" are neither deliberately formed nor made but, as Oscar Wilde said about the arrangement of screens, "simply occur."

Janus was the name given by the Romans to the tutelary deity who guarded the doorway and who thus had to face both ways. The doors of his temples were kept open in time of war, the time in which the ideas of contradiction and conflict are most naturally regnant. The most intense wars are civil wars, just as the most vivid and rending personal conflicts are internal ones, and what I hope to do now is give some idea of what it is like to fight on two fronts at once, to try and keep opposing ideas alive in the same mind, even occasionally to show two faces at the same time.

Yvonne

There is always a moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in

...

— Graham Greene: *The Power and the Glory*

Something I owe to the soil that grew —

More to the life that fed —

But most to Allah who gave me two

Separate sides to my head.

— Rudyard Kipling: *Kim*

IOF COURSE do not believe that it is “Allah” who determines these things. (Salman Rushdie, commenting on my book *god Is Not Great*, remarked rather mordantly that the chief problem with its title was a lack of economy: that it was in other words exactly one word too long.)

But whatever one’s ontology may be, it will always seem tempting to believe that everything must have a first cause or, if nothing quite as grand as that, at the very least a definite beginning. And on that point I have no vagueness or indecision. I do know a little of how I came to be in two minds. And this is how it begins with me:

I am standing on a ferry-boat that is crossing a lovely harbor. I have since learned many versions and variations of the word “blue,” but let’s say that a brilliant if slightly harsh sunshine illuminates a cerulean sky-vault and an azure sea and also limns the way in which these two textures collide and reflect. The resulting tinge of green is in lambent contrast with the darker vegetation on the hillsides and makes an almost blinding combination when, allied with those discrepant yet melding blues, it hits the white buildings that reach down to the edge of the water. As a flash of drama and beauty and seascape and landscape, it’s as good an inaugural memory as one could wish.

Since this little voyage is occurring in about 1952 and I have been born in 1949, I have no means of appreciating that this is the Grand Harbor at Valletta, the capital of the tiny island-state of Malta and one of the finest Baroque and Renaissance cities of Europe. A jewel set in the sea between Sicily and Libya, it has been for centuries a place of the two-edged sword between the Christian and Muslim worlds. Its population is so overwhelmingly Roman Catholic that there are, within the walled city, a great plethora of ornate churches, the cathedral being decorated by the murals of Caravaggio himself, that seductive votary of the higher wickedness. The island withstood one of the longest Turkish sieges in the history of “Christendom.” But the Maltese tongue is a dialect version of the Arabic spoken in the Maghreb and is the only Semitic

language to be written in a Latin script. If you happen to attend a Maltese Catholic church during Mass, you will see the priest raising the Communion Host and calling on “Allah,” because this after all is the local word for “god.” My first memory, in other words, is of a ragged and jagged, but nonetheless permeable and charming, frontier between two cultures and civilizations.

I am, at this stage, far too secure and confident to register anything of the kind. (If I speak a few phrases of Maltese, it is not with a view to becoming bilingual or multicultural but in order to address my priest-ridden nannies and the kitchen maids with their huge broods of children. This was the place where I first learned to see the picture of Catholicism as one of plump shepherds and lean sheep.)* Malta is effectively a British colony — its most heroic recent chapter the withstanding of a hysterical aerial bombardment by Hitler and Mussolini — and it has remained a solid possession of the Royal Navy, in which my father proudly serves, ever since the Napoleonic Wars. Much more to the immediate point, I am standing on the deck of this vessel in company with my mother, who holds my hand when I desire it and also lets me scamper off to explore if I insist.

So, all things being considered, not too shaky a start. I am well-dressed and well-fed, with a full head of hair and a slender waist, and operating in a context of startling architectural and natural beauty, and full of brio and self-confidence, and on a boat in the company of a beautiful woman who loves me.

I didn’t call her by this name at the time, but “Yvonne” is the echo with which I most piercingly and yearningly recall her memory to me. After all, it was her name, and it was what her friends called her, and my shell-like ear detected quite early on a difference between this and the various comfortable Nancys and Joans and Ethels and Marjories who — sterling types all — tended to be the spouses and helpmeets of my father’s brother-officers. Yvonne. A bit of class there: a bit of style. A touch or dash of garlic and olive and rosemary to sweeten the good old plain English loaf from which, the fact must be faced, I was also sliced. But more of this when I come to Commander Hitchens. I mustn’t pretend to remember more than I really do, but I am very aware that it makes a great difference to have had, in early life, a passionate lady in one’s own corner.

For example, noticing that I had skipped the baby-talk stage and gone straight to speaking in complete sentences (even if sometimes derivative ones such as, according to family legend, “Let’s all go and have a drink at the club”), she sat me down one day and produced an elementary phonetic reading-book, or what used to be known to the humble as “a speller.” This concerned the tedious adventures of a woodland elf or goblin called Lob-a-gob (his name helpfully subdivided in this way) but, by the time I was done with it, I was committed for life to having some sort of reading matter within reach at all times, and was always to be ahead of my class in reading-age.

By this period, however, our family had left Malta and been posted to the much more austere surroundings of Rosyth, another naval base on the east coast of Scotland. I think Malta may have been a sort of high point for Yvonne: all British people were

a cut above the rest in a semicolony and there was that club for cocktails and even the chance of some local “help.” Not that she longed to wallow in idleness but, having endured a girlhood of scarcity, slump, and then war, she couldn’t have minded a bit of color and Mediterranean dash and may well have felt she’d earned it. (On our way back from Malta we stopped for a few hours at Nice: her and my first taste of the Riviera. I remember how happy she looked.) The grayness and drabness of “married quarters” in drizzle-flogged Fifeshire must have hit her quite hard.

But she and my father had first been thrown together precisely because of drizzle and austerity, and the grim, grinding war against the Nazis. He, a career Navy man, had been based at Scapa Flow, the huge, cold-water sound in the Orkney Islands which helped establish and maintain British control over the North Sea. She was a volunteer in the Women’s Royal Naval Service or, in the parlance of the day, a “Wren.” (My most cherished photograph of her shows her in uniform.) After a short wartime courtship they had been married in early April 1945, not long before Adolf Hitler had shoved a gun into his own (apparently halitosis-reeking) mouth. One young and eager girl from a broken Jewish home in Liverpool, wed to one man twelve years her senior from a sternly united if somewhat repressed Baptist family in Portsmouth. Wartime was certainly full of such improvised unions, in which probably both at first counted themselves fortunate, but I know for a fact that while my father never stopped considering himself lucky, my mother soon ceased to do so. She also decided, for a reason that I believe I can guess, to engage in the not-so-small deception of not mentioning to anyone in the Hitchens family that she was of Jewish descent.

She herself had wanted to “pass” as English after noticing some slight unpleasantness being visited on my grandmother, who in the 1930s toiled in the millinery business. And Yvonne could pass, too, as a light brunette with hazel-ish eyes and (always to my fancy and imagination) a “French” aspect. But more to the point, I now feel sure, she did not want either me or my brother to be taxed with die Judenfrage — the Jewish question. What I do not know is quite what this concealment or reticence cost her. What I can tell you something about is what it meant for me.

The paradox was this: in postwar Britain as in Britain at all other times, there was only one tried and tested form of social mobility. The firstborn son (at least) had to be educated at a private school, with an eventual view to attending a decent university. But school fees were high, and the shoals of class and accent and social position somewhat difficult for first-timers to navigate. Neither of my parents had been to college. One of my earliest coherent memories is of sitting in my pajamas at the top of the stairs, eavesdropping on a domestic argument. It was an easy enough one to follow. Yvonne wanted me to go to a fee-paying school. My father — “The Commander” as we sometimes ironically and affectionately called him — made the heavy but obvious objection that it was well beyond our means. Yvonne was having none of this. “If there is going to be an upper class in this country,” she stated with decision, “then Christopher is going to be in it.” I may not have the words exactly right — could she have said “ruling class” or “Establishment,” terms that would then have

been opaque to me? — but the purport was very clear. And, from my hidden seat in the gallery, I silently applauded. Thus a further paradox discloses itself: my mother was much less British than my father but wanted above all for me to be an English gentleman. (You, dear reader, be the judge of how well that worked out.) And, though she wanted to keep me near, she needed to argue hotly for my sake that I be sent away.

I registered this contradiction very acutely as, alternating between the beams and smiles of maternal encouragement and the hot tears of separation, she escorted me to my boarding school at the age of eight. I shall always be slightly sorry that I didn't make more of an effort to pretend that I was desolated, too. I knew I would miss Yvonne but I suppose by then I'd had the essential experience of being loved without ever being spoiled. I was eager to get on with it. And at the school, which I had already visited as a prospective boarder, there could be found a library with shelves that seemed inexhaustible. There was nothing like that at our house, and Yvonne had taught me to love books. The cruelest thing I ever did, at the end of my first term away from home, was to come home for Christmas and address her as "Mrs. Hitchens." I shan't forget her shocked face. It was the enforced etiquette to address all females at the school, from masters' wives to staff, in this way. But I still suspect myself of having committed a mean little attention-getting subterfuge.

This perhaps helps explain the gradual diminution of my store of memory of Yvonne: from the ages of eight to eighteen I was to be away from home for most of the year and the crucial rites of passage, from the pains of sexual maturity to the acquisition of friends, enemies, and an education, took place outside the bonds of family. Nonetheless, I always somehow knew how she was, and could generally guess what I didn't know, or what was to be inferred from between the lines of her weekly letters.

My father was a very good man and a worthy and honest and hardworking one, but he bored her, as did much of the remainder of her life. "The one unforgivable sin," she used to say, "is to be boring." What she wanted was the metropolis, with cocktail parties and theater trips and smart friends and witty conversation, such as she had once had as a young thing in prewar Liverpool, where she'd lived near Penny Lane and briefly known people like the madly gay Frank Hauser, later director of the Oxford Playhouse, and been introduced by a boyfriend to the work of the handsome Ulster poet Louis MacNeice, contemporary of Auden and author of *Autumn Journal* and (her favorite) *The Earth Compels*. What she got instead was provincial life in a succession of small English towns and villages, first as a Navy wife and then as the wife of a man who, "let go" by the Navy after a lifetime of service, worked for the rest of his days in bit-part jobs as an accountant or "bursar." It is a terrible thing to feel sorry for one's mother or indeed father. And it's an additionally awful thing to feel this and to know the impotence of the adolescent to do anything at all about it. Worse still, perhaps, is the selfish consolation that it isn't really one's job to rear one's parents. Anyway, I knew that Yvonne felt that life was passing her by, and I knew that the money that could have given her the occasional glamorous holiday or trip to town was instead being spent (at her own insistence) on school fees for me and my brother, Peter (who

had arrived during our time in Malta), so I resolved at least to work extremely hard and be worthy of the sacrifice.

She didn't just sit there while I was away. She tried instead to become a force in the world of fashion. Perhaps answering the call of her milliner forebears, but at any rate determined not to succumb to the prevalent dowdiness of postwar Britain, she was forever involved in schemes for brightening the apparel of her friends and neighbors. "One thing I do have," she used to say with a slightly defensive tone, as if she lacked some other qualities, "is a bit of good taste." I personally thought she had the other qualities too: on those official holidays when parents would visit my boarding school and many boys almost expired in advance from the sheer dread of embarrassment, Yvonne never did, or wore, anything that I could later be teased about (and this was in the days when women still wore hats). She was invariably the prettiest and brightest of the mothers, and I could always kiss her gladly, right in front of everyone else, without any fear of mushiness, lipstick-stains, or other disasters. In those moments I would have dared anyone to tease me about her, and I was small for my age.

However, the dress-shop business didn't go well. If it wasn't for bad luck, in fact, Yvonne would have had no luck at all. With various friends and partners she tried to float a store called Pandora's Box, I remember, and another called Susannah Munday, named for an ancestress of ours on the paternal Hampshire side. These enterprises just didn't fly, and I couldn't think why not except that the local housewives were just too drab and myopic and penny-pinching. I used to love the idea of dropping by as I went shopping, so that she could show me off to her friends and have a general shriek and gossip over some coffee, but I could always tell that business wasn't good. With what a jolt of recognition did I read, years later, V.S. Naipaul's uncanny diagnosis of the situation in *The Enigma of Arrival*. He was writing about Salisbury, which was close enough to Portsmouth:

A shop might be just two or three minutes' walk from the market square, but could be off the main shopping track. Many little businesses failed — quickly, visibly. Especially pathetic were the shops that — not understanding that people with important shopping to do usually did it in London — aimed at style. How dismal those boutiques and women's dress shops quickly became, the hysteria of their owners showing in their windows!

I might want to quarrel with the choice of the word "hysteria," but if you substituted "quiet desperation," you might not be far off. Even years later, when the term "struggle" had become for me almost synonymous with the words "liberation" or "working class," I never forgot that the *petit bourgeois* knew about struggling, too.

I am speaking of the time of my adolescence. As the fact of this development became inescapably evident (in the early fall of 1964, according to my best memory) and as it came time to go back to school again, my mother took me for a memorable drive along Portsmouth Harbor. I think I had an idea of what was coming when I scrambled into the seat alongside her. There had been a few fatuous and bungled attempts at "facts of life" chats from my repressed and awkward schoolmasters (and some hair-raising

speculations from some of my more advanced schoolmates: I myself being what was euphemistically called “a late developer”), and I somehow knew that my father would very emphatically not want to undertake any gruff moment of manly heart-to-heart with his firstborn — as indeed my mother confirmed by way of explanation for what she was herself about to say. In the next few moments, guiding the Hillman smoothly along the road, she managed with near-magical deftness and lightness to convey the idea that, if you felt strongly enough about somebody and learned to take their desires, too, into account, the resulting mutuality and reciprocity would be much more than merely worthwhile. I don’t know quite how she managed this, and I still marvel at the way that she both recognized and transcended my innocence, but the outcome was a deep peace and satisfaction that I can yet feel (and, on some especially good subsequent occasions, have been able to call clearly to my mind).

She never liked any of my girlfriends, ever, but her criticisms were sometimes quite pointed (“Honestly darling, she’s madly sweet and everything but she does look a bit like a pit-pony.”) yet she never made me think that she was one of those mothers who can’t surrender their sons to another female. She was so little of a Jewish mother, indeed, that she didn’t even allow me to know about her ancestry: something that I do very slightly hold against her. She wasn’t overprotective, she let me roam and hitchhike about the place from quite a young age, she yearned only for me to improve my education (aha!), she had two books of finely bound poetry apart from the MacNeice (Rupert Brooke, and Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury*), which I will die to save even if my house burns down; she drove me all the way to Stratford for the Shakespeare anniversary in 1966 and on the wintry day later that year that I was accepted by Balliol College, Oxford, I absolutely knew that she felt at least some of the sacrifice and tedium and weariness of the years had been worthwhile. In fact, that night at a fairly rare slap-up dinner “out” is almost the only family celebration of unalloyed joy that (perhaps because it was mainly if not indeed exclusively about me) I can ever recall.

It pains me to say that last thing, but the truth is that I can remember many nice country walks and even one epic game of golf with my father, and many good times with my brother, Peter, as well, and more moments with Yvonne than I can possibly tell about here. But like many families we didn’t always succeed in managing as a “unit.” It was better if there were guests, or other relatives, or at least a pet animal to which we could all address ourselves. I’ll close this reflection with a memory that I cannot omit.

We had been for a family holiday — I think it may have been the last one we all had together — on the Devonshire coast at the John Betjeman-style resort of Budleigh Salterton. I hadn’t thought it had been too tense by Hitchens standards, but on the last day my father announced that the men of the family would be going home by train. Yvonne, it seemed, wanted a bit of time to herself and was going to take the car and get home by easy and leisurely stages. I found I approved of this idea: I could see her cruising agreeably along in the roadster, smoking the odd cigarette in that

careless and carefree way she had, stopping as and when it pleased her, falling into casual and witty conversation at some of the better hostelrys along the roads. Why on earth not? She was way overdue for a bit of sophistication and refinement and a few days of damn-the-expense indulgence.

She was home the next day, with her neck in a brace, having been painfully rear-ended by some idiot before she had even properly embarked on the treat that was rightfully hers. My father silently and efficiently took charge of all the boring insurance and repair details, while Yvonne looked, for the first time I had ever seen her, deflated and defeated. I have never before or since felt so utterly sorry for anybody, or so powerless to assist, or so uneasy about the future, or so unable to say why I was so uneasy. To this day, I can't easily stand to hear the Danny Williams version of her favorite "Moon River," because it captures the sort of pining note that is the more painful for being inchoate. While shifting scenery at the Oxford Playhouse not long afterward (for one of the first wage-packets I ever earned) I saw a production of *The Cherry Orchard* from the wings — a good point of vantage for a Chekhov play, incidentally — and felt a pang of vicarious identification with the women who would never quite make it to the bright lights of the big city, and who couldn't even count on the survival of their provincial idyll, either. Oh Yvonne, if there was any justice you should have had the opportunity to enjoy at least one of these, if not both.

She soon afterward gave me a black-tie dinner jacket as a present to take to Oxford, being sure that I'd need formal wear for all the Union debates and other high-toned events at which I would doubtless be starring. I did actually don this garment a few times, but by the middle of 1968 Yvonne had become mainly used to reading about my getting arrested while wearing jeans and donkey jacket and carrying some insurgent flag. I have to say that she didn't complain as much as she might have done ("though I do rather hate it, darling, when my friends ring up and pretend that they are so sorry to see you on TV in that way"). Her politics had always been liberal and humanitarian, and she had a great abhorrence of any sort of cruelty or bullying: she fondly thought that my commitments were mainly to the underdog. For my father's flinty and adamant Toryism she had little sympathy. (I do remember her once asking me why it was that so many professional revolutionaries were childless: a question which seemed beside the point at the time but has recurred to me occasionally since.) Unless the police actually came to the house with a warrant — which they did, once, after I had been arrested again while still on bail for a previous offense — she barely uttered a moan. And I, well, I was impatient to outgrow my family and fly the nest, and in the vacations from Oxford as well as after I graduated and moved impatiently and ambitiously to London, I didn't go home any more than I had to.

Even after all these years I find I can hardly bear to criticize Yvonne, but there was something about which I could and did tease her. She had a slight — actually a definite — weakness for "New Age" and faddish and cultish attractions. When I was a boy it was Gayelord Hauser's "Look Younger, Live Longer" regimen: a smirking charmer's catch-penny diet-book that enthralled about half the lower-middle-class women we

knew. As time progressed, it was the bogus refulgences of Kahlil Gibran and the sickly tautologies of *The Prophet*. As I say, she could take some raillery about this from me, at least when it was about unwanted poundage or unreadable verses. But (and this is very often the awful fate of the one who teases) I did not realize how much unhappiness was involved, and I did not remotely appreciate how much damage had been done, until it was far too late. Allow me to relate this to you as it unfolded itself to me.

Going back to Oxford one day, and after I had moved to London and had begun working at the *New Statesman*, I was striding down the High Street and ran straight into Yvonne just outside The Queen's College. We embraced at once. As I unclasped her, I noticed a man standing shyly to one side, and evidently carrying her shopping-parcels. We were introduced. I proposed stepping into the Queen's Lane coffee house. I don't remember how it went: I was in Oxford to keep some pressing political and sexual engagements that seemed important at the time. The man seemed nice enough, if a bit wispy, and had an engaging grin. He was called Timothy Bryan, which I also remember thinking was a wispy name. I felt no premonition.

But next time I saw her, my mother was very anxious to know what I thought of him. I said, becoming dimly but eventually alert, that he seemed fine. Did I really, really think so? I suddenly understood that I was being asked to approve of something. And it all came out in a rush: Yvonne had met him on a little holiday she'd managed to take in Athens, he seemed to understand her perfectly, he was a poet and a dreamer, she had already decided to break it all to my father "The Commander" and was going to live with Mr. Bryan. The main thing I remember thinking, as the sun angled across our old second-floor family apartment, was "Please don't tell me that you waited until Peter and I were old enough." She added, at that moment, with perfect sincerity, that she'd waited until my brother and I were old enough. It was also at about that time — throwing all caution, as they say, to the winds — that she told me she had had an abortion, both before my own birth, and after it. The one after I could bring myself to think of with equanimity, or at least some measure of equanimity, whereas the one before felt a bit too much like a close shave or a near-miss, in respect of moi.

This was the laid-back early 1970s and I had neither the wish nor the ability to be "judgmental." Yvonne was the only member of my family with whom I could discuss sex and love in any case. I was then informed that she and Timothy had another thing in common. He had once been an ordained minister of the Church of England (at the famous church of St.-Martin-in-the-Fields, off Trafalgar Square, as I later discovered) but had seen through organized religion. Both he and she were now devotees of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi: the sinister windbag who had brought enlightenment to the Beatles in the summer of love. I had to boggle a bit at this capitulation to such a palpable fraud — "Have you given The Perfect Master any money? Has he given you a secret mantra to intone?" — but when the answer to the second question turned out to be a sincere and shy "yes," I forgave her in a burst of laughter in which she (with a slight reserve, I thought) nonetheless joined.

It was arranged that Yvonne and the ex-Rev would come to dine with me in London. Feeling more loyal to my mother than disloyal to my father, I took the happy couple to my favorite Bengali restaurant, The Ganges in Gerrard Street. This was the heart of my culinary leftist Soho, and I knew that the management would be warmly hospitable to any guests of mine. All went well enough, and I could also affect to be cutting a bit of a figure in my novice years as a scribbler in the capital. A hint of Bloomsbury and Fitzrovia and Soho was, I knew, just the sort of spice that Yvonne would appreciate. I dropped an author's name or two . . . ordered that second carafe with a lazy flick of the hand, paid the bill carelessly and wondered how I would conceal it on my expense account the next day. The former priest Mr. Bryan was not a bad conversationalist, with a fondness for poetry and the quotation of same. Outside in the street, importuned by gypsy taxi drivers, I used the word "fuck" for the first time in my mother's presence, and felt her both bridling a bit and shrugging amusedly at the inevitability of it. At any rate, I could tell that she was happy to be in the metropolis, and happy, too, that I liked her new man well enough. And I still have a rather sharp pang whenever I come to that corner of Shaftesbury Avenue where I kissed her goodbye, because she had been absolutely everything to me in her way and because I was never ever going to see her again.

I think that I must have talked to her after that, though, because the curry supper had been in the early fall of 1973 and she telephoned me in London (and this is certainly the last time that I was to hear her voice) at around the time of what some people call the Yom Kippur War and some the Ramadan War, which was in October of that year. This call was for the purpose of advising me that she intended to move to Israel. I completely misinterpreted this as another quasi-spiritual impulse ("Oh, Mummy, honestly": I did still sometimes call her "Mummy") and my impatience earned me a short lecture about how the Jews had made the desert bloom and were exerting themselves in a heroic manner. We were perhaps both at fault: I ought to have been less mocking and dismissive and she might have decided that now if ever was the moment to tell me what she'd been holding back about our ancestral ties. Anyway, I counseled her against removing herself to a war zone, let alone taking someone else's bleeding holy land, on top of her other troubles, and though I didn't know it, we bid farewell. I would give a very great deal to be able to start that conversation over again.

For my father to call was almost unheard-of: his taciturnity was renowned and the telephone was considered an expense in those days. But call he did, and not that many days later, and came to the point with his customary dispatch. "Do you happen to know where your mother is?" I said "no" with complete honesty, and then felt that slightly sickened feeling that comes when you realize that you are simply but politely not believed. (Perhaps this emotion was the late residue of my own recent complicity with Yvonne and Timothy, but my father did sound distinctly skeptical of my truthful answer.) "Well," he went on evenly enough, "I haven't seen or heard from her in days, and her passport isn't where it usually is." I forget quite how we left it, but I shall never forget how we resumed that conversation.

What it is to be twenty-four, and fairly new to London, and cutting your first little swath through town. I'd had a few Fleet Street and television jobs and gigs, and had just been hired by one of the best-known literary-political weeklies in the English-speaking world, and was lying in bed one morning with a wonderful new girlfriend when the telephone rang to disclose, as I lifted the receiver, the voice of an old girlfriend. Bizarrely, or so it seemed to my pampered and disordered senses, she asked me the very same question that my father had recently asked. Did I know where my mother was? I have never quite known how to ask forgiveness, but now I wish I had been able to repress the irritable thought that I was getting just a bit too grown-up for this line of inquiry.

Melissa in any case was as brisk and tender as I would have wanted to be if our situations had been reversed. Had I listened to that morning's BBC news? No. Well, there was a short report about a woman with my surname having been found murdered in Athens. I felt everything in me somehow flying out between my toes. What? Perhaps no need to panic, said Melissa sweetly. Had I seen that morning's London Times? No. Well, there was another brief print report about the same event. But listen, would there have been a man involved? Would this woman called Hitchens (not that common a name, I dully thought) have been traveling with anybody? Yes, I said, and gave the probable or presumable name. "Oh dear, then I'm very sorry but it probably is your mum."

So the rather diffident and wispy ex-Reverend Bryan, so recently my guest at dinner, had bloodily murdered my mother and then taken his own life. Beneath that scanty exterior had lain a raving psycho. That was what all the reports agreed in saying. In some hotel in Athens, the couple had been found dead separately but together, in adjoining rooms. For my father, who was the next person to ring me, this was especially and particularly devastating. He was not far short of his sixty-fifth birthday. He had also had to reconcile himself to the loss of his adored wife's affection, in a day when divorce was still considered scandalous, and had reluctantly agreed that she would spend much of her private time at the house of another man. But at the respectable boys' prep school where he kept the books, and in the surrounding society of North Oxford, the two of them had had a pact. If invited to a sherry party or a dinner, they would still show up together as if nothing had happened. Now, and on the front pages at that, everything was made known at once, and to everybody. I do not know how he bore the shock, but there was no question of his coming to Athens, and I myself, in any case, was already on my way there and honestly preferred to face it alone.

This lacerating, howling moment in my life was not the first time that the private and the political had intersected, but it was by some distance the most vivid. For many people in my generation, the seizure of power in Greece by militaristic fascists in April 1967 had been one of the definitive moments in what we were retrospectively to call "the Sixties." That a Western European country — the stock phrase "cradle of democracy" was seldom omitted — could have been hijacked by a dictatorship of dark glasses and torturers and steel helmets and yet remain within NATO: the whole idea

made a vulgar satire of the Cold War propaganda about any “free world.” I had spoken at the Oxford Union alongside Helen Vlachos, the heroic publisher of the Athens daily paper *Kathimerini*, which had closed and padlocked its doors rather than submit to censorship. I had taken part in protests outside the Greek embassy, and passed out numberless leaflets echoing Byron’s line “that Greece might yet be free.” And then, almost as my mother lay dying, the Athens junta had in fact been overthrown — but only from the extreme right, so that its replacement was even more vicious than its predecessor. Thus it was that when I first saw the city of Pericles and Phidias and Sophocles, its main square was congested with dirty-gray American-supplied tanks, and its wine-dark sea at Phaleron Bay and Sounion full of the sleek shapes of the U.S. Sixth Fleet.

The atmosphere of that week at the end of November 1973 is instantly accessible to me, and in an almost minute-by-minute way. I can remember seeing the students yelling defiance from behind the wrecked gates of the rebellious Athens Polytechnic, after the broad-daylight and undisguised massacre of the unarmed anti-junta protestors. I can remember meeting friends with bullet wounds that they dared not take to the hospital. I recall, too, a party in a poor student’s crummy upstairs apartment, where those present made the odd gesture of singing “The Internationale” almost under their breath, lest they attract the attention of the ever-prowling secret police. My old notebook still contains the testimony of torture victims, with their phone numbers written backward in my clumsy attempt to protect them if my notes were seized. It was one of my first forays into the world of the death squad and the underground and the republics of fear.

With Yvonne lying cold? You are quite right to ask. But it turns out, as I have found in other ways and in other places, that the separation between personal and public is not so neat. On arrival in Athens, I had of course gone directly to meet the coroner in my mother’s case. His name was Dimitrios Kapsaskis. It rang a distinct bell. This was the man who had, without wishing to do so, taken a starring part in that greatest of all Sixties movies, *Z*. In this filmic-political masterpiece by Constantine Costa-Gavras, Kapsaskis testified that the hero Gregory Lambrakis had broken his skull accidentally in a fall, rather than having had it smashed by a secret-police operative. Sitting opposite this shabby official villain and trying to talk objectively about my mother while knowing what was happening to my friends outside on the street was an education of a kind.

It was the same when I had to go to the local police station for other formalities. Captain Nicholas Balaskas faced me across a desk in a forbidding office on Lekkas Street which displayed the blazing phoenix: the compulsory logo and insignia of the dictatorship. At the British embassy, which was then run by a genial old diplomat whose son had been with me at Balliol, I had to sit through a lunch where a reactionary creep of a Labour MP named Francis Noel-Baker gave a lecture about the virtues of the junta and (the first but not the last time I was ever to hear these two arguments in

combination) both denied that it tortured its prisoners while asserting that it would be quite justified if it did do so!

I then had a strange moment of shared mourning, which helped remind me of what I obviously already “knew”: namely that my own bereavement was nothing unique. In a run-down restaurant near Syntagma Square I endured a melancholy lunch with Chester Kallman. This once-golden boy, who W.H. Auden had feared might be “the wrong blond” when they first met in 1939, had since been the life-partner and verse-collaborator of the great poet, the source of much of his misery as well as much of his bliss, and the dedicatee of some especially fervent and consecrated poems. He was fifty-two and looked seventy, with an almost grannyish trembling and protruding lower lip and a quivering hand that spilled his avgolemono soup down his already well-encrusted shirtfront. Difficult to picture him as the boy who had once so insouciantly compared himself to Carole Lombard. I had only a few weeks previously gone to Christ Church Cathedral in Oxford to attend Auden’s memorial. My dear friend James Fenton, who had been a protégé of Auden’s and a sometime guest at the Auden-Kallman home in Kirchstetten, had just won the Eric Gregory Award for poetry and decided to invest the prize money in an intrepid voyage to Vietnam that was to yield its own poetic harvest, so I had gone back to Oxford in part to represent him in his absence, as well as to witness a gathering of poets and writers and literary figures, from Stephen Spender to Charles Monteith (discoverer of *Lord of the Flies*), who were unlikely ever to gather in one place again. Kallman, who had about two years left to live, was not especially desirous of hearing about any of this. “I do not wish,” he said slurringly, “to be thought of as Wystan’s relict.” Uncharitably perhaps, and even though I knew he had done some original work of his own, I wondered if he seriously expected to be much or long remembered in any other way.

Even this minor moment of pathos was inflected with politics. Kallman had done his level best over the years to seduce the entire rank-and-file of the Hellenic armed forces and had once been threatened with arrest and deportation by a certain Brigadier Tsoumbas. (“Soom-bass”: I can still hear his knell-like pronunciation of the dreaded name.) The recent swerve from the extreme right to the even more extreme fascist right was threatening to bring the vile Tsoumbas into high office, and Chester was apprehensive and querulous, with his own safety naturally enough uppermost in mind.

I was going through all of these motions while I awaited a bureaucratic verdict of which I was already fairly sure. My mother had not been murdered. She had, with her lover, contracted a pact of suicide. She took an overdose of sleeping pills, perhaps washed down with a mouthful or two of alcohol, while he — whose need to die must have been very great — took an overdose with booze also and, to make assurance doubly sure, slashed himself in a hot bath. I shall never be sure what depth of misery had made this outcome seem to her the sole recourse: on the hotel’s switchboard record were several attempted calls to my number in London which the operator had failed to connect. Who knows what might have changed if Yvonne could have heard my voice even in her extremity? I might have said something to cheer or even tease

her: something to set against her despair and perhaps give her a momentary purchase against the death wish.

A second-to-last piece of wretchedness almost completes this episode. Whenever I hear the dull word “closure,” I am made to realize that I, at least, will never achieve it. This is because the Athens police made me look at a photograph of Yvonne as she had been discovered. I will tell you nothing about this except that the scene was decent and peaceful but that she was off the bed and on the floor, and that the bedside telephone had been dislodged from its cradle. It’s impossible to “read” this bit of forensics with certainty, but I shall always have to wonder if she had briefly regained consciousness, or perhaps even belatedly regretted her choice, and tried at the very last to stay alive.

At all events, this is how it ends. I am eventually escorted to the hotel suite where it had all happened. The two bodies had had to be removed, and their coffins sealed, before I could get there. This was for the dismally sordid reason that the dead couple had taken a while to be discovered. The pain of this is so piercing and exquisite, and the scenery of the two rooms so nasty and so tawdry, that I hide my tears and my nausea by pretending to seek some air at the window. And there, for the first time, I receive a shattering, full-on view of the Acropolis. For a moment, and like the Berlin Wall and other celebrated vistas when glimpsed for the first time, it almost resembles some remembered postcard of itself. But then it becomes utterly authentic and unique. That temple really must be the Parthenon, and almost near enough to stretch out and touch. The room behind me is full of death and darkness and depression, but suddenly here again and fully present is the flash and dazzle and brilliance of the green, blue, and white of the life-giving Mediterranean air and light that lent me my first hope and confidence. I only wish I could have been clutching my mother’s hand for this, too.

Yvonne, then, was the exotic and the sunlit when I could easily have had a boyhood of stern and dutiful English gray. She was the cream in the coffee, the gin in the Campari, the offer of wine or champagne instead of beer, the laugh in the face of bores and purse-mouths and skinflints, the insurance against bigots and prudes. Her defeat and despair were also mine for a long time, but I have reason to know that she wanted me to withstand the woe, and when I once heard myself telling someone that she had allowed me “a second identity” I quickly checked myself and thought, no, perhaps with luck she had represented my first and truest one.

A Coda on the Question of Self-slaughter

I have intermittently sunk myself, over the course of the past four decades or so, into dismal attempts to imagine or think or “feel” myself into my mother’s state of mind as she decided that the remainder of her life would simply not be worth living. There is a considerable literature on the subject, which I have made an effort to scrutinize, but all of it has seemed to me too portentous and general and sociological to be of much help. Suicide-writing in our time, moreover, has mainly been produced long after the act itself ceased to be regarded as ipso facto immoral or as deserving an extra round of postmortem pain and punishment in the afterlife. I was myself rather astounded, when dealing with the Anglican chaplain at the Protestant cemetery in Athens (which

was the only resting place consistent with her wishes), to find that this epoch had not quite ended. The sheep-faced Reverend didn't really want to perform his office at all. He muttered a bit about the difficulty of suicides being interred in consecrated ground, and he may have had something to say about my mother having been taken in adultery . . . At any rate I shoved some money in his direction and he became sulkily compliant as the priesthood generally does. It was fortunate for him, though, that I couldn't feel any more dislike and contempt for him and for his sickly religion than I already did. If I had been a red-blooded Protestant of any conviction, he would soon enough have found out what a boot felt like when it was planted in his withered backside. (On my way out, through the surrounding Greek Orthodox precincts, I paused to place some red carnations on the huge pile of tribute that surmounted the grave of the great George Seferis, national poet of the Greeks and foe of all superstitions, whose 1971 funeral had been the occasion for a silent mass demonstration against the junta.)

To an extraordinary degree, modern suicide-writing takes its point of departure from the death of Sylvia Plath. When I myself first read *The Bell Jar*, the phrase of hers that most arrested me was the one with which she described her father's hometown. Otto Plath had originated in Grabow, a dull spot in what used to be called "the Polish corridor." His angst-infected daughter had described this place as "some manic-depressive hamlet in the black heart of Prussia." Her poem "Daddy" must be the strictest verdict passed by a daughter on a male parent since the last reunion of the House of Atreus, with its especially unsettling opinion that, as a result of paternal illuse: "Every woman loves a fascist . . . the boot in the face."*

My mother's ancestors did in fact come from a small and ultimately rather distraught small town in German-Polish Prussia, and her father had given her mother a truly ghastly time before dematerializing in the fog of war, but Yvonne was not one of those who, having had ill done to her, did "ill in return." She hoped, rather, that it would fall to her to shield others from such pain. I myself don't think, striking though the image may be, that an entire "hamlet" can be manic-depressive. However, I can forgive la Plath her possibly subconscious metaphor because most of what I know about manic depression I first learned from Hamlet.

"I have, of late," the Prince of Denmark tells us, "but wherefore I know not — lost all my mirth." Everyone living has occasionally experienced that feeling, but the lines that accompany it are the best definition of the blues that was ever set down. ("Tired of living, scared of dying" is the next-best encapsulation, offered in "Old Man River.") Who would carry on with the unending tedium and potential misery if they did not think that extinction would be even less desirable or — as it is phrased in another of Hamlet's mood-swing soliloquies — if "the ever-lasting" had "not set his canon 'gainst self-slaughter"?

There are fourteen suicides in eight works of Shakespeare, according to Giles Romilly Fedden's study of the question, and these include the deliberate and ostensibly noble ones of Romeo and Juliet and of Othello. It's of interest that only Hamlet's darling Ophelia, whose death at her own hands is not strictly intentional, is the object of

condemnation by the clergy. My own indifference to religion and refusal to credit any babble about an afterlife has, alas, denied me the hearty satisfaction experienced by Ophelia's brother Laertes, who whirls on the moralizing cleric to say:

I tell thee, churlish priest,
A ministering angel shall my sister be,
When thou liest howling.

Memorable to be sure, but too dependent on the evil and stupidity of the heaven/hell dualism, and of scant use to me in deciding how it was that a thoughtful, loving, cheerful person like Yvonne, who was in reasonable health, would want to simply give up. I thought it might have something to do with what the specialists call "anhedonia," or the sudden inability to derive pleasure from anything, most especially from the pleasurable. Al Alvarez, in his very testing and demanding study of the subject, *The Savage God*, returns often to the suicide of Cesare Pavese, who took his own life at the apparent height of his powers. "In the year before he died he turned out two of his best novels . . . One month before the end he received the Strega Prize, the supreme accolade for an Italian writer. 'I have never been so much alive as now,' he wrote, 'never so young.' A few days later he was dead. Perhaps the sweetness itself of his creative powers made his innate depression all the harder to bear."

This is almost exactly what William Styron once told me in a greasy diner in Hartford, Connecticut, about a golden moment in Paris when he had been waiting to be given a large cash prize, an emblazoned ribbon and medal of literary achievement and a handsome dinner to which all his friends had been bidden. "I looked longingly across the lobby at the street. And I mean longingly. I thought, if I could just hurl myself through those heavy revolving doors I might get myself under the wheels of that merciful bus. And then the agony could stop."*

But my poor Yvonne had never suffered from an excess of reward and recognition, of the kind that sometimes does make honest people feel ashamed or even unworthy. However, what she had done was to fall in love, as she had pined so long to do, and then find out that it was fractionally too late for that. In theory she had everything she might have desired — a charming man who adored her; an interval in which her boys were grown and she need not guard a nest; a prospect of leisure and a non-vengeful husband. Many English married women of her class and time would have considered themselves fortunate. But in practice she was on the verge of menopause, had exchanged a dutiful and thrifty and devoted husband for an improvident and volatile man, and then discovered that what "volatile" really meant was . . . manic depression. She may not have needed or wanted to die, but she needed and wanted someone who did need and did want to die. This is beyond anhedonia.

Examples like hers are also outside the scope of Emile Durkheim's sweeping account of the place of self-slaughter in alienated and deracinated and impersonal societies. I have always admired Durkheim for pointing out that the Jewish people invented their own religion (as opposed to the preposterous and totalitarian view that it was the other way about) but his categorization of suicide doesn't include the Yvonne-sized

niche that I have so long been trying to identify and locate. He classified the act under the three headings of the egoistic, the altruistic, and the anomic.

The “egoistic” is misleadingly titled, because it really refers to suicide as a reaction to social fragmentation or atomization: to periods when old certainties or solidarities are decomposing and people feel panic and insecurity and loneliness. (Thus, a corollary to it is the observable fact that suicide rates decline during wartime, when people rally round a flag and also see their own small miseries in better proportion.) The “altruistic” also has a wartime connotation, in that it signifies the willingness to lay down one’s life for the good of the larger collective, or conceivably even the smaller collective such as the family or — Captain Oates on Scott’s doomed expedition — the group. Of this phenomenon, Albert Camus provided a nice *précis* by saying: “What is called a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying.” Alvarez extends Durkheim’s tropes to include religious and tribal fanaticism, such as the kamikaze pilots or those Hindus who were ecstatically willing to hurl themselves under the wheels of the divinely powered Juggernaut. The “anomic” suicide, finally, is the outcome of a sudden and jarring change in the person’s social position. “A searing divorce or a death in the family” are among the examples Alvarez gives as typical.

It’s of interest that this taxonomy appears to say nothing about the so-called suicidal “type.” From experience I should say that there is, perhaps, such a type, and that it can be dangerously frivolous to say that attempted suicides are only crying for “help.” I have known several who, after some apparently half-hearted “bid,” or even bids, made a decisive end of themselves. But Yvonne was by no imaginable measure the “type.” She abhorred self-pity and suspected anything that was too ostentatious or demonstrative. However, she had fallen in with someone who very probably was bipolar or in other ways the “type,” and she had certainly undergone the wrenching and jarring and abrupt loss of social position and security (and respectability) that had always been of such importance to her. Couple this with the gnawing fear that she was losing her looks . . . anyway, for me a searing marital separation had indirectly led to “a death in the family.”

Durkheim’s categories seem almost too grandiose to take account of her suicide (how we all would like our deaths to possess a touch of meaning). The egoistic doesn’t really cover it at all; nor did the altruistic when I first read about it; and “anomie” to my Marxist ear used to be what mere individuals had instead of what, with a better understanding of their class position, they would have recognized as alienation. Yvonne’s was “anomic,” then, but with a hint of the altruistic also. Of the two notes that she left, one (which, pardon me, I do not mean to quote) was to me. The other was to whoever had to shoulder the responsibility of finding her, or rather them. I was quite undone by the latter note as well: it essentially apologized for the mess and inconvenience. Oh Mummy, so like you. In her private communication she gave the impression of believing that this was best for all concerned, and that it was in some way a small sacrifice from which those who adored her would benefit in the long run. She was wrong there.

For the anomic, Cesare Pavese almost certainly provided the best text by observing drily enough that “no one ever lacks a good reason for suicide.” And Alvarez furnishes self-slaughterers with the kindest epitaph by writing that, in making death into a conscious choice: “Some kind of minimal freedom — the freedom to die in one’s own way and in one’s own time — has been salvaged from the wreck of all those unwanted necessities.”

I once spoke at a memorial meeting for an altruistic suicide: the Czech student Jan Palach, who set himself on fire in Wenceslas Square in Prague to defy the Russian invaders of his country. But since then I have had every chance to become sickened by the very idea of “martyrdom.” The same monotheistic religions that condemn suicide by individuals have a tendency to exalt and overpraise self-destruction by those who kill themselves (and others) with a hymn or a prayer on their lips. Alvarez, like almost every other author, gets “Masada” wrong: he says that “hundreds of Jews put themselves to death” there “rather than submit to the Roman legions.” In fact, religious fanatics who had been expelled even by other Jewish communities first murdered their own families and then drew lots for the exalted duty of murdering one another. Only the very last ones had to settle for killing themselves.

So, divided in mind once more, I often want to agree with Saul Bellow’s Augie March who, when rebuked by his elders and enjoined to conform and to “accept the data of experience,” replies: “it can never be right to offer to die, and if that’s what the data of experience tell you, then you must get along without them.” Yet my next subject is a man who for a long time braved death for a living and would have been perfectly willing to offer to die in a cause that he considered to be (and that was) larger than himself.

* Everything about Christianity is contained in the pathetic image of “the flock.”

* The feminist school has often looked in a manner of marked disapproval at her husband, Ted Hughes. I find it difficult to imagine him actually maltreating Sylvia physically, but there’s no doubt that he could be quite stupendously wanting in sensitivity. I once went for some drinks with him at the apartment of my friend and editor Ben Sonnenberg, who was by then almost completely immobilized by multiple sclerosis. Hughes droned on for an agonizingly long time about the powers of a faith-healer in the (perhaps somewhat manic-depressive) Devonshire hamlet where he lived. This shaman, it seemed, was beyond praise for his ability with crippled people. On and on went the encomium. I could not meet Ben’s eye but from his wheelchair he eventually asked with commendable lightness: “How is he with sufferers from MS?” “Oh, not bad at all,” replied Hughes, before blithely resuming with an account of how this quack could cure disabled farm-animals as well.

* At this diner we were served by a pimply and stringy-haired youth of appallingly dank demeanor. Bringing back Bill’s credit card he remarked that it bore a name that was almost the same as that of a famous writer. Bill said nothing. Tonelessly, the youth went on: “He’s called William Stryon.” I left this up to Bill, who again held off until the kid matter-of-factly said, “Anyway, that guy’s book saved my life.” At this point

Styron invited him to sit down, and he was eventually persuaded that he was at the same table as the author of *Darkness Visible*. It was like a transformation scene: he told us brokenly of how he'd sought and found the needful help. "Does this happen to you a lot?" I later asked Styron. "Oh, all the time. I even get the police calling up to ask if I'll come on the line and talk to the man who's threatening to jump."

The Commander

He loved me tenderly and shyly from a distance, and later on took a naïve pride in seeing my name in print.

— Arthur Koestler: *Arrow in the Blue*

I heard the news today, Oh Boy.

The English army had just won the war.

— The Beatles: Sergeant Pepper: “A Day in the Life”

AN ANCIENT PIECE of Judaic commentary holds that the liver is the organ that best represents the relationship between parents and child: it is the heaviest of all the viscera and accordingly the most appropriate bit of one’s guts. Only two of the six hundred and thirteen Jewish commandments, or prohibitions, offer any reward for compliance and both are parental: the first is in the original Decalogue when those who “honor thy father and thy mother” are assured that this will increase their days in the promised or stolen Canaanite land that is about to be given them, and the second involves some convoluted piece of quasi-reasoning whereby a bird’s egg can be taken by a hungry Jew as long as the poor mother bird isn’t there to witness the depredation. How to discern whether it’s a mother or father bird is not confided by the sages.

Commander Eric Ernest Hitchens of the Royal Navy (my middle name is Eric and I have sometimes idly wondered how things might have been different if either of us had been called Ernest) was a man of relatively few words, would have had little patience for Talmudic convolutions, and was not one of those whom nature had designed to be a nest-builder. But his liver — to borrow a phrase from Gore Vidal — was “that of a hero,” and I must have inherited from him my fondness, if not my tolerance, for strong waters. I can remember perhaps three or four things of the rather laconic and diffident sort that he said to me. One — also biblically derived — was that my early socialist conviction was “founded on sand.” Another was that while one ought to beware of women with thin lips (this was the nearest we ever approached to a male-on-male conversation), those with widely spaced eyes were to be sought out and appreciated: excellent advice both times and no doubt dearly bought. Out of nowhere in particular, but on some unusually bleak West Country day he pronounced: “I sometimes think that the Gulf Stream is beginning to weaken,” thereby anticipating either the warming or else the cooling that seemingly awaits us all. When my firstborn child, his first grandson, arrived, I got a one-line card: “glad it’s a boy.” Perhaps you are by now getting an impression. But the remark that most summed him up was the flat statement that the war of 1939 to 1945 had been “the only time when I really felt I knew what I was doing.”

This, as I was made to appreciate while growing up myself, had actually been the testament of a British generation. Born in the early years of the century, afflicted by slump and Depression after the First World War in which their fathers had fought, then flung back into combat against German imperialism in their maturity, starting to get married and to have children in the bleak austerity that succeeded victory in 1945, they all wondered quite where the years of their youth and strength had gone, and saw only more decades of struggle and hardship still to come before the exigencies of retirement. As Bertie Wooster once phrased it, they experienced some difficulty in detecting the bluebird.

It could have been worse. My father's father, the stern Alfred Ernest Hitchens, was a mirthless Calvinist patriarch who took a dim view of everything from music to television. The old man's forebears hailed from the backlands of Thomas Hardy's Wessex and perhaps even farther west — Hitchens being in its origin a Cornish name — and my brother possesses ancestral birth and marriage certificates that are "signed" with an "X" by the peasants who were most probably recruited into Portsmouth to help build the historic dockyards.

Portsmouth. The true home port of the Royal Navy, and nicknamed "Pompey" (as is its soccer team) by those locals for whom no other town will do. It is one of the world's most astonishing natural harbors, rivaling even Valletta in the way that it commands the Channel approaches to the Atlantic and the North Sea, and it looms over the French coast while sheltering in the lee of the Isle of Wight, which the conquering Romans once named Vectis. The last place that Horatio Nelson set foot on dry land, and to this moment the home of his flagship the Victory. The birthplace of Charles Dickens and the home of Rudyard Kipling and Arthur Conan Doyle. Here I drew my first squalling breath on 13 April 1949, and here my male ancestors embarked time and again to slip down the Channel and do the King's enemies a bit of no good. My grandfather had been a ranker in the army in India, and was to the end of his days only softened in his general puritan harshness by his warm affection for that country, expressed in a collection of Benares brasses that competed for space in his home with the biographies of forgotten missionaries.

I still have an oil painting, almost my only family heirloom, which depicts a blue-eyed, rosy-cheeked ten-year-old boy in a white collar and blue bowtied suit. This promising lad is looking into the distance and arguably being instructed to think of his country's destiny. In my own youth, I was made to stand next to this frame while older relatives remarked on the distinct resemblance I bore to "Great-Uncle Harry." The boy in the frame was indeed my great-uncle, acting as the model for an exhibition called "Young England" in 1900. Fifteen years later his cruiser was shattered and sunk at the Battle of Jutland ("There seems to be something wrong with our bloody ships today," as Admiral Beatty commented on seeing yet another vessel burst its boilers and go sky-high) yet he survived in the bitter North Sea waters and is said to have saved the shivering Maltese mess-steward while quietly letting the barbills sink unpaid to the bottom.

I don't quite remember how old I was before I met anybody who wasn't concerned with the Navy, or at least with some branch of the armed forces of which ours was always "The Senior Service." I was christened on a submarine, urinating freely as the reverend made me the first Hitchens to eschew Baptism and Judaism and become a member of the more middle-class Church of England. I came to understand the difference between a destroyer and a cruiser and a corvette, and could tell someone's rank by the number of gold rings worn on the sleeve. When we moved to Malta, it was for the Navy. When we migrated to Scotland, it was to the base at Rosyth, quite near the Dunfermline birthplace of Admiral Cochrane, liberator of Chile and model for Patrick O'Brian's Jack Aubrey. When we were transferred again to Plymouth, I went to a boys' boarding school in the Devonshire town of Tavistock, birthplace of Sir Francis Drake. Every dormitory at the school was named for an admiral who had vanquished England's (and later Great Britain's) enemies at sea.

I have mentioned the disagreement between my mother and father as to whether they could afford that school, and I should now give another instance of the ways in which they did not think alike. We were living in the Dartmoor village of Crapstone, a name for which I didn't much care because it could get me roughed up at school. ("Where did you say you lived, Hitchens?") In due time we moved away, but to a village in Sussex called Funtington, which somehow was still not quite the improvement for which I had been quietly hoping.

At all events, at the age of about nine I was listening to a bit of gossip about one of our next-door neighbors, a Marine officer of lugubrious aspect and mien, and his all-enduring wife. "Daphne was telling me," said my mother to my father about this man, "that his temper is so foul that she's taken to diluting his gin bottle with water when he's not looking." There was a significant pause. "If the woman is watering Nigel's bloody gin," said the Commander, "then I'm not surprised that he's always in a filthy temper." From this exchange I learned quite a lot about the different manner in which men and women, or at any rate married couples, can reason. I also added to my store of knowledge about the Commander's attitude to gin, which was a relatively devout one. Alcohol for me has been an aspect of my optimism: the mood caught by Charles Ryder in *Brideshead Revisited* when he discourses on aspects of the Bacchic and the Dionysian and claims that he at least chooses to drink "in the love of the moment, and the wish to prolong and enhance it." I dare say some people have seen me the worse for wear in less charming ways, but I know I have been true to the original as well. The Commander was not a happy drinker. He didn't actually drink all that much, but he imbibed regularly and determinedly, and it was a reinforcement to his pessimism and disappointment, both personal and political.

As I was beginning to say, my entire boyhood was overshadowed by two great subjects, one of them majestic and the other rather less so. The first was the recent (and terribly costly) victory of Britain over the forces of Nazism. The second was the ongoing (and consequent) evacuation by British forces of bases and colonies that we could no longer afford to maintain. This epic and its closure were inscribed in the very

scenery around me: Portsmouth and Plymouth had both been savagely blitzed and the scars were still palpable. The term “bomb-site” was a familiar one, used to describe a blackened gap in a street or the empty place where an office or pub used to stand. More than this, though, the drama was inscribed in the circumambient culture. Until I was about thirteen, I thought that all films and all television programs were about the Second World War, with a strong emphasis on the role played in that war by the Royal Navy. I saw Jack Hawkins with his binoculars on the icy bridge in *The Cruel Sea*: the movie version of a heart-stopping novel about the Battle of the Atlantic by Nicholas Monsarrat that by then I knew almost by heart. The Commander, who had seen action on his ship HMS Jamaica in almost every maritime theater from the Mediterranean to the Pacific, had had an especially arduous and bitter time, escorting convoys to Russia “over the hump” of Scandinavia to Murmansk and Archangel at a time when the Nazis controlled much of the coast and the air, and on the day after Christmas 1943 (“Boxing Day” as the English call it) proudly participating as the Jamaica pressed home for the kill and fired torpedoes through the hull of one of Hitler’s most dangerous warships, the *Scharnhorst*. Sending a Nazi convoy raider to the bottom is a better day’s work than any I have ever done, and every year on the anniversary the Commander would allow himself one extra tot of Christmas cheer, or possibly two, which nobody begrudged him. (To this day, I observe the occasion myself.)

But he would then become glum, because he had most decidedly not taken the King’s Commission in order to end up running guns to Joseph Stalin (he had loathed the morose, graceless reception he got when his ship docked under the gaze of the Red Navy) and because almost everything since that great Boxing Day had been headed downhill. The Empire and the Navy were being wound up fast, the colors were being struck from Malaya in the East to Cyprus and Malta nearer home, the Senior Service itself was being cut to the bone. When I was born in Portsmouth, my father was on board a ship called the *Warrior*, anchored in a harbor that had once seen scores of aircraft carriers and great gray battleships pass in review. In Malta there had still been a shimmer or scintilla of greatness to the Navy, but by the time I was old enough to take notice the Commander was putting on his uniform only to go to a “stone frigate”: a non-seagoing dockside office in Plymouth where they calculated things in ledgers. Every morning on the BBC until I was six I would hear the newscaster utter the name “Sir Winston Churchill,” who was then prime minister. There came the day when this stopped, and my childish ears received the strange name “Sir Anthony Eden,” who had finally succeeded the old lion. Within a year or so, Eden had tried to emulate Churchill by invading Egypt at Suez, and pretending that Britain could simultaneously do without the UN and the United States. International and American revenge was swift, and from then on the atmosphere can’t even be described as a “long, withdrawing roar,” since the tide of empire and dominion merely and sadly ebbed.

“We won the war — or did we?” This remark, often accompanied by a meaning and shooting glance and an air of significance, was a staple of conversation between my father and his rather few friends as the decanter went round. Later in life, I am

very sorry to say, it helped me to understand the “stab in the back” mentality that had infected so much of German opinion after 1918. You might call it the politics of resentment. These men had borne the heat and burden of the day, but now the only chatter in the press was of cheap and flashy success in commerce; now the colonies and bases were being mortgaged to the Americans (who, as we were invariably told, had come almost lethargically late to the struggle against the Axis); now there were ridiculous, posturing, self-inflated leaders like Kenyatta and Makarios and Nkrumah where only very recently the Union Jack had guaranteed prosperity under law. This grievance was very deeply felt but was also, except in the company of fellow sufferers, rather repressed. The worst thing the Navy did to the Commander was to retire him against his will sometime after Suez, and then and only then to raise the promised pay and pension of those officers who would later join up. This betrayal by the Admiralty was a never-ending source of upset and rancor: the more wartime service and action you had seen, the less of a pension you received. The Commander would write letters to Navy ministers and members of Parliament, and he even joined an association of “on the beach” ex-officers like himself. But one day when, tiring of his plaintiveness, I told him that nothing would change until he and his comrades marched in a phalanx to Buckingham Palace and handed back their uniforms and swords and scabbards and medals, he was quite shocked. “Oh,” he responded. “We couldn’t think of doing that.” Thus did I begin to see, or thought I began to see, how the British Conservatives kept the fierce, irrational loyalty of those whom they exploited. “He’s a Tory,” I was much later to hear of some dogged loyalist, “but he’s got nothing to be Tory about.” My thoughts immediately flew to my father, whose own devoted and brave loyalism had been estimated so cheaply by what I was by then calling the ruling class.

When I say that we didn’t hold much converse, I suppose that I should blame myself as well as him. But in some ways I don’t blame myself that much: at the age of ten or so I turned from the newspaper to ask him why the paratroopers from Algeria were threatening to occupy Paris and proclaim a military coup d’etat in mainland France. His typical two-word response — “Gallic temperament” — rather dried up my interest in pursuing the subject any further. But I disappointed him, too, I know. He would have liked me to be good at games and sports, as he was. I couldn’t even pretend to care about cricket or rugby or any of that. Convinced that I might want to earn my colors instead as some kind of Scout, he went to a huge amount of trouble to send me, at my prep school, miniature versions of complicated knots executed in string and pipe-cleaner and neatly diagrammed. Had I bothered to master these, I could have perhaps later made better headway with the nautico-literary descriptions of the vessels and ropes of Hornblower and Aubrey, and their halliards and bowlines and mainbraces (the most alarming of the latter being the “cuntsplICE,” demanded by Captain Aubrey from his boatswain in a heated moment, about which I could certainly never have asked Commander Hitchens).

He was quite a small man and, when he took off his uniform (or had it taken away from him) and went to work as a bookkeeper, looked very slightly shrunken. For as long

as he could, he took jobs that kept him near the sea, especially near the Hampshire-Sussex coast. He would work for a boatbuilder here, a speedboat-manufacturer there. We finally drifted inland, nearer to the center of my mother's beloved Oxford, where there was a boys' prep school that needed an accountant, and he seized the chance to acquire a dog. I hadn't realized until then quite how much he preferred the predictability and loyalty of animals to the vagaries and frailties of human beings. Late in life the landlords of the apartment building where he lived were to tell him that he couldn't keep his red-setter/retriever mix, a lovely animal named Becket. The now-beached Commander couldn't afford to move house again, so instead of protesting, he meekly gave the dog away. But not before mooting with me a plan to establish Becket somewhere else, "so that I could go and visit him from time to time." Again I had the experience of a moment of piercing pity, of the sort I could only now imagine feeling for a child of mine whom it was beyond my power to help.

I do have a heroic memory of him from my boyhood, and it happens to concern water. We were at a swimming-pool party, held at the local golf and country club that was almost but not quite out of our social orbit, when I heard a splash and saw the Commander fully clothed in the shallow end, pipe still clamped in his mouth. I remember hoping that he had not fallen in, in front of all these people, because of the gin. Then I saw that he was holding a little girl in his arms. She had been drowning, quietly, just outside her depth, until someone had squealed an alarm and my father had been the speediest man to act. I remember two things about the aftermath. The first was the Commander's "no fuss; anyone would have done it" attitude to those who slapped him on the back in admiration. That was absolutely in character, and to be expected. But the second was the glare of undisguised rage and hatred from the little girl's father, who should have been paying attention and who had instead been quaffing and laughing with his pals. That hateful look taught me a lot about human nature in a short time.

Otherwise I am rather barren of paternal recollections, and shall have to settle for the memory of a few walks, and for the strange cult of golf. Seafarer though he was, my father loved the downlands of Hampshire and Sussex and later Oxfordshire and could stride along with his trusty stick, pointing out here a steading and there a ridgeway. He was a Saxon in his own way, and still had the attitude, now almost extinct, that there had been such a thing as "the Norman yoke" imposed upon this ancient landscape and people. A favorite joke on his side of the family concerned the Hampshire yeoman in dispute with his squire. "I suppose you know," observes the squire loftily, "that my ancestors came over with William the Conqueror." "Yes," responds the yeoman. "We were waiting for you." (In an alternative version once offered by the rogue Marxist Welshman Raymond Williams, the yeoman tries to be witty and says: "Oh yes, and how are you liking it over here?") I mention this because a certain kind of British conservatism is quite closely connected with this folk memory of populism and ethnicity, and because it became important for me to comprehend this later on.

The golf game must have taken place when I was about thirteen. I had taken up the sport, and even got myself a few clubs, with the idea that I ought to have something in common with my reticent old man, who loved golf and treasured a pewter mug he had once won in a Navy tournament held on the deck of an aircraft carrier. My effort paid off, if only once. We had a round of nine holes that somehow went well for both of us, and then he treated me to a heavy “tea” in the clubhouse where, if nothing much got said, there was no tension or awkwardness, either. It was the closest I ever came, or felt, to him. There was a very soft and beautiful dusk, I remember, as we drove slowly and quietly home through the purple-and-yellow gorse of the moors.

Once I had left home for university and then for London, and once my mother had been taken from us, and once he had had to hear, and from his son at that, that Yvonne had not been murdered but had slain herself while distraught about another man, a very slight but definite coolness replaced the respectful distance that had developed between me and the Commander. More than anything, this chill consisted of a subject (the prior existence of his wife and my mother) that he simply would not and could not discuss with me. Over time, all the same, there was the occasional thaw. He disliked coming to London on principle and had enraged me when I was younger by refusing to take a job as the secretary of Brooks’s Club. (I could have been living in London — in Mayfair, for heaven’s sake — and when I was a teenager!) But I did once lure him to the detested city to see a musical (about Fats Waller, an uncharacteristic favorite of his, called *Your Feet’s Too Big*) and he once astonished me by asking, in the late 1970s, if I’d care to come with him to the reunion of his old shipmates. Turning up at some down-at-heel Navy veterans’ club on the appointed night, I was quick to realize that this late muster was almost certainly going to be the last one for the fine company that had once crewed the good ship *Jamaica*. But how brave and modest and honest and unassuming they were, these men who had bucketed through icy storms and every kind of peril in order to sweep Hitler from the seas. An oddly touching detail stays with me: instead of referring to my father as Eric or the Commander they all called him “Hitch,” which was what my close friends were beginning to call me.

At around this time I was starting to turn my thoughts and ambitions toward America, which the grizzled veteran showed no interest in visiting. In uniform at any rate, he had been everywhere from China to Chile to Cyprus to Ceylon, but the New World held no charms for him and at our infrequent meetings he never evinced any curiosity about the place. If he asked a question on another topic, it would be of the rhetorical kind: “Don’t you think Northern Ireland could do with a good stiff dose of martial law?” — almost as if force had never yet been tried in the black record of British rule in Ireland — and if he made a statement, there might very well be a rhetorical element there, too. (“If they build this bloody Channel Tunnel and join us to France,” he once said in what I’d call the classical statement of his worldview, “I shall never vote Conservative again.”) I sometimes used to wonder if he was saying these things for effect, or even because of the gin, but if challenged he would re-state

things even more decidedly: a tendency I have since come to notice and sometimes to deplore in myself.

He must have known that he had some kind of a Red for a son, but he seemed to manage to talk to me as if I still had elementary Saxon common sense, and I was very affected when I discovered that, by stealth, to his small circle of friends, he was giving Christmas gift subscriptions to my pinko magazine, the *New Statesman*. "Rather interesting piece by my son in that last issue . . . don't know if you noticed it." Did this make up for my failures as a sportsman? I doubt it, but then I had to ask myself if I had chosen the field of journalism to compensate for other shortcomings on the field of valor. On this point, too, he administered more of a shock to me than he can have intended. After I had returned from a visit to Lebanon in the mid-1970s, and a trip to the war zone in the south of that country that I had later written up for the magazine, I was sitting at my desk one afternoon when the telephone rang and it was the Commander. This occurrence was rare enough in itself to make me worry that something might be amiss. But he was calling to say that he had admired my article and, while I was still searching for the words in which to respond, he in effect doubled the stakes by saying that he thought it had been "rather brave" of me to go there. And then, as I grappled with that rather vertiginous development, he said goodbye and replaced the receiver. A man of few words, as I believe I have said.

At the time, I couldn't make any definite connection between my own visits to the places where he'd been stationed, from the South Atlantic to the Eastern Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean, and the Commander's earlier presence there. I myself could not picture how these one-time colonies must have looked when viewed through a massive ship's gunsight, or from the deck of a superbly engineered war-machine. In truth, when in Cyprus or in Palestine or southern Africa or elsewhere, I generally felt myself so much in sympathy with those who had resisted British rule that I thought it better for the Commander and myself to avoid the subject. If you had asked me then about the likelihood of the Union Jack flying again over Basra or the Khyber Pass, I would have both mocked and scorned the idea. Yet when the Argentine fascist junta invaded the Falkland Islands in the early days of 1982, just after I had immigrated to New York, I felt a sudden stab of partisanship for the Royal Navy as it sailed out to reverse the outcome. I even wrote to the Commander in fairly gung-ho terms, hoping for a hint of common ground. His response surprised and even slightly depressed me. "I don't know if it frightens the enemy," he wrote about Britain's last war-footing fleet as it found its inexorable way to the South Atlantic, "but it certainly frightens me." This slightly hackneyed borrowing, from what the Duke of Wellington had said of his "infamous army" of drunken and homicidal riffraff on the eve of Waterloo, left me feeling flat. ("Waterlooville" was the name of a suburb of Portsmouth, and there was a celebrated pub called "The Heroes of Waterlooville" whose inn sign showed the redcoats smashing Bonaparte's "Old Guard," so he had to know that I would find his historical allusion slightly trite.)

On reflection, though, I am able to see what I did learn from my father. I had once thought that he'd helped me understand the Tory mentality, all the better to combat and repudiate it. And in that respect he was greatly if accidentally instructive. But over the longer stretch, I have come to realize that he taught me — without ever intending to — what it is to feel disappointed and betrayed by your “own” side. He had a certain idea of England, insular to a degree, and conservative for sure but not always, or not necessarily, reactionary. In this England, patient merit would take precedence over the insolence of office, and people who earned their money would be accorded more respect than people who merely had it or “made” it. The antiquity and tranquility of the landscape and the coastline would likewise have earned their share of deference: those who wanted to uproot or to “develop” an area would have to make a case for change rather than be permitted the glib and clever assumption that change was a good thing in itself.

And yet the postwar Conservative Party had become the agent of hectic and greedy modernistic metamorphosis: tearing up the old railway lines and cutting great new swaths of motorway through hill and forest and dale; licensing the commercial principle in everything from television to elections; contemptuous of tradition; handing the skylines and harbors of our grand and blitzed old seaports to builders and speculators who swiftly made them unrecognizable to the veterans who had made those place names honored and famous. And this was just in the time of Harold Macmillan. If the Commander had lived to see the full impact of Thatcherism, he would have felt that there was almost nothing left worth fighting for, or rather having fought for.

I have so few vivid memories of him that one may do duty for many: we had gone as a family into Portsmouth for the opening night of *The Longest Day*. This epic film about the D-Day landings would, I knew from experience, be almost certain to annoy or disappoint the Commander in at least one of two ways. The movie would either understate the role of Britain in the historic storming of the beaches of occupied Europe (reversing an ancient verdict by having us invade Normandy) or it would underplay the part of the Royal Navy in this hinge event. In the event, it was grudgingly agreed in the car on the way home that fairness had at least been attempted. There were a few laughs at the expense of “the Yanks and their gadgets,” and a few reminiscences of the Dieppe raid that had raised the curtain on Normandy: a hellish fiasco in which the Commander had helped land the doomed Canadian forces on bullet-swept beaches, with Lord Mountbatten (an especially vain member of the British Royal Family) as part of his ship's company. But this effort at good cheer was all aimed at erasing what had occurred before the cinema's curtains had parted. My father had come back from the box office with the news that only the most absurdly expensive or the most abjectly cheap seats were now available. He looked quite put out at this: Didn't the throng for this film understand that he'd practically been there? Yvonne attempted mollification. “Who's snapped up the tickets then? ‘The affluent society,’ I suppose?” “You have that right,” said the Commander with bitterness. He'd done so much for the

empire and it had done so little for him in return. If I had had my way, he would have been respectfully escorted to a front-row seat, or perhaps a box.

But I also admired him for his lack of guile and his dislike for anything that was surreptitious or underhand. While in the Royal Navy, he had indignantly refused any advances from the Freemasons, even though this mafia of the mediocre might, had he but joined them, have swung the difference between being promoted and otherwise. One loyalty was enough for him. His candor and modesty once almost caused me to weep. He told of a senior officer who had asked him if he'd come and help out at a cocktail party on the base. It was explained to him in confidence by his superior that the event was meant to soak up all the bores who hadn't been invited to anything yet. "Thank you, sir," he had replied. "But I believe I have already received my invitation." Yvonne's face, when he told this story in company, was a frozen study that I never forgot.

The Commander lost his last proper job in a similarly naïve way, feeling himself obliged to tell the boys' school in Oxford — the place which had furnished his last and only economic security — that he had reached the statutory retirement age. "Honestly, Eric," the somewhat shambolic headmaster later informed me he had told him, "you didn't have to do that. Nobody was going to make anything of it. Nobody had ever even thought of asking. But now that you have bloody well told us, the Board of Governors has no legal option but to give you a gold watch or something and let you go." And so he went, quietly and uncomplainingly as ever.* In his last years, in enforced semi-retirement, he did some very small-time bookkeeping work for a medical man of sorts, in the out-of-the-way Oxfordshire village of Sutton Courtenay, where George Orwell is buried and where, when I once visited, the vicar led me to the spot and then said: "Oh, sorry: wrong grave. This one says 'Eric Blair.' "

Eric Ernest Hitchens's own grave is on Portsdown Hill, overlooking what Arthur Conan Doyle used to call "The Narrow Sea." This historic stretch of water was decidedly and historically "ours." ("I do not say," Lord St. Vincent is supposed to have told Parliament in the Napoleonic epoch, "that our enemies cannot come. I only say that they cannot come by sea.") Here is the chapel where General Eisenhower said a prayer for fine weather and victory the night before the D-Day landings in Normandy: a stained-glass window commemorates the modest warrior who later became president of the United States. Commander Hitchens had once assured me, after a visit to my long-bedridden grandfather, that he would not make a protracted business of dying, and he was as good as his word. He died in 1987, aged 78. Having never spent a day in bed in his life, he went very speedily from diagnosis of an inoperable cancer in his esophagus to a hammer-blow heart attack that gave his hostess, his sister Ena, barely time to rush to his side. (My Aunt Ena had also landed on the beaches of Normandy as a nurse in the second wave — another excellent day's work — and got all the way to Germany before they told her to stop.)

The Commander's funeral took place on a day of bitter and extreme cold. I dismounted from the train at what had once been my home-bound station for the school

holidays. By a macabre coincidence, as I walked through the freezing station yard I saw workmen painting out the faint storefront sign “Susannah Munday” on what had once been my mother’s sad attempt at a dress shop. I was able to see my father in his last repose before the screwing-on of the lid, and later to do for him what he had once done for me, and carry him on my shoulders. We laid the coffin in the chancel of the D-Day chapel: my brother had made all the liturgical and musical arrangements with a clear eye to tradition and dignity. I rather pity those Anglo-American families to whom the “Navy Hymn” is not a part of the emotional furniture: its words and music are impossibly stirring even to one who finds the opening words “Eternal Father” doubly problematic. The tune is actually called “Melita,” after the old name of the island of Malta where St. Paul was shipwrecked, and was written for someone who was about to take ship across the Atlantic for the United States. My own text was from that same Paul of Tarsus, and from his Epistle to the Philippians, which I selected for its non-religious yet high moral character:

Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

Try looking that up in a “modern” version of the New Testament (Philippians 4:8) and see what a ration of bland doggerel you get. I shall never understand how the keepers and trustees of the King James Version threw away such a treasure. But that very thought, if you like, is partly taken from my father’s legacy of suspicion of change and of resistance to the rude shock of the new.

The Commander had no surviving friends to speak of and in the misty churchyard there were only a few gaunt Hampshire faces with that Hitchens look: the look of the tough south English peasant that one can sometimes also see in Georgia and the Carolinas. These distant kinsmen gave a hasty clasp of the hand and faded back into the chalky landscape. It was all stark enough to have pleased my father at his most downbeat. An absence of fuss could be noted. I suddenly remembered the most contemptuous word I had ever heard the old man utter. Discovering me lying in the bath with a cigarette, a book, and a perilously perched glass (I must have been attempting some adolescent version of the aesthetic), he almost barked: “What is this? Luxury?” That this was another word for sin, drawn from the repertory of antique Calvinism, I immediately understood.

That my mother would have approved — though perhaps languidly preferring a chaise longue to a bath — I also knew. So, here you have my two much-opposed and sharply discrepant ancestral stems: two stray branches that only war and chance could ever have caused to become entwined. I ought not to overstate the contradictions: one of the two apparently stern and flinty and martial and continent and pessimistic; the other exotic and beseeching and hopeful and tentative, yet the first one very much less sturdy than it should by rights have been. Even though it has left me with a strong sense of “fight-or-flight” on family occasions, and a real dread of clan occasions such

as birthdays and Christmas and other moments of mandatory gaiety, I am grateful enough for the blessed anxiety and unease that it has bequeathed to me.

* Strangely, though, the matter of his age was also the only thing in which I ever caught him out in a petty dishonesty. He used to tell us that he had been born in 1912. My brother, Peter, and I were both amateur numismatists in boyhood, and these were the days when hoop-sized pennies from the Victorian and Edwardian era could still turn up in your small change. If we found a 1912 coin, we would show him, and then proudly hoard and sometimes even mount and display it. It was somehow deflating to discover — as he must have known we would — that he had been born in 1909. I still cannot be sure why he practiced this uncharacteristic deception: conceivably to attenuate the difference in years between himself and Yvonne. But she could not possibly have been fooled, as his sons pointlessly were.

Fragments from an Education

Orwell, Connolly, Waugh, Betjeman, to name only a few, have pungently described the disenchantments of schooldays . . . I do not wish to appear less competent than my contemporaries in making creep the flesh of the epicure of sadomasochistic school reminiscence.

— Anthony Powell: *Infants of the Spring*

. . . that stoic redskin interlude which our schools intrude between the fast-flowing tears of the child and the man.

— Evelyn Waugh: *Brideshead Revisited*

INOW CLAIM STANFORD, California, as a part of my own turf but I was extremely apprehensive and feeling very junior when I first glimpsed the campus in 1987. The impression of first-day-at-school in its grand quads was only enhanced by the effort of my old friend Edward Said, with whom I was visiting the campus for a conference, to encourage me to feel more at home. “Come on,” he said, “we’ll go and take a cocktail from Ian Watt.” I was made additionally nervous by the thought of introduction to this dry, wry, and donnish figure, the world’s expert on Joseph Conrad and the author of *The Rise of the Novel*. On greeting, he caused me to feel even more uneasy by drawing attention to the unusual number of Japanese students who could be seen from his windows. “I know it’s silly to say so, but it still makes me feel odd sometimes.”

Nobody could have been less chauvinistic than Ian Watt but then, he was one of the few survivors of *The Bridge On The River Kwai*, *The Burma Railroad*, *Changi Jail* in Singapore, and other Hirohito horrors that I still capitalize in my mind. He admitted later that, detecting other people’s reserve after returning home from these wartime nightmares, he had developed a manner of discussing them apotropaically, as it were, so as to defuse them a bit. And he told me the following tale, which I set down with the hope that it captures his memorably laconic tone of voice:

Well, we were in a cell that was probably built for six but was holding about sixteen of us. There wasn’t much food and we hadn’t been given any water for quite a while. The heat was absolutely ferocious. Dysentery had begun to take its toll, which was distinctly disagreeable at such close quarters . . .

Added to this unpleasantness, we could hear one of our number being rather badly beaten by the Japanese guards, with rifle-butts it seemed, in their guardroom down the corridor. At this rather trying moment one of my young subalterns, who’d managed to fall asleep, started screaming and flailing and yelling. He was shouting: “No, no — please don’t . . . Not any more, not again, Oh God please.” Hideous noises like that. I had to take a snap decision to prevent panic, so I ordered the sergeant to slap him and

wake him up. When he came to, he apologized for being a bore but brokenly confessed that he'd dreamed he was back at Tonbridge.

My laughter at this, for all its brilliant timing and understatement, was very slightly awkward. Watt went on to recall an interview with that other old Asia hand E.M. Forster, in which he'd been asked, as an "old boy" of Tonbridge School, whether he would ever agree to write an article for the school magazine. "Only," said the author of *A Passage to India*, "if it could be against compulsory games." The very phrase "compulsory games" had automatic resonance for me, bringing back not merely the memory of freezing soccer and rugby pitches, and of the gloating sadists who infested the changing-rooms that were the aftermath of these pointless contests, but also W.H. Auden's suggestive line in one of his greatest poems ["1 September 1939"]:

And helpless governors wake / To resume their compulsory game . . .

It was indeed Auden — who had been a master at such a school as well as having been a pupil at one — who had said that the experience had given him an instinctive understanding of what it would be like to live under fascism. (He had also said, when told by the headmaster that only "the cream" attended the school: "yes I know what you mean — thick and rich.")

But this is where I must very slightly disappoint you. The three great subjects of Beating, Bullying, and Buggery (the junior or cadet equivalent of Winston Churchill's naval triptych of "Rum, Sodomy, and the Lash") are familiar enough to me in their way, and I have often been closely questioned — usually by girls — about their influence on my formation. I was subjected to a certain amount and to a certain extent to the first two of the Big Bs but not (my italics) to the third. I should perhaps add that I was never big or strong or desperate enough to inflict any of the above procedures on anyone else. In fact, in the annals of British boarding-school trauma, I scarcely count even as walking wounded. This is because, at the very last moment, I was saved from having to go to Tonbridge.

Have you ever walked away from a car smash without a scathe, or had that other experience so well evoked by Winston Churchill: the sheer perfect relief of being shot at by someone who has missed you? I have in fact had both these experiences, but neither approximates to my sense of deliverance from the Tonbridgean. It was once again a matter of my mother versus my father. Neither of them knowing anything about the upper reaches of the education system, it had been decided when I was born to "put my name down" for the only school with which we had contact, run by someone who had once been on the same warship as the Commander. This seemed an efficient rather than a random way of doing things. However, and just before I was due to take the entrance exam at the age of thirteen, my mother bethought herself that it might be worth taking a look at the place where I was due to be conscripted for the next five formative years.

You would not, gentle reader, be scanning these pages had it been otherwise. Tonbridge was a synonym for those Spartan schools where the empire, the church, the cricket field, the war memorial, and the monarchy were, well, sovereign. The blue-eyed

boy, small for his age and with rather feminine eyelashes, who is indifferent to sports and happiest in the library is . . . bugged. Not to say beaten and bullied. All this Yvonne saw, or I suppose I should say she somehow intuited, at a glance.

My poor parents. During my infancy in Scotland I had had to be taken away from one school, with the forbidding name of Inchkeith, when it had been noticed at home that I cowered and flung up a protective arm every time an adult male came near me. Investigation showed the place to be a minor hell of flagellation and “abuse” (such a pathetic euphemism for the real thing) so I was taken away and put in a nearer establishment named Camdean. On my first day there I was hit between the eyes with a piece of slate during an exchange of views with the Catholic school across the road, with whom our hardened Protestant gangs were at odds. Innocent of any interest in this quarrel, I nonetheless bear the faint scar of it, above the bridge of my nose, to this day.

For the next five years, by now removed southward to Devon, where my Fifeshire accent was duly knocked out of me, I underwent an experience that was once commonplace but has now become as remote and obscure in its way as travel by steam train. Indeed, I often have difficulty convincing my graduate students that I really did go off to prep school at the age of eight, from station platforms begrimed with coal dust and echoing to the mounting “whomp, whomp, woof, woof” of the pistons beginning to turn, as my own “trunk” and “tuck box” were loaded into a “luggage car.” Not only that, but that I wore corduroy shorts in all weathers, blazers with a school crest on Sundays, slept in a dormitory with open windows, began every day with a cold bath (followed by the declension of Latin irregular verbs), wolfed lumpy porridge for breakfast, attended compulsory divine service every morning and evening, and kept a diary in which — in a special code — I recorded the number of times when I was left alone with a grown-up man, who was perhaps four times my weight and five times my age, and bent over to be thrashed with a cane.

The strange thing, or so I now think, was the way in which it didn’t feel all that strange. The fictions and cartoons of Nigel Molesworth, of Paul Pennyfeather in Waugh’s *Decline and Fall*, and numberless other chapters of English literary folklore have somehow made all this mania and ritual appear “normal,” even praiseworthy. Did we suspect our schoolmasters — not to mention their weirdly etiolated female companions or “wives,” when they had any — of being in any way “odd,” not to say queer? We had scarcely the equipment with which to express the idea, and anyway what would this awful thought make of our parents, who were paying — as we were so often reminded — a princely sum for our privileged existences? The word “privilege” was indeed employed without stint. Yes, I think that must have been it. If we had not been certain that we were better off than the oafs and jerks who lived on housing estates and went to state-run day schools, we might have asked more questions about being robbed of all privacy, encouraged to inform on one another, taught how to fawn upon authority and turn upon the vulnerable outsider, and subjected at all times to rules which it was not always possible to understand, let alone to obey.

I think it was that last point which impressed itself upon me most, and which made me shudder with recognition when I read Auden's otherwise overwrought comparison of the English boarding school to a totalitarian regime. The conventional word that is employed to describe tyranny is "systematic." The true essence of a dictatorship is in fact not its regularity but its unpredictability and caprice; those who live under it must never be able to relax, must never be quite sure if they have followed the rules correctly or not. (The only rule of thumb was: whatever is not compulsory is forbidden.) Thus, the ruled can always be found to be in the wrong. The ability to run such a "system" is among the greatest pleasures of arbitrary authority, and I count myself lucky, if that's the word, to have worked this out by the time I was ten. Later in life I came up with the term "micro-megalomaniac" to describe those who are content to maintain absolute domination of a small sphere. I know what the germ of the idea was, all right. "Hitchens, take that look off your face!" Near-instant panic. I hadn't realized I was wearing a "look." (Face-crime!) "Hitchens, report yourself at once to the study!" "Report myself for what, sir?" "Don't make it worse for yourself, Hitchens, you know perfectly well." But I didn't. And then: "Hitchens, it's not just that you have let the whole school down. You have let yourself down." To myself I was frantically muttering: Now what? It turned out to be some dormitory sex-game from which — though the fools in charge didn't know it — I had in fact been excluded. But a protestation of my innocence would have been, as in any inquisition, an additional proof of guilt.

There were other manifestations, too. There was nowhere to hide. The lavatory doors sometimes had no bolts. One was always subject to invigilation, waking and sleeping. Collective punishment was something I learned about swiftly: "Until the offender confesses in public," a giant voice would intone, "all your 'privileges' will be withdrawn." There were curfews, where we were kept at our desks or in our dormitories under a cloud of threats while officialdom prowled the corridors in search of unspecified crimes and criminals. Again I stress the matter of sheer scale: the teachers were enormous compared to us and this lent a Brobdingnagian aspect to the scene. In seeming contrast, but in fact as reinforcement, there would be long and "jolly" periods where masters and boys would join in scenes of compulsory enthusiasm — usually over the achievements of a sports team — and would celebrate great moments of victory over lesser and smaller schools. I remember years later reading about Stalin that the intimates of his inner circle were always at their most nervous when he was in a "good" mood, and understanding instantly what was meant by that.

And yet it still wasn't fascism, and the men and women who ran this bizarre microcosm were dedicated in their own weird way. The school was on the edge of Dartmoor — the site of the famously grim prison in Waugh's *Decline and Fall* — and haggard, despairing escaped convicts were more than once recaptured after hiding in the sheds on our cricket grounds. Yet the natural beauty of the region was astonishing, and our teachers were on hand all day and at weekends, many of them conveying their enthusiasm for birds and animals and trees. We were all of us compelled to sit through lessons in the sinister fairy tales of Christianity as well, and nature was sometimes enlisted

as illustrating god's design, but I can't pretend that I hated singing the hymns or learning the psalms, and I enjoyed being in the choir and was honored when asked to read from the lectern on Sundays. In fact, as you have perhaps guessed, I was getting an early training in the idea that life meant keeping two separate and distinct sets of books. If my parents knew what really went on at the school, I used to think (not being the first little boy to imagine that my main job was that of protecting parental innocence), they would faint from the shock. So I would be staunch and defend them from the knowledge. Meanwhile, and speaking of books, the school possessed its very own library, and several of the masters had private collections of their own, to which one might be admitted (not always without risk to these men's immortal souls) as a great treat.

This often feels as if it happened to somebody else yet I can be sure it did not because I can recall the element of sadomasochism so well. Awareness of this is no doubt innate in all of us, and I suppose a case could be made for teaching it to children as part of "sex education" or the facts of life, but I had to sit in a freezing classroom at first light, at a tender age, and hear my silver-haired Latin teacher Mr. Witherington approach the verge of tears as he digressed from the study of Caesar and Tacitus and told us with an awful catch in his voice of the way in which he had been flogged at Eastbourne School. And that same brutish academy, we thought as we squirmed our tiny rears on the wooden benches, was one of those to which we were supposed to aspire. I think I wish I had not been introduced so early to the connection between obscure sexual excitement and the infliction — or the reception — of pain.

Again come the two sets of books: I would escape to the library and lose myself in the adventure stories of John Buchan and "Sapper" and G.A. Henty and Percy Westerman, and acquaint myself with imperial and military values just as, unknown to me in the England of the late 1950s that lay outside the school's boundary, these were going straight out of style. Meanwhile and on the other side of the ledger, I would tell myself that I wasn't really part of the hierarchy of cruelty, either as bully or victim. I wasn't any use at sports, I didn't have the kind of "keenness" that made one even a junior prefect, but on the other hand I did need to protect myself from being a mere weed and weakling and kick-bag. Sometimes there was a fatso or freak toward whom I could divert the attention of the mob, but I can honestly claim to have become ashamed of this tactic. There came a day when, without exactly realizing it in a fully conscious manner, I understood that words could function as weapons. I don't remember all the offenses and hurts that had been inflicted on me, but I do recollect exactly what I said as I whirled on my playground tormentor, an especially vile boy named Welchman who was a snitch and a stoolpigeon as well as the embodiment of the (not invariably reliable) maxim that all bullies are cowards at heart. "You," I said in fairly level but loud tones through my split lips, "are a liar, a bully, a coward, and a thief." It was amazing to see the way in which this lummoX fell back, his face filling with alarm. It was also quite something to see the tide of playground public opinion turn so suddenly against him.

Looking back, it is the masochistic element that impresses me more than the sadistic one. It's relatively easy to see why people want to exert power over others, but what fascinated me was the way in which the victims colluded in the business. Bullies would acquire a personal squad of toadies with impressive speed and ease. The more tyrannical the schoolmaster, the more those who lived in fear of him would rush to placate him and to anticipate his moods. Small boys who were ill-favored, or "out of favor" with authority, would swiftly attract the derision and contempt of the majority as well. I still writhe when I think how little I did to oppose this. My tongue sharpened itself mainly in my own defense.

The Commander by now not being a huge figure in my universe, the substitute father figures of school authority took up correspondingly more space. Years later Alexander Waugh, inspired biographer of his own father and grandfather, showed me Franz Kafka's "Letter to My Father." I didn't find this fascinating document — which old man Kafka never read — reminding me at all of my domestic pater, but I know exactly what came to me when I read Kafka's recollection of

the many occasions on which I had, according to your clearly expressed opinion, deserved a beating but was let off at the last moment by your grace, I again accumulated only a huge sense of guilt. On every side I was to blame, I was in your debt.

My memory of how that felt was as vivid as possible. Gratitude for having been spared, vague guilt at an offense I had not known about or guessed at (thought crime!), strong fear of a repeat offense that I could not predict or avoid, the emotion of relief colliding with the feeling of unworthiness. And fear of the all-powerful boss, too, combined with an awareness of all the blessings and forgiveness which it was in his Almighty power to bestow. One of the most awful reproaches in the school's arsenal of psychological torture — Orwell catches it very well in his essay "Such, Such Were the Joys" — was the one about one's sickly ingratitude: the selfish refusal to shape up after all that had been done on one's behalf. Of course I now recognize this as the working model, drawn from monotheistic religion, where love is compulsory and must be offered to a higher being whom one must necessarily also fear. This moral blackmail is based on a quintessential servility. The fact that the headmaster held the prayerbook and the Bible during the services also drove home to me the obvious fact that religion is an excellent reinforcement of shaky temporal authority.

Hugh Wortham, my huge and dominating headmaster and introducer to the dark arts of corporal punishment, was a lifelong bachelor, but some of the local mothers found him handsome, and Yvonne gaily said that he put her in mind of Rex Harrison. His huge, brawny, furry arms and his immense horseshoes of teeth made him seem almost gorilla-like to me and a bold contrast to the rather slight figure of the Commander. His rages would shake the windows and make small boys turn white: his "good moods" were a hell to endure and a challenge to manipulate. Heaven knows what he'd been through sexually: he himself didn't stoop to "fiddling" with any of us but if you were occasionally favored, as I occasionally was, you would be given a copy of David Blaize or one of the Jeremy novels and asked if you'd care to read it "in your free time."

Though I didn't have the vocabulary for this in those days, I now know quite a lot about E.F. Benson and Hugh Walpole and I sensed even then that this was the world of the smoldering and yearning and repressed adult homosexual, fixated on his own schooldays and probably most attracted to those who are themselves blithely unaware of the intensity of the attention.

There were also some masters, twitchy and sad and at the end of their tethers and the close of their careers, who by the same herd instinct we knew to be fair game. Poor old Mr. Robertson — “Rubberguts,” with his decrepit Austin car and his equally decrepit wife Lydia — could not keep order and made the fatal mistake of trying to curry favor with the boys by little acts of kindness and bribery with sweets. He was childless and pathetic and he taught the unmanly subject of geography, and we somehow knew that the real authorities in the school didn't respect him either, so we felt free to make his life a misery. There was more satisfaction to be had in teasing and torturing a feeble member of the Establishment than there was in cornering some hapless and pustular bedwetter of our own cohort. Rubberguts eventually left the school and for all I know died in poverty in some seaside boardinghouse, but before we broke him the poor childless chap swooped on me one day in the changing rooms, caught me under the armpits, held me up and gave me, or to be exact my forehead, the most chaste possible kiss. Then he put me down and silently, sadly mooched away. At first I thought I had a good tale to share with my fellow gloating little beasts, but then I found myself admitting that there had been nothing so creepy about it, merely something melancholy, and I never said a word to a soul. It is strange how the boundary between the knowing and the innocent is subconsciously patrolled: one may be apparently quite “wised up” while being in reality quite naïve, or entirely unaware of the grosser aspects of existence while yet possessing some intuition of what lies on the other side of the adult veil. I couldn't make this encounter seem dirty while there were boys more advanced than myself who could make even the word “clean” sound suggestive. I suspected that they sometimes pretended to know more than they really did.

I was also pretending. But I was bluffing in a different way, about my aptitude in English literature and history. Backward in hormonal development, I could show precocity when it came to longer words and harder books. The best plan here is to bite off more than you can chew. At the age of twelve I had summoned the nerve to borrow from the headmaster, and to read, *War and Peace*. Emboldened by the sheer bulk of the thing, I swerved into Prescott's *History of the Conquest of Mexico*. Of these, I retained for a long time (apart from the fascinating family trees of the Rostovs and the Bolkonskis) the memory of the Battle of Borodino and of the military alliance between the people of Tlascala and the Spaniards against the Aztecs. In other words, I was inhaling these classics essentially as adventure stories. But when I later had to take an examination on Henry V, I was able to make a comparison between King Henry the night before Agincourt and Pierre Bezukhov before Borodino, which made me feel that I hadn't just been showing off to myself, or indeed to others. Nonetheless, I was

probably insufferable until one very observant master — a man named Eyre who was later sacked after a horrific lapse into pederasty — instilled in me a sense of proportion. “You might try this,” he said diffidently, slipping into my hand the first novel of Evelyn Waugh. The headmaster followed up with some P.G. Wodehouse. How can I forget the moment when, in the company of Paul Pennyfeather and Mr. Mulliner, I learned that to be amusing was not to be frivolous and that language — always the language — was the magic key as much to prose as to poetry?

Perhaps two or three times a year I receive a questionnaire from some writers’ organization or some writerly magazine, asking me to name my formative books. The temptation to inflate the currency of the past is always present. “It was when perusing the immortal Gustave Flaubert at the tender age of X that my eyes were opened to . . .” In fact, I suspect that it doesn’t very much matter what one reads in the early years, once one has acquired the essential ability to read for pleasure alone. My parents were less quick than my teachers to “get” this point. I had an erratic godmother who on one of her visits decided to make up for all her previous lapses, and actually to provide me with a present. I was accordingly taken by the whole family to a fine bookshop in Plymouth and told to pick any six books that I liked. It didn’t take long: I wanted a garish series of the adventures of Billy Bunter. I was sternly told by my seniors that this wouldn’t do at all, and provided instead with a very handsome set of Arthur Ransome’s uplifting stories about enterprising English children in the great outdoors. In revenge, these remained moldering on my top shelf, never even opened, until I contrived to leave them behind in one of our many family moves. Thus, all unknowing, I passed up the chance of introduction to an author who, as Manchester Guardian correspondent in Moscow in 1918, had exposed the “secret treaties” that were behind the First World War, and had had a fling with Trotsky’s secretary into the bargain. (It shocked me to discover this later on, as it would most certainly have shocked the relatives who pressed Ransome on me.) My mother was out of sorts for a whole day: “Silly boy,” she said. “Aunt Pam was in such a good mood that you could easily have had a nice wrist-watch if you had asked for it.”

But I didn’t want a bloody wrist-watch. I wanted to be left alone with a pile of books of my own choice. And very gradually, and as it does, omnivorous reading began to become a little more discriminating. I spent a long time wallowing in the pleasures of the “good-bad book,” as G.K. Chesterton (later plagiarized by George Orwell) was to term this tempting genre. John Buchan’s Richard Hannay romances and colonial yarns, and then Nevil Shute’s stories about Australia, Malaya, engineering, and — with his masterpiece *On the Beach* — the foretaste of nuclear anxiety. Dennis Wheatley’s melodramas of Satanism and the occult, spiced with a very heavy dash of reactionary politics, gave me a brief interest in numerology and then helped to inoculate me against superstition in general. C.S. Forester’s Hornblower stories had a perhaps unintended effect, in that they showed me that a British naval hero could simultaneously be a martyr to doubt and introspection (as well as be aware of the slave trade, which up until then I thought the Royal Navy had aided only in putting down).

On a seemingly parallel track, I was still being educated for an order of things that, without my fully realizing it, was very rapidly passing away. Hearing something about fighting in far-off British-run Malaya I would ask a boy whose father served there what the Malays were like. “Jolly loyal,” was his reply: even at the time this struck me as cryptically unsatisfactory. The situation in the Central African Federation sometimes seeped into the news: when I inquired about Southern Rhodesia, one of the masters instantly said that the native inhabitants were “only just down from the trees” — the first but not at all the last time that I was to hear that loathsome expression. The only mentionable problem with the existing Conservative government of Harold Macmillan was that it was too liberal and had given in to the wogs and “Gyppos” (Egyptians) over the Suez Canal. On Guy Fawkes night, that wondrous evening of roast chestnuts and fireworks and mellow fruitfulness, the ceremonial pyre was often surmounted by a symbolically unpopular figure of a later vintage than 1605: one year the headmaster decreed that the immolated carcass be that of Sir David Eccles, then a blamelessly mediocre minister of education. He had allowed himself to make some remarks that were critical of the public or rather “private” schools: the essential rampart of English educational hierarchy. “Hitchens,” said the terrifying Mr. Wortham, “you have a sense of history or so it seems. If our great public schools were to be swept away, it would be worse even than the dissolution of the monasteries.” Having at that stage only cropped and grazed on the lower slopes of Wordsworthian verse, I could not quite visualize the proportions of this world-historical calamity, but I seemed to see an epoch passing, and the roofs of great palaces suddenly open to the pitiless sky.

It was, to a lesser degree, a version of the same crisis that I saw my parents facing. In the grander houses in the villages where we lived, you could still see signs saying “Tradesmen’s Entrance,” directing the vulgar to a side door. We could not aspire to that sort of standing, but it was considered essential by my mother in particular that the Hitchenses never sink one inch back down the social incline that we had so arduously ascended. That way led to public or “council” housing, to the “rough boys” who would hang around outside cinemas and railway stations, to people who went on strike and thus “held the country to ransom,” and to people who dropped the “H” at the beginnings of words and used the word “toilet” when they meant to refer to the lavatory.

In Fifeshire we had briefly had a babysitter called Jeannie: a large, ruddy, motherly proletarian whose husband was a crane-driver in the Navy dockyard. She once took my brother to her “council” house for “tea,” by which she meant “dinner” or at least “early supper”: a meat-and-potato fest rammed home with a mug of hot and sweet brown nectar. Peter was fascinated above all by the way her husband ate with his knife. Ate off his knife, that is to say. I swear that my mother went chalk-white when she heard of this. All I ever had to do, if I wished to tease her, was to wield my knife as if it were a fork, or to hold it as if it were a pen, or to mouth the word “toilet.” Lesser prohibitions and anxieties — “notepaper” for writing-paper, “mirror” for looking-glass — were not as absolute. “Phone” for telephone was, however, considered distinctly vulgar. My first introduction to the Mitford sisters and their impossible glamour and charm was by

way of Nancy's guide to the pitfalls of class and the fashion in which all English people are branded on the tongue, either by their accent or by their vernacular.*

In this unending social battle, in which private education was a necessary but not sufficient condition for victory, the Hitchens chin was barely above the ever-rising floodwaters. At any moment my father might lose his latest job, and we had no capital of any kind on which to fall back. He himself had relatives who — I find I have to confess this — bought a china plaque with the word “toilet” and helpfully screwed it to the outside of their lavatory door. (To the door of the actual room with a bath and washbasin in it, they also affixed a plaque saying “bathroom.” Their house was a five-room bungalow where it was hard to get lost. Thank heaven for the Englishman who invented the saving term “loo.”) My mother's exquisite pain at this sort of thing was further accented by deep reticence about her own family background. And all this strain was being undergone so that I, the firstborn, could become an English gentleman at precisely the time when the market for such a finished product was undergoing a steep decline.

Thus I have to be honest and say that the single book that most altered my life was *How Green Was My Valley*. One day I took up a tattered paperback copy of Richard Llewellyn's classic (it was a Pan or Penguin edition, proclaiming it “the best-seller of the war years,” which meant that it seemed kosher to me) and then sat as if snared by an enchantment until I had finished it. Then I read it again. In the next few years I inhaled and imbibed it dozens of times and could at any moment have sat for an examination on its major and minor themes. The world and experience of its boy narrator, Huw Morgan, became more real to me than my own. It was an earthquake, a climacteric, a revelation.

I was one of those rural and suburban boys who, like Ruskin when taking the railway across North London, would feel the impulse to pull down the blinds as my train went through scenes of ugliness and misery and desolation in places called Hackney Downs and London Fields. Once, after staying with a school friend on the Mumbles peninsula of South Wales, I had been as distressed as William Blake by my brief glimpse of the hell-mouth scenes of the steelworks and coal-pits around Port Talbot. But now I realized that, just on the other side of the bright Bristol Channel from the lovely moors and uplands of my upbringing, there was a world as remote from my own as the moon, or as Joseph Conrad's Congo.

Several aspects of this hitherto-occluded other Britain lodged in the mind. First of all, its inhabitants worked mostly under the ground, like the Morlocks in H.G. Wells. Second, they spoke a non-English language at home and at church, and considered themselves conquered and dispossessed as a nation as well as suppressed as a class. Third, they thought of going on strike as an act of unselfish solidarity and emancipation rather than as “holding the country to ransom.” Fourth — though I do not know why I am placing this last on my list — they conceived of education and learning as the avenues to a better life, for their fellows as well as themselves, and not as an expensively bought means of declaring themselves superior to others less fortunate.

This was a jolt to my system and no mistake: indeed it was a severe and seismic shock to all the other systems that had undergirded my own little position. In the annals of “good-bad,” then, I would put *How Green Was My Valley* in the same class as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*: a work that leaves an ineradicable “scratch on the mind,” to borrow Harold Isaacs’s useful phrase. There was another element as well. At a certain point, on some springy-turfed Welsh hillside far above the scenes of alienation and exploitation that lay below, young Huw contrived to part with his irksome virginity. Richard Llewellyn handled this transition with very slightly too much quasi-poetic euphemism, his crucial error being (to my fevered imagining) the idea that the inflamed heat of young manhood could be assuaged only by the relative “coolness” of a feminine interior. One had had a vague hope that the ardency would be appeased by an even greater heat, rather than sizzled like a red-hot horseshoe dipped in water, but at this stage I would have been willing to settle for anything that offered incandescence in either direction.

It interested me very much, later on, to discover that Huw’s creator Richard Llewellyn was not at all the fire-eating partisan of the coal miners’ struggles that I had taken him to be, but rather a conservative and old-fashioned type who had been setting down a world he had lost. It only goes to show. If you spend a certain amount of every day memorizing the following incantations, the effects may not always be the ones that are intended:

Teach us, good Lord, to serve thee as thou deservest:

To give, and not to count the cost,

To fight, and not to heed the wounds,

To toil, and not to seek for rest,

To labor, and to ask for no reward,

Save that of knowing that we do thy will.

That is from Ignatius Loyola. Or this, from Sir Francis Drake himself:

O Lord God, when thou hast given thy servants to endeavour any great matter, grant us also to know that it is not the beginning but the continuing of the same, until it be thoroughly finished, which yieldeth the true glory; through Him that for the finishing of thy work laid down his life . . .

Even when you have learned later about Loyola’s fanaticism or Drake’s piracy, verses like these have the faculty of recurring to one at apt or critical moments. Years later I read Lionel Trilling on George Orwell’s attachment to “traditional” and “martial” values. Trilling guessed that Orwell esteemed these supposedly conservative virtues because he thought they might come in handy later on, as revolutionary ones.

And this is partly why I can’t entirely second or echo his own great memoir of prep-school misery. For me, the experience of being sent away at a tender age was, at any cost, finally an emancipating one. I knew I hadn’t been dispatched to boarding school to get me out of the way (an assurance that I don’t think the young Orwell shared). I knew it was my only eventual meal ticket for a decent university: that undiscovered country to which no Hitchens had yet traveled. I knew that I owed my

parents the repayment of a debt. True, I did get pushed around and unfairly punished and introduced too soon to some distressing facts of existence, but I would not have preferred to stay at home or to have been sheltered from these experiences, and it was probably good for me to be deprived of my adoring mother and taught — I can still remember the phrase — that I wasn't by any means "the only pebble on the beach." Why, I once inquired, was the school boxing tournament into which I had been entered against my will called "The Ninety Percent"? "Because, Hitchens, the fight involves only ten percent skill and ninety percent guts." This seemed even then like a parody of a Tom Brown story, and I had the socks knocked off me in the ring, but why do I remember it after half a century? The school motto was *Ut Prosim* ("That I May Be Useful"), and when one has joined in the singing of "I Vow to Thee My Country" — especially on 11 November by the war memorial — or "The Day Thou Gavest, Lord, Is Ended" ("To sing is to pray twice," as St. Augustine put it) then one may in fact be very slightly better equipped to face that Japanese jail or Iraqi checkpoint.

I have just looked up the gleaming new website of Mount House, and realized that if I have set all this down in my turn, it is because I was among the last generation to go through the "old school" version of Englishness. The site speaks enthusiastically of the number of girls being educated at the establishment (good grief!), of the availability of vegetarian diets and caterings for other "special needs," and of its sensitivity to various sorts of "learning disability." Now I cannot say I am completely sorry to think that there will be no more "eat that mutton, Hitchens" or "bend over that chair, Hitchens," or "shall we call him Christine, boys, he's so feeble?" but something in me hopes that it hasn't all become positive reinforcement, with high marks constantly awarded for mere self-esteem.

* The durability of this "Upstairs, Downstairs" ethos is remarkable in point of both time and place. I was to become very close to Jessica Mitford, who was almost a sorceress in her ability to use her upper-class skills for American leftist purposes. Told once by a white Southerner at a cocktail party that "it don't seem possible" that school integration could work, she icily replied: "To me it do!" and turned on her heel leaving him wilted like a salted snail. During the McCarthy period, when her fellow Communists became very timorous, she discovered that the Oakland branch was advising its black members, when turning up for a meeting at the home of a well-to-do comrade, to avoid FBI attention by pretending to be house-servants and using the back door. "Well, I mean to say, I sailed right round and told them I thought that was an absolute stinker."

Cambridge

MY MOTHER HAVING DECIDED that Tonbridge was out of the question for her sensitive Christopher, some swift work had to be done to reposition me in the struggle — the whole aim and object of the five years at Mount House — to make me into a proper public-school boy. Mr. Wortham proved adept at the string-pulling of the system. It was quite rapidly decided that I should instead apply to go to The Leys School, in Cambridge. The atmosphere there was more intellectual and the headmaster, Alan Barker, was a friend of Mr. Wortham's. Since I was being taken as a "late" applicant, I would still sit the same exam — the "Common Entrance" that has been the fate of the English prep-school boy since records were kept — but would have to achieve a scholarship mark at it. This I was able to do without much of a strain. For many years I kept the telegram (ah, those days of the telegram) which was received by my proud parents: "PASSED FOR LEYS CONGRATULATIONS WORTHAM." This also enabled me to "score" a bit over my thirteen-year-old playmates. English public schools have names like Radley and Repton and Charterhouse and Sherborne and Stowe (not to mention the Eton and Harrow to which we knew we could not aspire), and it was quite the done thing to debate the relative merits of these status-conscious destinations. "Hah, Pugh is going to Sedbergh — moldy old prison." "Oh yes, well you're going to Sherborne, which is full of snobs." When my turn came, I would portentously say: "I'm going to Cambridge." That shut them up. Cambridge these little bastards had heard of. They just didn't have anything sarcastic to say about it.

I was bluffing, of course, but I still liked the look of things. My new school was in town, and in the ancient town of Cambridge at that, instead of out on some blasted heath where long and muddy cross-country "runs" could be inflicted on you and even the nearest manic-depressive hamlet was many furlongs or versts or miles away. Most English public schools are affiliated with the national absurdity of the Anglican or "Church of England" confession (as if there could be a version of Christianity specifically linked to a group of northerly islands), whereas The Leys was Methodist, which put it in the Dissenting or Nonconformist tradition, founded by that admitted maniac and demagogue John Wesley but still better than the alliance between a state church, the monarchy, the armed forces, and the Tory Party. Many of the teachers and masters were part-time dons at the university. I was, by the age of thirteen, manumitted from provincial and rural life and enforced infancy, and put at last into long trousers, and allowed in sight of the great libraries and quadrangles that had nurtured Chaucer and Milton and Newton (and Cromwell).

For many people, the Oxford-Cambridge dichotomy is an either/or proposition, like Jack Sprat and his wife, or Harvard versus Yale, or Army versus Navy. In days gone by, plebeian Londoners who had been to neither university would get into loud public disputes every year about which “eight” they favored in the annual Oxford-Cambridge Boat Race from Putney to Mortlake: one of the great “who cares?” events of any epoch. For me, the similarities outdistance the distinctions. Both towns show the unoriginality of the English when it comes to names: there used to be a ford for oxen by the Thames and there was once a place where it was possible to bridge the Cam. Both have colleges rather than a university. Both took a long time to recognize the existence of the railway, so that the station is too far from the center. Some say that Cambridge is more austere and Oxford more louche and luxurious, but could even All Souls be more exotic and languid and exclusive than the Apostles’ Club or the courts of Kings and Trinity, nursery of such ripe and gorgeous plants as E.M. Forster and John Maynard Keynes, to say nothing of the coterie of Stalinist traitors from Kim Philby to Sir Anthony Blunt? (“At least Oxford spies for us,” as one portly academic once put it to me, “while Cambridge seems to prefer to spy for the other side.”)

They used to say that Cambridge was better at “science”; the deceptive word “scientist” as opposed to the superior term “natural philosopher” not having been coined until the 1830s. Very well, it was at least true that Isaac Newton had operated here (his frantic experiments in bogus alchemy more than once igniting his own rooms) and that Charles Darwin had occupied the very same chambers as William Paley, author of *Natural Theology* and supreme bard of the quixotic argument “from design.” More intriguing to me and my young contemporaries, restlessly modern as we aspired to be in the early 1960s, was the chance to walk past the Cavendish Laboratories and see where the atom had first been split, or to pass by The Eagle pub, into which Crick and Watson had strolled with exaggerated nonchalance one lunchtime to announce that with the double helix they had uncovered “the secret of existence.”

My encounter with all this liberating knowledge and inquisitive atmosphere was very nearly over before it had begun. In my very first term, in October 1962, President Kennedy went to the brink, as the saying invariably goes, over Cuba. I shall never forget where I was standing and what I was doing on the day he nearly killed me. (It was on the touchline, being forced to watch a rugby game, that I overheard some older boys discussing the likelihood of our annihilation.) At the close of the BBC’s programming that night, Richard Dimbleby enjoined all parents to please act normally and send their children to school in the morning. This didn’t apply to those of us boarders who were already at school. We were left to wonder how the adult world could be ready to gamble itself, and the life of all the subsequent and for that matter preceding generations, on a sordid squabble over a banana republic. I wouldn’t have phrased it like that then, but I do remember feeling furious disgust at the idea of being sacrificed in an American quarrel that seemed largely to be of Kennedy’s making in the first place.

I have changed my mind on a number of things since, including almost everything having to do with Cuba, but the idea that we should be grateful for having been spared, and should shower our gratitude upon the supposed Galahad of Camelot for his gracious lenience in opting not to commit genocide and suicide, seemed a bit creepy. When Kennedy was shot the following year, I knew myself somewhat apart from this supposedly generational trauma in that I felt no particular sense of loss at the passing of such a high-risk narcissist. If I registered any distinct emotion, it was that of mild relief.

If politics could force its way into my life in such a vicious and chilling manner, I felt, then I had better find out a bit more about it. At Mount House I had enjoyed the “current affairs” class and taken part in a few school debates, forcing myself to speak in public because for a short while I had developed a stutter. Who knows where this originated in my psyche (my mother later told me that I’d also stuttered a bit when my baby brother was born, no doubt in another cynical bid for attention), but it was certainly made worse by teasing and I once made the huge mistake of trying to say the name of my railway destination at term’s end — Chichester — in front of a large group. The driveling Chi-Chi-Chi-Chi-Chichester noise that resulted was to follow me around for a bit. Anyway, the main position I can remember taking was in opposition to the Tory attempt to ban “colored” immigration from the West Indies.*

Two aspects of The Leys combined to change not just what I thought, but — always much more important — how I thought. The first pressure was negatively charged, so to speak, and the second more positively so. To begin with the negative: I was highly conscious of being very fortunate to be at the school, and of having parents who were willing to sacrifice to get me there and keep me there. It offended me, in an almost aesthetic way, to find that the bulk of my contemporaries took this immense good fortune as no more than their due. Methodism is a trade like any other, and the majority of the boys were the sons of solid Lancashire and Yorkshire businessmen, who thought it entirely natural that they need not attend the sort of school where they might have to consort with the children of their employees. I found myself immensely disliking this mentality, and the accents in which it was expressed.

On the positive side, The Leys was in Cambridge, and if your father was a don at the university you could be a “home boarder”: in other words come to the school daily and go home at night. This meant that there was a certain leaven in the lump, and many lifelines to the outside world. There were boys with names like Huxley and Keynes, who really were from those distinguished families, and there was the son of a Jewish Nobel Prize winner named Perutz. As the general election of 1964 approached, a number of Labour bumper stickers were to be seen on our teachers’ cars. Then there was one of Methodism’s many paradoxes, which was its historic identification with the working class. This has been overstated and often distorted — the historian Élie Halévy had a memorable debate with Eric Hobsbawm over whether it was Methodism that had defused revolution among the lower orders in the nineteenth century — but it meant in practice that some of the visiting preachers on Sunday were unpolished ministers from

tough working-class parishes, who gave us some idea of how the other half (actually very much more than half) lived. Donald Soper, the best-known Methodist in the country, was an announced socialist with a column in *Tribune*, George Orwell's old weekly. His visit to address us in assembly was a sensation. The country's other leftist weekly, the *New Statesman*, was kept in the library, along with a specially displayed copy of the Fabian Society pamphlet that called for the abolition of the public school system. The great J.G. Ballard, who had had the reverse of the Ian Watt experience in that he'd been interned by the Japanese (Empire of the Sun) as a small boy, before being sent to the same house in the same boarding school as me, once did jokingly say that the food at The Leys was inferior to the Lunghua camp in Shanghai, but was later to admit that he'd been agreeably surprised by how comparatively little torture there had been.

This duality in the life and mind of The Leys was beautifully captured for me by an incident in my first year. I was cornered in some chilly recreation room by a would-be bully named E.A.M. Smith, a brainless and cruel lad a year or so my senior. This tough and tasty dunce excelled at games and was a member of a highly exclusive Christian crackpot sect named the Glanton Brethren, which in its own disordered mind constituted an elect of god's anointed. "Hitchens is being gassy," he said, using the school's argot for people like me who talked too much. "The cure for being gassy is a bit of a beating." I wasn't completely sure that he couldn't deliver on this threat, and the uncertainty must have shown on my features because suddenly a voice cut in: "Oh, please, don't give a damn about Smith." The moron's grin began to fade and the few who would probably have sided with him lost interest at once.* My rescuer was a tall, thin boy with a certain presence to him. Who was this chap, who could make a muscular thug shrivel? His name, it turned out, was Michael Prest. He was in the next "house" to me but was a home boarder because his father was an economics don at Jesus College. I recognized him without knowing his name because every morning in chapel, when the rest of us bent forward at the call to pray, he remained sitting up and unbowed. There was nothing the prefects and teachers could do about this: the law said we had to be in chapel every day but they couldn't force us to pray on top of that, or even compel us to pretend to do so. I admired this stand without emulating it. Within a few days I had made a new and fast friend and then one morning, as everyone else but Michael crashed lazily forward in their pews, I took a deep breath and held myself upright. It felt very lonely for a moment but soon there was nothing to it. I started bringing books to read during the sermons and the prayers, in order to improve the shining hour. R.H. Tawney on Religion and the Rise of Capitalism was, I remember, an early choice.

The lexicographer Wilfred Funk was once invited to say what he thought was the most beautiful word in the English language and nominated "mange." If asked, I would without hesitation give the word "library." The Leys not only had a fine library of its own, but my house — "North B" (the other houses, since shamed by the magnificence of Hogwarts, being unimaginatively named "North A," "East," "West," and "School") —

also had its own mini-version. From this hoard I one evening borrowed a life-changing book called *Hanged by the Neck*, a Penguin paperback issued as part of the growing national debate over the death penalty. It had two authors: one was Arthur Koestler and the other C.H. Rolph. The latter was the crime correspondent for the *New Statesman*: the name concealed the identity of Inspector Bill Hewitt of the City of London police, whom I was later to meet. Between them, these two simply demolished the case for capital punishment and gave some hair-raising examples of cold, hideous miscarriages of justice. This had two effects on me: it drew me further into the then-raging argument over the historic British institution of the gallows, which eventually culminated in its abolition in 1967, and it decided me that I would read anything by Arthur Koestler. Before long I was re-reading *Darkness at Noon* for what felt like (and quite possibly was) the third time in a month.

Things were quickening with me, in other words. I was in a sophisticated city with a treasure-house of culture. (One evening I found myself sitting in King's College chapel, listening as Yehudi Menuhin played, just in front of the newly acquired Rubens, *Adoration of the Magi*. I recall thinking that this was almost too rich a mixture for a Navy brat.) The Leys if anything favored sciences over the arts — its old boys tended to be “quietly eminent,” as one newspaper article rather devastatingly phrased it — but we could boast of having produced James Hilton (“*Mr. Chips*” having been based upon a veteran master of the school named W.H. Balgarnie*) as well as Malcolm Lowry and J.G. Ballard. I became too omnivorous in my reading, trying too hard to master new words and concepts, and to let them fall in conversation or argument, with sometimes alarming results. I gained a reputation among the sporting types (and perhaps, to be fair, not only among them) as a pseudo-intellectual. I recall two diagnoses from this period. The first, from some school counselor with a psychologist's bent, awarded me an “Aladdin's Cave complex.” This was flattering in a way, since it suggested that I had an *embarras de choix*. But it also suggested that I was too brittle to decide among so many possible treats. The second, blunter verdict came from my fairly genial if unillusioned housemaster. He informed me, in the course of one of several harangues about my character, that I was in some danger of “ending up as a pamphleteer.” It was one of those moments that one knows instantly will always be retained in the memory. At last I had a word for it! And a word that had been applied to Defoe, at that.

By the time that I was fifteen or so, then, I had acquired some precocious knowledge of the Cambridge-related worlds of Bloomsbury and the Fabians, symbolized by the figure of Bertrand Russell, whose books I was also smuggling into the chapel. I knew enough to know that my next stop ought to be Oxford, which furnished the other half of this socio-intellectual equation. I even had a clear notion that the ideal Oxford college would be Balliol, and the desired course of study Philosophy, Politics and Economics, or the famous “PPE.” I was doing well enough at “The Lit”: the Literary and Debating Society run by one of the more urbane classics masters. My stutter almost banished, I even did a little acting and made a small success of the part of Taplow in Terence Rattigan's classic *The Browning Version*. And I was beginning to try some writing.

I had “known” for years that this was what I really wanted to do. Indeed, in my grander moments I would want to claim that I had always “understood” that it was what I had to do. But I had no real concept of writing as a “living,” let alone as a life. At prep school and in the holidays, I had filled little exercise books with chiefly historical efforts, including a soon-abandoned grand narrative of the Napoleonic Wars. At The Leys there was an annual thing called the Thomas Essay Prize, with a book-token at the end of it and a handshake from the headmaster on the school’s open “speech day” every summer, for the dotting parents to witness. I entered myself for this prize in my first year and was runner-up, and I won it in one form or another every subsequent year. The only set topic that I can now remember (because there was always a set topic and it was always a worthy and elevated one) was Martin Buber’s homely maxim that “True Living Lies in Meeting.” (How was I to know that this pious old hypocrite, the author of *I and Thou*, had after 1948 moved into the Jerusalem house from which the family of my one-day-to-be friend Edward Said had been evicted?) *Cacoethia scribendi*, says Paul Cavafy somewhere: “the itch to scribble.” If I could be moved to write by the banalities of Buber, I was plainly a bit more than just itchy. The eclectic urge struck me in every department of scribbling, and I flung myself into verse parodies, short stories (for some reason very often about animals) and, in one especially regrettable episode which involved brooding, meaning-of-life, moody walks along the river that led from Cambridge to Grantchester, a project for a “libretto” to be co-written with a musically inclined boy named Spratling.

This could all have ended very badly indeed, with wilting affectation and high self-indulgence. But then I discovered something that I have struggled ever since to convey to my own students. In writing and reading, there is a gold standard. How will you be able to detect it? You will know it all right. I got full marks for an essay on Chaucer’s wonderful “Prologue” to the *Canterbury Tales* (and how fortunate I was to have Colin Wilcockson, one of the world’s experts on Langland, as my instructor). I couldn’t sleep for two nights after first reading *Crime and Punishment*. Yet never did I breathe the pure serene, as I might fetchingly have tried to say in those days, until my little craft crashed on the reefs of, first, Wilfred Owen and then George Orwell.

It can be good to start with a shipwreck. Your ideal authors ought to pull you from the foundering of your previous existence, not smilingly guide you into a friendly and peaceable harbor. Just as Llewellyn’s tale of Huw Morgan had upended my sense of the social scale, so the words of Owen’s “*Dulce et Decorum Est*” went off like a landmine under my concept of history and empire. The moment came in class. It was the turn of a very handsome boy named Sean Watson to read. As he stumbled his bored and boring way through the lines, I was consumed first by a sense of outrage, as if seeing somebody taking an axe to a grand piano. How could anybody be so brutish and insensitive? I wanted to wrench the book from his hands and declaim the poem. But then I found that this would not in fact be possible, because my eyes were blinded with stinging tears. To this day, I have difficulty reciting the poem out loud without a catch in my throat.

I became consumed with the subject and got hold of a revisionist history of the First World War, *In Flanders Fields*, by Leon Wolff, as well as *All Quiet on the Western Front* and an anti-war British novel of the trenches called *Covenant with Death*, by John Harris, the neglect of which I would still define as a huge injustice. (Its action follows a group of workers from Sheffield, from the day they enlist as friends to the day their lives are callously thrown away.) I read all the other war poets, from Siegfried Sassoon to Edmund Blunden to Robert Graves. I could feel all the ballast in my hold turning over as I came to view “The Great War” not as an episode of imperishable valor, celebrated every year on 11 November with the jingoistic verse of Rupert Brooke and Lawrence Binyon, but as an imperialist slaughter that had been ended on such bad terms by such stupid statesmen that it necessitated an even more horrible second round in 1939. Even Winston Churchill and the “Finest Hour,” in this perspective, seemed open to question, and if there was one thing that was not open to question, to someone brought up in a British military atmosphere in the 1950s, it was Winston Churchill and the “Finest Hour.” When allied with my socialist and Fabian readings in other areas, this soon had me thinking of the Spanish Civil War as the only “just” war there had probably ever been. And so I was fairly soon immersed in *Homage to Catalonia*.

I actually couldn’t make head or tail of this book in those days because the ideological battles within the Left were still opaque to me. And I had come to Orwell by an unusual path anyway. We were all expected to read *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-four*, which had been placed on the syllabus as part of the curriculum of the Cold War. (I took the opportunity to show off, and to compare and contrast *Animal Farm* to *Darkness at Noon*, which I alone in the class had read.) But I had chanced on Orwell’s “social” novels first, and had consumed *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* and *A Clergyman’s Daughter* as well as *Coming Up for Air*. In these pages, I found some specimens of exactly the lower-middle-class family that was familiar to me from life: the insecure and anxious layer of old England that strove to keep up appearances and, as Orwell put it, had “nothing to lose but their aitches.” I understood that Miss Austen and Mr. Dickens and even George Eliot had written with sympathy about folk of the middling sort, but I still hadn’t quite appreciated that actual fiction could be written about morose, proud but self-pitying people like us, and was powerfully struck by the manner in which Orwell mimicked and “caught” the tone. If he was reliable on essentials like this, I reasoned, I could trust him on other subjects as well. Soon enough, I was following Orwell to Wigan Pier (James Hilton, creator of “Shangri-La” as well as Mr. Chips, also came, it may interest you to know, from Wigan) and shadowing him in mind on his other expeditions to the lower depths.

Highly derivative in my approach, I began writing grittily polemical and socially conscious essays and fiercely anti-militarist poems. When these were turned down by the school magazine (which was not every time but often enough to inspire bold thoughts of revolt), Michael Prest and I and a few kindred spirits set up a magazine of our own, cautiously and neutrally called *Comment* to avoid too much official attention,

and actually learned to operate a manual printing press in the basement of one of the school buildings. Ink-stained pamphleteer! Very heaven!

Cambridge again — both gown and town — came to my aid. I coolly informed my housemaster that I would no longer be donning the uniform of the school's "Combined Cadet Corps," with its "Queen and Country" ethos. He at first opposed this, on the usual grounds that it would "set a precedent," but yielded to my argument that no, it would do no such thing, since none of the other boys in fact wanted to follow suit.* I already knew this because, instead of reporting for rifle-parades, I had to volunteer to do the alternative, which was "social service" in the back streets of the town, and I knew for damn sure that my schoolfellows would want no truck with any of that. I, however, as the budding socialist, positively enjoyed going into the homes of the poor and helping them fill out questionnaires about their needs.

Joining the high-toned United Nations Association and becoming the school's representative on its Cambridge schools' committee was a shrewd move (and an easy one, given that nobody else wanted the job). It meant that I was allowed to go to meetings with reps from other little academies, which in turn meant the chance to meet girls at the famously intellectual Perse School. Here I had the huge luck to encounter Janet Montefiore, a dauntingly brilliant girl who has since emerged as a distinguished professor of literature. She invited me to come and hear Edmund Blunden read his poetry at the Perse and I sat almost numb with emotion, having shaken the hand of someone who had been a contemporary of Wilfred Owen. She did better than that. Her father, Hugh, a Jewish convert to Christianity, was the vicar of Great St. Mary's, the University Church, and ran a famous program for visiting speakers. One night at her invitation — it seemed like a good enough use for a church — I crammed myself into a pew to hear W.H. Auden read from his poetry, and again was spellbound at the thought of seeing a man who had been in Spain at the same time as Orwell. (I didn't know of their bitter quarrel and wouldn't then have understood it.) I use conventional form when I say that Auden "read from" his poems; actually he recited them with great aplomb, and I recall hearing from Hugh Montefiore, long after he himself became a bishop, that he was astounded at how much Auden had been able to drink at dinner beforehand, and still perform this great live act. I can also distinctly remember hearing Auden say that he'd reached a stage where his leathery and runnelled face looked like "a wedding cake that's been left out in the rain." (This was before the release of the horror song "MacArthur Park.")

So that was another version of doomed youth and of once-epicene but now-departed beauty. Perhaps now is the moment at which I should make my own confession here. We were taught the poetry of Owen and Auden at school, and allowed to ruminate on the obsession of Owen with wounded and bleeding young soldiers, as well as on the cunning way in which Auden opened "Lay Your Sleeping Head, My Love / Human on My Faithless Arm." The master who introduced this was dexterous enough to point out that the words could easily be rearranged to make it "faithless on my human arm," and ambidextrous enough to instruct us also in the subtleties of Catullus and his "Vivamus

mea Lesbia,” but I don’t think any instructor was sufficiently phlegmatic to break the news that the two great English poets of the preceding two generations had been quite so gay. Lytton Strachey once summarized the boarding-school hothouse dilemma very aptly:

How odd the fate of pretty boys!
Who, if they dare to taste the joys
That so enchanted Classic minds,
Get whipped upon their neat behinds.
Yet should they fail to construe well
The lines that of those raptures tell
It’s very odd you must confess —
Their neat behinds get whipped no less.

There were two ways in which this hottest of all subjects could “come up” in an all-male school featuring communal showers, communal sleeping arrangements, communal lavatories, and the ever-present threat of an official thrashing on the rear. The first was unambiguously physical. Most boys decided quite early on that, since their penises would evidently give them no rest at all, they would repay the favor by giving their penises no respite in return. The night was loud with the boasts and the groans that resulted from this endless, and fairly evenly matched, single combat between chaps and their cocks. To even the dullest lad, furthermore, it would sometimes occur to think that self-abuse was slightly wasted on the self, and might be better relished in mixed company. Some were choosy about the company, and some less so, but I can only remember a very few boys who abstained from (or to put it more cruelly, were so unappetizing as to be left out of) this compensation for the general hellishness of male adolescence. It was quite possible to arrange a vigorous session of mutual relief without a word being spoken, even without eye contact.

It’s very important to understand that ninety percent of these enthusiastic participants would have punched you in the throat if you suggested there was anything homosexual (or “queer”) about what they were doing. (When I later read Gore Vidal’s distinction between homosexual persons and homosexual acts, I saw the point at once.) The unstated excuse was that this was what one did until the so-far unattainable girls became available. And there were related etiquettes to be observed: a senior boy might well have some sort of “pash” on a much junior one, but any action taken by him would be very strongly deplored. (You couldn’t actually treat a boy like a girl, in other words.) Yet the very word “pash” somehow gives the game away. In a minority of “cases” — another word for it, often represented by the = sign between two names written up as graffiti — things were infinitely more serious, as well as more ridiculous, because what appeared to be involved was, of all ludicrous things, the emotions. The routines of the day, from stolen glimpses across the chapel in the morning to a longing glance across the quadrangle as the bells tolled for “lights-out,” could be utterly consumed by the presence of “him.” One such episode came close to ruining my life, or so I thought and believed at the time.

I had one advantage and one disadvantage in this ongoing monastic sex drama, and the problem was that the advantage and the disadvantage were the same. I was a late developer physically, was quite girlish in my prepubescent years and then later, if I do say so myself, not all that bad-looking once boyishness had, so to speak, “kicked in.” This meant that I didn’t lack for partners when it came to the everyday (well, not every day) business of sheer physical relief. But it also meant that I could become the recipient of attention from older males, attention that could sometimes be very sudden and quite frightening. This perhaps made me additionally vulnerable to the fantasy of the “romantic” idyll.

Mr. Chips’s feminist-socialist wife had phrased it in a no-nonsense way by saying that official disapproval of public-school homosexuality was the equivalent of condemning a boy for being there in the first place. She was chiefly right about the sheer physical aspect. I knowingly run the risk of absurdity if I offer the spiritual or the transcendent in opposition to this, but actually it was my first exposure to love as well as to sex, and it helped teach me as vividly as anything could have done that religion was cruel and stupid. One was indeed punishable for one’s very nature: “Created sick: commanded to be sound.” The details aren’t very important, but until this moment I have doubted if I would ever be able to set them down. “He” was a sort of strawberry blond, very slightly bow-legged, with a wicked smile that seemed to promise both innocence and experience. He was in another “house.” He was my age. He was quite right-wing (which I swiftly decided to forgive) but also a “rebel” in the sense of being a cavalier elitist. His family had some connection with the louche Simon Raven, whose “Fielding Gray” novels of schoolboy infatuation and later versions of decadence furnished, for me at any rate, a sort of cheap-rate anteroom to the grander sequences of Anthony Powell. The marvelous boy was more urbane than I was, and much more knowing, if slightly less academic. His name was Guy, and I still sometimes twitch a little when I run into someone else who’s called that — even in America, where in a way it is every boy’s name.

Were poems exchanged? Were there white-hot and snatched kisses? Did we sometimes pine for the holidays to end, so that (unlike everybody else) we actually yearned to be back at school? Yes, yes, and yes. Did we sleep together? Well, dear reader, the “straight” answer is no, we didn’t. The heated yet chaste embrace was exactly what marked us off from the grim and turgid and randy manipulations in which the common herd — not excluding ourselves in our lower moments with lesser beings — partook. I won’t deny that there was some fondling. However, when we were actually caught it must have looked bad, since we had finally managed — no small achievement in a place where any sort of privacy was rendered near-unlawful — to find somewhere to be alone. The senior boy who made the discovery was a thicknecked sportocrat with the unimprovable name of Peter Raper: he had had his own bulging eye on my Guy for some time and this was his revenge.

The usual “thing” would have been public disgrace followed by expulsion. But “things” were made both more cruel and more arbitrary, and also less so. Various of my

teachers persuaded the headmaster that I was a good prospect for passing the entrance exam for Oxford: a statistic on which the school annually prided (and sold) itself. The same could be said of Guy, though he didn't eventually make it. Accordingly, having been coldly exposed to public shame, we were allowed to "stay on" but forbidden to speak to each other. At the time, I vaguely but quite worriedly thought that this might have the effect of killing me. Yet there was something so stupid, as well as so intricate, in the official sadism that I managed to surmount most of its effects. (After all, this was a time when not only was all homosexual conduct illegal in the rest of society, but all contact with members of the female sex was punishable by beating within the rules of my school! You could not win. "Perversion," so often invoked from the pulpit and the podium, was the very word that I personally employed for this sick mentality on the part of the authorities.) Of the reaction of my parents I remember almost nothing. The luckless Commander was summoned and we had a whey-faced interview in some "study" or another until I realized that he was far more embarrassed than I was. (And this was a man whose regular standby of stoicism was to intone, unvaryingly, "Worse things happen in big ships.") My mother wisely said nothing and wrote nothing. At the end of the term I didn't go home but went rock-climbing in North Wales with a school group where there was considerable free and emotionless sex among the tents and cooking fires. When I finally did get back, not having advertised my arrival time in advance, I was lucky to find my mother alone in the kitchen. She brilliantly rose and greeted me as if I'd been expected for some brittle and glamorous cocktail party of the sort that she always planned and never quite gave.

Looking back on this, I once again have the feeling that it all happened to somebody else. And yet I can be sure it was to me. Hoping to profit by a "lesson" or two, even from the most dismal and sordid moments, I could nominate perhaps more than a couple. The first is that, though I am generally glad not to be gay, I learned early on that most debates on this question are vapid or worse, since what we are discussing is not a form of sex, or not only a form of sex, but a form of love. As such, it must command respect. Then, and from having been the object of homosexual attention and predatory jealousy — this went on happening to me until I was almost out of university — I believe that the whole experience gave me some sympathy for women. I mean by that to say that I know what it's like to be the recipient of unwanted or even coercive approaches, or to be approached surreptitiously under the guise of friendship. (Assaulted once by a truck driver when I was hitchhiking, and quite lucky to have broken away from him unharmed, I can never listen to any excuses about how the victims of such attacks in some way "invite" it.) I always take it for granted that sexual moralizing by public figures is a sign of hypocrisy or worse, and most usually a desire to perform the very act that is most being condemned.*

I understand in retrospect that this was my first introduction to a conflict that dominates all our lives: the endless, irreconcilable conflict between the values of Athens and Jerusalem. On the one hand, very approximately, is the world not of hedonism but of tolerance of the recognition that sex and love have their ironic and perverse dimen-

sions. On the other is the stone-faced demand for continence, sacrifice, and conformity, and the devising of ever-crueler punishments for deviance, all invoked as if this very fanaticism did not give its whole game away. Repression is the problem in the first place. So, even at the cost of some intense momentary pain, I suppose that I might as well have learned this sooner rather than later.**

In the autumn of 1964, Michael Prest and I managed the Labour campaign in the school's mock version of the general election. No boy at The Leys had any memory of any government except that of the Tories, who had been in power, with four successive prime ministerships, since Sir Winston Churchill's victory in 1951. But the apparent grandeur of this had sunk into the farcical as the Profumo affair, allied to an infinite number of other scandals from missile procurement to rack-renting in London slums, made the term "the Establishment" (then newly coined by my future friend Henry Fairlie) a byword for "stink." Boldly, Michael and I marched into the town and went to Labour HQ. We got hold of some leaflets to distribute and some posters to nail to the school's trees. We invited a local Labour member of the council — his name, I remember, was Alderman Ramsbottom — to come and speak at lunchtime outside the school's cafeteria or "tuck-shop." I was afraid that the snobs and yobs (then synonymous in my mind) would sneer at him for his name, and so they did. But not for long. With great patience he outlined the achievements of previous socialist administrations and then asked the assembled boys if they could think of anything the Tories had done lately that could match the establishment of the National Health Service and the "granting" of independence to India. Satirically I shouted "Suez!"

Of course, on the day itself, the Tories got an easy majority of the school vote, in fact an overall majority, and I saw my own slender total being cut into by an effective and popular and charismatic Communist boy named Bevis Sale. Still, the Tories lost nationally. And I have to set down the fact that the school's own "establishment" was committed to fair play. The local Tory MP, Sir Hamilton Kerr, came to respond to my plebeian Ramsbottom and made himself look a complete weed and drip by comparison. ("Pompous little ponce," I heard my Scots housemaster distinctly say.) An even more grotesque figure named Sir Percy Rugg, who had been at the school and was the Conservative leader on the London city council, came to lunch after chapel one Sunday, and the headmaster's wife made sure that, as opposition spokesman, I was invited. The headmaster himself, a man somehow aptly named Alan Barker, sat on the Cambridge city council as an independent — being too right-wing for the official Conservatives — and his wife Jean has since become a national treasure in the massive and flesh-pink form of Lady Trumpington.

So I say again that I believe I benefited more from my public school than many boys who took it for granted. There came a day when the plummy-voiced reactionary Barker called me to his headmaster's library and handed me (1) a copy of Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* and (2) a copy of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's *Communist Manifesto*. He went on to instruct me in the elementary mechanics of dialectical materialism. I am sure that his intention was to inoculate me (the term

“tremendously wrongheaded” was certainly used) but, just as Arthur Koestler had given so many good lines to his brutish but shrewd interrogator Gletkin in *Darkness at Noon*, so the dialectic in my churning mind took on a life of its own. It was certainly rather broadminded of old Barker to give me a demolition job on high-Victorian reputations that had been written by a notorious old Fabian socialist queen. And with Marx and Engels, I realized that I was reading a superb paean to revolutionary properties and qualities — but to those of capitalism, not just of the working class.

Before long, I was peeling off the compulsory-wear school tie that made us easily identifiable in the streets of the town, and joining undergraduates at lectures in the history faculty. I heard Herbert Butterfield of Peterhouse, a famous Methodist and critic of the Whig interpretation of history, talk on Machiavelli. I went to Walter Ullman’s inaugural lecture on theocratic states. It became possible, in a town with many jovially blind-eyed landlords, to join people for drinks and disputation in pubs afterward. While I was little more than a schoolboy, I was more than ready to be that relatively new thing — a “student.”

Other noises, coming from just off the tiny stage of school, had begun to reach me, sometimes by transistor radio. At the Poetry Society one evening, a boy named Mainwaring interrupted our sedate discussion to urge forward a new name that I first registered mentally as Bob Dillon. I was fairly soon hooked on what Philip Larkin called Dylan’s “cawing, derisive voice,” and felt almost personally addressed by the words of “Masters of War” and “Hard Rain,” which seemed to encapsulate the way in which I had felt about Cuba. Then there were the loving and less cawing strains of “Mr. Tambourine Man,” “She Belongs to Me,” and “Baby Blue” . . . I’ve since had all kinds of differences with Professor Christopher Ricks, but he is and always has been correct in maintaining that Dylan is one of the essential poets of our time, and it felt right to meet him in the company of Shelley and Milton and Lowell and not in one of the record shops that were then beginning to sprout alongside the town coffee bars.

A more exotic name was also being wafted through the ether and into my head: the name Vietnam. This did not come freighted with fear like the word “Cuba”; it arrived, rather, as a summary and combination of everything one had ever learned, from Goya to Wilfred Owen, about the horrors of war. There was something profoundly, horribly shocking in the odds and the proportions of the thing. To all appearances, it seemed as if a military-industrial superpower was employing a terrifying aerial bombardment of steel and explosives and chemicals to subdue a defiant agrarian society. I had expected the newly elected Labour government to withhold British support for this foul war (and the amazingly coarse and thuggish-looking American president who was prosecuting it), and when this expectation was disappointed I began, along with many, many of my contemporaries, to experience a furious disillusionment with “conventional” politics. A bit young to be so cynical and so superior, you may think. My reply is that you should fucking well have been there, and felt it for yourself. Had the study of life and literature and history merely domesticated me to waste and betray my youth, and to gape at a spectacle of undisguised atrocity and aggression as if it should be calmly

received? I hope never to lose the access to outrage that I felt then. At Easter 1966 my brother and I joined the annual march of Britain's "stage army of the good": the yearly pilgrimage of pacifists and anarchists and rag-tag Reds that tramped from the nuclear weapons factory at Aldermaston to the traditional center of radical protest in Trafalgar Square. I donned the universal symbol of peace and wore in my lapel its broken-cross or imploring-outstretched-arm logo. I also read Bertrand Russell's appeal to forget about the insipid slogan of "peace" and take the side of the fighting Vietcong. I began to take part in the hot arguments that were latent in these two positions. Singing to the Trafalgar Square crowd, along with various folk-moaners like Julie Felix, was the dynamic, sexy Paul Jones of Manfred Mann. Patrolling the fringes of the demonstration were blue-uniformed figures whom I had been brought up to view as friends and protectors. The first real kick he gets from a cop is often a huge moment of truth to a young member of the middle class . . .

One should not postpone the raising of a curtain. In my own case, the revelation of "curtain up" was more of a sudden vivid peek from the wings but no less memorable for that. I was back at boarding school, and gritting my teeth to do well in my exams so that I might shed the schoolboy carapace and pupate as a full-fledged "student" at Balliol. It must have been the late summer of 1966, and probably toward the end of term, because otherwise the headmaster wouldn't have given permission for our very own homegrown school "pop" group, harmlessly enough named "The Saints," to give a concert on the cricket field. It was one of those warm and still evenings that in ancient Cambridge stay in the memory for a long time. Boys and masters sat or stood as they would have done for a cricket match, the more senior in comfy seats in the pavilion, the others on benches, the rest on the grass. After taking us through a fairly tame Buddy Holly-style repertoire, the respectable "Saints" switched to a passably potent and twanging version of "House of the Rising Sun." The amplifiers must have been good and, as I said, the night was soft and still. At any rate, the sound must have carried because very suddenly, and very quietly, the cricket ground of our exclusive private school was overrun by a huge crowd of boys (and even girls) from the town. They had heard the strains of rock, even of mild rock, and they knew about Eric Burdon and The Animals, and they also knew by now that there was nothing much their parents or the police could do about it, or about them. They crossed a social and geographic boundary that they had never transgressed before, and suddenly found it to be delightfully easy. Nonetheless, they were civil and quiet and curious, which meant that even my most awful contemporaries were embarrassingly polite and broadminded in return (as well as nervously aware of being surprised and outnumbered). There was even some mild fraternization before the school authorities saw the way things might go and pulled the plugs that had animated the drums and guitars. Then, but too late, the traditional police constables made their appearance.

As one who had already been employing the town against the school for all kinds of private and public purposes, I was still rather slow to see what had just happened to old Britain in front of my very eyes. The first thought I had was derived from my

traditional and classical half: surely this was like those other “animals” of the forest who had been shyly drawn to sit, forgetting their own wildness, when Orpheus began to pluck his lute? It was quite some while later that I thought, no, you sentimental fool, what you were seeing, and hearing, was the opening of “The Sixties.”

* I was to get over my speech impediment and now find that I can speak perfectly contentedly, often or preferably without interruption, for hours at a time. Let this be an inspiration to all those who contend with childhood disabilities.

* In an excellent instance of the “revenge is sour” rule, I was to meet Smith again many years later. It was on the London underground one morning. He was an abject tramp, carrying two heavy bags of rotting old newspapers and declaiming aloud to the unheeding world around him. He chose to sit down just next to me. I pondered for a moment and couldn’t resist: “E.A.M. Smith!” I said into his ear. He jumped like a pea on a hot shovel. “How do you know my name?” Cruelly I replied: “We’ve had our eye on you for some time.” His face betrayed the animal fear of the hopeless paranoid, and so I couldn’t bear to continue. “It’s all right. I just remember you from school. It’s Hitchens here.” He said dully: “I remember you. You were a sinner. I used to pray for you.” That seemed about right.

* This book, like the several movies that bear its name, has become a synonym for old-school-tie values and general mushy sentiment about the dear old days. In fact, Mr. Chipping’s lovely wife, Kathie, is a socialist and a feminist who wins all hearts; she forces him to be honest about homosexual play among the boys; he ends up sympathizing with railway strikers, opposing the British Empire in the Boer War and insisting on decent respect for Germans after 1914.

* At about this time I read *Catch-22* and was thrilled when Yossarian, confronted by Major Danby’s version of the old official trick-question “Suppose everybody felt that way?” replied “Then I’d certainly be a damned fool to feel any other way, wouldn’t I?”

* From *King Lear*: “Thou rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand! Why dost thou lash that whore? . . . Thou hotly lust’st to use her in that kind, for which thou whip’st her.” This is why, whenever I hear some bigmouth in Washington or the Christian heartland banging on about the evils of sodomy or whatever, I mentally enter his name in my notebook and contentedly set my watch. Sooner rather than later, he will be discovered down on his weary and wellworn old knees in some dreary motel or latrine, with an expired Visa card, having tried to pay well over the odds to be peed upon by some Apache transvestite.

** It was Guy, now dead for some time but in his later years an amazingly successful seducer of girls, who first insisted that I read the Greek-classical novels of Mary Renault. If this was all he had done for me, I would still be hoarsely grateful to him. While other boys plowed their way across the puerile yet toilsome pages of *Narnia*, or sank themselves into the costive innards of Middle Earth, I was following the thread of Ariadne and the tracks of Alexander. *The King Must Die*; *The Bull from the Sea*: Athens has seldom trumped Jerusalem with greater style or panache.

The Sixties: Revolution in the Revolution (and Brideshead Regurgitated)

Contradiction is what keeps sanity in place.

—Gustave Flaubert

ISUPPOSE YOU KNOW,” said the most careful and elegant and witty English poet of my generation when I first took his hand and accepted a Bloody Mary financed from his slight but always-open purse, “that you are the second most famous person in Oxford.” We were in the unswept front room of the King’s Arms, a celebrated but grim pub which allowed one to wear out the intervals of the day between the drably utilitarian Bodleian Library — open to the public and across the road — and the soaringly beautiful Codrington Library, which was for private members only and formed a part of the sort of upper-crust game reserve that was All Souls. The year was 1969 and I had spent a good deal of time failing to study seriously in either library. I also detected, in James Fenton’s rather pointed if not indeed barbed hello, a sort of reproach that I should have squandered so much of my studentship and still ended up as only the second most notorious person at the university. Time spent on a second-class degree, it was often said, was time wasted even if it was “an upper second.” For this to be said of one’s degree was perhaps understandable, even forgivable. But of one’s thus-far career?*

Of course I knew without asking who had won the laurel as the most famous person. This was Mike Rosen, a tall and rangy and bushy and charismatic Jewish socialist who could draw all eyes and who had already had a theatrical piece performed at the Oxford Playhouse. It was said that this same play (its name was Backbone) might have a season at the Royal Court in Sloane Square, which at that date still possessed the frisson that attached to *Look Back in Anger* and countless other dramas that had unsettled London’s theatergoing bourgeoisie. So everybody knew who Mike Rosen was. The experts in children’s literature — that most exacting form of all writing, to which he has contributed whole shelves — still do. But I bridled nonetheless. Rosen’s parents were of the Old Left. I thought his family was fatally compromised by Stalinism. During the Oxford Playhouse version of Günter Grass’s play *The Plebeians Rehearse the Uprising*, where the actors in a Bertolt Brecht drama become the sudden participants in real events, Rosen had been happy to go along with the play-within-the-play that

satirized the ghastly East German regime and celebrated the workers' revolt against it that had taken place in 1953. At an early age, then, we all got to know Brecht's mordant line about East German Communism: that if the People had indeed let down the Party — as had actually been said in a Communist leaflet distributed on the Stalinallee or Stalin Street — then the Party might have to dissolve the People and elect a new one. I went to the play and was impressed to see Rosen take the part of the Berlin worker who — in a premonition of November 1989 — ripped the red flag off the Brandenburg Gate. It was said that Mike's father had been very distressed to learn of his son betraying the proletariat in this way.

You may ask what kind of Oxford it was in which an ex-Stalinist and a post-Trotskyist vied for the celebrity that had once belonged to Oscar Wilde and Kenneth Tynan, or more fictionally, Zuleika Dobson and Sebastian Flyte, or more realistically, the supposedly serious politicians who had been at my own college and then gone on to be prime minister, foreign secretary, and all the rest of it. The clue, at least in this decade, lay in a very small distinction. There were people of the Sixties, and then there were the "sixty-eighters" or, if you wanted to be more assertively Marxist and internationalist about it, *les soixante-huitards*. I was one of those who desired to be a bit more assertively Marxist and internationalist about it. After all, to be a mere "Sixties" person, all you needed was to have been born in the right year, and to be available for what I once heard called "the most contemptible solidarity of all: the generational."

Without quite knowing it, I had been rehearsing for 1968 for some time. I attended every demonstration that I could against the war in Vietnam. I joined the Labour Party as soon as I was eligible to do so, and went to branch meetings to agitate against the Labour government's craven support for President Johnson. At that stage I suppose I would have described myself as a Left Social Democrat (or "LSD" in the jargon of the movement). Anyway I know that this was my frame of mind when I went to a meeting at Oxford Town Hall one evening in the winter of 1966.

The main speaker was John Berger, the art critic and novelist who was still, then, a member of the Communist Party. He spoke with some verve about the suffering and the resistance of the Vietnamese. Then we heard from some moon-faced pacifist priest and a Labour local councillor or two, and finally a man who I distinctly remember was called Henderson Brooks. He was evidently a Maoist of some kind and spoke with the sort of sloganized hysteria that I instantly recognized from Orwell's description of the Left Book Club meeting in *Coming Up for Air*. It was fascinating to see that some people still talked like that: Did I dream it or did he actually say "running dogs of capitalism"? Anyway, I was getting better at this sort of thing and in the question period got up and said some satirical things about the Great Helmsman of the Chinese people: a people who were then floundering wretchedly in bankruptcy, famine, and mass murder under the state sponsorship of Mao's "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution." I don't remember what was said in riposte but as the meeting was breaking up, I was approached by a rather terrier-like man who said he'd admired my remarks and asked

me if I'd like to go with him to the pub. If a pint of tepid British beer can be said to have acted as a catalyst, then this encounter changed my life.

My host was named Peter Sedgwick. He was a short, slightly misshapen fellow — I mean by the unkind but indispensable word misshapen to convey that his back was slightly hunched — with penetrating blue eyes and thinning wiry curls. He was a specialist in psychiatry. After some general chat he rather diffidently handed me some of the “literature” (the Left always used to speak of its pamphlets and leaflets in this exalted way) of a group called the International Socialists. I promised to take a look, we made an appointment to meet again, and my education in “Left Opposition” Marxism began.

I had been impressed by the essays of Marx to which my headmaster had prophylactically (or so he thought) introduced me. But when applied to the English scene there seemed scant relevance in these texts. Had not the postwar social changes in Britain rendered the idea of “class” somewhat obsolete? Were the trade unions not a self-serving interest bloc? And wasn't the failure of Communism in Russia and Eastern Europe a demonstration in practice of the failure (to put it no higher) of the Communist idea? Only in countries like apartheid South Africa, whose goods I was already boycotting, could anything so dogmatic have a residual appeal. These were among my objections to moving any further to the left than I already had.

From Peter I heard (and read, because he liked to write me letters as well) that by no means was class a dead issue, and that in the workshops and factories of Britain there was a growing shop-floor movement, which sought to democratize the act of labor itself and put an end to the wasteful inequalities of capitalist competition. In contrast, the Labour government was building a corporate state: an alliance between big capital, union bureaucrats, and the government, from which an impermeable hierarchy would emerge. (This had some force in my ear: the car industry was the lifeblood of non-university Oxford, and the Labour government had just spent an immense sum of public money to finance a merger of the two main automobile manufacturers. The tendency of capitalism toward monopoly seemed not to have abated.)

Then, Peter inquired searchingly, what about this same capitalism's tendency to war? Much of the full-employment surge that had followed 1945 and made the Great Depression seem so far away was based on a sort of militarized Keynesianism: an “arms economy” that kept the assembly lines going and the wage-packets full but exposed us all to an unelected and uniformed authority and ultimately to the sheer barbarism that would follow a nuclear “exchange.” Still reeling as I was from the Cuban missile moment, and horrified as I had become by the high-tech assault on Vietnam, I was perhaps especially susceptible to persuasion here.

Most important, though, it was from Peter that I acquired a grounding in the alternative history of the twentieth century. Yes, it was true that the Soviet Union and its satellites were a tyrannical empire (in point of fact a “state-capitalist” system, according to the theoreticians of the International Socialists), but did I know what Rosa Luxemburg had written to Lenin, warning him of the tyranny to come, in 1918? Did I

know about the epic struggle of Leon Trotsky to mount an international resistance to Stalin? Was I aware that in mutated and isolated forms, that magnificent struggle was still going on? I knew nothing of this, but I became increasingly fascinated to learn of it, and to read more of it.

I was slowly being inducted into a revolution within the revolution, or to a Left that was in and yet not of the “Left” as it was generally understood. This perfectly suited my already-acquired and protective habit of keeping two sets of books.

Thus, by the time that I enrolled as an “undergraduate” at Balliol College, Oxford, I was already a militant “student” member of the International Socialist groupuscule, as such factions were to become known after the momentously imminent events in France. That winter of 1967 I doubt that our Oxford branch contained more than a dozen members: perhaps three from the Cowley factories and the rest drawn from the student-teacher-stray-intellectual classes. In a year we had grown to perhaps a hundred, with a “periphery” of many more and an influence well beyond our size. This was because we were the only ones to see 1968 coming: I mean really coming.

I can still remember the feelings of mingled exhilaration and vindication that accompanied this. Some premonitory birth pangs had been felt throughout 1967, even as I was learning from Peter Sedgwick how to try and trace the red thread of the anti-Stalinist Left through the bloody labyrinth of the century. In the spring of 1967 had come the atrocious military coup in Greece, making “free-world” NATO complicit in a filthy dictatorship. At about this time it was becoming clear that the American forces in Vietnam had no chance of repressing the southern insurgency and keeping the country partitioned unless they were prepared to redouble their troop presence or else resort to methods of wholesale cruelty and destruction (on which it often seemed that they had decided already). The same was becoming self-evident for another NATO dictatorship: Salazar’s bankrupt and odious regime in Portugal, trying in vain to frustrate the forces of liberation in its colonies in southern and western Africa. In Prague, the Czechoslovak Communist Party was morally and intellectually disintegrating, purely because people had been permitted to raise the most elementary questions (about whether they could read Franz Kafka, for example). In a way most stirringly of all, and with that exemplary dignity and courage that truly has passed into history, black America had quietly and simply folded its arms and said “enough” and was prepared to dare and outface any bully who took up the challenge.

There did not seem enough hours in the day, or days in the week, with which to take part in the different movements of solidarity. But I was no longer a boarding-school boy, so I could afford the time. In addition, and rather seductively at that age, one seemed somehow to have become equipped with a special set of spectacles with which to read the newspapers and thereby make unique sense of them. Events in Vietnam and Selma clearly discredited the vaunted “New Frontier” of American pseudo-liberalism, just as the stirrings in Poland and Czechoslovakia demonstrated the historic bankruptcy of Stalinism, while it went without saying that a British Labour government that could not even put down a white settler racist revolt in colonial Rhodesia (we all proudly

called it by its true name of Zimbabwe) was showing in practice that Social Democratic reformism had exhausted itself. Soon all humane people would understand the need for a revolution from below, where those who worked and struggled and produced would be the ruling class. Those with eyes to see could detect this with ease, while those whose eyes had yet to be opened could always . . . well, it was thought that events would also assist in persuading them. I realize that this may sound slightly as if I had joined a cult. There actually was a rival Trotskyist group, later to make itself notorious by recruiting Corin and Vanessa Redgrave, whose depraved “leader” Gerry Healy did in fact teach us all we needed to learn about cultism and the mental and sexual and financial exploitation of the young and the credulous. (I learned a lot about “faith-based” movements from this early instruction.) But the “I.S.,” as our group was known, had a relaxed and humorous internal life and also a quizzical and critical attitude to the “Sixties” mindset.

We didn’t grow our hair too long, because we wanted to mingle with the workers at the factory gate and on the housing estates. We didn’t “do” drugs, which we regarded as a pathetic, weak-minded escapism almost as contemptible as religion (as well as a bad habit which could expose us to a “plant” from the police). Rock and roll and sex were OK. Looking back, I still think we picked the right options. The general atmosphere of intellectual promiscuity and “Third World” romanticism didn’t grab us all that hard, either. If there were any two pseudo-intellectuals who really defined moral silliness in that period, they were Herbert Marcuse and R.D. Laing. The first had come up with the lazy concept of “repressive tolerance” to explain how liberalism was just another mask for tyranny, and the second was a would-be shrink who believed schizophrenia to be, rather than a nightmarish yet treatable malady, a social “construct” imposed by the ideology of the family. It so happened that the best critiques of both these frauds (as well as a stringent essay against the marijuana “culture” titled “Flowers of Decay”) had been written for the annual Socialist Register by my new comrade Peter Sedgwick, who was a qualified expert in mental health as well as in the difference between frantic Frankfurtian illusion and stubborn material reality. So how lucky I was to have been initiated, if that’s the word I want, by someone who was a trained and hardened skeptic about the worst of the Left as well as an advocate for the best of it.*

Three major names survive for me from this period (when, so solemnly and suddenly history-conscious, I had not yet ceased to be a teenager). The first is that of Jacek Kurón, who with his colleague Karel Modzelewski had newly written a “socialist manifesto” from within the forbidding walls of a prison in Poland. These two hardy intellectuals had been members of a “Trotskyist” group before being abruptly jailed for their work, and it was one of my jobs to see that their pamphlet got a wide circulation, and that “our” version of anti-Communism was heard as loudly as the commonplace “Cold War” variety. The Polish workers, said this argument, should understand that the Communist Party was their exploiter and not their representative. Did we know that in our tiny way we were assisting at the inception of Polish Solidarnosc?

The second name is that of C.L.R. James, one of the moral titans of twentieth-century dissent. In the 1930s he had managed to combine two very attractive positions. He was the main spokesman for the independence of his native Trinidad and the chief cricket correspondent of the Guardian. His book on the latter subject, *Beyond a Boundary*, elucidates this recondite sport for the uninitiated and also suggests that in several ways it is not really a “sport” at all, but more of a classical art form that prepares young men for social grace as well as for chivalric heroism. James — whose early short stories, collected as *Minty Alley*, were plainly influential on the early writings of V.S. Naipaul — managed to do without Naipaul’s combination of rancor and racial/ethnic resentment. He was an internationalist to his core. His monumental work is *Black Jacobins*, a history of Toussaint L’Ouverture and the slave insurrection in Haiti. This rebellion, taking the slogans of the French Revolution to be universal, ran up against the disagreeable fact that the France of Bonaparte regarded the noble words of 1789 as being, at best, for whites only. James’s book — exactly the sort of history that was left out of the school and university syllabus — had a lasting effect on me. So did its author, when I helped arrange a meeting for him at Ruskin College, Oxford, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Russian Revolution. He chose to speak largely about Vietnam, putting it squarely in the context of imperialism and the resistance to it, and his wonderfully sonorous voice was as enthralling to me as his very striking carriage and appearance. He was getting on by then, but the nimbus of white hair only accentuated his hollow-cheeked, almost anthracite face. One had heard of his legendary success with women (all of it gallant and consensual, unlike that of some other masters of the platform) but for me a little crackle of current was provided by the reflection that here stood a man who had, in real time, publicly broken with Stalin and associated with Trotsky, actively taken part in an anti-colonial revolution, and been present (before being hastily deported) in the very early stirrings of the American civil rights movement.

Another important thing about “CLR,” as he was known in our little movement, was his disdainful opposition to any Third World fetishism or half-baked negritude. He had schooled himself in classical literature and regarded the canon of English as something with which every literate person of any culture should become acquainted. He had a particular love for Thackeray, and it was said that he could recite chapters of *Vanity Fair* by heart. This commitment was important then and was to become much more so as the 1960s fashion turned against “Eurocentrism.”*

The third name from the esoteric historical and cultural dimension with which I was becoming so enamored was that of Victor Serge. This Belgian-born proletarian rebel had graduated from embroilment in the politics of Barcelona and harsh experience of the inside of many European jails (episodes which were to help him produce two excellent books in the shape of *Birth of Our Power* and *Men in Prison*) to direct participation in the upheavals of the First World War and the Bolshevik seizure of power. During his work with the Third International he had the opportunity to see the monstrosity of Stalinism in detail, and as it was actually taking shape. It seems

possible that he was the first person to use the word “totalitarianism”: in any event he was early in apprehending the whole implication of the concept. He had to get out of the Soviet Union in a big hurry, having backed the Left Opposition, and might well have died in the Gulag if it had not been for the intercession of a few of those European intellectuals who had not capitulated to the Red Tsar. His precious papers were all stolen from him by the secret police at the frontier; he was able to republish his poems from memory, and that capacious memory, too, was strong enough to enable him to produce a novel — *The Case of Comrade Tulayev* — which many good judges regard as the earliest and best fictional representation of the show trials and the Great Terror. Ending up in exile in Mexico like some others who had survived what we Luxemburgists and Trotskyists used to call “the midnight of the century” — the dire moment of explicit collusion between Stalin and Hitler — Serge died there but not before producing one of the finest autobiographies of that same century: *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*. As it happened, none other than Peter Sedgwick had, when I met him, just edited and introduced a fine edition of this book for Oxford University Press. My headmaster Alan Barker had produced a potted history of the American Civil War, and my English master Colin Wilcockson had edited Langland and *Piers Plowman*, and in my budding-bibliophile way I did possess signed copies of these volumes, but I’d never before had a friend who was in so many ways an actual author and critic, and of the books I’ve lost in the various moves and mess-ups of my life the one I regret most keenly is the one that Peter Sedgwick gave me. I shall not forget the inscription though. “To Chris,” it said, “in friendship and fraternity.”

This was my official induction into the comradely manners and addresses of the Left, but it also presented a problem which I didn’t particularly like to “raise” — as we invariably said when mounting an objection. The awkward fact was: I simply couldn’t bear or stand to be called “Chris.”

* “I think you are going finally to displace me as the most hated man in American life. And of course that position is bearable only if one is number one. To be the second most hated man in the picture will probably prove to be a little like working behind a mule for years . . .” Norman Mailer to William F. Buckley, 20 April 1965.

* I can’t say that we didn’t have to deal with our own cognitive dissonance. The British working class was for the most part entirely unmoved by our exertions. I do remember a demonstration, assiduously prepared for by mass factory-gate leafleting, to which exactly no workers showed up. My theoretician friend David Rosenberg, confronting this daunting result, said to me: “It rather confirms our analysis that the union bureaucrats can no longer truly mobilize their rank and file.” True enough as far as it went: but also true that those who bang their heads against history’s wall had better be equipped with some kind of a theoretical crash helmet. It was to take me some time to doff my own.

* I visited CLR on his deathbed in London — on the corner of Shakespeare Avenue and Railton Road — in the late 1980s. He was still quite lucid but hard of hearing. I asked him to inscribe a new edition of *Black Jacobins* and, when he inquired what I’d

like him to put on the flyleaf, simply suggested that he use the old Left salutation and put “yours fraternally.” He fixed me with a piercing look. “I do not,” he said sternly, “believe in eternity.” For a moment I was confused and then thought how apt it was that, in mishearing me but repudiating the afterlife, CLR could get fraternity and eternity entangled with one another.

Chris or Christopher?

Perhaps I should add that when Christopher Hitchens was still a humble Chris, he and I were comrades in the same far-left political outfit. But he has gone on to higher things, discovering in the process a degree of political maturity as a naturalized citizen of Babylon, whereas I have remained stuck in the same old political groove, a case of arrested development if ever there was one.

— Terry Eagleton, trying to be funny while describing himself accurately in *Reason, Faith and Revolution* [2009]

THERE WAS A little more to this dislike, of having my name circumcised or otherwise amputated, than may at first appear. “Chris,” it seemed to me, was too matey and pseudo-friendly as an abbreviation, even had it gone with another kind of surname. Chris Price, an old comrade of mine and a Labour member of Parliament, almost preferred it. But then his second name began with a “P.” Whereas mine began with an “H,” and the next thing after “Chris Hitchens” — itself a dreary sound — would be, given this incentive to ditch the aspirate, “Chris ’itchens.” All other aesthetic considerations to one side, I knew that this would be more than Yvonne could bear. (What she wanted was to see me represent Balliol on the University Challenge team, where I did actually make my first-ever television appearance. I can still remember the name of the captain of St. David’s, Lampeter, a theological college in North Wales for heaven’s sake, which trounced us in the very first round and demolished the complacent Balliol myth of “effortless superiority.” He was called Jim Melican.) My mother had not nurtured her firstborn son in order to hear him addressed as if he were a taxi driver or pothole-filler. And yet, to that son’s chosen brothers and sisters of the Labour and socialist movement, it was a part of the warmth and fraternity — part of one’s very acceptance — that the informal version be adopted without any further permission or ado. Could I tell Yvonne that so many of my dearest associates were now called names like “Harry” or “Norm”? I couldn’t see it softening the blow. She swallowed a bit when someone did call me “Chris” in her presence, and shuddered when I myself used one of the movement’s favorite nouns and verbs — the keyword “concern” — with the accent on the first syllable. So help me, I can plead that I hadn’t quite known I was doing it.

Oddly enough — as the English say on so many occasions where there is nothing in the least bit odd to relate, as in “I saw old Jorkins the other day, oddly enough” — I hadn’t ever had to face this problem before. At English boarding schools you are known by your last name, or by your initials if you are very lucky or extremely unlucky. (Yvonne had been vigilant about this too, understanding that one’s initials had often to be stenciled on luggage or briefcases, and deploring the thoughtless parents who had

baptized their sons with life-threatening initials like “VD” or “BO.”) There were always nicknames, but these were mostly infantile, such as “Jumbo” for a fatso. If another boy was addressing you by your actual first name, it often heralded some doomed or farcical romantic proposal. And the time when all my best friends would solve the problem by calling me “Hitch” lay well in the future. Meanwhile, this “Chris/Christopher” business was a torment and, as I say, it symbolized something about the double life that I was trying to lead at Oxford.

I use the words “double life” without any shame. To be sure, I had hoped to re-make myself into a serious person and an ally of the working class and was educating myself with that in view. But I also wanted to see a bit of life and the world and to shed the carapace of a sexually inhibited schoolboy. There was the Oxford of A.D. Lindsay’s great anti-Munich and anti-Chamberlain and anti-Hitler election campaign in 1938 — Lindsay having been head of my college — and then there was the Oxford of the great steaming and clanging car factories that had been founded by Lord Nuffield (one of the financiers of prewar British fascism). But somewhere there was also the Oxford of Evelyn Waugh and Oscar Wilde and Max Beerbohm and punts and strawberries and enticing young ladies. Occasionally the two aspects overlapped: in the Victorian buildings of the Oxford Union debating society, which I joined on my first day, there were some faded pre-Raphaelite frescoes executed by the aesthete — but the socialist aesthete — William Morris. In any case, I was determined as far as I could to have it both ways.

To do otherwise, it seemed, would have been to miss the point of being there. As the head of my college we had Christopher Hill — nobody ever thought of calling him “Chris” — who was arguably the most distinguished Marxist historian of his day and certainly the man who had done the most to influence thinking about that English Civil War (or rather, “English Revolution”), which had ended by separating the head of King Charles I from his shoulders in 1649. One could have sherry with this amazing man (who had called his daughter “Fanny” at a time when he thought that eighteenth-century pornography was a rarefied pastime that would never catch up to him) and learn to negotiate his mild, disarming stutter. Or, down the road a bit in Wadham College, there was Sir Maurice Bowra, an inspired classicist around whom the aura of Brideshead still clung. (He always had the look, to me, of a near-extinct but still-smoldering volcano: on our first introduction he gave me one of the most frankly appraising “once-over/up-and-down” glances I have ever had. The joke about “Wadham and Gomorrah,” apparently, had been his own idea.)

My main tutor was Dr. Steven Lukes, already famous for his study of Emile Durkheim and soon to be more celebrated still for his book *Power: A Radical View*. Thanks to his kind interest in me, I was taken to a private seminar at Nuffield College (yes, named after that fascist-sympathizing automobile tycoon) to talk with Noam Chomsky, who had come to deliver the John Locke lectures. And I was also invited to a small cocktail party to meet Sir Isaiah Berlin.

I hope that by dropping these names I can convey something of the headiness of it. It might have been heady at any time, but in the '68 atmosphere it chanced to coincide with other ferments and intoxications as well. It's trite to say that each generation rebels, and I'd already had the chance to get bored with the late-'50s image of a "rebel without a cause." But it so fell out that we, the so-called boomers or at least the '68 portion of us, were rebels with a cause. Thus it happened that one evening in the Oxford Union dining room, when I was still not yet twenty and maybe not even nineteen, I acted as host to Isaiah Berlin, our guest as an invited speaker on the subject of his very first published book, the life and thought of Karl Marx. The sponsor was the Oxford University Labour Club, which had not yet irretrievably split between the Socialists and the Social Democrats, and I had been listed on the club's card as "Secretary: Chris Hitchens (Ball)." This rankled twice: even the name of my ancient college had been pruned and cut back. Still, not much could spoil an evening where one was hosting an eyewitness of the Bolshevik revolution in St. Petersburg: still the only such person I have ever met.

I have to say that the evening was two kinds of shock to me. In the first place, Berlin's urbanity and magnetism were like nothing I had ever met before and vindicated, I remember thinking, the whole point of coming to Oxford in the first place. "Cured me for life, cured me for life," he murmured authoritatively, about the experience of seeing a Communist revolution at first hand. Having had every opportunity to grow weary of undergraduate naïveté and/or enthusiasm, he betrayed no sign of it and managed to answer questions as if they were being put to him for the first time. This I understood as a great gift without being able to define it, just as I who knew nothing of food or wine somehow understood that the dinner we were offering him — a strain on our fiercely straitened socialist budget — was far inferior to the average he could have expected if dining at home or in college, or indeed alone.*

The second shock came when we moved to the seminar room for the talk itself. Though he spoke with his customary plummy authority, and leavened this with a good deal of irony and wit, Berlin clearly didn't know very much about either Marx or Marxism. He woodenly maintained that Marx was a historical "determinist." It's true that the old boy sometimes spoke of "history" itself as an actor, but he actually stressed human agency more than almost any other thinker. It came to me later as quite a confirmation to read, in Berlin's biography, that he had been commissioned to write a "quickie" book on Marx, and had told the publishers how unqualified he felt to do it. (This was another aspect of his famous insecurity about his own golden reputation: a self-doubt that he could never get his many disciples to take seriously.) But at the time, I was marooned between two almost equally subversive and exciting thoughts. Was it possible that the class of celebrated "experts" were all like this, that there was an academic kingdom of Oz where it was only pretended that the authorities were absolute? Or was I putting on airs and presuming to judge my betters?*

At the somewhat later cocktail party in Beaumont Street, Berlin again lived up to his billing by, first, remembering my name and the circumstances under which we had

met, and, second, remembering that I'd said that his talk had made my own Marxism a little more self-confident, and, third, ignoring much more distinguished figures who wanted his company, and telling me quite a long story about Henry James and Winston Churchill. Having told you that much, how can I avoid re-telling it to you? It seems that in the early days of the First World War, both James and Churchill had been invited to a lunch party near one of the Channel ports, James presumably because he lived at Rye and Churchill because he was running the Admiralty. James was all enthusiasm, having applied to become a British citizen and flushed with the zeal of the convert. Churchill, however, had no time for the old man's eager questions about the progress of the war, and rather snubbed him. When the coming statesman had left in his chauffeur-driven car to go back to London, the rest of the company turned to Henry James to see if he could be cheered up after being so crushed. But he brightened on his own account and said: "It is strange with how uneven a hand nature chooses to distribute her richest favors," going on to add "but it rather bucks one up." In that way that was so characteristic of him, Berlin went on to repeat "rather bucks one up" a couple of times.

I had had a frisson of another sort when seated in a small Nuffield seminar room with Noam Chomsky. Having attended those John Locke lectures, in which he had galvanized the university by insisting on delivering one of the series solely on the question of Vietnam, I knew that he was a highly potent scholar and speaker. (A large number of leftists in those days suddenly discovered a consuming interest in linguistics and the deep structure of "generative grammar.") But up close I realized there was something toneless about him: something indeed almost mechanical, as if he were afraid to show any engagement with the emotions. He wasted, I remember, a huge amount of time on a banal question about the American Maoist sect "Progressive Labor." Through this and other experiences I began to discern one of the elements of an education: get as near to the supposed masters and commanders as you can and see what stuff they are really made of. As I watched famous scholars and professors flounder here and there, I also, in my career as a speaker at the Oxford Union, had a chance to meet senior ministers and parliamentarians "up close" and dine with them before as well as drink with them afterward, and be amazed once again at how ignorant and sometimes plain stupid were the people who claimed to run the country. This was an essential stage of my formation and one for which I am hugely grateful, though I fear it must have made me much more insufferably cocky and sure of myself than I deserved to be. A consciousness of rectitude can be a terrible thing, and in those days I didn't just think that I was right: I thought that "we" (our group of International Socialists in particular) were being damn well proved right. If you have never yourself had the experience of feeling that you are yoked to the great steam engine of history, then allow me to inform you that the conviction is a very intoxicating one.

In the early spring of 1968 we saw the valiant guerrillas of the Vietcong carrying their fight to the very doorstep of the American embassy in Saigon. Not long after came the never-to-be-forgotten shots of the Capitol in Washington shrouded in plumes

of smoke and flame, as black America refused to sit still for the murder of the gentle Martin Luther King. In Poland, a so-called anti-Zionist purge proved that the Stalinist gerontocrats would stoop even to Hitlerite tactics to repress dissent and prolong their sterile and boring hold on power. The year began to gather pace and acquire a rhythm: in late April (on Hitler's birthday to be precise) Enoch Powell appeared to insult the memory of Dr. King by making a speech warning that "colored" immigration to Britain would eventuate in bloodshed. He succeeded at any rate in igniting a bonfire of rubbishy racism among many elements of the British working class. A few weeks later, the French working class appeared to make a completely different point by joining a revolt against ten years of Gaullism that had originally begun among Parisian students, and by not merely going on strike but occupying the factories that warehoused them for the working day. Many of the Paris '68 slogans struck my cohort as absurd or quixotic or narcissistic ("Take Your Desires For Reality" was one especially silly one), but I shall never forget how the workers at the Berliet factory rearranged the big letters of the company's name to read "Liberte" right over the factory gate. Suddenly, it did truly seem possible that the revolutionary tradition of Europe was being revived. How was I to know that I was watching the end of a tradition rather than the resurrection of one?

I kept that transistor radio by my bed and almost every morning I would reach out and turn it on and be forced out of bed by some fresh crisis. Bobby Kennedy slain; the implosion of Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society"; the mass mobilizations of American youth against the draft. When I was eighteen and nineteen and twenty, there was no eighteen-year-old franchise, and the single deadliest and most telling line of Barry McGuire's then-famous song "Eve of Destruction" was "You're old enough to kill, but not for voting."* One was, to a certain degree, compelled to think in generational terms, and in these terms my whole arrival at Balliol, an outcome for which I had worked so hard for so long, had been a disappointment. There were still petty rules and regulations covering one's movements, still a curfew by which time the college gate was locked and all female guests had to be out of one's room, still instructions about what to wear, and still the impression that one's new dons, like one's former teachers, were in loco parentis or surrogate parents or guardians. In time, my "generation" was to change a lot of that, too. But we of the International Socialists thought that such alterations were incidental, indeed almost irrelevant, when contrasted to the global struggle of which we quite genuinely believed ourselves to be a part. Let me give an example (I would once have said: "Let me give a concrete example").

For some time, there had been mounting reports of a rising in Africa against Portuguese colonialism. The senescent dictator António Salazar, a dirty relic from the era of Mussolini and Hitler, held the people of Portugal itself in bondage but also counted among his "possessions" the territories of Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau. Angola and Mozambique, if you glance at a map, are like pillars or gates guarding the eastern and western approaches to Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia) and South Africa. Thus it seemed fairly obvious that a victory against Portuguese fascism would also spell the

end, in not too much time, of apartheid. Picture then my pride and excitement when it was announced that Dr. Eduardo Mondlane, the founder of the Mozambican movement FRELIMO (Front for the Liberation of Mozambique), would be in England and had accepted an invitation from our modest little Labour Club to come and speak. We booked a big hall for him, and a very small room (my own, inside the college, because our resources were exhausted) for a reception. Both events were full, and I shall not forget the immense pride with which I opened my door to this genial and eloquent and brave and modest man. In my lodgings that evening, as I think back on it, the guests (among them Robert Resha, representative in London of Mandela's African National Congress) included the spokesmen for several movements that were later to become governments. After Mondlane's rafter-ringing speech (through which Michael Prest sat by the door determinedly holding a stout and sharp umbrella in case any local fascists tried any rough stuff), we all marched in torchlight procession to lay a wreath for those who had died to free their country. A few weeks later, Dr. Mondlane opened a parcel in his office in Tanzania and was murdered by an explosive charge that had been sent to him by the Portuguese secret police. I have since laid another wreath on his grave in a free Mozambique.

I can't be as proud now as I was then of also hosting Nathan Shamyurira, a spokesman for the black majority in white Rhodesia, for whom we arranged a meeting in the precincts of Rhodes House itself, one of the great imperialist's many endowments to Oxford. He spoke persuasively enough, but the next time I saw him in the flesh he was a minister in Robert Mugabe's unspeakable government. However, and in compensation, I can say that Nelson Mandela, then only at the beginning of his almost three decades of imprisonment, was made an honorary vice president of the Labour Club and had his name put on our membership cards. We wrote to him on Robben Island to inform him of this honor. Decades later when I met him at the British ambassador's house in Washington, I rather absurdly asked him if he had ever received the letter. With that room-warming smile of his, he replied that he had indeed received it, and that he remembered it brightening his day. I didn't really believe this charming pretense, but I did become voiceless for a minute or so.

Just as "Oxford" allowed one to meet near-legendary members of the Establishment's firmament on nearly equal terms, so it enabled encounters with celebrated academic dissidents. One of the achievements of our "year" was to bring the students of Ruskin College, the Labour movement institute for scholarship-minded workers, into the argument. (All right, not to "bring" them but to help them bridge the gap by, for example, demanding that they be made eligible to join the Oxford Union.) At gatherings of the "History Workshop," held on Ruskin's grounds and in nearby alehouses, I heard E.P. Thompson deliver an impromptu lecture on the "Enclosures" of common land in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in which he brought an otherwise unsentimental audience to tears with his recitation of the poems of John Clare. The gentle and humane spirit of the late Raphael Samuel was the animating force in this "higher education": his democratic energy was boundless and his meek, modest appearance always

made him a special target for the rough attentions of the police. I can still see him being rudely shoved into a cell where I and others were already penned after a demonstration, his spectacles deliberately broken and his face and hands cut and bruised, for all the world like some luckless Jewish scholar who had been made a plaything by the brown comedians on Kristallnacht. Taking his seat on the bare floor and looking myopically and cheerfully about himself, he reconvened the last session of the History Workshop and made us all recollect how even Edward Thompson had left a few things out of the account. Nowadays the very word “Workshop” is an intimation to me of boredom and dogma, and I shall never forget Raphael’s honesty when he finally wrote in the 1980s that he didn’t really desire to live in a socialist society, but his *Theaters of Memory* is still a potent and eloquent reminder of a braver time, the recollection of which I don’t have the right to deny.

All this was very much a part of the “Chris” half of my existence, the Chris who wore a donkey jacket and got himself beaten up by scabs in a punch-up on the picket line at French and Collett’s non-union auto-parts factory. (Fenton swears that I even donned a beret to lead a demonstration: he is quite incapable of an untruth but I am sure I didn’t do it more than once.) This was all in a day’s work: a day that might include leafleting or selling the *Socialist Worker* outside a car plant in the morning, then spray-painting pro-Vietcong graffiti on the walls, and arguing vehemently with Communists and Social Democrats or rival groups of Trotskyists long into the night. These latter battles were by far the most bitter and strenuous ones, and they often involved disputes that would have seemed ridiculously arcane to the outsider (as to whether the Soviet system was a “deformed” or “degenerated” workers’ state, for example, as opposed to our indictment of it as “state capitalist”). However, a training in logic chopping and Talmudic-style micro-exegesis can come in handy in later life, as can a training in speaking with a bullhorn from an upturned milk crate outside a factory, and then later scrambling into a dinner jacket and addressing the Oxford Union debating society under the rules of parliamentary order.

That last example was an instance of the “Christopher” side. It was through the Union, in fact, that I found myself becoming socially involved with an altogether different “set.” These were confident young men who owned fast cars, who had “rooms” rather than a room, who wore waistcoats and cravats and drank wine and liqueurs instead of beer. After I’d made some successful sally or other in a Union debate, a group of these closed in on me as the proceedings were ending and more or less challenged me to come and have a cocktail. I couldn’t resist: anyway I didn’t want to. Here, I thought, might be the entrée to that more gorgeous and seductive Oxford of which I’d read so much and (thus far) experienced so little.

Thereby, and perhaps not quite unlike poor, dowdy Charles Ryder in Waugh’s masterpiece, I found myself from time to time transported into the world of Christ Church and the Gridiron Club and invited to dine in restaurants which featured tasseled menus and wine lists. This was wholly new to me and potentially very embarrassing, too, since I had virtually no money. (The Commander, when I turned eighteen, had taken me to

the bank, opened an account in my name with fifty pounds in it and told me, in effect, that that was my lot.) However, without a word actually being spoken, it was subtly conveyed to me by my new friends that I wasn't expected to reciprocate. I was, instead, expected to sing for my supper. This could have been corrupting, but I justified it to myself by saying that I was learning from, and perhaps even teaching, the enemy camp. In the late Sixties, it wasn't only we who thought there might be a revolution round the corner. Quite a good portion of the Establishment was fairly rattled and apprehensive also, and the Tory press was full of material which — because it tended to exaggerate our influence and numbers — made those of us on the hard Left feel that perhaps we weren't wasting our time. (The university authorities at one time seriously considered paving over the cobblestones in some of Oxford's older streets, lest they be dug up and employed as missiles as had occurred in Paris.)

In case I may seem too opportunistic, let me say that I genuinely came to like some of these gilded and witty reactionaries. One of them, the late David Levy, later quite a celebrated conservative intellectual, was certainly the first protofascist I had ever met, and I would often almost literally pinch myself as he burred gaily on about Charles Maurras and Action Française, about the beauties of Salazar's Portugal and Franco's Spain, and sang the words of the Mussolini anthem "Giovinezza." "Gaily" might chance to be the apt expression here, because there was a good deal of camp among these young men, and a certain amount of active bisexuality — though I don't think David himself ever even looked at a woman. It makes me blush a bit to say so, but I was still prized for my looks in those days and, from experience at my own much less glamorous boarding school, could read the signs and knew the ropes. Every now and then, even though I was by then fixed on the pursuit of young women, a mild and mildly enjoyable relapse would occur and I suppose that I can "claim" this, if that's the right word, of two young men who later became members of Margaret Thatcher's government.

For this very reason I can't really give any more names, but one oblique consequence was that I got myself invited to meet John Sparrow at All Souls. How to describe "The Warden," as he was universally known? And how to describe his college, a florid antique shop that admitted no students and guarded only the exalted privileges of its "fellows": a den of iniquity to every egalitarian and a place where silver candelabras and goblets adorned a nightly debauch of venison and port. Or so the tales ran. It was in this thick, rich atmosphere that the Munich agreement had partly been hatched: there was a whole book with the simple, damning title All Souls and Appeasement. I absolutely could not wait to see the place for myself.

It was by no means a disappointment. Sparrow was hosting a small lunch — "luncheon" might have been more the mot juste — and as he took my hand with both of his he summoned a butler named Lane to inquire what I might desire by way of a drink. I had never seen a butler before, and this one had the same name as Algy's manservant in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. I had barely had time to adjust myself when lunch began and I was overwhelmed by the variety and deliciousness of the food and wine, and the splendor of the silver and glass. Sparrow exerted himself to

live up to everything one had ever heard about him. He declared that homosexuality ought to be punishable — “gravely punishable,” as he put it with purring relish — even though he hoped to remain a member of a sophisticated minority that would be exempt from this very code. Since the law had only recently been changed, I recall myself guessing that there was an element of masochistic nostalgia in this. Sparrow had evidently done some hard thinking about buggery. He had contributed to the last great argument about literary censorship in England, arguing that in a very rugged passage of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* D.H. Lawrence had plainly intended to suggest that the gamekeeper had sodomized his boss’s wife. (I must say that I agree with this analysis, though what struck me most about the novel when I last read it was the way in which gruff Nottinghamshire miners say “aks” for “ask,” in just the same manner that now marks off the speech of the black American ghetto. Some work here surely for a philologist, but not a project that would have especially amused Sparrow.)

Like Lord Marchmain in *Brideshead*, Sparrow was “everything that the Socialists would have me be.” His reactionary style was almost, if not in fact, a self-parody. He had engaged a photographer to walk around Oxford and take discreet photographs, not of the most beautiful and epicene young men, but of the most scrofulous and surly ones. This might have betrayed an interest in “rough trade” and was perhaps not unconnected to it, but when he showed me the resulting album (which contained snatched studies of quite a few of my more disaffected friends), he accompanied my turning of the pages with a reading of Walter Pater on the ephemerality and fragility of youth. I was by then a dinner guest, and even an after-dinner guest over the candles and decanters as they reflected each other in the high polish of the table. One evening I was placed next to that great Cornish queen A.L. Rowse, who had only recently unburdened himself of a new gay theory of the origin and dedication of Shakespeare’s Sonnets but mainly wanted to tell me what I already knew, that Hitchens was a Cornish name, and positively demanded to be told whether the Mrs. Hitchens who kept sending him such fervent and unwanted love letters was by any chance my mother. He was so lost in conceit that he did not, I remember thinking, completely trust my denial.

For all who try to lead a double life there will eventually be “a small but interesting revenge” as James Fenton later phrased it to me. Mine came when I was addressing a crowd of infuriated students from the steps of the Clarendon Building and denouncing some official infraction of our rights to free sex and free association and free speech. Over the heads of the audience, as I was hitting my peroration, I saw the silvered and saturnine features of “The Warden,” who must by then have been the most execrated figure on the Oxford Left. A twitch at the corner of his lip betrayed his design, which I detected almost at the same instant. Making a discreet but determined path through the astonished protestors, he arrived just as I was concluding and said: “My dear Christopher, I am so sorry to have missed most of your speech. I have no doubt it was admirable. But I do hope you haven’t forgotten that you promised to look in after dinner tonight.” It was a moment of cock-crow. I could have pretended not to understand, but I replied instead that I was looking forward to it and — as he glided

away with a sleek air of “game, set, and match” clinging to him — faced the slightly baffled faces of my comrades. I could have taken refuge in some “know your enemy” formulation, but something in me said that this would be ignoble. I didn’t want a one-dimensional politicized life.

I sympathized, all the same, with those who were effectively forced to live one. Again to cite James Fenton, who first pointed it out to me, you were compelled to notice something different about the American students. As the rest of us poured out of “hall” after dinner and had a smoke and a drink in the quad, they tended to draw aside and form a huddle, as if hashing over some private matter or specific grief. We all knew what this was. Having been lucky enough to become Rhodes Scholars or in other ways be chosen as envoys of their country, they found themselves overseas at a time when the United States was conducting an imperialist war in Indochina and a holding action against the insistent demands of its own long-oppressed black minority at home. Those things would have been bad enough by themselves, but in addition it was entirely possible that these young Americans could be compelled to take part in a war they mostly regarded as criminal. Hence those tight little circles on the lawn as the Oxford dusk came on: Should they defy the draft and become outlaws, with the choice of prison or exile, or submit and become obedient and get on with their careers? It’s been often said since that it was only the military draft that stoked anti-war feeling among the relatively privileged American students, and that once the system of conscription was abolished, the feeling of outrage about Vietnam was diminished in proportion. I was there and I remember clearly, and I feel it a point of honor to give the lie to this sneer. The young Americans I knew were not afraid of being killed, or rather, they were very much more afraid that they would be forced to kill.*

I remember the address — 46 Leckford Road — where many of them shared a house. Frank Aller, for example, a brilliant and conscience-ridden young man, eventually took his own life because he could not bear the conflict between his love of his country and his hatred of the war. Another young man lodging at the same address was Bill Clinton. I don’t recollect him so well though my friend and contemporary Martin Walker, later to be one of Clinton’s best biographers, swears that he remembers us being in the same room. The occasion was to become a famous one, since it was the very time when the habitual and professional liar Clinton later claimed that he “didn’t inhale.” There’s no mystery about this, any more than there ever was about his later falsifications. He has always been allergic to smoke and he preferred, like many another marijuana enthusiast, to take his dope in the form of large handfuls of cookies and brownies. Distributed around Oxford at the time were many young men — Strobe Talbott, Robert Reich, Ira Magaziner — who were later to become members of the Clinton administration. Of these, I remember Magaziner (later the man to ruin American health care on behalf of Hillary Clinton) the best. He had been something of a leader of the anti-war movement at Brown University in Rhode Island. I had written “RING IRA” on a pad by the telephone in a house I was then sharing, and when the police

came calling on another matter to do with a public demonstration, they took a lot of persuading that this was not a sinister appointment with Irish Republicanism.

I didn't much like what little I knew of Clinton, and this may have had something to do with my suspicion that he, too, was trying to have things both ways. Someone was informing on the American anti-war students and reporting their activities to Mr. Cord Meyer and the CIA desk at the London embassy in Grosvenor Square (we knew this because the fools once approached the wrong guy as a recruit, and he blew the whistle), and I am not the only person who has sometimes suspected that it was Clinton who was the snitch. On another face-both-ways question, he and I both became peripherally involved (at different times, I hasten to add) with a pair of Leckford Road girls who, principally Sapphic in their interests, would arrange for sessions of group frolic. The men who flattered themselves that they were the desired objective would later discover that they were merely the goats tethered in the clearing, the better to magnetize more women into the trap. I have always thought that to be a deft and sinuous scheme and wish that I had understood its dynamics better at the time. But this is very much like the rest of life, where, as Kierkegaard so shrewdly observes, one is condemned to live it forward and review it backward. If you are going to sleep with Thatcher's future ministers and toy with a future president's lesbian girlfriend, in other words, you will not be able to savor it fully at the time and will have to content yourself with recollecting it in some kind of tranquility.

I tried at the time and have even attempted retrospectively to pretend that I enjoyed Oxford more than I did. For example, my tutor in formal logic was Dr. Anthony Kenny, who was then only beginning to raise the vast architecture of his now-magisterial *History of Philosophy*. Descending the staircase from his room after a tutorial, I remember thinking that I had finally lodged in my mind the principles of Cartesian reasoning. Kenny had been a Catholic priest in a tough parish in Liverpool before deciding that Thomas Aquinas's proofs of god's existence were unsatisfactory. He left the ministry and quite some time later got married, at which point the Catholic Church excommunicated him because he had violated his vows as a priest! Many people don't understand that the term "lapsed Catholic" entails the sinister implication that only the Church can decide who leaves it and why, or when. (I had already come across some extreme Communist sects which would insist on expelling anyone who wished to resign.) Anyway, on the evening of my Cartesian tutorial I sat in my room listening to all the bells of Oxford chiming and tolling, and telling myself "Here you are, in a college that has been a great center of learning since the medieval schoolmen. Outside your window is the very place where Bishops Cranmer and Latimer and Ridley were burned at the stake for their principles. You can be the inheritor of all this, and more, and give yourself to the life of the mind." Even as I tried to convince myself, I realized what I have often had to accept since, that if you have to try and persuade yourself of something, you are probably already very much inclined to doubt or distrust it.

Did I really think that my examinations in logic and philosophy didn't matter much, because a revolution was in progress or at least in prospect? I did. Did I ignore my

parents and my tutors when they said that my career prospects would suffer unless I applied myself more to my studies? Yes again, and not so much with careless abandon as with the thought that such counterinducements were somehow contemptible. Did I go to a vast demonstration in Grosvenor Square in London, outside the American embassy, which turned into a pitched battle between ourselves and the mounted police, and wonder in advance how many people might actually be killed in such a confrontation? Yes I did, and I can still recall the way in which my throat and heart seemed to swell as the police were temporarily driven back, and the advancing allies of the Vietnamese began to sing "We Shall Overcome." I added to my police record for arrests, of all of which I am still reasonably proud. When a charge against me of "incitement to riot" was eventually dropped, I was slightly crestfallen because I had thought it a back-handed tribute to my abilities as an orator. I helped organize a sit-down outside an Oxford hairdressers' shop that refused black female customers. While still on bail for this pending offense, I sat down again on the pitch at a cricket match involving a segregated South African team. In court, I failed to amuse the magistrate when I complained of the brutal behavior of the arresting police officer and gave the number that he had worn on his uniform. "How can you be so sure," snapped the man on the judicial bench, "of that number?" "Merely because, Your Honor," I responded sarcastically, "the figures 1389 are the same as the date of the great Peasants' Revolt." The resulting heavy fine reflected the court's view of my impromptu contempt, as well as of my refusal to swear on the Bible when I took my oath. When found guilty, my comrades and I rose to our feet in the dock and sang "The Internationale," fists raised in the approved and defiant manner.

I didn't have the money to pay the fine, but I had been told that there was every chance that John Lennon would shell out for all of us. I later vastly preferred Mick Jagger's "Street Fighting Man," which had been written for my then-friend Tariq Ali, to the Beatles' more conciliatory "You Say You Want a Revolution," but in those days I would also have agreed with one of Lenin's favorite statements (borrowed as I now know from the satirical Juvenal) that pecunia non olet or "money has no smell." Anyway I left the court in a hurry because on the following day I was due to board a charter flight that would take me across the Atlantic for the first time in my life and land me in revolutionary Cuba.

* I was later to find that George Orwell, invited by Philip Larkin in 1941 to address a joint meeting of the Labour Club and the English Club, had been given an inedible dinner because Larkin had earlier splurged all the hospitality fund on an ill-advised blowout for Dylan Thomas.

* His very name seemed to exude authority: Old Testament conjoined to the brilliant but haunted capital. The only rival in nomenclature I can call to mind is my friend Pascal Bruckner.

* It's sobering and depressing to reflect that McGuire, who had mainly been influenced by the war in the Middle East the preceding year, is now one of those bards who still likes to sing about the end of days because he is a millennialist and fundamentalist

Christian. But by then, I had come to prefer even the hard-line militant verses of Phil Ochs to the more lenient Bob Dylan.

* I would never have guessed at the time that conscription would be abolished by Richard Nixon, and still less that he would appoint Milton Friedman and Alan Greenspan to the Presidential Commission on the subject. The two right-wing libertarians condemned the draft as “involuntary servitude.” Today, almost the only people who call for the return of the system are collectivists and liberals.

Havana versus Prague

Within the Revolution, everything. Outside the Revolution, nothing.

— Fidel Castro

Ex ecclesia, nulla salus. [Outside the church, no salvation.]

— Thomas Aquinas

At the risk of seeming ridiculous, the true revolutionary is moved by true feelings of love.

— Ernesto “Che” Guevara

Socialism with a human face.

— Alexander Dubek

THE EXPEDITION TO CUBA was the toughest exercise in double-accounting that I had so far undertaken. It was only a few months since Guevara had met his pathetic yet stirring demise in the highlands of Bolivia, and the Cuban government had announced that any young leftist who wanted to break the embargo and could get to the island would be a guest in a special camp for “internationalists.” This, with its chance to mingle with revolutionaries from all over the globe, was an unmissable invitation. But it was also an opportunity to see whether Cuba’s claim to be an alternative “model” to Soviet state-socialism possessed any staying-power. It’s difficult to remember today, when Havana itself is run by a wrinkled oligarchy of old Communist gargoyles, but in the 1960s there was a dramatic contrast between the waxworks in the Kremlin and the young, informal, spontaneous, and even somewhat sexy leadership in Havana. Not that we of the International Socialists, who sent our own team of polemicists and dialecticians to the camp, were much impressed by beard-sporting histrionic types, either. It was revolution within the revolution again.

Since I couldn’t pay that fine, how had I paid for the flight? Easy. I had just been awarded a Kitchener Scholarship, named for the man whose face adorned the World War One poster admonishing all young Britons to remember that “Your Country Needs YOU!” Available only to the sons of naval and military officers who were obliged to lead low-budget lives at university, this award required an interview with some red-faced old buffers who wanted mainly to reassure themselves about one’s general soundness. I had a decent shave and put on a tie and played along. When asked what I did for extracurricular activity, I cited the Oxford Union. “Didn’t Her Majesty The Queen,” one of the whiskery veterans inquired, “just recently attend a debate there?” This was too good to miss: she had in fact shown up and I had been technically a member of the committee that ran the debate. Modestly, I made the most of this fact and knew in that moment that the scholarship named for the red-coated imperial hero of Khartoum

would be mine and would help finance a socialist incendiary. (I think I may also have justified my duplicity by recalling the shameful way in which the Navy had treated my father over his pension. Yes, that's right — they owe us. What great self-persuaders we all are.)

At Gatwick Airport I recognized quite a few of the brothers and sisters who turned up to board the scruffy Czechoslovak charter aircraft that was to take us to Havana, and I submitted sullenly to the business of being pulled to one side while plainclothes British policemen rudely grabbed my passport and wrote down all my details in a ledger before letting me proceed. (Who cares? I thought angrily. Their rule won't last much longer.)

"The belly of the beast" was the expression commonly used for the United States in those days, and there seemed something gratifying in the way that our plane made only a brief touchdown in Newfoundland before embarking upon the second leg and setting course for Havana while avoiding the taint of Yanqui airspace. Arrival at the José Martí Airport, with its blinding sunshine and crushing humidity, was an excitement all of its own. We were greeted by smiling and good-looking young comrades who offered a tray of daiquiri rum cocktails: this first impression was as unlike the Berlin Wall version of official Communism as one could wish. But there came at once a slight moment of awkwardness. After handing over my passport, I waited awhile and, having by now heard a couple of rousing speeches of welcome, asked for it back. The hospitable international-ist grin on the face of the Cuban host contracted perhaps a millimeter or so. "We look after it for you." "You do? For how long?" "Until you leave our country." I felt an immediate sense of unease but decided to get over it.

I might perhaps have succeeded in getting over it, were it not for a couple of later developments. The scheme was for our planeload of mainly British internationalists to board the waiting buses that would take us to the Campamento Cinco de Mayo, a newly built work-camp in the hilly, verdant province of Pinar del Rio. Here we would join our French, German, Italian, African, and other *compañeros*, and have dialogues with them in the evening while helping to plant much-needed coffee seedlings during the day. In this fashion, we would build links between different insurgencies at the grassroots level while — at the seedling level — helping to rid Cuba of its notorious colonial dependency on the single crop (the infamous "monoculture") of sugar.* What could be more agreeable?

I didn't expect or want luxury at the camp, and I didn't get it. Canvas bunk beds, very early starts, communal showers and meals: these were no sweat and no problem for one who had survived English public school, whereas in contrast to my boarding-school experience the food was excellent and plentiful, and there were females with red scarves in their hair. I didn't especially like the way that uplifting music and hectoring speeches were played all the time on the camp's loudspeaker system, but I was much more alarmed when, deciding on a hike one day to enjoy the surrounding scenery, I began to wave goodbye to the Cuban boys at the gate and was ordered to hold it right there. Where did I think I was going? On a hike. Well, I was told, I couldn't. And

why not? Because we say so. Now, I didn't speak much Spanish and I didn't have a passport (it suddenly came back to me) and I would have had only a vague idea how to negotiate my way to a neighboring village, let alone to Havana. But the guards — as I now thought of them — pointed emphatically back up the trail to the camp. Once you have been told that you can't leave a place, its attractions may be many but its charm will instantly be void. A cat may stay contentedly in one spot for hours at a time, but detain it in that spot by grasping its tail and it will try to tear out its own tail by the roots. I wasn't free to move at all, and the Cubans who wanted to leave Cuba were only free, after a long process, to be expelled from their country of birth and never allowed to return.

Naturally this qualified my attitude to the camp itself but then, I had come with my fellow Trotskyists and Luxemburgists precisely to test the Cuban claim that this was a new revolution, a brave departure from the grim, gray pattern of Soviet socialism. Also, it had to be admitted, Cuba was helping the many rebel forces that were even then fighting so bravely on a Latin American continent that was dominated by cruel and backward military dictatorships. Factional disputes in the camp kept us joyously and passionately awake. Of course we argued about everything from the Paris Commune to the Spanish Civil War, but two critical questions were these: Had Che Guevara been right in proposing that "moral incentives" should replace material ones? And what line should be taken about the increasingly bitter split between the Russian and Czechoslovakian Communist Parties?

On the question of moral incentives and the idea of "the new socialist man," I had nothing but doubts. At the close of his beautiful essay *Literature and Revolution*, Trotsky had spoken lyrically of a future in which "the average man will rise to the stature of an Aristotle, a Goethe or a Marx"; in which his very physique would become "more supple, muscular and harmonious," and had closed by saying that "beyond these hills, new peaks will rise." Myself, I could understand that political and economic conditions could make people very much worse (as in the case of Nazism, say) but I had too much English empirical schooling to believe that material circumstances on their own could make people all that much better. And surely, to be a materialist in the first place entailed the acceptance of mankind as a primate species? Karl Marx himself had admired and even hoped to emulate Charles Darwin. Anyway, here was my chance at witnessing a laboratory experiment. Was Cuba producing a more selfless and exemplary human type?

I shan't easily forget the reply I received from a very sweet if slightly slow-spoken Communist Party official. "Yes," he said. "In fact the 'new man' is being evolved in the town of San Andres." As soon as I heard this, I demanded to visit this Utopian commune, as did many of my comrades, but the trip to San Andres was always somehow being postponed while they ironed out the wrinkles in the "new man," and one was forced to wonder why in any case it should only "work" in this particular isolated hamlet. As a consolation prize, perhaps, we were instead invited to see Fidel Castro speak in Santa Clara, at a mass rally on 26 July, anniversary of the beginning of the

revolution, in the very city that Che Guevara had personally wrested from the control of the old regime.

Although Guevara's martyred cadaver had been displayed on televisions all around the world, looking more than slightly Christ-like in its defiant and bearded serenity, his actual resting place was — as with the Nazarene, indeed — unknown. (He had in fact been secretly buried by the CIA under the tarmac of a Bolivian airstrip, and after having his hands amputated for fingerprinting purposes, but this grisly detail was not to be uncovered, or the whole reliquary returned to Havana, until the 1990s.) Thus, the yell that "Che Guevara no ha muerte!" had a sort of resonance, just as the innumerable images of his living visage possessed an iconic potency. The Cuban leadership declared 1968 to be the "Year of the Heroic Guerrilla" and issued a call to all the schoolchildren in the country that they should live their lives "Como el Che" or in the manner of Guevara. It was the impossibility of following this directive that hit me first, even before the realization that the whole thing was borrowed from what Christians called "The Imitation of Christ." So there it was: Cuban socialism was too much like a boarding school in one way and too much like a church in another.

Long lectures from the headmaster were another feature that the two setups had in common. (That, and a huge overemphasis on team games and competitive sports of every kind.) I mustn't pretend that it wasn't somewhat thrilling to have a front-row seat and see the young Fidel Castro step up to the microphone and begin to stroke his beard in that way he once had. But after the first couple of hours and the first few standing ovations I felt that I had begun to grasp the main points. And a couple of hours later I was about ready to go and look for a cold beer. This commodity was actually easily come by, and for free, and one cynic suggested to me that that's how so many of the audience had been recruited to the rally in the first place. What hit me even more in my midsection, though, was the astonishing availability of young hookers on the edge of the crowd. One of the claims of the Cuban revolution was to have abolished prostitution and though I had never personally believed this to be feasible (the withering away of the state being one thing but the withering away of the penis quite another), the whore scene in Santa Clara was many times more lurid than anything to be imagined in a "bourgeois" society. The same thing went, by the way, for the regime's much more arrogant and nasty claim to have done away with that other "bourgeois" vice of homosexuality. In such working public lavatories as one could find, the slogan *libertad por los maricones* was frequently chalked or scrawled, to show that the Cuban gays were by no means willing to concur in their own abolition. As the macro address by the Maximum Leader showed signs of drawing to a close, the crowd began to disintegrate into its individual constituents of people hurrying home. The red-scarfed militants near the platform kept up a steady volley of cheers, but the masses were calling it a day. There was a distinct impression that more and better material incentives were what many workers and peasants would appreciate. I won't claim that I saw this all at once, and another part of me was still with the zealous

Cubans who wanted to make sacrifices for Vietnam and Angola, and who didn't want a life of ease.

These and other reflections inevitably "raised the question" — as we never tired of putting it — of Czechoslovakia. The Cuban leadership took no decided view on the increasingly public quarrel between Prague and Moscow. The Cuban Communist Party paper *Granma* (later to be described by my Argentine anti-fascist friend Jacobo Timerman as "a degradation of the act of reading") was then printing the communiqués from both Communist capitals. This neutrality was not at all shared by the Cuban in the street, as I was to find out. Perhaps it had something to do with the natural bias in favor of a small country as against a superpower; equally probably, as I was told, it had to do with the arrogant conduct of the many Russian "advisors" in Cuba. Certainly when you have had your European features greeted by little showers of pebbles and dogshit and the taunt "Sovietico" from the street urchins of Havana, you have been granted a glimpse or a hint of that very useful thing, an unscripted public opinion. Moreover, the Czech crew of the charter plane that brought me to Cuba had issued an invitation. When we go back, they said, we stop in London to drop you off and we are not allowed to pick up any passengers. In other words, we fly on to Prague with an empty plane. If you care to stay on board, we can show you "Socialism With A Human Face" for no extra charge. I had instantly signed on for this marvelous opportunity. Reporting to the Czechoslovak Airlines office in Havana to reconfirm my ticket, I found that the Czechs and Slovaks of the city had mounted their own demonstration on La Rampa, the city's main drag, and had been greeted by enthusiastic applause from average citizens on the sidewalk: another unfakeable test of popular emotion.

Back in the camp, though, it seemed hard to imagine that Party-mindedness would not emerge as the eventual victor. I can remember exactly how I came to realize this. Cuba was famous for its celebration of cinema and its lionization of its revolutionary directors like Tomás Guitiérrez Alea, the great "Titon" (even if his best-known marquee title, *Memories of Underdevelopment*, was perhaps only rivaled in sheer balls-aching tedium of nomenclature by the Czechoslovak masterpiece *Closely Watched Trains*). Almost every night we could sit on a hillside and watch dramatic movies projected onto a huge open-air screen. On one tense and humid evening I watched Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers*, completely unaware as were many first-time viewers that the harsh, grainy sequences of street fighting were not taken from a documentary, and near-intoxicated (despite my supposedly better ideological training) by the visceral, sordid romance of the urban guerrilla. When it was over I sat around, part-hypnotized by the raw seduction of violence, until they showed it again. (Several of the people I met in the *Campamento Cinco de Mayo* later showed up in the dock in Europe as members of the "Angry Brigade," the "Red Brigade," and kindred nihilist organizations. One of them I had known quite well. I attended his trial at the Old Bailey in the early 1970s and, as an early "Angry Brigade" communiqué was read out by the prosecuting counsel, suddenly realized that it was almost word-for-word what I had heard young Kit actually saying under the palms of Pinar del Rio.)

At all events, to the camp one day, for a seminar on film and revolution, was brought the legendary Cuban director Santiago Alvarez. I had seen some of his stuff and been more impressed by its pace and color than I should have been: I knew perfectly well that the hideous President Johnson had not ordered the murders of John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Robert Kennedy, but in that frenzied year it was exciting to see a piece of throbbing filmic propaganda called “LBJ” (the letters standing for “Luther, Bobby, and Jack” though even the order was weirdly wrong there) which blamed him for all three, and which additionally boasted a piercing soundtrack with the magnificent, defiant wailings of Miriam Makeba, wife of the crazed but charismatic incendiary Stokely Carmichael.

For all this lurid lapse into infantile pre-Oliver Stone leftism, old Alvarez then gave a reasonable-enough talk, and so I put up my hand and asked him a question. How did he find it, as an artist, to be working in Cuba, a state that had official policies on the aesthetic? Alvarez had obviously expected something like this and replied that artistic and intellectual liberty was untrammelled. Were there, I inquired, no exceptions to this? Well, he said, almost laughing at the naïveté of my question, it would not of course be possible or desirable to attempt any attacks or satires on the Leader of the Revolution himself. But otherwise, the freedom of conscience and creativity was absolute.

I do not know if what I next said came from the “Left” or “Right” part of my brain, but I like to think I anticipated at least some of the huge cultural and literary defection that later cost Castro the allegiance of writers as diverse as Carlos Franqui, Heberto Padilla, Jorge Edwards, and many others. I made the mere observation that if the most salient figure in the state and society was immune from critical comment, then all the rest was detail. Ah, please never forget how useful the obvious can be. And how right it is that the image of the undraped emperor is such a keystone of our folklore. I don’t think I have ever been so richly rewarded merely for saying the self-evident. There was quite an “atmosphere” until after Alvarez — whose reply, if any, I don’t remember — had left, and then this “atmosphere” persisted while I took my metal tray and lined up in the dining hall. When I pretended to ask what was up, one of the Scottish comrades informed me: “The Cuban brothers thought what you said and did was so obviously counter-revolutionary.” I was both annoyed and delighted by this obloquy. I certainly considered myself a revolutionary and would warmly have contested the right of anybody to deny me the title, but there was also the sheer pleasure of seeing cliché in action: almost as if one had been called an “enemy of the people,” or a “capitalist hyena” or — back to school again — someone who had “let the whole side down.” You do not forget, even if you come from a free and humorous society, the first time that you are with unsmiling seriousness called a “counter-revolutionary” to your face.

It cannot have been many mornings later when I was shaken awake and told “Get up, and get up NOW! The Russians have invaded Czechoslovakia.” The person who was doing the shaking had bet me a trifling sum that this outcome would not occur, so it was nice of her to bring me the news of her own loss. I had already felt, in the course of the annus mirabilis of 1968, the sensation of being somehow involved in a

historical moment or conjuncture, but at that instant in Cuba I think I could have been forgiven the self-dramatization. For one thing, and merely because of the time zone, the terrible news from Eastern Europe came to us quite early in the morning. And as I have said, the Castro leadership had as yet taken no public position on what was still an inter-Communist quarrel. It was announced that Fidel would speak that night and give the “line.” I was quite sure that I knew what he was going to say (and indeed was frivolous enough to make a few more wagers on the side) but meanwhile one was in the almost unique position of being in a Communist state where for a whole day there was no official position on the most important item of international news.

I was in Havana itself by then, because it was almost time to catch the charter plane home or, in my case, to Prague. The Red Army’s first action had been to seize and immobilize the main airports of Czechoslovakia, so our plane hadn’t even been able to leave its base. I remember going to the campus of Havana University, where there were a surprising number of students willing to denounce the Russian action without looking over their shoulders or lowering their voices. All dissent had to be couched in Communist terms, so you heard it said that “Che” would never have supported such big-power bullying. (This I then half-believed but now doubt.) The Chinese leadership in Beijing had lost no time in denouncing “Soviet social-imperialism,” and there was a demonstration outside the Chinese embassy in support of this position, with people wearing little badges of Mao. I was told by somebody that if you went to call on the Chinese, they would ply you with cocktails and cigarettes while they explained their position, so I posed as an internationalist visitor and found the story to be true . . . the exquisite cigarettes, I remember, had the name “Double Happiness.” The politics weren’t so sublime: a tiny diplomatic bureaucrat explained that China had been the first to call for Russian intervention in Hungary to stop counter-revolution in 1956, so had every right to denounce the latest move as “counter-revolutionary” in turn. The logic of this didn’t seem exactly beautiful. And there was that unsettling term again . . .

At lunchtime came the news that Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese Communists had supported the Russians. This was enough to sway quite a number of Cubans . . . then dusk began to draw in and the population mustered around the TV sets. I forget now where I watched the lengthy tirade in which Fidel Castro ended all Utopian babble about Cuba following a different course from the sclerotic Stalinists in the Kremlin, but I think it was in the same pink-façaded Hotel Nacional where Graham Greene’s sadistic Captain Segura once received a cold blast of soda-water in the face and shouted “Cono!” before he could stop himself. As the speech of the bearded one wore on, the faces of some of my comrades began to take on a startled and upset cold-shower look as well. And by the end of it, as the routine standing ovation of the Central Committee was being shown, the argument in our ranks was already under way.

Apart from those few who stubbornly thought that Castro had done and said the right thing by taking the Brezhnev line, the main division was between those who thought he had acted under duress and those who felt he was expressing his real ideo-

logical kinship. I thought it could well be both: it was obvious that Cuban Communism depended upon Soviet oil and weapons to survive but even had this not been so, Castro in his speech had been frigidly unsympathetic to the desire of the Czechoslovaks to live a life that was more open to the market economy, more attuned to the culture of the United States, and more adapted to the open societies of Western Europe.

Once more making the stern attempt to be dialectical about this, I think I concluded without actually admitting it to myself that Castroism might still have a point in Latin America and the Caribbean, where monstrously reactionary dictatorships like those of Brazil and Nicaragua and Haiti were still undergirded by cynical American power. However, in more advanced Europe the impulses of a revolutionary Left could and should be used to erode the Berlin Wall from both sides. There were a number of brave Trotskyists among the Czech resistance, after all, led by the heroic Peter Uhl . . . Anyway, I do not completely hate myself for attempting this book balancing. And I can say with some pride that our small International Socialist contingent in Havana managed to receive a rolled-up tube of a special edition of *Socialist Worker* from London by way of the mail, and that this edition was headed in big bold black capitals: "Russians Get Out of Czechoslovakia!" To have handed this out in Cuba during a world crisis was for me a matter of socialist honor and gave me an irrepressible sense of participating in a genuinely historic moment. It seemed so clear that the ossified, torpid Communist systems and parties had committed a kind of political and moral suicide by their Panzerkommunismus (Ernst Fischer's acid phrase) conduct in Prague. Yet this seemed to offer a chance that in France, in Poland and Czechoslovakia, and in the yet-to-be-liberated territories of the "Third World," the brave soixante-huitards were clearing the way for a "real" and authentic Left to emerge at last.

The long-delayed Czech charter flight almost failed to clear the palm trees at the fringe of Havana Airport — something to do with a wrong guess about the weight of the luggage — but the expressions of the crew conveyed a generally listless attitude. They were returning to a country where the state-decreed slogan was that of postinvasion "normalization" (one of the most casually ugly phrases of the whole twentieth century). Once again we had a stopover in Canada and on the TV screens saw the Chicago police beating puddles of blood out of the demonstrators who were willing to pit themselves against a filthy war, a racist Democratic Party machine, and a fixed convention. Damn it, I remember thinking. I have missed Prague and now I am missing Chicago.

"Tourist of the Revolution" was a phrase that was later used to ridicule those who went in search of socialist fatherlands, but I truly did not think of myself as a tourist. I simply and exhaustingly and fervently wished I could be in many places at once, so as to lean the uttermost of my slight weight onto the fulcrum. It was years later that I read Thomas Paine saying that to have played a part in two revolutions was "to have lived to some purpose." This was the sort of eloquence that I wish I could have commanded at the time.

However, I was still somewhat imprisoned within the jargon of Left sectarianism. By the time our plane had landed in London, with the Czechs continuing morosely

homeward and I myself being subjected to yet another police scrutiny of my passport and my person, the new post-Chicago headline of *Socialist Worker* read like this: "East and West: Tanks and Cops Defend 'Freedom.'" To a point, I approved this moral equivalence. It was at any rate better than those who only moaned painlessly about Prague (which the West had not defended) or those who were only moved to protest about Vietnam. The verbal crudeness of the headline's phrasing bothered me less than it should have done. After all, as our plane had neared London, we had been told that one of our number might possibly be detained and even deported upon arrival. He was a South African exile. Nothing more needed to be said: we all knew that we would form a cluster around him, pile our Luggage into the shape of a barricade, raise our fists and utter the most obvious chants of resistance until we could be sure that a proper left-wing lawyer had arrived. The risk of our own detention or blacklisting would have been nothing more than the payment of a duty. Had you then accused me of being "sloganistic" in my politics, I would have considered it no great insult.

As 1968 began to ebb into 1969, however, and as "anticlimax" began to become a real word in my lexicon, another term began to obtrude itself. People began to intone the words "The Personal Is Political." At the instant I first heard this deadly expression, I knew as one does from the utterance of any sinister bullshit that it was — cliché is arguably forgivable here — very bad news. From now on, it would be enough to be a member of a sex or gender, or epidermal subdivision, or even erotic "preference," to qualify as a revolutionary. In order to begin a speech or to ask a question from the floor, all that would be necessary by way of preface would be the words: "Speaking as a . . ." Then could follow any self-loving description. I will have to say this much for the old "hard" Left: we earned our claim to speak and intervene by right of experience and sacrifice and work. It would never have done for any of us to stand up and say that our sex or sexuality or pigmentation or disability were qualifications in themselves. There are many ways of dating the moment when the Left lost or — I would prefer to say — discarded its moral advantage, but this was the first time that I was to see the sellout conducted so cheaply.

Back in Oxford I ran into "The Warden" in the High Street. He was very much his usual self, bustling and brimming and half-deferential, half-ironic. "My dear Christopher, just the man I wanted to tell. We have a new fellow coming to the college: a new recruit as you would probably say, but a hero, an absolute hero. Bit of a Marxist I'm afraid but it can't be helped. You must meet him." This was my introduction to Leszek Kolakowski, who was then not much known outside his native Poland. He had been one of the "reform Communist" intellectuals of the "Polish spring" of 1956, a moment that had inaugurated a period of relative openness under the Gomulka regime. The reactionary and anti-Jewish crackdown of 1968, presaged by the arrest and imprisonment of Kurón and Modzelewski, had put all this into reverse. Kolakowski had, like so many of the intellectual leadership of Eastern Europe, been partly deported and partly self-exiled. He had at first gone to teach philosophy at the University of California at Berkeley — a campus whose name was near-sacred to those of us who felt we were

breathing the pure air of the Sixties — but had evidently tired of this already and was willing to come to All Souls.*

Kolakowski had missed his “formal” education because of the Nazi occupation of his country but had more than made up for it by the hungry ingestion of books during the wartime underground years, during which time he had also become a consecrated Communist. When we eventually met, I was first of all and perhaps rather foolishly impressed by how exactly he looked his part. Victor Laszlo in *Casablanca* simply seems too sleek and well-fed to have been a survivor of Nazi penal institutions (I still shudder when I think how nearly Ronald Reagan came to being cast as Rick in that movie) but Leszek had the ideally gaunt, austere appearance of the dissident who has known what it is to suffer material as well as intellectual deprivation.** His voice and manner, also, were appropriately ironic and sardonic. And he had, in effect, seen all the way through Communism. In my boyish way I thought I had done the same. But — and I cannot tell you how much this argument used to matter — I would not concede that Leninism and Stalinism were the same thing, or that the second logically followed from the first. After much wrestling and juggling, Kolakowski had simply given up on the whole idea of “reform” Communism, or was at any rate in the throes of doing so. I did not believe that Stalin’s system could be reformed, but I was quite convinced that it could and would only be overturned by, and from, the Left. Kolakowski was quite patient with me. At the time — and how embarrassing I now find it to say this — I thought that it was I who was being quite indulgent to him.

The Polish ambassador to London, a doltish apparatchik named Marian Dobrosielski, was invited to Oxford to give a talk. With the help of some Polish leftist friends to act as translators for the Polish press on file at St. Anthony’s College, I managed to draft and print a leaflet, in Polish and English, telling the Stalinist envoy that he was not welcome. I asked Kolakowski if he’d come to the event and help to swell our protest. He declined, saying rather drily that there was little point in such commonplace encounters. We went ahead anyway, and gave Ambassador Dobrosielski quite a bad time, and just as the evening was breaking up I saw a bony and quizzical visage peering from a dark corner at the very back of the hall. Leszek had not, after all, been able to resist showing up. At the time, I thought that this was a small triumph for Trotskyism over “mere” anti-Communism. In fact, Kolakowski was just beginning to erect the edifice of his astonishing trilogy *Main Currents of Marxism*. I was fabulously lucky in having met him so early, but much too callow and overconfident to take full advantage of the chance I’d been given. Still, for almost the next two decades of my life I carried on an argument with him, and others like him, about the nature of Communism. Yes, the germ of Stalinism had been in Leninism to begin with. But had there not been other germs as well? And what historical conditions led to the dominance of which germs? I suppose I still hope to show that not everything about this debate was a complete waste of time.

The remainder of my golden Oxford years slid by in this way and, though I was oppressed at the time by a sense of waste — what my fellow Balliolman Anthony

Powell had called “the crushing melancholy of the undergraduate condition”^{*} — I do not believe that they were entirely squandered, either. Let us say one quarter of the time allotted to political confrontations and dramas, another devoted to reading books on any subject except the ones I was supposed to be studying, another quarter on seeking out intellectual heavyweights who commanded artillery superior to my own, with the residual twenty-five percent being consumed by the polymorphous perverse. It could have been worse. I made a minor discovery which has been useful to me since in the analysis of some larger public figures like my contemporary Bill Clinton: if you can give a decent speech in public or cut any kind of figure on the podium, then you need never dine or sleep alone. I was actually a bit more confident on the platform than I was in the sack, and I can remember losing my virginity — a bit later than most of my peers, I suspect — with a girl who, inviting me to tea at one of the then-segregated female colleges, allowed me to notice that her walls were covered with photographs taken of me by an unseen cameraman who’d followed my public career. Since apparently I could do no wrong with this young lady . . .

There came also a day when the undergraduate weekly *Cherwell* asked me if I would like to help write the “John Evelyn” gossip column. This was a prestige spot, disapproved of by some of my grimmer and less hedonistic comrades, but a perfect finesse of that problem offered itself at once. I was to be co-author of the column with Patrick Cockburn, whose father, Claud, a Red veteran of the Spanish Civil War, had been one of the great guerrilla journalists of all time. Had been? In the London offices of the great satirical magazine *Private Eye*, he still was a figure of immense authority. His oldest son, Alexander, had left Oxford to become one of the editors of the *New Left Review*, and his middle son, Andrew, an arrestingly handsome boy with a look reminiscent of the young T.S. Eliot, was another of my contemporaries. Anybody who knows anything about the later history of radical journalism will recognize these names, as they will that of the great documentary maker Christo Hird, who became the third member of our “John Evelyn” team and helped us transform it from a mere chronicle of idle and gilded youth into something more mordant and investigative and Swiftian (or so we liked to think). Once again, that lure of printers’ ink and the word “pamphleteer.”

I had better confess, before quitting this, to a “having it both ways” moment that gave me even at the time a twinge of remorse. When Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger circumvented Congress and the Constitution and the strategic majority of Nixon’s own cabinet in 1970 in order to conduct the invasion of Cambodia, I had already been invited to debate with the then-Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart at the Oxford Union on the morality of the war in Indochina. The obscene images of the conflict as they were extended to yet another country were so enraging that I banished all thoughts of scruple. I accepted the formal invitation to take part in the debate, and to attend the dinner beforehand with the foreign secretary. Meanwhile, I intrigued with friends to make sure that there was a large claue of hard-core protestors stationed in the main hall and in the gallery. I made my speech from the dispatch box in the

approved manner — it wasn't one of my best but it made a fairly fierce and detailed case against the imperial incursion — and then loudly insulted the government's guest of honor, deserted the other guests, and went to sit with, and shout with, the mob. At a given signal when Stewart rose to speak, a phalanx also rose and simply and repetitively yelled the one word "murderer" in his face. It was horribly gratifying to see the way in which such a leading member of Her Majesty's Government turned so pale under the assault. At another signal, a noose was uncurled from the gallery and fell dangling within inches of the wretched foreign secretary's head. (It was dropped by James Long, later to be a distinguished economics editor at the BBC.) Nobody had ever attempted to abort a debate in these precincts before, and so the pitifully weak staff of the building was at a loss. We could have done almost anything we wanted, including at least roughing up if not lynching the foreign secretary. A sudden consciousness of exactly this ability — both intoxicating and nauseating — is probably what stalled us. We contented ourselves with further deafening insults and marched away. The official Minute Book of our little parliament still records that: "For the first time in the 147 years of the Society's existence, the House voted to stand adjourned sine die on account of riot."

The publicity was astounding. An editorial in the Times opined that our movement of protest was "one of the nastiest political phenomena that Britain has experienced in this century," which I thought — when one considered only a few of the other "phenomena" — was plainly absurd. We had, in our own opinion, not "silenced" Mr. Stewart, whose views were well known and could easily be broadcast, so much as we had voiced the outrage that should properly be felt at the destruction of Cambodian society. I remember arguing with dexterous casuistry that we had compelled the Establishment press to take notice and had thus, in a way, actually succeeded in enlarging the area of free speech. A nice try, I hope you will admit. But however one phrased the case, the only reason for mentioning free speech in the first place was that, however one looked at it, we had in fact shut down a public debate by force. I had a huge quarrel about it with Jack Straw, then the head of the National Union of Students and a strong opponent of the Vietnam War, who insisted that the right of free expression trumped all other considerations. (It was years before we agreed on anything again, and by that time he was himself the foreign secretary — for Tony Blair — and arguing at the United Nations for the removal of the intolerable Saddam Hussein tyranny from Iraq.)

I remember how we arrived at a higher synthesis: a final justification of our breach of the rules of civility, debate, and hospitality. After all, we had — did we not? — a higher cause and nobler purpose. It was even possible, given the huge media fuss generated by our action, that the people of Indochina would get to hear of it and, as a result, take additional heart from the knowledge of our solidarity. As I write this, I realize that I then truly did believe it. After a mighty demonstration outside the American embassy in Grosvenor Square, Michael Rosen had written a haunting poem, published in the university's literary magazine *Isis*, that hymned a then-famous poster of a Vietnamese woman in a paddy field, with a gun slung over her shoulder. Please

let it be, the poem had urged, that some of the news and pictures of our revolt will reach you and put a smile on your face. Next to this imperative, we felt, all lesser reservations were merely pallid and insipid. So, quite hardened as I was to insisting on this point against those who were more tentative, why was it that I could not quite repress the sense of having done something shabby? “I have something to expiate,” as D.H. Lawrence put it in his poem “Snake.” “A pettiness.”

* Not unlike the state of Kentucky, which subsists on bourbon, gambling, and tobacco, Cuba’s economy rested almost wholly on the manufacture of agreeable toxins like rum and cigars. But even then, its chief export was its own citizens. When I returned to Cuba some years later, there was no trace to be found of the coffee plantation and — in the era of Gorbachev’s perestroika, which Castro was resisting — about a fifty-fifty chance of getting a cup of actual coffee even in a Havana hotel.

* While at Berkeley he had been handed a pamphlet that spoke of the contents of the university’s library system as so much “useless white knowledge”: this had somewhat put him off the New Left in its then-Bay Area form, where I assure you it can still be met with.

** I was later to find that as a youth he had contracted tuberculosis of the bones.

* Books Do Furnish a Room, 1971.

The Fenton Factor

The friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,
Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel.

— Hamlet: Act I, Scene iii

OF COURSE I knew about Fenton, too, when I took that first cocktail off him in the public bar of the King's Arms. He had already demonstrated extreme precocity in winning the Newdigate poetry prize for a sonnet sequence titled *Our Western Furniture*, about Commodore Perry's historic "opening" of the closed island society of Japan. It had a beauty and ominousness to it which I shall try to catch by this brief extract:

I saw the salmon flash, caught in the net.
It was the only light. It flicked the spray!
An energy to spawn and procreate!
The sudden poet's cry — its silver grey
Dagger-blade flash — a protest yet:
"I saw the ships in Nagasaki Bay."

On the cover of the first published version was a paragraph from Commodore Perry's report to Congress in 1856 (just one year before India rose in rebellion against the East India Company). "It seems to me," opined the gallant Commodore:

that the people of America will, in some form or another, extend their dominion and their power, until they shall have placed the Saxon race upon the eastern shores of Asia. I think too that eastward and southward will her great rival in future aggrandizement (Russia) stretch forth her power to the coasts of China and Siam and thus the Saxon and the Cossack will meet . . . Will it be in friendship? I fear not! The antagonistic exponents of freedom and absolutism must thus meet at last and then will be fought the mighty battle on which the world will look with breathless interest; for on its issue the freedom or the slavery of the world will depend.

This seemed quite redolent of the huge drama then playing itself out in Indochina (a comparison to which James himself drew attention), but it came at the subject in a very different and much less propagandistic way than I had been doing. I take down my first edition of this poem, very finely bound by the Sycamore Press (a hand-set-type operation run out of the garage of the poet and tutor of Magdalen College, John Fuller). "To Christopher Hitchens from James Fenton with much love," it says on the flyleaf, the inscription dated "November 1969." When James's first collection of published poems, *Terminal Moraine*, came out in 1972, I have just noticed to my irritation, it was inscribed "To Chris, from the author, with lots of love." I hadn't before registered this qualitative degeneration. What I had noticed at the time was an

observation by the great Roy Fuller, honored laureate of the 1930s and father of John, at a party at the latter's house in Benson Place. "You're a friend of young Fenton's, then?" he said gruffly. I allowed as much. "I rather think that he writes as well now, if not better, than Wystan did at his age." I knew this would please James, who had first been introduced to Auden and Kallman through some mutual friends in Florence, but I also knew it wouldn't go to his head.

Ah, that head! Redmond O'Hanlon was later to compare it to an owl's egg. It certainly did have the most domed and sapient appearance. And under the arc and curve of that skull lay an extraordinary variety of elements and materials. The first of these was a sort of direct line to the tradition of English poetry, the second was a talent for burlesque and parody, often manifested with an almost manic glee, and the third was a buried seriousness that, as with his mentor Auden, derived from a sort of post-Christianity based on a form of English Protestantism. He also, broke as he was and as we all were, invariably had the price of a drink or a smoke about his person, and I am glad that I loved and love him so, because it was he who awakened my thus far buried and dangerous lust for alcohol and nicotine. Friends, somebody said, are "god's apology for relations." I was one of those who had tended to think of friends at school as comrades or acquaintances or co-conspirators or cronies or sex partners (or an occasional salad of all four). Monastic school and college traditions, I will plead, made this less freakish and grotesque than it may now look on the page. I did have a friend, Michael Prest, my former rescuer from bullying and the only man I still knew from school. And I had a comrade, James Pettifer, who was a playwright and polymath and internationalist. It was so that we could all three find a fourth person to share the expenses of a house in the wastes of Cowley Road that we were meeting Fenton in that pub. All of us, I am sure, would still date our future moments from the one in which this encounter occurred.

It isn't a matter of looking back and thinking: this was when I met the finest English poet of his generation. I already knew, or at any rate believed, that he was the finest poet of his generation writing in English. The pressing question was: Could he be induced to write a few stanzas that would be of immediate help to the cause of the socialist revolution? I knew that Auden had been inconvenienced by similar demands but I also believed that I was more persuasive and subtle and less dogmatic than those who had tried to induce him, too, into composing lines that could be employed as weaponry.

James was absolutely ready to do anything he could in order to help the struggling people of Indochina (indeed, in a quieter way he was much more decided upon this than I was), but he thought there were other things in life as well. He liked long walks, and he loved the ancient buildings and antique trees and botany of Oxford. He liked to talk about Italy and Greece and all matters classical. He had a huge talent for rude songs and crude puns, rescued from vulgarity by a sort of innocence. He was tremendously impressed, as well as a bit put off, by the extreme seriousness of George Steiner, who had just published his imposing collection of essays *Language and Silence*. In rather the

same way as I had felt a bit overawed by Isaiah Berlin, James was unable to forget the embarrassment of an undergraduate dinner with Steiner, in which he had overdone his own insouciance and had too languidly said that there were no great unifying causes left anymore: no grand subject of the sort that had sent Auden to Spain or China. Steiner had snapped at this Fentonian display of the blasé and told him to take a hard look at what seemed to be happening in Vietnam. And this had certainly worked with James, who was swift on the uptake and who cringed to remember how smug he must have sounded. However, before this full confession could be registered, there was some other business to be done, as we tramped across Magdalen Bridge: the polishing of the rude songs:

I Am The King of China
And I Like A Tight Vagina:
It Lets Me Show The Things I Know —
Like The Prose Style of George Steiner.

James's "King of China" series — which had to follow the scheme laid out above, where the first line could not be changed at all and the subsequent lines should be obscene and if possible (failing in the above case) mildly homosexual — was obviously a minor-key achievement for the times. However, I would defend it very strongly and believe it has its place in the history of Auden-inspired minor but useful obscenity. The model verse ran like this, and all others had to observe the rules:

I Am The King of China
And My Court Is Crammed With Sages.
But When I Want A Bit Of Bum,
I Ring Around My Yellow Pages.

I cannot be sure if the Sycamore Press's (very limited and hand-printed and elegant) edition of this collection of trivia yet survives, but if so, there is a sporting chance that my own contribution is still in print:

I Am The King of China.
I'm A Patron of the Prize-Ring.
And Every Time My Man's On Top —
You Can Feel My Boxer Rising.

I already knew in principle that word games, like limericks and acrostics and acronyms and crosswords, are good training in and of themselves. I could not then guess at the harvest of such marvels that lay ahead, but I did dimly appreciate that the Fenton factor was having the effect of making me somewhat less rigidly disapproving. In his copy of Steiner's *Language and Silence*, though, I found a thumbed-over dog-eared page that fell open at an essay titled "Trotsky and the Tragic Imagination," and realized that my new chum had suggested to me a possible relationship, which was that of politics to literature but this time beginning at the literary end and not at the ideological one.

James was a son of the Church: his father was a leading Anglican divine, the principal of a theological training college in Durham and author of a standard commentary

on the Gospel of Luke. James's mother had died suddenly while he was at public school (Repton), and Canon Fenton had remarried, in a reverse-Murdstone-ish kind of way, a woman who could not bear to be reminded of his former life or former wife. This had led to an estrangement from the children — James had an older brother and younger sister — and to their being brought up by a pair of maiden aunts in Wales. This outwardly unlucky experience had made him rather a genius at handling personal relations and improvising surrogate families. (The two aunts, for example, were named Eileen and Noel: rather than have to call them either thing, or to have to address them as "Aunt," James hit on the idea of naming them "E" and "N," which worked brilliantly. In later years, E went back to her prewar work as a teacher in Jerusalem and helped out at the Anglican school at St. George's Cathedral where Edward Said had been a pupil. It used to satisfy me greatly when returning correspondents would tell me that they had "run into Aunt E at the American Colony Hotel." Having a drink with her there myself one day, I heard her say wistfully that she wished she could have been called to the priesthood instead of being limited to being a glorified missionary. On principle I could not care less who took holy orders or who did not, but it did hit me with terrific force what a wonderful minister she would have made.)

This talent of James's for hitting it off with people was immediately evident when we all moved into our "digs." There were in theory four rooms, but one of them gave directly onto the kitchen and it was obvious that whoever slept there would be effectively living in a corridor and at the mercy of the requirements of everyone else. "I'll take that one," said James at once, as if he'd pre-emptively "bagged" the best quarters for himself. I remember thinking that there was a sort of quasi-Christianity in this cheerful self-sacrifice: a thought that James would often give me cause to have again. It was additionally decent of him in that he was the only one of us who didn't at the time have a female companion. (Incidentally, Pettifer's girlfriend and wife-to-be was called Sue Comely. Michael Prest's was named Liz Horn. Mine was named Teresa Sweet. Later, James was to have a walk-out with a Valkyrie look-alike named Elizabeth Whipp, and it was he who first noticed when we were all together that the firm of Comely, Horn, Whipp, and Sweet would make quite a sensational brothel-management team.)

Apart from renewing the interest in poetry that I had been in danger of letting lapse because of my political obsessions, and apart from getting me to smoke the deadly brand of Players Number Six (the "tokens" of which he collected in the hope perhaps of one day buying a gramophone or an electric kettle) as well as to imbibe Teacher's Scotch whisky, Fenton changed my life in two other ways. We were walking along Turl Street one day when he stopped to speak to a small, slightly pouting yet rather stern-looking young blond man, who had on his arm an even more blonde girl. The girl I slightly knew. Her name was Alexandra Wells, known throughout the university as the enticing "Gully," and she was the stepdaughter of Sir A.J. Ayer, also known as "Freddie," whose book *Language, Truth and Logic* had brought the work of the Viennese philosophers to England. A tireless and justly celebrated fornicator, Freddie was the patron of our Labour Club and one of the few senior academics who could

be counted on to sign petitions from the insurgent Left. (He's brilliantly caricatured as Sir Roy Vandervane in Kingsley Amis's neglected masterpiece novel *Girl*, 20.) I chatted to Gully, for whom I harbored a keen secret desire — she was later to say to me, on the sole occasion when I have heard the words used literally: “not if you were the last man on earth”^{*} — and who was the only young woman on campus who had dared to try the latest fashion for wearing “hot pants.” James briefly made the introduction to her escort, whose hand I no less briefly took. As we passed on, I asked: “Did he say his name was Amis?” “Yes,” came the response. “He's called Martin Amis.” I inquired slightly indifferently if he was any relation to the famous comic novelist, who had notoriously signed a letter to the *Times*, along with Simon Raven and Robert Conquest and others, supporting the American war on Vietnam.

It sometimes makes me whistle to think about this near-miss. Martin had been born in the same year as Fenton and myself, but had arrived in Oxford a year later because of various disasters (later hilariously narrated in his memoir *Experience*) involving his poor schooling, his chaotic family, and his smoke-wreathed experiments with voyages of the imagination. So he was a year “below” me and — this is why he was lurking in “the Turl” — a member of Exeter College. Alma mater of Richard Burton and Tariq Ali as it may have been, this college was thought even by non-snobs to be a bit on the “minor” side: more for the boat club than the cognoscenti. Who knows how many blunders I might have made with Martin if we had chosen that as our moment of first acquaintance? At the very least I would probably have felt compelled to say something disobliging about Kingsley, and that might have been all that it took to cause a lifetime estrangement. At any rate the danger passed, and I was safely out of the university, having almost failed to get a degree of any kind when Martin stepped forward to get the best “First” in English of his year.

Then one day — I can be sure it was in the fall of 1969 — Fenton proposed a day off and a day out. The adventurous plan was to board the train to London, take a taxi to Chancery Lane, have a decent lunch with some interesting people, and then see what opportunities presented themselves for the evening. I was agog, but apprehensive. How, first of all, was this to be financed? James assured me that if I was willing to do a little carrying, all would be well. My role as bearer involved the toting of a big bag of books. Once arrived at Paddington Station, we indulged in the luxury of a cab which let us off at a bookshop named Gaston's, on Chancery Lane between Holborn and Fleet Street. There and with a practiced air James traded the books for crisp currency notes. While still an undergraduate he had already become a reviewer for London papers and had learned a cardinal principle of the reviewer's trade — which was that Gaston's would give fifty percent of the cover price of a new volume, always assuming it to be in good condition. I was lost in wonder, both at the sophistication of this, and at the largesse.

I had never seen or smelled Fleet Street or Bloomsbury before, and these totemic names took on life and shape as the luxurious day drew on and became a misty autumnal one. Lunch was with Anthony Thwaite, in a wine bar with sawdust on the floor and — to my fanciful thought — Dickensian and Johnsonian elements in its

atmosphere. Thwaite, a diminutive figure with a big thatch of hair, was a poet who had formed part of the “Movement” that comprised such elevated names as Philip Larkin and Robert Conquest. He was also the literary editor of the *New Statesman*, which at that time was certainly the most celebrated of London’s intellectual weeklies. I considered myself to be miles to the “left” of it, of course, but still in awe of the review on which I had cut my teeth as a schoolboy, and on whose stairway one might have met Bertrand Russell, say, or George Bernard Shaw. In one room was an old hatstand draped with an ancient raincoat said to have belonged to H.G. Wells. The lore had it that if you donned this totemic Macintosh and ventured out in it, you would make a conquest of the very first woman you met. To be invited back to this famous office in Great Turnstile after lunch and to climb that stairway to Thwaite’s aerie was an uncovenanted bonus. To exit the building onto Lincoln’s Inn Fields clutching a couple of review copies of my own — “We might like you to take a look at these for us”: Surely there had been a misunderstanding? — was to feel that one had drunk far more at that lunch than one actually had.

I can’t be sure where we dined or where we slept that night, but I do remember taking James, by way of return as it were, to the Curzon cinema to see Costa-Gavras’s film *Z*. The effect of it on both of us was electric. I was trying to recruit James to the International Socialists at the time, and so when he murmured something about how eye-opening a movie it was, I readily and militantly challenged him with a “what are you doing about it?” that was, when I think about it, a slightly poor return for the marvelous day he had shown me. Quite taking me at my own face value, however (something that always makes me uneasy), he replied evenly enough: “Oh, I am going to do something about it.”

By the end of that year I had been published in the *New Statesman* with my review of Eric Hobsbawm’s book on labor militancy in the Victorian epoch (“Hitchens in the *New Statesman*? Hitchens on Eric Hobsbawm? Who is this callow youth?” I can still hear these questions) and had been invited to the Christmas cocktail party given in the magazine’s boardroom, where the cartoons and caricatures of Bloomsbury were on the very walls. There, I mentally bid farewell to Oxford and to the provinces in general. If ever anyone was “hooked,” it was me. The network of streets and lanes and squares roughly between Blackfriars Bridge and Ludgate Circus and Theobalds Road and Covent Garden had me in thrall. So they do still, in their way. This was the district that stretched from the Marx Memorial Library on Clerkenwell Green to the British Museum Reading Room where the old boy had done his best work. Extending itself a bit to the north and colonizing Charlotte Street up to Fitzroy Square, it became the area where Anthony Powell had located some of his more louche scenes of pre- and postwar literary interpenetration. Looping around on itself and doubling back via Shaftesbury Avenue, the neighborhood might be said to “take in” Soho, with its little grid of streets and alleys, containing the offices of *Private Eye* and *New Left Review*, and then Gerrard Street, now “Chinatown,” in which Dr. Johnson’s “Club” of Burke, Gibbon, Reynolds, and Garrick had met (and near the corner of which I was later to

take my last glimpse of my mother). In these and other purlieus was manufactured the journalistic small-arms ammunition that was to be hurled against the gigantic (but inaccurate and poorly commanded) batteries of Fleet Street's Tory newspaper establishment, located farther east as a sort of bulwark to the City of London.

The problem, as usual, was how to be able to play a decent hand on both sides of this street. Peter De Vries, one of my favorite minor novelists (he could make you laugh out loud, as in *Mackerel Plaza*, as well as weep, as with *Blood of the Lamb*), was once asked to name his ambitions as a writer. He replied that he wanted a mass audience for his books, one that would be large enough for his more elite audience to look down upon. I suspect that many authors, if they were honest, would admit to something like the same. My desire at that stage was to make a sufficient living at the business of Grub Street "hackery" — the refreshing term that the English use for the scribbling trade — so as to be able to toil more nobly in the evenings and weekends, both on my literary efforts and on my alliance with the working class.

I wasn't by any means the first person to have thought of this scheme, nor to have run into some of its more immediate obstacles. In order to get a job in "the media" in those days, you had to be a member of a labor union. I thought that that was fair enough, and indeed favored the closed shop, and was anxious to join a union if only so that I could start agitating as a union member, but then there was the difficulty that I couldn't join such a union unless I already had a job. This was a bar to entry, itself based on a double standard, that made one unashamed to play things both ways in one's own turn. One had somehow to get from being the second most famous person at Oxford to being a completely obscure but perhaps "promising" person in the metropolis. Once again, it was a lunch at All Souls that supplied the answer. The *London Times* was starting a new supplement, to be devoted to higher education. It needed a newly created staff, which in turn meant that a job could be awarded without a union ticket being required as a precondition. Thus did I become a "Social Science Correspondent" on a paper that had yet to be printed: a Gogol-like ghost job which I held for about six months before its editor said something to me that made it impossible to go on working for him.* I sometimes wonder what might have become of me if I had been good enough at that job to keep it: the paper could well have become my winding-sheet. Still, I had at least managed to move myself to London and I had become a member of the journalists' union.

I had also managed to negotiate the slight but unmistakable political invigilation that used to be part of the scenery in those days. When applying for a trainee job at the BBC, I had been asked by one member of the interviewing panel: "Do you feel strongly about things? Strongly enough for example to sit down in Trafalgar Square?" I wasn't stupid enough not to realize that he wouldn't have asked that question if he didn't already know the answer to it. I didn't get the job, either — another defeat for which I am eternally grateful. (And this now makes me old enough to remember a time when the BBC tried to exclude subversive and resentful types.) A later interview, for that *Times* job, was more typical of British Establishment reserve and understatement

at its deadliest. “Just a formality . . . won’t take a second. Need to ask you a few things before we have you on the strength.” The interlocutor was a Mr. Grant, a slightly red-faced and portly chap with no special title. This was in the days when the offices of the Times were in the magnificently named Printing House Square, just opposite the old Blackfriars Station where on the portico were still incised the names of ancient steam-railway destinations like Darmstadt and St. Petersburg. It was redolent of the time when the young Graham Greene had been a subeditor down the corridor. Mr. Grant asked me a few questions of such apparent innocuousness that I became suitably lulled. Then: “Interested in politics at all?” I decided there could only be one answer to that. “Good, good. Would you describe yourself as having any special affiliation?” Again on the assumption that he knew the answer, as well as on the conviction that it would be shameful to conceal my stance, I replied: “I am a socialist.” “Fine, fine, my dear boy: don’t look so defensive. More socialists on the Times than you would probably guess. Some of our best people too . . .” I was just relaxing when he leaned forward slightly and asked, looking me directly in the eye: “By the way, would the Labour Party allow you to join it?”

This, as he must have known, was the very question that I might have hoped to avoid. I was “in” the Labour movement all right, but not at all “of” it.

Let us go then, you and I, to a meeting in a rather dingy and poorly lit union hall in Haringay, North London. The time: the mid-1970s. The place: a run-down but resilient district, with a high level of Irish and other immigrant population. I am the invited speaker and the subject is Cyprus, the former British colony in the Mediterranean which has recently been attacked and invaded by both Greek and Turkish NATO armies. Many refugees from this cruel bombardment and occupation have arrived in London to join the staunchly working-class and left-wing Cypriot community that has been here since the 1930s. My articles on the ongoing imperial crime have won me a certain audience. The brothers and sisters in Haringay aren’t easily impressed by visiting talent, and it’s unlikely that I’ll even get the taciturn treasurer of the local branch to refund my “tube” fare from downtown, but I’m used to this no-nonsense style and have even trained myself to approve of it. Before being exposed to my scintillating rhetoric, the audience will be subjected to a steady series of quotidian preliminaries. There will be an appeal for the strike fund at a neighboring engineering factory, whose workforce has been “out” on the picket line for over a month. There will be an announcement about a regional meeting to discuss resolutions for the forthcoming annual Labour Party conference, scheduled for a distant and dismal seaside resort sometime in the fall. The lady who helps run social services for needy immigrants will make an appeal, couched in that amazing warmth in which some Labour matriarchs specialize, urging Cypriots (who generally prize family values above all else and are leery of charity) to claim their entitlements as Commonwealth citizens. It is stressed that no distinction is to be made between Greek and Turkish Cypriots, none of whom have ever raised so much as a voice or a hand to each other in this old and fraternal borough. A veteran of the bus drivers’ union gets to his feet to make a sturdy, ringing call for British workers

to take their holidays in democratic and struggling Cyprus, instead of on the so-called touristic Costa Brava that is part of the disgrace that is (still, after all those years and in spite of all our efforts) General Franco's Spain. These are people who shun the gaudy display of supermarkets and spend their hard-earned wages at the Co-Op, with which many of them also bank their small savings.

It's all gone now, or gone to pieces, but this was what we used to call "the Labour movement." Sometimes in elevated May Day rhetoric it was TIGMOO (This Great Movement Of Ours) and sometimes it was TMAAW (The Movement As A Whole) but even as we mocked this stock speech, we felt a fierce pride at belonging to the ranks that it described. Men and women, "warriors for the working day," who had survived mass unemployment and slum housing and bitter exploitation, stuck together to resist fascism at home and abroad, rebuilt the country after 1945, fought for independence for the colonies, and striven to remove the terrible fear — of illness and penury and a Dickensian old age — that had hagridden the British working class. In 1939, when it had once again become necessary to summon those workers back to the colors and the flag and the defense of the nation (mainly in consequence of the abysmal and shameful capitulations of the ruling class in the face of Nazism), the recruiting officers had been appalled at the human material that was presented to them. Men with crumbled teeth, failing eyesight, wheezing pigeon-like chests, bow-legged and balding; exhibiting symptoms of deficiency diseases like rickets and pellagra that would have shocked some of Britain's Indian and African subjects. As a child born after the war and in the first years of the National Health Service (itself always semireverently capitalized by the people as "the NHS") I was a beneficiary of all this, despite my father's Toryism. Free blackcurrant juice for Vitamin C — making me pee purple — was available at school, as was free milk, from which I first made the nauseating discovery of what is now called "lactose intolerance." A "district nurse" called as a matter of course on any household that had registered the birth of a new baby. If I developed a squint or a toothache, my parents need not fear bankruptcy, but could take me to be fitted with spectacles or healed with a filling. The resulting work is not beautiful (I winced with recognition when I first read the expression "British teeth" in Gore Vidal's *Judgment of Paris*) but it is nonetheless real and tangible and available as a kind of right, and a hard-won right at that. Everybody in the hall is proud of the fact that the most elemental thing of all — human blood — is freely donated to the National Health Service, which never runs out of it and never pays a penny to those who line up to give it and expect nothing in return but a strong brown cup of serious proletarian tea.

For me, this "movement" is everything. It contains within itself the germinal hope of a better future where a thinking working class can acquire the faculties of a serious party of government, and can extend these small early "reformist" gains into something more comprehensive — all the while uniting with similar movements in other countries to repudiate the narrow nationalisms and chauvinisms that lead to wars and partitions. To be enrolled in its ranks is to be a part of an alternative history as well as an alternative present and future. Official Britain may have its Valhalla of heroes and

statesmen and conquerors and empire-builders, but we know that the highest point ever reached by European civilization was in the city of Basel in 1912, when the leaders of the socialist parties of all countries met to coordinate an opposition to the coming World War. The names of real heroes like Jean Jaures and Karl Liebknecht make the figures of Asquith and Churchill and Lloyd George seem like pygmies. The violence and disruption of a socialist transformation in those years would have been infinitely less than the insane sacrifice of culture to barbarism, and the Nazism and Stalinism that ensued from it. This feeling seemed absolutely authentic to me at the time. (As a matter of fact it still does.) The only two immediate difficulties with this idealism are that, first, this same movement is, at least for the time being, expressed politically by a very boring and compromised party known as the Labour Party; and, second, that in the industry where I actually happen to work, the unions are the most hidebound and conservative force of all, which in the newspaper business is saying quite a good deal.

In my efforts to live up to the Peter De Vries maxim, I took various “mainstream” jobs, from being a freelance researcher for the “Insight” team at Harold Evans’s Sunday Times (then at its zenith), to working at the newly formed London Weekend Television, to being a correspondent for the Daily Express and a part-time editorial or “leader”-writer for the old Evening Standard. This makes me one of the last of those who can say that they worked for “Beaverbrook Newspapers”: the famous old racket, half-magic and half-criminal, that was preserved forever in Evelyn Waugh’s portrayal of *The Daily Beast*. Writing my own introduction to the Penguin edition of *Scoop*, I said of Waugh’s Fleet Street masterpiece that it perfectly evoked both the fugitive glamour of the business — that pseudo-deco black-glass palace on Fleet Street from which one might take a taxi at short notice to the airport, clutching a brick of traveler’s checks, with an exotic visa in one’s old blue-gold hardback British passport (“The Street of Adventure”) — as well as its irredeemable squalor (“The Street of Shame”). Here is how Waugh introduces a group of veteran British hacks met in some dismal overseas bar:

Shumble, Whelper and Pigge knew Corker; they had loitered of old on many a doorstep and forced an entry into many a stricken home . . .

I once had a drink with an Express veteran, his face richly veined and seamed with grog-blossom, in the old Punch Tavern opposite the offices, while he explained to me the etiquette of stricken-home violation. The bereaved generally liked to offer a cup of tea, he said, out of immemorial working-class courtesy. Thus, when extracting the maximum of tragedy from the relatives of a recent victim — be it of crime or fire or plane crash — it was always important to take along a colleague. “He offers to help them out in the kitchen while they put the kettle on, and that gives you a nice time to slip into the front room and collar the family photos from off the mantelpiece.” Lest I seem to pretend to have been shocked by this, I freely admit that the unofficial motto of our foreign correspondent’s desk was, when setting off to some scene of mass graves and riven societies, “Anyone here been raped and speaks English?” In Martin

Amis's novel of Fleet Street, *Yellow Dog*, you might think that the contempt shown by the reporters for both their subjects and their readers is overdone, but you would be wrong.*

In many ways journalism was the ideal profession for someone like myself who was drawn to the Janus-faced mode of life. Did I say "profession"? There is something about the craft and practice (better words for it) that is naturally two-faced. One has to pretend to be at least formally polite to the politicians one interviews; one has to be civil and smiling and curious when sitting with criminal lunatic "freedom fighters" and crazed, aphasic dictators.

I can give an example of this from the formative days of my own career in the media racket. In the early 1970s, in what had once been called "the jewel of Africa," there was a state-sponsored pogrom against Ugandans of Asian descent, who were first dispossessed and then deported. The man responsible was the almost pornographically wicked figure Idi Amin (later to become an exiled guest in Saudi Arabia as a heroic son of Islam). His bigotry and greed were two aspects of the same rampant disorder: he wanted the assets of the Asian business community as his political spoil, and he also wanted to be the man who "Africanized" his unhappy country by ethnic cleansing. Most of the Asians had British passports, though it had never been thought that they would employ them for the crassly tactless purpose of (say) coming to live in the United Kingdom. When they did exercise this small legal privilege, there was quite a strong racist reaction to their arrival. One of those who was most demagogic on the point was Sir Oswald Mosley, an ageing figure to whom there still clung the authentic stench of the 1930s, when he had been the black-shirted leader of the British Union of Fascists. Since the end of the Second World War, he had chosen to live in Paris. As it happened, my very amateur network of intelligence and information brought me the news that the old would-be dictator was in London and staying at the Ritz. I decided to see if he would come on the television show for which I was then a researcher and cub reporter.

The first part was easy: I established that he was indeed at the Ritz and that he was willing to be interviewed. The second bit was slightly more difficult: Was I not having to be civil to a man who had had Josef Goebbels as the best man at his wedding to Lady Diana Mitford, with Adolf Hitler (who gave the happy couple a framed portrait of himself as a nuptial gift) in attendance as guest of honor? I decided that the problem could be resolved in the following way: the opportunity was too good to miss but there the formalities ended. I would send him a car, and would greet him in the lobby, but would not extend my hand when he arrived. I rehearsed the moment many times, waking and sleeping, until the limousine drew up and the now-silvered and bull-like figure of the old bastard began to emerge. Somehow I found I was putting out my own hand first and saying: "Sir Oswald, how very good of you to come." In what seemed a volitionless state, I then conducted him to the hospitality suite and poured him a drink.

I can justify this if you like. (It occurs to me now that I could also have justified it then, since Mosley was the model for Sir Roderick Spode, the brutish and ridiculous

leader of the “Black Shorts” movement in P.G. Wodehouse’s 1938 masterpiece *The Code of the Woosters*, and one doesn’t get many chances to meet such an original. But I was far too solemn for that in those days.) Instead, I justified myself tactically. From our ensuing chat I learned that he had never dreaded the Marxist hecklers of the Thirties who had hurled rocks and vegetation at him. The most disconcerting tactic of the Left, he informed me, had been to occupy the first few rows of seats in a town hall and then, as he began speaking, to open newspapers and bury their faces in the pages. It’s somehow very hard to whip up a crowd when the front-row seats are thus otherwise engaged. He carried on in this urbane and confessional manner until it was time to put him on the set and begin the serious business. As soon as the studio lights came up and the camera’s light began winking red, he seemed to shrug off his previous character and style and to become suddenly lean and hawklike as of yore. The whole timbre of his voice altered, and to the interviewer’s first question on Ugandan Asian immigration he returned a rasping, sneering answer that summoned all the old echoes of race and nation. Thus, green and untried as I was, I had the opportunity to notice in one hour what many members of the British upper class had been unable to bring themselves to see in the 1930s: there was one Mosley who acted in a fairly civilized and even amusing way in the drawing rooms and country houses, and another whose relish it was to go down to the slums of the East End and get all dirtied up with those who were so base and stupid as to think that their lives would improve if they were not afflicted with Jewish neighbors.

How I managed the conclusion of the thing I can’t now recall: perhaps I was proud and heroic enough to decline a handshake as Sir Oswald departed. Anyway, it taught me that the moral attitudes that one strikes are often devoid of any significance.*

This was all in “the Seventies.” When exactly did we begin to periodize by decades instead of, say, by reigns? Did people in the Thirties know that they were going to be historically collectivized in that way? There were no noughts or tens in the twentieth century, which went straight from Edwardian to the Great War. Hints of an idea of “the Twenties” had been contained in the concept of the Jazz Age. In the spring of 1968 I do remember a revolutionary speaker on the pavement outside the London School of Economics referring to a year that might one day be matched with 1848 and 1917, and we did have a sort of consciousness of living in “the Sixties” while they were still going on. But the Seventies were only the Seventies because they had to have a name. Nullity and anticlimax appeared to close in on all sides. And so did certain kinds of nastiness, often composed of, or distilled from, the worst of the Sixties. The television HQ to which I had invited Mosley was situated in a new high-rise on the South Bank of the Thames, with a commanding view of London. Looking out of one of its higher windows after lunch one day, I first saw and then heard a huge explosion. It seemed to be located somewhere near St. Paul’s Cathedral. What I had just seen — and was to be seeing at street level within the hour — was the first Irish Republican Army car bomb to detonate on the British mainland. The “target” had been the Old Bailey: the country’s supreme court.

I had always been opposed to the partition of Ireland and a strong supporter of the civil rights movement against the Orange sectarian minstate that embodied the petrified, stagnant outcomes of that old and cruel division. My outfit, the International Socialists, had been involved at an early stage in the nonsectarian protests and marches and strikes that had challenged the Ulster “Six County” rump system. Many was the evening, especially after the “Bloody Sunday” massacre by British troops in Derry, and after Britain’s imposition of internment, better known as imprisonment without trial (but with some torture), that I had spent in Irish pubs and clubs, making speeches and organizing protests. As a journalist, also, I started visiting Belfast and Derry and Newry and had my first experience of seeing shots fired in anger, as well as nail bombs thrown and gasoline bombs too. As one brought up inside the protective womb of the Royal Navy and its bases, it felt very strange to me to see the British Army patrolling streets that were at least constitutionally “British,” but while wearing the visors and helmets of occupying space aliens. That was one distinct oddity. The other — in a city like Belfast where there had been almost no Commonwealth immigration — was that if one saw a black face it was almost invariably the face of a British soldier. (Some of the taunts from angry old ladies in Republican slum districts did not fail to make use of this striking contrast. “What’ll you do with it, then, soldier boy?” shrilled one banshee as a young squaddie from Barbados flourished a “rubber bullet”: a crowd-control device that resembled a Coke bottle sculpted in black. “Post it to your focken wife?” I never forgot the look of hurt on his face.)

With James Fenton (whom I had eventually succeeded in recruiting to the International Socialists) I made a few trips to Northern Ireland and collaborated on an article or two for the *New Statesman*. (One of these carried our joint byline: something that still gives me great pride in retrospect.) Our own polemics were of course staunchly nonsectarian, stressing the contribution of Irish Protestants like Wolfe Tone to the long tradition of republicanism, and laying emphasis on historic Irish socialists like James Connolly and Jim Larkin. In the squalid and cramped back streets around the Belfast shipyards, it seemed to us, no better illustration could be found of the need for working people to forget their confessional and national differences and unite in a brotherly fashion. But to say that such appeals failed to achieve locomotive force among the masses would be to understate the case to an almost heroic degree.

I eventually came to appreciate a feature of the situation that has since helped me to understand similar obduracy in Lebanon, Gaza, Cyprus, and several other spots. The local leaderships that are generated by the “troubles” in such places do not want there to be a solution. A solution would mean that they were no longer deferred to by visiting UN or American mediators, no longer invited to ritzy high-profile international conferences, no longer treated with deference by the mass media, and no longer able to make a second living by smuggling and protection-racketeering. The power of this parasitic class was what protracted the fighting in Northern Ireland for years and years after it had become obvious to all that nobody (except the racketeers) could

“win.” And when it was over, far too many of the racketeers became profiteers of the “peace process” as well.

No, what got people going in Belfast in the early 1970s was not humanism and solidarity but rather violence, cruelty, conspiracy, bigotry, alcohol, and organized crime.* I did in fact make friends with a few Protestant workers in the Woodvale District who showed some interest in crossing the divide and having speech with their Catholic brethren, but they developed a depressing tendency to wind up in the trunks of bullet-sprayed cars, or sometimes — I think of Ernie Elliot — to be bullet-sprayed before being stuffed into the trunk. This was all brought home to me with singular force when James failed to turn up for a rendezvous that we had made in Andersonstown, a grit-strewn housing estate dominated by the emerging Provisional IRA. He had gone to the agreed pub and sat down to look at some documents about British Army roundups and internments in the area. This was a mistake, arguably a big one. Within minutes, a group had joined him and told him to put his hands on the table, under which a gun was pointing at his midsection. Taken to a filthy house and told to lie on the floor, he was kept for several hours while his captors failed to reach the various people in London who could have vouched that he was indeed a reporter and not a spy or a provocateur. But eventually they let him go, and he wrote quite an amusing account of his brush with terror. This was rendered much less risible a few days later, when in a villainous Belfast tavern I chanced to introduce him to a local reporter with known “republican” connections. “Did you say ‘Fenton’?” breathed this worthy gent. “Did you know they took a vote about what to do with you? It was just six-to-five against shooting you there and then.” That sort of vote was almost the only concept of democracy that some of the denizens of the city were ever able to form. (The woman who had “chaired” the meeting, a haggard crone by the name of Maire Drumm, was later shot in her hospital bed by some no less tender “Ulster Volunteer” Unionist ruffian who were prepared to cross the city’s divide just for the chance to enjoy such an atrocity.)

A reprehensible temptation presented itself at once. In places like this, in contrast to the rather dreary precincts of the British urban and suburban and rural mainland, there was drama to be had, and for the asking. Every night and day there were bombs and gunshots and riots and roundups, and it didn’t take long to gain a little access to the bars and shebeens where these things were discussed with a certain knowingness. One could do this as a political activist or as a journalist or, as in my case, an amateur combination of both. I have to admit that I sometimes found this double life more than just figuratively intoxicating. I was sufficiently furious, after the British Army massacre of demonstrators on Bloody Sunday, that I once shocked Fenton very much by saying that, if an IRA man were to be on the run and needing no more than a bed for the night and not a word spoken, I myself might be ready to furnish the needful. Of course I knew to beware of this vicarious identification with the “authentic.” I had acquired some of that wariness in Cuba. But I hadn’t yet quite learned to stay clear of it consistently. And — to mention another expression that annoyed James so much that I often used it merely to tease him — these encounters on the dark side also supplied

“good copy.” In the weirdly beautiful landscapes along the Irish border, most especially in Derry with its haunting evening light along the Waterside and the old walls, and in rainy Belfast with its nineteenth-century slums and yet its permanent view of the lovely surrounding hills, I saw my first “war” without even needing a passport to travel to it.

One is unlikely to forget the first time that one sees violent death, or feels it graze one’s own sleeve. The Europa Hotel in Belfast was for me the first of many journalistic resorts, from the Commodore in Beirut to Meikles in Rhodesia-Zimbabwe to the Holiday Inn in Sarajevo where one was to find “Mahogany Ridge”: the hack shorthand for the Scoop-like bar where so many war stories were told and written. Here was where one might go to meet surreptitious “sources,” to trade tales with rivals and exchange information with friends, to play poker with the employer’s money, to rub shoulders and scrape acquaintance with the fringe elements of the demimondes of terrorism and counterintelligence. One evening, when as it happens I was sincerely entertaining some local trade-union men to a nonsectarian supper, there came the crash of an explosion that was near enough to rattle the glasses. Hastening outside and into the warren of little streets across the road, one saw that a renowned local drink-shop named the Elbow Room was no more. Named as much for its position at the junction of two narrow streets as for the bending of the relevant arm joint, it had taken the full force of a car bomb that had been parked in a confined space. The resulting blast had blown everything in and then, it seemed by some evil backdraft, sucked everything out again. The mess of beer and whisky and blood and glass was everywhere, as were some huddled objects that made me wince and flinch. I remember best a Belfast fireman, one of those seemingly seven-foot giants in whom the province specialized, coming out from the ruins with a small figure wrapped in a tarpaulin in his arms. He then sat down on what was left of the steps and began to weep. I had that terrible inward feeling that I have since had at bullfights and executions and war scenes, of wanting this to stop while simultaneously wishing it to go on, and wanting to look away while needing to look more closely. Deciding that the man must be cradling a murdered child, I was bizarrely taken aback to find that he was in fact sobbing over a hopelessly mangled dog. And a Belfast fireman must by then have been exposed to quite a lot . . .

My own case was much less dramatic but still very vivid to me. Coming back to the Europa one night from checking casualties at the Royal Victoria Hospital, I couldn’t find a taxi and decided to hoof it through some of the insurgent-run lanes of the Falls Road district. I hadn’t reckoned with the speed of nightfall and found myself alone in the gathering dark: a crepuscular gloom augmented by the local habit of shooting out all the streetlights. A very sudden bang convinced me that a nail bomb had been thrown at a British patrol, and I swiftly decided that the better part of valor was to drop into the gutter and make myself inconspicuous. Judging by the whistling and cracking of nearby volleys, this decision was shrewd enough as far as it went, and I remember thinking how awful it would be to end my career as the random victim of a ricochet. Instead, I nearly ended it as a bloody fool who tested the patience of

the British Army. Rising too soon from my semi-recumbent posture, I found myself slammed against the wall by a squad of soldiers with blackened faces, and asked various urgent questions that were larded with terse remarks about the many shortcomings of the Irish. Getting my breath back and managing a brief statement in my cut-glass Oxford tones, I was abruptly recognized as nonthreatening, brusquely advised to fuck off, and off I duly and promptly fucked. Graham Greene writes somewhere about John Buchan that his thrillers — *The Thirty-Nine Steps* being a salient example — achieve some of their effect by the imminence of death in otherwise normal situations, such as right beside the railings of Hyde Park. I wasn't exactly in Hyde Park, but I was still in my own country and the telephone boxes were red and the police uniforms were blue, and the awareness that the distinction between "over here" and "over there," or between "home" and "abroad" is often a false one has never left me.

So, here was how to get through the boring and constipated Seventies. First, adopt the profession of journalism that allowed one to become a version of John Bunyan's "Mr. Facing-Both-Ways." (Northern Ireland was near-perfect for polishing up this act, since in one day one might visit a Republican bar and a Unionist saloon before rounding off the night at an off-the-record dinner with a British intelligence officer.) Second, keep traveling to exotic places that seemed to preserve at least some of the waning promise of 1968. Third, maintain the double life in London as well. I would do my day jobs at various mainstream papers and magazines and TV stations, where my title was "Christopher Hitchens," and then sneak down to the East End where I was variously features editor of *Socialist Worker* and book-review editor of the theoretical monthly *International Socialism*. (On the masthead of the latter, my name stubbornly continued to appear as "Chris," whereas at the *New Statesman* I would always insist on it being rendered full-out, even though on the cover this sometimes meant that it was too long to be featured where I most wanted it.) Of the "agitational" rags with which I have been involved, *Socialist Worker* was one of the best. I managed to conscript James Fenton as its film critic; an achievement which turned out a bit too rich for the digestive system of some of the sterner comrades. He contributed an almost lyrically Marxist notice of Pontecorvo's slave-revolt movie *Queimada* before attracting annoyed letters for his slightly camp praise of a then-recent "Carry On" production. Working to improve these dour pages brought me into proper contact with Paul Foot, the scion of one of England's truly great radical families and perhaps the person with whom it was hardest to identify the difference between the way he thought and felt and the principled manner in which he lived and behaved. (When he later became gravely ill and was asked if he would like his hospital bed moved into a private room, he was incapable of speech but fully able to make an easy-to-recognize digital gesture.) He was somewhat older than me, but his reaction to any injustice was as outraged and appalled as that of any young person who has just discovered that life is unfair.* By this I do not at all want to make him sound naïve: I resolved to try and resist in my own life the jaded reaction that makes one coarsened to the ugly habits of power. There were some giants on the Left in those days.

It was becoming reasonably obvious, however, that I wasn't going to be one of them. I knew that with half of myself I was supposed to be building up the Labour movement and then with another half of myself subverting and infiltrating it from the ultra-Left, but then I came across that fatal phrase of Oscar Wilde's that says the problem with socialism is that it wastes too many evenings on "meetings." Boredom has always been my besetting vice in any case. Then, I still wanted some sort of a good time and that definition had to include a variety of acquaintances and a decent if not sumptuous menu. The Central line on the Underground could make the journey from the proletarian East End to the Oxford Circus/Regent Street quarter very smooth: I remember dashing from the grimy offices of the Worker to a job interview in the West End where I (rashly but successfully) tried to sell a freshly printed copy to John Birt, future boss of the BBC, member of the House of Lords, and character in the play and movie Frost-Nixon. (He hired me anyway.) The pages of the satirical review *Private Eye* record the early stages of this mutation. Early entries have me as "handsome Christopher 'Robin' Hitchens," yet as the Seventies go by, these soon give way to another staple reference, this time to the "chubby Trotskyist defector." Such photographs as survive tend to confirm the same story.

I mentioned that Fenton had introduced me at Oxford to some of the charms of alcohol and tobacco. This is to give you NO IDEA of how much I improved upon his initiation ceremonies. I dare say this might have happened to me anyway, but the discovery that so much of London journalistic life took place in pubs and bars, and that anything absorbed there could be charged to an expense account, caused me to resemble the cat Webster in the imperishable story by P.G. Wodehouse:

Webster sat crouched upon the floor beside the widening pool of whisky. But it was not horror and disgust that had caused him to crouch. He was crouched because, crouching, he could get nearer to the stuff and obtain crisper action. His tongue was moving in and out like a piston . . . And Webster winked, too — a wholehearted, roguish wink that said, as plainly as if he had spoken the words:

"How long has this been going on?"

Then with a slight hiccough he turned back to the task of getting his quick before it soaked into the floor.

I soon made that fine cat look like the mere beginner that it was. The Commander used to drink too much, and Yvonne was seldom without a lit cigarette ("I lit another cigarette," says John Self in Martin Amis's *Money*, adding "Unless I specifically inform you to the contrary, I am always lighting another cigarette.") As a boy I had disliked the smell of both habits, which I suppose adds to the strong case that genetic predisposition plays a role in these addictions. But my tolerance for alcohol was very much greater than my father's had been, greater indeed than anyone I seemed to run into. It wasn't all that easy to get a reputation for boozing when you worked in and around old Fleet Street, where the hardened hands would spill more just getting the stuff to their lips than most people imbibe in a week, but I managed it. I still have somewhere the memo from Bill Cater at the accounts office of Harry Evans's *Sunday Times*, for whom I had

done a story that eventually led to the imprisonment of a corrupt Labour mayor. “I’ve passed your Dundee expenses,” he wrote, “but I couldn’t help noticing that almost half the bills were for cocktails. I don’t think any newspaper is entitled to this kind of loyalty.”

A figure from this period may illustrate how nearly I might have run completely to seed. Since redeemed from an unjust obscurity by Francis Wheen’s wonderful biography, Tom Driberg in the last years of his life was still a true legend on the journalistic and cultural Left. In youth, he had been an original member of Evelyn Waugh’s Brideshead set, while also maintaining good relations with the more radical forces clustered around W.H. Auden and Stephen Spender. He had, indeed, given the young Auden his first copy of *The Waste Land*, and joined him in reading it aloud. Adopted by Edith Sitwell as the coming poet of her own generation, nominated by Aleister Crowley as the successor to his own Satanic role as “The Beast 666,” friendly if not indeed intimate with Guy Burgess, the most calcified degenerate of those who had deserted British Intelligence for the embrace of Moscow and the KGB, Tom in his amoral and aloof elegance breathed all of the dubious enchantments of the 1930s and was redolent, too, of all the byways of Bohemia. I knew him by reputation as a leading member of the Left faction of the Labour Party in Parliament, and as the author of some sparkling collections of journalism. (Reporting from Vietnam in 1945, he may have been the first person to assert the extreme unwisdom of trying to restore French colonialism with British troops.) Anyway, he was sometimes invited to contribute the “Londoner’s Diary” to the *New Statesman*, and one week issued an appeal to readers to help him complete an indecent limerick the first line of which ran: “There once was a man of Stoke Poges.” This highly respectable town in Buckinghamshire seemed to cry out for the rhyme “poke Doges,” which in turn meant that the remainder of the limerick would have to be Venetian in flavor.

Fenton and I, assisted by our dear friend Anthony Holden, accepted the challenge and were duly invited to a lunch by old Tom held at the *Quo Vadis* restaurant in Dean Street, above which Karl Marx had once kept his squalid lodgings. How we completed the task I don’t entirely remember (“entirely resolved to poke Doges. So this elderly menace / Took steamship to Venice . . .” But what was the last line?). At all events, by the time the restaurant had finally insisted on throwing us out — this in the days when the pubs in London were not allowed to stay open in the afternoon — Tom simply took me down the street and up a flight of dingy stairs and made me a member of the infamous “Colony Room Club,” an off-hours drinking establishment run by a tyrannical Sapphist named Muriel Belcher. Renowned to this day for its committed members, from Peter O’Toole to Francis Bacon, the joint at that epoch gave off an atmosphere of inspissated gloom, punctuated by moments of high insobriety and low camp. Muriel, arguably the rudest person in England (“shut up cunt and order some more champagne”), almost never left her perch at the corner of the bar and was committed to that form of humor that insists on referring to all gentlemen as ladies. Occasionally this routine was still funny. “Yes,” she would screech if someone

mentioned the London Blitz, “that was when we were all fighting that nasty Mrs. Hitler.” O’Toole’s favorite was a rejoinder she made when he’d described some ancient and absent member as a bit of a bore. “He was a very brave lady,” insisted Muriel, “in the First World War!” This Pythonesque drag queenery was all very well in its way, and it was nice to have a boozy hideaway in the afternoons and late evenings, but there were times when it all felt a bit thin and sketchy, and as with some pubs in Fleet Street there seemed to be too many people who were perhaps forty and looked perhaps sixty: awful warnings in fact, splashing their lives up against the porcelain. In time I took heed and mainly confined my drinking to mealtimes, which was at least a start.

Driberg developed a fondness for me which I don’t think was especially sexual. He would “try” any male person at least once, on the principle that you never know your luck, but he preferred working-class tough guys (policemen and soldiers an especial treat) and all he really wished was to offer them his version of lip service. I once had to cancel a dinner engagement with him and, being asked rather querulously why this was, replied that my girlfriend was in hospital for some tests and that I wanted to visit her after work. “Ah yes,” said Tom with every apparent effort at solicitude, “there’s a lot to go wrong with them, isn’t there? I do so hope that it isn’t her clitoris or anything ghastly like that.” Not all of this was by any means affectation. For Tom, the entire notion of heterosexual intercourse was gruesome to the last degree. (“That awful wound, my dear Christopher. I just don’t see how you can.” Forced into a marriage of convenience as the price of his early political ambitions, he was said to have accused his bride of attempting to rape him on their wedding night.) In this, he was like Noël Coward, who was once asked by Gore Vidal if he had ever even attempted anything with a woman. “Certainly not,” replied The Master. “Not even with Gertrude Lawrence?” Gore inquired. “Particularly not with Miss Lawrence,” was Coward’s return-serve to that. (In something of the same manner, Chester Kallman would sometimes taunt Auden, during domestic disputes, with the fact that Wystan had admittedly slept with Erika Mann. “At least I’m pure, dear,” he would intone.) Through Tom I was eventually to meet Gore Vidal, and also to learn how when in Rome the two of them would hunt together and organize a proper division of labor. Rugged young men recruited from the Via Veneto would be taken from the rear by Gore and then thrust, with any luck semi-erect, into the next-door room where Tom would suck them dry. It shows what few people understand even now, which is the variety of homosexual conduct. “I do not want a penis anywhere near me,” as Gore would put it in that terse and memorable way he had. Incidentally, this double act also emphasized another distinction: Tom adored to give pleasure while Gore has always liked to boast that he has never knowingly or intentionally gratified any of his partners. Not even a sighing reach-around by the sound of it.

I am necessarily telling the next story very slightly out of order, but there came a time when Kingsley Amis asked me if by any chance I could introduce him to Tom Driberg. He understood that the old cocksucker had a trove of unpublished filthy poetry from W.H. Auden, Constant Lambert, and others, and he (Kingsley) had been

commissioned to edit the new Oxford Book of Light Verse. Might Tom, in exchange for a good dinner, be induced to share his collection? If so, Kingsley handsomely offered to make a foursome of it at a good restaurant and invite myself and Martin along for the fun. I telephoned Tom and asked him if he would say yes. "I'd be most interested to meet the senior Amis," he murmured. "But do tell me, is he by chance as attractive as his lovely young son?" To this absurd query, from the ever-hopeful old cruiser, the best reply I could improvise was, "Well, Tom, Kingsley is old enough to be his father."

* This declaration on her part was all the more striking for being pre-emptive, in view of the fact that I had never even dared to proposition her.

* "You're fired" were the exact words as I remember them.

* I appear in some obscure online dictionary of quotations for having said that I became a journalist partly so that I wouldn't ever have to rely on the press for my information.

* This was perhaps not quite as true for my next confrontation with the old buzzard. In 1980 his wife, Lady Diana — estranged sister of my later friend Jessica Mitford — wrote a review of a book about the Goebbels family for the London sheet Books and Bookmen, an outlet to which I also occasionally contributed. Even had I not been appalled by her gushing praise for the delightful Josef and Magda, I would have drawn the line at the metaphor she employed for their murder of their four children. This she called "a Masada-like deed." I thought that crossed a line, and said so in the New Statesman, adding an unkind play on the name of the publisher of Books and Bookmen, a man named Philip Dosse. Mr. Dosse that week committed suicide and Auberon Waugh accused me in the Spectator of having driven him to his death. I both liked and disliked — fortunately I disliked more — the notion that a polemic of mine could have anything like this effect. By the time it was revealed to my relief that Mr. Dosse had killed himself without having read my piece, and because of an impending collision with his creditors and the Inland Revenue, I had opened an envelope from the "Chateau de la Gloire," the rather grotesque address outside Paris which I knew to be the lair of the Mosleys, and convenient for their friendship with their frightful neighbors, the Duke of Windsor and Mrs. Simpson. The enclosed letter was from Sir Oswald, complaining that while he was fair game, it wasn't cricket to be attacking his dear wife. Since she had been a far more active Nazi than he and had invited Hitler to her wedding, I thought this was weak stuff. Later, opening that day's London Times, I saw Sir Oswald's obituary notice, which means that it's quite thinkable that I was the recipient of the last missive he ever wrote. Lady Diana was to outlive him for some decades, never uttering a repentant remark about her Third Reich period. When I once asked Decca if she ever had any contact at all with her sister, she replied: "Certainly not! I think I did bow slightly to her at dear Nancy's funeral, but otherwise it's been absolutely non-speakers since Munich!"

* The most witty and penetrating first-hand account of this morbid interlude is to be found in Kevin Myers's memoir *Watching the Door*.

* When Paul died, the organizer of his memorial meeting invited me to record a video tribute, which I gladly did. In a minor spasm of spite, the gargoyles who by then ran the Socialist Workers Party prevented it from being shown at the event.

Martin

My friendship with the Hitch has always been perfectly cloudless. It is a love whose month is ever May.

— Martin Amis: *The Independent*, 15 January 2007

[as cited in the National Portrait Gallery catalogue that reported my death]

EVENTS ONLY ELICITED the above tribute from Martin when in our real lives it was mid-September and when the press had been making the very most of a disagreement we had been having in print about Stalin and Trotsky in the summer of 2001. Looking back, though, I am inclined to date the burgeoning refulgence of our love to something more like the calendar equivalent of April. Still, it was actually in the gloomy autumn of 1973, around the time of the Yom Kippur/Ramadan War between Israel and Egypt, that we actually and properly met. To anchor the moment in time: Salvador Allende had just been murdered by Pinochet in Chile, W.H. Auden had died, James Fenton (the author of the most beautiful poems to come out of the Indochina War) had won the Eric Gregory Award for poetry and used the money to go off and live in Vietnam and Cambodia, and at the age of twenty-four I had been hired to fill at least some of the void that he left behind at the *New Statesman*. Peter Ackroyd, literary editor of the rival and raffishly Tory *Spectator*, was giving me a drink one evening after returning from a trip of his own to the Middle East, and he said in that inimitable quacking and croaking and mirthful voice of his: “I’ve got someone I think you should meet.” When he told me the name, I rather off-handedly said that I believed we’d once met already, with Fenton at Oxford. Anyway, it was agreed that we would make up a threesome on the following evening, at the same sawdust-infested wine bar called the Bung Hole where my *New Statesman* career had begun.

Lovers often invest their first meetings with retrospective significance, as if to try and conjure the elements of the numinous out of the stubborn witness of the everyday. I can remember it all very well: Ackroyd doing his best to be a good host (it’s a fearsome responsibility to promise two acquaintances that they will be sure to get along well with one another) and Martin rather languid and understated. He did not, for example, even pretend to remember when I said we had met before with our other mutual friend Fenton.*A verse letter to him from Clive James, published in *Encounter* at about this period, described Martin as resembling “a stubby Jagger,” and I remember this because of how very exact it seemed. He was more blond than Jagger and indeed rather shorter, but his sensuous lower lip was a crucial feature (I didn’t then know that he thought he was most vulnerable in the mouth) and there was no doubt that you would always know when he had come into the room.

His office performed, Ackroyd withdrew and the remaining pair of us later played some desultory pinball in another bar. I noticed that Martin had the gift of mimicry: he could drop or raise his voice and alter his features and just simply “be” the person we were talking about (I cannot now remember who). He asked me which novelists I enjoyed and I first mentioned Graham Greene: this answer palpably did not excite him with its adventurousness. In answer to my reciprocal question he said he thought that one had to look for something between the twin peaks of Dickens and Nabokov, and it came back to me that Fenton had said to me how almost frighteningly “assured” all Martin’s literary essays were turning out to be. I don’t recollect how the evening ended.

But some kind of mutuality had been stirred, and we soon enough had dinner with our respective girlfriends in some Cypriot taverna in Camden Town, where things went with a swing and I can remember making him laugh. Then Yvonne died and I vanished from London and from life for a bit, to discover on my return that Martin had taken the trouble to write me a brief, well-phrased, memorable note of condolence. (A lesson for life: always when in doubt please do send letters of commiseration; at the very least they will be appreciated and at the best they may even succeed in their apparently futile ambition of lightening the burden of bereavement.) The next I knew, I was invited to a small party to celebrate the publication of Martin’s first novel, *The Rachel Papers*.

Chat about this literary debut had been in the wind for a while, and Martin had an editorial position at the *Times Literary Supplement* as well as a mounting reputation as a reviewer and (which of course could be made to irk him) the same surname as one of the most famous novelists writing in English. Thus it seemed rather odd that he should be throwing his own book party, in his own small and shared flat, at his own expense. But I am glad of it, because those of us who had the good luck and good taste to attend were later able to reminisce rather triumphantly.

The 1973/74 apparel was absurd of course: cowboy boots and flared trousers for some of the men (those ill-advised cross-hatched blue jeans, designed to resemble armor, for me in particular) and Christ knows what for the girls. Sobriety and corduroy were supplied, however, by Amis senior and by his friend Robert Conquest, the great poet and even greater historian of Stalinism. In the *International Socialists* we made his book on *The Great Terror* required reading, but that didn’t mean I didn’t suspect him — and Kingsley too — of pronounced reactionary tendencies. This was mainly because of the reprehensible line they had both taken over Vietnam. Yet I was queasily aware that Kingsley’s *Girl, 20*, with its ridiculing of “Sixties” morality and mentality, was rather hard to laugh off. Then there was Clive James, dressed as usual like someone who had assembled his wardrobe in the pitch dark, but always “on” and always awash in cross-references and apt allusions. The presence of these few but gravity-donating figures, plus the climb up the stairs from Pont Street on the fringes of Chelsea, made me conserve my breath for a time. I had in fact met both Kingers and Conkers — as they were sometimes known — before, but I was very aware that my roadworthiness

(Martin prefers the term “seaworthiness”) in real grown-up company was not to be assumed: at any rate not by me.

The main event of my evening turned out in any case to take place at the opposite end of the age and gender scale. It suddenly seemed to me that Martin’s sister Sally did not perhaps find me entirely repulsive. As the evening gently evaporated I found myself taking her arm in the street and seeing — through quite a lot of fog, I now remember — the looming bulk of the Cadogan Hotel. Perhaps a little flown with wine, I suddenly and confusedly felt that it might be a fine thing to take her to the very place where Oscar Wilde had been arrested. I couldn’t possibly afford it but then, as I thought about it, I couldn’t possibly afford not to do it once I had thought about it. The Wilde suite itself was not available but we did procure a decent room and things proceeded happily enough. Ghost of Oscar or no ghost of Oscar, I did briefly allow myself to wonder if there was anything remotely subliminal or oblique in what I was doing: Sally had rather the same coloring as the brother I was beginning to adore though not at all the same face (it was years until it was established that she was not Kingsley’s daughter, but that’s another tale altogether).

I find now that I can more or less acquit myself on any charge of having desired Martin carnally. (My looks by then had in any case declined to the point where only women would go to bed with me.) What eventuated instead was the most heterosexual relationship that one young man could conceivably have with another. As the days became weeks, and the months became seasons, and as we fell happily into the habit of lunching and dining and party going à deux, there began an inexhaustible conversation, about womanhood in all its forms and varieties and permutations, that saw us through several episodes of sexual drought as well as through some periods of embarrassment of riches.

It was not, or not by any means all, the locker-room talk that you may imagine (though any reader of Martin’s novels will know how brilliantly inventive is his capacity for bawdry: I refuse to say “obscenity” because the obscene is too easy and besides, it is always either quite humorless or too dependent for its humor on the knowledge that mere infants have of the human anatomy).^{*} It might have been anyone — actually I am sure it was our poet friend Craig Raine — who came up with the appalling yet unforgettable idea that there is a design flaw in the female form, and that the breasts and the buttocks really ought to be on the same side. But it was Martin who went to all the trouble, with dead-pan and dead-on acuity, of arguing the respective merits of which side that ought to be. (One doesn’t necessarily want to see both features walking toward one, for example, but then again it might be dispiriting to see them both simultaneously marching away . . .) As for metaphors, everybody has at one point seen men standing in front of the pornography section, in either a magazine store or a video emporium, but it was Martin who observed these swaying and muttering figures pulling out and then replacing the contents and compared it to “the Wailing Wall.” He had an instinctive understanding of the relationship between Eros and Thanatos: one winter he was suffering quite badly from flu and left the New Statesman office early

to go home. I agreed to walk an abnormally subdued and muffled Martin down the gelid street to Holborn tube station: as we trudged along there was a girl in front of us who looked as if she was walking on beautifully fluted stilts. “How might it be . . .?” he murmured thoughtfully with absolutely no leer or salacity. At once, it seemed, he had brightened and straightened and ceased to snuffle.

This was a tiny aspect of an elaborate and detailed investigation of the feminine mystique: a scrupulous weighing of evidence and comparing of notes. I would love to be able to give the impression that it was a relationship between equals but, if represented in cartoon form, the true picture would be closer to one of those great white sharks that evolution has fitted out with an accompanying but rather smaller fish.* I would turn up at parties with Martin, to be sure, but with a rather resigned attitude. At one soirée in Holland Park, he was introduced to a young woman with a result that was as close as made no difference to witnessing a lightning strike or a thunderbolt. His then-girlfriend was present at the party, as I think was the other young lady’s husband, but what then happened in the adjoining room was unstoppable and seemed somehow foreordained. We both knew that the subsequent pregnancy was almost certainly also a consequent one, but so gentlemanly was the husband in the case that it was not until two decades later that Martin received the letter from his missing daughter, the lovely Delilah Seale, his “bonding” with whom — there doesn’t seem to be another word for it — is one of the most affecting things I have ever chanced to see. (And she, the offspring of that thunderbolt moment, has now become the mother of Martin’s first grandchild: another thought that gives me a reflective but piercingly sweet pang. Pasternak was perhaps not such a fool when he wrote in *Dr. Zhivago* that all conceptions are immaculate.)*

I could tell that Martin was fitted for glory in work as well as life and, when *The Rachel Papers* was a huge critical and commercial grand slam, I sent him a long telegram. It was a stave from F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Early Success*. Of course in some ways this was inappropriate — “Scottie” burned out and died at forty-four and is buried, along with poor mad Zelda, not far from me in Rockville, Maryland — but to us then, the age of forty lay well over the horizon. It wasn’t really true of Martin, as Fitzgerald had put it, that “premature success gives one an almost mystical conception of destiny as opposed to will power — at its worst the Napoleonic delusion.” However, there was a paragraph that did seem to meet the case and this I sent him:

The compensation of a very early success is a conviction that life is a romantic matter. In the best sense one stays young. When the primary objects of love and money could be taken for granted and a shaky eminence had lost its fascination, I had fair years to waste, years that I can’t honestly say I regret, in seeking the eternal Carnival by the Sea.

Over the course of the next several years, we were still able to indulge in creative time-wasting by talking — always with ardent respect, but always exhaustively and until there was absolutely nothing left to say — about women, different women, and sometimes the same woman. I remember being rather relieved when, of one of those

women, it could be said that it was I who had featured with her, so to speak, first. It seemed only fair . . . And then the talk would turn to other things. Martin never let friendship take precedence over his first love, which was and is the English language. If one employed a lazy or stale phrase, it would be rubbed in (there, I have done it again), no, it would be incisively emphasized, with a curl of that mighty lip and an ironic gesture. If one committed the offense in print — I remember once saying “no mean achievement” in an article — the rebuke might come in note form, or by one’s being handed a copy of the article with a penciled underlining. He could take this vigilance to almost parodic lengths. The words “ruggedly handsome features” appear on the first page of *Nineteen Eighty-four* and for a while Martin declined to go any further into the book. (“The man can’t write worth a damn.”) He was later to admit that the novel did improve a trifle after that. Years later, when I gave him the manuscript of my book on Orwell, he brought it to our next rendezvous at a Manhattan bistro and wordlessly handed it back. He had gone through it page by page, painstakingly correcting my pepper-shaker punctuation.

He seemed to have read everything and he had the rare faculty of being able to quote longish staves of prose from memory. A passage about Sir Leicester Dedlock and gout from *Bleak House*; a spine-tingling rendition of Humbert Humbert’s last verbal duel with Quilty; a paraphrase or two about Alexander Portnoy’s mother (the latter perhaps not so astonishing now I think about it: in his work as well as in his life, Martin has done the really hard thinking about handjobs, and put us all very sincerely and gratefully in his debt). In this area, too, I felt myself the junior. It was he who got me to read Nabokov and to do so with care as well as with awe, if only because I knew I would be asked questions. However, I was able to return the favor in a way which was to help change his life in turn, by pressing on him a copy of *Humboldt’s Gift*.*

Loved by women while also being adored by men — shall I say “no mean achievement”? — Martin also has a way of attracting fathers. He once went to meet John Updike at the Massachusetts General Hospital and told me that, when he’d said goodbye, had felt oddly as if waving farewell to a male parent. I happened to be interviewing John Updike a year or so later and mentioned that I knew his great admirer the younger Amis. With an extraordinarily gentle expression on his face, Updike recalled the meeting at “Mass Gen” and said: “It was the strangest thing watching him walk away — almost as if he were my son.” And nobody who has read Martin on Saul Bellow, let alone seen him in the company of the old man, can doubt for a second that his combination of admiring and protective feelings had eventually become fiercely filial. He said indignantly to me, when I gave Bellow’s *Ravelstein* a slightly disobliging review, “Don’t cheek your elders.” I waited for something else — some hint of the ironic, perhaps — but with perfectly emphatic gravity he repeated the admonition. This from the one-time *enfant terrible* could mean only one thing.**

But I was also lucky in meeting Martin when his relationship with his true father was at its absolute best. I remember envying the way in which the two of them could tell jokes without inhibition, discuss matters sexual, and compete only over minor

differences about literature or politics. There had once been a bad time when Martin and his siblings (and his mother) had been abandoned by the old man, and there was to come a moment when that same old man metamorphosed into an elderly man, querulous and paranoid and devoid of wit. But in between there was a wonderful golden late summer. “Dad, will you make some of your noises?” It was easy to see, when this invitation was taken up, where Martin had acquired his own gift for mimicry. Kingsley could “do” the sound of a brass band approaching on a foggy day. He could become the Metropolitan line train entering Edgware Road station. He could be four wrecked tramps coughing in a bus shelter (this was very demanding and once led to heart palpitations). To create the hiss and crackle of a wartime radio broadcast delivered by Franklin Delano Roosevelt was for him scant problem (a tape of it, indeed, was played at his memorial meeting, where I was hugely honored to be among the speakers). The *pièce de résistance*, an attempt by British soldiers to start up a frozen two-ton truck on a windy morning “somewhere in Germany,” was for special occasions only. One held one’s breath as Kingsley emitted the first screech of the busted starting-key. His only slightly lesser vocal achievement — of a motor-bike yelling in mechanical agony — once caused a man who had just parked his own machine in the street to turn back anxiously and take a look. The old boy’s imitation of an angry dog barking the words “fuck off” was note-perfect.*

Evenings at his home in Flask Walk (the perfect address) were of Falstaffian proportions, with bulging sacks of takeaway food and continual raids on the rightly vaunted arsenal of his cellar. “Hitch,” he said to me once. “You have been here before and you know the rule of the house. If you don’t have a drink in your hand it’s your own fault.” Noises might or might not be part of the entertainment: he had a tendency to the gross and evidently thought that a belch (say) was a terrible thing to waste. I remember his unscripted trombonings and trumpetings, his cigars and his Macallan single malt, his limericks and his charades, just as I remember sitting quietly while he talked with authority about why Jane Austen was not all that good. The word “good,” in all its variations (see the blues in the footnote preceding), was almost all that this man of immense vocabulary required as a shorthand critical tool. I don’t know whether the concept hailed from the “Newspeak” dictionary in Nineteen Eighty-four, where the choices range from “plusgood” to “doubleplusungood,” but “bloody good” from Kingsley was authoritatively affirmative, “good” was really pretty good, “some good” wasn’t at all bad, “no good” was applied very scathingly indeed and a three-sentence six-word pronouncement which I heard him render upon Graham Greene’s then-latest novel *The Human Factor* (“Absolutely no. Bloody good. AT ALL!”) was conclusive.*

I shall try and be brief about the sorry way in which things “ended up.” After I had left for America, Kingsley wrote a novel called *Stanley and the Women*. This failed to get itself published in New York, and word reached me that objections from feminists had prevented it from getting adopted by any major house. (There were also those who claimed to find it anti-Semitic, though the only “offensive” remarks in its pages were made by a young man who was clearly out of his mind.) I launched a campaign in my

column in the Times Literary Supplement, against what was just then becoming widely known as “political correctness.” I kept on being boring about this, until eventually I received a letter from an editor — a Jewish woman as it happened — who said in effect, Okay, you win, we’ll save the honor of publishing by “doing” Stanley.

Kingsley, whom I hadn’t seen for years, invited me to a celebration of this small victory on my next visit to London. We were to meet at the Garrick Club, be joined by Martin, see a movie, and then have a lavish dinner. I still shrink from recalling it: as soon as I arrived at the Garrick’s bar he told me a joke I’d heard before and could obviously see that it hadn’t “worked.” His choice of film was an Eddie Murphy insult that seemed to contradict his increasing contempt for American culture: he appeared genuinely offended that we thought so little of it. Martin and I kept nervously behaving as if he must somehow be joking — “flawless masterpiece,” he kept energetically insisting — and this was a mistake. Not only was he not joking, he was in every other way failing to be amusing. In an alarming reversal of his earlier Falstaffianism, he also managed to look both corpulent and resentful: “surfeit swell’d” to be sure, but quite without mirth. I think he may have managed one of his riffs about Nelson Mandela being a terrorist. Most painful of all, and somehow rendering rather pointless the original “point” of the evening, he had abandoned his old liking of the United States and passed the test of the true reactionary by becoming a sulphurous anti-American. (Every modern American novelist, he ended up by telling Martin once, and subverting my defense of him, “is either a Jew or a hick.”) I was never to see “Kingers” again and, when I was almost the only person given kindly treatment in his notorious Memoirs, felt oddly discriminated against. That last evening of ours was the very definition of having no fun: we were no longer drawing on a common store of comic gags and literary allusions.

I boldly assert, in fact I think I know, that a lot of friendships and connections absolutely depend upon a sort of shared language, or slang. Not necessarily designed to exclude others, these can establish a certain comity and, even after a long absence, re-establish it in a second. Martin was — is — a genius at this sort of thing. It arose — arises — from his willingness to devote real time to the pitiless search for the apt resonance. I don’t know quite why this lodges in my mind, but we once went to some grand black-tie ball that had been slightly overadvertised and proved disappointing. The following morning he rang me. “I’ve found the way to describe the men at that horror-show last evening . . . Tuxed fucks.” As this will illustrate, he did not scorn the demotic or the American: in fact he remains almost unique in the way that he can blend pub-talk and mid-Atlantic idiom into paragraphs and pages that are also fully aware of Milton and Shakespeare. I am morally certain that it’s this combination of the classical with the wisened-up and street-smart, most conspicuously with Augie March, that made it a sure thing that he and Saul Bellow would one day take each other’s hands. Martin had a period of relishing the Boston thug-writer George V. Higgins, author of *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*. Higgins’s characters had an infectious way of saying “inna” and “onna,” so Martin would say, for example, “I think this lunch should

be onna Hitch” or “I heard he wasn’t that useful inna sack.” Simple pleasures you may say, but linguistic sinew is acquired in this fashion and he would not dump a trope until he had chewed all the flesh and pulp of it and was left only with pith and pips. Thus there arrived a day when Park Lane played host to a fancy new American hotel with the no less fancy name of “The Inn on The Park” and he suggested a high-priced cocktail there for no better reason than that he could instruct the cab driver to “park inna Inn onna Park.” This near-palindrome (as I now think of it) gave us much innocent pleasure.

Not all of our pleasures were innocent. There came the day when we were both in New York, and both beginning to feel the long, strong gravitational pull of the great American planet, but where a slight chore meanwhile required itself to be performed. In the midterm churning of what was to become his breakout novel *Money*, Martin required his character to visit a brothel or bordello. He even had one all picked out: its front-name was the “Tahitia,” a dire Polynesian-themed massage parlor, on lower Lexington Avenue. “And you,” he informed me, “are fucking well coming with me.”* I wanted to say something girlish like “Have I ever refused you anything?” but instead settled for something rather more masculine like “Do we know the form at this joint?” I could not possibly have felt less like any such expedition: I had a paint-stripping hangover and a sour mouth, but he had that look of set purpose on his face that I well knew, and also knew could not be gainsaid. How bad could it be?

Pretty damn bad as it turned out. Of the numerous regrettable elements that go to make up the unlawful carnal-knowledge industry, I should single out for distinction the look of undisguised contempt that is often worn on the faces of its female staff. Some of the working “hostesses” may have to simulate delight or even interest — itself a pretty cock-shriveling thought — but when these same ladies do the negotiating, they can shrug off the fake charm as a snake discards an unwanted skin. I suppose they know, or presume, that they have already got the despised male client exactly where they want him. As it happens, this wasn’t true in our case — I would gladly have paid not to have sex at this point, and Martin needed only to snap his fingers in order to enjoy female company — but the cynical little witches at the “Tahitia” were not to know that they were being conscripted into the service of literature. It was well said — by Jean Tarrou in *The Plague*, I think — that attendance at lectures in an unknown language will help to hone one’s awareness of the exceedingly slow passage of time. I once had the experience of being “waterboarded” and can now dimly appreciate how much every second counts in the experience of the torture victim, forced to go on enduring what is unendurable. But not even the lapse of time between then and now has numbed my recollection of how truly horrible it was to be faking interest in someone who was being paid — and paid rather more, incidentally, than I could afford — to feign a contemptuous interest in me. The multiplier effect of this mutual degradation gave me dry-heaves and flop-sweats and, I began to fear, conveyed the entirely misleading impression of my being a customer who was convulsed by the hectic sickness of lust. The seconds went limping and dragging by on absolutely leaden feet.

It was the cash question, though, that saved me. With some presence of mind, I had for once pre-empted Martin in the “bar” of the dump, where the gruesome selection process began, by swiftly pointing to the prettiest and slenderest of those available (who also possessed one of the most vicious-looking smiles I have ever seen on a human face). Once removed to her sinister cubicle, we commenced to bargain. Or rather, in a sort of squalid reverse-haggle, every time I agreed to the price she added some tax or impost or surcharge and bid me higher. Clad by now only in some sort of exiguous sarong, and equipped only with a dank Ziploc bag containing my credit cards and money (one was obliged to “check” everything else before entering the humid “bar”) I wearily started to count out the ever-steepening fee, which was the only thing in the room that showed any sign of enlarging itself. It turned out that, what with tips and percentages and what-not, the avaricious bitch had contrived a figure that was not just more than I could afford, but more than I had on me. I was down to the quarters and nickels, and it showed. She had, I will say for her, more pride than that. A handful of change thrown in . . . No. No one can be expected to take this. So I took her cue of rage and stood up with about as much self-esteem as I could wrap around myself. Here was a two-faced coin of luck: I not only didn’t have to go through with it, but I didn’t have to shell out the dough, either.

I lurked torpidly in the recovery room or whatever they call it, and was eventually joined by a rather reduced and chastened Martin. If you want to know what happened to him, the whole experience enriched and enhanced by what I confessed to him of what had happened to me, you must read pages 98–104 of the Penguin edition of *Money*, where John Self tries to get laid for pay “under the bam, under the boo,” at a perfectly foul establishment named “The Happy Isles.” There are many, many reasons why *Money* is the Great English Novel of the 1980s, to which I am able to add this ensuing insight. Out of our grim little encounter (where he, poor bastard, actually had to part with the cash and endure a sexual fiasco) came several paragraphs of pure reality-based fantasy that make me twist and snarl with laughter every time. And no, you most definitely did not have to have been there. We went off to recuperate at a lunch with Jane Bonham Carter and Ian LeFresnais, at which I remember using hot Japanese sake, by no means for the first time, as an expedient solvent for my still-clinging hangover. Seldom can a midmorning have been so ill spent, yet (which perhaps goes to show) seldom can such rank dissipation have yielded so many dividends on the page.

In all of Martin’s fiction one finds this same keen relish for, and appreciation of, the multiple uses of embarrassment. The bite of his wit redeems this from being mere farce or humiliation. When fused with his high seriousness about language, the effect is truly formidable. He once rebuked some pedantic antagonist by saying that the man lacked any sense of humor, but added that by this accusation he really intended to impugn his want of seriousness. In a completely other incarnation, I have often thought that he would have made a terrifying barrister. Once decided on mastering a brief, whether it be in his work on nuclear weapons, the Final Solution, or the Gulag, he would go

off and positively saturate himself in the literature, and you could always tell there was a work in progress when all his conversation began to orient itself to the master-theme. (In this he strangely resembled Perry Anderson, the theoretician of New Left Review, with whom I also became friendly at about this time. Perry's encyclopedism extended well beyond ideology: he introduced me to the great social comedy of Anthony Powell's Dance sequence, of which he possesses a matchless understanding.) Like Perry, Martin contrived to do this without becoming monomaniacal or Ancient Mariner-like. There was a time when he wouldn't have known the difference between Bukharin and Bakunin, and his later writing on Marxism gets quite a few things wrong, including some things about me, and about James Fenton. Uncharacteristically for Martin, his labor on the great subject of Communism is also highly deficient in lacking a tragic sense, but he still passed the greatest of all tests in being a pleasure to argue with.

Back to my point about shared language: this gradual thickening of mutual experience became its own patois, as Money shows. Only recently, I found myself smirking in a foolish manner as a New York Times profile of Martin referred to the words "rug" (for hair-do) and "sock" (for loathsomely inadequate bachelor accommodations), that he had popularized for a generation. I played my own small part in this, with "sock" as I recall, as also with the then-overused word "re-think" to describe any wearisomely necessary and repetitive activity (such as a haircut or a bathroom trip). But it was not until Martin had put it into circulation that a coinage of this sort could hope to acquire any real currency.*

Something of the same was true of the "Friday lunch" that has now become the potential stuff of a new "Bloomsbury" legend. I find I want to try to limit myself on this subject, because the temptation to be "in" ought be resisted, and also because in this instance you probably did indeed have to "be there." I also bear in mind what Fenton once told me about the first Bloomsbury: in the early days of tape-recording it was decided to make a secret tape of the brilliant conversation of Raymond Mortimer and others. All who were "in" on the plan were later agreed that Mortimer and the others had been at their most scintillating on the afternoon concerned. But when replayed, the tape was as dull as rain. So the first thing to say about this luncheon circle was that, like Topsy in the old folk-story, it "just grewed." There was never the intention or design that it become a "set" or a "circle," and of course if there had been any such intention, the thing would have been abortive. The Friday lunch began to simply "occur" in the mid-1970s, and persisted into the early 1980s, and is now cemented in place in several memoirs and biographies. Let me try and tell you something of how it was.

It began, largely at Martin's initiation, as a sort of end-of-the-week clearinghouse for gossip and jokes, based on the then-proximity of various literary magazines and newspapers. Reliable founding attendees included the Australian poets Clive James and Peter Porter, Craig Raine (T.S. Eliot's successor as poetry editor at Faber and Faber), the Observer's literary editor Terry Kilmartin (the re-translator of Scott Moncrieff's version of Marcel Proust, and the only man alive trusted by Gore Vidal to edit

his copy without further permission), the cartoonist and rake and dandy Mark Boxer, whose illustrations then graced (for once the word is quite apt) all the best bookcovers as well as the Times's op-ed page. Among those bookcovers were the dozen volumes of Anthony Powell's masterwork and among Mark's aesthetic and social verdicts the one I remember being delivered with the most authority was his decided and long-meditated conclusion that: "It's the height of bad manners to sleep with somebody less than three times." (Once, planning a party with Martin and myself, he had completed the formal task of inviting all those who simply had to be asked, and exclaimed with relief and delight: "From now on, we should go on the basis of looks alone.") The critic Russell Davies, the then-rising novelists Ian McEwan and Julian Barnes, James Fenton and Robert Conquest when they were in England, Kingsley when he wasn't otherwise engaged with yet more lavish and extensive lunches, and your humble servant help to complete this *dramatis personae*. There were no women, or no regular ones, and nothing was ever said, or explicitly resolved, about this fact. Between us, we were believed to "control" a lot of the reviewing space in London, and much envious and paranoid comment was made then, and has been made since, to the effect that we vindicated or confirmed Dr. F.R. Leavis's nightmare of a conspiratorial London literary establishment. But I can only remember one occasion when a book was brought along to lunch (to be given to me, so that I could "fill in" for some reviewer who had failed at the last moment), and I truly don't think that this "counts."

Time spent on recollecting our little Bohemia confirms three related but contrasting things for me. The first was the pervasive cultural influence of Philip Larkin. The second was the importance of word games and the long, exhaustive process that makes them both live and become worthwhile. The third was the gradual but ineluctable rise of Margaret Thatcher and her transatlantic counterpart Ronald Reagan. These, then, will be my excuses and pretexts for "letting in daylight upon magic," as Walter Bagehot phrased it.

Unspoken in our circle was quite a deep divide between Left and, if not exactly Right, yet increasingly anti-Left. Fenton and I were still quite Marxist in our own way, even if our cohort was of the heterodox type that I tried to describe earlier. Kingsley had become increasingly vocally right-wing, it often seeming to outsiders that he was confusing the state of the country with the condition of his own liver (but please see his diaries of the time to notice how cogent he often still was). Clive and Martin had been hugely impressed — as who indeed had not? — by the emergence of Alexander Solzhenitsyn as a moral and historical titan witnessing for truth against the state-sponsored lie. In between, men like Terry and Mark found it difficult to repudiate their dislike for a Tory Party that had been the main enemy in their youth. Robert Conquest was and still is the most distinguished and authoritative anti-Communist (and ex-Communist) writing in English, but if this subject was excluded, his politics tended toward something fairly equably Social Democratic in temper. He and I agreed that the Moscow Olympics should be boycotted after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and of course it was he who noticed that some of the aquatic events were being held in

the Baltic states, the Russian annexation of which had never been recognized by the post-Yalta agreements that defined the Cold War. At the last lunch I ever attended before emigrating for the United States, a toast was raised to Bob's impending fourth or was it fifth marriage. "Well," he replied modestly, "I thought perhaps 'one for the road.'" Philip Larkin wrote gloomily to Kingsley that the new Texan spouse would probably make their old friend move permanently to America, "as Yank bags do." And so indeed it proved. Elisabeth — or "Liddie" — is a bit more than the "other half": she is a great scholar in her own person and the anchor of one of the most successful late marriages on record. Once Martin and I had also married Americans, she printed a T-shirt for all concerned that read "Yank bags club."

I learned appreciably from registering the crosscurrents that underlay this apparently light but really quite serious lunch. Our common admiration for Larkin, as a poet if not as a man, arose from the bleak honesty with which he confronted the fucked-up — the expression must be allowed — condition of the country in those years. It was his use of that phrase — "They fuck you up, your mum and dad," as the opening line of his masterly "This Be the Verse" — that put him outside the pale of the "family values" community. At one of my first encounters with Martin, when we discovered a common affinity for the man, I put my own main emphasis on his poem "Going, Going," which was a non-lachrymose elegy for the seaside and countryside of England, increasingly vandalized and paved and polluted by a combination of plebeian litter-louts and polluting capitalists. The poem had actually been commissioned by the Tory government of Edward Heath, to accompany the publication of a "White Paper" on the environment, but had then been censored because of a verse about the greedy businessmen who filled the estuaries with effluent. Larkin's innate pessimism, his loyalty to the gritty northern town of Hull (where lay the provincial university that employed him), and his hilarious interest in filth of all kinds were attractive to all of us: likewise his very moving, deliberate refusal of the false consolations of religion (beautifully captured by his "Aubade" and "Churchgoing") on which not even Kingsley disagreed. However, Larkin's pungent loathing for the Left, for immigrants, for striking workers, for foreigners and indeed "abroad," and for London showed that you couldn't have everything.

From Larkin's own emphatic use of it, a common-enough idiom, that of the "fool," was also evolved so as to try and make it as capacious as Kingsley's variation on the ordinary word "good." Thus there were of course, and as ever in English, plain fools and damn fools. But trying extra hard to be stupid could get you "bloody fool," and real excellence and application in the willful led to the summa of "fucking fool." This last title corresponded to Orwell's definition of something so simultaneously dumb and sinister that only an intellectual could be capable of uttering it. One lunchtime attempt to draw up a "Fucking Fools' First Eleven" of current greats attracted various nominations, John Berger being unanimously chosen as captain.

As for the word games, just bear with me if you would. Try, first, turning the word "House" into "Sock." OK: Bleak Sock, Heartbreak Sock, The Fall of the Sock of Usher, The Sock of Atreus, The Sock of the Seven Gables, The Sock of the Rising Sun . .

. This can take time, as can the substitution (a very common English vulgarism) of the word “cunt,” for the word “man.” Thus: A Cunt for All Seasons, A Cunt’s a Cunt for All That, He Was a Cunt: Take Him for All in All, The Cunt Who Shot Liberty Valance, Batcunt, Supercunt (I know, I know but one must keep the pot boiling) and then, all right, a shift to the only hardly less coarse word “prong,” as in The Prong with the Golden Gun, Our Prong in Havana, Prongs without Women, Those Magnificent Prongs in Their Flying Machines, and so forth. These and other similarly grueling routines had to be rolled around the palate and the tongue many a time before Clive James suddenly exclaimed: “‘A Shropshire Cunt.’ By A.E. Sockprong.” This symbiosis seemed somehow to make the long interludes of puerility worthwhile.

Clive was in some ways the chief whip of the lunch and would often ring round to make sure that there was a quorum (though I noticed that whenever Martin was away his enthusiasm waned a bit, as did everyone else’s). He needed an audience and damn well deserved one. He beautifully illustrated my Peter De Vries point by having an absolutely massive following on television while slaving until dawn in Cambridge to produce gem-like essays for no-readership magazines like the New Review or, as his later anthologies of criticism and poetry have amazingly proven, for no immediate audience except himself: a fairly exacting one at that. His authority with the hyperbolic metaphor is, I think, unchallenged. Arnold Schwarzenegger in Pumping Iron resembled “a brown condom stuffed with walnuts.” Of an encounter with some bore with famous halitosis Clive once announced “by this time his breath was undoing my tie.” I well remember the day when he delivered his review of Leonid Brezhnev’s memoirs to the New Statesman and Martin read its opening paragraphs out loud: “Here is a book so dull that a whirling dervish could read himself to sleep with it . . . If it were to be read in the open air, birds would fall stunned from the sky.” One could hear his twanging marsupial tones in his scorn for this world-class drone and bully (whose work was being “published” by the ever-servile and mercenary tycoon Robert Maxwell, one of the Labour Party’s many sources of shame). Clive had given up alcohol after a long period of enjoying a master-servant relationship with it, in which unfortunately the role of the booze had been played by Dirk Bogarde. He thus threw in money only for the food part of the bill, until one day he noticed how much the restaurant charged for awful muck such as bitter lemon and tonic water. At this he moaned with theatrical remorse: “I owe you all several hundred pounds!” But not all was geniality and verve: the only rift in the Friday lute came when Clive took huge exception to Fenton’s review of his (actually quite bad) verse-play about the rise of Prince Charles. The expression complained of, I seem to recall, was “this is the worst poem of the twentieth century.” The ensuing chill went on for a bit.

Ygael Gluckstein, the theoretical guru of the International Socialists, whose “party name” was Tony Cliff, used to tell an anecdote that I came to regard as an analogy for this sort of wordplay. Rosa Luxemburg, our heroine in the struggle against German imperialism (and the woman who had told Lenin that the right to free expression was meaningless unless it was the right of “the person who thinks differently”) had once

satirized the overcautious work of the German reformists and trade unionists as “the labor of Sisyphus.” Whenever she approached the podium of the Social Democratic conventions before 1914, and before they proved her right by siding with the filthy kaiser on the crucial vote for war, she would be jeered at as she moved her lamed body toward the platform, and catcalled as “Sisyphus” by the union hacks. “So maybe Sisyphus was wasting his time,” Gluckstein would say, hesitating for emphasis: “But maybe from this he still got some good muscles!”

If this historico-materialist point could be adapted for literary weight-training purposes, I would feel compelled to place on record the marginal question of the Tupper family. Everything depended, in this otherwise undistinguished imaginary dynasty, on your nickname. Thus, you might be an overeager salesman known to his colleagues as “Pushy” Tupper. You might even be a pedantic and donnish fellow saddled with the tag of “Stuffy.” The opium-addict “Poppy” was about as far as most of us were prepared to last on this short-lived expedition, but Robert Conquest, the king of the limerick (and the dragon slayer of the Stalinoid apologists) always thought that if a job was worth doing it was worth doing well. He went off and brooded, and came back with Whirly, the helicopter pioneer, as well as the two hopeless boozers Whisky and indeed Rye Tupper. Ought one to blush, and to admit that some of these went straight into print as the questions-and-answers of the *New Statesman* weekend competition? Well, so did other things no less trivial that are now the stuff of *New Yorker* profiles, such as new equivalents for the old phrase “cruising for a bruising.” (“Angling for a mangling,” “aiming for a maiming,” “strolling for a rolling” and — my own favorite — “thirsting for a worsting.”) There was also the time that competitors were asked to submit a paragraph of a Graham Greene parody: Greene himself entered under a pseudonym and placed third. More demanding still was the restless quest, again chiefly led by Conquest, to inscribe the names of obscure and lowly, unenviable, and ultimately poorly rewarded occupations. Thus: one employed as a disciplinarian of last resort in a turbulent kitchen: “Cook-sacker.” As a disciplinarian of last resort in an ill-run lunatic asylum: “Kook-socket.” As the man in the bottling plant who keeps things moist: “Cork-soaker.” As a sectarian pyromaniac in the Scots wars of religion: “Kirk-sacker.” As one who has the lonely task of interrupting boat races by leaning over the bridge to snatch up the steersman with rod and line: “Cox-hooker.”

Simple “versified filth” — Amis senior’s crushing condemnation of most popular limericks — was not allowed.*

One of Kingsley’s letters from this period may show the way things were tending, and certainly makes me remember the atmosphere as it then was. He is writing to Robert Conquest on 7 April 1977:

The swing to the right here is putting the wind up the lefties. At the Friday lunch the other day they, chiefly Hitchens and Fenton, were saying that chaps were getting fed up about stuff that may not be Labour’s fault, but is associated with them rather than the Tories: porn and permissiveness generally, comprehensivization, TUC bosses, terrorism, and the defence run-down.

In cultural-political terms that's much as I remember it myself: an expiring postwar Labour consensus, increasingly dependent upon tax-funded statism yet actually run by the union-based, old-line right wing of the Labour Party machine. "A Weimar without the sex," as I once tried to phrase it at the time. Except that in the rest of society there was sex aplenty, with the hedonism of "the Sixties" almost officially instated as dogma, and the slow, surreptitious growth of this consensus to the then unguessed-at status of "correctness."

There could have been no bad time to meet him, but this in retrospect seems to have been the perfect moment to become acquainted with Ian McEwan. It was Martin who brought us together (Ian having succeeded him as the winner of the Somerset Maugham Award). By then, "everyone" had been mesmerized by Ian's early collections of short stories, *First Love*, *Last Rites* and *In Between the Sheets*. Met in person, he seemed at first to possess some of the same vaguely unsettling qualities as his tales. He never raised his voice, surveyed the world in a very level and almost affectless fashion through moon-shaped granny glasses, wore his hair in a fringe, was rail-thin, showed an interest in what Martin used to call "hippyish" pursuits, and when I met him was choosing to live on the fringes of the then weed-infested "front-line" black ghetto in Brixton. "What he wrote, you could see," as Clive James put it when using Ian's character in a novel, and when it came to fiction he seemed to have contact with other, remoter spheres. (He could and still can, for example, write about childhood and youth with an almost eerie ability to think and feel his way back into it: a faculty that many superb writers are unable to recruit in themselves.) I was sitting at my *New Statesman* desk one afternoon when the telephone rang and a strange voice asked for me by name. After I had confirmed that it was indeed me, or I, the voice said: "This is Thomas Pynchon speaking." I am glad that I did not say what I first thought of saying, because he was soon enough able to demonstrate that it was him, and that a mutual friend (make that a common friend) named Ian McEwan had suggested that he call. The book of still another friend, Larry Kramer's ultrahomosexual effort *Faggots*, had been seized by the British Customs and Excise and all the impounded copies were in danger of being destroyed. Mr. Pynchon was somewhere in England and was mightily distressed by this. What could be done? Could I raise an outcry, as Pynchon had been assured by Ian I could? I told him that one could protest hoarsely and long but that Britain had no law protecting free speech or forbidding state censorship. We chatted a bit longer, I artlessly offered to call him back, he laughingly declined this transparent try-on and faded back into the world where only McEwan could find him. (Ian seemed to be able to manage this sort of thing without ever boasting of it: he also formed a friendship with the almost-impossible-to-find Milan Kundera.)

From this you may surmise that Ian was not part of any pronounced drift to the political or cultural Right. But nor was he someone who had stopped reflecting at approximately the time of Woodstock. His father had been a regular officer in a Scottish regiment. He had a serious working knowledge of military history. His love of the natural world and of wildlife, leading to the arduously contemplative hikes about which

we teased him, was matched by an interest in the “hard” sciences. I think that he did, at one stage in his life, dabble a bit in what’s loosely called the “New Age,” but in the end it was the rigorous side that won out and his novels are almost always patrolling some difficult frontier between the speculative and the unseen and the ways in which material reality reimposes itself. When not talking with penetration about literature and music, he was in himself an acute register of the stresses, cultural and moral, that were remaking the old British political divide.

One day, or actually one night, I made another saunter across the bridge of that divide in order to test the temperature and conditions on the other side. The circumstances could hardly have been more propitious for me: the Tories were having a reception in the Rosebery Room of the House of Lords, in order to launch a crusty old book by a crusty old peer named Lord Butler, and there was a rumor that the newly elected female leader of the Conservative Party would be among those present for the cocktails. I had written a longish article for the New York Times magazine, saying in effect that if Labour could not revolutionize British society, then the task might well fall to the Right. I had also written a shorter piece for the New Statesman, reporting from the Conservative Party conference and saying in passing that I thought Mrs. Thatcher was surprisingly sexy. (To this day, I have never had so much anger-mail saying, in effect, “How could you?”) I felt immune to Mrs. Thatcher in most other ways, since for all her glib “free-market” advocacy on one front, she seemed to be an emotional ally of the authoritarian and protectionist white-settler regime in Rhodesia. And it was this very thing that afforded me the opportunity to grapple with her so early in her career.

At the party was Sir Peregrine Worsthorpe, a poised and engaging chap with whom I’d had many debates in Rhodesia itself, both at the celebrated colonial bar of the Meikles Hotel and in other more rugged locations. I’d even taken him to meet Sir Roy Welensky, the tough old right-wing white trade unionist and former prime minister of Rhodesia who had broken with the treasonous pro-apartheid riffraff around Ian Smith. “It’s always seemed perfectly simple to me, Mr. Verse-torn,” this old bulldog growled in the unmistakable accent of the region: “If you don’t like blick min, then don’t come and live in Ifrica.” Perry had granted the justice of this, as how could he not, and now felt that he owed me a small service in return. “Care to meet the new Leader?” Who could refuse? Within moments, Margaret Thatcher and I were face to face.

Within moments, too, I had turned away and was showing her my buttocks. I suppose that I must give some sort of explanation for this. Almost as soon as we shook hands on immediate introduction, I felt that she knew my name and had perhaps connected it to the socialist weekly that had recently called her rather sexy. While she struggled adorably with this moment of pretty confusion, I felt obliged to seek controversy and picked a fight with her on a detail of Rhodesia/Zimbabwe policy. She took me up on it. I was (as it chances) right on the small point of fact, and she was wrong. But she maintained her wrongness with such adamant strength that I eventually conceded the point and even bowed slightly to emphasize my acknowledgment. “No,”

she said. “Bow lower!” Smiling agreeably, I bent forward a bit farther. “No, no,” she trilled. “Much lower!” By this time, a little group of interested bystanders was gathering. I again bent forward, this time much more self-consciously. Stepping around behind me, she unmasked her batteries and smote me on the rear with the parliamentary order-paper that she had been rolling into a cylinder behind her back. I regained the vertical with some awkwardness. As she walked away, she looked back over her shoulder and gave an almost imperceptibly slight roll of the hip while mouthing the words: “Naughty boy!”

I had and have eyewitnesses to this. At the time, though, I hardly believed it myself. It is only from a later perspective, looking back on the manner in which she slaughtered and cowed all the former male leadership of her party and replaced them with pliant tools, that I appreciate the premonitory glimpse — of what someone in another context once called “the smack of firm government” — that I had been afforded. Even at the time, as I left that party, I knew I had met someone rather impressive. And the worst of “Thatcherism,” as I was beginning by degrees to discover, was the rodent slowly stirring in my viscera: the uneasy but unbanishable feeling that on some essential matters she might be right.

* It is characteristic of Martin to have pointed out that Dickens’s title *Our Mutual Friend* contains, or is, a solecism. One can have common friends but not mutual ones.

* The crudest thing that comes to mind — because it is such a cliché element of male fantasy — was our word, annexed from something said by Clive James, for the possibility of enjoying two young ladies at the same time. The term for this remote but intriguing contingency, which I still think was at least partially redeemed by its inventiveness, was “a carwash.” Think about it, or forget it if you can. Incidentally, Kingsley’s novel *The Green Man* contains the best-ever depiction of one of the many ways that this much-rehearsed ideal can go badly wrong in practice.

* Picture my mixed emotions at appearing in his novel *The Pregnant Widow* in the character of his elder brother.

* As I write this I have just read a “round-up” of authorial opinion printed by a London Sunday newspaper to coincide with Martin’s 60th birthday. It’s one of the most dispiriting things I have ever seen in print. With a few exceptions the contributors seem provincial and resentful and sunk in their own mediocrity. After all this time, they are obsessed with Martin’s supposed head start in having had a distinguished father, and with the question of whether or not he is a “misogynist.” On the first point he has answered quite well for himself — “Yes, it’s just like taking over the family pub” — and on the second I have to reconcile myself with much annoyance to the fact that most people never saw him with his sister, will never see him with his daughters, or his legion of female friends, not by any means all of whom are former “conquests.” So far from being some jaded Casanova, Martin possesses the rare gift—enviable if potentially time consuming — of being able to find something attractive in almost any woman. If this be misogyny, then give us increase of it.

* In 2008, when I finally had a best-seller hit of my own, it was from the pages of Bellow's great book that Martin sent me a sort of return compliment for my Fitzgerald telegram of 1974:

It was my turn to be famous and to make money, to get heavy mail, to be recognized by influential people, to be dined at Sardi's and propositioned in padded booths by women who sprayed themselves with musk, to buy Sea Island cotton underpants and leather luggage, to live through the intolerable excitement of vindication. (I was right all along!) I experienced the high voltage of publicity . . .

This, too — the Sea Island gear and the musky women, for example — was quite imperfect as an analogy while still conveying an atmosphere.

** There was also a time when he might have adopted Vladimir Nabokov, posthumously as it were, as a proxy parent. He made himself master of the subject matter, got to know surviving members of the family, wrote an essay on *Lolita* that was frighteningly exact, did everything except take up Lepidoptera. But the more Martin absorbed himself in the man's work, the more it was borne in on him that the recurrent twelve-year-old-girl theme in Nabokov's writing was something more alarming and disturbing than a daring literary one-off. See, for his stern register of this disquieting business, the *Guardian* 14 November 2009.

* I am aware at all times, gentle reader, of the "perhaps you had to be there" element in a memoir. I strive to keep it permanently in mind. In the case of Kingsley, you don't absolutely have to have been there. Try this, from one of his many wonderful letters to Philip Larkin. Amis is imitating the ingratiating announcer of the BBC's condescending weekly program *Jazz Record Requests*: ". . . Archie Shepp at his most exhilarating. Now to remind us of jazz's almost infinite variety, back almost fifty years to Nogood Deaf Poxxy Sam and One-Titted Woman Blues: 'Wawawawa wawawaa wawa wawa wa wa Oh ah gawooma shony gawon tia waah, wawa wa yeh ah gawooma shony gawon tia wawawwa waah wa boyf she ganutha she wouno where to put ia.' " I was reading this late one night, several years after Kingsley's death, and once I'd tried it out loud a couple of times I felt, through my hot tears of astonished laughter, that it was as if he were in the room. And he went to all this trouble for a private letter!

* I write this in a week where I have been re-reading *Northanger Abbey*, and reflecting once again on the sheer justice of Kingsley's verdict on Miss Austen's "inclination to take a long time over what is of minor importance and a short time over what is major."

* I was later rather startled, not to say impressed, when I learned that he had "cleared" all this "research" with his then-wife, the fragrant and lofty Antonia. He telephoned her in London and, rather than temporize, informed her right away that: "I'm going to a handjob parlor with the Hitch."

* The only time that he ever seemed at all literal to me was in his absorption with soccer games. He would even buy tabloid newspapers on the following day, "to read accounts of previously played football matches" as I tried discouragingly to put it. From him I learned to accept, as I have since learned to accept from my son and

my godson Jacob Amis and their friends, that there are men to whom the outcome of such sporting engagements is emotionally important. This is a test of masculinity, like some straight men's fascination with lesbianism, which I simply cannot seem to pass.

* Indeed, insistence upon the capacious subtleties of the limerick was something of a hallmark. Once again Conquest takes the palm: his condensation of the "Seven Ages of Man" shows how much force can be packed into the deceptively slight five-line frame. Thus:

Seven Ages: first puking and mewling
Then very pissed-off with your schooling
Then fucks, and then fights
Next judging chaps' rights
Then sitting in slippers: then drooling.

This is not the only example of Conquest's genius for compression. The history of the Bolshevik "experiment" in five lines? Barely a problem:

There was an old bastard named Lenin
Who did two or three million men in.
That's a lot to have done in
But where he did one in
That old bastard Stalin did ten in.

Portugal to Poland

IN RETROSPECT it seems to have been more conscious on my part than perhaps it was at the time, but there came a stage where I took refuge in travel. To adapt what Cavafy says about the barbarians, this was a solution of various kinds. It removed me from a London that was often dank and second-rate. It kindled in me a resolution which I have tried to keep ever since: to spend at least once every year a little time in a country less fortunate than my own. (If this doesn't stop you getting fat, it can at least help prevent you from getting too soft.) And, in the period I am writing about, it allowed me to continue seeing the Left as a force that was still struggling for first principles against the traditional foes.

I would be indignant if anyone were to describe this as “romantic” — a term that we were especially educated to despise in the International Socialists, even though I now think that there may be more reprehensible words. But, if you exempt a solidarity trip that I took to express support for the Icelandic socialists who were fighting to stop British trawlers from hoovering up all their fish (and Iceland is an exotic locale all of its own, with its moonscape interior and geyser-supplied hot water with the ever-present diabolical whiff of sulphur), it is true that the impulse generally led me to the south and to the Mediterranean and to the Levant.

One of the many great hopes of 1968 had been to complete the unfinished business of the Second World War and cleanse Spain and Portugal of their antique fascist regimes. Not only had this ambition not been realized, but another dictatorship of the Right had been imposed on Greece and then spread, with calamitous results, to the independent republic of Cyprus. The drama extended across both sides of the Pillars of Hercules: Franco's Spain made a free gift of its Western Sahara colonial possession to the absolutist monarchy in Morocco, leaving the population voiceless in its own destiny. It also extended to the extreme opposite end of the Mediterranean, where an Israeli Jewish opposition to the occupation of Palestinian land was beginning to take shape, and where in Lebanon an alliance of secular and Palestinian forces was emerging to challenge the old confession-based hierarchy.

A whole anthology of images survives vividly in my mind from this time. A spontaneous riot on the broad Ramblas of Barcelona, after the last-ever use of the hideous medieval garrotte for the judicial murder of a Catalan anarchist named Salvador Puig Antich: the illegal Catalan flag proudly flown and a shower of gasoline bombs falling on Franco's military police. A journey to Guernica — a place name that I could hardly believe corresponded to an actual living town — to rendezvous with Basque activists. A weekend in the Latin Quarter in Paris, complete with telephone “passwords” and

anonymous handshakes in corner zinc bars, so that I could meet a Portuguese resistance leader named Palma Inacio who was engaged in organizing an armed battle against the dictatorship in Lisbon. Some long, hot, and fragrant days in Tyre and Sidon and points south of Beirut, meeting with militants of the “Democratic Front” who, over lunch in the olive groves, would patiently explain to me that Jews and Arabs were brothers under the skin and that only imperialism was really the problem. Standing in Freedom Square in Nicosia among a roaring crowd of demonstrators, many of whom had recently fought with gun in hand against the Greek junta’s attempt to annex Cyprus, but whose voices could also be heard over the impermeable wall that the invading Turkish army had built right across a free city.

I liked all this for its elemental headiness (it seemed to go so well with different blends of wine and raki) but also for its seriousness — politics in these latitudes being a game played for keeps — and for its immediate and intense connection to history. I felt I knew the Ramblas from Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia*: in Algiers after returning from an expedition with the Polisario guerrillas fighting in the Sahara, I thought I also had at least a vicarious glimpse of the continuation of an old struggle for the soul of North Africa that had once involved Camus and Sartre. As for Cyprus, where I fell so hard in love with the island and the people — and with the very place names: Famagusta, Larnaca, Limassol, Kyrenia, and with one very dramatic and life-altering Cypriot — was not the philhellenic tradition the very one that had helped revive British radicalism more than a century before? (Today I want to puke when I hear the word “radical” applied so slothfully and stupidly to Islamist murderers; the most plainly reactionary people in the world.)

The alteration of perspective was the most useful thing. In northern Europe it was, roughly speaking, a case of the free West versus the “satellite states” of the East. In Cyprus, though, the illegal occupying power was a member of NATO. In Portugal, the fascist regime itself was a member of NATO. Likewise in the case of Greece. In Spain, the main external relationship of the system was with Washington. Thus it was possible to meet Communists who, in these special circumstances, not only made sense but had heroic records and were respected popular figures. In Cyprus, at a very red-flag rally where I was among the platform speakers, I had the distinct honor of shaking the hand of Manolis Glezos, who had given the signal for revolt in Athens in 1944 by climbing up the Parthenon and tearing the swastika flag from the pediment. Not a bad day’s work, I think you’ll agree.*

However, of Comrade Glezos it also had to be said that he had once run a bookstore in Athens that largely featured the work of Enver Hoxha of Albania, possibly the most Aztec-like of all Europe’s remaining Stalinists. And I hadn’t forgotten the second great promise of 1968, which was that of solidarity with the forces of dissent in “the other Europe,” the nations of the East and the Baltic who had been stranded and frozen in time ever since the Yalta agreement permitted the partition of the continent. Thus for me the three most important episodes from this epoch are the stirrings of revolution in Portugal and in Poland, and the experience of counter-revolution in Argentina.

Lusitania

Mediterranean though it can feel, Portugal is the only European country that has the Atlantic Ocean lapping around the inner harbor of its capital city. Its amazing mariners took its oddly inflected language as far away as East Timor and Macao though King Henry “the Navigator” probably never actually boarded a ship. As soon as I could manage it after the revolution of April 1974, I arrived ordinarily enough by air, and was then told to wait in the customs area. Was I perhaps on some list of undesirables, as I had found myself to be at other airports? A lanky, white-haired official, proffering a card that proclaimed his name to be Viera da Fonseca (just like the delicious port wine), extended a hand. He was to escort me to a hotel. It appeared that I was an honored guest. For the first time in my life, I was on a list of desirables. When the files of the former secret police of the Salazar/Caetano dictatorship had been broken open, it was found that I was listed as a particular foe of the ancien régime. Having imagined myself dossing down happily with my comrades on the floor of some left-wing slum apartment, I was promoted to a fairly elevated floor of the Tivoli Hotel on the Avenida Libertad, with a view of the city’s captivating harbor. It all seemed too much, as if one had suddenly received the profits and dividends of an investment that had barely been made. I formed a private resolution not to become too used to it.

But the fall of fascism in Lisbon in April 1974 was the occasion for an almost perfect storm of radical desires. The overthrow of the Caetano dictatorship was not only part of the long-postponed business of cleansing Europe of pre-1939 fascism, it was also a sort of revenge for the destruction in the preceding autumn (on 11 September to be precise) of the Allende government in Chile. There were other happy convergences at work, also. With the old gang removed, the grip of Portugal on its African colonies was broken, and this meant not only the emancipation of Angola and Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau but also an acceleration of the process that would eventually terminate racist rule in Rhodesia and South Africa. Other revolutionary ripple effects might be expected in Portuguese-speaking Brazil, the largest and in some ways the most vicious of the authoritarian military regimes of the Southern Cone of the Americas, while the effect on neighboring Spain surely had to be a demoralizing one from the viewpoint of Franco’s military and religious allies. A whole series of fault lines radiated away from this Lisbon earthquake, all of them shivering the structures of traditional order. And this was simply to speak politically. The cultural element made it seem as if the best of 1968 was still relevant. One of the precipitating prerevolutionary moments had been the publication of a feminist manifesto by three women, all of whom were named Maria, and “The Three Marias” became an exciting example of what womanhood could do when faced with a theocratic oligarchy that had treated them as breeding machines not far advanced above the level of chattel. Sex, long repressed, was to be scented very strongly on the wind: I remember in particular the only partly satirical Movimento da Esquerda Libidinoso or “Movement of the Libidinous Left,” with its slogan “Somos um partido sexocrático,” whose evident objective was the frantic making-up of lost

time. The best revolutionary poster I saw — perhaps the best I have ever seen — expressed this same thought in a rather less erotic way: it showed a modest Portuguese family in traditional dress, being introduced to a receiving line of new friends who included Socrates, Einstein, Beethoven, Spinoza, Shakespeare, Charlie Chaplin, Louis Armstrong, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud. (There are many people in much richer countries who are still putting off this rendezvous.)

As well as being a colonial power, Portugal under fascism had managed also to let itself become a semi-colony, whose main export was cheap labor to the rest of Europe and whose illiteracy rate was about thirty percent. The resulting division of the country, between the boss class and the officer class and the rank-and-file, was very striking. The astounding thing, in the mass demonstrations that thronged the Avenida Libertad and the Rossio Square, was to see the squads of uniformed young sailors and soldiers joining in with the workers and the students: to my eyes an almost literal replay of the scenes from *Battleship Potemkin* or the storming of the Winter Palace. And, once I had cleared my eyes by drying them, I noticed that the parallel with St. Petersburg could be drawn in other ways, too.

In 1968 the ferment of revolution had taken the ossified French Communist Party completely aback, forcing it in effect to line up with de Gaulle. This it had done, partly to protect its position as “the party of order” and partly to obey Soviet instructions that the anti-NATO and anti-American regime of the Gaullists be left as far as possible unmolested. In Portugal no such inhibitions were in play, because the old order had irretrievably vanished like breath off a razor blade, and there was a good old-fashioned power vacuum or, as we used to say in factional meetings, a “situation of dual power.” Workers’ committees were forming embryo soviets, soldiers’ and sailors’ collectives had whole ships and regiments under their temporary command, landless workers in the countryside were taking over abandoned farms and properties. There were two things to notice about this. One was that hardly a shot was fired: the Portuguese may have exported a good deal of their violence overseas to Africa but in the country itself the rhythms were — when compared to neighboring Spain, say — remarkably gentle. (As a possible metaphor, in Portuguese bullfights the bull is not tortured or killed: the matador tests only his own agility and bravery against the noble beast.) The second thing to absorb was that, behind all the spontaneity and eroticism and generalized “festival of the oppressed” merrymaking, a grim-faced Communist apparatus was making preparations for an end to the revels and a serious seizure of the state.

“The USSR is the sun in our universe,” proclaimed Alvaro Cunhal, leader of the Portuguese Stalinists, who had returned from exile in Moscow to direct operations. The tactics were more those of 1948 in Prague than St. Petersburg in 1917, consisting of the slow acquisition of positions in the army and the police, and the application of what used to be called “salami tactics” against other parties. The Portuguese Socialist Party enjoyed the support of a majority of the people, so it was not by coincidence that one of its main newspapers, *La Republica*, became the target of a “spontaneous” takeover by the print-workers, which their Communist union bosses endorsed as if butter would

not melt in their mouths. Nor was it by coincidence that the Chemical Workers' Union, which had a latent socialist majority among its membership, found some of its Communist officials oddly reluctant to hold a ballot. The emergency nationalization of the banks meant opportunities, in a state that had formerly been corporatist and monopolistic, for the bureaucratic "new class" to become the owners of large tracts of Africa, and the proprietors of seats on the boards of newspapers and television stations. The leader of the Socialist Party, Mario Soares, a man whom I would normally have regarded as a pallid and compromising Social Democrat, summarized the situation with some pith. I still have the question he put to me, double-underlined in my notebook from Lisbon. "If the army officers are so much on the side of the people, why do they not put on civilian clothes?" It was a question not just for that moment.

I began to be extremely downcast by the failure, or was it refusal, of my International Socialist comrades to see what was staring them right in the face. Intoxicated by the admittedly very moving attempts at personal liberation and social "self-management," they could not or would not appreciate how much of this was being manipulated by a dreary conformist sect with an ultimate loyalty to Russia. Thus I found myself one evening in late March 1975 at a huge rally in the Campo Pequeno bullring in Lisbon, organized by the distinctly cautious Socialist Party but with the invigorating slogan: "Socialismo Si! Dictatura Nao!" The whole arena was a mass of red flags, and the other chants echoed the original one. There were calls for the right of chemical workers to vote, a banner that read "Down With Social Fascism" and another that expressed my own views almost perfectly in respect of foreign intervention in Portugal: "Nem Kissinger, Nem Brezhnev!" I took my old friend Colin MacCabe along to this event. For his numberless sins he was at the time a member of the Communist Party, and at first employed an old Maoist catchphrase — "waving the red flag to oppose the red flag" — to dismiss what he was seeing. But gradually he became more impressed and as the evening began to crystallize he unbent so far as to say: "Sometimes the wrong people can have the right line." I thought then that he had said more than he intended, and myself experienced the remark as a sort of emancipation from the worry, which did still occasionally nag at me, that by taking up some out-of-line position I would find myself "in bed with," as the saying went, unsavory elements. It's good to throw off this sort of moral blackmail and mind-forged manacle as early in life as one can.*

The sequel takes very little time to tell: the Communists and their ultra-Left allies hopelessly overplayed their hand by trying for a barracks-based coup, the more traditional and rural and religious elements of Portuguese society rose in an indignant counter-revolution, a sort of equilibrium was restored and — *e finita la commedia*. The young radicals who had come from all over Europe to a feast of sex and sunshine and anti-politics folded their tents and doffed their motley and went home. It was the last fall of the curtain on the last act of the 1968 style, with its "take your desires for reality" wall posters and its concept of work as play. For me, it was also the end of the line with my old groupuscule. I had developed other disagreements, too, as the old and open-minded "International Socialists" began to mutate into a more party-line

sect. But Portugal had broken the mainspring for me, because it had caused me to understand that I thought democracy and pluralism were good things in themselves, and ends in themselves at that, rather than means to another end.

In his superb collection of essays *Writers and Politics*, which influenced me enormously when I first found it in a public library in Devonshire in 1967, Conor Cruise O'Brien had phrased it better than I could then hope to do:

“Are you a socialist?” asked the African leader.

I said, yes.

He looked me in the eye. “People have been telling me,” he said lightly, “that you are a liberal . . .”

The statement in its context invited a denial. I said nothing.

And yet, as I drove home from my interview with the leader, I had to realize that a liberal, incurably, was what I was. Whatever I might argue, I was more profoundly attached to liberal concepts of freedom — freedom of speech and of the press, academic freedom, independent judgment and independent judges — than I was to the idea of a disciplined party mobilizing all the forces of society for the creation of a social order guaranteeing more real freedom for all instead of just for a few. The revolutionary idea struck me as more immediately relevant for most of humanity than were the liberal concepts. But it was the liberal concepts and their long-term importance — though not the name of liberal — that held my allegiance.

One can read such things and understand and even appreciate them, and one can undergo experiences that recall one to the original text as if in confirmation. I cite O'Brien not as an argument from authority, for I was to have many disputes with him down the years, but as a man of considerable mind who brilliantly summarized the contradictions with which I had been living, and with which in many ways I was condemned to go on coexisting for some time to come.*

Liberté à la Polonaise

I was to have the same contrasts emphasized for me in a different way at the opposite end of Europe over the Christmas of 1976. The previous summer I had been very intrigued by reports of a small-scale but suggestive workers' revolt in Communist Poland, where Party property and several stretches of railway line had been extensively damaged in rioting against a sudden announcement from on high of a steep rise in the price of food. Some protestors had been killed and the rest dispersed and several put on trial — nothing exceptional in that — but a new element had intruded itself. Petitions had been circulating in Warsaw, soliciting money for a legal defense of the accused workers. Voices had been raised, demanding an inquiry into the conduct of the police and militia during the disturbances. Was it possible that, twenty years after the Polish “spring” of 1956, the *Germinal* of another movement from below was under way?

Interviewing one of the former leaders of the Portuguese fascist system, Dr. Franco Nogueira, in his office at the amazingly titled *Banco Spiritu Santu e Comercial* (Bank of the Holy Spirit and Commerce, its grotesque moniker partly explained by a family name), I had been informed by him that it was relatively easy to keep Portugal and

its people contained and under control because the country was peculiar in Europe in only having one land frontier. Poland's problem is the exact opposite. It is condemned by geography to live between Germany and Russia, and has been repeatedly invaded, occupied, and partitioned. Not an entirely blameless country — its forces took part in the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia after the British sell-out in Munich — in 1939 it was attacked and overrun by both Hitler and Stalin acting in concert. Its borders were redrawn again after 1945 — I was late in life to discover that those frontier territories had been the home of my mother's ancestors — and in 1976 the eventual results of the Hitler-Stalin rapacity could be seen in a dingy Russian-backed Communist bureaucracy sitting atop a sullen and strongly Catholic people who perhaps only agreed with their rulers in distrusting Federal Germany. (An old national chestnut asks the question: If the Russians and Germans both attack again, who do you shoot first? Answer: "The Germans. Business Before Pleasure." You can also deduce something about a Pole who answers this question the other way around.)

My business, however, was not with the Communists or the nationalists but with the democrats and the internationalists. At the time, these seemed to be about ten or twenty in number, barely enough to constitute a minyan had they been Jewish, which a few of them — however secular and non-Zionist — actually were. The one I most wished to meet was Jacek Kurón, author of the Trotskyist manifesto against the regime that I had so eagerly hawked around Oxford. He was still going, and strongly at that, in a tiny apartment much invigilated by the "U.B." or Polish secret police. Out of this cell of an apartment and other cells like it was to come a replicating system — the Workers Defense Committee/Komitet Obrony Robotnikow or KOR — which would eventually multiply and divide and evolve (perhaps paradoxically) into something more basic and simple: the elementary word — and movement — *Solidarnosc* or "Solidarity."

Rabbi Tarfon says somewhere that the task can never be quite completed, yet one has no right to give it up. Of the comrades I met that bleak winter, many of them veterans of the extremely nasty Polish prison system, none really expected to make more than a small dent in the regime. Yet to an outsider like myself, there did seem to be a faint nimbus of optimism, visible on the very edge of a dark and cold star. It was, to put it another way, quite astonishing to see how much, and to what an extent, the party-state depended on lies. Small lies and big lies. Petty lies hardly worth telling, that would shame a nose-picking, whining, guilty child, and huge lies that would cause a hardened blackmailer and perjurer to blush a bit.

To give an example of the paltry sort: the Chilean Communist leader Luis Corvalán had recently been "swapped," in a piece of overt Cold War horsetrading, for the Soviet dissident Vladimir Bukovsky. No evident disgrace in that, perhaps, but the Polish Communist press insisted only on reporting the release of Corvalán, and only as the outcome of a campaign of international proletarian solidarity. In a time of BBC and other broadcasts, and with many Poles having family overseas, the chances of such a falsification being believed were exactly nil. Yet such crass falsification was the everyday currency of the Polish media.

On the macro scale, it was still officially “true” that the mass graves of Katyn, across the Belarus border, in which the corpses of tens of thousands of Polish officers had been hastily interred in the 1940s, were the responsibility of the Nazis. But there simply wasn’t a single person in the whole of Poland who credited this disgusting untruth. Not even those paid to spread it believed it.*

My American Trotskyist girlfriend and I had been told by friends that the thing to take to Warsaw was blue jeans, which had totemic value on the black market. We accordingly packed several old, patched, worn-out pairs. We scrounged a bed from my old Oxford comrade Christopher Bobinski, who was then just beginning his stellar career as a reporter from his homeland. As an interpreter he provided us with the lovely Barbara Kopec, who held down a daytime job in the “Palace of Culture” that dominated the main square of the city. It had been built as a personal gift from Joseph Stalin to the people of Poland, and in its form and shape expressed all the good taste and goodwill that such benevolence might have implied. It wasn’t much fun working inside the building, as Barbara remarked, but at least it meant she didn’t have to look at the damn thing.

When we went to meet Jacek Kurón in his tiny cluttered apartment, this tough and stocky fellow punctured one of my illusions right away, by saying that he no longer had any illusions about Trotskyism. The real terrain of struggle was for democratic liberties and the rule of law. And, even as we spoke, we were continually reminded of the distance to be traveled toward this goal. At regular intervals, Kurón’s phone would ring and he would be subjected to “spontaneous” abuse. In an effort to spook him, a death threat had been anonymously delivered, with a countdown of a hundred days. It stood at sixty-five to go on the day of our visit. And the besetting sin of Polish public life, anti-Semitism, was in evidence as well. He showed and read me a violently Jew-hating letter, sent to him by registered mail. The sender had then delivered another letter, this time by hand, confessing that the first missive had been dictated to him in a police station! This showed a real sickness in the Communist system, not just because of the use of bigotry as a provocation, but because anti-Semitism had historically always been used by the Polish right wing against the Reds. It took real calcified cynicism to employ such a weapon of reaction against dissent. (It would have been even nastier if Jacek Kurón had actually been Jewish, but the fact is that he wasn’t: Polish and other Jew-baiters have been known to operate without possessing the raw material of any actual Jews to “work” with.)

In their pedantic way, the postwar Communists had tried to rebuild Warsaw as an exact replica of its prewar self. Some of this was soulless and dull, but there was heavy snow that Christmas, and I found the icy city rather hypnotizing. We went to the nearby township of Kazimierz, once a center of Jewish life before the nearly “clean” sweep that had been made of Polish Jewry. We attended a midnight Mass in Vilanow, where the congregation was so densely packed that it spilled out of doors, with worshippers kneeling in the drifts. I could not understand much of the sermon, but it didn’t seem to be delivered in the emetic, emollient tones of the Second Vatican

Council. Polish Catholicism, often a historic ally of extremist politics, also had its collaborationist side with a semi-official group known as Pax Christi sitting in the rubber-stamp parliament. But that Christmas Cardinal Wyszynski gave a rather decent and spirited sermon, making quite strong statements about the repression of strikers. Everybody got to hear about it, but the official press didn't report a single line of the homily, thus underlining yet again the self-defeating character of lying and censorship. "Self-sabotaging" might be a better term: one of the strikes in the port city of Stettin had been provoked when the shipyard workers read in the Communist Party paper that they had all "volunteered" to work longer hours in the interests of production. One of the leaders of that strike, a man named Edmund Baluka, later told me that he had been sent as a soldier into Czechoslovakia during the Warsaw Pact aggression of August 1968. He had been told, and had believed, that he was going to repel a West German invasion of Prague. Discovering a complete absence of Germans in the country — except for East German soldiers who were also taking part in the Russian-sponsored occupation — had destroyed his entire faith in anything the Party ever said. (Baluka, too, was for some time to associate himself with Trotskyism.)

Our young friends in the KOR invited us for a Christmas Eve feast in a cold but cheery apartment. There was a great deal to eat and drink, but I suddenly noticed with an inner qualm that everything — every loaf and sausage and cheese and bottle — was the last third or quarter of itself. It was clear that in the interests of hospitality, all the odds and ends and saved-up leftovers were being deployed. I was glad to be able to produce the parcel of blue jeans. And I don't remember a gift ever going over so well. "Are you sure you can spare all of these?" we were asked, as if we were parting with a fortune. "On the black market, this can raise a huge amount for the committee." There was also the eagerly discussed hope that KOR could start an underground publishing house, to print among other things the works of George Orwell. (This did later happen, with a samizdat imprint called NOWA.) Even so, and keen as I was on the latter idea especially, I urged them to keep back at least something of our gift for themselves. They remained self-denyingly serious, though I think it was decided that Barbara should have a pair of her very own, if only to show off a bit of style in the Stalinist wedding cake that was her office building. In later years, as the strikes burgeoned and spread and the Polish working class outlived both the Polish Communist Party and — as in Portugal — the attempt of that party to stay in power by using the army, I liked to imagine those blue jeans as having acted as one of the pebbles that began the historical avalanche.

My ability to carry my liquor was very useful on that trip, as it has been on several other voyages. The hearteningly jovial and inspiring evening ended with a drinking-bout challenge to me from a young comrade named Witold. Two lines of shot glasses were arranged down each side of the dining table, and filled to the brim with different flavors of Polish vodka, including my own then-favorite Zubrovka, tinted a pale-ish green by the buffalo grass that grows in the east of the country. Last man to the finish-line was a sissy. I do not actually remember whether I beat Witold or whether

it was a dead heat, but I remember a rush of pride at his fraternal embrace, and also his exclaiming: “Christophe, tu es un vrai Polonais!” It was a title of honor.

This trip was also to yield me another of those life-altering aperçus. It came from Adam Michnik, one of the founders of the KOR and later one of the chief intellectuals of Solidarnosc and later still — and to this day — a leading figure in the academic and publishing life of his country. When I met him, he was already a veteran of numerous victimizations and imprisonments. His troubles had begun in 1966, when he was expelled from the university for organizing a seminar for Professor Leszek Kolakowski. Having a Jewish father but not a Jewish mother he could easily have “passed” but preferred to describe himself as a Pole of Jewish descent. He was then definitely of the secular Left, and had been impressed by the way that, in Franco Spain, “civil society” had been able to build up parallel institutions that could gradually and organically replace the deliquescent absolutist state. This was very much the model that many of Poland’s oppositionists were to follow. I mentioned to him at our first meeting that Jacek Kurón thought the next wave of protests wouldn’t be very “socialistic,” because the word had been so much discredited by Communist rule. Michnik wasn’t so sure. “After all, ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’ are words that have been discredited by governments as well, but we do not abandon them for that reason. The real struggle for us is for the citizen to cease to be the property of the state.” I knew as I wrote it down and underlined it that that last sentence was a pregnant one, that its implications for all political positions were enormous and that in order to stay true to the principle — once again, the principle of consistent anti-totalitarianism — one might have to expose oneself to steadily mounting contradictions.

I was to see Adam Michnik on and off through the long transformation of Poland and watch him emerge as an honored historian and politician as well as the editor of perhaps the country’s most respected newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborzka*, which had begun life as an illegal strike-sheet. One of the juiciest pleasures of life is to be able to salute and embrace, as elected leaders and honored representatives, people whom you first met when they were on the run or in exile or (like Adam) in and out of jail. I was to have this experience again, and I hope to have it many more times in the future: it sometimes allows me to feel that life is full of point.

Argentina: Death and Disappearance (and an Infinite Library)

At a lunchtime reception for the diplomatic corps in Washington, given the day before the inauguration of Barack Obama as president, I was approached by a good-looking man who extended his hand. “We once met many years ago,” he said. “And you knew and befriended my father.” My mind emptied, as so often happens on such occasions. I had to inform him that he had the advantage of me. “My name is Hector Timerman. I am the ambassador of Argentina.”

In my above album of things that seem to make life pointful and worthwhile, and that even occasionally suggest, in Dr. King’s phrase as often cited by President Obama, that there could be a long arc in the moral universe that slowly, eventually bends toward justice, this would constitute an exceptional entry. It was also something more

than a nudge to my memory. There was a time when the name of Jacobo Timerman, the kidnapped and tortured editor of the newspaper *La Opinion* in Buenos Aires, was a talismanic one. The mere mention of it was enough to elicit moans of obscene pleasure from every fascist south of the Rio Grande: finally in Argentina there was a strict “New Order” that would stamp hard upon the international Communist-Jewish collusion. A little later, the mention of Timerman’s case was enough to derail the nomination of Ronald Reagan’s first nominee as undersecretary for human rights; a man who didn’t seem to have grasped the point that neo-Nazism was a problem for American values. And Timerman’s memoir, *Prisoner without a Name, Cell without a Number*, was the book above all that clothed in living, hurting flesh the necessarily abstract idea of the *desaparecido*: the disappeared one or, to invest it with the more sinister and grisly past participle with which it came into the world, the one who has been “disappeared.” In the nuances of that past participle, many, many people vanished into a void that is still unimaginable. It became one of the keywords, along with *escuadrone de la muerte* or “death squads,” of another arc, this time of radical evil, that spanned a whole subcontinent. Do you know why General Jorge Rafael Videla of Argentina was eventually sentenced? Well, do you? Because he sold the children of the tortured rape victims who were held in his private prison. I could italicize every second word in that last sentence without making it any more heart-stopping. And this subhuman character was boasted of, as a personal friend and genial host, even after he had been removed from the office he had defiled, by none other than Henry Kissinger. So there was an almost hygienic effect in meeting, in a new Washington, as an envoy of an elected government, the son of the brave man who had both survived and exposed the Videla tyranny.

I had four ambitions when I disembarked in the extravagantly lovely city of Buenos Aires in December of 1977. The first was to see if I could discover what had happened to Jacobo Timerman. The second was to interview the president, who was then General Videla. The third was to see the pampas, and the fourth was to meet my literary hero Jorge Luis Borges. I failed — though not completely — with the first. And I succeeded with the other three, though not in quite the ways I had anticipated.

Clichés, as the late William Safire was fond of saying, should be avoided like the plague, yet one stale journalistic standby — the “pall of fear” hanging over the city — seemed to be warranted. People spoke to foreigners with an averted gaze, and everybody seemed to know somebody who had just vanished. The rumors of what had happened to them were fantastic and bizarre though, as it turned out, they were only an understatement of the real thing. Before going to see General Videla in Perón’s old pink presidential palace at the Casa Rosada, I went to deliver some letters from Amnesty International to a local human rights group, and also to check in with *Los Madres*: the black-draped mothers who paraded, every week, with pictures of their missing loved ones in the Plaza Mayo. (“*Todo mi familia!*” as one elderly lady kept telling me imploringly, as she flourished their photographs. “*Todo mi familia!*”) From these and from other relatives and friends I got a line of questioning to put to the

general. I would be told by him, they forewarned me, that people “disappeared” all the time, either because of traffic accidents and family quarrels or, in the dire civil-war circumstances of Argentina, because of the wish to drop out of a gang and the need to avoid one’s former associates. But this was a cover story. Most of those who disappeared were openly taken away in the unmarked Ford Falcon cars of the Buenos Aires military police. I should inquire of the general what precisely had happened to Claudia Inez Grumberg, a paraplegic who was unable to move on her own but who had last been seen in the hands of his ever-vigilant armed forces.

Escorted into Videla’s presence, I justified my politeness and formality by telling myself that I wasn’t there to make points but to elicit facts. I possess a picture of the encounter that still makes me want to spew: there stands the killer and torturer and rape-profiteer, as if to illustrate some seminar on the banality of evil. Bony-thin and mediocre in appearance, with a scrubby moustache, he looks for all the world like a cretin impersonating a toothbrush. I am gripping his hand in a much too unctuous manner and smiling as if genuinely delighted at the introduction. Aching to expunge this humiliation, I waited while he went almost pedantically through the predicted script, waving away the rumored but doubtless regrettable dematerializations that were said to be afflicting his fellow Argentines. And then I asked him about Senorita Grumberg. He replied that if what I had said was true, then I should remember that “terrorism is not just killing with a bomb, but activating ideas. Maybe that’s why she’s detained.” I expressed astonishment at this reply and, evidently thinking that I hadn’t understood him the first time, Videla enlarged on the theme. “We consider it a great crime to work against the Western and Christian style of life: it is not just the bomber but the ideologist who is the danger.” Behind him, I could see one or two of his brighter staff officers looking at me with stark hostility as they realized that the general — El Presidente— had made a mistake by speaking so candidly. (I was later to find that I was being followed around the city, which caused me many a fearful moment.) In response to a follow-up question, Videla crassly denied — “rotondamente”: “roundly” denied — holding Jacobo Timerman “as either a journalist or a Jew.” While we were having this surreal exchange, here is what Timerman was being told by his taunting tormentors:

Argentina has three main enemies: Karl Marx, because he tried to destroy the Christian concept of society; Sigmund Freud, because he tried to destroy the Christian concept of the family; and Albert Einstein, because he tried to destroy the Christian concept of time and space.

Punctuated by thrusts of the cattle prod, it wasn’t difficult to determine the direction that such a clerical-fascist interrogation was taking. And Senorita Grumberg, too, was a Jew. We later discovered what happened to the majority of those who had been held and tortured in the secret prisons of the regime. According to a Navy captain named Adolfo Scilingo, who published a book of confessions, these broken victims were often destroyed as “evidence” by being flown out way over the wastes of the South Atlantic and flung from airplanes into the freezing water below. Imagine the fun ele-

ment when there's the surprise bonus of a Jewish female prisoner in a wheelchair to be disposed of . . . we slide open the door and get ready to roll her and then it's one, two, three . . . go!

Many governments employ torture but this was the first time that the element of Saturnalia and pornography in the process had been made so clear to me. If you care to imagine what any inadequate or cruel man might do, given unlimited power over a woman, then anything that you can bring yourself to suspect was what became routine in ESMA, the Navy Mechanics School that became the headquarters of the business. I talked to Dr. Emilio Mignone, a distinguished Physician whose daughter Monica had disappeared into the precincts of that hellish place. What do you find to say to a doctor and a humanitarian who has been gutted by the image of a starving rat being introduced to his daughter's genitalia? Like hell itself the school was endorsed and blessed by priests, in case any stray consciences needed to be stilled. The Catholic chaplain of ESMA, Father Christian von Wernich, was three decades later convicted of direct complicity in murder, torture, and abduction. The Papal Nuncio, later to become Cardinal Pio Laghi, was the sleek tennis partner of Admiral Emilio Massera, the supervising member of the Argentine Navy's whole sadistic enterprise. Here's Timerman again, on the details and elaborations of his own electric-shock torture:

Now they're really amused, and burst into laughter. Someone tries a variation while still clapping hands: "Clipped prick . . . clipped prick." Whereupon they begin alternating while clapping their hands: "Jew . . . Clipped prick . . . Jew . . . Clipped prick." It seems they're no longer angry, merely having a good time. I keep bouncing in the chair and moaning as the electric shocks penetrate . . .

And here he is again, on a truly ingenious element of the inferno, when suspects are brought in and tortured en famille and where:

The entire affective world, constructed over the years with utmost difficulty, collapses with a kick in the father's genitals, a smack on the mother's face, an obscene insult to the sister, or the sexual violation of a daughter. Suddenly an entire culture based on familial love, devotion, the capacity for mutual sacrifice collapses. Nothing is possible in such a universe, and that is precisely what the torturers know . . . From my cell, I'd hear the whispered voices of children trying to learn what was happening to their parents, and I'd witness the efforts of daughters to win over a guard, to arouse a feeling of tenderness in him, to incite the hope of some lovely future relationship between them in order to learn what was happening to her mother, to get an orange sent to her, to get permission for her to go to the bathroom.

I borrow Jacobo's words here because they are crystalline authentic and because my own would be no good: Flaubert was right when he said that our use of language is like a cracked kettle on which we bang out tunes for bears to dance to, while all the time we need to move the very stars to pity.

For all its outwardly easy Latin charm, Buenos Aires was making me feel sick and upset, so I did take that trip to the great plains where the gaucho epics had been written, and I did manage to eat a couple of the famous asados: the Argentine

barbecue fiesta (once summarized by Martin Amis's John Self as "a sort of triple mixed grill swaddled in steaks") with its slavish propitiation of the sizzling gods of cholesterol. Yet even this was spoiled for me: my hosts did their own slaughtering and the smell of drying blood from the abattoir became too much for some reason (I actually went "off" steak for a good few years after this trip). Then from the intrepid Robert Cox of the Buenos Aires Herald I learned another jaunty fascist colloquialism: before the South Atlantic dumping method was adopted, the secret cremation of maimed and tortured bodies at the Navy School had been called an asado. In my youth I was quite often accused, and perhaps not unfairly, of being too politicized and of trying to import politics into all discussions. I would reply that it wasn't my fault if politics kept on invading the private sphere and, in the case of Argentina at any rate, I think I was right. The miasma of the dictatorship pervaded absolutely everything, not excluding the aperitifs and the main course.

It even made its sickening way into the bookish, secluded atmosphere of Apartment 6B on Calle Maipu 994, just off the Plaza San Martin, where lived Jorge Luis Borges. I was extremely shy of approaching my hero but he, as I found out, was sorely in need of company. By then almost completely blind, he was claustrated and even a little confused and this may help explain the rather shocking attitude that he took to the blunt trauma that was being inflicted in the streets and squares around him. "This was my country and it might be yet," he intoned to me when the topic first came up, as it had to: "But something came between it and the sun." This couplet he claimed (I have never been able to locate it) was from Edmund Blunden, whose gnarled hand I had been so excited to shake all those years ago, but it was not the Videla junta that Borges meant by the allusion. It was the pre-existing rule of Juan Perón, which he felt had depraved and corrupted Argentine society. I didn't disagree with this at all — and Perón had victimized Borges's mother and sister as well as having Borges himself fired from his job at the National Library — but it was nonetheless sad to hear the old man saying that he heartily preferred the new uniformed regime, as being one of "gentlemen" as opposed to "pimps." This was a touch like listening to Evelyn Waugh at his most liverish and bufferish. (It was also partly redeemed by a piece of learned philology or etymology concerning the Buenos Aires dockside slang for pimp: canfinflero. "A canfinfla, you see," said Borges with perfect composure, "is a pussy or more exactly a cunt. So a canfinflero is a trafficker in cunt: in Anglo-Saxon we might say a 'cunter.'" Had not the very tango itself been evolved in a brothel in 1880? Borges could talk indefinitely about this sort of thing, perhaps in revenge for having had an oversolicitous mother who tyrannized him all his life.)

He wanted me to read aloud to him and this I gladly did. I most remember his request for Kipling's "Harp Song of the Dane Women," a poem that employs mainly Anglo-Saxon and Norse words (Borges's own talk was spiced with terms like "folk" and "kin") and which opens so beautifully and hauntingly with the Viking wives as they are keening:

What is a woman that you forsake her

And the hearth fire and the home acre
To go with that old grey widow-maker?

For every author and topic Borges had a crisp summation. G.K. Chesterton: “Such a pity that he became a Catholic.” Kipling: “Unappreciated because too many of his peers were socialists.” “It’s a shame that we have to choose between two such second-rate countries as the USSR and the USA.” The hours I spent in this anachronistic, bibliophile, Anglophile retreat were in surreal contrast to the shrieking horror show that was being enacted in the rest of the city. I never felt this more acutely than when, having maneuvered the old boy down the spiral staircase for a rare out-of-doors lunch the next day — terrified of letting him slip and tumble — I got him back upstairs again. He invited me back for even more readings the following morning but I had to decline. I pleaded truthfully that I was booked on a plane for Chile. “I am so sorry,” said this courteous old genius. “But may I then offer you a gift in return for your company?” I naturally protested with all the energy of an English middle-class upbringing: couldn’t hear of such a thing; pleasure and privilege all mine; no question of accepting any present. He stilled my burlblings with an upraised finger. “You will remember,” he said, “the lines I will now speak. You will always remember them.” And he then recited the following:

What man has bent o’er his son’s sleep, to brood
How that face shall watch his when cold it lies?
Or thought, as his own mother kissed his eyes,
Of what her kiss was when his father wooed?

The title (Sonnet XXIX of Dante Gabriel Rossetti) — “Inclusiveness” — may sound a trifle sickly but the enfolded thought recurred to me more than once after I became a father and Borges was quite right: I have never had to remind myself of the words. I was mumbling my thanks when he said, again with utter composure: “While you are in Chile do you plan a call on General Pinochet?” I replied with what I hoped was equivalent aplomb that I had no such intention. “A pity,” came the response. “He is a true gentleman. He was recently kind enough to award me a literary prize.” It wasn’t the ideal note on which to bid Borges farewell, but it was an excellent illustration of something else I was becoming used to noticing — that in contrast or corollary to what Colin MacCabe had said to me in Lisbon, sometimes it was also the right people who took the wrong line.*

Two small sequels complete this episode in my life, which turned out to be a sort of hinge. After returning to London via Chile, I wrote a longish report for the *New Statesman* about the American-backed dictatorships of the Southern Cone. This drew two invitations. The first came from Kai Bird, writing on behalf of Victor Navasky, the new editor of *The Nation* magazine in New York. My article was much admired at their office: Might I consider writing for them in the future? (“Dear Ms. Bird,” I ignorantly wrote back to the future Pulitzer-winning historian and biographer, readily accepting his offer.) The second invitation was from my old comrade Denis Matyjasek, by now renamed MacShane because the BBC wouldn’t let him use an unpronounceable Polish

name on the air, and also by then the leader of the National Union of Journalists. Would I speak with him at a public meeting, to enlighten all the reporters who would be covering the upcoming soccer World Cup in Argentina, and to encourage them to make inquiries about the human rights situation? Naturally I would, I replied to Tony Blair's future deputy foreign minister. If there was one thing of which my Argentine experience had convinced me, it was that for all its hackery and cynicism, the profession of journalism did still have its aspect of nobility. Jacobo Timerman, some time after his release, was to praise Robert Cox of the English-language Buenos Aires Herald as a natural English gentleman. Timerman himself struck me as a vivid example of the great tradition of secular Jewish dissent. Both had testified to the health of the written word and its salutary effect upon diseased and disordered societies. I was renewed in believing in what I wanted to do.

The MacShane-sponsored solidarity evening came: I made my pitch and told my tales, the turnout was good, the questions were of a fairly high standard and then up got a man in a three-piece suit who in a very plummy accent identified himself with a double-barreled name. Here it comes, I thought, there's always some bleeding Tory trying to put a veneer on military rule. The gentleman proceeded to give high praise to my speech. He underlined the fascistic nature of the junta and went on to call attention to its aggressive design on the Falkland Islands, where lived an ancient community of British farmers and fishermen. In 1978 this didn't seem to be a geopolitical detail of any consuming interest, but I do remember agreeing with him that when challenged about its own depredations, the Argentine Right invariably tried to change the subject to the injustice of British possession of the Falklands (or Las Malvinas as they were known locally).

As a consequence, I was invited to an evening event thrown by the Falkland Islands Committee in the garden of Lincoln's Inn. I asked if I might bring my father, who had himself briefly been stationed on this desolate archipelago. The reception was a distinct success, if somehow quaint in its almost antique Englishness. I have often noticed that nationalism is at its strongest at the periphery. Hitler was Austrian, Bonaparte Corsican. In postwar Greece and Turkey the two most prominent ultra-right nationalists had both been born in Cyprus. The most extreme Irish Republicans are in Belfast and Derry (and Boston and New York). Sun Yat Sen, father of Chinese nationalism, was from Hong Kong. The Serbian extremists Miloševi and Karadži were from Montenegro and their most incendiary Croat counterparts in the Ustashe tended to hail from the frontier lands of Western Herzegovina. Falklands nationalism was too mild to stand comparison with any of these toxic movements, but the loyalist atmosphere on the lawn that night, with a Navy band playing and ancient settler families inquiring after one another's descendants, was of an unquestioning and profound and rooted kind that one almost never encountered in the rest of a declining and anxious Britain. It was a bit much even for Commander Hitchens, who privately thought the islands slightly absurd and probably undefendable. When the time came when his old Royal Navy was sinking and shattering the Argentine fleet, the cadet school of which was a

training camp for torture and rape, I was one of the very few socialists to support Mrs. Thatcher and he was one of the very few Tories to doubt the wisdom of the enterprise. So it goes.

I may seem to be getting ahead of my story there — it can happen to the best and the worst raconteur — but in fact the remaining short time of my life in England was becoming more and more overshadowed by that same Iron Lady. I didn't really like anything about her, except, that is, for the most important thing about her, which was that she was "a conviction politician." In the Labour Party, this sort of principled character had effectively ceased to exist. The closing years of "Old Labour" in Britain were years laced with corruption, cynicism, emollience, and drift. I tried my best to maintain my old commitment, but the effort was too much. In the area where I did my actual work, the printing trade unions were not much better than a protection racket for a privileged guild. In the rest of the country, Labour had become a status quo party, hostile to the union with Europe, suspicious of technological innovation, inward-looking, and envious. Striking workers were too easily emboldened because they were inconveniencing, not the capitalist and the owner and the scab, but the vulnerable remainder of the working public.

My last-ditch moment, though, was the official defense of torture in Northern Ireland. Labour's "responsible" minister in the province, a bullying dwarf named Roy Mason, had both denied and excused (perhaps you notice how the denial is so often the preface to the justification) the use of atrocious methods. Everybody knows the creepy excuses that are always involved here: "terrorism" must be stopped, lives are at stake, the "ticking bomb" must be intercepted. That after so many years of unhappy engagement with Ireland we should imagine that torture should be given another try . . . and that I should know people in the government who would defend it. I had a friend-losing and tearful dinner with a brilliant young junior minister who would not repudiate methods that were bursting the eardrums and fracturing the limbs of Irish prisoners. In the election campaign of 1979 I wrote as much as I could about this for the *New Statesman*. The election itself had been precipitated by a vote of confidence in the House of Commons, when the Irish Left and Republican members had furiously refused to vote to keep Labour in office. To this day, I find, many habitual Labour supporters have succeeded in forgetting that shame. I was in the press gallery that night, and I remember thinking that it would be a long time before there was another Labour government, and that if it came to that I didn't really care.

Decades earlier, in some essays (boldly titled "Origins of the Present Crisis") that had been one of the founding documents of the New Left, Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn had anatomized the British disease as that of an intransigent ancien régime whose pathologies were as much institutional as economic. A stringently Marxist conclusion from this would have been that if Labour and "the Left" could not or would not confront the ossification of the past, then the historic task would fall to a newly dynamic "Right." Christopher Hill was later to say to me, half-admiringly, that Mrs. Thatcher had not just chosen to face down the outmoded syndicalism of the trade unions but had also

“taken on” corporate-state ideas among business people, and picked fights with the House of Lords, the ancient universities, the traditional Conservative Party, the Church of England, and even the House of Windsor. Moreover, in the two most hidebound areas of old-style British authority, Northern Ireland and Southern Rhodesia, she was also able to enforce some of the constitutional revolutions that Old Labour had been too cowardly and too deferential to impose. She went barmy in the end and even attempted to keep the Berlin Wall as a part of the status quo but at the time she made me suffer from the same *odi et amo* complex that I’d begun to develop on the night of the spanking . . .

It took me years to admit it to anybody, but when the election day came I deliberately did not vote to keep Labour in office. I had various private excuses: I lived in a part of London where Labour didn’t need my franchise because it had long held the district as a rotten borough. Then: Why should I swallow my vomit when Gerry Fitt and Frank MacManus, the Irish MPs who had made the difference in Parliament, had been unable to swallow theirs? On and on I went in my own mind, increasingly expert in self-persuasion. But in truth, I secretly knew quite well that I wasn’t merely registering an abstention. I was in effect voting for Mrs. Thatcher. And I was secretly, guiltily glad to see her terminating the long reign of mediocrity and torpor. On top of this, I was becoming increasingly aware that that other old Tory, Dr. Samuel Johnson, had been quite wrong when he pronounced that a man who was tired of London was tired of life. With me, it was if anything the reverse. If I was ever going, it was time for me to go.

* A comparable if not equivalent consideration sometimes applied in the “other” case: for all his indomitable moral courage Solzhenitsyn had already begun to show signs of being an extreme Russian nationalist and partisan of religious orthodoxy. The synthesis for which one aimed was the Orwellian one of evolving a consistent and integral anti-totalitarianism.

* Colin, who went on to become a distinguished author of books on James Joyce and Jean-Luc Godard, years later called me from China where Deng Xiaoping had just announced that his reforms would mean that all would get richer but some would get richer than others. “So it looks as if your pal Orwell was on to something after all.” I thought that was a handsome enough concession. It was rather a poor return, when his friend the grim and fraudulent Stalinist philosopher Louis Althusser was convicted of murdering his wife, for me to say, “I see Comrade Althusser has been awarded the electric chair of philosophy at the Ecole Abnormale.”

* O’Brien’s definition of liberalism as a position “that made the rich world yawn and the poor world sick” is a phrasing that older readers may remember if only because of Phil Ochs’s biting satirical song “Love Me, I’m a Liberal.” Arrested once in Oxford for disrupting a cricket match with an apartheid South African team, I was able to get myself acquitted of the police frame-up because a bystander came forward and offered himself as an impartial witness. He was a highly respectable citizen and cricket-watcher and the treasurer of the local Liberal Party. Attending the trial and after giving his

testimony, he saw me refuse to take my oath on the Bible and heard me tell the bench as my reason that I was “an atheist and a Marxist.” After the hearing was over, he came up to me and said that if he had known that I was that kind of person, he would never have volunteered to testify. For many years, this well-meaning but invertebrate figure was my ideal type of the “liberal” mentality, and he still comes back to me at odd moments.

* The British Foreign Office may be an exception here. Its bureaucrats continued to spout the lie, born of the wartime alliance with Stalin, until the Soviet Union beat them to it under Mikhail Gorbachev and officially accepted responsibility for Katyn in 1990.

* In justice to Borges it has to be added that a few years later he came to realize that he had been duped by the junta, and did sign a rather courageous petition about the desaparecidos. Men like him often, and in spite of their inclinations, have a natural “gold standard” when it comes to questions of principle.

A Second Identity: On Becoming an (Anglo) American

Who are you indeed who would talk or sing to America?

— Walt Whitman: *Leaves of Grass*

We go to Europe to be Americanized.

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

The American who has known Europe much can never again see his country with the single eye of his ante-European days.

— Henry James: *The Ambassadors*

It did not cause me any trouble to become an Italian, but my becoming an American is my own work.

— Max Ascoli

IT DOESN'T HAPPEN to me anymore, because a fresh generation of Africans and Asians has arisen to take over the business, but in my early years in Washington, D.C., I would often find myself in the back of a big beat-up old cab driven by an African-American veteran. I became used to the formalities of the *mise-en-scène*: on some hot and drowsy Dixie-like afternoon I would flag down a flaking Chevy. Behind the wheel, leaning wa-aay back and relaxed, often with a cigar stub in the corner of his mouth (and, I am not making this up, but sometimes also with a genuine porkpie hat on the back of his head) would be a grizzled man with the waist of his pants somewhere up around his armpits. I would state my desired destination. In accordance with ancient cabdriver custom, he would say nothing in response but simply engage the stickshift on his steering wheel and begin to cruise in a leisurely fashion. There would be a pause. Then: "You from England?" I would always try to say something along the lines of "Well, I'm in no position to deny it." This occasionally got me a grin; in any case, I always knew what was coming next. "I was there once." "Were you in the service?" "I sure was." "Did you get to Normandy?" "Yes, sir." But it wasn't Normandy or combat about which they wanted to reminisce. (With real combat veterans, by the way, it almost never is.) It was England itself. "Man did it know how to rain . . . and the warm beer. Nice people, though. Real nice." I would never forget to say, as I got out and deliberately didn't overtip (that seeming a cheap thing to do), how much this effort on their part was remembered and appreciated.

It is not at that level that the Anglo-American "special relationship" is usually celebrated. It tends to be more consecrated by meetings of the Churchill Society, by

the queen's visit to horseflesh haciendas in Virginia and Kentucky, by ceremonies with flags and drums and national banners. But I think that the above element of it deserves to be better remembered. For many of these brave gentlemen, segregated in their U.S. Army units, England was the first picture they ever saw of how a non-segregated society might look. In my hometown of Portsmouth there was a riot in 1943, with the locals scorning attempts by American military policemen to enforce a color bar in the pubs. The young Medgar Evers apparently told his English friends that after what he'd seen and learned, when he got back to Mississippi he wasn't going to put up with any more of this garbage. On my very first trip through the Deep South, in 1970, I stopped at some tiny Greyhound bus waystation in Alabama to have a glass of refreshment, and a young black man hearing my voice came up to be hospitable and said: "We here greatly admire the stand of you-all in the Second World War." It stuck in my mind because it was the first time I had ever actually heard someone say "y'all" — it seemed to take slightly longer to say in this part of Alabama — and because I could be fairly sure that on this occasion it must actually mean all of us rather than just the person being addressed. (I now appreciate the difference between "y'all" and "all of y'all.")

Americans. They came right out with things. Hitchens family lore related the tale of how once, when I was but a toddler, my parents were passing with me through an airport and ran into some Yanks. "Real cute kid," said these big and brash people without troubling to make a formal introduction. They insisted on photographing me and, before breaking off to resume their American lives, pressed into my dimpled fist a signed dollar bill in token of my cuteness. This story was often told (I expect that Yvonne and the Commander had been to an airport together perhaps three times in their lives) and always with a note of condescension. That was Americans for you: wanting to be friendly all right, but so loud, and inclined to flash the cash.

Parental views diverged a bit at this point, precisely because of the same wartime memory that the old grunts in D.C. had been recalling. The Commander tended to stress the deplorable tardiness of American entry into the Second World War and the exorbitant price exacted by Mr. Roosevelt for the superannuated ships he had offered to Britain under his Lend-Lease program. Yvonne's memory of the same conflict was more indulgent: American servicemen in wartime Britain were openhanded and warm, and to a date could bring along things like nylon stockings and chocolate and smoked salmon. (Those very factors helped explain the gender difference in attitudes to "Yanks": British fighters drew much smaller wages and had scant access to frills and luxuries. It wasn't very long before our guests and deliverers from across the Atlantic were being sourly described as "overpaid, oversexed, and over here," though it was generally agreed, as George Orwell noted at the time, that the black or "Negro" soldiers were the most courteous and gallant among them.)

So I was brought up, at home and at school, with an ambivalent view of "our American cousins." Like many poor relations, we consoled ourselves Englishly with the thought that we made up in good taste and refinement for what we increasingly lacked in money and influence. Americanism in all its forms seemed to be trashy and

wasteful and crude, even brutal. There was a metaphor ready to hand in my native Hampshire. Until some time after the war, the squirrels of England had been red. I can still vaguely remember these sweet Beatrix Potter-type creatures, smaller and prettier and more agile and lacking the rat-like features that disclose themselves when you get close to a gray squirrel. These latter riffraff, once imported from America by some kind of regrettable accident, had escaped from captivity and gradually massacred and driven out the more demure and refined English breed. It was said that the gray squirrels didn't fight fair and would with a raking motion of their back paws castrate the luckless red ones. Whatever the truth of that, the sighting of a native English squirrel was soon to be a rarity, confined to the north of Scotland and the Isle of Wight, and this seemed to be emblematic, for the anxious lower middle class, of a more general massification and degentrification and, well, Americanization of everything.

This was the same tendency that Orwell thought he had noticed two decades earlier, with British comic papers being driven out by coarse American "mags": tales of chivalry and derring-do replaced with sexual and even sadistic themes and the decent English boy-hero deposed in favor of the wised-up thug. Comic-books were certainly my own introduction to the Yank style: in spite of endless parental disapproval and discouragement I would sneak off to the corner shop and waste my pocket money on cheap Western and gangster stuff. It was easy to read, rather more "real" than Rupert Bear or Dan Dare or the other insipid English equivalents, and it made America seem huge and violent and coarse, and in places half-wild. The newspapers and TV made it seem like that, too. Presidents got shot. People got lynched. A man named Caryl Chessman — a bizarre enough name as it seemed to me — was put to death for rape after a long legal wrangle in California and (this being the detail that held my youthful attention) put to death in "a gas chamber." I mean, I had had no idea . . . Mrs. Moss, the first American I ever consciously met, was one of my history teachers when I was about twelve, and she had a real flair for igniting interest in her subject. But she also wanted to stray into the awkward territory of "modern" history, which broke the usual bounds and challenged the idea that the past was a pageant — of one damn king after another — culminating in the map of the world (still displayed in my boyhood), which showed the British Empire in majestic red. This new American postwar atmosphere was a direct challenge to one's sense of security.

Such an impression wasn't corrected even by reading Mark Twain, who was presented to us as a children's writer only and who seemed to be depicting conditions of near-primeval backwardness, or by watching the input that made the early days of television so exciting: The Lone Ranger, or Clint Eastwood as Rowdy Yates in *Rawhide*. So many cattle, so much emptiness, so many displays of homicidal ill-temper. A little later I was captivated by *West Side Story* and wrote home from school giving my parents a detailed summary of the plot, but they chose to pretend that I hadn't sent this, and on reflection I had to agree that the picture of New York wasn't a very alluring one at that. America seemed either too modern, with no castles or cathedrals and no

sense of history, or simply too premodern with too much wilderness and unpolished conduct.

One also, in our milieu, simply didn't meet enough Americans to form an opinion. And when one did — this was in the days of crew-cuts and short-legged pants — they, too, often really did sport crew-cuts and trousers that mysteriously ended several inches short of the instep. Why was that? It obviously wasn't poverty. A colleague of my father's had a daughter who got herself married and found that an American friend she had met on holiday had offered to pay the whole cost of the nuptial feast. I forget the name of this paladin, but he had a crew-cut and amputated trouser-bottoms and a cigar stub and he came from a place called Yonkers, which seemed to me a ridiculous name to give to a suburb. (I, who had survived Crapstone . . .) Anyway, once again one received a Henry Jamesian impression of brash generosity without overmuch refinement. There was a boy at my boarding school called Warren Powers Laird Myers, the son of an officer stationed at one of the many U.S. Air Force bases in Cambridgeshire. Trousers at The Leys School were uniform and regulation, but he still managed to show a bit of shin and to buzz-cut his hair. "I am not a Yankee," he informed me (he was from Norfolk, Virginia). "I am a CON-federate." From what I was then gleaning of the news from Dixie, this was unpromising. In our ranks we also had Jamie Auchincloss, a sprig of the Kennedy-Bouvier family that was then occupying the White House. His trousers managed to avoid covering his ankles also, though the fact that he shared a parent with Jackie Kennedy meant that anything he did was accepted as fashionable by definition. The pants of a man I'll call Mr. "Miller," a visiting American master who skillfully introduced me to J.D. Salinger, were also falling short of their mark. Mr. Miller's great teacher-feature was that he saw sexual imagery absolutely everywhere and was slightly too fond of pointing it out (oversexed and over here: I suppose it figured). Meanwhile, and as I mentioned much earlier, the dominant images projected from the United States were of the attack-dog-and-firehose kind, with swag-bellied cops lying about themselves and the political succession changed as much by bullets as by ballots.

Yet when I had been to hear W.H. Auden recite his poems at Great St. Mary's Church in 1966, I had noticed that he closed with the words "God bless the USA, so large, so friendly, and so rich." (I now believe that that evening I was privileged to hear the first public rendering of "On the Circuit," of which that is the last line. It's a poem I have come to adore as I go around the United States as an itinerant lecturer.) Come to think of it, hadn't Auden actually chosen to live in America, even to become an American? As I went further into the question, and consulted my favorite authors, it kept recurring more and more insistently. Oscar Wilde had loved America and even believed it capable of settling the age-old Irish problem. P.G. Wodehouse had emigrated there and seemed happy as a clam. (Why a clam? one sometimes wanted to know.) One of my heroines, Jessica Mitford, had written a hilarious book about the floridly ghastly and exploitative American funeral industry — fully the nonfiction equivalent of Evelyn Waugh's *Loved One* — but then again she had long domiciled herself in

Oakland, California. American movies seemed much more vigorous and colorful and adventurous than their British counterparts. Groups like the Beatles and the Rolling Stones didn't appear to have "made it" until they had been on American TV or been ratified by an appearance in a huge American stadium.

I couldn't quite square this at first with my revulsion from the America of drawling and snarling accents, and cheap fizzy softdrinks and turbocharged war and racism, but my two-track system must have begun churning away again, because not long after leaving Cambridge and arriving in Oxford I began to have a recurrent dream. There was nothing especially subtle about it from the imaging point of view. I simply found myself somewhere in Midtown Manhattan, looking up at the skyscrapers. But the illusion was always accompanied by a feeling of profound happiness, and a sensation of being free in a way I had never known before. American music and American culture were much more pervasive in England by then, and much more nonconformist than they had been in the early days of TV, so that I had an early exposure to the great conundrum that has occupied me since: How is the United States at once the most conservative and commercial AND the most revolutionary society on Earth? I may as well confess another thing: the Mamas and the Papas had produced an album called *If You Can Believe Your Eyes and Ears*. Many, many fans were ravished by "California Dreamin'" and "Monday, Monday," and also by the bewitching sexuality of the female lead singer, Michelle Phillips, but there was a single track called "Go Where You Wanna Go," which, when I played it alone in my Balliol garret quarters, would almost guarantee that I would have to go out and walk restlessly around the quad before I could sleep. And then I would be very liable to dream the dream again . . .

By then I was getting to know a good number of Americans and it now seems odd and even sad to me that our engagement with one another was so purely politicized. I never asked them, for example, what life and culture were like in Ohio or Rhode Island or California, and they never seemed interested in saying. The war — the bloody war all the time — and the civil rights struggle were the beginning and end of all conversations. The most charming and eloquent of the black Americans was a loquacious Panther (who later became "head of protocol" for the city of Philadelphia). So, while I did my stuff in helping my American comrades discredit first President Johnson and then President Nixon, I quietly opened another front and applied for the Coolidge Atlantic Crossing or "Pathfinder" Scholarship, awarded by Balliol College every year so that about ten of us could be introduced to the American Way. The endowing patron of this award, Mr. William Appleton Coolidge, was a direct descendant of Thomas Jefferson through the Randolph family of Massachusetts. He was an ancient, who had been at Balliol two generations previously. He had a sentimental attitude toward the college and, if I may so phrase it, toward young Englishmen in particular. I was one of the winners of one of his scholarships. He crossed the seas, as he did every year, to run his eye over the new crop. A meeting was arranged in the Master's lodgings. Coolidge was an imposing and craggy man whose trousers, mercifully, seemed equal to the task of shielding his shin and ankle from the vulgar gaze. I rather stupidly asked him if he was related to the

president of the same name. “Why no,” replied Bill. “I believe that he was one of the working Coolidges.” Once again, one found oneself dealing with something, or someone, “so large, so friendly, and so rich.”

A little later, the Apollo mission was consummated and there were Americans on the moon. I remember distinctly looking up from the quad on what was quite a moon-flooded night, and thinking about it. They made it! The Stars and Stripes are finally flown on another orb! Also, English becomes the first and only language spoken on a neighboring rock! Who could forbear to cheer? Still, the experience was poisoned for me by having to watch Richard Nixon smirking as he babbled to the lunar-nauts by some closed-circuit link. Was even the silvery orb to be tainted by the base, earthbound reality of imperialism?

At around this time I also met my first U.S. senator. Hugh Scott, the Republican from Pennsylvania, had been seconded to Balliol for some “special relationship” purpose and was occasionally wheeled out to put a respectable face on things. He’s rather forgotten now, but Norman Mailer had caught the tailor’s-dummy, all-things-to-all-men aspect of the senatorial mien in a thumbnail sketch from the fateful Nixon convention in Miami in 1968:

Scott had modest but impeccable aplomb as he explained that since only 12 per cent of the delegates had been in San Francisco in 1964, he did not expect bitterness from old Goldwater followers to hurt Rockefeller’s chances now. A fine character actor had been lost when Hugh Scott went into politics: he could have played the spectrum from butler to count.

Alarming though American politics and politicians seemed — especially as one devoured Mailer’s punchy and instant-paperbacked reporting from the street fights outside the Pentagon and the party conclaves — I didn’t fail to register the note of thwarted patriotism that he sometimes sounded when he was writing about himself in the third person:

A profound part of him detested the thought of seeing his American society — evil, absurd, touching, pathetic, sickening, comic, full of novelistic marrow — disappear now in the nihilistic maw of a national disorder.

In one way, this reeked of Mailer’s showbiz reluctance to lose a country that supplied him with such good copy. But I thought I could detect the pulse of patriotic sympathy in him, too, if only because I also felt it latently in myself. Experience with Communists and fellow travelers in Cuba and elsewhere had made me somewhat immune to the sort of propaganda that emphasized “Uncle Sam” or “the Yanqui,” let alone the sort that burned the American flag. This style, which usually warned one of the presence of the “peace-loving and progressive forces,” also reminded me of the snobbish and even chauvinistic anti-Americanism that I’d overheard on the British Right. Trying to keep all these reflections in balance, in late July 1970 I bought a bucket-shop ticket for a charter flight via Iceland to John F. Kennedy Airport.

Sometimes an expectation or a wish does come true. I have no faith in precognitive dreams or any patience for “dream” rhetoric in general, yet Manhattan was exactly as

I had hoped it would be. I had to survive some very discouraging first impressions: the airport café where I ate my first breakfast was a nothingness of plastic and formica and the “English muffin” was a travesty of both Englishness and muffindom. Outside stood a paunchy cop with, on his heavy belt, an accoutrement of gun and club and handcuff of a sort that I had never seen in real life and had believed exaggerated in the movies. The bus into the city was sweaty and the Port Authority Terminal is probably the worst possible place from which to take your original bearings on Midtown. The next thing I actually saw in the city was a flag-bedecked campaign headquarters for the ultraright candidacy of James Buckley (brother of William F.) for the Senate. “Join The March For America!” it yelled. But I was near-delirious. Gazing up at the pillared skyline, I knew that I was surveying a tremendous work of man. Buying myself a drink in the smaller warrens below, in all their ethnic variety (and willingness to keep odd and late hours, and provide plentiful ice cubes, and free matchbooks in contrast to English parsimony in these matters), I felt the same thing in a different way. The balance between the macro and the micro, the heroic scale and the human scale, has never since ceased to fascinate and charm me. Evelyn Waugh was in error when he said that in New York there was a neurosis in the air which the inhabitants mistook for energy. There was, rather, a tensile excitement in that air which made one think — made me think for many years — that time spent asleep in New York was somehow time wasted. Whether this thought has lengthened or shortened my life I shall never know, but it has certainly colored it.

In the streets and avenues of this amazing city, there was barely a crewcut to be seen, and everybody’s trousers — if they wore any trousers — seemed equal to the task of covering the ankle if not indeed the entire shoe. (Bellbottoms may have been involved.) With skirts, though, the reverse process applied. In some manner, the whole place was redolent of sex, but in a natural rather than a leering way. Three big differences between this culture and the English one began to disclose themselves at once.

The first was the extraordinary hospitality. Balliol College had equipped me with a list of former alumni who were willing to “put me up” and this comprised some fairly solid citizens all across the USA. But Americans to whom one had barely been introduced would also insist that one came for a weekend “on the shore,” or “upstate,” and would actually mean it. On the way to any destination, if you put out your thumb on the roadside you would almost immediately get a lift or a “ride” (to set this down now makes me bite my lip as I mourn the lapse of time and the passing of hitchhiking) and very often the driver would go out of his or her way to drop you where you wanted to go. Music on the radio would be loud and various as the trip progressed, and if there was any song more evocative of those days than “Go Where You Wanna Go” it was the schmaltzy, haunting “Leaving on a Jet Plane.” Should you happen to be in need of a jet plane, you could go to the airport and try your luck. It cost nothing to acquire a standby “YouthFare” card and, once equipped with this proof of mere youthfulness, you could wait in the boarding area and snap up any unbought seat for a few dollars. I first flew across the Great Lakes from New York to Chicago in this manner, in

brilliant sunshine, on a plane where I was the sole passenger and the tawny, lissome American Airlines hostesses treated me as if I had paid for First Class. In Britain, “inter-city” travel meant crummy station platforms and delayed and dirty trains run by resentful oldsters. To really feel the connection between youth and freedom (and somehow, nothing did this for me more than the experience of flight), I had also had to flee.

My trip to Chicago, where I was rather chilled to see the egotistic, minatory signs on the airport road welcoming me in the name of “Richard J. Daley, Mayor,” also happened to coincide with the first celebration of International Women’s Day. All through the downtown “Loop,” one sun-drenched lunchtime, a great avalanche of pulchritude filled the plazas just as music and fighting speeches moved the air. I felt the stirrings and yearnings of another civil rights movement, triggered by an earlier one that still had some distance to run. (In a distant undertone, I also felt the premonition of “identity politics” but believe me, to see the womanhood of Chicago en fête in all its bird-of-paradise variety that day was not something to give you any pinched or narrow conception of things.)

Hospitality, easy riding, and easy flying: Could it get any better? Mr. Coolidge had decreed that all those accepting his scholarship money should be unaccompanied by females. After voyaging up to stay with him in his magnificent home in Topsfield, Massachusetts, and putting in my time lying on his pool-patio and being discreetly growled and purred at, I felt somewhat released from this obligation. (He threw an all-male lunch which included the then-president of Harvard, a man with the near-perfect New England name of Nathan Pusey and perhaps a hint of austere attenuation in his gray pants-leggings.) My girlfriend was coming to the United States anyway, and in those days if you bought the ticket outside the country you could travel on the Greyhound bus system for ninety-nine days for ninety-nine dollars. This was even better than YouthFare. I told her to buy and bring two tickets. Seeing America by road turned out to be even finer than gazing at it from the sky.

For all the indifference I felt toward the shallow concept of a “Woodstock Nation,” there was in those days a sort of “underground” vernacular for people under the age of twenty-one. A brisk flash of the “peace” sign would get you a roadside lift even more quickly than the showing of a mere thumb, and if you needed to borrow a floor or a bunk there was a similar idiom, often to do with the verses of Bob Dylan. (It comes back to me that on one of those big smooth rocks on the edge of Central Park, someone had painted in giant letters: “He Not Busy Being Born Is Busy Dying,” and underneath it the deranged Weatherman flash of a “W” with a superimposed lightning bolt and then the subtitle: “Make The Pigs Pay!”*)

It was possible to voyage all over the United States for a few dollars a day, sometimes sleeping a night on the bus when it was crossing the emptier bits, but then getting off and staying, not just with the list of Balliol alumni, but with individuals and even “collectives” on the informal list of the American branch of the International Socialists. This double act worked well enough in Detroit. We stayed with a snowy-haired ramrod-

straight old union man named Carl Haessler, who had been at Balliol before the First World War and in jail with Eugene Victor Debs, grand old man of American Socialism, during and after it. From his home we got ourselves introduced to the “Black Caucus” on the assembly line at the Hamtramck and Flint auto plants (these hard guys were extremely scornful of the “petit-bourgeois adventurism” of the Black Panthers) and were taken to a free rock concert on a vacant lot not far from the headquarters of General Motors itself. In those days there were several cities where you could still smell the riots and burnings of not so very long before, and Detroit was one of them.

But it didn’t work so well in Salt Lake City, say, where Balliol men and Trotskyists alike were as rare as rocking-horse droppings and one had little choice but to take the tour of the Mormon Tabernacle and notice the John Birch Society bookshop that was right next door to it. Beautiful as Salt Lake City was, with its street plan leading to white-topped horizons in every direction, and lovely as Utah was, with its main church having only just had the needful “revelation” that black people might have human souls after all, it was a slight relief to cross the frontier of Nevada and breathe the bracingly sordid and amoral air of Reno and Las Vegas. The variety and scope and contrast of this country seemed limitless. And then the bus began to cruise lazily through Sacramento toward the Bay Area, and into the then-mecca of the radical style.

The best of that scene was probably over, because by the time you have heard of such a “scene” it has almost invariably moved on or decayed, but I had already formed a sharply new picture of life in the United States, and exposure to California did little to dull my enthusiasm. Here was a country that could engage in a frightening and debilitating and unjust war, and undergo a simultaneous convulsion of its cities on the question of justice for its oldest and largest minority, and start a national conversation on the rights of women, and turn its most respectable campuses into agitated seminars on right and wrong, and have a show trial of confessed saboteurs in Chicago where the incredibly guilty defendants actually got off, and put quite a lot of this onto its television and movie screens in real time. This seemed like a state of affairs worth fighting for, or at least fighting over.

There was a lot of nonsense talked, to be sure, much of it drug-sodden. But the note of generosity never seemed to be absent. In this part of California, one could hitchhike not just between towns but between city blocks, as if there were a free taxi service. One man took us, for a lark, on a vertiginous detour down the same hairpin San Francisco helter-skelter street that had featured Steve McQueen’s celebrated car chase in Bullitt. Over at City Lights bookstore in North Beach you could see a man chatting with customers and looking like Lawrence Ferlinghetti: it was Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Haight-Ashbury and the flower-power district were getting truly tawdry but this was also in obedience to the iron law which states that once you have to call something a “historic district” or a “popular quarter” then, just like the Wild West, it loses whatever character gave it the definition in the first place. Berkeley, however, perhaps because it bore the name of a distinguished philosopher who had predicted a great future for America, still managed to remain itself (as in many ways and through many

“Berserkely” metamorphoses it still does). During the showing of a film in a movie theater on Telegraph Avenue, the projector broke down, and the manager came to the front of the house and made the following offer. We could all wait while he “rapped with” us for a while about Hitchcock’s career as an auteur (the movie was *The Thirty-nine Steps*). If, after that, the projectionist still couldn’t fix things, we could have our money back. And anyone who didn’t want to join the rap session could claim their money back right away. Fair enough? Fair? I was thunderstruck, if only by trying to picture this happening in a British cinema. (Of course it would be tough to imagine it happening in a New York or Cleveland one, either, but a crucial part of seeing America was also seeing how many Americas there were.)

For all this seductive open-arms aspect, and while we were all grooving away, the bombs were still falling and the shipments of weaponry to dictators were punctually leaving the docks at nearby Oakland. I went to see the Black Panthers, whose “breakfast program” for poor ghetto kids had degenerated into a shakedown of local merchants and whose newspaper now featured paeans to North Korea. I went to call on David Horowitz at the offices of the legendary radical glossy *Ramparts*, where he inaugurated what was to be four decades of commingled love/hate/respect between us by sneering humorously at my faith in the revival of the working class and recommending that I go call on the International Socialists, which I had already done. Our local Berkeley guru was Hal Draper, twin brother of the more famous historian Theodore and also one of the world’s experts on the poetry of Heinrich Heine. He was suitably contemptuous of the prevailing “left” fashions and illusions. But there was work to be done down in the Salinas Valley where César Chávez was organizing the grape pickers and lettuce workers out of their state of un-unionized peonage. In Europe I had been told by sapient academics that there wasn’t really any class system in the United States: well, you couldn’t prove that by the conditions in California’s agribusiness, or indeed its urban factories.*

I joined the picket line on a very spirited strike, set to start at midnight, against the General Motors plant at Fremont. Just before the deadline the company tried to get some blackleg supply trucks through the gate: these were intercepted and burned and gave a lovely light. On the front page of the rather awful *Communist People’s Daily World* the following day, there appeared a headline that can still make me think “Late Sixties” just by remembering it. It showed the blazing trucks and it read “Fremont: At The Midnight Hour.” (Down the page was a shorter report, announcing that Salvador Allende on the previous evening had won the election to become the first socialist president of Chile.)

The summer began to lengthen a trifle — not that one notices the seasons all that much on the West Coast — and with regret I began to work my way back east, following the perimeter of the country rather than crossing its heartland. I made as many stops as possible, in La Jolla where an old friend of mine was studying under the legendary if posturing Herbert Marcuse (and where I belatedly and self-consciously added the Pacific to the list of oceans in which I had swum), in El Paso where I made my first

venture south of the Mexican border to Juarez, and in New Orleans where Bourbon Street hadn't yet become completely kitsch and could still seem quite startlingly and encouragingly obscene. I still regret passing so little time in the rest of the Deep South, but I really wanted to be back in New York as the leaves turned.

I had by then more or less made up my mind to overstay my visa and apply for a work permit. All I needed was a sponsor, either at a magazine or newspaper or publishing house. I had already been published in the *New Statesman*, which then had a bit of a following among the U.S. intelligentsia. I had already had a friendly interview with Carey McWilliams, the extraordinary and gentlemanly radical veteran who edited *The Nation* (still in my future) and whose history of modern California, *Island on the Land*, was, and still is, considered more or less the book to beat. He had given me a list of people to see in the Golden State, including Lou Goldblatt, the stout longshoremen's union leader who had been one of the gutsy few to denounce the round-up and internment of Japanese-Americans in 1942. Now I was looking feverishly for anyone who would take me on, on any terms.

Again, and considering that I was a twenty-one-year-old stripling with only a very few decent magazine clips to his name, I was overwhelmed by how many people were willing to give me the time of day. An editor at Random House had me to a big lunch and gave me a letter that promised a contract if I could furnish a synopsis. (This would have been for a very solemn book on the intersections of race and class.) Agents made room for me in their crowded days: I had the chance to see Midtown Manhattan from high-level corner offices, which is an experience I still find captivating but I then thought of as near-orgasmic. Life in Britain had seemed like one long antechamber to a room that had too many barriers to entry; here in the USA it seemed to be true that if you dared to give things "your best shot" then the other much-used phrases like "land of opportunity" would kick in as well.

I did have one difficulty. It sometimes seemed as if my attempts at nuanced response were falling a trifle flat. It had happened to me in the Midwest, when a chance neighbor on a bus or a plane would say: "Of course, we're Baptists," and I would soothingly say, "Of course," as if in confirmation. It had occurred in California also, when people I had barely met would tell me what their "shrink" thought of them, and I would do my damndest to wear an encouraging face. But even in sophisticated New York I found myself occasionally unmanned. For example, I remember a female editor saying to me over a generous cocktail: "Of course the difference between us and you Brits is that you have irony and we don't." I decided to smile and murmur, "Well, apparently not," and she looked at me as if a trick cigar had just exploded in her face. At all costs I didn't wish to seem "superior" — I hadn't read *The Loved One* for nothing — but the price of being literal seemed too steep. In my eagerness to scrape acquaintance I dug that list of potential bluechip Balliol hosts out of the bottom of my bag and noticed that it contained the name of Penn Kimball, listed as "Professor of Journalism" at Columbia University. Surely this was a mistake or a misprint? Journalism was a state of mind: it wasn't the sort of thing that could be taught, or in which one could get an academic

qualification. But within a short time of making my call to him, I was ascending the steps of a pseudo-Athenian building which actually and quite unironically housed a "School of Journalism." And within a day or so of that experience, I had accepted an invitation to stay in Westport, Connecticut, with Professor Kimball and his sharp, knowing wife.

There — within a bull's roar of the house occupied by Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward — I was taken to my first Democratic Town Committee meeting, and introduced to the sort of decorous yet vigorous New England local democracy that I was later to try and intuit again from the work of John Updike. This was as different from Berkeley and Oakland, let alone Chicago and Detroit, as one could easily get. But it was pluralism and it was transparent. The biggest and most passionate of the side arguments, I still remember, was between those who still thought it had been OK to vote for Gene McCarthy over Hubert Humphrey in 1968, and those who thought that this leftist self-indulgence had held open the door for Richard Nixon and his goons. So I was given a vivid preview of a dispute that has raged in different forms for the rest of my life. Kimball was a New Deal-type liberal with an elevated contempt for my own leftism, and I remember him disagreeing with special scorn when a truly striking but hysterical brunette (who also happened to be a local realtor) described the USA as "fascist." I was rather intrigued to discover that in snow-white Connecticut there were such sultry and subversive females. Later in his life, Penn was to discover that he and his wife had been under almost permanent police surveillance since the onset of the Cold War, and that this explained many denials of many employment opportunities: his ensuing book *The File* is a well-controlled masterpiece of frigid outrage at America's betrayal of a loyal citizen. The man who had falsely ratted him out, it emerged, was Arthur Schlesinger Jr., famous Kennedy suck-up and believer in "the vital center."

One always has the vague illusion of taking or making one's own decisions, the illusion itself running in parallel with the awareness that most such calls are made for you by other people, or by circumstances, or just made. I didn't have the wherewithal to stay on in New York. I didn't have the heft to get a lawyer who would help me overstay my student visa and fight for a work permit. Feeling weak but happy, because it had after all been a hell of a ride, I went to a travel agent near the old Pan Am Building and booked another bucket-shop charter home. During the wait, I was exposed to a near-perfect rapid-fire duet between the salesman of the cheap tickets and his partner: a sort of West Side Story except in Yiddish-English or I suppose Hebronic. ("Explain to me something. Why should I need you on my vacation?") I had thought this style came from some kind of expired vaudeville and was impressed to find that it took place in real life and in muscular, humorous English idiom.

Rolling Stone gave a party at Orsino's to mark the opening of its "Straight Arrow" book imprint and I was somehow invited to this, and went from there to the midnight jet plane from JFK. My retrospective excitement and sadness meant that I slept not at all and drank the foul cocktail known as a "Manhattan" to such an extent that I have never needed to touch it again. My welcome home was everything I could have asked

for, and the wonderful warm bath of England enveloped me again, as it does if you let it. Soon enough, I was swallowed up in the exigencies of making a living, trying to write, negotiating a move from Oxford to London, all of that. I gave a series of talks and lectures to the comrades, explaining to them that there was a revolutionary character to the United States. And every now and then, I would wake up early and remember things like the wobbling sirens in Detroit, or the guitarists in Washington Square, or the contours of the Guggenheim Museum, or the “ping” in the metal cup as the Bell Telephone operator refunded you your lost dime if the connection hadn’t worked. Songs that were loved in England, like Simon and Garfunkel’s lines about “counting the cars on the New Jersey Turnpike,” or Judy Collins’s or Bob Dylan’s version of “Lost in the Rain in Juarez,” could now be visualized by me as poems and pictures of real places. I was hooked and felt the occasional tug and twitch upon the thread, but the line was a long one and I could often swim with the lazy English current for months at a time without remembering my New World.

I shared a house on my return with Richard Parker, a brilliant California radical (and future biographer of John Kenneth Galbraith) who had been one of the commanding figures in the Bay Area Left. He was at the center of a group of radical American political economists at Oxford, who included one of my former tutors, Keith Griffin. Together, we distributed anti-war leaflets at the U.S. Air Force base in Upper Heyford and befriended a number of disaffected servicemen who were stationed there. From then on, my life was always to contain many American friends and, as I moved to London and began to try and make a mark as a journalist, I invariably felt it a distinction to be invited to write for any American magazine or newspaper. I was especially pleased with myself later on when the New York Times magazine asked me to profile the emerging Mrs. Thatcher, of whom I wrote — very much against the general expectation — that she would probably be the next prime minister.

Almost all my American acquaintances took the same attitude of visceral hatred toward Richard Nixon as I did, so there was no evident conflict between our friendship and an attitude that essentially characterized the United States as an evil empire. In the countries I was beginning to visit as a reporter — Spain, Portugal, Greece, Cyprus, later Chile — it was often American power that in the last resort guaranteed the forces of reaction. At home, Nixon had staged something very like a coup, running a parallel regime of bagmen and wiretappers behind the façade of the legitimate government. “Big Brother and the Holding Company” was, I remember, one of the better titles of a pamphlet about the Watergate gang. Overseas, his indescribably loathsome deputy Henry Kissinger felt free to suborn murder and sponsor military coups. A vast system of nuclear weaponry meanwhile meant that — as Martin Luther King had phrased it — we were ever ready to commit suicide and genocide at the same time. The colossal expense of this military-industrial system was also a theft from the world’s poor. I began to read quite a lot of Hunter Thompson, and when Nixon finally went down, I celebrated as if I’d defeated a personal enemy.

In the aftermath of that very thing, though, I had to reflect a bit. After all, the American legal system and the U.S. Constitution had survived Nixon's attempt to undo it. Congress had held wide-open hearings, of a kind it was very hard to imagine taking place in the Palace of Westminster, and summoned important witnesses to testify. The Justice Department had resisted the president's lawless attempts to purge it. The special-prosecutor system had proved itself. The American press, led by the Washington Post, had penetrated the veil of lies and bribery and — despite crude threats from the White House — had eventually named the main perpetrators on the front page. And all of this in a time of continuing warfare in Indochina.

A great number of the "issues" that I confronted in the 1970s, both as a journalist and as a political activist, had to do with censorship and press freedom and public information. Reporters in Britain were arrested for trying to investigate matters touching on "national security": the Official Secrets Act had a clause that even made the "collection" of information an offense. In the United States there was a Freedom of Information Act that at least made the presumption of innocence when it came to disclosure. In London, an editor could be served by the state with a "D-Notice," preventing him or her from publishing a story that might embarrass the government. In the United States, the First Amendment to the Constitution — as had been re-affirmed in the case of the Pentagon Papers — forbade "prior restraint" of the press. As for Parliament, its efforts to circumscribe the executive were little short of pathetic. Anyone who had watched or read the Fulbright or Church committee hearings in Washington could only moan with contempt when a Westminster "select committee" made a feeble attempt to find out how British policy in Cyprus, say, had amounted to something between a betrayal and a fiasco.

In the late 1970s I nearly went to jail for revealing, on a television program, that the government had pre-vetted a London jury in an Official Secrets Act trial and, not content with excluding in advance anyone it suspected of sympathy with the defense, had also planted a former member of the elite Special Air Services regiment in the box. The judge in the case halted the trial and summoned me for contempt of court. I carried a toothbrush around in my top pocket for a day or so, but His Worship meanwhile succumbed to a stroke, the principal effect of which was amnesia, and so the danger passed. In America, as I kept pointing out, it would have been those who had interfered with the jury, not those who had caught them in the act, who would be the ones in danger of imprisonment.

One more episode may also illustrate my gradual enlightenment on these points. In the 1970s there was considerable nuisance from fascist and neo-Nazi groups in Britain, which mounted disgusting attacks on emigrants from the Commonwealth and began the recirculation of moth-eaten (or rather vermin-infested) anti-Semitic and Holocaust-denying screeds. It was one of one's standard duties as a leftist to turn out on weekends and block the efforts of this rabble to stage a march or to put up a platform in a street market. Stones and fists would fly, posters would be ripped down: it was all part of a storied socialist tradition that went back to street combat with the Blackshirts in

the 1930s. The police often seemed to me partial to the fascists: you could be arrested “for your own protection” if you even looked as if you were going to make a fight of it. Then one day I read in an American newspaper that, in the town of Skokie, Illinois, the American Nazi Party was going to hold a swastika-flourishing parade. They had chosen this particular suburb of Chicago because it had an unusually large population of Jewish refugees from Germany. Nice work. A temporary ban on the march had, I read, been imposed. But the same injunction was being contested in court by . . . the American Civil Liberties Union! That had to be some kind of mistake. Socialist Worker (which I still read though I no longer helped to edit or sell it) published a viperous paragraph saying that this exposed the empty sham of American liberalism. I went into the thing more closely, out of curiosity, and read an excellent defense of the ACLU by its director, Aryeh Neier, himself a refugee from Nazism. The First Amendment to the Constitution, he said, enshrined the right of all citizens to free expression and to free assembly. If this protection was withdrawn from anybody, perhaps especially somebody repulsively unpopular, then it would be weakened or diluted in general. It took me a space of time to assimilate this simple Jeffersonian point, if only because I had been raised in a culture where the law governing free speech and free assembly was whatever the nearest policeman happened to say it was.*

Then there was the American embassy. With its horrible defacement of the west side of Grosvenor Square it had served in the Sixties as an aesthetic target as much as a political one. But after the eviction of Nixon from the White House, this same neo-brutalist London fortress began to mount a sort of charm offensive. Elliot Richardson, the dignified attorney general who had refused Nixon’s peremptory order to fire Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox (“Sack the Cox-Sacker,” as a friend of mine had written on a placard outside the White House at the time, as if borrowing from Bob Conquest’s most painstaking work), became ambassador and took an early opportunity to come and have lunch at the New Statesman. I hadn’t seen liberal Republicanism up close before and though it did appear a touch self-satisfied, I felt I had met less attractive kinds of politics. Then, after an interval, the State Department gazetted Dr. Kingman Brewster to become its envoy. As president of Yale during the fabled Black Panther trial in New Haven, he had attracted huge obloquy for apparently saying that a black man might be unable to receive a fair trial. Actually, he had only asked if this might be the case, rather than stated that it really was so, but once a bogus story has been printed for the first time, it will be reprinted again and again by the lazy and/or the malicious. Ambassador Brewster and his wife gave a number of striking evenings at Winfield House in Regent’s Park — Barbara Hutton’s gift to both London and Washington — where there were after-dinner seminars on everything from affirmative action to El Salvador. The guest list was, I thought, consciously weighted to the left of center. (In due time, Ambassador Brewster agreed to sponsor me for a green card.) Once again, the inescapable American note seemed to be that of generosity and largemindedness.

I’d be coy if I failed to mention another thing, which was American women. How can one phrase this delicately? English womanhood was, of course, adorable, and the idea

of the “English rose” had not yet acquired the sickliness of the Diana epoch, but it did have a slight tendency to leave the initiative to the male. My besetting weakness in this department has always been that I like to know that initiatives are already welcome, if you catch my drift. (This was one of the many differences in style between myself and young Amis, who quite correctly reasoned that neither party could be entirely sure of this welcome until one of them — and he was perfectly willing to volunteer for any ice-breaking duty — had put matters to the proof.) American girls, I came to find, were more . . . forward. They would come right out with it, and would give direct voice, sometimes in a tone of near-command, to their desires. I don’t think that I can even begin sufficiently to express my gratitude. It was one such fling that reunited me with the United States after almost seven years absence from it: she met me in London but she lived in New York and when I boarded Pan Am to catch up with her, let alone when I saw again the Pan Am Building from high up on Park Avenue, I had a non-platonic hint of that platonic ideal whereby two separated spheres have been happily conjoined once more. This conviction outlasted the affair. From then on, every time I flew back to England, I was mentally busy with the idea that I would soon return to New York, this time on a one-way ticket.

Thus when I began to publish a few more pieces in *The Nation*, and on one such visit went to call on Victor Navasky at the magazine’s downtown offices, and heard him inquire if I ever felt like coming over permanently, I felt I had flung a proper grappling hook across the water. All the awful business of visas, immigration forms, work permits (so very much worse now than it was then) would yield a little if I had a patron or sponsor. So on 9 October 1981 I bought that one-way ticket and barely looked behind me as I went to Heathrow and flew west to see again what had become my favorite sight: Manhattan in early evening as viewed in anticipation from the tip of Long Island. I had perhaps one suitcase, one half-offer of part-time work at the *Nation* office, a truly saintly offer of a long-term stay in the West Village from my old Hitch-proof Oxford friend Gully Wells and her husband, Peter, and a few thousand dollars in the bank.

There is of course a much-derided way for Englishmen to try and “make it” in America, and perhaps especially in New York and Los Angeles. They charm their way into publishing, say, or advertising, or the movies, by the mere attitude and plausibility that’s represented by their famous “accent.” And then at weekends they get together and have Marmite and Earl Grey and discuss cricket scores and have a good snigger at the gullibility and sappiness of their American hosts. (Really and truly “hosts,” as in the relationship with the parasitic.) Waugh had lampooned it in his description of the Hollywood cricket players in *The Loved One* (which I forgot to mention is subtitled *An Anglo-American Tragedy*):

For these the club was the symbol of their Englishry. Here they collected subscriptions for the Red Cross and talked at their ease, out of the hearing of their alien employers and protectors.

Shortly after I arrived in New York, Tom Wolfe claimed to have diagnosed the same syndrome in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*:

One had the sense of a very rich and suave secret legion that had insinuated itself into the cooperative apartment houses of Park Avenue and Fifth Avenue, from there to pounce at will upon the Yankees' fat fowl, to devour at leisure the last plump white meat on the bones of capitalism . . . They were comrades in arms, in the service of Great Britain's wounded chauvinism.

I was offended, when this fiction first came out, to read third-hand speculation that I was myself the model for the venal English hack and social climber Peter Fallow. True, I had deliberately offended Wolfe — who knows how to take an underhanded revenge — but not by haunting the penthouses of Park or Fifth. To the contrary, I had written disoblingly about his reactionary affectations in a small West Coast leftist magazine called *Mother Jones*. This was hardly arrivisme on my part: I was “down” with my fellow American radicals, not conspiring with a bunch of aristos and expats. Yet there is something about the English voice that can still catch some Americans — even outwardly assured white-suit-wearing Virginians — on the raw. More democratic Americans were happier with the sound of it. I resolved neither to exploit this nor to over-assimilate. When the young ladies of AT&T would say: “Just keep talking. I love your accent,” I would respond: “But my dear, I don't have an accent. It's you who has the accent, and a very nice one, too.” Five times out of ten I would then be told I sounded like Richard Burton, which I do quite understand was kindly meant.

Actual class struggles apart, one of the aesthetic ways you could prove that there was a class system in America was by cogitating on the word, or acronym, “WASP.” First minted by E. Digby Baltzell in his book *The Protestant Establishment*, the term stood for “White Anglo-Saxon Protestant.” Except that, as I never grew tired of pointing out, the “W” was something of a redundancy (there being by definition no BASPs or JASPs for anyone to be confused with, or confused about). “ASP,” on the other hand, lacked some of the all-important tone. There being so relatively few Anglo-Saxon Catholics in the United States, the “S” was arguably surplus to requirements as well. But then the acronym AS would scarcely do, either. And it would raise an additional difficulty. If “Anglo-Saxon” descent was the qualifying thing, which surely it was, then why were George Wallace and Jerry Falwell not WASPs? After all, they were not merely white and Anglo-Saxon and Protestant, but very emphatic about all three things. Whereas a man like William F. Buckley, say, despite being a white Irish Catholic, radiated the very sort of demeanor for which the word WASP had been coined to begin with. So, for the matter of that, did the dapper gentleman from Richmond, Virginia, Tom Wolfe. Could it be, then, that WASP was really a term of class rather than ethnicity? Q.E.D. Those other white Anglo-Saxon Protestants of the less polished kind had long enjoyed a colloquial description all of their own. It was the good old word “redneck,” and those it described were concentrated in what H.L. Mencken had unfeelingly called “the hookworm and incest” belt of Anglo-Saxondom. Thus, to be English in America was, if one had enjoyed something like an Oxbridge education and spoke in tones

acceptable to the (then) BBC, to be in the upper middle class almost by definition. As Sir Ambrose Abercrombie explains the system of stratification in America later on in *The Loved One*: “You never find an Englishman among the underdogs — except in England, of course.”

There’s an interesting corollary to this, which is that the hyphenation question is, and always has been and will be, different for English immigrants. One can be an Italian-American, a Greek-American, an Irish-American and so forth. (Jews for some reason prefer the words the other way around, as in “American Jewish Congress” or “American Jewish Committee.”) And any of those groups can and does have a “national day” parade on Fifth Avenue in New York. But there is no such thing as an “English-American” let alone a “British-American,” and one can only boggle at the idea of what, if we did exist, our national day parade on Fifth Avenue might look like. One can, though, be an Englishman in America. There is a culture, even a literature, possibly a language, and certainly a diplomatic and military relationship, that can accurately be termed “Anglo-American.” But something in the very landscape and mapping of America, with seven eastern seaboard states named for English monarchs or aristocrats and countless hamlets and cities replicated from counties and shires across the Atlantic, that makes hyphenation redundant. Hyphenation — if one may be blunt — is for latecomers. It’s been very absorbing (the term I hope is the apt one) to see the emergence of another non-hyphenated immigrant group. Those from south of the Rio Grande are now seldom if ever known as Mexican-American, say, let alone Salvadoran-American. They are, instead, “Hispanic” or “Latino.” And they, too, were in many ways forerunners rather than latecomers.

The two things that my English background and youth had most featured — anxieties about class and the decline of empire — helped me to negotiate and explicate these subjects, both of which lay under a certain ban of “denial” or reticence, to an American readership. It so happened that as I was finding my feet in New York, the Public Broadcasting System (sometimes known as “Petroleum’s British Subsidiary” because of the salience of its Mobil Masterpiece Theatre) was screening *Brideshead Revisited* with none other than William F. Buckley occupying Alistair Cooke’s customary leather armchair by the fireside. So, though there were large events unfolding in the political world, from the application of the Reagan doctrine in Central America to the drama in Poland and the clash over missile deployment, the first really long considerations that I wrote for *The Nation* and *Mother Jones* were about the intersections of class and empire. I drew on what I knew best, to stress that behind the manorial glamour of *Brideshead Castle* there lay the deep melancholy caused by the imperialist slaughter of 1914–1918, and that much of Tom Wolfe’s celebrated “style” was part of a revival of a right-wing politics based on the defensive class-consciousness of the well-off.

Having sponged on my unimprovable friends Gully and Peter for long enough, I became the tenant of a walk-up on East Tenth Street, on the north side of Tompkins Square, found for me by the seemingly omni-connected Ian McEwan, and there I had

a desk with a view across town of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. My landlord had a good library in this small apartment, and the neighborhood, then very poor and grungy and old-style ethnic with a traditional emphasis on Ukrainians, also featured several decent writerly cafés and restaurants. There was a coffeehouse called Di Roberti's, to which W.H. Auden had been known to shamble in his carpet slippers from St. Marks Place. (Auden: almost the only Englishman to have successfully mutated into an American, or at any rate certainly into a New Yorker. A previous occupant of his rather ramshackle old apartment building had been Leon Trotsky, who could have made a considerable American if things had been very, very different. One day, perhaps, we will uncover some of those old New York movies in which he was cast as an extra.) I felt I had accomplished one rite of New York passage myself, by getting horribly mugged on my own front steps within a few months of moving in. I can still remember the burning shame of having not resisted, despite the assurances of the girl I was escorting that I had done the sensible thing. I shall never forget the choking horror of seeing the knife-wielding psycho turning back, having had second thoughts about not stabbing us after he realized that we had seen him too closely for too long, and the desperate haste with which we slammed the street door behind us just in time, seeing him still menacing us and snarling through the glass. I coldly knew at that moment that if I had had a weapon on me, I would unhesitatingly have shot him dead. He was white, incidentally, though at the police-precinct the surly cops laboriously showed me a whole album of deep-black perps, before asking me if I was sure the assailant hadn't been "light Hispanic." By the time I'd said "no" to that, too, they obviously suspected me of being a bleeding-heart liberal.

The tempo of life in Manhattan seemed something like twice what it had been in London and, however late I went to bed, I invariably woke up early and couldn't get back to sleep. I was reading more and writing more, and furthermore writing for a new audience (of both editors and subscribers) after the over-familiar clientele of the United Kingdom. Yet I was also getting asked more, by papers "back home" (as I swore to try not to think of it) to write about the United States. And what a subject America was: an inexhaustible one in fact, begun by written proclamations and assertions that were open to rewriting and revision and amendment, and thus constituting an enormous "work-in-progress" in which one might hope to play a tiny part. It came to me that this was perhaps why I had felt such a strong push and pull of both emigration and immigration: that the need to write and the magnetic attraction of America had been two versions of the same impulse.

One reason for my varied nightlife in New York was my friendship with Brian and Keith McNally, the two brothers who had opened the Odeon restaurant (now and always to be immortal in a certain zeitgeist because it's the luminous illustration on the jacket of *Bright Lights, Big City*). Just as you can't picture McInerney without that cover shot, so it suddenly seemed that you couldn't picture the background of it without the McNallys. I felt awkwardly proud of having been friendly with them before they became so sought after: there had been a time when, of these two rather

contrasting East Enders, Keith had been the suave maitre d' and Brian a bit more the combo of barman and — if it absolutely came to it — bouncer. They were both accomplished autodidacts. Keith concentrated on the aesthetic and the theatrical (he was adored as a discovery by both Alan Bennett and Jonathan Miller) while Brian was more riveted by history and ideology. Without our ever making too much of actually saying so, we realized that in England we would probably never have met, or not on such socially easy terms.

Brian it was who woke me very early one morning, sounding almost like a movie version of a Blitz-era Ealing Studios Cockney and inveighing against a “fuckin’ diabolical liberty.” This turned out to be, once my disordered senses had cleared, the Argentine invasion of the Falkland Islands. Far from home and fairly far from being Thatcherites, we were at one in the belief that under no circumstances could anybody put up with being pushed around by a crew of Buenos Aires brownshirts.

The aggression, for which my still-vivid visit to Argentina had helped prepare me, was the occasion for a fascinating division of forces and clash of opinions on both sides of the Atlantic. It seemed obvious to me that the military junta would never have dared attack a British territory unless it had been given some sort of “green light” from Washington. Indeed, it was at once reported that Jeanne Kirkpatrick, Reagan’s UN ambassador and a leading apologist for anti-Communist dictatorships, had graced an Argentine diplomatic reception on the very night of the invasion. General Alexander Haig, Ronald Reagan’s vain, preposterous secretary of state, was also in his usual engorged condition of being crazy for anything that was militaristic, sadistic, and butch in a uniform. But the assurances given to Haig’s equivalents in Buenos Aires had all been predicated on the assumption that the British would not fight for a stony archipelago at the wrong end of the world. I abruptly realized, for reasons that I believed had little if anything to do with my blood and heritage, and despite the impediment placed in the way of my becoming more American, that I would be unable to bear the shame if this assumption proved to be correct.

In my new cohort around *The Nation*, the sending of a British naval expedition to recover the islands was mostly greeted with mirth and incredulity. Surely this wasn’t serious? The British mood wouldn’t outlast the shipping home of the first “body bag” (a term that was to become more wearisome to me with each passing year). At first I tried opportunistically to accommodate this mentality and split the difference, and even wrote an editorial mocking the “Rule Britannia” jingoism that seemed to be spoiling the show back home. My cheeks still inflame a bit to remember it. And then Alexander Chancellor, editor of *The Spectator*, gave me a call. His correspondent in Washington, an otherwise lovely man, was also having trouble taking the thing seriously and was filing copy that was “frankly a bit ‘flip.’ ” Would I mind surging down to the capital and seeing if I could hold the fort for a while? I didn’t hesitate. Never mind its ostensible Toryism: Chancellor’s *Spectator* had been outpacing my old stable at the *New Statesman* for some while, recruiting some of the latter’s best talents; it was a

distinction even to be asked. I was soon on the shuttle, for what was really my first-ever Washington assignment.

It was a tremendous introduction to the “class” and “empire” dichotomies I mentioned above. On the one side was the very ugliest bit of the new American empire, represented by the Haig-Kirkpatrick alliance of uniformed bullies and power-sucking pseudo-intellectuals. They spoke for the Argentine torturers who were — as they then well knew but we did not — already acting as the herders and trainers for a homicidal crew that the world would soon know as the Nicaraguan contras. (It really counts as an irony of history that it was Mrs. Thatcher’s bellicosity that robbed the neo-cons of their favorite proxy, compelling the then-unknown Oliver North to finance the contras from hostage trading with the Iranian mullahs instead, and very nearly demolishing the presidency of her adored “Ronnie.”) On the opposing side stood the most traditional and apparently superannuated but also in a way the classiest bit of the old British Empire, given a near-ideal embodiment in this case by Sir Nicholas “Nico” Henderson, lodged as he was in the spacious ambassadorial residence designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens (architect of New Delhi) on the great western sweep of Massachusetts Avenue.

I dare say that, like many Foreign Office types, Sir Nicholas had his doubts about the prudence of sending the Royal Navy so far from home base on an obscure point of principle, but I can testify that it took him about three days to knock the creepy Argentine envoy right off the court and hound him from decent Georgetown society. A tubercular shoulder in youth had given “Nico” a hard time getting dressed in the morning: he was always well turned out but just very slightly rumpled and was by this stage in his life described as looking a bit like “a ruined country house.” This he regarded as no insult. Indeed, he undoubtedly made good use of the way in which it caused superficial characters to underestimate him. By judicious leaking, he also managed to make la Kirkpatrick and her associates look rather unsavory. And, by calling in a number of markers, he induced Caspar Weinberger to throw the Defense Department onto the British side of the scale. I didn’t care for Weinberger either, or for what I regarded as the American cult of Winston Churchill that he represented, but for me the main objective couldn’t be in doubt. At all costs the United States should not salvage yet another filthy Latin American caudillo. Eventually Reagan sided with Weinberger and Thatcher against Haig and Kirkpatrick, and Argentina itself was liberated along with the tiny British archipelago it had tried to steal. I could not have had a better introduction to Washington and its power struggles.

He might have done the right thing on that occasion, but I did not at all like Ronald Reagan, and nobody then could persuade me that I should. Even now, when I squint back at him through the more roseate lens of his historic compromise with Gorbachev, I can easily remember (which is precisely why one’s memoirs must always strive to avoid too much retrospective lens adjustment) exactly why I found him so rebarbative at the time. There was, first, his appallingly facile manner as a liar. He could fix the camera with a folksy smirk that I always found annoying but that got him called “The Great Communicator” by a chorus of toadies in the press, and proceed to utter

the most resounding untruths. (“South Africa has stood beside us in every major war we have ever fought,” he declared while defending a regime whose party leadership had been locked up by the British for pro-Nazi sympathies in the Second World War. “The Russian language contains no word for ‘freedom’ ” was another stupefying pronouncement of his: Who knows where he got it from, or who can imagine a president whose staff couldn’t tell him of the noble word Svoboda? On two separate occasions, he claimed that, having never quit the safety of the Los Angeles movie backlots, he had been present for the liberation of the Nazi death camps. It could get worrying.) Up close, at press conferences, the carapace of geniality proved to be flaky: I was once within a few feet of his lizard-like face when he was asked a question that he didn’t care for — about the theft of President Carter’s briefing book by Reagan campaign operatives during the 1980 elections — and found myself quite shaken by the look of senile, shifty malice that came into his eyes as he offered the excuse that the New York Times had also accepted stolen property in the case of the Pentagon Papers. Nobody was less surprised than I when Reagan was later found to be suffering from Alzheimer’s disease: I believe it will one day be admitted that some of his family and one or two of his physicians had begun to suspect this as early as his first term.

The Leader of the Free World was frequently photographed in the company of “end-times” Protestant fundamentalists and biblical literalists like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson: tethered gas-balloons of greed and cynicism once written up by Martin Amis as “frauds of Chaucerian proportions.” The president found time to burble with such characters about the fulfillment of ancient “prophecy” and the coming Apocalypse. He also speculated drivellingly that the jury might yet return an open verdict on the theory of evolution. He was married to a woman who employed a White House astrologer. He said that the Abraham Lincoln Battalion had fought on “the wrong side” in the civil war in Spain, which logically meant that there had been a “right” side and that it was the Francoist one. (When the last attempt at a fascist coup was made in Spain, in the early 1980s, the Reagan administration was asked for comment, again in the person of the Strangelovian freak Alexander Haig, who flabbergastingly said that the armed attack on Spain’s elected parliament was a purely internal Spanish affair.) With Haig, Reagan also gave permission to Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon to invade Lebanon in 1982, and to take their incursion as far as Beirut to do the dirty work of the Catholic Phalange. In order to gratify Chancellor Helmut Kohl of West Germany, Reagan agreed to visit an SS cemetery in Bitburg (Ich bin ein Bitburger) and, as if that in itself was not bad enough, to declare that those interred there were not just “victims,” but victims “just as much” as the civilians they had slaughtered. He made stupid, alarming on-air jokes about pre-emptively bombing the USSR. He pardoned the convicted FBI agents Felt and Miller, who had been prosecuted and fired for illegal break-ins and wiretaps directed at the anti-war movement. In a really sweet irony, one of these men (Mark Felt), as I was to learn, had been the “Deep Throat” whose torpedoes had sent the previous elected Republican administration to the floor of the sea.*

Introduction to the Federal City had been so engrossing that, when Victor Navasky and Kai Bird asked me if I would consider moving there permanently for the magazine, I scarcely hesitated. On my departure for Washington, Victor bought me a farewell lunch at a restaurant near Pennsylvania Station. Known as the “wily and parsimonious” Navasky, in consequence of an imperishable column by Calvin Trillin in which the latter had recorded his being hired for a payment “somewhere in the low two figures,” Victor may have been narrow with the magazine’s money but he was always very generous with his own and it was a pretty decent snack. A different kind of wiliness had also helped him persuade me to move south: he had remarked casually that *The Nation* hadn’t had a regular Washington columnist since I.F. Stone. This name was magic to all Sixties radicals and to earlier generations too: Stone had published his own weekly sheet of investigations and polemics, exposing the warmakers and the segregationists, and actually made a living out of being an independent non-alienated producer of printed words on the page. The good life of the pamphleteer. So flattered and excited was I by this latent comparison that I fell into the Trillin trap and forgot to ask about an exact salary figure until it was very slightly too late . . .

I was looking forward to fighting back against the Reaganites in their capital city, and in such distinguished company as Izzy Stone’s at that (he had promised to host a reception in my honor when I got there), but I still registered a twinge at quitting Manhattan, and this twinge became a pang as, moving toward the door of the restaurant, I had an alluring glimpse of Susan Sontag taking her lunch with Roger Straus. I knew Susan slightly by then: she was a sovereign figure in the small world of those who tilled the field of ideas. She didn’t have any boss, but she did have a distinguished book publisher who was also a friend and who was proud to print anything she wrote. Obviously my “pang” was part envy. Susan, political as she was, didn’t have to lead the very politicized life that I was about to embark upon.*

To become a Washingtonian is to choose a very odd way of becoming an American. It felt at first like moving to a company town where nothing ever actually got itself made. The typical local “look” was that of a lawyer (almost indistinguishable, in both the male and female cases, from that of the legislative aide). Dowdiness was a theme: on the streets of New York one’s visual sense was constantly assailed and tortured by a fiesta of distraction: in my new home I found I could walk almost the whole length of Connecticut Avenue without having to turn my head for a second look. So much the better, perhaps, since for the first time in my working life I wasn’t going to an office where there were congenial fellow scribblers, but was having to evolve a stern daily and weekly discipline of my own, and at home.

In my search for an inexpensive place to live, I soon discovered that there was a very stark discrepancy between the city’s neighborhoods, and that this discrepancy was no less starkly demarcated. In 1982 and for some years afterward, you could still see the scarred and burned-out area, from eastern downtown to the districts behind the then-dilapidated and disused Union Station and right up through Capitol Hill, that dated from the riots in 1968. The smallness of D.C. made it an additional shock to realize

quite how close, to the White House and to the Dome, that righteous mayhem had come. After staying for a bit with a Zimbabwean friend at the World Bank, and then with a British correspondent of some standing, I came to appreciate that I couldn't and perhaps shouldn't afford their leafy neighborhoods of the Northwest. I found a row house in northeast Capitol Hill, where if I wanted to cab it home late at night from Dupont Circle, African-born taxi drivers would sometimes decline to take me (on the unarguable — at least by me with them — grounds that it was “a black area”). I have never since been able to use the word “gentrification” as a sneer: the unavoidable truth is that it's almost invariably a good symptom.

Other areas of the city were being cheered up at a more rapid rate. Dupont Circle itself was being redone by an immigration of gay couples with spending money, who fixed up the housing stock and opened cafés and specialty stores. In Adams-Morgan, the city's little Latin Quarter, there was some music to hear and an ethnic mix from Ethiopian to El Salvadoran where nobody predominated unduly. Georgetown still had its hostesses in those days, and I was somewhat befriended by one of the very nicest of them, Joan Bingham. In this female-dominated circle, which had always formed a part of the Anglo-American “special relationship” and which eventually went into eclipse along with it, there were still to be found grandes dames like Katharine Graham and Susan Mary Alsop and Evangeline Bruce and Kay Halle, and as Oscar Wilde once remarked of Frank Harris, I was invited to all of these great salons — once.

Since I was in the city to work for an American magazine (while all of my British friends were naturally enough writing for London ones), my perspective had perforce to alter and my personal way of becoming Americanized was to remain a blood brother of the American Left. I felt a kinship with this in any case: the tradition of Marx's great solidarity with Lincoln in the Civil War; the great and humane figure of Eugene Debs; the mighty class battles of the 1930s that baptized the labor movement — which then helped co-sponsor the March on Washington in 1963. Through men like Izzy Stone I was introduced to some veterans of these heart-stirring episodes. Then Ralph Nader invited me to lunch (and offered me the strange sum of seven thousand dollars if I would give up smoking, which I didn't, or didn't then).

The taunt against us by the Reagan-Kirkpatrick faction was that we were “anti-American” and, when we criticized Israeli expansionism, anti-Semitic. In parallel with this came the accusation that, in the Cold War, we regarded the United States and the USSR as “morally equivalent.” One grew used to countering this line of attack and adept at saying that America was being untrue to itself when (say) it tolerated death squads in El Salvador. In the Israeli case, as Stone was fond of pointing out, there was more criticism of government policy in the Jerusalem press than in the American one. Jewish leftist critics of Zionism were to be found all over the American scene, and nothing about them was “self-hating” (the other fork of the “anti-Semitic” indictment). On the “moral equivalence” charge I had a little more difficulty: my old Trotskyism had taught me to be much more anti-Soviet than many of my comrades, and I was often made aware in Nation circles that there really were people who did think that Joseph

McCarthy had been far, far worse than Joseph Stalin. But on thermonuclear weapons, for example, I did feel that there was an approximate moral equivalence, which got worse as American strategists began to use exterminist phrases such as “launch on warning.” And I thought South Africa more nearly met the definition of a “totalitarian” state than did, for example, Hungary. I fell into correspondence with Noam Chomsky on some of these points, and used to go and visit him up in Cambridge, on one occasion speaking on the same platform in defense of Cyprus. He worried me once by saying that as far as he could see, the “moral equivalence” calculus favored the Soviet Union, but I filed this under another heading. My much-admired Gore Vidal worried me once or twice, too. I went down to Lynchburg, Virginia, in the early Reagan days, to see him trail his coat and tease the faithful at a public lecture in Jerry Falwell’s hometown. This he did brilliantly. I took young Amis along for the ride, and we all three had dinner. As if helpfully introducing an innocent Martin to the native loam of America, Gore happened to mention the FBI and broke off to tell him confidently: “You know — that’s our KGB.” I could feel Martin resisting this glibness: he later wrote that Gore, while a great performer, needed to know that there was something radically, nay terminally, wrong with his smile. Not very much later, I was made to cringe myself by Vidal’s response to a bitter charge of anti-Americanism from Norman Podhoretz. He began well enough, by saying airily that he could hardly be accused of hatred for a nation of which he was the “official biographer.” That was a fair-enough riposte, in view of the body of fiction about the life and history of the republic that he had so carefully and lovingly composed.* Things got a touch less lofty when Gore then rounded on Podhoretz and accused him of being an Israeli rather than an American. This chanced to be in a special edition of *The Nation* about patriotism and internationalism: it upset Alexander Cockburn and myself enough for us to express our reservations to Navasky. With one of the shrugs for which he was famous, Victor (who secretly welcomed the notoriety that it would bring the magazine) said: “Well, Gore is Gore.” This I was later to find true enough.

* I still know someone who was at the very, very far-out meeting that founded the “Weatherman” faction. He too was strongly for a Bob Dylan sloganography but held out for the sect to be named “The Vandals,” because in another and equally telling “underground” line of Dylan’s “Subterranean Homesick Blues,” is it not truly said: “The pump don’t work ’cos the vandals took the handle”? Get sick, get well . . . my friend’s recovered now.

* An old joke has an Oxford professor meeting an American former graduate student and asking him what he’s working on these days. “My thesis is on the survival of the class system in the United States.” “Oh really, that’s interesting: one didn’t think there was a class system in the United States.” “Nobody does. That’s how it survives.”

* In my first months of living in Washington, D.C., I went to a Ku Klux Klan rally where the sheeted marchers were protected from furious counterdemonstrators by phalanxes of imperturbable black policemen who saw to it that the constitutional rights of those who detested them were duly and good-humoredly upheld.

* I was to learn this earlier than most people by a piece of induction of which I am still faintly proud. Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein had both sworn that they would never reveal Deep Throat's identity until he died, or until he gave them further notice. But Carl Bernstein had been married to the tempestuous Nora Ephron, and I believed from knowing both of them slightly that it was impossible for Nora not to have asked, and even more impossible for Carl not to have told her. Nora's best friend was Annie Navasky, adorable wife of Victor. I therefore evolved the plan of asking Annie. She said — this, by the way, was at a dinner for Alger Hiss — that she had been told the name but that it didn't ring a bell and wasn't exciting and that she'd forgotten it. Overcoming my discouragement at this, I adopted the more direct approach of asking Nora straight out. She also said that it wasn't sensational — this was in the days when crazy people thought Deep Throat might have been Henry Kissinger — but told me that to the best of her recollection it was an FBI man called Felt. For quite a while I myself could not believe that it was the same one, so I missed yet another chance for a scoop.

* I am sometimes asked about the concept or definition of a “public intellectual,” and though I find the whole idea faintly silly, I believe it should ideally mean that the person so identified is self-sustaining and autonomously financed. Susan was pre-eminently one such.

* I was once seated in a television studio with Newt Gingrich, waiting for the debate between us to get going, when the presenter made an off-air remark that was highly disobliging to Gore. The former Republican Speaker abruptly became very prim and disapproving, and said that he would prefer not to listen to any abuse of the author of *Lincoln*: a novel that he regarded as being above reproach. I conveyed this news to the author himself, who took the tribute as he takes all tributes: as being overdue and well deserved.

Changing Places

All the essentials of humanity's artistic treasures can be found in New York.
— Claude Lévi-Strauss

THE STAGES BY WHICH one mutates or pupates from one identity to another are not always evident while they are being undergone. I suppose I shed some skins and also acquired some layers. I wrote for some years a nonpolitical column about cultural matters for the London Times Literary Supplement, calling it "American Notes." But I sentimentally helped host Neil Kinnock's staff when he came on his doomed mission as the penultimate leader of the "old" Labour Party, and when I swore out an affidavit to testify to Congress during the impeachment trial of the loathsome Bill Clinton, I was asked to state my citizenship and found myself saying that I was a citizen of the European Union. All this made a loose but comfortable fit with my continuing idea of myself as an internationalist.

I might have gone on in this way more or less indefinitely, keeping my European but also British passport and my trusty green card, which was so old by now that it was blue, but which counted as platinum because it was one of those beauties that didn't carry an expiration date. The immigration officers had started to say "welcome home" when I presented it, and I would reply: "nice to be back." I had long since ceased to notice — or do I mean to care about? — things like the stubborn American belief that "hot tea" is made with lukewarm or formerly boiled water, rather than water that is actually boiling. I now took it for granted that perfect strangers would mention their preferred churches or even — at least in New York and California — their shrinks. I had slowly realized that when male neighbors on airplanes or bar stools struck up conversation by asking about "the playoffs," I didn't actually have to know or care anything about sports: it was merely an initial Y-chromosome attempt at an opening and one could get straight to sex or politics (or silence if desired) by acknowledging this and cutting out the middle-man subject.

Speaking of airplanes . . . on a day in early September 2001 I got up at a decent hour on a morning that simply had to be described as golden and crisp, went out through the blazingly autumnal Virginia woods to Dulles Airport and boarded a flight for Seattle. It was one of those days when everything went right and America again seemed full of light and space and liberty and good fortune: my upgrade on United cleared the waiting list and I ate a packed lunch with a good book, taking time every now and then to look down on the superbly cultivated munificence of American agriculture, contrasting as it did with the great scapes of wooded and mountainous wilderness. On top of all this, I was going so luxuriously west in order to be paid money to deliver an attack

on Henry Kissinger. Whitman College, in the town of Walla Walla in Washington State, was associated with the late Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson, a man who despite his supposed “neo-conservatism” had always detested Kissinger’s willingness to adjust himself to the convenience of Leonid Brezhnev and other despots. To complete my near-perfect day, the Walla Walla campus was a sylvan delight, the student body immaculate and receptive, while the faculty club knew how to throw a proper dinner, and I had a “scoop” of my own to contribute. On the following morning, the family of a murdered Chilean general was to be given leave to bring suit against Henry Kissinger in a federal court in Washington, D.C. The news was about to be transmitted on the BBC and would, I knew and could disclose, be on the front page of the following day’s Washington Post. I delivered a not-bad speech, rounded it off with this exciting news and received a standing ovation — including from some of Henry Jackson’s family — after which I wound up by saying: “So, comrades and friends, brothers and sisters, we shall be able to say that tomorrow — September 11th 2001 — will long be remembered as a landmark day in the struggle for human rights.” I shook a lot of hands, kissed a few cheeks, signed quite a number of my Kissinger books, and retired (as Lord Rochester once said, as if breaking the rule of a lifetime) “early, sober and alone.”

Very early next morning my wife, Carol, had me lifting the phone before I could quite appreciate the fact. From the East Coast, she had a three-hour time-zone advantage. “If you turn on the TV,” she said with her not-unknown dryness and economy, “you may find that the war-crimes trial of Henry Kissinger has been slightly postponed.” I found a remote-control device, which gave me the Weather Channel as such things always do, but even the Weather Channel had the “breaking” story.

“Breaking” was about right. I felt myself rending internally as I was forced to watch — that’s how it felt, as with being made to witness a torture or an execution — the scenes I don’t have to describe to you. Or perhaps you will forgive me one exception to that resolution. As I saw the first of the towers begin to dissolve and lose its shape and outline, I was alerted to what was imminent by the abrupt sinking and sagging of the big antenna on the roof. I can only phrase this by saying that I was very suddenly and very overwhelmingly actuated by pity. I know that this is the pathetic fallacy at work and I dare say I knew it then, but it was like watching the mute last moments of a dying elephant, say, or perhaps a whale. At any rate, the next emotion I felt was a rush of protectiveness, as if something vulnerable required my succor. Vulnerable? This commercial behemoth at the heart of an often-callous empire? Well, yes, at the risk of embarrassment. And my protective feelings were further engaged and enlisted as, on this most faultless of September days, the whole southern tip of Manhattan was suddenly engulfed in a rolling, boiling cloud of filth that blotted out the sun. And in that filth was contained the pulverized remnant of many of my fellow creatures. In a first-reaction report I wrote that it was as if Charles Manson had been made god for a day.

More Mansonism was in store. My hometown was under attack as well. The next time Carol called, she wasn’t quite so wry and detached. The Defense Department

was on fire. She could not get across town to collect our daughter, who had just been dropped at school. Chaos was official. There were hysterical and false reports of explosions near the White House and the State Department. The wonderful spaces and distances of America feel fractionally less glorious when a husband and father is on the wrong side of the Continental Divide and can't do a thing. It transpired that, if not for the gallant action of the passengers on United Flight 93, and the traditional tardiness of air-traffic control at Newark Airport, which gave those heroes and heroines their time lag, another plane would have gone sailing through the blue of that day, arrowing right behind the coiffed heads of the TV newscasters, and burst into a gorgeous ball of red and yellow and black against the dome of the Capitol.

From an early age, I had dreamed of Manhattan and identified it with breadth of mind, with liberty, with opportunity. Now it seemed that there were those who, from across the sea, had also been fantasizing about my longed-for city. But fantasizing about hurting it, maiming it, disfiguring it, and bringing it crashing to the ground. "Let it come down!" as the first murderer says in *Macbeth*, expressing in those four words a whole skullful of nihilism and resentment. Before the close of that day, I had deliberately violated the rule that one ought not to let the sun set on one's anger, and had sworn a sort of oath to remain coldly furious until these hateful forces had been brought to a most strict and merciless account.

And what of my other adopted city? How often had I laughed or even sneered at Washington, sometimes saying (echoing a smart friend) that it was New York's nicest suburb, and at other times mocking it in various tones as "provincial" or a "company town." Should I now also feel protective about that other behemoth, the Pentagon? Well, into its outer walls had been flown a nice acquaintance of mine, a feisty Republican lady named Barbara Olson. She had managed to get her husband on her cellphone to say she had been hijacked, and to him had fallen the task of telling her that she was mistaken about that. She was not a hostage. There were not going to be any "demands." She was to be murdered in order that others, too, might die. As I tried to picture her reaction, I hit a barrier that my imagination was unable to cross. Also, when you have seen the Pentagon still smoldering across the river, from the roof of your own apartment building, you are liable to undergo an abrupt shift of perspective that qualifies any nostalgia for Norman Mailer's "Armies of the Night" or Allen Ginsberg's quixotic attempt to levitate the building. In his book *The Company of Critics* the Social Democratic intellectual Michael Walzer says that most of his friends and colleagues have never even visited Washington except to protest. I was to find this thought, about the mentality of America's intellectuals, recurring to me as the days went by, but meanwhile my feeling for the city became distinctly more tender, and I began to value more what I had become used to taking for granted: the openness and greenery, the nexus of friends and contacts, the wonderful museums and galleries and concert halls, the two Shakespeare theaters, and the way that one could walk right up to the railings of the White House. And then another filthy miasma arrived, this time in the form of anthrax spores stuffed into envelopes. A well-liked mailman on our

route was one of the casualties, and our downstairs mailroom was briefly closed. This is the sort of phenomenon that breeds paranoia and hatred and fear, yet I was above all struck, throughout that month, by the calm and dignity with which New Yorkers and Washingtonians were conducting themselves. Every now and then, some nervous official would broadcast an appeal to people NOT to go and launch random attacks on Arab-run groceries or local mosques; these appeals grated on me as being superfluous and patronizing. There were a very few abject morons out in the boondocks who summoned the courage to attack anyone wearing a turban — they usually managed to pick Sikhs or Tibetans — but this was hardly a police-blotter blip.

Two things began to contend for mastery in my head. At first, I was most afraid of an orgiastic flag-waving unanimity, in which the press and media would congeal into an uncritical mass, as if “we” all lived in a one-party consensus. But then a chance encounter crystallized quite another fear. I was still stuck out at Whitman College, waiting for the airports to reopen, and went into a store to buy some overnight supplies. I was approached by a young woman who had been at my Kissinger lecture, and we chatted briefly about it before turning to the inescapable topic. “You know what my friends are saying?” she inquired. “They are saying it’s the chickens coming home to roost.”

I have always had a dislike for that rather fatuous and folkish expression, and this dislike now came welling up in me with an almost tidal force. (What bloody “chickens”? Come to think of it, whose bloody “home”? And, for Christ’s sake, what sort of “roost”?) And I could suddenly visualize, with an awful and sickening certainty, what we were going to be getting by way of comment from Noam Chomsky and his co-thinkers in the coming days. This realization helped me considerably in sorting out the discrepant and even discordant discussions that were taking place in my interior, and I soon enough sat down to write my regular column for *The Nation*. I titled it “Against Rationalization.” I did not intend to be told, I said, that the people of the United States — who included all those toiling in the Pentagon as well as all those, citizens and non-citizens, who had been immolated in Manhattan — had in any sense deserved this or brought it upon themselves. I also tried to give a name to the mirthless, medieval, death-obsessed barbarism that had so brazenly unmasked itself. It was, I said, “Fascism with an Islamic Face.” In this I attempted to annex Alexander Dubek’s phrase about Czechoslovakia adopting “Socialism with a Human Face,” and also to echo Susan Sontag’s later ironic re-working, following the military coup in Poland, of the idea of Communism going the other way and degenerating into “Fascism with a Human Face.” Obviously, this concept is too baggy to be used every time, so I am occasionally “credited” with coining the unsatisfactory term “Islamofascism” instead.

Anyway, I didn’t have long to wait for my worst fears about the Left to prove correct. Comparing Al Qaeda’s use of stolen airplanes with President Clinton’s certainly atrocious use of cruise missiles against Sudan three years before (which were at least ostensibly directed at Al Qaeda targets), Noam Chomsky found the moral balance to be approximately even, with the United States at perhaps a slight disadvantage.

He also described the potential civilian casualties of an American counterstroke in Afghanistan as amounting to “a silent genocide.” As time had elapsed, I had gradually been made aware that there was a deep division between Noam and myself. Highly critical as we both were of American foreign policy, the difference came down to this. Regarding almost everything since Columbus as having been one continuous succession of genocides and land-thefts, he did not really believe that the United States of America was a good idea to begin with. Whereas I had slowly come to appreciate that it most certainly was, and was beginning to feel less and less shy about saying so. We commenced a duel, conducted largely in cyberspace, in which I began by pointing out the difference between unmanned cruise missiles on the one hand and crowded civilian airliners rammed into heavily populated buildings on the other. We more or less went on from there.

Gore Vidal, also, could hardly wait to go slumming. He took the earliest opportunity of claiming that, while Osama bin Laden had not been proved to be the evil genius of the attacks, it was by no means too early to allege that the Bush administration had played a hidden hand in them. Or at least, if it had not actually instigated the assault, it had (as with Roosevelt at Pearl Harbor!) seen it coming and welcomed it as a pretext for engorging the defense budget and seizing the oilfields of the southern Caucasus. His articles featured half-baked citations from the most dismal, ignorant paranoids. President Bush had evidently forewarned himself of the air piracy in order that he should seize the chance to look like a craven, whey-faced ignoramus on worldwide TV. Vidal’s old antagonist Norman Mailer was largely at one with him on this, jauntily alleging that endless war was the only way to vindicate the drooping virility of the traditional white American male. Thus did the nation’s intelligentsia, and a part of the mental universe of the *New York Review of Books*, show its readiness in a crisis. I thought I had to say a word for the fortitude that the rest of society was manifesting.

I had another motive that is perhaps plainer to me now than it was then. I could not bear the idea that anything I had written or said myself had contributed to this mood of cynicism and defeatism, not to mention moral imbecility, on the Left. I did not want that young lady at Whitman College to waste her time drawing facile and masochistic conclusions. I had said all I could about American policy in South Africa and Chile (Salvador Allende had been overthrown and murdered on another 11 September twenty-eight years before) but as I asked an audience in Georgetown in a later debate with Tariq Ali, could anyone imagine Mandela or Allende ordering their supporters to use civilian airliners to slaughter more civilians? Any comparison of that kind, or any extension of it to Vietnam, was — quite apart from anything else — vilely insulting to the causes and struggles with which it was being compared.

I went up to New York as soon as I could, and I got my editors to send me off to the Pakistan/Afghan/Kashmiri frontier as soon as possible after that. In Manhattan, it was both upsetting, and yet confirming, to see my favorite poet becoming the unofficial laureate of the moment. Auden’s “September 1, 1939” had by some unspoken agreement been sent all around the Internet, and was to be found pasted or stapled to public

surfaces in the city. Its early-warning couplet, “The unmentionable odor of death / Offends the September night,” began to materialize itself, especially as one worked one’s way south below Union Square and began to feel the nostrils actually dilate with the miasma. (Ever since, the lovely coincidence of the words “fall” and “New York” has always had a wretchedly double meaning for me.) I contrived to get very close to Ground Zero and had to send all my clothes to be cleaned immediately afterward. I talked to my graduate class at the New School for Social Research — itself partly founded as a haven for refugees from fascism — where a few of our downtown dorms had been converted into shelters. The parents of some students had urged them to desert the stricken city and head home. I told them that they’d never forgive themselves if they left New York now. I saw the improvised photo notices of the “missing” and the “disappeared” taped to walls and shop windows downtown, using every language from Spanish to Armenian, and heard again the echo from the victims of the death squads. I saw the awakening of a new respect for the almost-eclipsed figure of the American proletarian, who was busting his sinews in the rubble and carnage of downtown while the more refined elements wrung their hands. What an opportunity for the Left to miss, there, and what an overbred and gutless Left it had proved to be. “Into this neutral air,” Auden had written on the eve of destruction in 1939, from his barstool eyrie on 52nd Street:

Where blind skyscrapers use
Their full height to proclaim
The strength of Collective Man,
Each language pours its vain
Competitive excuse.

Even as the whining and the excuse making began, Auden’s lines were being reborn and recirculated, as if to emphasize that while the great edifices of New York may indeed be “capitalist,” they also represent a triumph of confidence and innovation and ingenuity on the part of the workers who so proudly strove to build them. There was for me a narrow but deep contrast between that ethos and the “Strawberry Fields” or “Candle in the Wind” flavor of the vigils downtown. There was something else from the “Devil’s Decade” of the 1930s that I was struggling to remember and soon enough it came to me. Remembering the last moments of the Titanic, George Orwell had written that:

In all the long list of horrors the one that most impressed me was that at the last the Titanic suddenly up-ended and sank bow foremost, so that the people clinging to the stern were lifted no less than three hundred feet into the air before they plunged into the abyss. It gave me a sinking sensation in the belly which I can still all but feel. Nothing in the [First World] War ever quite gave me that sensation.

“Look, teacher,” the New York Times reported a child shrilling as the Twin Towers were becoming pyres: “the birds are on fire.” Here was a sweet, infantile rationalization of an uncommon sight: human beings who had hesitated too long between the alternatives of jumping to their deaths or being burned alive, and who were thus jumping and

burning, and from much more than three hundred feet. Nothing that I have witnessed since, including Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo and various scenes in Afghanistan and Iraq, has erased those initial images of the deep and sick relationship between murder and suicide, or of the wolfish faces of those who gloated over the horror. I have just looked up the little piece that I wrote at the time for my editors at Vanity Fair (which they titled “For Patriot Dreams”) and I now see that I ended it like this, with another closing stave from Auden and then a few clumsy lines of my own:

Defenseless under the night
Our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light
Flash out . . .

I don’t know so much about “defenseless.” Some of us will vow to defend it, or help the defenders. As for the flashes of light, imagine the nuance of genius that made Auden term them “ironic.” It would be a holy fool who mistook this for weakness or sentimentality. Shall I take out the papers of citizenship? Wrong question. In every essential way, I already have.

Introducing the same essay, which he honored me by anthologizing in a collection that he edited just before his distressingly early death, the late Stephen Jay Gould wrote: “I loved the juxtaposition of David Halberstam’s and Christopher Hitchens’s essays, the first from a longtime New Yorker who used 9/11 to make some kind of peace that he had not found with his life, the second from an Englishman who used the same event to come to terms after decades of struggle.” Flattered as I was to be chosen by such a distinguished educator and explicator (Gould’s understated Marxism was still unmissable in his great works on evolutionary biology), I found that I didn’t quite like the idea that I was starting to “come to terms” or hang up my gloves or in any other sense cool off. In truth, a whole new terrain of struggle had just opened up in front of me. I also noticed another thing, which was the title of that Orwell essay from 1940, written only a few short months after Auden’s poem, which I had looked up for its reference to the Titanic. It was called “My Country Right or Left.” I slightly recast this to say to myself, about the USA: My country after all.

I was still only offering a general solidarity without paying the full price of the ticket. Two things had not yet happened. The fantastic, gigantic international campaign of defamation and slander of the United States had not yet got under way, and the argument about the deployment of its sons and daughters to the frontiers had not begun to take on the shape that it has since assumed.

It’s only with a conscious effort now that one can recall the supposed moment of international pro-American solidarity that ensued from the September 11 assault. There were vigils and candles, solemn editorials and sonorous pronouncements. President Bush (who had run away and disappeared on the day itself) did his best to muddy the waters by saying that it was a matter of “Amurrka” versus “the terrorists” (sometimes he seemed almost to say “tourists”) and didn’t appear to acknowledge, or

even to know about, the huge number of non-American citizens who had perished in downtown New York. But even without this clumsiness on his part, I believe that the venomous propaganda would still have been coming. Within a few days, the Muslim world had been infected by the base, hysterical lie that all Jews had left the World Trade Center just in time to avoid the airstrike. At the New York film festival, held while lower Manhattan was still giving off evil-smelling fumes, I debated with Oliver Stone, who expressed the cheery view that the “uprising” that had occurred downtown would soon link up with a generalized anti-globalization movement. Next up was my magazine *The Nation*, whose publishing wing cashed in with a hastily translated version of a deranged French best-seller, alleging that the Pentagon had not been hit with a civilian plane carrying my friend Barbara, but rather by a cruise missile fired by the Bush administration. The disgusting “Reverends” Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell were also on hand to announce that the United States had merited the devastation because of its willingness to tolerate sexual deviance. Here was an unexampled case of seeing all one’s worst enemies in plain view: the clerical freaks and bigots of all persuasions and the old Charles Lindbergh isolationist Right, the latter sometimes masquerading as a corny and folksy version of a Grassy Knoll conspiracist “Left.”

I took it upon myself to defend my adopted homeland from this kind of insult and calumny, the spittle of which was being gigglingly prepared even as the funerals and commemorations were going calmly forward. I was impressed to see who rallied and who did not. Salman Rushdie, Ian McEwan, and Martin Amis all wrote outstanding articles, expressing the support of non-Americans for the United States against this unashamed cult of death. Norman Mailer, John Updike, and even Susan Sontag — to say nothing of Noam Chomsky — appeared to be petrified of being caught on the same side as a Republican president, and often contented themselves with inexpensive, unserious remarks about American machismo or Bush’s “cowboy” style. It was fatalistically agreed in almost all polite circles that even if one could kill or capture Osama bin Laden, it would only mean that others would spring up in his place (and that’s if you believed, unlike Gore Vidal or Michael Moore, with whom I also debated later on this point, that he was in fact the culprit).

I decided to venture back to the epicenter of jihad and wrote an essay — “On the Frontier of Apocalypse” — which said that the problem country was actually not so much Afghanistan but Pakistan: our oldest regional ally and the working model for a nuclear-armed, failed-state “Islamic republic.” I am still fairly proud of that article. I also began to hear more from my Iraqi and Kurdish friends about the very mad, menacing way in which the Saddam Hussein regime was celebrating and even praising the 9/11 attacks. Ba’athist rhetoric was frequently a matter of dementia, as I well knew, but this was at a time when even Iranian and Saudi Arabian circles were trying to look and sound sympathetic. Amid all this chaos on the various frontiers what I increasingly thought was: thank whatever powers there may be for the power of the United States of America. Without that reserve strength, the sheer mass of its arsenal in combination with the innovative maneuvers of its special forces, the tyrants and riffraff of the world

would possess an undeserved sense of impunity. As it was, the Taliban were soon in full flight from the celebrating people they had for so long oppressed, and Al Qaeda was being taught to take heavy casualties as well as inflict them. I was not against this.

I can identify the moment when I decided to come off the fence and to admit that I felt that I had been cheating on my dues. I was keener on the foreign policy response of the administration than on its crude and hasty domestic measures, telling amused audiences that as long as green-card holders could be imprisoned without trial by Attorney General John Ashcroft, I felt I couldn't pass up that chance. But the whole atmosphere was becoming less flippant by the day, especially as the United States began to ask the United Nations to live up to its resolutions on Iraq and on terrorism. One night I was coming back from a TV debate and talking to my Bosnian Muslim driver, who considered his own country of birth to have been rescued from dismemberment and genocide by an earlier American military intervention. "You citizen yet?" he asked me. I made some temporizing reply. "You should get on with it: America needs us." For emphasis, he pressed on me the name of a good immigration lawyer. In a couple of days I called the number, to be greeted by a female voice which was as purely Irish as the summer day is long. I gave her my name. "And was it you that wrote that book about Mother Teresa?" Reckoning the chances that such an Irish tone would track with a Catholic girlhood, I confirmed that this was so and made ready to call another attorney. "That being the case," said the disembodied loveliness, "this firm will be happy to take your own case pro bono and without a fee at all." Not bad, I thought to myself: a pure coincidence between a secular Bosnian Muslim and an anti-clerical Hibernian. Only in America . . . When I went round to the office itself I was sure I recognized the lady but couldn't quite "place" her, and she told me that if I'd ever been in the old Class Reunion saloon down by the White House, she'd once been the barmaid. That was in fact the true explanation, but by this stage I was almost beginning to feel that the warmth and geniality of the USA was beginning to overdo itself a trifle.

That was premature. The American bureaucracy very swiftly overcompensates for any bright-eyed immigrant delusions. *Nihil humanum a me alienum puto*, said the Roman poet Terence: "Nothing human is alien to me." The slogan of the old Immigration and Naturalization Service could have been the reverse: To us, no aliens are human. When folded — along with the Bureau of Alcohol, Firearms, and Tobacco, the only department of state I had ever hoped to command — into the vast inner space of the Department of Homeland Security, the resulting super-ministry was more like the Circumlocution Office than a reformed bureaucracy. My Canadian friend David Frum, who was actually working in the White House and had had a hand in writing the famous "axis of evil" speech, had his personal paperwork lost when he applied to become an American. Ian McEwan was put under close arrest and hit with an indelible "entry denied" stamp while trying to cross from Vancouver to Seattle for a big public reading: it would have been of little use to him to plead that the First Lady had recently asked

him to dinner. A Muslim professor of my acquaintance, a permanent resident of many decades' standing, was detained and asked "Are you a Sunni?" When he replied in the affirmative, he was asked "Why are you not a Shi'a?" (Not something that Muslims get asked every day, and a question requiring quite a lot of time for reflection, an interval for which the interrogating officer had no patience.)

Innumerable times I was told, or assured without asking, that I would hear back from officialdom "within ninety days." I wasn't in any special hurry, but it grated when ninety days came and went. Letters came from offices in Vermont and required themselves to be returned to offices in states very far away from the Canadian border. Eventually I received a summons to an interview in Virginia. There would be an exam, I was told, on American law and history. To make this easier, a series of sample questions was enclosed, together with the answers. I realized in scanning them that it wouldn't do to try and be clever, let alone funny. For example, to the question: "Against whom did we fight in the revolution of 1776?" it would be right, if incorrect, to say "The British" and wrong, if correct, to say "The usurping Hanoverian monarchy." Some of the pre-supplied Qs and As appeared to me to be paltry: to the question: "Name one benefit of being a citizen of the United States?" the printed answer was: "To obtain Federal Government jobs, to travel with a U.S. passport, or to petition for close relatives to come to the United States to live." This had a rather cheap and unimaginative, indeed rather Tammany tone to it. Q: "What did the Emancipation Proclamation do? A: "It freed the slaves." No it didn't: that had to wait until the Thirteenth Amendment, the first United States document to mention the actual word "slavery" (and not ratified by the State of Mississippi until 1995).

Having previously been made to go to a whole separate appointment in deepest Maryland just to be fingerprinted, I sat up on the night before my Virginia one, and decided to read slowly through the Constitution. I wasn't especially nervous about flunking. I just felt like re-reading it. There are very few worthwhile documents in human history that are or were the product of a committee. I suppose that the King James or "Authorized" Version of the Bible is the best. Next to that — and of course very much shorter and rather less monarchical and tyrannical — the American Declaration of Independence and the preamble to the United States Constitution seem to me to rank exceedingly high. I sipped my wine and let the small hours advance as I read, and consulted the supporting case law from the great attendant volume of Professors Lockhart, Kamisar, and Choper. To study the amendments — the Bill of Rights and its successor clauses — is to read the history of the United States in miniature. Here were all the measures that set out to distinguish the new United States from the arbitrary and corrupt practices of the Hanoverian usurpers: amendments abolishing the established church, postulating an armed people, opposing the billeting of soldiers upon civilians, limiting searches of property and persons and in general setting limits and boundaries to state power. One had to admire the unambivalent way in which these were written. "Respecting an establishment of religion," said the very first amendment, drawing on Jefferson's and Madison's Virginia Statute For Religious Freedom,

“Congress shall make no law.” Little wiggle room there; no crevice through which a later horse-and-cart could ever be driven. Alas for advocates of “gun control,” the Second Amendment seems to enshrine a “right of the people to keep and bear arms” irrespective of whether they are militia members or not. (The clause structure is admittedly a little reminiscent of the ablative absolute.) And the Eighth Amendment, forbidding “cruel and unusual punishments,” is of scant comfort to those like me who might like that definition stretched to include the death penalty. If the Founders had wanted to forbid capital punishment (as, say, the state constitution of Michigan explicitly does), they would have done so in plain words.

The least plain words are probably those of the Emancipation Proclamation, which show that Abraham Lincoln’s years as a country lawyer and rhetorical pedant were not wasted. But in splitting the difference between a war-winning measure and a liberating one, he nonetheless achieved magnificence, by demonstrating to those who had seceded from the protection of this document the folly and wickedness of what they had done. To have stood as straight as a spear and as hard as a rail through four years, and to have insisted every single day, often against his own generals, that the writ of the United States Constitution still ran in every tiny county of the remotest part of the indissoluble and above all undissolved Union: it’s almost forgivable that people confuse it with the Thirteenth Amendment because when scrutinizing the moment you actually do hear the sound of a “trumpet that can never call retreat,” and you do understand why Hegel said that history was the story of freedom becoming conscious of itself.

Inching along less dramatically and agonizingly through 1865 and 1870 come the workaday, necessary amendments finally doing away with involuntary servitude and racism in the franchise. Direct election of senators arrives in 1913. One step forward, one step back: 1919 sees Prohibition but then only the next year the Nineteenth Amendment extends suffrage to women. In 1951 the Twenty-second Amendment, limiting presidential terms to two, reflects the vindictiveness of a Republican Congress after the three drubbings taken by the GOP at the hands of FDR. Things go quiet for a bit until in 1964 the poll tax is abolished as a test of eligibility to vote, and in the dry words of this constitutional guarantee one can detect all the distilled spirit of *Shuttlesworth v. City of Birmingham* (which I then re-read, marveling again at the nerve of the fifty-two poor parishioners led by the Reverend Shuttlesworth on that Good Friday, little knowing that their church would soon be dynamited), and of other landmark cases like my personal favorite, *Loving v. Virginia*, which in 1967 struck down the law forbidding “mixed” marriages. The Twenty-sixth Amendment, setting the voting age at eighteen in 1971, is the way in which I suppose my own “generation” has engraved itself on this great tablet of freedom under the law.

The next day was a Day of the Beast (the 6th of June 2006 or 6/6/06) and this seemed auspicious enough as I drove out to Fairfax County and stopped just off the highway named for Robert E. Lee. In the waiting room, under portraits of George W. Bush and Homeland Security Director Michael Chertoff, there sat the sort of rainbow constituency that I had become used to joining on the various stages of my application.

A woman from Barbados recognized me from the TV and asked shyly if I knew how soon she could hope to get a passport since she needed to travel. We chatted about the fact that both our current countries had the same Queen. Husbands and wives were testing each other on sample questionnaires. There were some basic toys on the floor for the many children who had to be brought along. For some reason cellphone use was forbidden. I picked up a leaflet which explained naturalization procedures, including the posthumous ones for military personnel who had died before getting their citizenship papers. (This had been true for many Hispanic soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, though usually the grant of citizenship had been made automatic and retrospective for such men and women and for their families.) Finally Ms. Lopez was ready for me.

The questions didn't take very long: I can boastfully say that I got top marks on the history and Constitution test. I decided not to show off: when asked who said "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death!" I replied "Patrick Henry" even though I strongly suspect, and have written, that the line comes from Addison's play *Cato*, which was vastly popular with American audiences at the time of the Revolution. There were then a few loose ends: I had listed all the political organizations of which I had been a member, including quite recently the "Committee for the Liberation of Iraq." Asked about this I said I technically was no longer a member, since the Committee had been wound up. "I suppose," said Ms. Lopez matter-of-factly, "it's not needed now that Iraq has been liberated." I wished I could share her certainty there.

She left the room and came back. "Congratulations!" she said. I stood up to shake her hand. "You have passed the examination. But unfortunately I cannot welcome you as a citizen today. You will be notified in due course by mail." No explanation was forthcoming for this disappointment. It was a moment of bathos and anticlimax; a poor sequel to my smoke-ringed, vinous reverie on American grandeur the previous night. Could I stand yet another pointless ninety-day delay, perhaps to be extended again even as it expired? Yes, in point of fact I could, if it came to it, but what about the lady from Barbados who had started the day so full of American expectation?

Not very many nights later I ran into Michael Chertoff, the head of the Homeland Security Department, at a reception at the embassy of Kuwait. (It's only a detail, but in 1990 all the embassies of Kuwait were demanded by Saddam Hussein as his personal property, as part of his annexation of the country, so I always feel a slight frisson when on Kuwaiti soil.) As we were introduced, he said that he'd heard somewhere that I was becoming an American. Now, at the time, I was also a named plaintiff in a major lawsuit against the National Security Agency and the Department of Justice, petitioning the courts to put a halt to the warrantless wiretapping of American residents and citizens. So I thought of unsettling him and asking how on earth he knew my movements and plans so well. But it seemed more opportune and more serious to say a word about how tough a time good people were having, backed up in apparently endless lines, as they tried to negotiate the "golden door" that is mentioned on the Statue of Liberty. In fact, probably making him regret that he had ever asked, I gave the examples of

several friends who had been abysmally hampered and insulted, and who wanted only to be allies of the USA.

It wasn't an absolute or mathematical consequence, but the next time I ran into him he again asked me how it was going and I said, look, the waiting in my case is the closest I have attained to a truly Zen experience of boredom and absurdity. Did I need anything? Well, sure, since he asked, I would like a personal citizenship ceremony at the Jefferson Memorial on the Tidal Basin, replete with cherry blossoms, on 13 April next, which would be my fifty-eighth birthday and would have been Thomas Jefferson's two hundred and sixty-fourth.*

The first trip I had taken, after arriving in the United States in 1981, had been down to Charlottesville to see Jefferson's house at Monticello: perhaps the most interesting private home in America. Here the great polymath had done the two things I most wished to do for myself if I ever became a house owner. He had designed and indexed a personal library and created a proper store of wine (some of it made with his own grapes). In a public dialogue between Susan Sontag and Umberto Eco I had once heard the latter define the polymath as someone who was "interested in everything, and in nothing else." Jefferson might have excelled as a lawyer, an architect, an engineer, a draughtsman, a botanist, an agronomist, a literary critic: almost anything in fact except a public speaker. At a time when smallpox vaccination was being denounced by leading men of god like Dr. Timothy Dwight of Yale as an interference with god's design, Jefferson helped devise a method of keeping Jenner's life-saving physic cool for conveyance over long distances, taught Lewis and Clark to administer it during their long trek across the interior, and saw to it that all his slaves were inoculated against the scourge. Mention of the system that underwrote his prosperity (and that I suppose had at a great remove also helped underwrite the scholarship that his descendant Mr. Coolidge had provided for me) was still slightly hushed when I first toured Monticello and asked to see the "servants' quarters."

But by 2007, when I had published my Jefferson biography, we had essentially ventilated the whole matter. Thanks to my friend Annette Gordon-Reed, the whole story of Jefferson's other family had become an open page for any reader, and one could even begin to dare see Sally Hemings as one of the unacknowledged "founding mothers" of that multiethnic American republic that Jefferson himself could never have foreseen. So the author of the Declaration of Independence and the Virginia Statute on Religious Freedom was a man who owned other people. (Part of my education in the subtleties of racism had been learning to cope with American historians who could easily accept that Jefferson had owned Sally Hemings and had indeed acquired her as a wedding present from a man who was his father-in-law and her actual father — this making the girl his wife's half-sister — but who could not bring themselves to believe that in addition to inheriting her and owning her, our third president had also gone so far as to have fucked her.) In taking on American citizenship, I was not invoking some sentimental Emma Lazarus idea of a country of refuge from the houses of bondage. I was consciously accepting that many people who later asserted themselves

as Americans had originally, as James Baldwin phrased it, been brought here not from but to a house of bondage. Thus, when Michael Chertoff rather generously called and said: all right, we'll see you at the Jefferson Memorial after lunch on 13 April, I gave some thought to the guests I would have at my ceremony.

I first invited Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the heroine of feminine resistance to the living death known as sharia. I had met her at a conference in Sweden when she was still a relatively unknown Dutch dissident member of Parliament, trying to warn Western liberals against the sick relativism which had permitted them to regard "honor" killings and genital mutilation as expressions of cultural diversity. Since September 2001 she had taken ever more forward and courageous positions, and seen her friend and colleague Theo van Gogh (distant descendant of the painter) ritually murdered in the streets of Amsterdam as an obscene vengeance for the film about Muslim female "submission" that they had jointly made. The knife that burst the ventricles of Theo's heart also pinned to his body a barbaric message that told Ayaan that she was next. Ever since then her life had been one of those "maximum security" nightmares where an over-nervous state had overcompensated for its previous negligence in confronting theocratic terrorism. And then the Dutch government, tiring of its strenuous commitment, had abandoned Ayaan to the tender mercies of the free market, while her pious Amsterdam neighbors demanded that she be evicted from her home lest she spoil their chances of a quiet life. What was left for her, after this double European betrayal, but to turn to the United States? When we met again, her magically beautiful face was alive with humor. Before escaping from Somalia she had survived brutal circumcision as a child, numberless beatings from clan members, the dull horror of an arranged and forcible marriage, the misery of tribe-based civil war and religion-based domestic tyranny, and the arduous transition from refugee to exile status. Yet she was — in all the right senses — glad to be alive. "You'll be pleased to hear, Christopher, that I am no longer a Muslim liberal but an atheist." I told her that I was indeed happy to learn of this. "Yes, I find that it obviates the necessity for any cognitive dissonance." Pure music. Edward Gibbon once wrote that if all of European civilization were to be destroyed, it could be reconstituted from what had been transferred across the Atlantic: this now holds true for other societies as well.

My old Oxford comrade Andrew Cockburn and his wife, Leslie, had been allies and friends of mine in every sort of crisis and companions at every sort of celebration from the births of our children to the nuptials of theirs. Both as writers and as makers of documentaries they had expanded the frontiers of radical investigative journalism: the sort of work that the First Amendment and the Freedom of Information culture makes possible. For another Irishman I chose Captain Seamus Quinn of the U.S. Marine Corps. "Tell it to the Marines" had been an insult in my father's house and it's amazing how durable the taunts of interservice rivalry can be, but the U.S. Marines I have met have been exceptional in their mental breadth and their ability to be self-critical. Stationed in Anbar province during the hottest and nastiest period of the war against "Al Quaeda in Mesopotamia," Seamus had given me regular email updates on the death-grapple

with these foulest of the foul, and thanks to him I'd had some advance intelligence of what later became known as "the surge": the combination of deadly force and political agility that had not only defeated Al Qaeda on the battlefield but discredited it in a region of Iraq that it had once dared to think that it might own.

Ever since I had been in Washington, Professor Norman Birnbaum had been a sort of mentor to me. Indeed, he had been a teacher to my earlier mentor Steven Lukes. He was a real veteran, present at the creation of the Old New Left, as he put it, and influential on the New New Left as well. If ever I needed an old copy of *Partisan Review*, he would either have it in his possession or in his memory, which was and is an institutional one. Internationalism is in Norman's blood, as the Left used to like to say of itself, and if I was ever visiting any European country in crisis I would call him up to find the name of that local Jewish savant who had in his time done battle against both sides of the Hitler-Stalin pact. ("You're going to Zagreb . . . Well you've certainly picked a nice time [this was in 1992, when the men in black shirts were openly back on the streets] . . . I should call up old Professor Rudi Supek if I were you." The good professor turned out (a) to possess a good cellar and (b) to have been the elected leader of those Yugoslav partisans who had been deported to a German camp. "So you see, Mr. Hitchens, I cannot truly call myself Croat or Serb because it would betray those brave Yugoslavs whom I had the honor of representing in Buchenwald." Yes, yes, I quite understand, but . . .) I was worried for a moment or two that Norman would not approve of my new friend Michael Chertoff, but he was as usual more than equal to the occasion, and told a surprised director of Homeland Security that he was sure he had known his father at City College in New York in the 1930s. It turned out that this was entirely possible. This was another moment at which to say "Only in America." And then we were all bolstered by Susan Schneider, the glamorous and loquacious wife of Mark, whose career as a human-rights champion, from Edward Kennedy's senatorial staff to the chairmanship of the Peace Corps, is barely to be equalled by any living person. (In El Salvador, there is a bridge named for Mark and Susan by a grateful citizenry. In Chile, if you get lost anywhere, just mention their names and people will instantly supply you not just with directions but with goods and services.)

There was a very stiff breeze blowing across the Tidal Basin but it served to give a real smack and crackle to the Stars and Stripes that Chertoff's people had brought along. It didn't take very long to administer the oath, or for me to swear allegiance and to declare that America's enemies, foreign and domestic, were also mine. Nor did I take very long to give my little acceptance speech, merely noting Mr. Jefferson's birthday and mentioning that, on his own tombstone, he had not cared to recall that he had been president, vice president, and secretary of state of the United States. Instead, he had asked to be remembered as the author of the Declaration of Independence, the founder of the University of Virginia, and the drafter of the Virginia Statute on Religious Freedom. For a writer to become an American is to subscribe of his own free will to a set of ideas and principles and to the documents that embody them in written

form, all the while delightedly appreciating that the documents can and often must be revised, so that the words therefore constitute, so to say, a work in progress.

This was all rather well set out in the passport that I immediately went to acquire. When I first came to know young Americans at Oxford, the British passport was a many-splendored thing: a blue-gold hardback emblazoned with heraldry and speaking grandly in the tones of Her Britannic Majesty's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. The American passport was a limp paperback by contrast, and spoke in costive Cold War terms of the number of countries, from Cuba to North Korea, where it could not be lawfully taken. The new-look United States travel document makes a real effort. On the inside front cover is an old engraving of what must be Francis Scott Key observing the siege of Fort McHenry in Baltimore, with the words of The Star-Spangled Banner inscribed in manuscript form. On the opposite page are the closing words of the Gettysburg Address, delivering the ringing triune phrasing "of," "by," and "for" the people. On succeeding pages appear the Preambles to the Constitution and the Declaration, and brave words from Dr. Martin Luther King, the Kennedy inaugural, and a Mohawk chieftain. The illustrations maintain the note of uplift, with the Statue of Liberty, the Atlantic-Pacific railroad, and the spacecraft Voyager as it pushes beyond the edge of our solar system. The whole is a nice combination of the civically religious — only Jefferson and King mentioning a "creator" — with the great American accomplishments in mechanical and scientific innovation. It is possible to imagine handing it over, when one is being held up by some festering thug at some scrofulous checkpoint, and loftily asking to see his proof of identity in return. But more than that, it is possible to imagine the unfortunates, whose lives are temporarily under the command and control of this festering thug, aspiring one day to carry this same passport themselves. Human history affords no precedent or parallel for this attainment. On the day that I swore my great oath, dozens of Afghans and Iranians and Iraqis did the same. A few days later, I noticed that I had sloppily gummed a postage stamp onto an envelope with the flag appearing upside down. I am the most frugal of men, but I reopened the letter, tore up and threw away the envelope, invested in a whole new stamp and sent Old Glory on its way with dignity unimpaired. A small gesture, but my own.*

* In fact Jefferson was born under the old calendar, on 2 April 1743, and had to change his birthday to the thirteenth when the historic Gregorian calendar date-shift was ordained. Both dates appear on his memorial obelisk at Charlottesville. I have often wondered what the racketeers of astrology and the zodiac did when everybody had to change birthdays and many people had to change their "sign." No doubt they managed to adjust suavely enough.

* There is flag-waving and flag-waving. When the giant statue of Saddam Hussein was pulled down from its plinth in Baghdad in April 2003, I was annoyed to see an American soldier step forward and drape a Stars and Stripes flag over the fallen visage of the dictator. This clearly disobeyed a standing order prohibiting display of the American colors. But then I learned that the overenthusiastic soldier was Marine

Corporal Edward Chin, an ethnic Chinese volunteer both of whose parents had escaped the hell of Burma and begun a new life in Brooklyn. The offense might have been worse.

Salman

A poet's work is to name the unnameable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep.

— Baal the Poet in *The Satanic Verses*

Where books are burned, people will next be burned.

— Heinrich Heine, on the burning of the Koran

by the Inquisition, in his *Almansor* [1821]

NOTTING HILL has always been my particular London. When I was eighteen, I signed up for an American-style “summer project” in the area, collecting data and raising consciousness in the “inner city.” The old ’hood had got a name for itself in the late 1950s as the site of Britain’s first race-riot,* and as I unrolled my sleeping bag amid the guitars and duffels on the floor of the run-down school where the volunteers slept, I could still see some of the traces. (The lightning-flash symbol of Sir Oswald Mosley’s fascist party, which had attempted to profit from the localized hatred, was often to be seen whitewashed and chalked on crumbling local walls. One of my contributions to the project was to organize teams to go up the Portobello Road rubbing these out or painting them over: a contribution to improving the atmosphere that was my first intuition of the “broken windows” theory of community policing.)

Padding around Notting Hill was an education in cheek-by-jowlery. Spicy Indian restaurants along Westbourne Grove, the West Indians and their ganja funk around the Mangrove in All Saints: Irish pubs where the regulars were not entirely thrilled by the arrival of the latest immigrants. Multiculturalism was a new thing in those days and even then could take aberrant forms. A ludicrous but menacing local figure had named himself “Michael X” in the hope of attracting some cross-Atlantic street cred: as a Trinidadian pimp and hustler called Michael de Freitas he had won notoriety as an especially nasty enforcer of evictions for a rack-rent landlord named, in one of those Dickensian coincidences, Mr. Rachman. The soi-disant X had a group — actually a gang — called RAAS. The letters were supposed to stand for Racial Adjustment Action Society and some white liberal clergymen and similar dupes were induced to take it seriously, but in Caribbean patois, as one soon discovered, a “raas” was a used tampon. How the gang must have cackled when they saw this filthy word solemnly printed in the newspapers. John Lennon fell for the con, as did some other gullible showbiz types. Years later, reporting on the murders that eventually saw the grisly Mr. X go through the trapdoor of a Trinidadian execution shed, I found myself on many a celebrity doorstep, including that of Corin Redgrave, of those who had been in his star-periphery. At Oxford in my first term, a rather silly Catholic bleeding-heart don

named Michael Dummett managed to use his privileges to get X to speak in the All Souls dining room. The New Statesman, by some frightful miscalculation, found that a block of its shares had been acquired by the head of RAAS, who could in theory have turned up to vote at board-meetings. The air of Notting Hill was thick with bullshit on the racial question, and some other questions too, and it was sometimes a relief to walk over to Holland Park and sit on the grass for some of the free open-air summer concerts. As always in London, it was astonishing to see how swiftly one could make the transition from a slum quarter to a green one. There were still private gardens in the middle of some of the crumbling old stucco squares, accessible only to lucky residents with keys. We briefly campaigned to have some of these gardens opened to local children, who got knocked down by traffic while playing in the street. I can't imagine what we thought we were doing: this much-restored housing stock went on to furnish a backdrop for Hugh Grant's oleaginous talents and later for the hardly less slithery emergence of David Cameron as the hip Tory.

It was in an early stage of this metamorphosis of the 'hood that I made a visit to London in the mid-1980s, and went back as I always did to Notting Hill. It was carnival time: the time of that great non-bullshit event where London's West Indians compete to flaunt the finest floats and to deploy the steel bands with the most stamina. Some of the indigenous bourgeoisie take that weekend off and flee to Dorset or Wiltshire, leaving their keys and their viewing balconies to trusted friends, while others "stay on" and maintain every appearance of ultra-coolness and empathy. It was in John Ryle's more-than-cool mews house that I was introduced to Salman Rushdie, who was scanning the external world with an ironic gaze shaded by the brim of a flat cap.

It would be trite to say that I already knew him by reputation. Who didn't? If *Midnight's Children* had not won the Booker Prize, and won it fairly early in that prize's career, then the Booker might have been the sort of prize won by its first winner, John Berger. But in proposing himself as the product of a simultaneous parturition and partition, the offspring of a country that had had to undergo amputation and mutilation in order to achieve independence, Salman had managed to represent as well as record all the ambivalences of the postcolonial. To phrase it another way, he had come via Rugby School and King's College Cambridge to remind the British that they had betrayed the very people they had claimed to be schooling for nationhood: tossed away the "jewel in their crown" like some cheap piece of paste.

One great fictional chronicler of this sell-out had been Paul Scott, whose *Raj Quartet* had spoken to my depths because it understood that the treason at midnight in 1947, and the monstrous birth of a spoiled theocracy in Pakistan, was a tragedy for the English too. I knew that Rushdie had written scornfully of the reception of Scott, at least on the screen, viewing this as an old-style wallow in sentiment and nostalgia. I knew also that he hung around with a somewhat "Third World" and even black-power crew in north London. In a celebrated broadcast about the way that Britain treated its internal colony — the immigrants — Salman had quoted warmly from the above-mentioned silly-clever Catholic don Michael Dummett of All Souls (he of the warm

collegial welcome for Michael X) about “the will not to know — a chosen ignorance, not the ignorance of innocence” where British attitudes to the “other” were involved. “Four hundred years of conquest and looting, four centuries of being told that you are superior to the fuzzy-wuzzies and the wogs, leave their stain,” as he had pugnaciously put it. So I was prepared to be slightly Mau-Mau-ed if I said anything that wasn’t all OK and on the up-and-up about the racial correctness question. But this turned out to be a needless and groundless fret. We bumbled a bit about Pakistan and about Benazir Bhutto, whom we had both known in different ways, and I didn’t quite tell him what I thought, which is that his novel *Shame*, anatomizing the heap of madneses and contradictions that went to make up the nightmarish state of Pakistan, was the superior in wit and depth even of *Midnight’s Children*.

We kept up a kind of touch after I went back to Washington. He wrote a book about a voyage to revolutionary Nicaragua, called *The Jaguar Smile*, which was unfairly attacked in America as a credulous work of revolutionary tourism. I defended it in print, saying that it seemed to me he had gone to Nicaragua knowing perfectly well in advance the dangers of excessive idealism. (Salman later confounded me by saying that he thought the Sandinistas had succeeded in deceiving him about a few things, but I think that makes the same point in a different way.) I published my first collection of essays, titled *Prepared for the Worst*, which contained a short critique of his attack on Paul Scott, and asked him for a jacket blurb. After a short pause, back came a very handsome endorsement with the proviso that it didn’t apply to “the inexplicable wrongheadedness on pages 225–227.”

Salman had not been at our table in the days of the Bloomsbury kebab joint, but he soon started to feature in all my conversations with, and letters from, Martin and Ian and Colin MacCabe. We began to meet during the permanent floating crap game of book launches and book fairs, and tended to sign the same petitions. But the first great qualitative change Salman brought was in the level of the after-dinner word games. I have already offered the excuse that the puerility of these was at least a muscle-building dress rehearsal for a higher form. You may think it absurd or pathetic, for example, to see what happens when you subtract the word “heart” from any well-known title or saying and then substitute the word “dick.” Some of the results are in fact mildly funny (“I Left My Dick in San Francisco,” “Bury My Dick at Wounded Knee,” “Dick of Darkness,” “The Dick of the Matter,” and so forth), and others can recur to one at absurd moments (“Dickbreak Hotel,” “The Sacred Dick,” “The Dick and Stomach of a King,” “The Jack of Dicks,” “An Affair of the Dick,” “The Dick Has Its Reasons,” “The Dick Is a Lonely Hunter”) where they even threaten to be apposite. You can — I warn you — spend years working on a coal-face like this before hitting an unlooked-for seam. How were we to know that Woody Allen, when questioned about his decision to run off with his adopted teenage daughter, would so tonelessly say: “The heart wants what it wants”? Much the same can be said of changing the word “love” (as a verb, that is) to “fuck.” Then you can get to “The Fucked One,” “The Man Who Fucked Women,” “Fuck, Fuck Me Do,” “She Fucks You,” “Fucked Not Wisely But Too

Well,” “Fuck Thy Neighbor,” and numberless similar instances of harmless pleasure. As a noun, and perhaps marginally more ambitiously, the word was to be dropped and replaced with “hysterical sex” thus: “The Allegory of Hysterical Sex,” “Hysterical Sex Is a Many-Splendored Thing,” “What Is This Thing Called Hysterical Sex?” “Hysterical Sex in a Cold Climate,” “Hysterical Sex, Actually,” “Free Hysterical Sex,” “Hysterical Sex Story,” “Hysterical Sex Potion Number Nine” (which has only just occurred to me), and “A Fool for Hysterical Sex” as well as “Ain’t No Cure for Hysterical Sex.” In spring a young man’s fancy lightly turns to thoughts of . . .

One might also instance the time when Martin returned from interviewing the pornographer John Staglione. This transcendent Californian director had scrubbed almost all “normal” sex from his “Buttman” productions, in favor of a near-exclusive emphasis on heterosexual sodomy. Martin, inquiring about this aesthetic auteurism, had been informed that, in the new age of filth, “pussies are bullshit.” This was a facer and no mistake. How to draw the nasty sting from something so profane? We proceeded carefully with the substitutions. “Bullshit Galore,” “What’s New Bullshitcat?” “The Owl and the Bullshitcat Went to Sea . . .” “Ding Dong Bell, Bullshit’s Down the Well,” “Bullshit in Boots” (a bit of a stretch). Salman it was who redeemed the occasion by casually tossing in “Octobullshit,” which had the looked-for and healing effect.

At all events there came a time when someone arrived late at a dinner party, complaining of having been stuck at an airport with nothing to read but a Robert Ludlum-style novel. This didn’t seem worth pursuing until the complaint was refined somewhat: “I mean it’s not just that the prose is so bloody awful but that the titles are so sodding pretentious . . . The Bourne Inheritance, The Eiger Sanction; all this portentous piffle.” Again, not a subject to set the table afire, until someone idly said they wondered what a Shakespeare play would be called if it were Ludlum who had the naming of it. At once Salman was engaged and began to smile. “All right, Salman: Hamlet by Ludlum!” At once — and I mean with as much preparation as I have given you — “The Elsinore Vacillation.” Fluke? Not exactly. Challenged to do the same for Macbeth, he produced “The Dunsinane Reforestation” with hardly a flourish and barely a beat. After this it was plain sailing through “The Kerchief Implication,” “The Rialto Sanction,” and one about Caliban and Prospero that I once knew but now can never remember.

There seemed to be no book or poem in English that he hadn’t read, and his first language had been Urdu. This was of course the tongue of the camp followers of the Mughal Empire, who had brought Islam to India and to Salman’s best-beloved native city of Bombay. At Cambridge he had studied the Koran as a literary text on some optional course, now no longer taught. To his reflections on this I paid not enough attention. Nobody in our world was religious; even India was basically secular, surely, and when white racists attacked British Asians they called them all “Pakis” without, if you like, discrimination. (The one thing that the racist can never manage is anything like discrimination: he is indiscriminate by definition.) The mosque was at the margin of English life: there was quite a nice-looking one as you took a taxi round Regent’s Park to watch England play Pakistan at cricket.

In the larger world, I knew well enough, there was a challenge from Islamic extremism. It had, for example, destroyed the promise of the great Iranian revolution that pitted masses of unarmed civilians against an oil-crazed megalomaniac with a pitiless network of secret police and a huge, purchased army which in the end was too mercenary and corrupt to fight for him. At the moment when Iran stood at the threshold of modernity, a black-winged ghoul came flapping back from exile on a French jet and imposed a version of his own dark and heavy uniform on a people too long used to being bullied and ordered around. For the female population of the country, at least, the new bondage was heavier than the old. And for my friends on the Iranian and Kurdish Left it became an argument as to which model of repression and imprisonment and torture was the harshest.

In New York my friend Edward Said had written a book — punningly titled *Covering Islam* — which partly sought to explain these unwelcome developments away. It was Western presumption, he argued, to regard Islam as a problem of backwardness. It led to our first major disagreement, which was still conducted in a friendly key. How, I demanded of him as he sat wreathed in fragrant pipe smoke and dressed in the most impeccable tweed, would a person like himself expect to fare in an Islamic republic? He had a most engaging crinkle around the eyes when he smiled, which he did as he told me that the more pressing question was the misrepresentation of Muslims by the “orientalist” and all-conquering West. The cloud that overshadowed our conversation was, then, no bigger than a man’s hand.

But I wasn’t conscious of any impending cloud on a later evening in late 1987 or early 1988, when I was dining at Edward’s table, overlooking the Hudson on Riverside Drive, and a courier came bustling up from the Andrew Wylie Agency in Midtown. He bore a large box, which contained the manuscript of a forthcoming novel by Salman Rushdie. A note came along with it, which I remember very well. Dear Edward, it said in effect, I’d be obliged to have your view on this, because I think it may upset some of the faithful . . . Edward himself was a Christian from Jerusalem — indeed, by birth an Anglican however secular he had since become. (In a public dialogue with Salman in London he had once described the Palestinian plight as one where his people, expelled and dispossessed by Jewish victors, were in the unique historical position of being “the victims of the victims”: there was something quasi-Christian, I thought, in the apparent humility of that statement.)

I mention this episode because it was later to be insinuated that Salman was himself the author of the fanatical response to his book, and that — in a phrase fashionable at the time — “he knew what he was doing.” Well, no doubt he did know what he was doing (no disgrace there, one might hope) and he certainly understood that he would attract attention if he took what was claimed as holy writ and employed it for literary purposes. In doing this when he did, he ignited one of the greatest-ever confrontations between the ironic and the literal mind: a necessary attrition that is always going on in some form. But he undertook it with care and measure and scruple, and nobody could have foreseen that he would be hit by simultaneous life and death sentences.

When the Washington Post telephoned me at home on Valentine's Day 1989 to ask my opinion about the Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwah, I felt at once that here was something that completely committed me. It was, if I can phrase it like this, a matter of everything I hated versus everything I loved. In the hate column: dictatorship, religion, stupidity, demagoguery, censorship, bullying, and intimidation. In the love column: literature, irony, humor, the individual, and the defense of free expression. Plus, of course, friendship — though I like to think that my reaction would have been the same if I hadn't known Salman at all. To re-state the premise of the argument again: the theocratic head of a foreign despotism offers money in his own name in order to suborn the murder of a civilian citizen of another country, for the offense of writing a work of fiction. No more root-and-branch challenge to the values of the Enlightenment (on the bicentennial of the fall of the Bastille) or to the First Amendment to the Constitution, could be imagined. President George H.W. Bush, when asked to comment, could only say grudgingly that, as far as he could see, no American interests were involved . . .

To the contrary, said Susan Sontag, Americans had a general interest in defending free expression from barbarism, and also in defending free citizens from state-supported threats of murder accompanied by sordid offers of bounty. It was providential that she was that year's president of PEN, because it quickly became evident that by no means everybody saw the question in this light. There were those who thought that Salman in one way or another deserved his punishment, or had at any rate brought it on himself, and there were those who were quite simply scared to death and believed that the Ayatollah's death squads could roam and kill at will. (Rushdie himself disappeared inside a black bubble of "total" security, and as time went on his Japanese translator was to be murdered, his Italian translator stabbed, and his Norwegian publisher shot three times and left for dead.)

Of those who tended to gloat over Salman's fate, a surprising number were on the Right. I say "surprising" because the conservatives had lamented the fall of the Shah and been appalled by the rise of Khomeini, and were generally the most inclined to lay emphasis on the term "terrorism" when confronted by violent challenges from the Third World. But in America the whole phalanx of neoconservatives, from Norman Podhoretz to A.M. Rosenthal and Charles Krauthammer, turned their ire on Salman and not on Khomeini, and appeared to relish the fact that this radical Indian friend of Nicaragua and the Palestinians had become a victim of "terrorism" in his turn. They preferred to forget how their hero Ronald Reagan had used the profit of illegal arms dealing with the Ayatollah to finance the homicidal contras in Nicaragua: but they did not forgive Salman for having written *The Jaguar Smile*. In Britain, writers and figures of a more specifically Tory type, like Hugh Trevor-Roper, Lord Shawcross, Auberon Waugh, and Paul Johnson, openly vented their distaste for the uppity wog in their midst and also accused him of deliberately provoking a fight with a great religion. (Meanwhile, in an unattractive example of what I nicknamed "reverse ecumenicism," the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Vatican, and the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel all issued statements to the effect that the main problem was not the offer of pay for the

murder of a writer, but the offense of blasphemy. The British Chief Rabbi, Immanuel Jakobowitz, aiming for a higher synthesis of fatuity, intoned that “both Rushdie and the Ayatollah have abused freedom of speech.”) This sort of stuff was at least partly to be expected. Rushdie was a bit of a Leftie; he had contrived to disturb the status quo: he could and should expect conservative disapproval.

More worrying to me were those on the Left who took almost exactly the same tone. Germaine Greer, always reliably terrible about such matters, again came to the fore, noisily defending the rights of bookburners. “The Rushdie affair,” wrote the Marxist critic John Berger within a few days of the fatwah, “has already cost several human lives and threatens to cost many, many more.” And “the Rushdie affair,” wrote Professor Michael Dummett of All Souls, “has done untold damage. It has intensified the alienation of Muslims here . . . Racist hostility towards them has been inflamed.” Here we saw the introduction — and by a former promoter of “Michael X,” do not forget — of a willful, crass confusion between religious faith, which is voluntary, and ethnicity, which is not.* All the deaths and injuries — all of them — from the mob scenes in Pakistan to the activities of the Iranian assassination squads, were directly caused by Rushdie’s enemies. None of the deaths or injuries — none of them — were caused by him, or by his friends or defenders. Yet you will notice the displacement tactic used by Berger and Dummett and the multi-culti Left, which blamed the mayhem on an abstract construct — “the Rushdie affair.” I dimly understood at the time that this kind of postmodern “Left,” somehow in league with political Islam, was something new, if not exactly New Left. That this trahison would take a partly “multicultural” form was also something that was slowly ceasing to surprise me. In his Diaries, the Labour Left leader Tony Benn recorded a meeting of like-minded members of Parliament the day after the fatwah, and mentioned the contribution of one of Britain’s first black MPs:

Bernie Grant kept interrupting, saying that the whites wanted to impose their values on the world. The House of Commons should not attack other cultures. He didn’t agree with the Muslims in Iran, but he supported their right to live their own lives. Burning books was not a big issue for blacks, he maintained.

And then there were those who, at a time of moral crisis for free expression, simply looked for a neutral hiding place. I remember it as at once the most depressing and the most inspiring month. The most depressing, because the centers of several British cities were choked by hysterical crowds, all demanding not just less freedom for the collective (they wanted more censorship and more restriction and the extension of an archaic blasphemy law, and more police power over publication) but also screaming for a deeply reactionary attack on the rights of the individual — the destruction of an author’s work and even the taking of an author’s life. That this ultrareactionary mobocracy was composed mainly of people with brown skins ought to have made no difference. In Pakistan, long familiar with the hysteria of the Jamaat Islami and other religio-dictatorial gangs, it would have made no difference at all. But somehow, when staged in the streets and squares of Britain, it did make a difference. A pronounced

awkwardness was introduced into the atmosphere: a hinting undercurrent of menace and implied moral and racial blackmail that has never since been dispelled. It took me a long time to separate and classify the three now-distinctive elements of the new and grievance-privileged Islamist mentality, which were self-righteousness, self-pity, and self-hatred.

So that was what some Notting Hill-ers would once have called a downer. Even more of one was the decision by the two main American bookstore chains to stop displaying or selling *The Satanic Verses*. This capitulation, justified in the name of “security” like almost every cowardly idiocy before and since, was reported on the day that I learned that certain usually trusty literary figures — Arthur Miller among them — had declined Susan Sontag’s invitation to come and read publicly from Salman’s novel in a downtown New York auditorium. Some of these veteran petition signers had openly said they were physically afraid, and one or two had added that their Jewishness ought to excuse them from endorsement or attendance, since their Semitic signatures could only make matters worse! That this kind of thing should be said, and by the author of *The Crucible*, was, to an infinite extent and degree, lowering to the spirit. It seemed that the assassins were winning without a fight, and that those who should be defending the citadel were weeping and scattering before they had even heard a shot or felt a wound.*

Susan Sontag was absolutely superb. She stood up proudly where everyone could see her and denounced the hirelings of the Ayatollah. She nagged everybody on her mailing list and shamed them, if they needed to be shamed, into either signing or showing up. “A bit of civic fortitude,” as she put it in that gravelly voice that she could summon so well, “is what is required here.” Cowardice is horribly infectious, but in that abysmal week she showed that courage can be infectious, too. I loved her. This may sound sentimental, but when she got Rushdie on the phone — not an easy thing to do once he had vanished into the netherworld of ultraprotection — she chuckled: “Salman! It’s like being in love! I think of you night and day: all the time!” Against the riot of hatred and cruelty and rage that had been conjured into existence by a verminous religious fanatic, this very manner of expression seemed an antidote: a humanist love plainly expressed against those whose love was only for death.

Two ominous modern phenomena began to make their appearance in that time of the toad. The first was the employment of pre-emptive censorship-by-force, as mentioned above, whereby the mere threat of violence was enough to make editors and publishers think twice, or rather think not at all. The second, if anything even more worrying, was the mobilization of foreign embassies to intervene in our internal affairs. All of a sudden, accredited diplomats of supposedly sovereign nations like Pakistan and Qatar were involving themselves in matters that were none of their concern, such as the publication or distribution or even paperback printing of works of fiction. And this unheard-of arrogation was none too subtly “meshed” and synchronized with the cruder potency of the threat, as if to say in a silky tone that you might prefer to deal with us, the envoys of a foreign power, rather than with the regrettably violent elements over whom we

have, needless to say, no control . . . In recent years this awful picture has become so familiar as to be dreary, most recently in the case of the caricatures of Islam's prophet that were briefly published in Denmark and reprinted nowhere else, while unchecked violence against a small Scandinavian democracy was seen as something for which it was the Danes who should be apologizing.

I felt then as I feel now: that this was a test. I saw Salman every time I went to London, getting gradually used to the moment at the end of the meeting when he would cram on some shades and a bush-hat or some other improvised disguise and slide into a waiting car that would take him to a secret destination. (This, in the middle of England, after the Cold War. The sting of that humiliation is with me still, and I fight against its ever being thought of as "normal.") I sat with him through some of the other humiliations whereby he was offered a shameful deal by the British authorities and the religious bullies whom they (still) like to promote by recognizing them as "negotiators." If Salman might perhaps undertake some sort of grovel, it was insinuated, if he might care to disown his own work and make a profession of faith, things might possibly arrange themselves, or be arranged. It was additionally put to him, by the pliant and sinuous men of Her Majesty's Foreign Office, that if he declined this magnanimous offer he might be protracting the misery of the Western hostages who were then being held, by Iranianpaid kidnappers, in filthy secret dungeons in Lebanon. So that Salman, who had done nothing except read and write, was to be declared the hostage of the hostages. The life of the torturer and the blackmailer is always made that little bit easier — not to say more enjoyable — by the ability to offer his victim what looks like a "choice." One of the worst mornings of my life came in the cold winter of 1990 when I read that Salman Rushdie had written a short article titled "Why I Have Embraced Islam."

There were two or conceivably three things that could be said about this. The first was said by my friend Ben Sonnenberg, who opined that it was no worse than Galileo's pro forma renunciation, designed only to save his own skin from the instruments of rending and tearing and burning which he had been shown by the Inquisition. The second was said by Carol, who pointed out that the relationship between the sun and the earth was unchanged by anything said or unsaid by Galileo, whereas Salman had made a direct, brave connection between his own work and life and the wider battle for free expression. ("This issue is more important," he had said on television on Day One, "than my book or even my life.") Thus, in a way, he had no right to withdraw his original statement. The third thing was said by Salman himself at our next meeting: that his awful article had been "the price of the ticket." I didn't exactly feel I had any right to tell him that he owed it to the cause of free expression to risk immolating himself, but then he did at least have the grace, as he was saying this thing, to look somewhat abashed. Anyway, as it turned out, there was no "ticket." The preachers at the Regent's Park Mosque, so fawning and pleasant when it came to the posturing Islamophile Prince Charles and so vicious when it came to Salman, may have pronounced the word "faith" to the point of nausea, but the concept of "good

faith” was foreign to them, and not even the craven Foreign Office could hold them to a crummy bargain they had never intended to honor.

It’s arduous in the extreme to have a disagreement, on principle, with someone who embodies what is to you the most important of all principles, but fortunately this tension didn’t endure. Salman began making ventures in travel, testing the walls of the prison that he had to cart, almost tortoise-like, around with him. Vaclav Havel agreed to receive him in Prague. President Mary Robinson of Ireland had him to Dublin. He continued pushing at the bars and restrictions, refusing to allow himself to be immured or obliterated. (It was at about this time that he took the “Proust Questionnaire” for Vanity Fair. One of the regular questions is: “What do you most dislike about your appearance?” His response: “Its infrequency.”)

Having been repudiated by George H.W. Bush on a previous trip to Washington — “just another author on a book-tour,” as the White House spokesman put it — he wanted to see if the newly elected Clinton administration would follow the Havel-Robinson lead. I have never felt more as if my life and my “job,” or my work, were the same thing. My immediate job was to make sure that the Iranian mullahs could not say that Rushdie had come back to Washington and been turned away yet again. I was ready for a certain amount of temporizing and hairsplitting and throat-clearing, but not for as much of it as I got. Every “official” human-rights committee in the nation’s capital turned me down flat when I asked them to sponsor a visit by Salman or to lend their help in getting him invited to the Oval Office. I was looked at with incredulity and even hostility, as if I had proposed something insanely dangerous as well as latently “offensive.” It was, if anything, even worse than the atmosphere of panic and capitulation in New York three years before.

The Susan Sontag role was now taken up by George Stephanopoulos. Again, it was striking to see how much difference a bit of character and guts and integrity could make. I telephoned him at the White House, presuming on a not very old or strong acquaintance, but he came right on the line and said immediately that he could guess why I might be calling. “Also,” he added, “it’s extremely clear what the obviously right thing is. Let me tell him that and see what I can do.” The Clintonian “him” in this case was his usual triangulating and vacillating self and would not make a definite commitment, but by the time Salman landed and had established himself in our apartment, which had been turned into an armed command post by the security services, it had been agreed that he could meet Tony Lake, Clinton’s chief of staff, and Secretary of State Warren Christopher, and that the meeting would take place at the White House. The excellent Sir Robin Renwick had also offered to give a later reception at the British embassy with Katharine Graham of the Washington Post as co-host. Honor was reasonably satisfied. Even if Clinton would not commit, it wasn’t going to be a hole-and-corner visit as in the Bush years.

It was Thanksgiving. The city was rather still. Salman was disposed to chat, and to chat about anything but the inevitable topic. One evening I told him that I had a slight column to write, for the upcoming “Black and White” issue of Vanity Fair. I

simply had to produce, I said, about three thousands words à la Truman Capote on exclusively black and white themes. Might he care to free-associate? He looked at me and lowered his very heavy lids: these later became so heavy that they needed a slight surgical correction but in those days he could adopt the gaze of what Martin unforgettably called “a falcon looking through a Venetian blind.” This meant his attention was engaged. For the next twenty or thirty minutes he poured out a spate of closely connected allusions, from the photographic-negative techniques of Eadweard Muybridge to a projected jet-black version of the Taj Mahal that Shah Jahan had planned but failed to build on the opposite side of a reflecting pool. My little essay was essentially written for me. More than that, though, was the intuition it gave me. People who knew Mozart said that he was not so much composing music as hearing it and then writing it down. On a previous visit, I had arranged for Salman to be given a private tour of the Folger Shakespeare Library, which has in its vaults an unrivaled collection of the playwright’s First Folios as well as — something we know he must have actually handled — the title deed to his house in Stratford. At lunch afterward, Salman had talked in an unstoppably poetic way about all matters Shakespearean: unstoppable in the sense that nobody present wanted to stop him. And again, it was more than a show of erudition. This was the Salman I wished the world could see, and hear. Paul Valéry said that poetry is not speech raised to the level of music, but music brought down to the level of speech. This was also the Salman who went beyond Valéry’s thesis and made me think that there might exist a deep connection between music and literature.

Although I am capable at a stretch of writing a short story or faking up a mock-sonnet, I soon enough realized when young that I did not have the true “stuff” for fiction and poetry. And I was very fortunate indeed to have, as contemporaries, several practitioners of those arts who made it obvious to me, without unduly rubbing in the point, that I would be wasting my time if I tried. Now, listening to Salman “compose,” as it were, I suddenly wondered if this was related to my near-total inability with music, itself quite possibly linked with my incapacity in chess and mathematics. Thinking quickly and checking one by one, I noticed that all my poet and novelist friends possessed at the very least some musical capacity: they could either play a little or could give a decent description of a musical event. Could it be this that marked them off from the mere essayist? I hit one iceberg-size objection right away. Vladimir Nabokov, perhaps the man of all men who could make one feel embarrassed to be employing the same language (English being only his third), detested music: “Music, I regret to say, affects me merely as an arbitrary succession of more or less irritating sounds . . . The concert piano and all wind instruments bore me in smaller doses and flay me in larger ones.” Ah, but that needn’t mean he wasn’t musical. He wrote a story in 1932 called “Music,” in which the protagonist is trapped at a recital with his former wife. (“Any music that he did not know could be likened to the patter of a conversation in a strange tongue.”) However, the chords and notes come to exert a healing power and he realizes suddenly “that the music, which before had seemed a narrow dungeon, had actually been incredible bliss, a magic glass dome that had embraced and imprisoned him and

her.” Another guest at the party speculates that what they have just heard might be the Kreutzer Sonata, which was the title of Tolstoy’s own personal favorite among his own works. And in the New York Public Library there rests a case of written material — “Nabokov Under Glass” — in which the great lepidopterist attempted a form of notation that could run along the top of his holographs. What is this if not a form of musicality? I feel certain that I was on to something. And at least a negative corollary seemed to be furnished by the Taliban in Afghanistan: they allowed the existence of prose and poetry only to the extent of the enforced recitation of one book, but all music they forbade outright.

The pressure of security around the apartment became almost farcically insupportable as the time came for Salman to be taken by armored vehicle to the White House. (“Is your secret guest your prime minister?” inquired my Filipina housekeeper in a reverent whisper. It turned out that the man she had identified as this key figure was Salman’s intrepid agent Andrew Wylie, who had joined us late one night.) As Salman eventually left for the appointment, there was still no word on whether the president would consent to meet him. But Stephanopoulos was on the phone in a half an hour or so, to say “The Eagle Has Landed” and the presidential hand had been outstretched. Later we celebrated this triumph at a press conference and later — after Clinton had basely and typically insisted that the meeting had been unofficial and accidental and off-the-record, with no photograph — we slightly uncelebrated. But it was still no defeat. At dinner I made a point of inviting Kemal Kurspahi, the editor of the Bosnian resistance’s daily paper *Oslobojenje* (Freedom): Muslim Bosnia was a site of daily slaughter by Christians and we had also been trying to get Clinton to take some kind of intelligibly vertebrate position on that. It may have been after that dinner that Salman began to evolve and improvise a new word game, this time of book titles that had almost but not quite made it to acceptance by publishers: *The Big Gatsby*, *A Farewell to Weapons*, *For Whom the Bell Rings*, *Good Expectations*, *Mr. Zhivago*, *Two Days in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch* . . .

Talking of “vitches” I noticed again not long ago that the patronymic middle name of Nicholas Rubashov in Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon* is “Salmanovitch.” Interesting to think of him being a son of a Salman: I don’t think it completely fanciful to imagine Rushdie as being the lineal descendant of all those who have had to confront the totalitarian idea physically as well as morally.* He would, I am sure, make light of this and pooh-pooh any comparison between himself and a Gulag victim. But it’s still quite something to be told, by the armed, hoarse enforcers of a murder-based regime, that you are yourself “a dead man on leave.” And the claustrophobic world in which he had to live for some years was a prefiguration of the world in which we all, to a greater or lesser extent, live now. I mean to say a world in which a fanatical religion, which makes absolutist claims for itself and promises to supply — even to be — a total solution to all problems, furthermore regards itself as so pure as to be above criticism. I had a small foretaste of how this world feels when, after Salman’s departure from Washington, I received a summons from the head of the Department of Narcotics and

Counterterrorism (“Drugs and Thugs” as it is known at Foggy Bottom) at the State Department.

Having overseen Salman’s visit, this man now told me, he and his people had been in receipt of “believable chatter” from Iranian sources, indicating an intended revenge on myself and my family for helping to host the trip. I took this in and asked what I was supposed to do. “We suggest changing your address.” But would not any Iranian state-directed agent who knew where I lived also be able to find out where I had moved? “Very well, might you at least consider changing your phone number?” Suddenly I “got it.” The State Department, like the British Foreign Office, had done its “due diligence.” It had called me in, warned me, and could now file the thing away. Already well-covered behinds had been given further protective clothing. But in truth I didn’t think my own rear end was any more exposed than anyone else’s.* And the time was soon to come when the mentality of the fatwah, allied to the ideology of jihad, would arrive in Washington by unscheduled civilian air transport and almost demolish a building far better armored than the Department of State.

I don’t think it’s possible to overstate the importance of the Rushdie case. Along with the reference to Koestler that I have already ventured, I did at one time propose another comparison that you may choose to think is almost as portentous. The Ayatollah’s fatwah had included in its condemnation all those “responsible for the publication” of *The Satanic Verses*. The night before I was due to speak at Susan Sontag’s solidarity meeting in New York, in the first week of the drama, I was striving to think of something that might go beyond the usual petition-signing and letter-writing routine, something that would mark this assault on our liberties and our principles as something out of the common, to be met with no ordinary response. I thought: What if we all declare ourselves “co-responsible for its publication”? This was the principle of solidarity introduced by the followers of Spartacus and taken to a still higher level by those Danes in 1941 who (not, alas, including their king: that story is a beautiful myth) voluntarily donned the yellow star as a gesture to those who were compelled to wear it. On the following morning I made the proposal in my speech and was agreeably surprised by how well it went over: the petition was drawn up there and then in that form, and signed by a pretty solid collection of authors from Norman Mailer* to Diana Trilling to Don DeLillo. It was then put out for general circulation and garnered widespread endorsement, though I moaned with disgust when it was eventually printed in the *Times Literary Supplement*, because meanwhile some quavering, cretinous hand had inserted the weasel words “while we regret any offense caused” into the preamble. I know I am not the only one who did not mind in the least if religious delusions were ridiculed, but if I had been the only one, I still wouldn’t have given a damn.

And what of Salman himself? He made, I will always feel, the ideal protagonist for this drama. If literature and the ironic mind are to be defended to the death, then it is as well to have a superbly literate and ironic individual as the case in point. I cannot remember any moment when he said or did anything crass, or when he raised his voice unduly or responded in kind to those who were taunting or baiting him. He was at one

time very concerned that he would dry up as a writer because of being moved from one safe house to another, but in practice produced several first-rate fictions and many brilliant essays and reviews,** thus disproving Orwell's fine but fallacious dictum that "the imagination, like certain wild animals, will not breed in captivity." I was going to say that he never lost his sense of humor, but this would be to miss the one great exception, which was the awful and unctuous and convoluted prose of his declaration of adherence to Islam. It really read as if written at gunpoint, which of course it had been. It also read as if it were written by someone else. During his stay with us at Thanksgiving, while he was signing a few books for his newly born "un-goddaughter," he seized the volume of essays in which this literary abortion was preserved like a nasty freak in a bottle, and wrote across the title "Why I Have Embraced Islam" the additional and expressive words: "No! Aargh!" He then carefully crossed out every page of the "offensive" piece, signing each one to confirm his own authorial deletion. It was as near to the defacement of a book — or to an auto-da-fé — as I could imagine him getting.

To proceed with that religious imagery, though, there was perhaps something fine to be salvaged even from this preceding degradation. By trying his best to compose matters with the mullahs, he had sincerely shown that he did not seek a violent collision, and he had gone a long way to ask that the bitter cup — of having to live the rest of his life under threat of death — might be allowed to pass from him. Who can fail to sympathize? But, having been made to understand that there was no path of compromise, Salman has become one of the world's most reliable defenders of the free expression of others. The sad paradox is that while he and his book both survived and flourished, nobody in the Anglo-American publishing business would now commission or print *The Satanic Verses*. Indeed, the whole cultural and media industry has become, where reactionary Islam is concerned, one long profile in prudence. The other paradox is that the very multiculturalism and multiethnicity that brought Salman to the West, and that also made us richer by Hanif Kureishi, Nadeem Aslam, Vikram Seth, Monica Ali, and many others, is now one of the disguises for a uniculturalism, based on moral relativism and moral blackmail (in addition to some more obvious blackmail of the less moral sort) whereby the Enlightenment has been redefined as "white" and "oppressive," mass illegal immigration threatens to spoil everything for everybody, and the figure of the free-floating transnational migrant has been deposed by the contorted face of the psychopathically religious international nihilist, praying for the day when his messianic demands will coincide with possession of an apocalyptic weapon. (These people are not called nihilists for nothing.) Of all of this we were warned, and Salman was the messenger. *Mutato nomine et de te fabula narratur*: Change only the name and this story is about you.

* Very well captured by Colin McInnes in his contemporary novels *City of Spades* and *Absolute Beginners*.

* It can and should be remembered that many religious texts, not least the sacred hadith of Islam, prescribe horrible penalties for those who apostasize from religion,

even if they were only born into it without their own consent. This does somewhat qualify the “voluntary” principle and it, too, had its part in the campaign to murder Salman. Nonetheless, I insist on my distinction between this man-made phenomenon and that of “race.”

* Later on, the working staff of these bookstores passed a resolution saying that they were not selling bananas or condoms, and would honor the professional duty to provide any customer with any book. And they were the ones standing by the plate-glass windows. I wish this example were better remembered, and more emulated, than it is.

* “Salmanovitch,” I have since learned, was Koestler’s rendition into Russian of “Solomonovitch,” the surname of an Israeli-Jewish editor he had known, and a great foe of the Jabotin-sky-Begin ultranationalists. Staying with nomenclature for a bit, “Rushdie” itself was derived as a family name by Salman’s father, who annexed it from Averroes ibn-Rushd, the great medieval scholar of the Jewish-Christian-Muslim synthesis that flourished in Andalusia before the zealots and dogmatists extinguished that brief candle.

* Since I speak and write about this a good deal, I am often asked at public meetings, in what sometimes seems to me a rather prurient way, whether I myself or my family have “ever been threatened” by jihadists. My answer is that yes, I have, and so has everyone else in the audience, if they have paid enough attention to the relevant bin-Ladenist broadcasts to notice the fact.

* I had thought I might never see Norman Mailer again after I had asked him, on a TV show with Germaine Greer, whether he’d ever wondered about his apparent obsession with sodomy and its male occasions (the barracks, the prison, the boxing gym, even in Harlot’s Ghost the interstices of the “intelligence community”) as well as its more notorious female ones. In the “green room” afterward, he reacted extremely badly, seizing a copy of Tough Guys Don’t Dance and inscribing it to me with a minatory sentence that told me to beware of his next interview. When that was eventually published, in a London magazine called *The Face*, it contained his accusation that the London literary scene had been rigged against him by a homosexual coterie dominated by Martin Amis, Ian Hamilton, and myself. Martin and I dallied briefly with the idea of writing in to say that this was very unfair—at least to Ian Hamilton. After the fatwah, though, Mailer became more friendly. Never to be outdone when the electricity of violence was in the air, he initially had to be talked out of a hypermacho scheme to raise money for a retaliatory “hit” against the Ayatollah but renewed contact with me because, I suppose, my own position made me look a bit less like a faggot.

** Including one favorite of mine, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, which is almost written to music.

Mesopotamia from Both Sides

Terror, the most abject terror, is in the atmosphere about us — a consuming passion, like that of jealousy — a haunting, exhausting specter, which sits like a blight upon life. Such a settled state of terror is one of the most awful of human phenomena. The air holds ghosts, all joy is dead; the sun is black, the mouth parched, the mind rent and in tatters.

— H.F.B. Lynch: *Armenia: Travels and Studies* [1901]

IN JULY OF 2007 my old magazine the *New Statesman* made an attempt to embarrass me by reprinting an article I had written from Iraq in early 1976. In those days, ran the snide prologue to the reproduction, “Young Hitchens saw Saddam as an up-and-coming secular socialist who would transform Iraq into a progressive model for the rest of the Middle East.” The implied accusation — of a U-turn or even of a turned coat — bothered me not at all. I had long since learned to ask John Maynard Keynes’s question: “When the facts change then my opinion changes: and you, sir?” But I was nonetheless conscious of two conflicting desires. The first was to point out that my original essay hadn’t got it all that wrong. The second was to give an account of how I had, in fact, almost completely reversed my opinion — and of how long such a process can take, and how painful it can be.

Iraq in March of 1976 was eight years into the rule of the Ba’ath Party. The nominal president Ahmad Hassan Abu Bakr, whose ugly face was on all the posters and banners, was understood to be terminally ailing from diabetes. Now and then, and always phrased in careful and oblique tones, one heard talk of his vice president Saddam Hussein, seemingly the head of the party’s security apparatus. “Make a note of the name,” I wrote in my dispatch, adding that “as the situation grows more complicated Saddam Hussein will rise more clearly to the top.” I am not so embarrassed to have written that — unless it be embarrassment for my rather leaden prose. But leaden prose always tends to be a symptom of other problems and if I am honest I think I can reconstruct the cause of my own *langue de bois*.

It was my second visit to Iraq and I knew approximately four things about the country. The first was that it had been a British colonial invention, carved out between the other arbitrary frontiers of the post-Ottoman Middle East, between Turkey, Iran, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. This meant that, as a British socialist, I had an instinctive sympathy with its nationalists. The second thing I knew was that it had a large Kurdish minority, and that the rights of this minority had long been a major cause of the Left. The third thing I knew was that the Ba’ath Party, which called itself socialist, was at least ostensibly secular and not religious. The fourth thing I

knew was that the casinos and brothels and nightclubs of London, just then awash in Gulf Arab clientele after the free-for-all of the post-1973 oil embargo, did not tend to feature droves of greedy Iraqis throwing their country's wealth away on drink and harlots. On the visible evidence, partly confirmed to me by guarded British diplomats at the Alwiyah Club near the River Tigris, Iraq was using its immense national income to create a serious infrastructure — of building and development, but also of health and welfare.*

My friend Gavin Young, the great travel writer and gay ex-Guardsman, had told me of the Marsh Arabs of the southern wetlands, pursuing an antique manner of life that still had strong biblical trace elements to it, but when I mentioned my wish for a visit down there, the relevant Iraqi officials steadfastly stonewalled me and tried to put me off. "Why do you want to see backwardness? We are a modern country now." This dimly jogged my memory of visitors to the USSR being taken to see tractor factories while collectivization was ravaging the countryside, but in truth I slightly prefer the city to the countryside and meanwhile I had found myself an extraordinary companion of the urban sort.

My first meeting with Mazen al-Zahawi was, I would say, unpropitious. In return for a visa, the Ba'athists insisted on providing me with a "guide." Many regimes do this as a means of keeping visiting scribes under control: you may sometimes escape a "minder" but there's an art and a science to it and it can take time. As I stood in line at Baghdad Airport for my passport to be stamped, I could see a group of people waiting on the other side of the barrier and instantly made up my mind which one I hoped would not be for me. He was sallow, morose-looking, and wearing dark glasses indoors: a thoroughly bad sign. A secret-police or Mukhabarat type, bored and resentful and hard to shake. As I passed through the barrier he stepped softly forward and gave me a soggy, insipid handshake.

I can't remember how we passed the time in the car — there was a chauffeur, in front of whom he was icily silent — but we got to the hotel and he said he'd let me check in and then meet me in the bar. I took my time. When I eventually pulled myself onto the neighboring stool, it was in order to feign exhaustion and to see if perhaps I might take an uninvigilated walk in the city while he thought I was napping. But he took off his shades, leaned toward me, placed his hand firmly on my knee and said: "I believe we are going to be such friends. My own little circle tells me that I am an exact blend of Adolf Hitler and Oscar Wilde." If I say that I suddenly noticed how faultless his English was, I say the least of it. "Are you a member of the drinking classes?" he went on, gesturing effectively to the attendant. "I thought so. Later on we shall repair to my home. I shall play you my personal tape of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. I am of course Gwendolyn. The part of Lady Bracknell is taken by Gavin Young." I think I can claim this as one of the more original introductions of an outsider to Ba'ath Party internal affairs.

Mazen did not at all disappoint. He took me to his family home near the banks of the Tigris, which proved to be the former house of Hitler's envoy to Iraq at the time of the

pro-Nazi coup in favor of Rashid Ali in 1941, a coup that, as I was to learn, had been supported by the political ancestors of the Ba'ath. There was a rather squawking home-made recording of Wilde's three-act masterpiece, in which Gavin's booming baritone and Mazen's lilting response could be discerned. It all rather conformed to Susan Sontag's speculations about "camp" and "fascinating fascism." I wondered uneasily what Gavin had told Mazen about me: Young was one of those old queens who believes that deep down all men are queer as clockwork oranges. But Mazen's own double life proved to be much more subtle and convoluted than that.

For one thing, he was by ancestry half-Kurdish. This was nothing special on its own; intermarriage between Arabs and Kurds in Iraq, as between Sunni and Shi'a, used to be a commonplace. But Iraq had just emerged from a bitter border war with the Shah of Iran, in which Henry Kissinger had used the Kurdish militias in the north as a proxy against Baghdad and then famously abandoned them, to be massacred on the hillsides, in order to seal a deal with the Shah. This had opened Iraqi Kurds to the charge of disloyalty, bad enough at any time, and also of being tools of Iran and its ally Israel, which was even worse. But it wasn't enough for Mazen to be half-Kurdish and (by night) all gay. During the rest of the working day he was on call to be one of the interpreters for Saddam Hussein. I had frequently met homosexuals who liked to live dangerously or on thin ice but this was the most daring feat of sociopolitical cross-dressing I had encountered to date.

Together we went to visit factories and dams and ministries — and mosques and museums and ziggurats — by day, and Baghdad's demimonde at night. My friend Marina Warner, back in London, was thinking of writing an opera about the Gilgamesh legend, and Mazen arranged for me to meet a keeper of antiquities at Gertrude Bell's National Museum to see if he might have anything useful to impart. ("Don't be too tarty," he warned me, I thought and hoped superfluously.) He repeated the same injunction when he asked me casually if I would care to meet Iraq's nominee for the leadership of the Palestinian struggle.

I was increasingly sympathetic to the Palestinians by then, and was hoping that if any Arab state would outgrow the humiliation of the 1973 defeat by Israel, it would be a secular one and not a Saudi-type or otherwise theocratic manifestation, so I said "yes" without any particular reflection. Accordingly, I was taken to a villa to meet Sabri al-Banna, known as "Abu Nidal" ("father of struggle"), who was at the time emerging as one of Yasser Arafat's main enemies. The meeting began inauspiciously when Abu Nidal asked me if I would like to be trained in one of his camps. No thanks, I explained. From this awkward beginning there was a further decline. I was then asked if I knew Said Hammami, the envoy of the PLO in London. I did in fact know him. He was a brave and decent man, who in a series of articles in the London Times had floated the first-ever trial balloon for a two-state solution in Israel/Palestine. "Well tell him he is a traitor," barked my host. "And tell him we have only one way with those who betray us." The rest of the interview passed as so many Middle Eastern interviews do: too many small cups of coffee served with too much fuss; too many unemployed

heavies standing about with nothing to do and nobody to do it with; too much ugly furniture, too many too-bright electric lights; and much too much faux bonhomie. The only political fact I could winnow, from Abu Nidal's vainglorious claims to control X number of "fighters" in Y number of countries, was that he admired the People's Republic of China for not recognizing the State of Israel. I forget how I got out of his office.

Somewhat more intellectually testing was my encounter with the Iraqi Communist Party, then a real power in the state and in the society (and the only faction in Iraq which for secular and internationalist reasons did recognize the State of Israel). I was taken to its downtown offices, there to meet Dr. Rajim Ahina. It was amazing to see how closely he stuck to the party line on every detail. When I asked why the Communists had agreed to sit on the governing council with the Ba'athists who used to shoot them and torture them, he replied that Iraq under the Ba'ath had become the only Arab state to give diplomatic recognition to East Germany: a response almost as boring and dank as Abu Nidal on Beijing. But at this point Mazen did me a favor and left the room, abdicating for a while the role of "minder." Dr. Ahina suddenly became less wooden and more animated. Many of the Party's leaders and activists were being secretly arrested, he told me. Here was a list of their names, in English. Could I take it back with me to London? I slid the folded piece of paper into my inside pocket. A moment like that is obviously very much more eloquent and informative than any amount of choreographed question-and-answer.

Later that night Mazen took me to dinner on a houseboat on the Tigris to meet a man named Yahya Thanayan who owned his own printing press. This old boy, as I thought of him, had been in prison under every regime in Baghdad since the British. The worst of all, he told me, had been his imprisonment under the current one. He had received the personal attentions of the dreaded Nadim Kzar, head of the secret police (who had recently been executed as part of the process by which Saddam Hussein was annexing all such powers to himself). However, Thanayan went on, he nonetheless believed that the Ba'athist government was the best that the unhappy country had yet had to endure. He was a cultivated man and did not seem to be suffering from any gruesome repressed masochism. And Mazen, too, half-Kurdish as he was and absolutely not cut out for life in any sort of Sparta, seemed genuine in acknowledging the regime's achievements. Oil had been nationalized and was not, as in neighboring Saudi Arabia or Iran, the property of a horde of venal monarchs and their princelings. Arab unity and secularism were being preached in the face of a tide of reaction sweeping the region.

So the article which I eventually wrote, while it certainly emphasized political repression, attempted to be fair on these points. Iraq was investing in its people; its constitution at least formally defined it as an Arab and Kurdish state (which was more than its NATO neighbor Turkey had ever done for its largest minority); it was modernizing and non-Islamic in its rhetoric. Yet I still grimaced when I re-read the piece, because what I left out was the most important thing of all: the X factor that was later summarized so well by the Iraqi dissident Kanan Makiya in the title of his

book *The Republic of Fear*. What I omitted, because I didn't really understand it, was the sheerly irrational. What I should have been noticing was hidden in the spaces between the ostensible words. I should have paid more attention to the way Dr. Ahina's expression had changed when he found himself unobserved. I should have registered the way that people almost automatically flinched at the mention of the name Saddam Hussein. I should have been more observant when, taken to one of the vaunted new clinics of Baghdad after I briefly became ill, I had not been alone with the young doctor for upward of a minute when he asked me in a whisper if I could help him get out of the country. (Later on, reporters who had been in Baghdad would debate whether the fear was so palpable that you could cut it with a knife, or so thick that you could actually eat it.)

I followed developments in Iraq after I got home, and began belatedly to appreciate that I had been shown the way things were actually pointing. Saddam Hussein soon made himself president and not long after that launched an all-out assault on the Iraqi Communists, smashing his main rival to the Left with a campaign of arrests and torture that was a mere foretaste of things to come. He began to spend more of his country's vast wealth on re-armament, clearly not intending to abide by the border truce he had signed with Iran. He also began to make Baghdad a haven for international gangsters. Just after New Year's Day in 1978, hugely to my horror and dismay, an agent of Abu Nidal's walked into the office of Said Hammami in Hay Hill in Mayfair and shot him dead. I had in fact gone to see Hammami on my return from London, and told him that this obscure Palestinian in Baghdad was making threatening noises at him. Said had shrugged — he had heard this kind of nasty bravado before. Now I was in the position, not just of having delivered a warning from a terrorist, but of having seen the threat explicitly carried out. This was the opening of an astonishing spree of murder and mayhem: in his day Abu Nidal's name was almost as notorious as Osama bin Laden's was later to become. He went on to bomb Rome and Vienna airports, and to assassinate several of Arafat's more negotiation-minded lieutenants. Issam Sartawi, the PLO delegate to the Socialist International, was gunned down while talking to my friend Vassos Lyssarides, leader of the Socialist Party of Cyprus. Every time a possible "back channel" was opened between Israelis and Palestinians, a long arm would reach out from Iraq, and the Palestinian interlocutor would be slain.

Even Iraqis in London lived under the Republic of Fear. My main contact at the embassy was the cultural officer, Naji Sabry al-Hadithi. He was a fairly literate and civilized fellow with a wonderful feeling for English, and he would invite me to lavish lunches and once to an Iraqi *soirée musicale* at his home. I invited him to dinner in turn at my crummy apartment in Islington and noticed after he had departed that he had left a bag behind. It turned out to contain a small rug, some Cuban cigars, some top-dollar single malt Scotch and a few other classy items: I could of course return them if I felt high-minded enough (I meant to, but I didn't). This was interesting: I was a fairly junior writer on a small socialist weekly. What did the Iraqis do when they wanted to butter up more senior members of the media, or of other elements of

the Establishment? I was later to find out. But before I could decide to start reducing my contact with Naji, he was recalled to Baghdad where first one and then two of his brothers had been accused of plotting against “the leadership.” One of them, a former envoy to Moscow, was very painfully killed. The other was very painfully treated but survived. Naji, who had such love for English, was put in charge of the regime’s English-language Baghdad Observer, an illiterate rag given over to the diffusion of menacing gibberish and abject leader-worship.

A small further inducement was offered to my magazine. The Iraqi embassy paid for a full-page advertisement, in which the Ba’athist regime offered all Iraqi Jews the right to come home and reclaim their property and citizenship. This attempt at restitution for the deportations and confiscations that had followed 1948 — and the public hangings of Jews that had followed Israel’s victory in 1967 — was no doubt as hypocritical as Saddam’s pro forma recognition of the Kurds. But at least it was the compliment that vice paid to virtue. In Baghdad I had sometimes teased Mazen by asking him how many Jews had accepted the offer and come back. “A trickle,” was his invariable reply, until one day he couldn’t keep it up anymore and said “not even Mr. Ben-Trickle has exercised his right of return.”

As the repression and terror in Iraq became more theatrically cruel, a group called CARDRI (Campaign for the Restoration of Democratic Rights in Iraq) was founded, by an old Communist friend of mine from Oxford named Fran Hazelton. It joined the list of many good causes from Chile to South Africa that drew the signatures of “Left” members of Parliament and intellectuals. I still have its archives and membership lists in my possession. But I admit that I let my own interest lapse a bit and that I wasn’t in any case able to get another visa to visit the country. I also stopped hearing from my former Iraqi friends as the pall over the country thickened and as the long insane war with Iran, launched by Saddam in 1979, with the support of the pious born-again creep Jimmy Carter, went pitilessly on. Under cover of this war, Saddam made a deliberate attempt at the extirpation of the Kurdish people by deploying weapons of mass destruction. He also began the building of a nuclear reactor at Osirak, badly hit but not destroyed by the Israelis in 1981. I kept in occasional touch with the Kurdish exile office in Washington, where by then I lived, and with some elements of the Iraqi Left. (My old Communist acquaintance Dr. Rajim Ahina managed to escape from Baghdad and died in London, where he is buried next to Karl Marx in Highgate Cemetery.)

In the spring of 1990 I flew from Washington to Aspen, Colorado, to attend a summit meeting between George H.W. Bush and Margaret Thatcher. Mrs. Thatcher arrived seeming distinctly frazzled and out of sorts: the Bush administration was clearly leaning toward Chancellor Kohl’s reunified Germany as its new best friend in Europe, and her own good friend Ian Gow had been blown up by the Provisional IRA a few nights before. And then the entire picture was altered by one bold stroke: Saddam Hussein announced that the state of Kuwait, a member state of the United Nations,

the Arab League, and many other international assemblies, had overnight become the nineteenth province of Iraq.

I spent that extraordinary weekend at Aspen in two minds and in two places. This was plainly a case of undisguised aggression and annexation, and one quaked to think what the civilians of Kuwait were undergoing. The Iraqi general in charge of the “operation,” I soon enough learned, was Ali Hassan al-Majid, known as “Chemical Ali” for his atrocities in Kurdistan. On the other hand, the Bush administration had been telling the Iraqis that it was neutral in the long-standing border dispute between Baghdad and the Kuwaiti royal family, and as between Ba’athists and feudal emirs there didn’t seem to be that much worth fighting over. It was true that Saddam Hussein had not long before employed poison gas against what President Bush insultingly persisted in calling “his own” people, but it was likewise true that the war material for this outrage had been supplied by the Reagan administration.

I have to admit, also, and with shame, that my own personal animosity against Bush was a factor in itself. I had simply detested the way in which he had lied his way as vice president through the Iran-contra scandal, cringe-makingly claiming to have been “out of the loop” while the White House ran an off-the-books private government based on illegal profits from the Ayatollah and some Central American mobsters. And I had coldly hated the way in which he won the 1988 election, allowing his less fastidious operators to smear the wretched Michael Dukakis with racist innuendo about Willie Horton. During the day in Aspen I hung out with my press colleagues and attended the increasingly bellicose high-level briefings at which Mrs. Thatcher shed all her earlier gloom and began to puff out like the ruff of some great cat in her enthusiasm for a fight. Here was an area of the world where the British had bases and traditions and expertise: What price fatboy Helmut Kohl now? One felt one could actually see her inserting the lead into the presidential pencil. In the evenings, I would go to the unfashionable edge of Aspen and hang out at Owl Farm in Woody Creek, home of the storied Hunter Thompson. In these booze-fueled and crepuscular surroundings, in the intervals of our own midnight gunplay with rows of empty bottles ranged against high-velocity rifles, the talk was all of the war-machine and its revival: of the United States finding a new fear-object after the fall of Communism, and speculations of a similar tone.

I have never been able to rid myself of the view that Bush was not really surprised to read the first reports from Kuwait — I watched him receive them very calmly — and only became upset when he learned that Saddam Hussein had taken the entire country. The whole thing stank of a pre-arranged carve-up gone wrong. It was almost impossible to read the transcript of his envoy’s last meeting with Saddam and to form any other opinion. Ambassador April Glaspie, whom I had known briefly in London, explicitly told the Iraqi dictator that the United States took no position on his quarrel with the Kuwaitis. Had Saddam taken only the Rumaila oil field and the Bubiyan and Warba islands, there would have been no *casus belli*. I printed the Glaspie memorandum in Harper’s magazine, along with some highly critical commentary, and made several speeches and media appearances saying that any war would be fought, in effect, on

false pretenses. (It had not occurred to me at the time, or not with full awareness, that if Saddam Hussein could have been so crazy as to go for broke, and to steal all of Kuwait when he could have had a lucrative chunk of it for the asking, why then he might be such a deranged megalomaniac that he could no longer discern even his own interests.)

The official rhetoric of the Bush administration made me suspicious as well. Saddam Hussein was suddenly compared to Hitler by people who had never noticed the resemblance before. Alarmist official propaganda — about Iraqi armored divisions poised on the Saudi border, and about Kuwaiti babies being thrown out of incubators to die on the cold floor — proved to be exaggeration or fabrication. The Saudi tyranny appeared to be the chief beneficiary of the dispatch of Coalition forces, while Saddam's mad blustering against Israel — and Arafat's wicked and stupid decision to embrace Saddam — seemed to mean yet another excuse for relegating the question of Palestinian statehood to the end of the queue. So with a fairly good conscience I continued to write and speak against the impending war, and to point out all the contradictions in the Bush position. After all, if Saddam was really Hitler, then surely we were committed not just to rescuing Kuwait but to invading Iraq and finding it a new government? And what gave us the right to do that, we the pals of the Saudis, betrayers of the Kurds, and horsetraders with the Iranian mullahs?

Every now and then, however, I found myself repressing a misgiving or two. Kuwait may not have been a model state, but it had a certain openness and, as Edward Said pointed out publicly, had made room on its small territory at least for a limited parliament, as well as for many Palestinian refugees. All reports from Iraqi dissidents seemed to suggest that the reign of terror inside the country was actually even worse than Washington was alleging. And it seemed that Saddam Hussein was absolutely incapable of realizing that he had made a calamitous mistake. I flew with Bush's party on Air Force One to Saudi Arabia, asking annoying questions at every opportunity and further irritating the Saudis by asking if I could have an interview with their honored Muslim guest, Field Marshall Idi Amin of Uganda. Then I went up to Dhahran, to the gigantic base where the Coalition was assembling its armada. It was at once clear that Iraq had no chance of holding off, let alone defeating, such a vast and sophisticated force. Any Iraqi conscripts put in the way of this juggernaut would simply be vaporized. Had the Ba'athists learned nothing from their previous military adventures?

When the war did come, not only were those luckless soldiers vaporized but so too were many civilians. Power stations, water supplies, bridges, and other crucial facilities in major cities were likewise hit with so-called smart bombs. And yet, it became clear, the Iraqi leadership was not going to be made to suffer alongside "its" people. Saddam's Republican Guard units between Kuwait City and Baghdad were left unscathed, while a column of scruffy stragglers and camp followers, trudging away from Kuwait after the surrender, was hit from the sky again and again and smeared all over the road of the Mutla Pass: the press gave this the unimaginative name of the "Highway of Death" but I thought, and wrote, and still think, that it was a grotesque carnival of turkey-shooting

sadism. Before the war, my old Marxist comrade Fred Halliday had broken ranks to some extent and told the Left: “You can avoid war, but only by leaving Kuwait in the hands of Saddam Hussein. You can be anti-imperialist, but you will have to decide if imperialism is worse than fascism.” I had been briefly swayed by this but was later to write with scorn that Comrade Halliday had been proved wrong. With Bush, you could have both imperialism and fascism: American and Saudi power restored and the Kuwaiti monarchy returned to power, with a chastened Saddam Hussein allowed to keep his own throne and bluntly admonished to remember from now on who was the boss. This was the very worst of both worlds. When General Norman Schwarzkopf gave his personal permission for Iraq to use its helicopter gunships to restore order in the Iraqi Shi’a south, I thought I had seen the absolute limits of political cynicism.

It was only on revisiting the region in the immediate aftermath that I slowly came to realize that my own logic could be turned, or rather could turn itself, against me. What if the war had led to the downfall of Saddam Hussein, instead of his confirmation in power? Would I not have been morally obliged to say that this was justifiable? The curse-word “fascism” is easily enough thrown around, including by me on occasion, but I give you my oath that it makes a difference to you when you see the real thing at work. Again, it was the element of the sadistic and the irrational — the *Götterdämmerung* aspect — that caught and held my attention. On his way out of Kuwait, with nothing left to fight for, Saddam Hussein had given the order to set fire to the oilfields and also to smash the wellheads, and thus allow the crude black stuff to run directly into the waters of the Gulf, and there thickly to coagulate. This deliberate eco-catastrophe was almost the equal of his draining of the southern marshes and subsequent incineration of the deliberately aridified environment: the smoke plume from that nightmare had been seen with the naked eye from the space shuttle. Yet with the birds and marine animals of the Gulf choked to death en masse, and the sky itself full of fumes and specks that sometimes blotted out the sun, the predominantly “Green” Left and anti-war movements could still not find a voice in which to call this by its right name. On my way through Europe I went to an anti-war “service” in a beautiful Renaissance church in Rome. The slogan was *L’Italia repudia la guerra*. “Italy repudiates war” — noble words taken from the country’s antifascist postwar constitution. As I sat amid this highly civilized and polished congregation, all of its members really quite put out by American vulgarity and militarism, I found myself abruptly and chronically bored and repelled by the prevailing smugness. To repudiate war in this morally neuter way was to allow fascism a clear run.

Once I had crossed Turkey and made an illegal entry into northern Iraq at the Habur checkpoint, I entered on a scene that did a bit more than merely change my outlook. The Kurdish provinces of Saddam Hussein’s dominion had been turned into a howling wilderness. In company with a clever, witty, tough-minded Iraqi-Jewish photographer who had seized this moment to “trickle” back to his ancestral country, and with two Kurdish militants as guides, I worked my way down the Zab River and through the mountains toward the once thickly populated towns and cities of the lower-

lying areas. Nothing prepares you for how lush and green the uplands are.* Nor could anything have prepared me for the chain of wrecked and gutted and poisoned cities that showed Saddam's unquenchable thirst for destruction. This is perhaps how the Scottish Highlands or the Irish farmlands might have felt after the "clearances": village after village and township after township voided of population and then dynamited or bulldozed, while on charred and desolate bits of the landscape ugly blockhouse encampments had been built to "concentrate" those thereby dispossessed. This was grim enough but then, along a road dotted with the hulks of T-34 Russian-built tanks, came something more reminiscent of eastern Poland in the early 1940s.

The Kurdish city of Halabja had been hit by Iraqi chemical weapons in March of 1988, losing over five thousand of its citizens in just one afternoon. Three years later, it was still possible to interview and to photograph people whose wounds were still burning and suppurating, or whose lungs had been corroded. It was also possible to do a little work to counter the "denial" campaign that some "experts" had already begun, claiming that it had been the Iranians who bombed the town. There were several unexploded chemical bombs still wedged in the basements of ruined buildings, with Iraqi Air Force markings on their casings, and I had myself photographed by Ed Kashi while crouching next to one of these.

It was, in fact, only after the ghastly war with Iran was over that the truly horrific work in Iraqi Kurdistan had begun. Employing a Koranic verse — the one concerning the so-called Anfal, or "spoils," specifying what may be exacted from a defeated foe — the Iraqi army and police destroyed more than 4,000 centers of population and killed at least 180,000 Kurds.* The remainder were packed into the concentration centers mentioned above, or else loaded onto trucks and deported to the southern regions, where their mass graves are being dug up to this day. In the town of Shaqlawa, where the Kurdish guerrillas had taken advantage of Saddam's defeat in Kuwait to set up a provisional headquarters, I heard some gut-twisting but half-credible rumors. It was said that thousands of men and boys of the Barzan clan had been taken away — this much could be proved — but taken away to be used as guinea pigs in tests of biological and chemical weaponry, and of fragmentation weapons. I have since learned that it's very incautious to doubt any atrocity story, however lurid, if it is laid to the charge of Saddam Hussein.

From Shaqlawa it wasn't too terribly far to the still-disputed cities of Suleimanya and Kirkuk, to which the temporarily demoralized Iraqi army had withdrawn. Our crappy Turkish rental car had died on us without a whimper. Jalal Talabani, the bearlike socialist who was the leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, lent us a jeep and two stalwarts so that we could proceed farther and faster. The two Pesh Merga soldiers, Hoshyar Samsam and Ali, had taped a photograph of President George Bush — wearing a jogging suit, of all things — to the windshield of the jeep. After a while, I was moved to ask if they felt they had to do this. (I think I may have wondered what I would say if we ran into any smart-ass reporter I knew.) The straightness of their answer shamed the deviousness of my question. "Without your Mr. Bush," they said,

“we think we and our families would all be dead.” I didn’t have to look very closely at my surroundings to see, and to appreciate, the blunt truth of this. It was one of those common-sense moments that make one doubt the value of one’s superior education. I decided that it would be merely flippant to say that he was not “my” Mr. Bush.

The Western soldiers up in this part of Iraq were mainly British, as were many of the planes and helicopters, but the vast airdrops of food and clothing and medicine were largely American-organized and the emplacement of a “no-fly zone” over the region, preventing the renewal of any coordinated assault by Saddam, depended very considerably on United States Air Force bases in neighboring Turkey. Though Bush and Thatcher had had no desire whatever to become drawn into the internal dynamics of Iraq after the retrieval of Kuwait, domestic public opinion had rebelled at the sight of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Kurds in flight, starving on the hillsides and machine-gunned along the roads. Was this any way to end a war for “liberation”? For me the immediate question became, Was I to be a part of this public opinion or not? I felt that I had no choice. Well then, what had become, or what was left, of my formerly proud “anti-war” stance? Was it anything much more than an affectation, or a residue?

All those who have had similar or comparable experiences will recognize the problem at once: it is not possible for long to be just a little bit heretical. To see American and British forces greeted by the people as liberators; to see the people’s evident disappointment that this liberation was only to be partial; to see a nearly exterminated population regain its pulse and begin returning and rebuilding: this took a bit of assimilating. And my old Left training wasn’t entirely useless to me, either. With the exception of the Mahabad Republic, briefly proclaimed with Communist support in Iranian Kurdistan after the Second World War and swiftly put down by the Shah, this was the closest that the Kurds, the largest population in the world without a state of its own, had come to controlling a piece of the earth that was distinctively theirs. Nor could I help noticing how many red flags were on display, how few mullahs there seemed to be, and how many invocations of old internationalist slogans were to be heard. It was chaotic and improvised; the men had a tendency to give the women back seats and to feel themselves naked unless festooned with weapons; the atmosphere was somewhat tribal for my taste but, as Orwell said when analyzing his own mixed feelings about republican and anarchist Catalonia, “I recognized it at once as a state of affairs worth fighting for.” The idea of “Reds for Bush” might seem incongruous, but it was a very great deal more wholesome than “pacifists for Saddam.”

With Ed Kashi I produced a short book about the Kurdish struggle, and I kept in touch with Barham Salih, the Kurdish representative in Washington, who had gone home to start reconstructing his country. (He is today the elected prime minister of the autonomous northern region.) The rest of Iraq meanwhile was retaken by Saddam Hussein as the private property of himself and his horrifying sons. Limitations to the reach of this crime family took the form of UN-mandated international sanctions, and of “no-fly” zones in the airspace of the country’s northern and southern provinces, which at least prevented a renewal of air-supported mass murder against the Kurdish and

Shi'a populations. Almost every single day, Saddam's forces fired on the British and American planes that patrolled and enforced those zones. As well as being in a state of unstable ceasefire, then, Iraq was also in a condition of being "half-slave and half-free": a volatile situation that clearly could not continue indefinitely.

Other things — Bosnia, Rwanda — emerged to trouble the sleep of those who cared about human rights. But what I had learned in Iraq was working somewhere in my mind. I got hold of a copy of the video that showed how Saddam Hussein had actually confirmed himself in power. This snuff-movie opens with a plenary session of the Ba'ath Party central committee: perhaps a hundred men. Suddenly the doors are locked and Saddam, in the chair, announces a special session. Into the room is dragged an obviously broken man, who begins to emit a robotic confession of treason and subversion, that he sobs has been instigated by Syrian and other agents. As the (literally) extorted confession unfolds, names begin to be named. Once a fellow-conspirator is identified, guards come to his seat and haul him from the room. The reclining Saddam, meanwhile, lights a large cigar and contentedly scans his dossiers. The sickness of fear in the room is such that men begin to crack up and weep, rising to their feet to shout hysterical praise, even love, for the leader. Inexorably, though, the cull continues, and faces and bodies go slack as their owners are pinioned and led away. When it is over, about half the committee members are left, moaning with relief and heaving with ardent love for the boss. (In an accompanying sequel, which I have not seen, they were apparently required to go into the yard outside and shoot the other half, thus sealing the pact with Saddam. I am not sure that even Beria or Himmler would have had the nerve and ingenuity and cruelty to come up with that.)

So, whenever the subject of Iraq came up, as it did keep on doing through the Clinton years, I had no excuse for not knowing the following things: I knew that its one-party, one-leader state machine was modeled on the precedents of both National Socialism and Stalinism, to say nothing of Al Capone. I knew that its police force was searching for psychopathic killers and sadistic serial murderers, not in order to arrest them but to employ them. I knew that its vast patrimony of oil wealth, far from being "nationalized," had been privatized for the use of one family, and was being squandered on hideous ostentation at home and militarism abroad. (Post-Kuwait inspections by the United Nations had uncovered a huge nuclear-reactor site that had not even been known about by the international community.) I had seen with my own eyes the evidence of a serious breach of the Genocide Convention on Iraqi soil, and I had also seen with my own eyes the evidence that it had been carried out in part with the use of weapons of mass destruction. I was, if you like, the prisoner of this knowledge. I certainly did not have the option of un-knowing it.

From time to time I would be asked to sign a petition against the sanctions, which were said to be killing tens of thousands of young and old Iraqis by the denial of medical supplies and food. I couldn't bring myself to be persuaded by this pseudo-humanitarianism. In the same period, Saddam had built himself a new palace in each of Iraq's eighteen provinces, while products like infant formula — actually provided

to Iraq under the oil-for-food program — were turning up on the black market being sold by Iraqi government agents. More and more, it seemed to me, anyone who really cared for the well-being and survival of Iraqis should be arguing for the removal of the insane despotism that had necessitated the sanctions and that was eating the country alive.

The verdict of insanity was important all by itself. It seemed increasingly obvious to me that Saddam Hussein was not a rational actor, did not understand the elementary business of deterrence and self-preservation, and for this reason remained a danger, as psychiatrists phrase it, both to himself and to others. One of the manifestations of his megalomania was an ever-increasing piety. He had himself photographed, and painted on huge murals, in the robes of a mullah. He ordered that the jihadi slogan Allahuh Akbar (“God Is Great”) be added to the national flag of Iraq. He began an immense mosque-building program, including the largest mosque in the Middle East, named for “the Mother of All Battles.” He had a whole Koran written in his own blood: this macabre totem was to have been the centerpiece of that mosque. His party and state rhetoric became increasingly frenzied and jihadist in tone, and he stopped supporting secular forces among the Palestinians and instead began financing theocratic ones, such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad. An Iraqi bounty was officially and openly paid to the family of any Palestinian suicide bomber. Yet none of this — none of it, including the naming of the slaughterhouse-campaign against the Kurds after a sura of the Koran — would unconvince the utterly smug Western “experts” who kept on insisting that his Caligula regime was a “secular” one. To the contrary, it was precisely the genuine secular forces in the country — the Kurds, the Communist and Socialist movements, and the independent trade unions — that Ba’athism had set out deliberately to destroy. And it then filled the resulting vacuum with toxic religious propaganda of the crudest kind. Anyone who heard an Iraqi radio or television broadcast in the last decade of the regime can readily confirm that the insistent themes were those of “martyrdom” and holy war.

I slowly began to make friends with the Iraqi exiles — authentic secularists for the most part — who were advocating “regime change.” Quite where this rather awkward, euphemistic formulation originated I cannot be certain. It seems to have crept into currency at about the time, during the Clinton administration, when Congress passed the Iraqi Liberation Act, making it long-term American policy to replace Saddam Hussein and short-term policy to set up a budget for his Iraqi opponents. This half-way house gave a temporary home to the idea that, while Iraqis were not strong enough to do the job themselves, the USA was not exactly undertaking to do it for them, either. Out of such sheepish, shame-faced half-acknowledgments, the “regime change” discourse began to chug into a sort of life.

Spike Milligan once wrote a book about being a shambolic conscript in some forgotten cookhouse in the wartime British Army and titled it *Adolf Hitler: My Part in His Downfall*. The attempt to change political Washington’s mind about Saddam Hussein has since been the subject of so much lurid invention and paranoid disinformation that

I really think it is time that I named myself, along with the other conspirators involved, and gave an account of what we did and why we did it.

The first of our faction was Kanan Makiya. In his books *The Republic of Fear and Cruelty and Silence*, about the Saddam tyranny and the wars and famines and plagues it had sponsored, he had shown remarkable forensic skill combined with a nicely astringent polemical style. I knew that he had in an earlier career been a Trotskyist, of a faction different from my own, and so when I read his critique of my own previous stand in his *Cruelty and Silence*, I was most of all impressed by how accurately he quoted me and by how gently he delivered his reproofs. (I had become too accustomed to the pseudo-Left new style, whereby if your opponent thought he had identified your lowest possible motive, he was quite certain that he had isolated the only real one. This vulgar method, which is now the norm and the standard in much non-Left journalism as well, is designed to have the effect of making any noisy moron into a master analyst.)

Makiya is an Iraqi of partly English parentage whose family calling was that of architecture. Possibly the most penetrating of his many books about Saddam and Saddamism is called *The Monument*. It is an intense, illustrated study of the vast parade ground and double arch in central Baghdad, constructed by Saddam Hussein to immortalize his “triumph” in the wars against Iran. I enclose the word “triumph” in quotation marks here not to ironize it, but to draw attention to its root in Roman barbaric and sadistic display: if modern public relations had allowed such a thing, then Saddam would certainly have dragged Persian captives at his chariot wheels before having them butchered as gladiator-fodder or fed to the feral. I have visited this obscene place several times now. The matching “arches” are each of two crossed swords or sabers or scimitars held by beefy forearms that were modeled, by trembling sculptors, from the dictator’s own limbs. The big blades meet, and intersect. From the wrist of each arm are slung great steel nets, filled to overflowing with the empty helmets of Iranian soldiers, holed with bullets and shrapnel, and gloatingly heaped up. They purposely evoke a pyramid of skulls. Iraqi schoolchildren were paraded to see this foulness. I think of it whenever I hear some fool say, “All right, we agree that Saddam was a bad guy.” Nobody capable of uttering that commonplace has any conception of radical evil.

My first instinct might have been to dynamite such a Golgotha but Kanan was always collected and cool. “No, Christopher, we shall ask to have it rededicated as a place of memorial for all the victims of Ba’athism, Arab and Kurdish and Persian. I don’t even want it bombed if the bombing ever comes. There will be an Iraq Memory Foundation, and this will be where we put it.”* We were talking on the campus of Brandeis University, where he taught then, and I had finished explaining to his class how I had begun to change my mind about the first Gulf War. It seemed to me that in Kanan I had found someone who preserved in himself everything that was worth keeping about the tradition of the “Left Opposition” that had so encouraged us when we were younger.

At a certain moment at the end of that first Gulf War, the Kurdish guerrilla forces had briefly occupied the centers of two or three northern Iraqi cities and captured a huge trove of documents belonging to the Saddam regime. These massive steel file cabinets contained the sort of self-incriminating evidence that would make future “denial” impossible: here were the still-reeking records of the killing fields, the mass graves, the torture sessions, and the illegal weapons. The Kurdish leadership had about one satellite phone to go around in those days, but it knew enough to call Peter Galbraith, whom I briefly introduce as our next co-conspirator.

I had known Galbraith, son of the author of *The Affluent Society*, since my first year in Washington in 1982. With a handful of others, he shored up or otherwise constituted the human-rights “Left” on the staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Whether it was helping Benazir Bhutto run in a reasonably free election in Pakistan in 1988, where I joined them both in Karachi, or getting a hearing on the Hill for Chilean or Czech or South African dissidents, Peter was one of those who would always be available for a late-night phone call pleading for a break for just one more victim. He not only arranged to get this massive file of Iraqi documents picked up, and personally saw to its being transported across the Euphrates River under fire, but then made sure that it was adopted as an official public resource by the Library of Congress. One by one, the building blocks for a legal and international arraignment of the Saddam Hussein regime were being assembled.

A tremendous comrade in precisely this aspect of the work was Ann Clwyd, who had been the Wales correspondent of the *New Statesman* when both of us were young. As a fiery leftist MP on Tony Blair’s backbenches, she sponsored an initiative-group called “Indict,” which called on Britain’s attorney general, and the law officers of equivalent nations, to prepare to bring Saddam Hussein to trial for international offenses that ranged from the taking of British hostages in Kuwait to the gassing of Kurdish civilians. (That this never quite happened is probably the fault of the bad conscience of those Western governments who had colluded with Saddam Hussein when he was a profitable business partner, but that doesn’t in the least affect the case that we regime-changers were making: indeed, it rather reinforces it.)

Again, if one were trying to assemble an informal international for the overthrow of fascism in Iraq, one could not dispense with Rolf Ekeus. He was and is the quintessential Swedish Social Democrat, personally and politically dedicated to every conceivable good cause from multilateral disarmament to the abolition of apartheid. (His brilliant wife, Kim, had been Sweden’s liaison with Nelson Mandela and the ANC since the 1960s.) Rolf had represented his country as ambassador in Washington and at the UN, and had after the Gulf War been placed in charge of the United Nations inspections in Iraq. It was said of him, correctly, that he had found and destroyed more Iraqi WMDs than the Coalition forces had managed to identify, let alone to neutralize, in the entire course of the war. And it had been, for him, a highly educational experience. Invited to a private meeting with Tariq Aziz, Saddam’s Catholic Christian crony and then-foreign minister, he had been offered a straight-out bribe of \$2.5 million on condition

that his inspection reports become more lenient. In that eventuality, he was calmly assured, this little trifle would be considered a mere first installment. (Ambassador Ekeus had a long and deserved reputation for incorruptibility, and the chances of his acceptance must have been reckoned as extremely close to nil, so if you conclude from this that the Iraqis were trying the same strategy on all United Nations personnel, you are probably using your head.) After the bribery was refused, an attempt was made to poison Rolf. And after that failed, his crucial defector-informants, the Kamel brothers, who were Saddam Hussein's in-laws and who had exposed the special "ministry of concealment" set up to deceive the inspectors, were lured back from Jordan to Iraq and murdered under a flag of truce. But those who make the presumption of innocence in the case of homicidal dictators take a lot of persuading. When it was decided to resume UN "inspections" once more, as a weak alternative to the Bush-Blair call for the existing resolutions to be enforced, Kofi Annan did at least call for Rolf Ekeus to be reappointed to the task he had already shown that he could do. The French and Russian and Chinese delegations made certain that another quite different Swede got the post instead: a bureaucrat under whose supervision both Iraq and North Korea had made the word "inspections" look risible.

The other great influences in our little conspiracy were Barham Salih, the aforementioned Kurdish envoy to Washington, and Kenneth Pollack, a liberal member of the Clinton administration's National Security Council. In 1990 he had vainly tried to warn a sunken and complacent CIA that Saddam Hussein was mobilizing for an invasion of Kuwait and had been met with stupid condescension from the sort of "intelligence" bureaucrat who believed that Iraq was run by a cynical but rational calculator. (And also, needless to add, by a modernizing "secularist.") Ken's book, regrettably and sensationally titled *The Threatening Storm*, was in fact one of the best pieces of closely marshaled evidence and reasoning ever to emerge from the wonk-world, and made a lucid, devastating case that Saddam Hussein and his system should be treated, on all the past and then-existing evidence, as staggeringly guilty until proven innocent. And such innocence could only really be established by having a government in Baghdad that was not a genocidal and paranoid and megalomaniacal version of the Sopranos. To call for real inspections was actually to demand regime change. People choose to forget it now, but the Pollack book did more than any presidential speech ever did to win over the "policy community" in Washington, just as it was Barham Salih who did more than anyone else to persuade the Congress, one vote at a time.

There came a day when my friend Jim Hoagland, an extremely knowledgeable and careful correspondent and columnist for the *Washington Post* who had been visiting and studying Iraq for several decades, asked if I would like to meet Ahmad Chalaby, the founder of the "Iraqi National Congress." I naturally said yes: every other Iraqi I knew who had stood up to Saddam Hussein had lost at the very least a family member, or at the very most a whole villageful of relatives and friends, so a man who hoisted a public standard against the regime and made a full-time job of it commanded my axiomatic respect. He presented himself at my apartment in Washington, wearing

a leather jacket that didn't especially suit him, and greeted the friends I'd hastily assembled to meet the person who maintained that he could bring down the despot. Chalaby has since become so well hosed with bile and spittle that I feel obliged to say several things in his defense. The first is that he made no grandiose claims. The case against Saddam Hussein was already complete, and whatever their reservations might be, in their hearts everybody knew this. How could one bring an end to the misery of the Iraqis, and the ongoing insult to international law and comity, with the minimum of violence? Chalaby's preferred strategy at that stage was to get American support for the indigenous Iraqi and Kurdish opposition forces, so that Saddam's clique — a Sunni tribal minority of the Sunni minority — could be isolated and brought down. Much of the Iraqi Army was on or near the verge of mutiny and desertion (this later proved to be true). The Shi'a were ready to rise in revolt if they could be persuaded that they would not again be abandoned as they had been in 1991. (This also proved to be the case.) In quasi-autonomous Kurdistan there were bases, and battle-tested fighting forces, which could lend serious back-up to any coordinated initiative. (Such had already been demonstrated, as I knew without having to be told.) Truth to tell, though, I was more impressed by the "civil society" element in Ahmad's conversation. If I mentioned or inquired about any Arab or Kurdish or Iranian intellectual, he seemed to have read their most recent book the day before. When it came to Marxism, he knew all the Iraqi Communists I had ever met, and even when it came to Trotskyism, he actually knew the meaning of the phrase "permanent revolution" — this is an acid test by the way — and furthermore knew that it was an expression originated by Parvus and not by Trotsky. On the next occasion when we met, he spent a good deal of time discussing the Bloomsbury Group and the shadings of difference between Lytton Strachey and John Maynard Keynes. Perhaps I seem too impressionable: at the time it seemed exciting and interesting that someone with a genius for politics was not just another monomaniac, but could discuss culture and literature as if these things, too, were at stake in the battle against the mirthless, ruthless totalitarians.*

An Anglo-Arab Trotskyist; a son of a Canada-born socialist economist; a passionate Welshwoman of the Labour movement; a Swedish Social Democrat and internationalist; a Kurdish socialist who had spent many years as a political prisoner; a mild and almost wonk-like think-tanker (if I do beg his pardon for saying so); and an exile member of the old Baghdad financier class, whose first training was that of mathematician. What a multifariously sinister crew! But this was the original combination of influences by which political Washington was eventually persuaded that Iraq should be helped into a post-Saddam era, if necessary by force. I specify the *dramatis personae* because of the near-unbelievable deluge of abusive and calumnious dreck that has since descended, and become encrusted and hardened. Those who tried to rid Iraq and the world of Saddam Hussein have been represented as part of a "neoconservative cabal," agents of a "Jewish lobby," and accused of forging evidence and fabricating pretexts for war. Chalaby's organization alone, with its negligible budget and minuscule staff, has been credited with single-handedly poisoning the informational well of the intelligence

services of the United States, Britain, France, and Germany, all of which at different times had independently certified that Saddam Hussein had possession of, or was in measurable reach of, weapons of mass destruction. In reality, this amateur coordination of small battalions and discrepant individuals was the most open conspiracy in which I have ever taken part.

After I had written a few polemics about Iraq, and taken part in several television debates on the subject, I received a call one day from the Pentagon. It was from Paul Wolfowitz, Donald Rumsfeld's deputy, asking if I would like to come and see him. This would make my second visit to the Defense Department, since during the run-up to the previous Gulf War I had been invited to speak to the Policy Planning Staff against the intervention. So I thought, sure, if only for the sake of irony and symmetry. Wolfowitz I only knew by reputation, and by reputation he actually was a member of the neoconservative cabal: one of that influential group of former liberals, strongly pro-Zionist, some with connections to the Leo Strauss school of intellectuals at the University of Chicago, who had moved into the study of strategy during the Reagan years and made their peace with the hawkish wing of the Republican Party.

The thing that struck me most, once I had presented myself at his office, was the extent to which Wolfowitz wanted to live down precisely this image. The first thing he showed me was a photograph of the "Situation Room" in the mid-1980s, where, around the table I could see President Reagan and most of his foreign-policy team, from Weinberger to Shultz to Donald Regan, slumped in attitudes of mild exhaustion. Off to the side was a more youthful Wolfowitz. He told me that this picture, which had pride of place in his office, was of exactly the moment when the Reaganites had narrowly voted to dump the Ferdinand Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines in 1986 and to recognize the election victory of his opponent Cory Aquino.* "It was the first argument I won," said Wolfowitz proudly. "I said that if we supported a dictator to keep hold of a base, we would end up losing the base and also deserving to do so. Whereas," he went on, "by joining the side of 'people power' in Manila that year, we helped democracy movements spread through Taiwan and South Korea and even I think into Tiananmen Square in 1989." He gave me a friendly smile: "It was the opposite of a Kissinger policy."

All right, I admit I was intrigued. Wolfowitz took the view that, great as the risks of "democratization" might be, they were as nothing to the risks of dictatorship: the most unstable and volatile system of all. The only area of the globe after 1989 where this had not been tried was the Arab sphere. It was time to confront the Bush/Powell/Kissinger consensus that had left Saddam Hussein in possession of Iraq after 1991. I suspect that, if the Democrats had won the election of 2000, and if Wolfowitz had remained a Democrat and been given the self-same job, many liberals and leftists in Washington would have been praising him for tackling the racist assumption that Arabs preferred, or even needed, to be ruled by despots.

That night I was going with Kanan Makiya to a private dinner in the Cleveland Park section of the city, to help set up the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq. It turned

out that Wolfowitz was to be the after-dinner speaker. He made a very forceful and lucid presentation, without notes, so that in a way I could have skipped the meeting we'd had at one of America's three "Ground Zeros" that afternoon. But I still would not have missed seeing that Reagan-era photograph. When the dinner was over — we had heard the news that Vaclav Havel and Lech Walesa would adorn the letterhead of the Committee — Kanan and I walked slowly back through a drenching rain that neither of us really noticed. It had been a whole quarter of a century since Saddam Hussein had taken control of Iraq: Hitler had ruled for twelve years and Stalin for about twenty-five. "I think, comrade," I told him as the water started to run down my back and we bid *au revoir*, "that this time you are really going home." We closed with "next time in Baghdad": a promise that we kept the following summer.

It is here that I ought to make my most painful self-criticisms. I saw Wolfowitz a few more times between then and the ultimate decision to intervene, which was made about six months later. I also got to know a bit about the near-incredible incompetence and disloyalty of the CIA and the State Department. I was able to satisfy myself that those within the administration who were making the case for "regime change" were sincere in what they believed and were not knowingly exaggerating anything for effect. And I was able to ask for assurances. For example, it was widely alleged on the anti-war Left that General Ariel Sharon would seize the pretext offered by the fog of war in Iraq and expel all the Palestinians from the West Bank. The then-head of the Middle East Studies Association actually came to my house to try and persuade me on this point. When I asked Wolfowitz if the Pentagon had thought of this contingency, he said that he had had one of the Israeli commanders into his office only the previous day, and told him that American sympathy for Israel did not extend to expansion or colonization and that once one of the Arab "rejectionist" strongholds had been removed from Saddam's control, the United States would be in a position to ask for the dismantlement of settlements to begin. (At a rally not long before this, called by American Jewry to protest the suicide-bombing campaign that Saddam Hussein was helping to bankroll, Wolfowitz had been aggressively booed for reminding the crowd that the Palestinian people were suffering, too.)

On another occasion, when the Turkish government was being more than usually obnoxious, and refusing the use of American bases on Turkish soil for the deployment of a "northern front," unless Turkish troops were also to be allowed into Iraqi Kurdistan, I asked Wolfowitz whether the United States would permit such a sell-out. Again he was without ambivalence: Turkish boots on Iraqi soil would not be allowed. If the Turks insisted on exacting that price, the liberation of Iraq would go ahead without them (which it did).

Wait a moment, did I not just promise to be "self-critical"? Of course, what I should have been asking Wolfowitz, instead of bending his ear about these enterprises of such moral pith and geostrategic moment, was: "Does the Army Corps of Engineers have a generator big enough to turn the lights of Baghdad back on?" or perhaps "Has a detachment of Marines been ordered to guard the Iraq National Museum?" But, not

being a professional soldier or quartermaster, nor feeling myself able to advise those who were, I rather tended to assume that things of this practical sort were being taken care of. It would have been like asking if we'd remembered to pack enough rations and ammunition. I feel stupid and ashamed to this day that I didn't ask the sort of question that Commander Hitchens would have insisted upon before even taking a ship into convoy. As Peter Galbraith was later to say so ruefully to me, surveying the terrifying damage done by unchecked looting, and the misery that this in turn inflicted on Iraqi society: "You never get a second chance to make a good first impression." This was to say the least of it: I probably now know more about the impeachable incompetence of the Bush administration than do many of those who would have left Iraq in the hands of Saddam. Some of it was almost quixotically American — the huge gleaming generator brought by truck across Jordan to Baghdad proved to be too digital and streamlined to be plugged into the Iraqi "grid," and we might have done better to buy some clapped-out equipment from Belarus or Ukraine. But some of the failures were infinitely more culpable than that and, even though they don't alter the case against Ba'athism, have permanently disfigured the record of those of us who made that case.

As the Iraq debate became more intense, it became suddenly obvious to me that I couldn't any longer remain where I was on the political "spectrum." Huge "anti-war" demonstrations were being organized by forces that actually exemplified what the CIA and others had naïvely maintained was impossible: a declared alliance between Ba'athist sympathizers and Islamic fundamentalists. The partisans of the failed One Party/One Leader state were now linking arms with the adorers of the One God. Some saw, or thought they saw, something "ironic" in this. My old friend Nick Cohen wrote scornfully that on a certain date, "about a million liberal-minded people marched through London to oppose the overthrow of a fascist regime." But what is "liberal-minded" about the Muslim Brotherhood and its clone-groups, or about the rump of British Stalinism, or about the purulent sect into which my former comrades of the International Socialists had mutated? To them — to the organizers and moving spirits of the march in other words — the very word "liberal" was a term of contempt.*

I did a few things in swift succession. I resigned my position as columnist for *The Nation* after an unbroken stint of twenty years man and boy as a biweekly contributor. There was no further point in working for a magazine that sympathized with the sort of "anti-war" culture I have just mentioned. I then booked a ticket for Qatar, the small but relatively open monarchic state which now housed both Al-Jazeera (then a new idea in the media) and the American Central Command or "Centcom." I could see that the endgame was approaching and I wanted to make my plans in advance. Changing planes on the way through England to the Gulf, I consciously made my last appearance as a man of the Left. I had said "yes" to the invitation — a very flattering one — to be a speaker at the annual Tribune rally at the Labour Party conference in Blackpool. This by tradition was the climactic event for the radical rank-and-file. And Tribune, often all over the map politically and journalistically, and frequently looking as if it had been designed and printed at the last moment and in the pitch dark, had at least

been the only paper in England to furnish George Orwell with a weekly column. May I be forgiven for quoting *My Life in the Bear Pit*, the taped diaries of David Blunkett, the blind Yorkshire socialist and proletarian who at the time was Tony Blair's home secretary:

Odd little snippet from conference: I don't think I recorded the weird little paradox about the Tribune meeting and the fact that they'd made a terrible blunder by inviting Christopher Hitchens, who they believed to be a left-wing journalist — which he has been, but he is vehemently anti-Saddam Hussein and gave the most brilliant lecture about the background and the detail of the individuals and why taking on Saddam Hussein was so important. Everybody sat there in absolute silence . . .

I don't remember the silence being quite absolute, because I had mentioned some courageous socialists like Barham Salih and Rolf Ekeus of whom some of the audience had at least heard. Attending the rally was Chris Mullin, one of the best and bravest and wittiest Tribune socialists ever elected to the House of Commons. May I quote his published diaries, too (*A View from the Foothills: The Diaries of Chris Mullin*), concerning the same evening?

The speeches were lacklustre with one notable exception: Christopher Hitchens, who argued the case for military intervention in Iraq. He appealed to those present "as internationalists, as people who can think for yourselves." It was not a war on Iraq that was proposed, he argued, but a war on Saddam. He urged the left to be a bit self-critical. . . . "If the left had had its way, General Galtieri would still be the President of Argentina; Milosevic would still be in power in Belgrade; Kosovo would be an empty wilderness; Mullah Omar would still be in Kabul."

I step over some further kind things that Chris had to say, and come to his "counterarguments," put to me over a subsequent cocktail: "chaos, civilian casualties, the danger that Saddam Hussein if cornered will resort to chemical weapons. Christopher dismissed them all. He reckons the regime is crumbling and that the odds are it will implode without the need for an invasion. Fingers crossed that he is right."

The "WMD" question, as everybody hopes now to forget, was very often a rhetorical tool in the hands of those who wanted to leave Saddam Hussein in power. Attack him, and he would unleash the weapons of horror that he had wielded so promiscuously before. This resembled one of those "prisoners' dilemma" games, where each forced choice tightens the noose and reduces the number of options. Meanwhile, every concession that Saddam did make was the direct consequence of the believable threat of force. Do any of the anti-war types ever ask themselves what would have happened if the Coalition forces had sailed home without firing a shot?

I had been closer to the scenery of WMD-use than most people, but I thought, and wrote, that Saddam's command over such weaponry in 2002–2003 was more latent than blatant. He certainly had some resources, some scientists, some elements and ingredients, and a long criminal record of both use and concealment. If I could have had it proved to me beyond doubt that he did NOT have any serious stockpiles on hand, I would have argued — did in fact argue — that this made it the perfect time to

hit him ruthlessly and conclusively. It would both punish the previous use and prevent any repetition of it. It would also bring Iraq into verifiable compliance with the ever-flourished and ever-cited UN and its important resolutions, thus allowing the lifting of economic sanctions and — according to the most vocal critics of such sanctions — saving hundreds of thousands of Iraqis from being or becoming civilian casualties.

In all my discussions with Wolfowitz and his people at the Pentagon, I never heard anything alarmist on the WMD issue. It was presumed that at some level Iraq remained a potential WMD state, and it was assumed that Saddam Hussein would never agree to come into compliance even with Hans Blix's very feeble "inspections" (which indeed he never did). This in itself was yet another proof of the inherent lunacy of the regime, and of the naïveté of those who thought that it, or its deranged leader, could ever be treated as a rational actor. It was this that I had meant when talking to Chris Mullin about the approach of an "implosion" point. By holding a referendum and claiming the first-ever 100 percent turnout (and 100 percent proportion of the turnout as a "yes" vote, at that) and by opening the wings of the horrible Abu Ghraib prison that contained the murderers and rapists and thieves who were part of the surplus value of his system, Saddam had given warning of the approach of his Ceausescu moment: a crazy meltdown of authority. Given the already-existing "chaos" in Iraq, and the divide-and-rule means by which the regime exploited religious and tribal hatreds, a meltdown was more likely to lead to a Rwanda on the Gulf than to a Romania. Absent a Coalition force, it would also lead to invasions from Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. Everything therefore pointed to the need for the international community to intervene at last, and on the right side for once, in maimed and traumatized Iraq, and to help it make the transition to some version of its right mind.

The WMD could be taken as emblematic of everything foul and wasteful about the Ba'athist system. I can remember only one instance where I was in any way "briefed" by anyone at the Defense Department. Underneath a Sunni mosque in central Baghdad, the parts and some of the ingredients of a chemical weapon had been located and identified with the help of local informers. I was told this off the record, and told also that I was not to make any use of the information. It was thought that, when the use of a holy place to hide such weaponry was disclosed by the intervention, it would help to change Muslim opinion. I still have the photographs that were taken in that mosque after the liberation, showing the cache of weaponry just where I had been told it would be. But if I was ever naïve about anything having to do with Iraqi WMD, it was in believing that the production of evidence like that, or indeed any other kind of evidence, would make even the most limited impression on the heavily armored certainties of the faithful.

Coda: Amateur Archaeology in Iraq

During all this I never quite lost the surreal sense that I had become in some way a pro-government dissident and that of all the paradoxes of my little life this might have to register as the most acute one. But it was the demonstrators in the streets — I was teaching at Berkeley for much of the first spring of the Iraq war — who struck me

as the real conformists of the scenario. Accused of becoming a sell-out by working for the interwar Yugoslav republic, Rebecca West's guide (and covert lover) Constantine, in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, confesses that, yes: "For the sake of my country, and perhaps a little for the sake of my soul, I have given up the deep peace of being in opposition." I, too, began to find that I could see things from the point of view of the governors and that I was on the side of those now striving to build up a new state in Afghanistan and Iraq. In any case, the opponents of the war were themselves aligned with the views of other governors and states, many of them much more smelly than George W. Bush.

I still cannot bear to imagine the idea of a victory for Putin and Chirac and Annan and Schroeder, let alone the Chinese or the Saudis, but in the event the glad moment came when Saddam Hussein outdid himself and refused to save his evil system even by making the small concession of admitting and proving to the UN that he didn't currently possess any workable WMDs. I crossed the Kuwaiti border into Iraq not long after the first wave had gone racing up toward Baghdad and saw a little of the barbaric state to which southern Iraqi society had been reduced by a combination of Saddamism and the sanctions that it had necessitated. In Kuwait City I had watched Saddam Hussein's Scud missiles being shot out of the sky as they were fired randomly toward his now-liberated former colony, and smiled as I saw all the members of the press corps donning gas masks and running to the shelters to avoid the shower of chemical weapons, gases, and nerve-agents which never turned up — and in which they later claimed never to have believed. I can say for myself that I didn't bring, or wear, or own, a gas mask, or believe that any element of Saddam's armed forces — except the imported and jihad-minded "Fedayeen Saddam" (a suggestive name in its own right) — would do any real fighting. As I left Kuwait, the European press was awash in ridiculous babbling about a last-ditch defense of Baghdad that would be the equivalent of "Stalingrad."

And that was just the hacks. A few days later came a more considered piece by the cultivated Jonathan Raban, deploying almost faultlessly the wrinkled lip across which he and his fellow members of the Anglo-American bien-pensant classes viewed the deplorable crudity of the U.S. of A.:

Passionate ideologues are incurious by nature and have no time for obstructive details. It's impossible to think of Paul Wolfowitz curling up for the evening with Edward Said's *Orientalism*, or the novels of Naguib Mahfouz, or *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, or the letters of Gertrude Bell, or the recently published, knotty, opaque but useful book by Lawrence Rosen, *The Culture of Islam*, based on Rosen's anthropological work

. . .

Made perhaps unintentionally absurd by that use of the expression "curled up" to depict the act of reading ("You'll usually find me," says Bertie Wooster to Florence Craye in *Thank You, Jeeves*, "curled up with Spinoza's latest"), Raban's *Guardian* effusion became ever more vulnerable to ridicule as he began to discourse knowingly on the "body" of the Islamic ummah or "community" as if it were a passive female form

capable of violation, for all the world as if Saddam Hussein had never invaded and tried to amputate and subjugate the two Muslim states of Iran and Kuwait, besides repeatedly raping and torturing and disfiguring his “own” captive nation.

In point of fact, Paul Wolfowitz wrote his doctoral dissertation on water and salinity in the Arab world, has lived for many years with an Arab woman scholar with close connections to Palestinian reformers, speaks more Arabic than Jonathan Raban, was married previously to an anthropologist with a special interest in the Muslim societies of Malaysia and Indonesia, was himself a diplomat in Jakarta and speaks some of the Bahasa language, too, and once telephoned me to disagree with a detail in something I had written about the Indonesian novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer. Wolfowitz was for many years the dean of a major school of Johns Hopkins University and is thanked by name in the acknowledgments of Azar Nafisi’s brave, beautiful book *Reading Lolita in Tehran: a study of the relations between literature, sexuality, and power under Muslim theocracy* that can stand comparison to anything written by Edward Said or even Naguib Mahfouz. If anyone was being colonial or “orientalist” here it was Jonathan Raban, a most refined Englishman who didn’t believe that a mere Yank could know anything about the exotic latitudes where only travel writers like himself were authorized to tread. But his tone of infuriated condescension was vastly preferable to the way in which the BBC’s on-air bookers and interviewers, telephoning me as if to make sure they couldn’t be accused of undue bias, would flatly and simply decline to pronounce Paul Wolfowitz’s name correctly. “Volfervitz,” they would say, putting a sinister top-spin on it. I remember a time in the 1970s when a certain Colonel X of the old le Carré school would sit in a discreet office at the BBC, occasionally asking program producers if they intended to make regular use of “this chap Hitchens, fascinating as he no doubt can be.” But at least in those days of nudge-and-wink political invigilation, it was considered minimal good manners to get someone’s name right. How hard could it be, I would inquire icily (and sometimes after the BBC caller had begun by addressing me as “Chris”) to pronounce the name phonetically or as it was spelled? “Oh all right,” one of them said grudgingly: “this fellow Wolfervitz who seems to be the power behind the scenes, with his neo-con cabal . . .” I made the man stop and begin all over again.

I prefer to think that I am not unusually thin-skinned when it comes to clumsy innuendos on the Jewish question. But this sort of stuff was a complete give-away, and I do think that one must never just sit there when it is being vented. As an undergraduate at Oxford I was once asked by a friendly don at All Souls if I would help him arrange a gentle punting trip for Sir Max Mallowan — also a fellow of the college, by then rather elderly — and Lady Mallowan. I agreed readily, and not just because Lady Mallowan was better known as Agatha Christie. Sir Max had been the doyen of the British archaeological expedition in Mesopotamia between the wars, and could be mentioned in the same breath as Gertrude Bell when it came to the treasure-house that was the Iraq National Museum. The afternoon drifted by agreeably enough and I must have passed muster in some way because I was then invited to dine at the

Mallowan home in nearby Wallingford. Around their table, in a house festooned with Middle Eastern miniatures and statuettes, I very suddenly felt myself congealing with unease. The anti-Jewish flavor of the talk was not to be ignored or overlooked, or put down to heavy humor or generational prejudice. It was vividly unpleasant and it was bottom-numbingly boring. (I had the excuse, if I can call it that, of not having read any of the “Agatha Christie” effusion. I have checked it since, and been surprised by many things about it, most of all its popularity. How right Raymond Chandler was to scorn her trudging. There must be some connection between the general nullity of Christie’s prose and the tendency of her detectives to take Jewishness as a symptom of crime. After 1945 she learned to hold down the bigotry a bit but one of the 1950s efforts, titled *They Came to Baghdad*, is all about a well-funded and Iraq-based plot for a New World Order, featuring clammy Jewish employers and a deeply sinister scheme called “the Wolfensohn merger.”)

When I went back to Iraq again, after the liberation was complete, I was myself engaged on a sort of “dig,” and I decided to travel with Paul Wolfowitz. It was in its own way an archaeological and anthropological expedition. Here are some of the things we unearthed or observed. Unnoticed by almost everybody, and unreported by most newspapers, Saddam Hussein’s former chief physicist Dr. Mahdi Obeidi had waited until a few weeks after the fall of Baghdad to accost some American soldiers and invite them to excavate his back garden. There he showed them the components of a gas centrifuge — the crown jewels of uranium enrichment — along with a two-foot stack of blueprints. This burial had originally been ordered by Saddam’s younger son Qusay, who had himself been in charge of the Ministry of Concealment, and had outlasted many visits by “inspectors.” I myself rather doubt that Hans Blix would ever have found the trove on his own.

Not long after that, a sandstorm near Baghdad uncovered a bizarre row of shimmering airplane tailfins. These proved to be the gravemarkers of a squadron of expensive Russian-built MIG-25 jet fighters. The point of the burial was and still remains unclear: one might as well set a jet engine on fire as immerse it in a dune. But the instinct for “hugger-mugger interment” among the eerie upper echelons of the Ba’ath Party seems to have been strongly ingrained. Iraq is almost the size of California. I dare say that they buried other military secrets that we will never know about.

Near the northern town of Kirkuk, in the June that followed the invasion, a total of eight million dollars in cash was dug out of the garden of Saddam Hussein’s personal secretary. Along with this came a further few million dollars’ worth of jewelry, “belonging” to Saddam Hussein’s wife. In the end, Saddam Hussein himself was pulled in an undignified manner from an underground hole where he had taken ignominious refuge.

But the worst of all the unearthings and diggings and disinterments took place not far from the ruins of Babylon, in the town of Al-Hilla. On 13 May 2003, not long after the liberation, frenzied local people had begged American forces to come and help, and also to bear witness. Ever since 1991 and the massive repression of the Shi’a

uprising, the site had had an evil and disgusting reputation. It was said by witnesses that three truckloads of people, three times a day, for a month, had been driven here. Forced into pre-dug mass graves, they were then either shot or buried alive. Seizing the chance to identify their missing loved ones, local people had swarmed to the place as soon as Saddam's regime disintegrated, and uncovered three thousand bodies with their bare hands before calling for help from the Coalition. By the time I got there, the excavation process was becoming more dignified and orderly but nothing could render it less obscene.

Lines of plastic body bags were laid out on the ground, sometimes "tagged" with personal items and identifying documents. Where digging was complete, the ground had been consecrated as a resting place. Elsewhere, the ghastly spadework continued. The two men in charge of the scene were a Major Schmidt from New Jersey and Dr. Rafed Fakher Husain, a strikingly composed Iraqi physician. "We lived without rights," he told me with a gesture of his hand toward this area of darkness. "And without ideas." The second sentence seemed to hang in the noisome air for longer than the first, and to express the desolation more completely. There were sixty-two more such sites, I was to learn, in this province of southern Iraq alone.

It was mid-July, when the Mesopotamian heat can without effort bring off the achievement of 120 degrees. This means a constant smearing of oneself with sunscreen and the exuding of drenching perspiration. The hair becomes matted and damp. The clothes cling. And then the wind gets up . . . I suddenly realized that a paste was forming all over me, made up of various greases and slimes, natural and artificial, and thickly overlaid by a crust from the clinging filth of a mass grave. I hope never again to feel so utterly befouled. It was in the nostrils, in the eyes . . . on the tongue and in the mouth. And the chance of a wash, let alone of a cleansing shower, was a good way off. I was eventually able to have that shower, almost weeping with mingled disgust and relief, in the al-Rashid hotel in Baghdad, but the rest of Iraqi society was still digging itself out of a shallow grave and those who fetishized the ideal of death and the grave — Ba'athist and Islamist — were getting ready to blast further hecatombs all across the landscape. "Scum of the earth," I wrote in my notebook, meaning by this cliché the Saddamist–Al Qaeda alliance and not the gritty residue that had been my nauseating carapace. After that, not even the abattoir stench from the execution sheds in newly liberated Abu Ghraib could shake me as much. I do remember thinking that attempts to clean out and restart that horror-prison were doomed, and that it should simply have been demolished, with salt strewn over the ruins. I wish that I had made that point more forcibly, too.*

Also unearthed, but this time in paper form and in the state archives, were documents showing that a surprising number of "anti-war" politicians in several countries were the beneficiaries of "Oil for Food" kickbacks — in other words of money stolen directly from the suffering Iraqi people about whom they orated. There was also a letter from my old friend Naji Sabry al-Hadithi, who had ended up as Saddam Hussein's

last foreign minister. It was addressed to Saddam himself, in the closing moments of the regime, and it expressed concern, of a sort that I believe is worth recording.

It was distressing, wrote Naji, to see the reports of Iraqi civilians rushing forward to greet advancing American and British soldiers. Such deplorable events were discrediting the heroic Saddamist struggle in the wider world. Might it not be advisable, he suggested to his leader, to send some of the suicide-martyrs of the Fedayeen Saddam, disguised as civilians, to detonate themselves as soon as they drew close enough to the new arrivals? That would soon enough teach the British and Americans to suspect all Iraqis as “terrorists,” and to keep their distance.* There was something horribly simple about this idea, and I wondered for a while why a foreign minister should even be suggesting such a vile thing. Later reports, to the effect that Naji had been shopping on the other side of the street and providing secret information to the Coalition via “back channels,” at least supplied a likely motive. In Saddam’s Iraq, if you wanted to cover yourself, the best thing was to propose the most exorbitantly cruel and extreme measures. Poor old Naji, then, to be reduced to this wicked expedient.

Anyway, Naji’s scheme was indeed adopted, as were some other “measures.” A woman in the town of Nasiriyah was publicly hanged for welcoming the liberators. We have video footage of other Iraqis having their tongues cut out or their extremities lopped off for the same offense, by the sort of black-cowled holy warriors who have become so drearily familiar to us since. It matters to me to remember this Saturnalia of butchery, because of third-hand observers who like to mock the idea that Iraqis ever saluted their liberators with “sweets and flowers” or whatever the sneer happens to be.

I cannot exactly vouch for the kinds of sweets or the sorts of flowers, but in Iraq I saw some quite extraordinary things and I will not be made to deny the evidence of my own eyes. Along the road from Basra one day in the summer of 2003, traveling all the way to the holy Shi’ite cities of Najaf and Karbala, I sat in a very lightly armed American convoy of civilian cars and saw people run to the roadside, with no advance notice of our arrival — I know this because I know we hadn’t planned in advance to take that road — and simply wave and smile and show signs of happiness. It was completely unlike anything stage-managed, which in the Iraq of Saddam had involved great orchestrated ululations and contortions and mad avowals of the willingness for blood-sacrifice. It was normal and proportional, and in its way rather beautiful, and I give the lie to those who say I did not see those crowds or clasp those hands.

Landing by chopper on another occasion in the Marshes, I did see a less-spontaneous (they knew we were coming) and more hysterical greeting. But the Marsh Arabs were hardly likely to react any other way, having had their ancient riparian habitat once destroyed by Saddam and now reflooded by the Americans. In those amazing reed palaces that could by a stretch have dated back to the mythical Abraham, the enthusiasm and hospitality might have been prepared but could not possibly have been feigned.

As for Kurdistan, I had already seen this land when it was Saddam’s people who had the mastery of it. Here one met an even more respectful joy, in a territory which did not

any longer require — or ask for — a single Western soldier. Here, we were the guests in a different sense because the people of northern Iraq already had secure stewardship of their own affairs and were firmly but politely outgrowing their former protectors. To witness this was wholly, profoundly satisfactory: I am sorry for those who have never had the experience of seeing the victory of a national liberation movement, and I feel cold contempt for those who jeer at it.

Naji Sabry's horrible suggestion that such enthusiasm be quelled in such a way — he had the grace to look abashed when I next saw him in exile in Qatar — of course makes the additional implicit point that the Ba'athist leadership knew, and took for granted, that it had suicide squads at its disposal. This in turn suggests a long and official collusion between the Saddam regime and the religious zealots. Abu Nidal had become by this time quite old hat (he was actually murdered by Saddam's police just as the Allies were surrounding Baghdad Airport, lest he disclose anything inconvenient). Captured by the Coalition while still under Iraqi protection was Abbu Abbas, leader of the gang that had rolled Leon Klinghoffer in his wheelchair from the deck of the Achille Lauro cruise ship. He had had to be released after his arrest in that episode because he was traveling on a diplomatic passport. An Iraqi diplomatic passport. Now, belatedly, he was under lock and key. Still not yet apprehended is Mr. Mehmet Yassin, the man who mixed the chemicals for the bomb that hit the World Trade Center in 1993, and then flew straight to Iraq after the FBI so incautiously granted him bail. Iraq was then a country that was as difficult to enter as it was hard to leave . . .

This thieves' kitchen dimension, of a country run by criminals and sadists, was not confined to the drugs-and-thugs corruption and terrorism side. And once again, I was to pick up the spoor of an old connection. Rolf Ekeus came round to my apartment one day and showed me the name of the Iraqi diplomat who had visited the little West African country of Niger: a statelet famous only for its production of yellowcake uranium. The name was Wissam Zahawi. He was the brother of my louche gay part-Kurdish friend, the by-now late Mazen. He was also, or had been at the time of his trip to Niger, Saddam Hussein's ambassador to the Vatican. I expressed incomprehension. What was an envoy to the Holy See doing in Niger? Obviously he was not taking a vacation. Rolf then explained two things to me. The first was that Wissam Zahawi had, when Rolf was at the United Nations, been one of Saddam Hussein's chief envoys for discussions on nuclear matters (this at a time when the Iraqis had functioning reactors). The second was that, during the period of sanctions that followed the Kuwait war, no Western European country had full diplomatic relations with Baghdad. The Vatican was the sole exception, so it was sent a very senior Iraqi envoy to act as a listening post. And this man, a specialist in nuclear matters, had made a discreet side trip to Niger. This was to suggest exactly what most right-thinking people were convinced was not the case: namely that British intelligence was on to something when it said that Saddam had not ceased seeking nuclear materials in Africa.*

I published a few columns on this, drawing at one point an angry email from Ambassador Zahawi that very satisfyingly blustered and bluffed on what he'd really been up

to. I also received — this is what sometimes makes journalism worthwhile — a letter from a BBC correspondent named Gordon Correa who had been writing a book about A.Q. Khan. This was the Pakistani proprietor of the nuclear black market that had supplied fissile material to Libya, North Korea, very probably to Syria, and was open for business with any member of the “rogue states” club. (Saddam’s people, we already knew for sure, had been meeting North Korean missile salesmen in Damascus until just before the invasion, when Kim Jong Il’s mercenary bargainers took fright and went home.) It turned out, said the highly interested Mr. Correa, that his man Khan had also been in Niger, and at about the same time that Zahawi had. The likelihood of the senior Iraqi diplomat in Europe and the senior Pakistani nuclear black-marketeer both choosing an off-season holiday in chic little uranium-rich Niger . . . well, you have to admit that it makes an affecting picture. But you must be ready to credit something as ridiculous as that if your touching belief is that Saddam Hussein was already “contained,” and that Mr. Bush and Mr. Blair were acting on panic reports, fabricated in turn by self-interested provocateurs. So I am proud of what our little international of volunteers was able to manage in this element of the crisis, too. It can be just as useful to expose the laughable as it is important to unmask the hateful: as I had slowly discovered in those riverside Thames-to-Tigris moments, covering as they did the waterfront from Adolf Hitler through Agatha Christie to Oscar Wilde.

Postscript

I was having an oppressively normal morning at the dawn of 2007, flicking through the banality of quotidian email traffic, when I idly clicked on a message from a friend headed “Seen This?” The attached item turned out to be a very well-written story by Teresa Watanabe of the Los Angeles Times. It described the death, in Mosul, Iraq, of a young soldier from Irvine, California, named Mark Jennings Daily, and the unusual degree of emotion that his community was undergoing as a consequence. The emotion derived from a very moving statement that the boy had left behind, stating his reasons for having become a volunteer and bravely facing the prospect that his words might have to be read posthumously. In a way, the story was almost too perfect: this handsome lad had been born on the Fourth of July, was a registered Democrat and self-described agnostic, a UCLA honors graduate, and during his college days had had fairly decided reservations about the war in Iraq. I read on, and actually printed the story out, and was turning a page when I saw the following:

“Somewhere along the way, he changed his mind. His family says there was no epiphany. Writings by author and columnist Christopher Hitchens on the moral case for war deeply influenced him . . .”

I don’t exaggerate by much when I say that I froze. I certainly felt a very deep pang of cold dismay. I had just returned from a visit to Iraq with my own son (who was then twenty-three, as was young Mr. Daily) and had found myself in a deeply pessimistic frame of mind about the war. Was it possible that I had helped persuade someone I had never met to place himself in the path of an IED? Over-dramatizing myself a bit in the angst of the moment, I found I was thinking of William Butler Yeats, who was

chilled to discover that the Irish rebels of 1916 had gone to their deaths quoting his play *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. He tried to cope with the disturbing idea in his poem “Man and the Echo”:

Did that play of mine send out
Certain men the English shot? . . .
Could my spoken words have checked
That whereby a house lay wrecked?

Abruptly dismissing any comparison between myself and one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century, I feverishly clicked on all the links from the article and found myself on Lieutenant Daily’s MySpace site, where his statement “Why I Joined” was posted. The site also immediately kicked into a skirling noise of Irish revolutionary pugnacity: a song from the Dropkick Murphys album *Warrior’s Code*. And there, at the top of the page, was a link to a passage from one of my articles, in which I poured scorn on those who were neutral about the battle for Iraq . . . I don’t remember ever feeling, in every allowable sense of the word, quite so hollow.

I writhed around in my chair for a bit and decided that I ought to call Ms. Watanabe, who could not have been nicer. She anticipated the question I was too tongue-tied to ask: Would the Daily family — those whose “house lay wrecked” — be contactable? “They’d actually like to hear from you.” She kindly gave me the email address and the home number.

I don’t intend to make a parade of my own feelings here, but I expect you will believe me when I tell you that I emailed first. For one thing, I didn’t want to choose a bad time to ring. For another, and as I wrote to his parents, I was quite prepared for them to resent me. So let me introduce you to one of the most generous and decent families in the United States, and allow me to tell you something of their experience.

In the midst of their own grief, to begin with, they took the trouble to try to make me feel better. I wasn’t to worry about any “guilt or responsibility”: their son had signed up with his eyes wide open and had “assured us that if he knew the possible outcome might be this, he would still go rather than have the option of living to age fifty and never having served his country. Trust us when we tell you that he was quite convincing and persuasive on this point, so that by the end of the conversation we were practically packing his bags and waving him off.” This made me relax fractionally, but then they went on to write: “Prior to his deployment he told us he was going to try to contact you from Iraq. He had the idea of being a correspondent from the front-lines through you, and wanted to get your opinion about his journalistic potential. He told us that he had tried to contact you from either Kuwait or Iraq. He thought maybe his email had not reached you . . .” That was a gash in my hide all right: I think of all the junk email I read every day, and then reflect that his precious one never got to me.

Lieutenant Daily crossed from Kuwait to Iraq in November 2006, where he would be deployed with the “C,” or “Comanche,” Company of the Second Battalion of the Seventh Cavalry Regiment — rather unpromisingly General Custer’s old outfit — in Mosul. On the 15th of January 2007, he was on patrol and noticed that the Humvee in front of

him was not properly “up-armored” against IEDs. He insisted on changing places and taking a lead position in his own Humvee, and was shortly afterward hit by an enormous buried mine that packed a charge of some 1,500 pounds of high explosive. Yes, that’s right. He, and the three other American soldiers and Iraqi interpreter who perished with him, “went to war with the army we had,” as Donald Rumsfeld so carefully put it. It’s some consolation to John and Linda Daily, and to Mark’s brother and two sisters, and to his widow (who had been married to him for just eighteen months) to know that he couldn’t have felt anything.

Yet what, and how, should we feel? People are not on their oath when speaking of the dead, but I have now talked to a good number of those who knew Mark Daily or were related to him, and it’s clear that the country lost an exceptional young citizen, whom I shall always wish I had had the chance to meet. He seems to have passed every test of young manhood, and to have been admired and loved and respected by old and young, male and female, family and friends. He could have had any career path he liked (and had won a George C. Marshall Award that led to an offer to teach at West Point). Why are we robbed of his contribution? As we got to know one another better, I sent the Daily family a moving statement made by the mother of Michael Kelly, my good friend and the editor-at-large of *The Atlantic Monthly*, who was killed near the Baghdad airport while embedded during the invasion of 2003. Marguerite Kelly was highly stoic about her son’s death, but I now think I committed an error of taste in showing this to the Dailys, who very gently responded that Michael had lived long enough to write books, have a career, become a father, and in general make his mark, while their son didn’t live long enough to enjoy any of these opportunities. If you have tears, prepare to shed them now . . .

In his brilliant book *What Is History?*, Professor E.H. Carr asked about ultimate causation. Take the case of a man who drinks a bit too much, gets behind the wheel of a car with defective brakes, drives it round a blind corner, and hits another man, who is crossing the road to buy cigarettes. Who is the one responsible? The man who had one drink too many, the lax inspector of brakes, the local authorities who didn’t straighten out a dangerous bend, or the smoker who chose to dash across the road to satisfy his bad habit? So, was Mark Daily killed by the Ba’athist and bin Ladenist riffraff who place bombs where they will do the most harm? Or by the Rumsfeld doctrine, which sent American soldiers to Iraq in insufficient numbers and with inadequate equipment? Or by the Bush administration, which thought Iraq would be easily pacified? Or by the previous Bush administration, which left Saddam Hussein in power in 1991 and fatally postponed the time of reckoning?

These grand, overarching questions cannot obscure, at least for me, the plain fact that Mark Daily felt himself to be morally committed. I discovered this in his life story and in his surviving writings. Again, not to romanticize him overmuch, but this is the boy who would not let others be bullied in school, who stuck up for his younger siblings, who was briefly a vegetarian and Green Party member because he couldn’t stand cruelty to animals or to the environment, a student who loudly defended Native

American rights and who challenged a MySpace neo-Nazi in an online debate in which the swastika-displaying antagonist finally admitted that he needed to rethink things. If I give the impression of a slight nerd here I do an injustice. Everything that Mark wrote was imbued with a great spirit of humor and tough-mindedness. Here's an excerpt from his "Why I Joined" statement:

Anyone who knew me before I joined knows that I am quite aware and at times sympathetic to the arguments against the war in Iraq. If you think the only way a person could bring themselves to volunteer for this war is through sheer desperation or blind obedience then consider me the exception (though there are countless like me). . . . Consider that there are 19 year old soldiers from the Midwest who have never touched a college campus or a protest who have done more to uphold the universal legitimacy of representative government and individual rights by placing themselves between Iraqi voting lines and homicidal religious fanatics.

And here's something from one of his last letters home:

I was having a conversation with a Kurdish man in the city of Dahok (by myself and completely safe) discussing whether or not the insurgents could be viewed as "freedom fighters" or "misguided anti-capitalists." Shaking his head as I attempted to articulate what can only be described as pathetic apologetics, he cut me off and said "the difference between insurgents and American soldiers is that they get paid to take life — to murder, and you get paid to save lives." He looked at me in such a way that made me feel like he was looking through me, into all the moral insecurity that living in a free nation will instill in you. He "oversimplified" the issue, or at least that is what college professors would accuse him of doing.

In his other emails and letters home, which the Daily family very kindly showed me, he asked for extra "care packages" to share with local Iraqis, and said, "I'm not sure if Irvine has a sister-city, but I am going to personally contact the mayor and ask him to extend his hand to Dahok, which has been more than hospitable to this native-son." (I was wrenched yet again to discover that he had got this touching idea from an old article of mine, which had made a proposal for city-twinning that went nowhere.) In the last analysis, it was quite clear, Mark had made up his mind that the United States was a force for good in the world, and that it had a duty to the freedom of others. A video clip of which he was very proud has him being "crowned" by a circle of smiling Iraqi officers. I have a photograph of him, standing bareheaded and contentedly smoking a cigar, on a rooftop in Mosul. He doesn't look like an occupier at all. He looks like a staunch friend and defender. On the photograph is written "We carry a new world in our hearts."

In his last handwritten letter home, posted on the last day of 2006, Mark modestly told his father that he'd been chosen to lead a combat platoon after a grenade attack had killed one of its soldiers and left its leader too shaken to carry on. He had apparently sounded steady enough on the radio on earlier missions for him to be given a leadership position after only a short time "in country." As he put it: "I am now happily doing what I was trained to do, and am fulfilling an obligation that has swelled inside me for

years. I am deep in my element . . . and I am euphoric.” He had no doubts at all about the value of his mission, and was the sort of natural soldier who makes the difference in any war.

At the first chance I got, I invited his family for lunch in California. We ended up spending the entire day together. As soon as they arrived, I knew I had been wrong to be so nervous. They looked too good to be true: like a poster for the American way. John Daily is an aerospace project manager, and his wife, Linda, is an audiologist. Their older daughter, Christine, eagerly awaiting her wedding, is a high-school biology teacher, and the younger sister, Nicole, is in high school. Their son Eric is a bright junior at Berkeley with a very winning and ironic grin. And there was Mark’s widow, an agonizingly beautiful girl named Snejana (“Janet”) Hristova, the daughter of political refugees from Bulgaria. Her first name can mean “snowflake,” and this was his name for her in the letters of fierce tenderness that he sent her from Iraq. These, with your permission, I will not share, except this:

One thing I have learned about myself since I’ve been out here is that everything I professed to you about what I want for the world and what I am willing to do to achieve it was true. . . .

My desire to “save the world” is really just an extension of trying to make a world fit for you.

If that is all she has left, I hope you will agree that it isn’t nothing.

I had already guessed that this was no gung-ho Orange County Republican clan. It was pretty clear that they could have done without the war, and would have been happier if their son had not gone anywhere near Iraq. (Mr. Daily told me that as a young man he had wondered about going to Canada if the Vietnam draft ever caught up with him.) But they had been amazed by the warmth of their neighbors’ response, and by the solidarity of his former brothers-in-arms — 1,600 people had turned out for Mark’s memorial service in Irvine. A sergeant’s wife had written a letter to Linda and posted it on Janet’s MySpace site on Mother’s Day, to tell her that her husband had been in the vehicle with which Mark had insisted on changing places. She had seven children who would have lost their father if it had gone the other way, and she felt both awfully guilty and humbly grateful that her husband had been spared by Mark’s heroism. Imagine yourself in that position, if you can, and you will perhaps get a hint of the world in which the Dailys now live: a world that alternates very sharply and steeply between grief and pride.

On a drive to Fort Knox, Kentucky, and again shortly before shipping out from Fort Bliss, Texas, Mark had told his father that he had three wishes in the event of his death. He wanted bagpipes played at the service, and an Irish wake to follow it. And he wanted to be cremated, with the ashes strewn on the beach at Neskowin, Oregon, the setting for his happiest memories of boyhood vacations. The first two of these conditions had already been fulfilled. The Dailys rather overwhelmed me by asking if I would join them for the third one. So it was that in August I found myself on the dunes by an especially lovely and remote stretch of the Oregon coastline. The extended family

was there, including both sets of grandparents, plus some college friends of Mark's and his best comrade from the army, an impressive South Dakotan named Matt Gross. As the sun began to sink on a day that had been devoted to reminiscence and moderate drinking, we took up the tattered Stars and Stripes that had flown outside the family home since Mark's deployment and walked to his favorite spot to plant it. Everyone was supposed to say something, but when John Daily took the first scoop from the urn and spread the ashes on the breeze, there was something so unutterably final in the gesture that tears seemed as natural as breathing and I wasn't at all sure that I could go through with it. My idea had been to quote from the last scene of Macbeth, which is the only passage I know that can hope to rise to such an occasion. The tyrant and usurper has been killed, but Ross has to tell old Siward that his boy has perished in the struggle:

Your son, my lord, has paid a soldier's debt;
He only lived but till he was a man;
The which no sooner had his prowess confirm'd
In the unshrinking station where he fought,
But like a man he died.

This being Shakespeare, the truly emotional and understated moment follows a beat or two later, when Ross adds:

Your cause of sorrow
Must not be measured by his worth, for then
It hath no end.

I became a trifle choked up after that, but everybody else also managed to speak, often reading poems of their own composition, and as the day ebbed in a blaze of glory over the ocean, I thought, Well, here we are to perform the last honors for a warrior and hero, and there are no hysterical ululations, no shrieks for revenge, no insults hurled at the enemy, no firing into the air or bogus hysterics. Instead, an honest, brave, modest family is doing its private best. I hope no fanatical fool could ever mistake this for weakness. It is, instead, a very particular kind of strength. If America can spontaneously produce young men like Mark, and occasions like this, it has a real homeland security instead of a bureaucratic one.

But Mark Daily wasn't yet finished with sending me messages from beyond the grave. He took a bag of books with him to Iraq, which included Thomas Paine's *The Crisis*, *War and Peace*, Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* (so, nobody's perfect), Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*, John McCain's *Why Courage Matters*, and George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-four*. And a family friend of the Dailys, noticing my own book on Orwell on their shelf, had told them that his father, the Trotskyist militant Harry David Milton, had been "the American" who rushed to Orwell's side after he had been shot in the throat by a fascist sniper. This seemed to verge on the eerie. Orwell thought that the Spanish Civil War was a just war, but he also came to understand that it was a dirty war, where a decent cause was hijacked by goons and thugs, and where betrayal and squalor negated the courage and sacrifice of those

who fought on principle. As one who had argued strongly for the liberation of Iraq — perhaps more strongly than I knew in this particular case — I had grown coarsened and sickened by the degeneration of the struggle, and the sordid news of corruption and brutality (Mark Daily told his father how dismayed he was by the appalling scenes at Abu Ghraib) and by the paltry politicians who squabble for precedence while lifeblood is spilled by young people whose boots they are not fit to clean.

It upsets and angers me more than I can safely say, when I re-read Mark's letters and poems and see that — as of course he would — he was magically able to locate the noble element in all this, and to take more comfort and inspiration from a few plain sentences uttered by a Kurdish man than from all the vapid speeches ever given. Orwell had a rather similar experience when encountering a young volunteer fighter in Barcelona, and realizing with a mixture of sadness and shock that for this boy all the tired old slogans of liberty and justice were still authentic. He cursed his own cynicism and disillusionment when he wrote:

For the fly-blown words that make me spew
Still in his ears were holy,
And he was born knowing what I had learned
Out of books and slowly.

However, after a few more verses about the lying and cruelty and stupidity that accompany war, he was still able to do a kind of justice to the brave young man:

But the thing I saw in your face
No power can disinherit:
No bomb that ever burst
Shatters the crystal spirit.

May it be so, then, and may death be not proud to have taken Mark Daily, whom I never knew but whom you now know a little, and — I hope — miss.

* Recently declassified papers show the British embassy in Baghdad reporting back to London in these terms: Saddam's accession to office was "the first smooth transfer of power since 1958" and, though "strong-arm methods may be needed to steady the ship, Saddam will not flinch."

* I used to make a point, later on in Washington, of arguing that no operations in Iraq should ever again be given the stupid code-name prefix of "Desert." Mesopotamia is not a desert.

* Today, in an echo of the Latin American vernacular about those who were, rather than had, "disappeared," Kurdish people describe certain towns or groups as having been "Anfalled."

* Kanan got his museum, and the Memory Foundation is now an archive for victims and survivors whose narrative would otherwise never have been set down. This remarkable achievement remains a continual cause of spite and resentment.

* I had of course heard that Ahmad had once been indicted — by a military court in Jordan when it was Saddam's ally — for being a shady businessman. I have also read persuasive evidence that this was a frame-up, as were many other charges —

“puppet of the CIA,” for one absurd example — that were made against him. My main difference with him is, and remains, his alignment with a confessional bloc in the Iraqi parliament. But without him, there might well not be an Iraqi parliament.

* See, for the best account of this upheaval in real time, James Fenton’s book *The Snap Revolution*.

* To be fair, Ian McEwan’s highly acute novel *Saturday*, which is easily the best evocation of this street-theater event, does capture the anguish of many “liberals” who did turn out. His work was also the first to isolate the unstinting self-regard that underlies the terribly OK-seeming mantra of “Not In Our Name.”

* It impressed me very much to see my Kurdish friends, including Iraq’s first-ever democratically chosen president, Jalal Talabani, publicly voice their opposition to the death penalty for Saddam Hussein and the other convicted war criminals. This appeal to clemency arose partly from their adherence to the Socialist International and also from their wish to begin Iraq again without a blood reckoning. After what they had endured, their forbearance was something extraordinary. In Kurdistan itself, where tribal retributionism was not so much in evidence, Barham Salih personally declined to sign death-warrants for the Islamist gangsters who had murdered his guards and very nearly slain him on his own doorstep.

* This document was originally published by my old friend Patrick Cockburn, perhaps the best chronicler of the war and certainly its most fervent and intelligent critic.

* This verifiable account is often confused with a bungled attempt to sell some forged documents from the embassy of Niger in Rome: a false trail that, whether out of cupidity or design, wasted the time of several already time-wasting “inquiries.”

Something of Myself

Ah wad some power the giftie gie us
To see ourselves as others see us.

— Robert Burns

Many men would take the death-sentence without a whimper, to escape the life-sentence which fate carries in her other hand.

— T.E. Lawrence

Plato says that the unexamined life is not worth living. But what if the examined life turns out to be a clunker as well?

— Kurt Vonnegut: *Wampeters, Foma and Granfaloon*s

ABOUT ONCE OR TWICE every month I engage in public debates with those whose pressing need it is to woo and to win the approval of supernatural beings. Very often, when I give my view that there is no supernatural dimension, and certainly not one that is only or especially available to the faithful, and that the natural world is wonderful enough — and even miraculous enough if you insist — I attract pitying looks and anxious questions. How, in that case, I am asked, do I find meaning and purpose in life? How does a mere and gross materialist, with no expectation of a life to come, decide what, if anything, is worth caring about?

Depending on my mood, I sometimes but not always refrain from pointing out what a breathtakingly insulting and patronizing question this is. (It is on a par with the equally subtle inquiry: Since you don't believe in our god, what stops you from stealing and lying and raping and killing to your heart's content?) Just as the answer to the latter question is: self-respect and the desire for the respect of others — while in the meantime it is precisely those who think they have divine permission who are truly capable of any atrocity — so the answer to the first question falls into two parts. A life that partakes even a little of friendship, love, irony, humor, parenthood, literature, and music, and the chance to take part in battles for the liberation of others cannot be called "meaningless" except if the person living it is also an existentialist and elects to call it so. It could be that all existence is a pointless joke, but it is not in fact possible to live one's everyday life as if this were so. Whereas if one sought to define meaninglessness and futility, the idea that a human life should be expended in the guilty, fearful, self-obsessed propitiation of supernatural nonentities . . . but there, there. Enough.

The clear awareness of having been born into a losing struggle need not lead one into despair. I do not especially like the idea that one day I shall be tapped on the

shoulder and informed, not that the party is over but that it is most assuredly going on — only henceforth in my absence. (It's the second of those thoughts: the edition of the newspaper that will come out on the day after I have gone, that is the more distressing.) Much more horrible, though, would be the announcement that the party was continuing forever, and that I was forbidden to leave. Whether it was a hellishly bad party or a party that was perfectly heavenly in every respect, the moment that it became eternal and compulsory would be the precise moment that it began to pall.

A memoir of the New School for Social Research, where I have the honor to be an occasional visiting teacher, describes how in the immediate post-1945 period Erich Fromm gave a lecture on "The Struggle Against Pointlessness." I have never been able to trace even one paragraph of this talk, though I hunger to know what it said. Attending the lecture would have been many young men just out of uniform, coming to the school on the GI Bill and having just inflicted a defeat on the fascist Axis. They can hardly have considered that struggle to have been "pointless" but then what of the millions who died so horribly in Europe and Asia and who died having barely lived? What was the "point" of them, except perhaps as ghastly illustrations of a wider point?

Attempts to locate oneself within history are as natural, and as absurd, as attempts to locate oneself within astronomy. On the day that I was born, 13 April 1949, nineteen senior Nazi officials were convicted at Nuremberg, including Hitler's former envoy to the Vatican, Baron Ernst von Weizsacker, who was found guilty of planning aggression against Czechoslovakia and committing atrocities against the Jewish people. On the same day, the State of Israel celebrated its first Passover seder and the United Nations, still meeting in those days at Flushing Meadow in Queens, voted to consider the Jewish state's application for membership. In Damascus, eleven newspapers were closed by the regime of General Hosni Zayim. In America, the National Committee on Alcoholism announced an upcoming "A-Day" under the nonuplifting slogan: "You can drink — help the alcoholic who can't." ("Can't"?) The International Court of Justice at The Hague ruled in favor of Britain in the Corfu Channel dispute with Albania. At the UN, Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko denounced the newly formed NATO alliance as a tool for aggression against the USSR. The rising Chinese Communists, under a man then known to Western readership as Mao Tze-Tung, announced a limited willingness to bargain with the still-existing Chinese government in a city then known to the outside world as "Peiping."

All this was unknown to me as I nuzzled my mother's breast for the first time, and would certainly have happened in just the same way if I had not been born at all, or even conceived. One of the newspaper astrologists for that day addressed those whose birthday it was:

There are powerful rays from the planet Mars, the war god, in your horoscope for your coming year, and this always means a chance to battle if you want to take it up. Try to avoid such disturbances where women relatives or friends are concerned, because the outlook for victory upon your part in such circumstances is rather dark. If you must fight, pick a man!

Sage counsel no doubt, which I wish I had imbibed with that same maternal lactation, but impartially offered also to the many people born on that day who were also destined to die on it.

I suppose that one reason I have always detested religion is its sly tendency to insinuate the idea that the universe is designed with “you” in mind or, even worse, that there is a divine plan into which one fits whether one knows it or not. This kind of modesty is too arrogant for me. However, I have been unblushing enough to write a book that is largely about myself, and I thought it might be of interest if I said a few words about what I am actually “like.” (In this, I am going by what I often feel, as a reviewer, is missing in standard works of memoir and autobiography.)

Here’s one way to start. Every month, my lustrous colleagues at Vanity Fair select a personality and subject him or her to what is known as “The Proust Questionnaire.” The great Marcel did not actually devise this form of self-interrogation, but on two occasions in his life he was seduced into answering one. I have here amalgamated the two sets of questions.

What do you regard as the lowest depth of misery? (Just to give you an idea, Proust’s reply was “To be separated from Mama.”) I think that the lowest depth of misery ought to be distinguished from the highest pitch of anguish. In the lower depths come enforced idleness, sexual boredom, and/or impotence. At the highest pitch, the death of a friend or even the fear of the death of a child.

Where would you like to live? In a state of conflict or a conflicted state.

What is your idea of earthly happiness? To be vindicated in my own lifetime.

To what faults do you feel most indulgent? To the ones that arise from urgent material needs.

Who are your favorite heroes of fiction? Dennis Barlow, Humbert Humbert, Horatio Hornblower, Jeeves, Nicholas Salzmanovitch Rubashov, Funes the Memorious, Lucifer.

Who are your favorite characters in history? Socrates, Spinoza, Thomas Paine, Rosa Luxemburg, Leon Trotsky.

Who are your favorite heroines in real life? The women of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran who risk their lives and their beauty to defy the foulness of theocracy. Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Azar Nafisi as their ideal feminine model.

Who are your favorite heroines of fiction? Maggie Tulliver, Dorothea, Becky Sharp, Candy, O, Bertie’s Aunt Dahlia.

Your favorite painter? Goya, Otto Dix.

Your favorite musician? J.S. Bach, Bob Dylan.

The quality you most admire in a man? Courage moral and physical: “anima” — the ability to think like a woman. Also a sense of the absurd.

The quality you most admire in a woman? Courage moral and physical: “anima” — the ability to visualize the mind and need of a man. Also a sense of the absurd.

Your favorite virtue? An appreciation for irony.

Your least favorite virtue, or nominee for the most overrated one? Faith. Closely followed — in view of the overall shortage of time — by patience.

Your proudest achievement? Since I can't claim the children as solely "mine," being the dedicatee of books by Salman Rushdie and Martin Amis, and poems by James Fenton and Robert Conquest.

Your favorite occupation? Travel in contested territory. Hard-working writing and reading when safely home, in the knowledge that an amusing friend is later coming to dinner.

Who would you have liked to be? Prometheus, Oscar Wilde, Emile Zola.

Your most marked characteristic? Insecurity.

What do you most value in your friends? Their continued existence.

What is your principal defect? Becoming bored too easily.

What to your mind would be the greatest of misfortunes? Loss of memory.

What would you like to be? One who understood music and chess and mathematics, or one who had had the courage to bear arms.

What is your favorite color? Blue. Sometimes red.

What is your favorite flower? Garlic.

What is your favorite bird? The owl.

What word or expression do you most overuse? Re-reading a collection of my stuff, I was rather startled to find that it was "perhaps."

Who are your favorite poets? Philip Larkin, Robert Conquest, W.H. Auden, James Fenton, W.B. Yeats, Chidioc Tichbourne, G.K. Chesterton, Wendy Cope.

What are your favorite names? Alexander, Sophia, Antonia, Celeste, Liam, Hannah, Elizabeth, Wolfgang.

What is it you most dislike? Stupidity, especially in its nastiest forms of racism and superstition.

Which historical figures do you most despise? Stanley Baldwin, the Ayatollah Khomeini.

Which contemporary figures do you most despise? Henry Kissinger, Osama bin Laden, Josef Ratzinger.

Which events in military history do you most admire? Thermopylae, Lepanto, the defense of Little Round Top at Gettysburg, the mutinies in the German Army in 1918 and the German General Staff in 1944, the Royal Navy's Arctic convoys.

Which natural gift would you most like to possess? The ability to master other languages (which would have hugely enhanced the scope of these answers).

How would you like to die? Fully conscious, and either fighting or reciting (or fooling around).

What do you most dislike about your appearance? The way in which it makes former admirers search for neutral words.

What is your motto? "Allons travailler!" (This more imperative version of "Get on with it!" is annexed from Emile Zola, though E.M. Forster somewhat overextended it by enjoining us to "get on with your own work, and behave as if you were immortal.")

Though this is only a party game (which is the form in which Proust was twice persuaded to play it), it can be revealing. Reviewing my own answers, I, at any rate,

can see where I give away more of myself than might be obvious. Take the answer to the question about the “principal defect.” I used also to play the game of “If you were an animal, what animal would you be?” When others chose for me, I was quite frequently a fox. Lately, however, there have been quite a few nominations of “badger.” This is not merely a question of my becoming stouter and more grizzled. It is the “down” side of what I consider one of my happier skills, as well. In other words, I would often rather have an argument or a quarrel than be bored, and because I hate to lose an argument, I am often willing to protract one for its own sake rather than concede even a small point.

Plainly, this unwillingness to give ground even on unimportant disagreements is the symptom of some deepseated insecurity, as was my one-time fondness for making teasing remarks (which I amended when I read Anthony Powell’s matter-of-fact observation that teasing is an unfailing sign of misery within) and as is my very pronounced impatience. The struggle, therefore, is to try and cultivate the virtuous side of these shortcomings: to be a genial host while only slightly whiffled, for example, or to be witty at the expense of one’s own weaknesses instead of those of other people.

I am often described to my irritation as a “contrarian” and even had the title inflicted on me by the publisher of one of my early books. (At least on that occasion I lived up to the title by ridiculing the word in my introduction to the book’s first chapter.) It is actually a pity that our culture doesn’t have a good vernacular word for an oppositionist or even for someone who tries to do his own thinking: the word “dissident” can’t be self-conferred because it is really a title of honor that has to be won or earned, while terms like “gadfly” or “maverick” are somehow trivial and condescending as well as over-full of self-regard. And I’ve lost count of the number of memoirs by old comrades or ex-comrades that have titles like “Against the Stream,” “Against the Current,” “Minority of One,” “Breaking Ranks” and so forth — all of them lending point to Harold Rosenberg’s withering remark about “the herd of independent minds.” Even when I was quite young I disliked being called a “rebel”: it seemed to make the patronizing suggestion that “questioning authority” was part of a “phase” through which I would naturally go. On the contrary, I was a relatively well-behaved and well-mannered boy, and chose my battles with some deliberation rather than just thinking with my hormones.

I am fairly proud, therefore, that my better and longer-meditated quarrels have won me at least some respect: respect that I could have forfeited if I had missed — as the French so quenchingly say — a perfectly good opportunity for keeping my mouth shut. After years of pursuing Henry Kissinger with allegations — liar, murderer, war criminal, pseudo-academic, bore — that made many observers say in print that if he had any balls at all he’d have to sue me, he instead lost his composure and made some hysterically slanderous counter-allegations, which ended up with his lawyers withdrawing rather than mine. That was well worth the time it took me.

During the 1992 election I concluded as early as my first visit to New Hampshire that Bill Clinton was hateful in his behavior to women, pathological as a liar, and

deeply suspect when it came to money in politics. I have never had to take any of that back, whereas if you look up what most of my profession was then writing about the beefy, unscrupulous “New Democrat,” you will be astonished at the quantity of sheer saccharine and drool. Anyway, I kept on about it even after most Republicans had consulted the opinion polls and decided it was a losing proposition, and if you look up the transcript of the eventual Senate trial of the president — only the second impeachment hearing in American history — you will see that the last order of business is a request (voted down) by the Senate majority leader to call Carol and me as witnesses. So I can dare to say that at least I saw it through.

When the late Pope John Paul II decided to place the woman so strangely known as “Mother” Teresa on the fast track for beatification, and thus to qualify her for eventual sainthood, the Vatican felt obliged to solicit my testimony and I thus spent several hours in a closed hearing room with a priest, a deacon, and a monsignor, no doubt making their day as I told off, as from a rosary, the frightful faults and crimes of the departed fanatic. In the course of this, I discovered that the pope during his tenure had surreptitiously abolished the famous office of “Devil’s Advocate,” in order to fast-track still more of his many candidates for canonization. I can thus claim to be the only living person to have represented the Devil pro bono.

Very often the test of one’s allegiance to a cause or to a people is precisely the willingness to stay the course when things are boring, to run the risk of repeating an old argument just one more time, or of going one more round with a hostile or (much worse) indifferent audience. I first became involved with the Czech opposition in 1968 when it was an intoxicating and celebrated cause. Then, during the depressing 1970s and 1980s I was a member of a routine committee that tried with limited success to help the reduced forces of Czech dissent to stay nourished (and published). The most pregnant moment of that commitment was one that I managed to miss at the time: I passed an afternoon with Zdenek Mlynar, exiled former secretary of the Czech Communist Party, who in the bleak early 1950s in Moscow had formed a friendship with a young Russian militant with an evident sense of irony named Mikhail Sergeyevitch Gorbachev. In 1988 I was arrested in Prague for attending a meeting of one of Vaclav Havel’s “Charter 77” committees. That outwardly exciting experience was interesting precisely because of its almost Zen-like tedium. I had gone to Prague determined to be the first visiting writer not to make use of the name Franz Kafka, but the numbing bureaucracy got the better of me. When I asked why I was being detained, I was told that I had no need to know the reason! Totalitarianism is itself a cliché (as well as a tundra of pulverizing boredom) and it forced the cliché upon me in turn. I did have to mention Kafka in my eventual story. The regime fell not very much later, as I had slightly foreseen in that same piece that it would. (I had happened to notice that the young Czechs arrested with us were not at all frightened by the police, as their older mentors had been and still were, and also that the police themselves were almost fatigued by their job. This was totalitarianism practically yawning itself to death.)* A couple of years after that I was overcome to be invited to an official reception in Prague,

to thank those who had been consistent friends through the stultifying years of what “The Party” had so perfectly termed “normalization.” As with my tiny moment with Nelson Mandela, a whole historic stretch of nothingness and depression, combined with the long and deep insult of having to be pushed around by boring and mediocre people, could be at least partially canceled and annealed by one flash of humor and charm and generosity. That’s what I meant by my “vindication” answer a few paragraphs further back.

I therefore am glad that I waited as long as I did before ingesting and digesting Marcel Proust, because one has to have endured a few decades before wanting, let alone needing, to embark on the project of recovering lost life. And I think it may be possible to review “the chronicles of wasted time.” William Morris wrote in *The Dream of John Ball* that men fight for things and then lose the battle, only to win it again in a shape and form that they had not expected, and then be compelled again to defend it under another name. We are all of us very good at self-persuasion and I strive to be alert to its traps, but a version of what Hegel called “the cunning of history” is a parallel commentary that I fight to keep alive in my mind.

My deep vice of lack of patience had its worst outcome, I feel sure, in the raising of my children.

Many men feel somewhat useless during the early childhood of their offspring (as well as paralyzed with admiration for the way that women seem somehow to know what to do when the babies arrive). I don’t think I can take refuge in the general weakness of my sex. Confronted with infancy, I was exceptionally no good. (Anything I don’t say here is only intended to spare others, not myself.) Like not a few men, I set myself to overcompensate by working ever harder, which I think has its own justification in the biologically essential task of feeding and clothing and educating one’s young, but I was really marking time until they were old enough to be able to hold a conversation. And I have to face the fact that the children of both my marriages learned much, much more about manhood and nurturing from their grandparents — my magnificent in-laws — than they did from me. That is one lapse, and not just a lapse in time, that I know I shall not make up for. One cannot invent memories for other people, and the father figure for my children must be indistinct at best until quite late in their lives. There are days when this gives me inexpressible pain, and I know that such days of remorse also lie in my future. (I distinguish remorse from regret in that remorse is sorrow for what one did do whereas regret is misery for what one did not do. Both seem to be involved in this case.)

The only recourse — my own promise and vow — was and is to get a bit better as they get older. Hence this example, which I hope I’ll be able to improve upon before they come and screw down the lid (or whatever it is). As he grew older, which was mostly in my absence, my firstborn son, Alexander, became ever more humorous and courageous. There came a time, as the confrontation with the enemies of our civilization became more acute, when he sent off various applications to enlist in the armed forces. I didn’t want to be involved in this decision either way, especially since

I was being regularly taunted for not having “sent” any of my children to fight in the wars of resistance that I supported. (As if I could “send” anybody, let alone a grown-up and tough and smart young man: what moral imbeciles the “anti-war” people have become.) Anyway, sometime late in 2007 I felt it was time that I myself went back to Iraq, and asked Alexander if he would like to come along. The plan was to limit the visit to the Kurdish north, which — as I told his mother — was reasonably safe. When we disembarked on free soil at Erbil Airport, there was a group of Kurds waiting to greet me as a friend and ally and I felt at that moment as if my boy might feel that his old father had not been entirely a jerk.*

To be the father of growing daughters is to understand something of what Yeats evokes with his imperishable phrase “terrible beauty.” Nothing can make one so happily exhilarated or so frightened: it’s a solid lesson in the limitations of self to realize that your heart is running around inside someone else’s body. It also makes me quite astonishingly calm at the thought of death: I know whom I would die to protect and I also understand that nobody but a lugubrious serf can possibly wish for a father who never goes away.** Incidentally, I have also learned a bit about the importance of avoiding feminine embarrassment (“Daddy,” wrote Sophia when she enrolled at the New School where I teach, “people will ask ‘why is old Christopher Hitchens kissing that girl?’”) and shall now cease and desist.

In his *Minima Moralia*, Theodor Adorno made a beautiful corkscrew or double-helix-shaped aphorism about the Hays Office, which was then the headquarters of moralistic and ideological invigilation of the movie industry. Under its unsmiling rules, no double beds could be shown, no “race-mixing,” no untoward conduct or risqué speech. Nonetheless, ventured Adorno, an intellectually and aesthetically satisfying film could be made, observing all the limitations prescribed by the Hays Office, on the sole condition that there was no Hays Office.

When I first came across this morsel of condensed reflection, I realized what a large role it had already played in my own life. “Let’s just go in and enjoy ourselves,” Yvonne had said after a long moment when the Hitchens family had silently reviewed the menu — actually of the prices not the courses — outside a restaurant on our first and only visit to Paris. I knew at once that the odds against enjoyment had shortened (or is it lengthened? I never remember). “You should be nicer to him,” a schoolmate had once said to me of some awfully ill-favored boy. “He has no friends.” This, I realized with a pang of pity that I can still remember, was only true as long as everybody agreed to it. There are more robust versions of the same contradiction: a plug-ugly labor union/Cosa Nostra figure, asked at a Senate hearing if he thought his outfit was too powerful, looked around a couple of times and leaned into the mike before saying: “Senator: being powerful’s a bit like being ladylike. If you have to say you are, then you prolly ain’t.” British diplomats and Anglo-American types in Washington have a near-superstitious prohibition on uttering the words “Special Relationship” to describe relations between Britain and America, lest the specialness itself vanish like a phantom at cock-crow. Never ask while you are doing it if what you are doing is fun. Don’t introduce even

your most reliably witty acquaintance as someone who will set the table on a roar. “Martin is your best friend, isn’t he?” a sweet and well-intentioned girl once said when both of us were present: it was the only time I ever felt awkward about this precious idea, which seemed somehow to risk diminishment if it were uttered aloud.

The fragility of love is what is most at stake here — humanity’s most crucial three-word avowal is often uttered only to find itself suddenly embarrassing or orphaned or isolated or ill-timed — but strangely enough it can work better as a literal or reassuring statement than a transcendent or numinous or ecstatic one. Ian McEwan wrote a morally faultless essay just after the atrocities of 11 September 2001, noting that almost all voicemail messages from those on the doomed aircraft had ended with this very common trinity of words, and adding (in an almost but not quite supererogatory fashion) that by this means the murder victims had outdone and outlived their butchers.

But for me this Hays Office problem complicates the ancient question that Bertrand Russell answered (to my immense surprise) in the affirmative. If you were offered the chance to live your own life again, would you seize the opportunity? The only real philosophical answer is automatically self-contradictory: “Only if I did not know that I was doing so.” To go through the entire experience once more would be banal and Sisyphean — even if it did build muscle — whereas to wish to be young again and to have the benefit of one’s learned and acquired existence is not at all to wish for a repeat performance, or a Groundhog Day. And the mind ought to, but cannot, set some limits to wish-thinking. All right, same me but with more money, an even sturdier penis, slightly different parents, a briefer latency period . . . the thing is absurd. I seriously would like to know what it was to be a woman, but like blind Tiresias would also want the option of re-metamorphosing if I wished. How terrible it is that we have so many more desires than opportunities.

So I wouldn’t be Hitch again, whatever the inducement. Nor would I have carried my green card in my wallet, as I loyally did every day for more than two decades (because I respected the law that said I should) if my adopted country had in fact subjected me to random stops and searches for it. Even if it were possible to cast my horoscope in this one life, and to make an accurate prediction about my future, it would not be possible to “show” it to me because as soon as I saw it my future would change by definition. This is why Werner Heisenberg’s adaptation of the Hays Office — the so-called principle of uncertainty whereby the act of measuring something has the effect of altering the measurement — is of such importance. In my case the difference is often made by publicity. For example, and to boast of one of my few virtues, I used to derive pleasure from giving my time to bright young people who showed promise as writers and who asked for my help. Then some profile of me quoted someone who disclosed that I liked to do this. Then it became something widely said of me, whereupon it became almost impossible for me to go on doing it, because I started to receive far more requests than I could respond to, let alone satisfy. Perception modifies reality: when I abandoned the smoking habit of more than three decades

I was given a supposedly helpful pill called Wellbutrin. But as soon as I discovered that this was the brand name for an antidepressant, I tossed the bottle away. There may be successful methods for overcoming the blues but for me they cannot include a capsule that says: “Fool yourself into happiness, while pretending not to do so.” I should actually want my mind to be strong enough to circumvent such a trick. I try to deny myself any illusions or delusions, and I think that this perhaps entitles me to try and deny the same to others, at least as long as they refuse to keep their fantasies to themselves. Karl Marx phrased this most perfectly by saying that critics should “pluck the flowers from the chain, not so that men may wear the chain without consolation, but so that they may break the chain, and cull the living flower.” So I was “a touch appalled” (as I once did hear Ronald Dworkin drawlingly say) when I read the following, in the memoir of my beloved friend Christopher Buckley. It’s drawn from a speech that was delivered at his father’s funeral:

We must do what we can to bring hammer blows against the bell jar that protects the dreamers from reality. The ideal scenario is that pounding from without we can effect resonances, which will one day crack through to the latent impulses of those who dream within, bringing to life a circuit that will spare the republic.

There’s a bit of metaphor mixture there — and an odd recurrence of that same “bell jar” that has shadowed me for so long — but I was beginning to swell with admiration for it until I noticed that it was a Buckleyism being cited by Henry Kissinger (during whose speech at the memorial I had stepped out into the rainswept street rather than be counted as “among” his audience). Hardest of all, as one becomes older, is to accept that sapient remarks can be drawn from the most unwelcome or seemingly improbable sources, and that the apparently more trustworthy sources can lead one astray.

Gore Vidal, for instance, once languidly told me that one should never miss a chance either to have sex or to appear on television. My efforts to live up to this maxim have mainly resulted in my passing many unglamorous hours on off-peak cable TV. It was actually Vidal’s great foe William F. Buckley who launched my part-time television career, by inviting me on to *Firing Line* when I was still quite young, and giving me one of the American Right’s less towering intellects as my foil. The response to the show made my day, and then my week. Yet almost every time I go to a TV studio, I feel faintly guilty. This is pre-eminently the “soft” world of dream and illusion and “perception”: it has only a surrogate relationship to the “hard” world of printed words and written-down concepts to which I’ve tried to dedicate my life, and that surrogate relationship, while it, too, may be “verbal,” consists of being glib rather than fluent, fast rather than quick, sharp rather than pointed. It means reveling in the fact that I have a meretricious, want-it-both-ways side. My only excuse is to say that at least I do not pretend that this is not so.

Another question one is frequently asked about one’s life — and probably has to ask oneself — is: Under what conditions would you lose, or “give” it? I start with a slight bias against the question, which itself has some Hays Office and Heisenberg difficulties. Every November of my boyhood, we put on red poppies and attended highly patriotic

services in remembrance of those who had “given” their lives. But on what assurance did we know that these gifts had really been made? Only the survivors — the living — could attest to it. In order to know that a person had truly laid down his life for his friends, or comrades, one would have to hear it from his own lips, or at least have heard it promised in advance. And that presented another difficulty. Many brave and now dead soldiers had nonetheless been conscripts. The known martyrs — those who actually, voluntarily sought death and rejoiced in the fact — had been the kamikaze pilots, immolating themselves to propitiate a “divine” emperor who looked (as Orwell once phrased it) like a monkey on a stick. Their Christian predecessors had endured torture and death (as well as inflicted it) in order to set up a theocracy. Their modern equivalents would be the suicide murderers, who mostly have the same aim in mind. About people who set out to lose their lives, then, there seems to hang an air of fanaticism: a gigantic sense of self-importance unattractively fused with a masochistic tendency to self-abnegation. Not wholesome.

The better and more realistic test would therefore seem to be: In what cause, or on what principle, would you risk your life? I reflect on the times when I nearly lost mine. One occasion — in Northern Ireland — I have already described on pages 147–148. If I had had a moment to think then, as my life ebbed away, my last thought would have been that I was dying while feeling, and doubtless looking, a bloody fool.* It also wouldn’t even have been in a “good cause,” which is how many people, including my father the Commander, most desire to picture their deaths. In my case it would have been journalistic ambition and youthful foolishness and also — since I had blundered my way into an ambush — what the British soldiers of the time rather unfeelingly called an “own goal.”

In Sarajevo in 1992, while being shown around the starved, bombarded city by the incomparable John Burns, I experienced four near misses in all, three of them in the course of one day. I certainly thought that the Bosnian cause was worth fighting for and worth defending, but I could not take myself seriously enough to imagine that my own demise would have forwarded the cause. (I also discovered that a famous jaunty Churchillism had its limits: the old war-lover wrote in one of his more youthful reminiscences that there is nothing so exhilarating as being shot at without result. In my case, the experience of a whirring, whizzing horror just missing my ear was indeed briefly exciting, but on reflection made me want above all to get to the airport. Catching the plane out with a whole skin is the best part by far.) Or suppose I had been hit by that mortar that burst with an awful shriek so near to me, and turned into a Catherine wheel of body-parts and (even worse) body-ingredients? Once again, I was moved above all not by the thought that my death would “count,” but that it would not count in the least.

I have sometimes discovered this sense, of my own relative unimportance, to be somewhat consoling. In Afghanistan a few years ago, I was stupid enough to get myself cut off and caught, in the outwardly lovely western city of Herat, hard by the Persian border, in a goons’ rodeo duel between two local homicidal potentates (the

journalistic euphemism for this type is “warlord”; the image of the “goons’ rodeo” I have annexed from Saul Bellow). On me was not enough money, not enough food, not enough documentation, not enough medication, not enough bottled water to withstand even a twoday siege. I did not have a cellphone. Nobody in the world, I abruptly realized, knew where I was. I knew nobody in the town and nobody in the town knew (perhaps a good thing) who I was, either. And the local airport had been closed, so that the excrement-colored capital city of Kabul, so far away, seemed suddenly like Parnassus. As all this started to register with me, the square began to fill with those least alluring of all types: strident but illiterate young men with religious headgear, high-velocity weapons, and modern jeeps. I had the chance for one phone call, on a quavering line from the lobby of a terrible hotel. It went through, and an American Special Forces guy told me to wait just where I was. He told me later that when he first pulled up with his team, and saw me standing in the mob with a shopping bag of books and papers and a nervous grin, he thought I had “balls of brass.” He soon lost that impression, and came to appreciate what a danger and nuisance I was, to myself and others. But we still see each other, and correspond (and, heroic as he is, he once soberingly told me, concerning the American presence in Afghanistan: “We’re blondes out there, man. Dumb and innocent as the day is long”).

After a stay in the military post, where among other things I met an officer with the surname of Marx who told me he was a Michael Moore fan, and where not one of the narcotics “enforcement” team believed in the starkly deranged “war on drugs,” I got myself onto an evacuation plane that was at least pointed at the capital city. Gazing out the window at the deforested and browned-over hills that had once been vineyards, and exhaling with relief at my deliverance, I began to feel a really shocking agony in my upper jaw. Had I been clenching my teeth with anxiety over the past few days? The question soon became immaterial as I understood that something was really, deeply wrong with at least one of my fangs and tusks. I could either “do” Afghan dentistry or take the long and penitential flight home to Washington. I remember almost every second of it, mainly because I don’t cry all that easily and by the time I was in Dupont Circle, I was white with misery. Of the later pain I was forced to think: Is this the sort of pang that women speak about with childbirth, where the memory simply and mercifully obliterates the recollection of what one’s peeled nerves can inflict? (In those days I had the same dentist as Vice President Dick Cheney, so was able to imagine my physician’s deft fingers inside those massive shark-like jaws, so ready to slam shut on any sentence to do with torture.) Finally weaned from analgesics and helpless puking, I was able to imagine — actually I obviously mean was quite unable to imagine — what my death would have been like if I had remained stranded in western Afghanistan and, like most people in the history of our primate species, been killed by my own teeth.

On the most recent occasions when I have faced either torture or death, the circumstances were either dubious or avoidable. My career as a writer was transfigured in 1992, when Graydon Carter succeeded Tina Brown as editor of *Vanity Fair* and asked me to become a regular columnist. In those days the magazine was commonly and mis-

leadingly referred to as “glossy” or even “glitzy,” and I privately suspected that there would be a trade-off for the many extra readers and extra dollars which I was being offered. Sooner or later would come pressure to write “down” a bit, or to simplify things for the customers, or to make certain concessions to overliteral fact-checking. (On the contrary, every copy editor and researcher on the magazine does their unstinting best to encourage you to do the same.) My bet with Graydon was essentially a simple one. In exchange for all this salary and all this freedom and all this exposure, he was to be able to ask me to write about, or to undergo, anything. A friend of mine named John Rickatson-Hatt used to say that he would try anything once “except incest and Scottish dancing.” With Graydon this has translated into my saying yes to undergoing a Brazilian bikini wax, and to writing an essay on why women weren’t funny as well as one on the origins of the term blowjob. It’s led to much else besides, including volunteering to have myself waterboarded (very much more frightening though less painful than the bikini wax) and to attending a series of rallies in Beirut in the spring of 2009. One of these was nasty enough — a huge Hezbollah event in the south of the city where great phalanxes of segregated men and women gathered under a banner showing a triumphant nuclear mushroom cloud — and the other was positively inspiring in that it was a colossal, informal, unsegregated, unregimented open-air gathering of Christians, Druze, Sunni Muslims, and secularists in coalition against the Syrian bullies and assassins and their Iranian proxies. I was exalted and exuberant enough, shortly after departing the latter, to make a mistake that still sometimes causes me to whistle and twitch, and even to jerk awake.

Walking along Hamra Street, the still-fashionable boulevard of the city, I suddenly saw a swastika poster. This, I needed no telling, was the symbol of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party. (As a sort of insurance, the Asad regime in Damascus maintains not one but two totalitarian surrogate parties in Lebanon: the Shi’a-run Hezbollah, and the SSNP, which has historically Greek Orthodox Christian roots. This two-track sectarian policy has no effect on those who are determined to define Ba’athism as “secular.”) Turning to my friends Michael Totten and Jonathan Foreman, who were my company on the stroll, I made some biting comment or other and took out my pen to deface the offending display. Not unlike the young man of Calcutta, who tried to write “fuck” on a shutter (and had got to FU, when a pious Hindu knocked him ass over tip in the gutter), I managed a four-letter word or so before being grabbed very hard from behind. A weaselly but wiry little tough guy kept hold of my jacket while speed-dialing for back-up with his other hand. How true it is that on occasions of true fear things seem to slow down and speed up: there were suddenly gaunt-looking creeps everywhere, with wolfish expressions on their faces. I had, without knowing it, disfigured a poster that commemorated one of their “martyrs.”

I suppose I could see that I had a kicking of some sort in my immediate future, and I am still wet with gratitude at the way that Michael and Jonathan stuck by me when they could easily have edged away, but what scared me the most was the way the first man wouldn’t let go of me. I could see the trunk of the car opening up, and one of

those private-prison cellars that all Beiruti gangs so much enjoy maintaining. It was about three o'clock on a brilliantly sunny afternoon.

I got a kicking and a smacking when the gang found its courage, and suffered torn and bloody clothes and broken sunglasses (and was just very slightly mortified when Jonathan wrote later how awful it had been to see this happening to a sixty-year-old man), but in the end there were enough bystanders around to make further horror difficult for the SSNP to bring off. They did terrify one cab driver into refusing us, but a second cabbie was bolder and we contrived to speed away. As we did so, one of the pro-Asad Nazis lunged through the window and caught me a poke high on my cheekbone, aiming for my eye. The pain and damage were negligible, but the look on his face is with me still: it was like meeting the enraptured gaze of one's torturer, or staring down the gunbarrel of a twitching psychopath. I later learned that the last man in trouble on this block — a Sunni Arab journalist who had only tried to photograph the swastika flags — was still in hospital after three months' intensive care.

Attempting to salvage a rag of pride from my having fled the scene, I did my stuff as best I could. With a group of tough Druze members of the Socialist Party I went back to the same corner an hour later to find it unpatrolled. And I kept my date to speak at the American University of Beirut, a night or so after that, even though the SSNP had by then produced a nasty poster with my name and face on it. (The tough Druze Socialist posse, you can be very sure, were invited along to that event, also.) But the plain fact is that I was rattled, and that I knew perfectly well that — had I really understood what I was doing on my little anti-swastika excursion — I would not have done it.

I still make sure to go, at least once every year, to a country where things cannot be taken for granted and where there is either too much law and order or too little. (Worst of all, I have found, are those post-Hobbesian places — such as the Congo — where tyranny and anarchy manage a fearful symmetry, and occur simultaneously.) One of the articles for Graydon Carter that won me the most praise was an essay titled "Visit to a Small Planet," in which I described acquiring another identity and bribing my way into North Korea. Every time I got a tribute to the success of this piece I felt a slight access of shame, because only I could appreciate what a failure it was. I had exerted all my slack literary muscles to evoke the eerie wretchedness and interstellar frigidity of the place, which is an absolutist despotism where the slaves are no longer even fed regularly (and is thus its own version of the worst of all possible worlds), but I knew with a sick certainty that I had absolutely not managed to convey to my readers anything of how it might feel to be a North Korean even for a day. Erich Fromm might perhaps have managed it: in a place with absolutely no private or personal life, with the incessant worship of a mediocre career-sadist as the only culture, where all citizens are the permanent property of the state, the highest form of pointlessness has been achieved. When my friend Tom Driberg had come home from the British Parliament's delegation to the opening-up of the Nazi camps, he had felt himself inadequate to the task of describing them, at a dinner table which included Dylan Thomas. (It occurs

to me now that perhaps a dinner table wasn't the ideal setting to begin with.) "They should send poets there," remarked Thomas. And one wishes that they had, or that some poets had gone of their own volition, if only to contest Theodor Adorno's later and highly dubious statement that after Auschwitz there could be no poetry.

My own efforts have certainly schooled me in my shortcomings as a writer, as well as proved to me what I suspected: that I lack the courage to be a real soldier or a real dissident. I have seen just enough warfare and political violence to know that, while I was pleased not to "crack" at first coming under fire, I could never be a full-time uniformed combatant or freedom fighter, or even war correspondent. And I have been arrested and locked up frequently enough — for short enough periods of time — to know that my faculties of resistance in that crucial department are slight as well. On the sole occasion when I came close to being tortured, by professional waterboarders who were nonetheless under my orders, I was so ashamed of how quickly I had been "broken" that I asked them to do it again, and lasted perhaps a few seconds longer for the sake of appearances.

A Short Footnote on the Grape and the Grain

In the continuing effort to gain some idea of how one appears to other people, nothing is more useful than exposing oneself to an audience of strangers in a bookstore or a lecture hall. Very often, for example, sitting anxiously in the front row are motherly-looking ladies who, when they later come to have their books inscribed, will say such reassuring things as: "It's so nice to meet you in person: I had the impression that you were so angry and maybe unhappy." I hadn't been at all aware of creating this effect. (One of them, asking me to sign her copy of my *Letters to a Young Contrarian*, said to me wistfully: "I bought a copy of this to give to my son, hoping he'd become a contrarian, but he refused." Adorno would have appreciated the paradox.)

More affecting still is the anxious, considerate way that my hosts greet me, sometimes even at the airport, with a large bottle of Johnnie Walker Black Label. It's almost as if they feel that they must propitiate the demon that I bring along with me. Interviewers arriving at my apartment frequently do the same, as if appeasing the insatiable. I don't want to say anything that will put even a small dent into this happy practice, but I do feel that I owe a few words. There was a time when I could reckon to outperform all but the most hardened imbibers, but I now drink relatively carefully. This ought to be obvious by induction: on average I produce at least a thousand words of printable copy every day, and sometimes more. I have never missed a deadline. I give a class or a lecture or a seminar perhaps four times a month and have never been late for an engagement or shown up the worse for wear. My boyish visage and my mellifluous tones are fairly regularly to be seen and heard on TV and radio, and nothing will amplify the slightest slur more than the studio microphone. (I think I did once appear on the BBC when fractionally whiffled, but those who asked me about it later were not sure whether I was not, a few days after September 11, a bit angry as well as a bit tired.) Anyway, it should be obvious that I couldn't do all of this if I was what the English so bluntly call a "piss-artist."

It's the professional deformation of many writers, and has ruined not a few. (I remember Kingsley Amis, himself no slouch, saying that he could tell on what page of the novel Paul Scott had reached for the bottle and thrown caution to the winds.) I work at home, where there is indeed a bar-room, and can suit myself. But I don't. At about half past midday, a decent slug of Mr. Walker's amber restorative, cut with Perrier water (an ideal delivery system) and no ice. At luncheon, perhaps half a bottle of red wine: not always more but never less. Then back to the desk, and ready to repeat the treatment at the evening meal. No "after dinner drinks" — most especially nothing sweet and never, ever any brandy. "Nightcaps" depend on how well the day went, but always the mixture as before. No mixing: no messing around with a gin here and a vodka there.

Alcohol makes other people less tedious, and food less bland, and can help provide what the Greeks called *entheos*, or the slight buzz of inspiration when reading or writing. The only worthwhile miracle in the New Testament — the transmutation of water into wine during the wedding at Cana — is a tribute to the persistence of Hellenism in an otherwise austere Judaea. The same applies to the seder at Passover, which is obviously modeled on the Platonic symposium: questions are asked (especially of the young) while wine is circulated. No better form of sodality has ever been devised: at Oxford one was positively expected to take wine during tutorials. The tongue must be untied. It's not a coincidence that Omar Khayyam, rebuking and ridiculing the stone-faced Iranian mullahs of his time, pointed to the value of the grape as a mockery of their joyless and sterile regime. Visiting today's Iran, I was delighted to find that citizens made a point of defying the clerical ban on booze, keeping it in their homes for visitors even if they didn't particularly take to it themselves, and bootlegging it with great brio and ingenuity. These small revolutions affirm the human.

At the wild Saturnalia that climaxes John Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat*, the charismatic Danny manages to lay so many women that, afterward, even the females who didn't receive his attentions prefer to claim, rather than appear to have been overlooked, that they were included, too. I can't make any comparable boast but quite often I get second-hand reports about people who claim to have spent evenings in my company that belong to song, story, and legend when it comes to the Dionysian. I once paid a visit to the grotesque holding-pen that the United States government maintains at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba. There wasn't an unsupervised moment on the whole trip, and the main meal we ate — a heavily calorific affair that was supposed to demonstrate how well-nourished the detainees were — was made even more inedible by the way that water (with the option of a can of Sprite) flowed like wine. Yet a few days later I ran into a friend at the White House who told me half-admiringly: "Way to go at Guantánamo: they say you managed to get your own bottle and open it down on the beach and have a party." This would have been utterly unfeasible in that bizarre Cuban enclave, half-madrassa and half-stockade, but it was still completely and willingly believed. Publicity means that actions are judged by reputations and not

the other way about: I never wonder how it happens that mythical figures in religious history come to have fantastic rumors credited to their names.

“Hitch: making rules about drinking can be the sign of an alcoholic,” as Martin Amis once teasingly said to me. (Adorno would have savored that, as well.) Of course, watching the clock for the start-time is probably a bad sign, but here are some simple pieces of advice for the young. Don’t drink on an empty stomach: the main point of the refreshment is the enhancement of food. Don’t drink if you have the blues: it’s a junk cure. Drink when you are in a good mood. Cheap booze is a false economy. It’s not true that you shouldn’t drink alone: these can be the happiest glasses you ever drain. Hangovers are another bad sign, and you should not expect to be believed if you take refuge in saying you can’t properly remember last night. (If you really don’t remember, that’s an even worse sign.) Avoid all narcotics: these make you more boring rather than less and are not designed — as are the grape and the grain — to enliven company. Be careful about up-grading too far to single malt Scotch: when you are voyaging in rough countries it won’t be easily available. Never even think about driving a car if you have taken a drop. It’s much worse to see a woman drunk than a man: I don’t know quite why this is true but it just is. Don’t ever be responsible for it.

* In the report of our arrest in the Prague Communist paper *Rude Pravo*, another production that if read aloud could cause flying creatures to fall stunned from the sky, it was rightly reported that some of the suspicious foreigners detained were thought to be sympathizers with Leon Trotsky. As a sort of editorial nudge to keep the prejudices of the readers awake, as well as the readers themselves, there followed a parenthesis explaining that Trotsky was a pseudonym for “Bronstein.” Every little bit helps, or so the crack editorial team must have thought.

* The sequel, which I cannot not tell, was this. We received an invitation to come down to Baghdad, which was in those awful days considered to be lethally unsafe even in the “Green Zone.” I told Alexander that it was his decision to make, and that nobody would think any the less of him for declining. He very coolly replied “But let’s go,” and so we did. I tried not to show how proud I was, which I now think was a mistake.

** Many writers, especially male ones, have told us that it is the decease of the father which opens the prospect of one’s own end, and affords an unobstructed view of the undug but awaiting grave that says “you’re next.” Unfilial as this may seem, that was not at all so in my own case. It was only when I watched Alexander being born that I knew at once that my own funeral director had very suddenly, but quite unmistakably, stepped onto the stage. I was surprised by how calmly I took this, but also by how reluctant I was to mention it to my male contemporaries. That changed only when one of these, my friend Chaim Tannenbaum, invited me home to view his own first son, Moses. “You haven’t met the kaddish,” was his unforgettable way of phrasing the invitation. This was also when I appreciated the entire implication of the poem that Jorge Luis Borges had given me — see page 199.

* Our Friday lunch vernacular, that used to distinguish between “plain fools” and “damn fools,” upgrading or downgrading as necessary to “bloody fool” and “fucking fool,” might have classified me as the latter, also.

Thinking Thrice about the Jewish Question . . .

The Jewish people and their fate are the living witness for the absence of redemption. This, one could say, is the meaning of the chosen people; the Jews are chosen to prove the absence of redemption.

—Leo Strauss: “Why We Remain Jews” [1962]

I think I may well be a Jew.

—Sylvia Plath: “Daddy” [1962]

In the early days of the December that my father was to die, my younger brother brought me the news that I was a Jew. I was then a transplanted Englishman in America, married, with one son, and, though unconsolated by any religion, a nonbelieving member of two Christian churches. On hearing the tidings, I was pleased to find that I was pleased.

Immediately above is the opening paragraph of my essay for Ben Sonnenberg’s quarterly *Grand Street* in the summer of 1988. It was reprinted quite a bit, and gave the eponymous title to my first collection of essays, *Prepared for the Worst*. It was my earliest and until now my only excursion into memoir, was largely positive and even upbeat if only because my semi-Semitism was on my mother’s side rather than, as with Sylvia Plath, a distraught paternal bequest, and it closed with the easily uttered words “To be continued . . .”

For the first forty-odd years of my life I had thought of myself as English, latterly with ambitions to become an Anglo-American. This national self-definition underwent an interesting change as a consequence of my maternal grandmother’s outliving both of my parents. Yvonne took her own life at a distressingly young age. My father’s robust health began to fail him in his late seventies and he died in late 1987. My brother, Peter, in the meantime, had become engaged to a Jewish girl and had taken her to meet “Dodo” — old Mrs. Dorothy Hickman — our only surviving grandparent. Later, and after she’d congratulated him on his choice, she rather disconcerted Peter by saying: “She’s Jewish, isn’t she?” He had agreed that this was the case and then she’d disconcerted him even further by saying, “Well, I’ve got something to tell you. So are you.”

How had this taken so long to emerge, and why was it still to be counted as a family secret? My mother had not wanted anyone to know, and indeed my father had been all his life unaware of the fact, and was to remain so to the end. I have now been back

through all the possible recollections and am fairly sure that I can guess the reason, but here's the trail I followed.

In what was once German Prussia, in the district of Posen and very near the border of Poland, there was a town called Kempen which had, for much of its existence, a Jewish majority. (It is now called Kempno and is about an hour's drive from the Polish city of Wrocław, formerly Breslau.) A certain Mr. Nathaniel Blumenthal, born in Kempen in 1844, decided to leave or was possibly taken by his parents, but at all events arrived in the English Midlands and, though he married "out," became the father of thirteen Orthodox children. It appears that he had disembarked at Liverpool (the joke among English Jews is that some of the duller emigrants did that, imagining that they had already reached New York) and settled in Leicester by 1871. On later census forms he gives his occupation as "tailor." In 1893, one of old Nate's daughters married a certain Lionel Levin, of Liverpool (the Levins also hailing originally from the Posen/Poznan area), and the British bureaucracy's marriage certificates certify them as having been wed "according to the rites of the German and Polish Jews." My mother's mother, whose birth name was Dorothy Levin, was born three years later, in 1896.

It doesn't seem to have taken them long to decide on assimilation, in that by the time of the First World War the Blumenthal family name had become "Dale" and the Levins were called "Lynn." This might have had something to do with the general revulsion against German names at that epoch, when even the British Royal Family scrapped its Saxe-Coburg-Gotha titles and became the House of Windsor, conveniently metamorphosing other names like "Battenberg" into "Mountbatten." But nominal assimilation didn't quite extend to the religious kind. Dodo could recall drawing the curtains on Friday night and bringing out the menorah, and also fasting on Yom Kippur ("even if only for my figure, dear"), but she also remembered being discreet about this because in Oxford, where my great-grandparents had by then moved, there was a bit of low-level prejudice.

My father had died very soon after Peter brought me the Jewish news, and I had flown over to England for the funeral (which Dodo was too frail to attend) and then gone at once to see her. What I wanted to understand was this: How had I been so incurious, and so easily deceived? She seemed determined to act the part of a soap-opera Jewish granny ("I could always see it in you and your brother: you both had the Jewish brains . . ."), and she certainly and rather abruptly looked Jewish to me, which she hadn't while I was growing up. Or perhaps better to say, when I was a boy I wasn't in any sense Jew-conscious: Dodo had dark ringletted hair and a complexion to match, and when I registered this at all, it was with the stray thought that she looked like a gypsy. But when you are young you take your relatives for granted, and even if you do ask childishly awkward questions you tend to accept the answer. "Hickman" wasn't an especially exotic name — my mother used to laugh that she couldn't wait to get rid of it and then wound up marrying a Hitchens — and when Peter and I asked what had happened to Dodo's husband, we were hushed with the information that he

had “died in the war.” Since all family stories of all kinds were always about “the war” we accepted this without question, as being overwhelmingly probable. It was years later when Peter discovered that Dodo had been married to a drunken and adulterous wife-beater, Lionel Hickman by name, who had continued our mischling tradition by converting to Judaism in order to marry her, given her an all-around vile time, and then been run over by a tram during the blackout that accompanied the Nazi blitzkrieg. Killed in the war, to be sure.

As I sat with the old lady in her little suburban parlor in the south London suburbs, I kept asking myself if I had any memories that might amount to premonitions of, or other awarenesses of, this heritage. Once one starts looking for such things, I know, the chance of “discovering” them has a tendency to increase. There on the mantelpiece was a photograph of Yvonne, looking young and blonde and venturesome and obviously quite well equipped to “pass” as a Gentile. “She didn’t much want to be a Jew,” said Dodo, “and I didn’t think your father’s family would have liked the idea, either. So we just decided to keep it to ourselves.” This was becoming dispiriting. My father had been a reactionary and a pessimist — the Private Eye caricatures of Denis Thatcher had always reminded me of his insistently Eeyore-ish tone, sometimes taken up by my brother — but not at all a bigot. If anything about Yvonne’s ethnic background might have given him check or pause, it would have been the discovery that her ancestors had identified themselves as German. The Commander’s view, echoing that of the Morgenthau Plan, was that post-1945 Germany would have been better if totally depopulated . . . But this he would not have thought of as a prejudice.

I was suddenly visited by a long-ago memory of my father’s father, breaking into a harangue when it became generally known in family circles that his elder grandson had declared for the Labour Party and for socialism. This must therefore have been about 1964 or perhaps, given the glacial pace at which news was delivered on his side of the family, as late as 1965 or ’66. He favored me, I remember, in his rather grinding and harsh Portsmouth tones, with a sort of bestiary of sinister surnames, all tending to show the unsoundness of Labour’s then-parliamentary Left. I can remember it now: “Look at them: Sidney Silverman, John Mendelson, Tom Driberg, Ian Mikardo” (this last a Portsmouth lad into whom, along with the fat-headed future Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan, my schoolmaster grandpa had attempted to wallop the rudiments of an education). At the time I hadn’t any idea what he meant to convey by all this, unless it was to identify unpatriotically German names — my later pal Tom Driberg had suffered cognomen-persecution all his life without being in the least Jewish — but I was later able to guess by a sort of reverse-engineering.* The old man was very forbidding in manner at the best of times: I can’t imagine what it would have been like for my mother, let alone her mother, to be introduced to the patriarch in 1945, when her marriage to the Commander was first mooted. One of the Commander’s very few surviving letters makes my point for me: it’s to his brother Ray and is dated 28 March 1945, from HMS Jamaica, which means that the warship must have been lying at anchor in the nearby Portsmouth harbor:

Dear Ray,

Many thanks for your letter of felicitation. Yes I quite agree that it does need a sense of proportion to enter the homestead and emerge unscathed and I thought it as well to put Yvonne through this acid test before enquiring whether she was further interested . . .

I don't think it would or could have taken Yvonne very long to decide against embarking upon some easy chat with her prospective father-in-law, about the long line of milliners, tailors, kosher butchers, and (to be fair) dentists from which I now know she had sprung. Looking back, I can't see my grandpa ever having had much use for any of the above professions. What he liked, or what I remember him liking, was lavishly illustrated histories of Protestant missionaries in Africa. On this topic, she could have been of little comfort or joy to him.

Sitting now with Dodo and recalling all this, I had to ask myself what Jewishness had meant to me, if anything, when I was a boy. I was completely sure that it meant nothing at all until I was thirteen, except as a sort of subtext to the Christian Bible stories with which I had been regaled at prep school. In some odd fashion the Nazarene Jesus had been a sort of rabbi, and horribly executed under the mocking title of "King of the Jews," but it had also been the Jews who most thirsted for his torture and death. Very, very occasionally some boy would make a mean or meaning or even demeaning remark about this, but in my early life there were no actual Jewish targets at which to direct such stuff. Moreover, the Nuremberg trials were a recent memory and, though most of our TV and movie fare still made it seem as if the Second World War had been a personal matter between Hitler and the better sort of English or British person, there were moments of documentary footage which showed the barely conceivable human detritus of the Final Solution, being bulldozed into mass graves. My mother in my hearing, when I was very small, had once used the expression "anti-Semitism" and I remember feeling with a sort of qualm that without having it fully explained, I somehow knew what it meant.

In Cambridge later on, there were Jewish boys at the school, and I suppose I noticed that they tended to have curlier hair and fleshier noses, rather as I had been led to expect. They also had names which were different — Perutz, the son of the Nobel Prize winner; Kissin, the clever boy who recommended that everyone read the *New Statesman*; Wertheimer, who wore a big lapel-button saying that "Hanging Is Murder." They were among the few supporters of my failed Labour campaign of 1964 and I suppose that, subliminally, they confirmed my grandfather's view that there was something almost axiomatically subversive about Jewishness. In history classes I read about the Dreyfus case and in English class wrote a defense of Shylock against his Venetian tormentors. There was mild, occasional anti-Jewish vulgarity to be heard among some of the more dense boys — always a version of the same cliché about the Jews being over-sharp in business — but one almost never saw or heard it directed at an actual Jew.

In the summer of 1967, between my leaving my boarding school and going to Oxford, and while I was undergoing my long-distance postal mentorship with Peter Sedgwick, the various Arab “republics” and feudal monarchies made common cause, it seemed, in a war to extinguish the State of Israel. It seemed to me obvious that here was a tiny state, clinging to the seaboard of the Eastern Mediterranean, and faced not with defeat but with existential obliteration. Like many leftists of the time, I sympathized by instinct with the Jewish state. I didn’t do so completely without misgivings: I had heard so many foam-flecked Tories raving on about the hated “Nasser” ever since the Suez war of 1956 that I was on my guard at hearing the same rhetoric again. And I sent off in the mail for a pamphlet that was co-produced by the “Israeli Socialist Organization” and the “Palestine Democratic Front,” a screed which purported to offer a nonsectarian solution but also proved to be written in a jargon that was based on no known language. Events anyway outpaced the pamphlet. Israel’s paratroopers were soon at the Wailing Wall and at Sharm el-Sheikh, and all the braggadocio of Nasserism rhetoric was shown as both rather empty and rather hateful. In those days I still thought, as most people did, of the struggle between Israel and “the Arabs” and not Israel and the Palestinians.

“But just look how the press treats the Israelites [sic],” said Dodo with indignation, abolishing my reverie and recalling me to the unchanging present in this respect. “We’ve never been liked, you know. I suppose I shouldn’t say it, but I think it’s because they’re jealous.” By this stage of my life I knew slightly too much to accept this ancient self-pity as the explanation of everything, but I didn’t want to have an argument with my sweet and sad old grandma so I took my leave and, turning at her little garden gate, somewhat awkwardly uttered the salute “Shalom!” She responded, “Shalom, shalom” as easily as if we’d always greeted and parted this way and, as I wrote it down at the time, I turned and trudged off to the station in the light, continuous English rain that was also my birthright.

Landscapes of Memory

“The deep, deep sleep of England,” wrote Orwell half-admiringly and half-despairingly about the eternal and unchanging charm of the southern English countryside as seen from the train between the English Channel and London itself. Being newly returned from the ever-freshening hells of the Spanish Civil War, he remembered enough to add rather severely that England might not jerk out of this slumber until it was abruptly roused by the roar and crash of bombs. (Not far from the peaceful, rural Anglican churchyard in which he lies buried are the Cotswold villages of Upper and Lower Slaughter. Upper Slaughter is almost the only village in England that does not have a war memorial to commemorate the fallen of 1914–1918. These few hamlets are known in the war-memorial literature as “blessed,” if you can imagine such a designation. What does that make the dead of the other hamlets?)

Even though I grew up in south coast naval towns where whole sleeves of streetscape had been stripped to show the scars of Nazi bombardment, I never failed to be struck by how swiftly one could slip from the city, into the woods or along the back roads and onto the downs, and be transported* into a landscape that was almost contemplative in its quietude. The off-beat names of the Hampshire and Sussex villages — Warblington was one of my favorites, with its flinted Saxon church, but East and indeed West Wittering ran it pretty close — seemed to convey a near Wodehousian and Blandings-like beatitude and serenity. There were two especially favorite places within an easy drive, one of them the renowned Selbourne, where Gilbert White had observed the ecology of just one little place in order to produce a micro-masterpiece of natural history, and then Chawton, near Alton. Some readers may already have caught their breath, I hope enviously.

It was as easy as breathing to go and have tea near the place where Jane Austen had so wittily scribbled and so painfully died. One of the things that causes some critics to marvel at Miss Austen is the laconic way in which, as a daughter of the epoch that saw the Napoleonic Wars, she contrives like a Greek dramatist to keep it off the stage while she concentrates on the human factor. I think this comes close to affectation on the part of some of her admirers. Captain Frederick Wentworth in *Persuasion*, for example, is partly of interest to the female sex because of the “prize” loot he has extracted from his encounters with Bonaparte’s navy. Still, as one born after Hiroshima I can testify that a small Hampshire township, however large the number of names of the fallen on its village-green war memorial, is more than a world away from any unpleasantness on the European mainland or the high or narrow seas that lie between. (I used to love the detail that Hampshire’s “New Forest” is so called because it was only planted for the hunt in the late eleventh century.) I remember watching with my father and brother through the fence of Stanstead House, the Sussex mansion of the Earl of Bessborough, one evening in the early 1960s, and seeing an immense golden meadow carpeted entirely by grazing rabbits. I’ll never keep that quiet, or be that still, again.

This was around the time of countrywide protest against the introduction of a horrible laboratory-confected disease, named “myxomatosis,” into the warrens of old England to keep down the number of nibbling rodents. Richard Adams’s lapine masterpiece *Watership Down* is the remarkable work that it is, not merely because it evokes the world of hedgerows and chalk-downs and streams and spinneys better than anything since *The Wind in the Willows*, but because it is only really possible to imagine gassing and massacre and organized cruelty on this ancient and green and gently rounded landscape if it is organized and carried out against herbivores.

In the German tongue, in the Polish town

Scraped flat by the roller

Of wars, wars, wars . . .

— Sylvia Plath: “Daddy” (1962)

“If this is Upper Silesia,” observed P.G. Wodehouse after being interned in Poland by the Nazis in 1940, “what on earth must Lower Silesia be like?” He was being flippant,

but with the excuse that he could have had no idea of what was about to make this region famous.

When it came time for me to make my “roots” visit, in search of my mother’s Polish and German ancestors, it was actually for the lower-lying latitudes of Silesia that I set off. The city of Wrocław, which until 1945 had been called Breslau, was the big historic melting-pot town that set the tone even for places across the Prussian border like Kempen/Kempno. When Dodo and others spoke of the place of their forebears, it was “Breslau” that they rather proudly if sadly named. And it was easy to see why. There was nothing provincial about it. In his book *Microcosm*, co-written with Roger Moorhouse, Norman Davies illustrates its eminence as a hub of Bohemian and Prussian life as well as the epicenter of the Silesian question, itself the trigger of the Seven Years’ War. “Wars, wars, wars”: reading up on the region I came across one moment when quintessential Englishness had in fact intersected with this darkling plain. In 1906 Winston Churchill, then the minister responsible for British colonies, had been honored by an invitation from Kaiser Wilhelm II to attend the annual maneuvers of the Imperial German Army, held at Breslau. The Kaiser was “resplendent in the uniform of the White Silesian Cuirassiers” and his massed and regimented infantry . . .

Reminded one more of great Atlantic rollers than human formations. Clouds of cavalry, avalanches of field-guns and — at that time a novelty — squadrons of motor-cars (private and military) completed the array. For five hours the immense defilade continued. Yet this was only a twentieth of the armed strength of the regular German Army before mobilization.

Strange to find Winston Churchill and Sylvia Plath both choosing the word “roller,” in both its juggernaut and wavelike declensions, for that scene.

I had a ghost or two at my elbow the entire time I was on (what is now) Polish soil. These revenants were of two kinds. The first, which was the nicest, had been gently summoned by my relatives known and unknown. Every article and review and book that I have ever published has constituted an appeal to the person or persons to whom I should have talked before I dared to write it. I never launch any little essay without the hope — and the fear, because the encounter may also be embarrassing — that I shall draw a letter that begins, “Dear Mr. Hitchens, it seems that you are unaware that . . .” It is in this sense that authorship is collaborative with “the reader.” And there’s no help for it: you only find out what you ought to have known by pretending to know at least some of it already.

It doesn’t matter how obscure or arcane or esoteric your place of publication may be: some sweet law ensures that the person who should be scrutinizing your work eventually does do so. Thus I came into contact with a woman who was, or would have been if they had known of each other, and thus was anyway, my mother’s first cousin. She now lived on the coast of Norfolk. One of her Blumenthal/Dale relatives had seen one of the reprints of my original article for Ben Sonnenberg, to which I had given the additional title: “On Not Knowing the Half of It.” Cast your bread on the waters . . . I’ll condense the time that all this took but simply say that by the time I arrived in

Poland I had a goodish oil-painting portrait of Nathan Blumenthal, a fair piece of his genealogy, and two chief questions remaining. Why had he left when he did, and were there any of his relations still around?

Jane Austen died two years after the Battle of Waterloo, where the combined forces of the Duke of Wellington and (as some British historians remember to mention) the Prussians under Marshal Blucher put an end to the Napoleonic era. On the territories of the Prussian/Silesian frontier, the echoes of this and later events are very far from being “noises off.” In particular was this true for the Jews of Kempen/Kempno. In 1812 Napoleon had issued his emancipation decree, liberating the Jews from ancient church-mandated legal disabilities. In 1814/1815 the Kempen Jews had begun the construction of a rather magnificent synagogue in a sort of neo-Palladian style. At the time, they constituted perhaps eighty percent of the town. I found it unsettling yet confirming to think of this side of my mitochondrial DNA being replicated in this context: I have had my mother’s wing of my genetic ancestry analyzed by the National Geographic tracing service and there it all is: the arrow moving northward from the African savannah, skirting the Mediterranean by way of the Levant, and passing through Eastern and Central Europe before crossing to the British Isles. And all of this knowable by an analysis of the cells on the inside of my mouth.

I almost prefer the more rambling and indirect and journalistic investigation, which seems somehow less . . . deterministic. In Breslau/Wrocław, where I arrived on the day that Professor Leszek Kolakowski died, a national hero, and was honored to be invited to speak at a meeting in his memory, I was lucky to be introduced to Mr. Jerzy Kichler, the head of the local Jewish community and a veteran of the Polish-Jewish diaspora. He also helps curate the city’s Jewish cemetery, around which he guided me. It’s like a memorial to Atlantis or Lyonesse: these are the stone buoys that mark a drowned world. From this city came the parents of Edith Stein, later martyred as a convert to Catholicism (and as a nun) in Auschwitz. Max Born, the Nobel laureate in physics in 1954 — and the man to whom Einstein wrote that celebrated 1926 letter about god’s refusal to play dice with the universe — was born here, to a father who hailed from Kempen. (Max’s daughter Irene moved to Cambridge and married a leader of the Enigma/Ultra disencrytion team: their daughter became famous under the name Olivia Newton-John.) Born’s conversion to Lutheranism did him no more good than Edith Stein’s when the Nazis applied their own laws about who was a Jew. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, another son of this place, had a twin sister who married a converted Jew. He was hanged in Flossenburg concentration camp — his murder commemorated in one of W.H. Auden’s weaker poems — on almost the last day of the war in April 1945.

One must beware of the temptation to invest everything with significance in retrospect, yet it chills the soul a bit to learn that from this great city-center of humane science and medicine, which produced the good doctor Alois Alzheimer as well as the physicist Max Born, Professor Fritz Haber moved his operations to Berlin in 1914 in order to place his chemistry skills at the service of a military government in search of weapons of mass destruction. (He oversaw the German chlorine-gas attack at Ypres

and after 1918 concerned himself with the development of Zyklon-B, thus radically attenuating his own posterity.)

Mr. Kichler was an excellent guide through all this, offering information when it was requested and leaving me alone when I seemed to need that. Together we made a point of visiting the tomb of Ernst Geiger, one of the originators of Reform Judaism, and of Ferdinand Lassalle, founder of the first German Social Democratic party (who in a private letter from Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels had been rather regrettably described as a “Jewish nigger”). He had been born on 13 April, the birthday that I share with Thomas Jefferson, Seamus Heaney, Alan Clark, Eudora Welty, and Orlando Letelier. The dates and the territory could also be made to “fit” with my own historical obsessions: when Nathan Blumenthal was born in 1844, Marx was just beginning to publish his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts in the Rhineland to the west and, by the time he first turned up in English paperwork in 1871, Rosa Luxemburg was being born, in the Russian-Polish town of Zamo far to the east.

Between these two points lay a sort of burned-over district, charred and trampled and desecrated in every direction and in every fashion. Trotsky had referred to the Hitler-Stalin pact as “the midnight of the century,” and it was across this terrain that the midnight had fallen. Wrocław/Breslau lies along the River Oder and boasts more than a hundred bridges. One of the best ways to see it is like Venice, from the various “arms” and “shoulders,” as the natives say, of the waterways. Between it and Kempen/Kempno are many rolling fields and green copses and forests, both coniferous and deciduous. But even the greenery can seem bleak at best or menacing at worst, when one recalls what was done in the shadow of those trees.

At least in Wrocław/Breslau the old “White Stork” synagogue had been restored, for a community of a few hundred, and the Jewish cemetery’s stones when possible repaired or re-lapidated. But in Kempen/Kempno there was only desolation. Trying to translate back to English landscape, one would need to be evoking Oliver Goldsmith or Thomas Gray, or John Clare, on the abandonment and emptiness. But even that would be relative, and as much to do with the loss of sheep as the loss of people. Old Mr. Kichler and I could easily have missed — and nearly did miss — the turnoff for the town. An obscure crossroads, some railway tracks intersecting, a large and illuminated McDonald’s hamburger sign: this could have been a nondescript Nowheresville in mid-prairie America. The local nickname for the eastern or Yiddish part of Kempen/Kempno was, it turned out, “Kamchatka” — the most extreme part of Siberia. Nobody quite seemed to know how such an irretrievably bare title came to be conferred, but it seemed apt enough. And the place seemed bizarrely unpeopled: when I later looked at the photographs I had taken, there wasn’t a soul to be seen. My late friend Amos Elon has written the best history of the German-Jewish relationship: it’s called *The Pity of It All*. I was very stirred to find, when I opened it, that he had placed on his epigraph page the opening lines of James Fenton’s poem “A German Requiem”:

It is not what they built. It is what they knocked down.

It is not the houses. It is the spaces between the houses.

It is not the streets that exist. It is the streets that no longer exist.

The lines recurred to me as I heard the echo of my footsteps. The noble old synagogue had been profaned and turned into a stable by the Nazis, and left open to the elements by the Communists, at least after they had briefly employed it as a “furniture facility.” It had then been vandalized and perhaps accidentally set aflame by incurious and callous local “youths.” Only the well-crafted walls really stood, though a recent grant from the European Union had allowed a makeshift roof and some wooden scaffolding to hold up and enclose the shell until further notice. Adjacent were the remains of a mikvah bath for the ritual purification of women, and a kosher abattoir for the ritual slaughter of beasts: I had to feel that it was grotesque that these obscurantist relics were the only ones to have survived. In a corner of the yard lay a pile of smashed stones on which appeared inscriptions in Hebrew and sometimes Yiddish. These were all that remained of the gravestones. There wasn’t a Jew left in the town, and there hadn’t been one, said Mr. Kichler, since 1945.

As we paged through the surviving municipal records, it actually became fairly easy to see how a once-flourishing community might have decided to start emigrating well before that, and at about the time that Nathan had. Subsequent to the 1812 Napoleonic edict abolishing anti-Jewish laws, the indigenous religious prejudices had reasserted themselves. Starting in 1833 there had been a series of Prussian measures, often associated with the name of a statesman named Wagner, increasing taxes for Jews and making them pay for the upkeep of Christian schools and institutions, as well as adding to their burden of military service. After the aspirations of 1848 had been crushed, it got worse yet: the leader of the ultraright authoritarians in the Prussian state parliament became Professor Friedrich Julius Stahl. (He’d been born Joel Golson, and it wasn’t enough for him to have converted to that bastardization of primitive Judaism known as Christianity: no, like Stalin after him he also wanted a surname of steel.) Amos Elon takes up the story:

In the largest German state, where two-thirds of the Jewish population lived, he enunciated the “philosophical” basis for continuing discrimination against his former co-religionists. He was not a great thinker but an able propagandist, persuasively articulating the conservative demand for “authority” and the sacred union of church and throne.

1848 had been a year of revolution and liberation for much of Europe, but other people’s ardent nationalism isn’t always, as they say, “good for the Jews.” It seemed probable that the brighter members of the Blumenthal clan would have seen and felt the atmosphere thickening. In this period, also, according to the records, there had been quite a severe epidemic of cholera. Outbreaks like that aren’t always good for the Jews either: they sometimes even manage to get themselves blamed for the plague, or for the poisoning of the wells.

But had the family left anyone behind? It’s a common enough name so I wasn’t sure how I would be able to distinguish between cadet and collateral branches, but the necessity for making such a discrimination was soon enough removed from me. The

editor of the local newspaper, Mr. Mirosław Lapa, had produced an illustrated history of the Jews of Kempen/Kempno, titled in Polish *Kepiński Żydzi*. Its photographs showed some of the major splendors, including the imposing temple in its high old times and the family groups gathered contentedly in front of thriving shops. There were few pictures of the later miseries, but there were some lists of names . . . Every Blumenthal I could find in the index had wound up on the transports to Auschwitz. So that was that.

I once spoke to someone who had survived the genocide in Rwanda, and she said to me that there was now nobody left on the face of the earth, either friend or relative, who knew who she was. No one who remembered her girlhood and her early mischief and family lore; no sibling or boon companion who could tease her about that first romance; no lover or pal with whom to reminisce. All her birthdays, exam results, illnesses, friendships, kinships — gone. She went on living, but with a *tabula rasa* as her diary and calendar and notebook. I think of this every time I hear of the callow ambition to “make a new start” or to be “born again”: Do those who talk this way truly wish for the slate to be wiped? Genocide means not just mass killing, to the level of extermination, but mass obliteration to the verge of extinction. You wish to have one more reflection on what it is to have been made the object of a “clean” sweep? Try Vladimir Nabokov’s microcosmic miniature story “Signs and Symbols,” which is about angst and misery in general but also succeeds in placing it in what might be termed a starkly individual perspective. The album of the distraught family contains a faded study of

Aunt Rosa, a fussy, angular, wild-eyed old lady, who had lived in a tremulous world of bad news, bankruptcies, train accidents, cancerous growths — until the Germans put her to death, together with all the people she had worried about.

We live only a few conscious decades, and we fret ourselves enough for several lifetimes. The various eggs and zygotes and other ingredients necessary for the subsequent conception and generation of the non-Anglo-Saxon half of the present author thus continued migrating, rather like the lucky and clever rabbits who left for *Watership Down* in good time, before the nozzles of poison had been callously shoved into the inlets of the ecology. Lonely and uncertain and angst-burdened as my grandmother’s and mother’s lives were in some ways to be, they took place in refulgent sunshine compared to what they had missed by their forebears having gotten the hell out of Kempno.

I still wasn’t completely done with my investigations of this enthrallingly upsetting region of the past. In the case of another relative — my ancestor-in-law David Sz-mulevski, a sort of great-uncle — the trail also went as far as Auschwitz but just for once did not end there. Born in the town of Kolo in the Poznań district in 1912, this man had a crepuscular existence on the edge of my family’s awareness. He had, it was said, been a leading anti-Nazi resister. He owns a chapter to himself in the anthology *They Fought Back*, a book which combats the wretched image of European Jews as fatalistic and passive. He had smuggled photographs out of Auschwitz — the *anus mundi* or heart of darkness — that showed the transmutation of human beings into

refuse and garbage.* He had been some kind of figure in the postwar Polish government (and then there were some whispers of a scandal involving art theft) before being expelled to France in 1968, after the infamous anti-Semitic and “anti-Zionist” purge of the Communist Party.

I had been on his track, in a small and amateur way, for a decade. I had arrived in Paris to try and find him, only to learn that he had recently died. There was no forwarding address. I went to see Daniel Singer, the late disciple of Isaac Deutscher, who from his apartment near the Matignon was himself a single-cell headquarters for anything to do with the Polish-Jewish-Marxist diaspora. He sent me to a man in downtown New York who lent me the only book in Yiddish that I possess — the memoirs of David Szmulevski — and also a very hastily typed English translation. The title of the volume is *Resistance in the Auschwitz-Birkenau Death Camp*. But the back-story was also of considerable interest and the lack of a post-story was perhaps more absorbing still.

Szmulevski had quite early in his life developed a hunger to leave the isolated village of Kolo (which means “wheel”) and had volunteered to become a young Zionist pioneer. Leaving from a Romanian port and landing in Palestine under the British mandate, he had worked on a very tough kibbutz and also on the waterfront in Tel Aviv. From his pages one could count off the swift evolutions of an interwar political consciousness: he observed that Arab workers were paid less and treated more rudely, and he began to run into free-thinking people — one young girl in particular — who gave him horizons much wider and more thrilling than the shtetl or the shul. (You think it’s a stretch to connect Professor Max Born to Olivia Newton-John? Szmulevski’s was almost the same Poland-to-Palestine route that was followed by Simon Pirsky, later Shimon Peres, the president of Israel, whose first cousin is Betty Pirsky or Lauren Bacall.)

I have quite recently found Szmulevski’s Polish Communist-era file, which states unambiguously that in the 1930s he had joined the Communist Party of Palestine. His own memoirs, written post-1968, make no mention of this and give the impression — without exactly making the claim — that he had really preferred the Jewish-Socialist Bund. However that may be, he attended a militant Jewish workers’ meeting one day in 1936 and volunteered to leave Palestine in order to fight the rising menace of Hitlerism — in Spain. He became a member of the Polish battalion of the International Brigade that was named for the great national poet Adam Mickiewicz. He was wounded, and was succored in hospital by the better-off American-emigrated branch of his family — the family of my wonderful late mother-in-law — which also sent a son to that war.*

Escaping to France after the victory of Spanish fascism, Szmulevski soon found that Europe’s pain had hardly begun. He was arrested by the German invaders of Paris and shipped back home, to Auschwitz, where he was employed as a “roofer” in the actual building of the labor-camp section of the place. People a few years older than me who did their National Service in the British Army say that you never, ever forget your “number”: the digits that become “you” for the duration. Szmulevski’s number in Auschwitz, I have learned, was 27849 (a relatively low one). He wore it for the rest of

his life. Able to make contact in the newly drafted slave-labor force with veterans of Spain and other hardened comrades, he had at least the chance of keeping up morale and of surviving.

His memoir is strangely artless and appealing, at times almost naïve. Here is his account of helping to organize a clandestine Yom Kippur service, at which the Kol Nidre prayer could be decently sung by the slaves and the condemned, in Auschwitz in the winter of 1943. To his own boyhood shtetl, he recalls:

. . . unable to form a minyan, Jews from surrounding villages and settlements would come with their families. Even if they had a minyan [the quorum of ten (male) Jews that is needful for a service to be held] they would still have needed a cantor or a prayer-leader with the proper amount of feeling. The melody of that particular prayer is dear to the heart of every Jew, even if he is not observant.

I did not take the way along which my father would have led me. My life journey distanced me from religious tradition and moved me closer to those who fight for justice on this earth, like those who took up arms against fascism — on the battlefields of Spain, in the French partisan groups and also in the death camp known as Auschwitz-Birkenau . . .

To me, the facilitation in the camps of any action forbidden by the Germans was part of the struggle against the Hitlerite enemy. Ever since then, when I pass a synagogue on Yom Kippur Eve there comes before my eyes the picture of the barracks in Auschwitz where a small number of worshippers was able to experience the atmosphere of the High Holy Days.

These are noble, even exalted, sentiments, which would provide some evidence for those who maintain that religion is at least a supplier of consolation. But they are somehow boringly expressed: they have a tinge of the “Popular Front” to them, with their “facilitations” and other rather wooden expressions. They don’t possess the defiant excitement of Primo Levi, who once wrote so bitinglly that if he was god, he would have wanted to spit on anyone who prayed in Auschwitz. In a way Szmulevski survived precisely because he was a good Party man. He lived to help arrange the postwar trials of the Auschwitz criminals, including one historic session that was organized by Germans and not by the Allies. He was able to testify and also to bring important photographic evidence. In 1960 he was garlanded with a high Resistance decoration by Josef Cyrankiewicz, the Socialist-turned-Communist prime minister of Poland who had been a fellow inmate of the same camp.

And this is where my real problem with him begins to take on shape. I sit in Poland, reading again his bureaucratic prose, and find that he claims to have taken up a job “within the national administration” after 1945. What does it mean, this post “within the national administration”? It means, as I eventually discover from the Polish “Ministry of Interior” archives in the Hoover Institution at Stanford, that Szmulevski was a full colonel responsible for Department Seven of the *Milicja Obywatelska* or “Citizen’s Militia,” headquartered in an old Warsaw palace that had been a seat of secret police authority since tsarist days. He never once alludes to this in his account

of being forced out of Poland in 1967, preferring to blame historic anti-Jewish prejudice for the whole business.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, historians have become both more accurate and more honest — fractionally more brave, one might say — about that “other” cleansing of the regions and peoples that were ground to atoms between the upper and nether millstones of Hitlerism and Stalinism. One of the most objective chroniclers is Professor Timothy Snyder of Yale University. In his view, it is still “Operation Reinhardt,” or the planned destruction of Polish Jewry, that is to be considered as the centerpiece of what we commonly call the Holocaust, in which of the estimated 5.7 million Jewish dead, “roughly three million were prewar Polish citizens.” We should not at all allow ourselves to forget the millions of non-Jewish citizens of Belarus, Russia, Ukraine, and other Slav territories who were also massacred. But for me the salient fact remains that anti-Semitism was the regnant, essential, organizing principle of all the other National Socialist race theories. It is thus not to be thought of as just one prejudice among many.

You can’t visit the area, though, without noticing the marks of what became a second erasure. The city of Wrocław/Breslau had been almost schematically rebuilt by the Communists along the lines of its prewar layout and architecture, and right down to its main square and Grass Market it looked like a storybook German town. But in that case, where was everybody? (And where had they gone? You can find one — restored — Jewish cemetery but try finding another one where any of the tombstones are incised in German.) I went to call on the mayor, a sturdy, thoughtful man named Rafal Dutkiewicz, who ruefully said that the problem with citizenship in his rather large bailiwick was that “nobody is really ‘from’ here.” Again I consult the rugged statistics offered by Professor Snyder: almost eight million German civilians were expelled or fled (or fled and returned and were then expelled) from Poland at the end of the Second World War. The eastern German lands from which they had fled or been pushed were then annexed by Poland. To make up the shortfall of population, Poles were moved into these Silesian provinces. And as if to encourage that process, the eastern half of prewar Poland was in turn annexed by the big brother Soviet Union, and a million expelled Poles became settlers in the areas from which Germans had been evicted. A huge zone of silence and complicity was created by this double negation.

There’s no exact moral equivalence between these crimes against humanity. It’s true that perhaps 600,000 Germans were killed in the whole business, which also involved the cleansing of Germans from the Czech lands, but many of these died in the fighting which the Nazis had so insanely prolonged. (Breslau/Wrocław was declared a “Fortress” or “Festung” city by the Third Reich and actually surrendered after the fall of Berlin itself, by which time it had been so much reduced to shards that there was nothing left to fight over.) So you could say, as some people defensively say about the leveling of such cities as Dresden and Würzburg, that the Nazis started it, and the Germans were punished for it.

What people still do not like to admit is that there were two crimes in the form of one. Just as the destruction of Jewry was the necessary condition for the rise and expansion of Nazism, so the ethnic cleansing of Germans was a precondition for the Stalinization of Poland. I first noticed this point when reading an essay by the late Ernest Gellner, who at the end of the war had warned Eastern Europeans that collective punishment of Germans would put them under Stalin's tutelage indefinitely. They would always feel the guilty need for an ally against potential German revenge. It is exactly the fear of revenge that motivates the deepest crimes, from the killing of the enemy's children lest they grow up to play their own part, to the erasure of the enemy's graveyards and holy places so that his hated name can be forgotten.

And thus to my final and most melancholy point: a great number of Stalin's enforcers and henchmen in Eastern Europe were Jews. And not just a great number, but a great proportion. The proportion was especially high in the secret police and "security" departments, where no doubt revenge played its own part, as did the ideological attachment to Communism that was so strong among internationally minded Jews at that period: Jews like David Szmulevski. There were reasonably strong indigenous Communist forces in Czechoslovakia and East Germany, but in Hungary and Poland the Communists were a small minority and knew it, were dependent on the Red Army and aware of the fact, and were disproportionately Jewish and widely detested for that reason.* Many of the penal labor camps constructed by the Nazis were later used as holding pens for German deportees by the Communists, and some of those who ran these grim places were Jewish. Nobody from Israel or the diaspora who goes to the East of Europe on a family-history fishing-trip should be unaware of the chance that they will find out both much less and much more than the package-tour had promised them. It's easy to say, with Albert Camus, "neither victims nor executioners." But real history is more pitiless even than you had been told it was.

He could be as scathing as the Russian Hebrew writers in his denunciations of Jews and Israel — more precisely the Israeli government. He followed Mendele when he compared Jews to hunchbacks ("Jewish Slavery and Emancipation," 1951) though he also echoed Kafka's allegory of Jewish deformity, "A Report To An Academy." Berlin believed that emancipation had turned the Jews into homeless, psychologically deformed strangers trying to gain acceptance in the Gentile world.

— David Aberbach on the centennial of Isaiah Berlin, June 2009

"Die Judenfrage," it used to be called, even by Jews. "The Jewish Question." I find I quite like this interrogative formulation, since the question — as Gertrude Stein once famously if terminally put it — may be more absorbing than the answer. Of course one is flirting with calamity in phrasing things this way, as I learned in school when the Irish question was discussed by some masters as the Irish "problem." Again, the word "solution" can be as neutral as the words "question" or "problem," but once one has defined a people or a nation as such, the search for a resolution can become a yearning for the conclusive. Endlösung: the final solution.

But it could be that any search for any “solution” is in itself potentially lethal or absurd. The Jewish quest for some ultimate answer to the “question” has taken intensely religious and nationalist forms as well as, in more recent times, the identification of huge numbers of Jews with Marxism. My mother’s family was not involved in any of the grandeur or tragedy of this: they sought to get by and to assimilate and to survive, while making a few observant gestures in the direction of their ancient faith and a few protective gestures in defense of the State of Israel.

In my mother’s case I have become convinced that she was willing to give up even the smallest adherence to the synagogue if it would smooth the accession of her two sons into polite English society, and that she only began to feel passionate about the Jewish state in the Middle East as she began to experience her own desperate need for a new start somewhere else: it was either that fresh beginning or an end to every hope. Our very last telephone conversation, when she expressed a desire to immigrate to Israel after the Yom Kippur War of 1973, was bewildering to me at the time and has sent me down many pathways since. And I always keep open the possibility that I could be mistaken and that she might have had her own reasons for being reticent. This is from a letter sent to me recently by one of her oldest friends:

She told me that she went to live with an aunt and uncle in Liverpool in a very Jewish community — perhaps went to school there or secretarial college and her first boyfriends were medical students up there. I have no idea how long she was there but it sounded as though she was happy and from there I presume she went into the WRENS [Women’s Royal Navy Service]. At what time she decided to conceal her Jewishness I have no idea, possibly on going into the WRENS.

This seems probable enough when I think about it: the Royal Navy was a fairly big tent and broad church but even in a wartime battle against Hitler a Jew (or “Jewess”) might have been conspicuous. On HMS Jamaica my father had had a literary shipmate named Warren Tute, who became a minor novelist in the postwar years and wrote one rather successful book, *The Cruiser*, in which my father appears under the name (no first or “Christian” name) of Lieutenant Hale. At one point in the story the master-at-arms of the vessel, which is called HMS *Antigone*, is mentally reviewing the ship’s crew:

He knew that Stoker First Class Danny Evans would be likely to celebrate his draft by going on the beer for a week in Tonypandy and then spending the next three months in the Second Class for Leave. He knew that Blacksmith First Class Rogers would try and smuggle Service provisions ashore for his mother and that Telegraphist Jacobs was a sea-lawyer who kept a copy of Karl Marx in his kitbag.

Martin Amis often points out that you can tell a lot about a novelist by the trouble he takes over the names of his characters, and Tute clearly didn’t break much of a sweat inventing a Welshman named Evans or a blacksmith named Rogers. By the same token, he didn’t mean us to think that the name “Jacobs” was anything more than a synonym for the vaguely suspect and unsound. I don’t think he was misrepresenting the atmosphere of the Navy by much: Jacobs would not have been persecuted (my father

would never have countenanced anything remotely like that), but I don't exactly see him rising through the ranks, either. "You catch it on the edge of a remark," as Harold Abrahams observes of discreet English non-philo-Semitism in *Chariots of Fire*, and that's how I caught it, deciding to subtitle my first essay on the subject "Homage to Telegraphist Jacobs." How much more lazy a phrase could there be than "a copy of Karl Marx," and yet wasn't there still something in this age-old identification of the Jew with the subversive? If so, good. Remember that it is "free-thinking Jews," not Jews as such, who are defined as the undesirables by T.S. Eliot in *After Strange Gods*.

If my mother's intention in whole or in part was to ensure that I never had to suffer any indignity or embarrassment for being a Jew, then she succeeded well enough. And in any case there were enough intermarriages and "conversions" on both sides of her line to make me one of those many mischling hybrids who are to be found distributed all over the known world. And, as someone who doesn't really believe that the human species is subdivided by "race," let alone that a nation or nationality can be defined by its religion, why should I not let the whole question slide away from me? Why — and then I'll stop asking rhetorical questions — did I at some point resolve that, in whatever tone of voice I was asked "Are you a Jew?" I would never hear myself deny it?

As a convinced atheist, I ought to agree with Voltaire that Judaism is not just one more religion, but in its way the root of religious evil. Without the stern, joyless rabbis and their 613 dour prohibitions, we might have avoided the whole nightmare of the Old Testament, and the brutal, crude wrenching of that into prophecy-derived Christianity, and the later plagiarism and mutation of Judaism and Christianity into the various rival forms of Islam. Much of the time, I do concur with Voltaire, but not without acknowledging that Judaism is dialectical. There is, after all, a specifically Jewish version of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, with a specifically Jewish name — the *Haskalah* — for itself. The term derives from the word for "mind" or "intellect," and it is naturally associated with ethics rather than rituals, life rather than prohibitions, and assimilation over "exile" or "return." It's everlastingly linked to the name of the great German teacher Moses Mendelssohn, one of those conspicuous Jewish hunchbacks who so upset and embarrassed Isaiah Berlin. (The other way to upset or embarrass Berlin, I found, was to mention that he himself was a cousin of Menachem Schneerson, the "messianic" Lubavitcher rebbe.) However, even pre-enlightenment Judaism forces its adherents to study and think, it reluctantly teaches them what others think, and it may even teach them how to think also.

In her preface to his collection of essays *The Non-Jewish Jew* Tamara Deutscher, widow of the great Isaac, relates the story of how her husband, future biographer of Leon Trotsky, studied for his bar mitzvah.* Considered the brightest boy in any yeshivah for years gone by or for miles around, he was set to speak to the following question: somewhere in the looped intestines of Jewish lore there is mention of a miraculous bird which visits the world only at intervals of several decades and then only very briefly. On its periodic landings it delivers and leaves behind a beakful of

bird-spit. This avian drool, if you can seize hold of even a drop of it, has wonder-working properties. Now comes the crucial question (surely you saw it coming?): Is the bird-spit to be reckoned as kosher or as treyfe? The boy Isaac spoke for several hours on the rival theories of this dispute, and on the competing commentaries on those rival theories, and of course on the commentaries on those commentaries. He used to say later that such onerous mental and textual labor did not serve to train the mind at all but rather — like the rote memorization of the Koran — stultified it. I am not sure that I agree. Much of my Marxist and post-Marxist life has been spent in apparent hair-splitting and logic-chopping, and I still feel that the sheer exercise can command respect. It may even build muscle . . .

Should I, too, prefer the title of “non-Jewish Jew”? For some time, I would have identified myself strongly with the attitude expressed by Rosa Luxemburg, writing from prison in 1917 to her anguished friend Mathilde Wurm:

What do you want with these special Jewish pains? I feel as close to the wretched victims of the rubber plantations in Putamayo and the blacks of Africa with whose bodies the Europeans play ball . . . I have no special corner in my heart for the ghetto: I am at home in the entire world, where there are clouds and birds and human tears.

An inordinate proportion of the Marxists I have known would probably have formulated their own views in much the same way. It was almost a point of honor not to engage in “thinking with the blood,” to borrow a notable phrase from D.H. Lawrence, and to immerse Jewishness in other and wider struggles. Indeed, the old canard about “rootless cosmopolitanism” finds a perverse sort of endorsement in Jewish internationalism: the more emphatically somebody stresses that sort of rhetoric about the suffering of others, the more likely I would be to assume that the speaker was a Jew. Does this mean that I think there are Jewish “characteristics”? Yes, I think it must mean that.

During the Bosnian war in the late 1990s, I spent several days traveling around the country with Susan Sontag and her son, my dear friend David Rieff. On one occasion, we made a special detour to the town of Zenica, where there was reported to be a serious infiltration of outside Muslim extremists: a charge that was often used to slander the Bosnian government of the time. We found very little evidence of that, but the community itself was much riven as between Muslim, Croat, and Serb. No faction was strong enough to predominate, each was strong enough to veto the other’s candidate for the chairmanship of the city council. Eventually, and in a way that was characteristically Bosnian, all three parties called on one of the town’s few Jews and asked him to assume the job. We called on him, and found that he was also the resident intellectual, with a natural gift for synthesizing matters. After we left him, Susan began to chortle in the car. “What do you think?” she asked. “Do you think that the only dentist and the only shrink in Zenica are Jewish also?” It would be dense to have pretended not to see her joke.

The Jewish Orthodox word for a heretic — which a heretic may also use for himself or herself — is apikoros. It derives from “Epicurean” and perfectly captures the division between Athens and Jerusalem. One notorious apikoros named Hiwa al-Balkhi, writing

in ninth-century Persia, offered two hundred awkward questions to the faithful. He drew upon himself the usual thunderous curses — “may his name be forgotten, may his bones be worn to nothing” — along with detailed refutations and denunciations by Abraham ibn Ezra and others. These exciting anathemas, of course, ensured that his worrying “questions” would remain current for as long as the Orthodox commentaries would be read. In this way, rather as when Maimonides says that the Messiah will come but that “he may tarry,” Jewishness contrives irony at its own expense. If there is one characteristic of Jews that I admire, it is that irony is seldom if ever wasted on them.

One of the questions asked by al-Balkhi, and often repeated to this day, is this: Why do the children of Israel continue to suffer? My grandmother Dodo thought it was because the goyim were jealous. The seder for Passover (which is a shame-faced simulacrum of a Hellenic question-and-answer session, even including the wine) tells the children that it’s one of those things that happens to every Jewish generation. After the Shoah or Endlösung or Holocaust, many rabbis tried to tell the survivors that the immolation had been a punishment for “exile,” or for insufficient attention to the Covenant. This explanation was something of a flop with those whose parents or children had been the raw material for the “proof,” so for a time the professional interpreters of god’s will went decently quiet. This interval of ambivalence lasted until the war of 1967, when it was announced that the divine purpose could be discerned after all. How wrong, how foolish, to have announced its discovery prematurely! The exile and the Shoah could now both be understood, as part of a heavenly if somewhat roundabout scheme to recover the Western Wall in Jerusalem and other pieces of biblically mandated real estate.

I regard it as a matter of self-respect to spit in public on rationalizations of this kind. (They are almost as repellent, in their combination of arrogance, masochism, and affected false modesty, as Edith Stein’s “offer” of her life to expiate the regrettable unbelief in Jesus of her former fellow Jews.) The sage Jews are those who have put religion behind them and become in so many societies the leaven of the secular and the atheist. I think I have a very good idea why it is that anti-Semitism is so tenacious and so protean and so enduring. Christianity and Islam, theistic though they may claim to be, are both based on the fetishizing of human primates: Jesus in one case and Mohammed in the other. Neither of these figures can be called exactly historical but both have one thing in common even in their quasi-mythical dimension. Both of them were first encountered by the Jews. And the Jews, ravenous as they were for any sign of the long-sought Messiah, were not taken in by either of these two pretenders, or not in large numbers or not for long.

If you meet a devout Christian or a believing Muslim, you are meeting someone who would give everything he owned for a personal, face-to-face meeting with the blessed founder or prophet. But in the visage of the Jew, such ardent believers encounter the very figure who did have such a precious moment, and who spurned the opportunity and turned shrugging aside. Do you imagine for a microsecond that such a vile, churlish

transgression will ever be forgiven? I myself certainly hope that it will not. The Jews have seen through Jesus and Mohammed. In retrospect, many of them have also seen through the mythical, primitive, and cruel figures of Abraham and Moses. Nearer to our own time, in the bitter combats over the work of Marx and Freud and Einstein, Jewish participants and protagonists have not been the least noticeable. May this always be the case, whenever any human primate sets up, or is set up by others, as a Messiah.

The most recent instance of Jewish belief in a rescue from the agonies of doubt and insecurity is Zionism. The very idea begins as a Utopia: Theodor Herzl's novel *Altneuland*, about "the return," is the only Utopian fiction ever written that has come true (if it has). But I have learned to distrust Utopias and to prefer satires. Marcel Proust was laughing at Herzl when he advocated a new "Gomorra" where same-sex people could have their own Levantine state (he actually might have liked some areas of today's Tel Aviv). Arthur Koestler, drifting over the Arctic in a Zeppelin in 1932, dropped a Star of David flag onto the tundra of Novaya Zemlya and claimed it for a Hebrew national home. Stalin himself set aside a special province for Jews in the faraway territory of Birobidjan . . . By the time my mother told me that she wanted to move to Israel in 1973, the Utopian element was still being emphasized but with perhaps a fraction less enthusiasm. It was more because I thought she might be risking herself by moving to a zone of conflict that I uttered discouraging noises. But I was also becoming aware that she might be taking part in the perpetuation of an injustice. I didn't myself visit the Holy Land until a couple of years later but when I did, I was very much dismayed.

Long before it was known to me as a place where my ancestry was even remotely involved, the idea of a state for Jews (or a Jewish state; not quite the same thing, as I failed at first to see) had been "sold" to me as an essentially secular and democratic one. The idea was a haven for the persecuted and the survivors, a democracy in a region where the idea was poorly understood, and a place where — as Philip Roth had put it in a one-handed novel that I read when I was about nineteen — even the traffic cops and soldiers were Jews. This, like the other emphases of that novel, I could grasp. Indeed, my first visit was sponsored by a group in London called the Friends of Israel. They offered to pay my expenses, that is, if on my return I would come and speak to one of their meetings.

I still haven't submitted that expenses claim. The misgivings I had were of two types, both of them ineradicable. The first and the simplest was the encounter with everyday injustice: by all means the traffic cops were Jews but so, it turned out, were the colonists and ethnic cleansers and even the torturers. It was Jewish leftist friends who insisted that I go and see towns and villages under occupation, and sit down with Palestinian Arabs who were living under house arrest — if they were lucky — or who were squatting in the ruins of their demolished homes if they were less fortunate. In Ramallah I spent the day with the beguiling Raimonda Tawil, confined to her home for committing no known crime save that of expressing her opinions. (For some

reason, what I most remember is a sudden exclamation from her very restrained and respectable husband, a manager of the local bank: “I would prefer living under a Bedouin mukhtar to another day of Israeli rule!” He had obviously spent some time thinking about the most revolting possible Arab alternative.) In Jerusalem I visited the Tutungi family, who could produce title deeds going back generations but who were being evicted from their apartment in the old city to make way for an expansion of the Jewish quarter. Jerusalem: that place of blood since remote antiquity. Jerusalem, over which the British and French and Russians had fought a foul war in the Crimea, and in the mid-nineteenth century, on the matter of which Christian Church could command the keys to some “holy sepulcher.” Jerusalem, where the anti-Semite Balfour had tried to bribe the Jews with the territory of another people in order to seduce them from Bolshevism and continue the diplomacy of the Great War. Jerusalem: that pest-house in whose environs all zealots hope that an even greater and final war can be provoked. It certainly made a warped appeal to my sense of history. In the less heroic and shorter term, what of justice and its Jewish resonance?

Suppose that a man leaps out of a burning building — as my dear friend and colleague Jeff Goldberg sat and said to my face over a table at La Tomate in Washington not two years ago — and lands on a bystander in the street below. Now, make the burning building be Europe, and the luckless man underneath be the Palestinian Arabs. Is this a historical injustice? Has the man below been made a victim, with infinite cause of complaint and indefinite justification for violent retaliation? My own reply would be a provisional “no,” but only on these conditions. The man leaping from the burning building must still make such restitution as he can to the man who broke his fall, and must not pretend that he never even landed on him. And he must base his case on the singularity and uniqueness of the original leap. It can’t, in other words, be “leap, leap, leap” for four generations and more. The people underneath cannot be expected to tolerate leaping on this scale and of this duration, if you catch my drift. In Palestine, tread softly, for you tread on their dreams. And do not tell the Palestinians that they were never fallen upon and bruised in the first place. Do not shame yourself with the cheap lie that they were told by their leaders to run away. Also, stop saying that nobody knew how to cultivate oranges in Jaffa until the Jews showed them how. “Making the desert bloom” — one of Yvonne’s stock phrases — makes desert dwellers out of people who were the agricultural superiors of the Crusaders.

In the mid-1970s, Jewish settlers from New York were already establishing second homes for themselves on occupied territory. From what burning house were they leaping? I went to interview some of these early Jewish colonial zealots — written off in those days as mere “fringe” elements — and found that they called themselves Gush Emunim or — it sounded just as bad in English — “The Bloc of the Faithful.” Why not just say “Party of God” and have done with it? At least they didn’t have the nerve to say that they stole other people’s land because their own home in Poland or Belarus had been taken from them. They said they took the land because god had given it to them from time immemorial. In the noisome town of Hebron, where all of life is focused

on a supposedly sacred boneyard in a dank local cave, one of the world's less pretty sights is that of supposed yeshivah students toting submachine guns and humbling the Arab inhabitants. When I asked one of these charmers where he got his legal authority to be a squatter, he flung his hand, index finger outstretched, toward the sky.

Actually — and this was where I began to feel seriously uncomfortable — some such divine claim underlay not just “the occupation” but the whole idea of a separate state for Jews in Palestine. Take away the divine warrant for the Holy Land and where were you, and what were you? Just another land-thief like the Turks or the British, except that in this case you wanted the land without the people. And the original Zionist slogan — “a land without a people for a people without a land” — disclosed its own negation when I saw the densely populated Arab towns dwelling sullenly under Jewish tutelage. You want irony? How about Jews becoming colonizers at just the moment when other Europeans had given up on the idea?

The great Jewish historian Jacob Talmon once wrote an open letter to Prime Minister Menachem Begin in which he specified that he didn't particularly care about the Arabs and their so-called rights and complaints. What disturbed him was the Messianic tone of the Israeli regime, which seemed to assume that destiny and prophecy would act as a solvent to all the apparently insoluble questions. Thus to my second worry, which even in the relatively palmy days of the mid-1970s was this. All questions of right to one side, I have never been able to banish the queasy inner suspicion that Israel just did not look, or feel, either permanent or sustainable. I felt this when sitting in the old Ottoman courtyards of Jerusalem, and I felt it even more when I saw the hideous “Fort Condo” settlements that had been thrown up around the city in order to give the opposite impression. If the statelet was only based on a narrow strip of the Mediterranean littoral (god having apparently ordered Moses to lead the Jews to one of the very few parts of the region with absolutely no oil at all), that would be bad enough. But in addition, it involved roosting on top of an ever-growing population that did not welcome the newcomers.

I regard anti-Semitism as ineradicable and as one element of the toxin with which religion has infected us. Perhaps partly for this reason, I have never been able to see Zionism as a cure for it. American and British and French Jews have told me with perfect sincerity that they are always prepared for the day when “it happens again” and the Jew-baiters take over. (And I don't pretend not to know what they are talking about: I have actually seen the rabid phenomenon at work in modern and sunny Argentina and am unable to forget it.) So then, they seem to think, they will take refuge in the Law of Return, and in Haifa, or for all I know in Hebron. Never mind for now that if all of world Jewry did settle in Palestine, this would actually necessitate further Israeli expansion, expulsion, and colonization, and that their departure under these apocalyptic conditions would leave the new brownshirts and blackshirts in possession of the French and British and American nuclear arsenals. This is ghetto thinking, hardly even fractionally updated to take into account what has changed. The important but delayed realization will have to come: Israeli Jews are a part of the diaspora, not a

group that has escaped from it. Why else does Israel daily beseech the often-flourishing Jews of other lands, urging them to help the most endangered Jews of all: the ones who rule Palestine by force of arms? Why else, having supposedly escaped from the need to rely on Gentile goodwill, has Israel come to depend more and more upon it? On this reckoning, Zionism must constitute one of the greatest potential non sequiturs in human history.

One of my first reservations about Zionism was and is that, semiconsciously at least, it grants the anti-Semite's first premise about the abnormality of the Jew. I once heard Avishai Margalit, one of Isaiah Berlin's most brilliant disciples, phrase this very memorably during a lecture he gave at the New School. The Zionist idea, he said, was supposed to take the deracinated European Jew — the so-called *luftmensch* or person made of thin air — and make a man of him. How to achieve this? By taking him from his watchmaker's shop in Budapest or his clinic in Vienna and putting a hoe in one hand and a gun in the other. In Palestine. The resulting sturdy farmer-soldier would then redeem the shuffling, cringing round-shouldered shopkeeper or usurer. This was the Leon Uris movie version of events, the theme music of which — I suddenly remember — my mother had at one point possessed on a long-playing record. Margalit pointed out that this "project" absolutely mandated a conflict with the Arab population, because it necessarily involved not just the occupation of their land but the confiscation of it. "Some say that this is the Israelis' original sin," he said deadpan. "With this I do not agree but I think we can call it Israel's immaculate misconception."

For myself, I don't feel like an apologetic *luftmensch*; I positively prefer the watchmaker and the bookseller and the doctor to the hearty farmer and colonist, and I pause to note that Arabs are retained on this forcibly Judaized land mainly in order that someone be available to do the hoeing and digging and heavy lifting that most Israelis are now too refined to do for themselves. There's a certain amount of ambiguity in my background, what with intermarriages and conversions, but under various readings of three codes which I don't much respect (Mosaic Law, the Nuremberg Laws, and the Israeli Law of Return) I do qualify as a member of the tribe, and any denial of that in my family has ceased with me. But I would not remove myself to Israel if it meant the continuing expropriation of another people, and if anti-Jewish fascism comes again to the Christian world — or more probably comes at us via the Muslim world — I already consider it an obligation to resist it wherever I live. I would detest myself if I fled from it in any direction. Leo Strauss was right. The Jews will not be "saved" or "redeemed." (Cheer up: neither will anyone else.) They/we will always be in exile whether they are in the greater Jerusalem area or not, and this in some ways is as it should be. They are, or we are, as a friend of Victor Klemperer's once put it to him in a very dark time, condemned and privileged to be "a seismic people." A critical register of the general health of civilization is the status of "the Jewish question." No insurance policy has ever been devised that can or will cover this risk.

* I should say in fairness that my brother, Peter, firmly believes that the latter explanation — ordinary xenophobia rather than Jew-hatred in other words — is the likelier one.

* All right, even the word “transported” has its nasty modern ring of deportation. Indeed, the early martyrs of the British Labour movement were peasants from the Dorset village so bewitchingly named Tolpuddle who were transported to Australia for the offense of forming a union.

* The intention had been to arouse the world’s conscience by initially showing these to the Vatican. This appeal did not work.

* I pause to mention that, with my sister-in-law’s uncle Ernest Halperin, this makes three widely dispersed ancestral relations of mine who fought for the Spanish Republic: something to tell my own descendants, some of whom carry their blood, if they will only hold still and listen to my tales. This is also probably the largest difference between the two sides of my family: apart from the traditional stories of British daring, the only example of heroism and gallantry ever related to me by the Commander was that of the Francoist General Jose Moscardo who refused to surrender the besieged Alcazar even when the Red forces threatened to execute his son Luis.

* My brave friend Anne Applebaum is about to confront this neglected aspect of the hidden history of the region in her study of the imposition of Communism after 1945. Of course it goes without saying that once Stalin had consolidated his power, he began to eliminate local rivals, many of whom like Artur London and Lazslo Rajk were also Jews. Interestingly, there was never such a show trial in Poland.

* Born in the extremely depressed hamlet of Chrzanow, a few miles north of Auschwitz, he was later to be expelled from the Polish Communist Party for “exaggerating the dangers of Nazism.” The year was 1932.

Edward Said in Light and Shade (and Saul)

IN THE COURSE of a long engagement with this whole tortured Frage, I made a friendship that taught me a very great deal. It was at a conference in Cyprus in 1976, where the theme was the rights of small nations, that I first met Edward Said. It was impossible not to be captivated by him: of his many immediately seductive qualities I will start by mentioning a very important one. When he laughed, it was as if he was surrendering unconditionally to some guilty pleasure. At first the very picture of professorial rectitude, with faultless tweeds, cravats, and other accoutrements (the pipe also being to the fore), he would react to a risqué remark, or a disclosure of something vaguely scandalous, as if a whole Trojan horse of mirth had been smuggled into his interior and suddenly disgorged its contents. The build-up, in other words, was worth one's effort. And very few allusions were wasted on him: he appeared to have memorized most of *Beyond the Fringe* and Monty Python and to be an excellent mimic of anything that smacked of the absurd. He could "do," I remember, a very vivid George Steiner . . .

I had not particularly liked the way in which he wrote about literature in *Beginnings*, and I was always on my guard if not outright hostile when any tincture of "deconstruction" or "postmodernism" was applied to my beloved canon of English writing, but when Edward talked about English literature and quoted from it, he passed the test that I always privately apply: Do you truly love this subject and could you bear to live for one moment if it was obliterated?

I was on my way to Israel from Cyprus and he gave me some Palestinian contacts to look up, mainly at Birzeit University near Ramallah. Everybody he suggested I meet proved to be welcoming, sane, secular, and realistic. Over the years, whenever I went to Beirut or Syria or elsewhere in the region, he always seemed to have access to people of that stripe. Though he never actually joined it, he was close to some civilian elements of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, which was the most Communist (and in the rather orthodox sense) of the Palestinian formations. I remember Edward once surprising me by saying, and apropos of nothing: "Do you know something I have never done in my political career? I have never publicly criticized the Soviet Union. It's not that I terribly sympathize with them or anything — it's just that the Soviets have never done anything to harm me, or us." At the time I thought this a rather naïve statement, even perhaps a slightly contemptible one, but by then I had been in

parts of the Middle East where it could come as a blessed relief to meet a consecrated Moscow-line atheist-dogmatist, if only for the comparatively rational humanism that he evinced amid so much religious barking and mania. It was only later to occur to me that Edward's pronounced dislike of George Orwell was something to which I ought to have paid more attention.*

After Cyprus, the next time I saw Edward was in New York. And, when I went to call on him up in Morningside Heights, I discovered the sidewalk around his building was alive with cops and "security" types. It was the era of the Jimmy Carter–Anwar Sadat–Menachem Begin "Camp David" deal, where the three leaders had attempted to square the circle by confecting an agreement in the absence of any representative of the Palestinians. Perhaps a bit sensitive to this rather conspicuous lacuna, Sadat had had one of his public fits of improvisation and caprice and declared — without asking any permission or giving any notice — that the good Professor Edward Said of Columbia University might perhaps make the necessary interlocutor for his dispossessed (and in this case excluded) people. It was the first time I had seen the media cliché in full action but yes, within hours the world had beaten a path to Edward's door and I in turn had to beat my way through to his apartment for dinner.

He was dismayed at Sadat's presumption and embarrassed — as was his lovely Lebanese wife, Mariam — at the unsolicited attention it had earned him. I learned a lot that evening, including a crucial thing about Edward that so many people failed ever to understand about him. This was that he did NOT consider himself a direct victim of 1947/48 and the Israeli triumph. His family had in the long run lost a lot of property in Jerusalem and suffered a distinct loss of pride, but he firmly declined to call himself a refugee. He had left Jerusalem for Egypt in good time, completed his studies at a parodic English-style boarding school in Cairo (with Omar Sharif wielding the punitive gym shoe as the sadistic "head boy" of Kitchener House) and gone on — with his original American passport — to qualify many times over at various universities in the United States. He owed his current eminence at Columbia to the special encouragement of Lionel Trilling.

However, it was precisely because he wasn't a penniless or stateless refugee (even if the family had lost the lovely old house in Jerusalem where Martin Buber later lived) that he felt such a strong responsibility for those who were. I was to grow used to hearing, around New York, the annoying way in which people would say: "Edward Said, such a suave and articulate and witty man," with the unspoken suffix "for a Palestinian." It irritated him, too, naturally enough, but in my private opinion it strengthened him in his determination to be an ambassador or spokesman for those who lived in camps or under occupation (or both). He almost overdid the ambassadorial aspect if you ask me, being always just too faultlessly dressed and spiffily turned out. Fools often contrasted this attention to his tenue with his membership of the Palestine National Council, the then-parliament-in-exile of the people without a land. In fact, his taking part in this rather shambolic assembly was a kind of noblesse oblige: an assurance to his landsmen (and also to himself) that he had not allowed and never would allow

himself to forget their plight. The downside of this noblesse was only to strike me much later on. I continued to observe how tightly and crisply he was buttoned and tied, as well as to notice that the well-wrapped contents were under pressure. I once walked Martin Amis up through the Morningside Heights area to go and call upon Edward — whose reviews and essays I had been urging Martin to print in his literary pages at the *New Statesman* — and on our arrival the good professor was perhaps slightly over-solicitous at the idea that we'd come on foot. His 'hood, at that time of the late New York seventies, could be described as a bit hairy. (After dinner, he had once sweetly insisted on walking me to the subway.) "If you mean," said Martin, "that the guys round here seem to style their hair by shoving their dicks into the light-socket . . ." I didn't think this was one of his absolute best, but I turned to see the Parr Professor of English and Comparative Literature fighting down a great eruption of anarchic mirth in which he almost certainly disapproved of having indulged.

Reading his autobiography many years later, I was astonished to find that Edward since boyhood had — not unlike Isaiah Berlin — often felt himself ungainly and ill-favored and awkward in bearing. He had always seemed to me quite the reverse: a touch dandyish perhaps but — as the saying goes — perfectly secure in his masculinity. On one occasion, after lunch in Georgetown, he took me with him to a renowned local tobacconist and asked to do something I had never witnessed before: "try on" a pipe. In case you ever wish to do this, here is the form: a solemn assistant produces a plastic envelope and fits it over the amber or ivory mouthpiece. You then clamp your teeth down to feel if the "fit" and weight are easy to your jaw. If not, then repeat with various stems until your browsing is complete. In those days I could have inhaled ten cigarettes and drunk three Tanqueray martinis in the time spent on such flaneur flippancy, but I admired the commitment to smoking nonetheless. Taking coffee with him once in a shopping mall in Stanford, I saw him suddenly register something over my shoulder. It was a ladies' dress shop. He excused himself and dashed in, to emerge soon after with some fashionable and costly looking bags. "Mariam," he said as if by way of explanation, "has never worn anything that I have not bought for her." On another occasion in Manhattan, after acting as a magnificent, encyclopedic guide around the gorgeous Andalusia (Al-Andalus) exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, he was giving lunch to Carol and to me when she noticed that her purse had been lost or stolen. At once, he was at her service, not only suggesting shops in the vicinity where a replacement might be found, but also offering to be her guide and advisor until she had selected a suitable new sac à main. I could no more have proposed myself for such an expedition than suggested myself as a cosmonaut, so what this says about my own heterosexual confidence I leave to others.

His insecurity, in other words, didn't show at all where he feared it did, in his carriage or his turnout. Nor did he let it show when he was lecturing, or otherwise performing in public. I wish I knew anything about music, but to watch him sit down at the piano was to see someone instantly becoming less self-conscious rather than more (a thing I have sometimes noticed with other artists, as with Annie Leibovitz

instantly acquiring confidence by picking up a camera). No, what made Edward uneasy was the question of Islam.

He was so much the picture of different kinds of assimilation that it was almost a case of multiple personalities. He could at one moment be almost a cosmopolitan Jew of the Upper West Side, music-loving, bibliophilic, well-traveled, multilingual. When I asked him for a one-on-one tutorial about George Eliot and Daniel Deronda, for a lecture I planned to give after my own discovery of the occulted Judaism in my own family, he invited me to his apartment — he had by then moved to the Claremont area — and gave me one of the best sessions I have ever had with a teacher: drawing out all the ambivalences of commentary on Anglo-Judaism from Sir Leslie Stephen to Virginia Woolf, from F.R. Leavis to Lord David Cecil, and making an excursus or two to take in Proust, Sainte-Beuve, and Steven Marcus. Considering that the novel was among other things a romanticization of Zionism that almost completely failed to mention the non-Jewish inhabitants of the territory, I thought that this was exemplary on Edward's part. But this was the other personality at work also: the donnish Englishman with pipe and tweeds, saying, "You might take a look at Frank Leavis on this point, even if it is a bit stodgy." Edward had attended St. George's Church of England school in Jerusalem — I assert this with knowledge and confidence in spite of the scurrilous campaign of lies on the subject that was later published in *Commentary* magazine — and felt himself to be a member of the small and somewhat derided Palestinian-Anglican communion in the city. He once invited me to lunch with the then-Anglican-Arab bishop of Jerusalem (a man later and rather too stereotypically arrested in a gentleman's lavatory during an interval in the Lambeth Conference of the Church of England) and demonstrated great interest in the liturgy and the rituals of the old place.

Arab nationalism in its traditional form was the way in which secular Arab Christians like Edward had found and kept a place for themselves, while simultaneously avoiding the charge of being too "Western." It was very noticeable among the Palestinians that the most demonstrably "extreme" nationalists — and Marxists — were often from Christian backgrounds. George Habash and Nayef Hawatmeh used to be celebrated examples of this phenomenon, long before anyone had heard of the cadres of Hamas, or Islamic Jihad. There was an element of overcompensation involved, or so I came to suspect.

It took a while for this disagreement between us to crystallize. I at first thought Edward's *Orientalism* was a very just and necessary book in that it forced Westerners to confront their own assumptions about the Levant and indeed the whole of the Orient. (My favorite example here was provided by the art critic Robert Hughes, whose Australian family referred contentedly to Indonesia as "the Far East," when if you could separate their colonial cosmology from their actual geography it was in fact their "Near North.") In time I came to see that Edward underrated Turkish imperialism, say, when compared to French or British conquests, and was rather grudging about the relative importance of German scholarship, but *Orientalism* was a book that made one think.*

It was with his much lesser effort, *Covering Islam*, that I began to realize that there was an apparently narrow but very deep difference between us.

As he defended the book one evening in the early 1980s at the Carnegie Endowment in New York, I knew that some of what he said was true enough, just as some of it was arguably less so. (Edward incautiously dismissed “speculations about the latest conspiracy to blow up buildings or sabotage commercial airliners” as the feverish product of “highly exaggerated stereotypes.”) *Covering Islam* took as its point of departure the Iranian revolution, which by then had been fully counter-revolutionized by the forces of the Ayatollah. Yes, it was true that the Western press — which was one half of the pun about “covering” — had been naïve if not worse about the Pahlavi regime. Yes, it was true that few Middle East “analysts” had had any concept of the latent power of Shi’ism to create mass mobilization. Yes, it was true that almost every stage of the Iranian drama had come as a complete surprise to the media. But wasn’t it also the case that Iranian society was now disappearing into a void of retrogressive piety that had levied war against Iranian Kurdistan and used medieval weaponry such as stoning and amputation against its internal critics, or even against those like unveiled women whose very existence constituted an offense? (“Living in the Islamic Republic,” Azar Nafisi was later to say in her *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, one of the many books that demonstrate the superiority of literature over religion as a source of morality and ethics, “is like having sex with someone you loathe.” As the many male victims of rape in the regime’s disgusting jails can testify, this state-run pathology of sexual repression and sexual sadism is not content to degrade women only.)*

Edward genially enough did not disagree with what I said, but he didn’t seem to admit my point, either. I wanted to press him harder so I veered close enough to the ad hominem to point out that his life — the life of the mind, the life of the book collector and music lover and indeed of the gallery-goer, appreciator of the feminine and occasional boulevardier — would become simply unlivable and unthinkable in an Islamic republic. Again, he could accede politely to my point but carry on somehow as if nothing had been conceded. I came slowly to realize that with Edward, too, I was keeping two sets of books. We agreed on things like the first Palestinian intifadah, another event that took the Western press completely off guard, and we collaborated on a book of essays that asserted and defended Palestinian rights. This was in the now hard-to-remember time when all official recognition was withheld from the PLO. Together we debated Professor Bernard Lewis and Leon Wieseltier at a once-celebrated conference of the Middle East Studies Association in Cambridge in 1986, tossing and goring them somewhat in a duel over academic “objectivity” in the wider discipline. But even then I was indistinctly aware that Edward didn’t feel himself quite at liberty to say certain things, while at the same time feeling rather too much obliged to say certain other things. A low point was an almost uncritical profile of Yasser Arafat that he contributed to *Interview* magazine in the late 1980s.

In those days, though, an adherence to Arafat was at least compatible with the Algiers declaration of the PLO, which Edward had striven to bring about. To remember

this agreement now is to recall an almost-vanished moment: the PLO was to renounce the clauses in its charter which either called for the demolition of the Israeli state or suggested that Jews had no place in Palestine to begin with. At Algiers, Edward's reasoning prevailed and the "Left-rejectionist" alliance, of George Habash and Nayef Hawatmeh, after stormy and emotional debate, lost. Morally, I felt that this deserved more praise than it received: Edward and those others who had left the land of pre-1947 Israel now in effect gave up their ancestral claim to it, in order that the generations dispossessed or expelled or occupied after 1967 could have a chance to build a state of their own in at least a portion of "the land." This self-denying renunciation had a quality of nobility to it.

But in those days the Palestinian "rejectionists" were secularists and leftists. Here was another moment, then, when one was witnessing the death of a movement rather than the birth of one (also, the birth of a movement based on death). There came a day I can't forget when I was in Jerusalem with my old comrade Professor Israel Shahak. This honest and learned old man, a survivor of the ghettos of Poland and the camp at Bergen-Belsen, had immigrated to Israel after the war and later become the loudest individual voice for Palestinian rights and the most deadly critic of the Torah-based land-thieves and vigilantes. Shahak it was who had introduced me to the life-giving work of Benedict (formerly Baruch, until he was excommunicated and anathematized) Spinoza. One of the great unacknowledged moral critics of our time, Shahak did not save his withering reproaches only for the Zionists. I wish I could replicate his warm Mitteleuropa gutturals on the page:

Christopher, you have maybe followed this new debate in Gaza between forces of the Hamas and of Islamic Jihad? You have not? Then I must tell you: it will much repay your interest.

Here was the ominously emergent great subject (we are speaking of the late 1980s and early 1990s). The "Islamic Jihad" forces in Gaza were saying in their propaganda that the whole of Spain, and not just Andalusia, was land stolen from Islam and that its immediate return should be demanded. The Hamas strategists were responding that, full as the Palestinian plate currently was, this might not be the moment to call for the Islamization of the entire Iberian peninsula. Perhaps for now, just the return of Andalusia would do. However, and almost as if not to be outdone, the Hamas website did feature the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, an anti-Semitic fabrication originally perpetrated by the Christian-Orthodox right wing in Russia which (because a forgery after all is at least a false copy of a true bill) it is wrong to describe even as a forgery. At around the same time, my friend Musa Budeiri, a professor at Birzeit University on the West Bank, told me that religious Muslim students were coming to him and announcing that they would no longer be studying for the humanities course that he taught because it required that they take instruction in Darwin . . .

As I later found on revisiting Gaza, I was being given by Shahak and Budeiri a premonitory glimpse of the new form that paranoid militant Islam was beginning to adopt. Hitherto, the Palestinians had been relatively immune to this Allahu Akhbar

style. I thought this was a hugely retrograde development. I said as much to Edward. To reprint Nazi propaganda and to make a theocratic claim to Spanish soil was to be a profascist and a supporter of “Caliphate” imperialism: it had nothing at all to do with the mis-treatment of the Palestinians. Once again, he did not exactly disagree. But he was anxious to emphasize that the Israelis had often encouraged Hamas as a foil against Fatah and the PLO. This I had known since seeing the burning out of leftist Palestinians by Muslim mobs in Gaza as early as 1981. Yet once again, it seemed Edward could only condemn Islamism if it could somehow be blamed on either Israel or the United States or the West, and not as a thing in itself. He sometimes employed the same sort of knight’s move when discussing other Arabist movements, excoriating Saddam Hussein’s Ba’ath Party, for example, mainly because it had once enjoyed the support of the CIA. But when Saddam was really being attacked, as in the case of his use of chemical weapons on noncombatants at Halabja, Edward gave second-hand currency to the falsified story that it had “really” been the Iranians who had done it. If that didn’t work, well, hadn’t the United States sold Saddam the weaponry in the first place? Finally, and always — and this question wasn’t automatically discredited by being a change of subject — what about Israel’s unwanted and ugly rule over more and more millions of non-Jews?

I evolved a test for this mentality, which I applied to more people than Edward. What would, or did, the relevant person say when the United States intervened to stop the massacres and dispossessions in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo? Here were two majority-Muslim territories and populations being vilely mistreated by Orthodox and Catholic Christians. There was no oil in the region. The state interests of Israel were not involved (indeed, Ariel Sharon publicly opposed the return of the Kosovar refugees to their homes on the grounds that it set an alarming — I want to say “unsettling” — precedent). The usual national-security “hawks,” like Henry Kissinger, were also strongly opposed to the mission. One evening at Edward’s apartment, with the other guest being the mercurial, courageous Azmi Bishara, then one of the more distinguished Arab members of the Israeli parliament, I was finally able to leave the arguing to someone else. Bishara (who incidentally told me that Israel Shahak had been the best and the kindest professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where he had studied) was quite shocked that Edward would not lend public support to Clinton for finally doing the right thing in the Balkans. Why was he being so stubborn? I had begun by then — belatedly you may say — to guess. Rather like our then-friend Noam Chomsky, Edward in the final instance believed that if the United States was doing something, then that thing could not by definition be a moral or ethical action.

There came an awful day when I picked up the phone and knew at once, as one does with some old friends even before they speak, that it was Edward. He sounded as if he were calling from the bottom of a well. I still thank my stars that I didn’t say what I nearly said, because the good professor’s phone pals were used to cheering or teasing him out of bouts of pessimism and insecurity when he would sometimes say ridiculous things like: “I hope you don’t mind being disturbed by some mere wog and upstart.”

The remedy for this was not to indulge it but to reply with bracing and satirical stuff which would soon get the gurgling laugh back into his throat. But I'm glad I didn't say, "What, Edward, splashing about again in the waters of self-pity?" because this time he was calling to tell me that he had contracted a rare strain of leukemia. Not at all untypically, he used the occasion to remind me that it was very important always to make and keep regular appointments with one's physician.

The rather striking thing was that, from then on, he actually became much less sorry for himself. He would often tell quite stoically of soul-devouring doses of "chemo" — he eventually put himself in the hands of some very advanced physicians at Long Island Jewish Hospital — and there were days when it was upsetting to see him so thin, as well as times when it seemed unnatural to see such an elegant man become so bloated. One evening he asked me if it might be a good scheme to talk to Susan Sontag about the metaphors of illness on which she had herself become so toughened an expert. I thought definitely yes, if only because they would have so much else to discuss. I know they did have the dinner but the only "metaphor" that I ever distilled or derived from Edward's eventually lethal sickness was this. Very soon after he found that he was ill, he resigned his position on the Palestine National Council, and telephoned me quite happily to tell me so. It was almost as if the intimation of mortality had emancipated him from the everyday requirements of party-mindedness and tribal loyalty. (I have sometimes noticed in other people that a clear-eyed sense of impending extinction can have a paradoxically liberating effect, as in: at least I don't have to do that anymore.)

Inevitably came the time when he angrily repudiated his former paladin Yasser Arafat. In fact, he described him to me as "the Palestinian blend of Marshal Petaín and Papa Doc." But the main problem, alas, remained the same. In Edward's moral universe, Arafat could at last be named as a thug and a practitioner of corruption and extortion. But he could only be identified as such to the extent that he was now and at last aligned with an American design. Thus the only truly unpardonable thing about "The Chairman" was his readiness to appear on the White House lawn with Yitzhak Rabin and Bill Clinton in 1993. I have real knowledge and memory of this, because George Stephanopoulos — whose father's Orthodox church in Ohio and New York had kept him in touch with what was still a predominantly Christian Arab-American opinion — called me more than once from the White House to help beseech Edward to show up at the event. "The feedback we get from Arab-American voters is this: If it's such a great idea, why isn't Said signing off on it?" When I called him, Edward was grudging and crabby. "The old man [Arafat] has no right to sign away land." Really? Then what had the Algiers deal been all about? How could two states come into being without mutual concessions on territory?

I did my best even so to get a hearing for Edward's reservations, and at his request I even wrote an uninspired introduction to his little anti-Oslo book *Peace and Its Discontents*, but my heart was not quite in it. The second so-called Palestinian intifadah, organized or incited in response to one of Ariel Sharon's staged provocations at the Al

Aqsa mosque, reeked to me of racist and religious demagoguery and of that dull, sinister “sacrificial” incantation that has since become so nauseating on a world scale.

Worse than that, in retrospect it cheapened and degraded the previous Palestinian appeals for solidarity. If the Palestinian people really wish to decide that they will battle to the very end to prevent partition or annexation of even an inch of their ancestral soil, then I have to concede that that is their right. I even think that a sixty-year rather botched experiment in marginal quasi-statehood is something that the Jewish people could consider abandoning. It represents barely an instant in our drawn-out and arduous history, and it’s already been agreed even by the heirs of Ze’ev Jabotinsky that the whole scheme is unrealizable in “Judaea and Samaria,” let alone in Gaza or Sinai. But it’s flat-out intolerable to be solicited to endorse a side-by-side Palestinian homeland and then to discover that there are sinuous two-faced apologists explaining away the suicide-murder of Jewish civilians in Tel Aviv, a city which would be part of a Jewish state or community under any conceivable “solution.” There’s that word again . . .*

If a difference of principle goes undiscussed for any length of time, it will start to compromise and undermine the integrity of a friendship. I was aware by 2001 that some of our conversations had become just very slightly reserved, and that we were sticking to “safe” topics. The political distance between us had widened much faster than our personal relations would yet have shown: I had urged *The Nation* to publish Kanan Makiya’s work on the Saddam Hussein regime, and when Edward rang the editors to complain, he was at first quite unaware that it had been my idea. His immediate riposte was vulgar in the extreme, containing the innuendo that Kanan was a paid agent, even a traitor.** Then all at once our personal and political quarrels were made very abruptly to converge. In the special edition of the *London Review of Books* published to mark the events of September 11, 2001, Edward painted a picture of an almost fascist America where Arab and Muslim citizens were being daily terrorized by pogroms, these being instigated by men like Paul Wolfowitz who had talked of “ending” the regimes that sheltered Al Qaeda. Again, I could hardly credit that these sentences were being produced by a cultured person, let alone printed by a civilized publication.

I resolutely refuse to believe that the state of Edward’s health had anything to do with this, and I don’t say this only because I was once later accused of attacking him “on his deathbed.” He was entirely lucid to the end, and the positions he took were easily recognizable by me as extensions or outgrowths of views he had expressed (and also declined to express) in the past. Alas, it is true that he was closer to the end than anybody knew when the thirtieth anniversary reissue of his *Orientalism* was published, but his long-precarious condition would hardly argue for giving him a lenient review, let alone denying him one altogether, which would have been the only alternatives. In the introduction he wrote for the new edition, he generally declined the opportunity to answer his scholarly critics, and instead gave the recent American arrival in Baghdad as a grand example of “Orientalism” in action. The looting and destruction of the exhibits in the Iraq National Museum had, he wrote, been a deliberate piece of United States

vandalism, perpetrated in order to shear the Iraqi people of their cultural patrimony and demonstrate to them their new servitude. Even at a time when anything at all could be said and believed so long as it was sufficiently and hysterically anti-Bush, this could be described as exceptionally mendacious. So when the Atlantic invited me to review Edward's revised edition, I decided I'd suspect myself more if I declined than if I agreed, and I wrote what I felt I had to.

Not long afterward, an Iraqi comrade sent me without comment an article Edward had contributed to a magazine in London that was published by a princeling of the Saudi royal family. In it, Edward quoted some sentences about the Iraq war that he off-handedly described as "racist." The sentences in question had been written by me. I felt myself assailed by a reaction that was at once hot-eyed and frigidly cold. He had cited the words without naming their author, and this I briefly thought could be construed as a friendly hesitance. Or as cowardice . . . I can never quite act the stern role of Mr. Darcy with any conviction, but privately I sometimes resolve that that's "it" as it were. I didn't say anything to Edward but then, I never said anything to him again, either. I believe that one or two charges simply must retain their face value and not become debauched or devalued. "Racist" is one such. It is an accusation that must either be made good upon, or fully retracted. I would not have as a friend somebody whom I suspected of that prejudice, and I decided to presume that Edward was honest and serious enough to feel the same way. I feel misery stealing over me again as I set this down: I wrote the best tribute I could manage when he died not long afterward (and there was no strain in that, as I was relieved to find), but I didn't go to, and wasn't invited to, his funeral.

Here is something of what I feel about friendship, and about the way in which it is a potent symbol of other things. In Martin Amis's enviably written memoir *Experience*, in the pages of which I am proud to appear several times, there is an episode about which people still interrogate me. Martin offers a slightly oblique and esoteric account of a trip on which he took me in 1989, to visit Saul Bellow in Vermont. On our buddy-movie drive up there from Cape Cod — he's almost word-perfect about this bit — he made it clear that I wasn't to drag the conversation toward anything political, let alone left-wing, let alone anything to do with Israel. ("No sinister balls," which was our colloquialism for a certain kind of too-easy leftism.) I knew I was being greatly honored by the invitation, not just because it was a huge distinction to meet Bellow but because, second only to an introduction to his father, it was the highest such gift that Martin could bestow. I needed no telling that I should seize the opportunity to do more listening than talking.

And yet it's true, as he reports, that by the end of dinner nobody could meet anyone else's eye and his own foot had become lamed and tired by its under-the-table collisions with my shins. How could this be? Now comes the chance for my own version of *Rashomon*.

Bellow had greeted us and given us drinks, and if I say so myself I had justified Martin's confidence during the predinner stage. Our host made an inquiry about Angus

Wilson to which I happened to know the answer, and also a question about his own past with Whittaker Chambers to which I could at least suggest a hypothetical solution.* Bellow in turn had read to us from some of his old writing about, and correspondence with, poor, mad, smashed John Berryman. Everything was shaping well enough. But right on the wicker table in the room where we were chatting, there lay something that was as potentially hackneyed in its menace as Anton Chekhov's gun on the mantelpiece. If it's there in the first act, in other words, the plain intention is that it will be fired before the curtain comes down. All you must do is wait. It was the only piece of printed matter in view, and it was the latest edition of Commentary magazine, and its bannered cover-story headline was: "Edward Said: Professor of Terror."

I hadn't completely wasted my time in dubious battle at New York and Washington and Chicago dinner parties, and I thought I knew when to raise my weary old dukes and when to keep them in my lap, but it was slightly nerve-straining to have to wonder in advance when and how this loaded barrel would be discharged. Dinner was by turns genial and sparkling, but the point came where Bellow made a sudden observation about anti-Zionism and then got up to fetch the magazine and underline his point. Indeed, I think he'd previously underlined some passages of the article as well. It was, even when tested against the depraved standard of polemic that had been set by Norman Podhoretz's editorship, a very coarse attack on Edward. I sat through Bellow's disgusted summary for a while until it calmly came to me that I couldn't say nothing. Conceivably, if Martin had not been there, I might have held my peace. But then, if he hadn't been there, neither would I have been. No, what I mean is that Bellow didn't know that I was a close friend of Edward's. But Martin did. Thus, even though I knew he wanted me to stay off anything controversial, I couldn't allow him to see me sitting there complicitly while an absent friend was being defamed. For all he knew, if the company was sufficiently illustrious, I might even let the cock crow for him. That would surely never do. So I said what I felt I ought to say — it wasn't that much, but it was more than enough — and the carefully planned and delightfully executed evening of my very dearest friend was straightaway ruined. He suffered more agony than he needed to, because Bellow as an old former Trotskyist and Chicago streetfighter was used to much warmer work and hardly took offense at all. He later sent me a warm letter about my introduction to a new edition of *Augie March*.

I certainly didn't concur with Edward on everything, but I was damned if I would hear him abused without saying a word. And I think this may be worth setting down, because there are other allegiances that can be stressed in comparable ways. It used to be a slight hallmark of being English or British that one didn't make a big thing out of patriotic allegiance, and was indeed brimful of sarcastic and critical remarks about the old country, but would pull oneself together and say a word or two if it was attacked or criticized in any nasty or stupid manner by anybody else. It's family, in other words, and friends are family to me. I feel rather the same way about being an American, and also about being of partly Jewish descent. To be any one of these things is to be no better than anyone else, but no worse. When confronted by certain enemies, it is

increasingly the “most definitely no worse” half of this unspoken agreement on which I tend to lay the emphasis. (As with Camus’s famous “neither victim nor executioner,” one hastens to assent but more and more to say “definitely not victim.”)

On my desk is an appeal from the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia. It asks me to become a sponsor and donor of this soon-to-be-opened institution, while an accompanying leaflet has enticing photographs of Bob Dylan, Betty Friedan, Sandy Koufax, Irving Berlin, Estee Lauder, Barbra Streisand, Albert Einstein, and Isaac Bashevis Singer. There is something faintly kitsch about this, as there is in the habit of those Jewish papers that annually list Jewish prize-winners from the Nobel to the Oscars. (It is apparently true that the London Jewish Chronicle once reported the result of a footrace under the headline “Goldstein Fifteenth.”) However, I think I may send a contribution. Other small “races” have come from unpromising and hazardous beginnings to achieve great things — no Roman would have believed that the brutish inhabitants of the British Isles could ever amount to much — and other small “races,” too, like Gypsies and Armenians, have outlived determined attempts to eradicate and exterminate them. But there is something about the persistence, both of the Jews and their persecutors, that does seem to merit a museum of its own.

So I close this long reflection on what I hope is a not-too-quaveringly semi-Semitic note. When I am at home, I will only enter a synagogue for the bar or bat mitzvah of a friend’s child, or in order to have a debate with the faithful. (When I was to be wed, I chose a rabbi named Robert Goldberg, an Einsteinian and a Shakespearean and a Spinozist, who had married Arthur Miller to Marilyn Monroe and had a copy of Marilyn’s conversion certificate. He conducted the ceremony in Victor and Annie Navasky’s front room, with David Rieff and Steve Wasserman as my best of men.) I wanted to do something to acknowledge, and to knit up, the broken continuity between me and my German-Polish forebears. When I am traveling, I will stop at the shul if it is in a country where Jews are under threat, or dying out, or were once persecuted. This has taken me down queer and sad little side streets in Morocco and Tunisia and Eritrea and India, and in Damascus and Budapest and Prague and Istanbul, more than once to temples that have recently been desecrated by the new breed of racist Islamic gangster. (I have also had quite serious discussions, with Iraqi Kurdish friends, about the possibility of Jews genuinely returning in friendship to the places in northern Iraq from which they were once expelled.) I hate the idea that the dispossession of one people should be held hostage to the victimhood of another, as it is in the Middle East and as it was in Eastern Europe. But I find myself somehow assuming that Jewishness and “normality” are in some profound way noncompatible. The most gracious thing said to me when I discovered my family secret was by Martin, who after a long evening of ironic reflection said quite simply: “Hitch, I find that I am a little envious of you.” I choose to think that this proved, once again, his appreciation for the nuances of risk, uncertainty, ambivalence, and ambiguity. These happen to be the very things that “security” and “normality,” rather like the fantasy of salvation, cannot purchase.

* The last time I heard an orthodox Marxist statement that was music to my ears was from a member of the Rwanda Patriotic Front, during the mass slaughter in the country. “The terms Hutu and Tutsi,” he said severely, “are merely ideological constructs, describing different relationships to the means and mode of production.” But of course!

* The best critique of it is Ibn Warraq’s *Defending the West*.

* I am absurdly proud that James Fenton’s poem “The Ballad of the Imam and the Shah,” which first appeared in his collection *Manila Envelope* and which foreshadows some of these pregnant admonitions, is dedicated to me.

* Edward had a personal horror of violence and never endorsed or excused it, though in a documentary he made about the conflict he said that actions like the bombing of pilgrims at Tel Aviv airport “did more harm than good,” which I remember thinking was (a) euphemistic and (b) a slipshod expression unworthy of a professor of English.

** In his attacks on fellow Arabs — Fouad Ajami being another recipient of his ire — Edward often became distressingly thuggish and *ad hominem*. Perhaps I was right to notice that softness on the USSR, which had been the special practitioner of such defamatory tactics.

* Offered a job as book critic for *Time* magazine as a young man, Bellow had been interviewed by Chambers and asked to give his opinion about William Wordsworth. Replying perhaps too quickly that Wordsworth had been a Romantic poet, he had been brusquely informed by Chambers that there was no place for him at the magazine. Bellow had often wondered, he told us, what he ought to have said. I suggested that he might have got the job if he’d replied that Wordsworth was a once-revolutionary poet who later became a conservative and was denounced by Browning and others as a turncoat. This seemed to Bellow to be probably right. More interesting was the related question: What if he’d kept that job?

Decline, Mutation, or Metamorphosis?

When the axe came into the woods, many of the trees said: “At least the handle is one of us.”

— Turkish proverb

If you desired to change the world, where would you start? With yourself or others?

— Alexander Solzhenitsyn

TOWARD THE CLOSE of *Hearing Secret Harmonies*, which is itself the close of his complex, majestic, rhythmical twelve-volume novel sequence *A Dance to the Music of Time* (and also by a nice chance the volume that happens to be dedicated to Robert Conquest), Anthony Powell’s narrator catches sight of a blue-clad person, crossing a playing field in his direction:

Watching the approaching figure, I was reminded of a remark made by Moreland ages before. It related to one of those childhood memories we sometimes found in common. This particular recollection had referred to an incident in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* that had stuck in both our minds. Moreland said that, after his aunt read the book aloud to him as a child, he could never, even after he was grown-up, watch a lone figure draw nearer across a field, without thinking that this was Apollyon come to contend with him. From the moment of first hearing that passage read aloud — assisted by a lively portrayal of the fiend in an illustration, realistically depicting his goat’s horns, bat’s wings, lion’s claws, lizard’s legs — the terror of that image, bursting out from an otherwise at moments prosy narrative, had embedded itself for all time in the imagination. I, too, as a child, had been riveted by the vividness of Apollyon’s advance across the quiet meadow.

When I first read this passage of Powell, I put down the novel and was immediately back in the Crapstone of my Devonshire boyhood. The long-forgotten but evidently well-retained scene of my memory is as plain in my recollection as anything that happened to me yesterday. My younger brother, Peter—aged perhaps eight—has so strongly imbibed John Bunyan’s Puritan classic as almost to have memorized it. (The “slough of despond,” “the Giant Despair,” “Doubting Castle,” the fripperies of “Vanity’s fair,” “Oh death, where is thy sting?” Can you remember when all these used to be part of the equipment of everybody literate in English? They are as real to my brother and to me as the shaggy, wild ponies on the nearby moors.) But, coming to the very decisive page that should show Apollyon in all his horrid magnificence, Peter finds that the publishers have bowdlerized the text, and withheld this famous illustration from

the version made available to the under-tens. He is not to be allowed to look *The Evil One* in the face.

This is one of those moments that, I choose to think, shows the Hitchens family at its best. Under an absolutely unremitting pressure from Peter, my father writes to the local library, to the bookshop, and eventually to the publishers themselves. No objection they can make is met by anything but scornful impatience; with a whim of steel my younger brother insists that if there is such an image, then he was not born to be shielded from it. I may have imagined this, but I am not certain that some harassed representative of the publisher does not actually call at our modest terrace house on the edge of Dartmoor, perhaps to confirm that this turbulent boy is really dictating such stuff to Commander Hitchens rather than acting as — say—the innocent front kid in some devil-worshipping or Straw Dogs coven.

I know that I mocked and teased Peter on the subject, because I was much too prone to tease him in any case, but the day came when the unabridged version arrived, and we could both solemnly turn — with parental supervision, of course, but in our own minds to protect our parents from any shock or trauma — to the color plate from hell. It was one of those pull-out pages that needs to be unfolded from the volume itself, in a three-stage concertina. And it was anticlimax defined. For one thing — Powell's summary above may have prepared you for this — it was absurdly overdone. A lizard-man or snake-man might have been represented creepily enough, but this non-artist had hugely overdone the number of possible mutations of leg, wing, and pinion and also given Apollyon a blazing furnace for a belly. The demon's wicked and gloating expression, looked at from one angle, was merely silly and bilious. I don't remember what the reaction of Yvonne and the Commander and Peter was to this long-awaited appointment with the forces of darkness, but on me it had the effect of reinforcing the growing opinion that all such images were strictly man-made, and indeed mainly designed like much of religion for the ignoble purpose of scaring children.

That's to one side. What I want to set down is the admiration I felt for Peter in taking things to their uttermost. He was already quite decided that he did not need any protection from unpleasantness, or from reality, and so it was immaterial that this particular exposure was to the unreal. "Facing it, Captain McWhirr," as Conrad puts it in his *Typhoon*. "Always facing it. That's the way to get through." To hand is a letter from Yvonne's dear friend Rosemary, in which she writes to me about the prep school Peter and I both attended and the gigantic and rather questionable chap who ran it:

At Mount House Peter was called before Mr. Wortham for some misdemeanour and said to him: "You may be in command now but you will never quell the fires within me." (You probably know this tale.) We have all dined out on it for years . . . Whenever I see or hear him on TV or radio I am aware that that passionate little boy was the father of the man.

I did not in fact know "this tale," but I am certainly impressed by it because it can only have been conveyed by the mountainous Mr. Wortham himself, who must

have been sufficiently disconcerted by Peter's mutinous backchat to report it to my parents. My younger brother has always since shown great steadiness under fire and in a variety of trying and testing circumstances at that, and it rather pleases me that his taunting enemies — just like the low, cheap crowd that would form around any conspicuous boy in the schoolyard — choose to mock him for being odd. He puts up with this handsomely enough, and he has lived to celebrate the total eclipse of a few politicians of the sad, ingratiating, crowd-pleasing sort, who were once nominated for certain glory by a mediocre press corps, yet had the air let out of them by Peter's questioning in public and his contempt in print. I become rather wistful when I reflect that this demonstration of Hitchensian moral courage has come at the price of a brother who isn't specially moved by our non-English ethnic heritage, and who is to outward appearances almost tragically right-wing.*

In Peter's most recent book, *The Broken Compass*, which contains several assertions and affirmations that make me desire to be wearing a necklace of the purest garlic even while reading them, there is a highly thoughtful and well-written passage on how it comes about that people do, in fact, undergo significant changes of mind. Given the absolute certainty that this process will be undergone by any serious person at least once, it is rather surprising to find how much is made out of it, and how many critics try to confect a mystery where none exists. Illustrating the same point in a different way, Peter takes the more subtle tack of showing how certain individuals will in fact alter their opinions, while often pretending to themselves and others for quite a long time that they have not "really" done so.

Analyzing the evolution of those, some of whom like myself were willing to make alliances of all kinds against Al Qaeda and its allies, he writes scornfully and — I must say — unsettlingly:

This is a very interesting halting place, as well as a comfortable one. For the habitual Leftist, it has the virtue of making him look as if he can change his mind, even when he has not really done so. It licenses him to be strongly anti-clerical and anti-religious, but in a way that Christian conservatives can tolerate.

The chapter is called "A Comfortable Stop on the Road to Damascus." The biblical cliché may seem inescapable but it actually retards understanding. There are people who attempt to demonstrate breadth of mind while only trying to have things both ways. ("Jews for Jesus" might be an example, or those "reform" Communists who tried and failed to cook a dish of "fried snowballs.") I once interviewed one of the original Stalinists-turned-dissident, the Yugoslav Milovan Djilas, who, sitting in his tiny Belgrade apartment, said that he had come to admire the work of Friedrich August von Hayek, adding hastily that he did not really agree with him about property rights: a prince-free reading of Hamlet if ever I struck one. However the whole point of the Damascus legend is that it refuses the very idea of the mind's evolution, replacing it with the deranged substitute of instant divine revelation.

We are forcibly made familiar, usually from febrile tenth-hand accounts of religious visionaries and other probable epileptics and schizophrenics, of those blinding and

indeed Damascene moments (or moments of un-blindness when scales supposedly fall from the eyes) that constitute such revelation. Yet one suspects, as with Archimedes and his eureka, that Pasteur was right and that in the case of sound minds at any rate, great apparent coincidences only occur to the intellect that has rehearsed and prepared for them. It may be the same with lesser convictions and allegiances. I once spoke with a hardened senior member of the Provisional Irish Republican Army, who was in the room with his leader David O'Connell when the news came that one of their bombs had "successfully" gone off. Among the casualties was a young woman who was pregnant. But it turned out that she was also Protestant. "Well, that's two for one, then," remarked O'Connell, light-heartedly clearing the air. In that instant, his deputy says, he himself internally defected from the IRA and began the second career as an informer for the British which would wreak the most terrible revenge on his former "associates." But I believe that he had been getting ever more sickened as time went by, and that there came a "moment" that seemed dramatic and was certainly memorably disgusting, when any extra morsel would have been too much for him. (There is also such a thing as ex post facto rationalization, especially in the case of people who have repented of terrible crimes.) It could be as true to say, as some of my tutors in Oxford philosophy used to seem to argue, that it is your mind that changes you.

The history of the twentieth-century Left is replete with such episodes, very often and very interestingly involving moments when somebody, hearing a statement of apparent agreement, experiences a violent sense of repulsion. The brilliant Austrian Marxist Ernst Fischer, having publicly defended the Hitler-Stalin pact as a tactical imperative, had his composure destroyed not long afterward when some dumkopf Communist told him excitedly: "Have you heard the news? We've taken Paris!" The moron was referring to the march of the Wehrmacht up the Champs-Élysées. Fischer wanted to say that this was not at all what he had intended, but then, perhaps it had been . . . During the Moscow show-trials, Whittaker Chambers heard Alger Hiss say approvingly that "Old Joe Stalin certainly knows how to play for keeps," and as an old Bolshevik he found himself experiencing a similar nausea. Incidentally, what single thing did Chambers and Hiss have in common? They both believed that the victory of Soviet Communism was inevitable. As a defector from that cause, Chambers believed that he had resignedly joined the losing side. As a lifelong opportunist, Hiss thought he had placed his own bet on the winning one. So it goes.

I was once slightly friendly with Dorothy Healey, a veteran American Communist who could boast, among other things, of having recruited the nasty but pulchritudinous incendiary Angela Davis into "The Party." Dorothy had been through a lot for her beliefs, ever since becoming a working-class Red during the Depression, and for those same beliefs she had also swallowed a good deal. She had managed to explain away the Soviet repressions and invasions and, on the radio show she hosted for the Pacifica channel, would often give air time to visiting officials from Moscow. Once, not long after the expulsion of Alexander Solzhenitsyn from the USSR, she invited some Soviet cultural hack to respond to the "Cold War hysteria" that the incident had generated in

the imperialist-dominated American press. The hack duly explained that Solzhenitsyn was a provocateur and a tool of reaction, and the author of a mendacious history of the Stalin era and . . . suddenly Dorothy asked him a question she had not planned. “You say it’s a terrible book full of lies?” “Yes,” replied the hack. “And just how,” she inquired, “do you know this?” “Because,” replied the hack, “I have read it.” Dorothy let a few beats go by before she said the next thing, and then she uttered — on air for all the comrades to hear — the response: “How come you have read it if it’s banned for everyone else in the Soviet Union?” At that instant, she told me, she understood that without any previous intention of doing so, she had resigned from the Communist Party. Yet again, though, I feel she had been keeping the lid on a stew of misgiving for some time, and reached the point where it might bubble over at any moment.*

If all my examples of sudden or gradual change of heart or mind are taken from the Left, I think this is for two good historical reasons. One is that we don’t seem to have any cases of Nazi and fascist workers and intellectuals undergoing crises of ideology and conscience and exclaiming: “Hitler has betrayed the revolution,” or flagellating themselves with the thought: “How could such frightful crimes be committed in the name of Nazism?” There are good and sufficient reasons for this that I don’t believe I need to explain: in his book *Koba the Dread*, which reproves me for my lenience in referring tenderly to old “comrades” on the Marxist Left, Martin Amis does say that of course one can’t imagine a hypothetical “Hitch” joshing in the same manner about his former blackshirt brothers and boozing partners, because in such a case he wouldn’t be the Hitch. No — and thanks to him for saying so — and nor by the way, in such a case, would Martin have consented for a single second to be my friend. (As the French say, if your aunt had wheels she still wouldn’t be a bus.) For this and related reasons I always mentally cross my fingers and keep a slight mental reservation whenever “left” and “right” crimes are too glibly mentioned in the same breath. Yet now, it is those on the Left who have come to offend and irritate me the most, and it is also their crimes and blunders that I feel myself more qualified, as well as more motivated, to point out.

I mentioned a second historical reticence just a while ago, and here it is. Many people suspect even themselves for growing cold on a cause that once animated them. I began this book by mentioning Julian Barnes’s late-life and death-anticipating memoir *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, and its role in my own dress rehearsal with the premature pomp of finding myself briefly posthumous. In one of his early chapters, Julian describes how that “Friday lunch” from our Bloomsbury boyhood still goes on, though now it’s held only once a year and takes the form of rather a stately dinner. Just to give you an idea of his tone:

Thirty or more years ago, this Friday lunch was instituted: a shouty, argumentative, smoky, boozy gathering attended by journalists, novelists, poets and cartoonists at the end of another working week. Over the years the venue has shifted many times, and the personnel been diminished by relocation and death. Now there are seven of us left, the eldest in his mid-seventies, the youngest in his late — very late—fifties.

I guessed the name of the oldest easily enough but it was with a twinge that I suddenly appreciated that that kid at the table is still Martin. I also paused at the disclosure that Julian himself now sits down while “thumbing in” his “deaf aids”: I don’t remember the old lunchtimes as being at all “shouty” but perhaps this auditory distortion, too, has deep roots. Anyway, here comes a small but unignorable jab:

The talk follows familiar tracks; gossip, bookbiz, litcrit, music, films, politics (some have done the ritual shuffle to the Right).

There is something in Julian’s implicit assumption here that makes me want to object. Is it true, as I might once have said myself, that a rejection of former allegiance can simply be read off from the graph of *anni domini*— mark the senile whistle and whinny and wheeze that is compressed into that damning word “shuffle” — and thus constitutes a cliché all of its own? “When people become older they become a little more tolerant,” snaps the case-hardened Komorovski to the hot young idealist Pasha Antipov in Dr. Zhivago. “Perhaps because they have more to ‘tolerate’ in themselves,” replies Antipov in what for many years I considered a very cutting return serve.*

I sometimes feel that I should carry around some sort of rectal thermometer, with which to test the rate at which I am becoming an old fart. There is no point in pretending that the process doesn’t occur: it happens to me when near-beardless uniformed officials or bureaucrats, one third of my age, adopt a soothing tone while telling me, “Sir, I’m going to have to ask you to . . .” It also happens when I hear some younger “wannabe” radicals employing hectoring arguments to which I have almost forgotten the answer. But that at least is because the arguments themselves are so old that they almost make me feel young again. From this kind of leathery awareness, nature itself protects the young, and a good thing, too, otherwise they would be old before their time and be taking no chances. Meanwhile, all of my children have negotiated the shoals of up-growing with a great deal more maturity than I did, and most of my moments of feeling that the world is not as bad as it might be have come from my students, especially the ones who decided in college that they wanted to join the armed forces and guard me while I sleep. (Meeting some of them later, after they have done a tour or two, has been particularly uplifting.) No, when I check the thermometer I find that it is the fucking old fools who get me down the worst, and the attainment of that level of idiocy can often require a lifetime.

Here is the voice of the above-mentioned Dorothy Healey on my voice-mail the day after I volunteered to testify to Congress that Clinton and his aides were lying when they said they had not been slandering and defaming Monica Lewinsky. “You stinking little rat, I always knew you were no good. You are a stoolpigeon and a fink. I hope you rot in scab and blackleg hell . . .” There was more. I used to replay it often. Two things about it struck me. The first and most obvious was the absolutely genuine and double-distilled malice: this was from a former not-that-close friend who would happily have got up early to see me tortured. The second was exactly that whistling and senile undertone. She didn’t have long to go and had been forced to admit that much if not most of her political life had been a waste of time, but here at least was something —

a case of a one-time comrade turning state's evidence, so to say — that allowed her all the unalloyed energy and joy of being a young Communist again. (As it happens I was testifying against the most powerful man in the world and in favor of a much-derided victim: in her mind any congressional committee was still run by Joe McCarthy.)*

Alteration of mind can creep up on you: for a good many years I maintained that I was a socialist if only to distinguish myself from the weak American term “liberal,” which I considered evasive. Brian Lamb, the host of C-Span cable television, bears some of the responsibility for this. Having got me to proudly announce my socialism once, on the air, he never again had me as a guest without asking me to reaffirm the statement. It became the moral equivalent of a test of masculinity: I wouldn't give him or his audience the satisfaction of a denial. Then I sat down to write my Letters to a Young Contrarian, and made up my mind to address the letters to real students whose faces and names and questions I had to keep in mind. What was I to say when they asked my advice about “commitment”? They all wanted to do something to better the human condition. Well, was there an authentic socialist movement for them to join, as I would once have said there was? Not really, or not anymore, or only in forms of populism and nationalism à la Hugo Chavez that seemed to me repellent. Could a real internationalist “Left” be expected to revive? It didn't seem probable. I abruptly realized that I had no right to bluff or to bullshit the young. (Late evenings with old comrades retelling tales of old campaigns weren't exactly dishonest, but then they didn't really count, either.) So I didn't so much repudiate a former loyalty, like some attention-grabbing defector, as feel it falling away from me. On some days, this is like the phantom pain of a missing limb. On others, it's more like the sensation of having taken off a needlessly heavy overcoat.*

I can write about this now in a relaxed manner, but for a long time I felt I had to phrase any disagreement with actual or former comrades in terms that were themselves “Left.” It was quite easy, for example, to argue that Bill Clinton was an acquiescent front man for all manner of corporate special interests. My book denouncing him for this, and for his disgusting crimes against women, and his “Wag-the-Dog” missile attack on Sudan, and his cruel use of the death penalty as a racist political weapon for his advancement in Arkansas, was brought out by the publishing arm of the New Left Review, which continued as my publisher for some time afterward. I became quite adept at the relevant dialectic. From Bosnia during the siege of Sarajevo, for instance, I could write that the old spirit of the Yugoslav socialist “partisans” was much more to be found in the anti-fascist posters and slogans of the Bosnian resistance than in the fiery yet lugubrious, defiant yet self-pitying, race-and-blood obsessed effusions of the Serbs, “socialist” though their nominal leader Slobodan Milošević might claim to be. The old slogans still sometimes strike me as the best ones, and “Death to Fascism” requires no improvement.

Sarajevo, though, was the first place where I began to realize that I had embarked upon a reconsideration that wasn't completely determined by me, or by what I already thought and knew, or thought I knew or thought. Much of it was probably dawning on

me while I slept. Watching the Stalinist world succumb so pathetically, even gratefully, to its death wish in late 1989, when I happily witnessed the terminal twitches and spasms of the Hungarian and Romanian regimes, I had briefly celebrated the end of the totalitarian idea. In Hungary this had already died years previously, at least as Communism, and in Romania it had long before mutated into something grotesque and monstrous: Caligula sculpted in concrete. Miloševi, too, exemplified this fusion of the cardboard-suited party-line populist and the hysterical nationalist demagogue. Here in grisly action was the gargoyle leader Paduk, founder of the “Party of the Average Man” from Nabokov’s 1947 *Bend Sinister*: the common-touch, little-guy, good-fellow type with the private line in blackmail and highly enriched child abuse.

Driving around Bosnia’s bombarded capital city with the bravest and most literate reporter of my generation, John Burns, I made the slightly invigorating discovery that must have occurred to previous Hitchenses in deadlier war zones. Physical courage is in some part the outcome of sheer circumstance. You can’t actually stay hidden forever on that corner at which the snipers are taking aim. You will starve to death, for one thing. So make the dash that you were going to have to make anyway, and you will have crushed your own cowardice for a moment, which is a tremendous feeling. I was often enough whimpering with fear but never given the chance to make fear make me feel any safer if I cowered or did nothing. (I also discovered, as have many others, that the stupid old propaganda line about “no atheists in foxholes” is just that: it never crossed my mind to pray.) I merely pass this on in case it’s ever of any use. Meanwhile, though, I was kept warm and animated by my rage at what I was seeing.

An ancient and civilized town, famous in European history as the site of a tragic drama but also celebrated as a symbiotic meeting place of peoples and cultures and religions (the name itself derives from the antique word *serai*, as in “caravanserai” or place of shelter and hospitality), was being coldly reduced to shards by drunken gunners on the surrounding hills who sniggeringly represented the primeval hatred of the peasant for the city and the illiterate for the educated. The first time I saw a mortar bomb burst, it did so in plain daylight, without the possibility of a targeting error, making an evil howl as it fell right against the wall of the beautiful and unmistakable National Library of Bosnia-Herzegovina. I felt an answering shriek within the cave of my own chest. When decoded, this internal yell took the form of a rather simple plea that the United States Air Force appear in the Bosnian skies and fill with fear and trembling the fat, red, broken-veined faces of the crack Serbian artillerymen who had never until then lost a battle against civilians.

Again, I couldn’t be entirely sure whether this was a quasi-Damascene moment or a long-meditated one. As a young boy I had been taken by my parents on a holiday in the Channel Islands or, as the French call them more neutrally, *Les Isles Anglo-Normandes*. This Anglo-Norman archipelago is anyway under British rule and has been for a long time, and I suppose I dimly knew that it was the only part of Britain that had been occupied by the Nazis. Straying away from my family to haunt a second-hand bookshop in the town of St. Helier, capital of the main island of Jersey, I found

a book thrillingly titled *Jersey under the Jackboot*. Its cover photograph showed the main square where I had just eaten my lunch, with a huge red-and-black swastika flag hanging from the town-hall balcony. In front was a genial British policeman, in blue uniform and helmet, directing the traffic. Now that was a moment when I could feel everything inside me rearranging itself. It was suddenly possible to picture all my boyhood authority figures, from headmasters to clergymen and even uniform-wearing parents, as they might have looked if German authority had been superimposed on them. It had, after all, happened to the church and the state and most of the armed forces on the French side of that “Channel.” The shock is with me still.

Michael Scammell’s biography of Arthur Koestler says that “his intellectual nerve-endings were so finely tuned that he experienced the onset of fresh ideas like orgasms, and mourned their passing as the end of treasured love-affairs.” I can lay no claim to have been half so fortunate. Brief and full of passionate intensity as it was, my moment in St. Helier wasn’t quite like that. Indeed, I can’t be sure that such transfiguring initial moments are even enviable. I do know what it’s like, however, to mourn the passing of a love, and I remember Sarajevo for that reason. By the end of that conflict, I was being called a traitor and a warmonger by quite a lot of the Left and was both appalled and relieved to find that I no longer really cared. Again to cite the ever-eloquent Koestler, this time on the Hitler-Stalin pact from his essay in *The God That Failed*. Without admitting it to himself, I think he had been quite badly hurt by charges of “selling out” and treason from his former comrades. (Hannah Arendt remarks somewhere that the great achievement of Stalinism was to have deposed the habit of argument and dispute among intellectuals, and to have replaced it with the inquisitorial, unanswerable question of motive.) Anyway, here’s how Koestler felt his fog of misery and doubt beginning to lift:

I remained in that state of suspended animation until the day when the swastika was hoisted on Moscow airport in honor of Ribbentrop’s arrival and the Red Army band broke into the Horst Wessel Song. That was the end, from then onward I no longer cared whether Hitler’s allies called me a counter-revolutionary.

Under much less arduous circumstances, I found it was taking me much longer to “let go.” I had wanted the moral arithmetic to add up, while still hoping that it could somehow be made to do this on the “left” side of the column. In Bosnia, though, I was brought to the abrupt admission that, if the majority of my former friends got their way about non-intervention, there would be another genocide on European soil. A century that had opened with the Muslim Turkish slaughter of the Armenians, and climaxed in the lowest sense of that term with an attempt to erase Jewry, could well close with a Christian destruction of the continent’s oldest Muslim population. This was an exceedingly clarifying reflection. It made me care much less about the amour propre of my previous loyalties. I might illustrate this better if I did so by means of two other figures who were highly important to me: Noam Chomsky and Susan Sontag.

At the time of the Miloševi wars, I was still engaged in a desultory email exchange with Chomsky on another matter. He had written, as far back as 1990, that Vaclav

Havel's visit to Washington after the overthrow of Czechoslovak Communism was not at all what it had seemed. For Havel to address a joint session on Capitol Hill, only months after the murders of the Jesuit leadership by death squads in El Salvador, and to make no mention of the part played by the United States in this dreadful episode, was in Noam's opinion disgraceful. (I think this "moral equivalence" canard was being resuscitated because of Havel's support for intervention in the Balkans: a policy that Chomsky detested.) Havel's speech, he intoned, was just as if an American Communist had gone to Moscow in 1938 and spoken to the Presidium as an invited guest while deliberately suppressing any mention of the purges. I tried as a friend to dissuade him from this analogy and from the conclusions that were doubtless meant to flow from it. I forget all the points I made, but I hope I kept in mind the fact that Congress was elected whereas Stalin's assembly was not, and the prevalence of censorship, torture, and murder in one case and not the other. I certainly said that Havel was the new and freely chosen representative of a small country, who had come to thank a big one which had at least rhetorically stood by it in adversity, so that the moment for a public denunciation of American war crimes was scarcely apt. I dare say that this last observation would have seemed paltry or worse to Chomsky. Anyway, at the close of one such exchange, and wearying of it a bit, I changed the subject and asked him if his co-author Edward Herman, who was then taking positions that made the names "Serbia" and "Yugoslavia" almost interchangeable, was to be regarded as his "co-thinker" on this, too. (In order to be clear: to say that the United States was bombing "Yugoslavia" seemed to me false. To say that a dictatorial and expansionist Serbia had been bombing the rest of Yugoslavia seemed to be true.) Professor Chomsky replied loftily that he did not really regard anyone as his co-thinker. This was his absolute right, but I felt that my reasonably direct question had received a rather shifty answer, and this from the man who so highly esteemed truth in language. I experienced the dismal feeling of a steep diminution of esteem on my own part, along with the premonition that this might not be the end of it.*

Susan Sontag was an admirable example of what it means, if it really means anything, to be a "public intellectual." She most certainly wasn't a private one. She was self-sustaining and self-supporting, and though she did like to follow fashion and keep herself updated, she was not a prisoner of trend. She was beautiful and dramatic, with the most astonishingly liquid eyes. She wanted to have everything at least three ways and she wanted it voraciously: an evening of theater or cinema followed by a lengthy dinner at an intriguing new restaurant, with visitors from at least one new country, to be succeeded by very late-night conversation precisely so that an early start could be made in the morning. I consider myself pretty durable in these same sweepstakes but I once almost fell asleep standing up while preparing her a sofa bed in Washington after a very exhausting day of multiple meals and discussions: she had vanished to begin the next day long before I regained consciousness. She had some of the vices that attend this voracity, becoming easily impatient and sometimes making one begin all over again to try for a plateau of intimacy that one felt had already been attained. The

reactionary critic Hilton Kramer once wrote, whether with deliberate or unconscious absurdity I do not know, that her beloved son (and my esteemed friend) David Rieff would not develop until he left “the Sontag circle.” This seemed like rather a lot to ask. Ridiculing Kramer at the end of a dinner, she and David and I clinked glasses to my toast: “May the circle be unbroken,” and later embraced on the sidewalk. Next time we met, she put me in the wrong about something where I quite possibly had been gravely wrong, but still . . . *

One always had to forgive her, because whether it was the AIDS plague — the initial nightmare of which we have now chosen to forget — or politics, she could call upon both moral and physical courage. And she did not just defend AIDS victims as a “category,” but generously drew upon her own struggles with carcinoma to help and advise individuals. Nobody human is ever consistent, but Susan showed herself prepared to follow where logic might compel her to go. I don’t say that she did this in a straight line, but then it would be boring if it were otherwise. I now understand that my first confrontation with what was to be the rest of my political life came when I watched her address the celebrated meeting “Solidarity with Solidarity” in New York in early 1982. It was by then fairly easy for the “progressive” world to make the formally correct noises about a military coup in Poland, and several speakers duly did so while hurrying to add (as Susan must have guessed they would) that workers were also being repressed in El Salvador, not to mention the United States. I knew I was present for a real rather than a routine event when she got up and said: “I repeat; not only is Fascism (and overt military rule) the probable destiny of all Communist societies — especially when their populations are moved to revolt — but Communism is itself a variant, the most successful variant, of Fascism. Fascism with a human face.” That last phrasing didn’t precisely “work,” or else it did work precisely because it was somewhat contradictory. Edmund White is once again wrong to say that she was “howled off the stage” in consequence: there was a sort of angry silence as the audience checked its reflexes. The comrades had already had to absorb her wounding suggestion — chosen as if on purpose to dissolve any illusions they retained — that the conservative lowbrow CIA-backed Reader’s Digest (its very name an insult to the well-read) would have been a better Everyman guide to Communist reality than *The Nation* or the *New Statesman*.

The usual duty of the “intellectual” is to argue for complexity and to insist that phenomena in the world of ideas should not be sloganized or reduced to easily repeated formulae. But there is another responsibility, to say that some things are simple and ought not to be obfuscated, and by 1982 Communism had long passed the point where it needed anything more than the old equation of history with the garbage can. Even Susan, though, felt that she might have gone a burned bridge too far. As someone who had spent much of his life writing for *The Nation* and the *New Statesman*, I presumed on our recent friendship to call round and ask if *The Nation* could have a copy of her (clearly prepared) speech, so as to put it in print and invite a symposium of comments. She agreed, but on the startling condition that the sentence about the superiority of

the Reader's Digest be cut out. Even then, I knew better than to pick a quarrel with her on a detail. We ran the speech as redacted by her, and I wrote an introductory passage describing the evening and therefore putting her excised sentence back in, as having been extensively reported.*

In the symposium that we eventually ran, a number of the Left intelligentsia made the abysmal mistake of saying, in effect, that while what Susan had said might be partly true or even plain true, she would still have been much better advised not to say it. I think she herself may have feared that she was somehow "objectively" helping Ronald Reagan. But whether her mind changed her, or she changed her mind, she manifested the older truth that all riveters of the mind-forged manacles most fear, and that I here repeat: One cannot be just a little bit heretical.

I add for emphasis that, within a decade, official Communism had imploded beyond all hope of repair, or else mutated into overt military dictatorship as in North Korea and Cuba — the last uniformed regime in Latin America — and that in Serbia the word "fascism," or even "National Socialism," would not have been much of an exaggeration. All that remained at that point was to stop temporizing, stop clinging to consoling hand-holds and dallying in halfway houses and call for NATO and the White House to abandon an ignoble neutrality and save the name of Europe. Which Susan loudly did, and today's rescued Sarajevo has a street that bears her name.*

Hannah Arendt used to speak of "the lost treasure of revolution": a protean phenomenon that eluded the capture of those who sought it the most. Like Hegel's "cunning of history" and Marx's "old mole" that surfaced in unpredictable and ironic places, this mercurial element did quicken my own short life in the magic, tragic years that are denoted as 1968, 1989, and 2001. In the course of all of them, even if not without convolutions and contradictions, it became evident that the only historical revolution with any verve left in it, or any example to offer others, was the American one. (Marx and Engels, who wrote so warmly about the United States and who were Lincoln's strongest supporters in Europe, and who so much disliked the bloodiness and backwardness of Russia, might not have been either surprised or disconcerted to notice this outcome.)

To announce that one has painfully learned to think for oneself might seem an unexciting conclusion and anyway, I have only my own word for it that I have in fact taught myself to do so. The ways in which the conclusion is arrived at may be interesting, though, just as it is always how people think that counts for much more than what they think. I suspect that the hardest thing for the idealist to surrender is the teleological, or the sense that there is some feasible, lovelier future that can be brought nearer by exertions in the present, and for which "sacrifices" are justified. With some part of myself, I still "feel," but no longer really think, that humanity would be the poorer without this fantastically potent illusion. "A map of the world that did not show Utopia," said Oscar Wilde, "would not be worth consulting." I used to adore that phrase, but now reflect more upon the shipwrecks and prison islands to which the quest has led.

But I hope and believe that my advancing age has not quite shamed my youth. I have actually seen more prisons broken open, more people and territory “liberated,” and more taboos broken and censors flouted, since I let go of the idea, or at any rate the plan, of a radiant future. Those “simple” ordinary propositions, of the open society, especially when contrasted with the lethal simplifications of that society’s sworn enemies, were all I required. This wasn’t a dreary shuffle to the Right, either. It used to be that the Right made tactical excuses for friendly dictatorships, whereas now most conservatives are frantic to avoid even the appearance of doing so, and at least some on the Left can take at least some of the credit for at least some of that. It is not so much that there are ironies of history, it is that history itself is ironic. It is not that there are no certainties, it is that it is an absolute certainty that there are no certainties. It is not only true that the test of knowledge is an acute and cultivated awareness of how little one knows (as Socrates knew so well), it is true that the unbounded areas and fields of one’s ignorance are now expanding in such a way, and at such a velocity, as to make the contemplation of them almost fantastically beautiful. One reason, then, that I would not relive my life is that one cannot be born knowing such things, but must find them out, even when they then seem bloody obvious, for oneself. If I had set out to put this on paper so as to spare you some or even any of the effort, I would be doing you an injustice.

I began this highly selective narrative by citing Auden on the unadvisability of being born in the first place — a view from which he quickly waltzed to Plan B: make the most of the dance (or, as Dorothy Parker elsewhere phrased it, “You might as well live”). In better moments I prefer the lyrical stoicism of my friend and ally Richard Dawkins, who never loses his sense of wonder at the sheer unlikelihood of having briefly “made it” on a planet where crude extinction has held such sway, and where the chance of being conceived, let alone safely delivered, is so infinitesimal.

When my beloved friend James Fenton came back from Indochina, having witnessed the fall of Saigon and Phnom Penh and the end, both tragic and ambiguous, of a war which so many of us had regarded as a test of sheer commitment, he was somewhat shaken. The closing words of one of his most exquisite poems from that period were: “I’m afraid that all my friends are dead.” But he knew that if there were any survivors they would know how to contact him, and when some of them did, and being the conscience-determined person he was and is, he went straight back to the frontiers and the camps to see how he could be of help. The resulting poems — collected as *Children in Exile* — comprise an essential complement to their predecessors in *Memory of War*. One of the latter is titled “Prison Island.” I happen to remember the genesis of this outwardly melancholy but diamond-hard poem particularly well: we had both just been verbally and aurally assailed by a braggart dogmatist who asserted of his own sect: “The possibility of defeat does not enter our calculations.”

This honking, tyrannical self-regard so annoyed James, and I think so much put him in mind of the deadly certainties that had brought such havoc to his Asian friends, that he could not rest until he had caught its hubris in the net of his verses. I have a

poignant memory of him reading the first draft aloud to me, in the attic room where he was then lodging. One stanza in particular caught and held me, too:

My dear friend, do you value the counsels of dead men?

I should say this. Fear defeat. Keep it before your mind

As much as victory. Defeat at the hands of friends,

Defeat in the plans of your confident generals.

Fear the kerchiefed captain who does not think he can die.

Over the course of the last decade, I have become vividly aware of a literally lethal challenge from the sort of people who deal in absolute certainty and believe themselves to be actuated and justified by a supreme authority. To have spent so long learning so relatively little, and then to be menaced in every aspect of my life by people who already know everything, and who have all the information they need . . . More depressing still, to see that in the face of this vicious assault so many of the best lack all conviction, hesitating to defend the society that makes their existence possible, while the worst are full to the brim and boiling over with murderous exaltation.

It's quite a task to combat the absolutists and the relativists at the same time: to maintain that there is no totalitarian solution while also insisting that, yes, we on our side also have unalterable convictions and are willing to fight for them. After various past allegiances, I have come to believe that Karl Marx was rightest of all when he recommended continual doubt and self-criticism. Membership in the skeptical faction or tendency is not at all a soft option. The defense of science and reason is the great imperative of our time, and I feel absurdly honored to be grouped in the public mind with great teachers and scholars such as Richard Dawkins (a true Balliol man if ever there was one), Daniel Dennett, and Sam Harris. To be an unbeliever is not to be merely "open-minded." It is, rather, a decisive admission of uncertainty that is dialectically connected to the repudiation of the totalitarian principle, in the mind as well as in politics. But that's my Hitch-22. I have already described some of the rehearsals for this war, which the relativists so plaintively call "endless" — as if it were not indeed the latest chapter of an eternal struggle — and I find that for the remainder of my days I shall be happy enough to see if I can emulate the understatement of Commander Hitchens, and to say that at least I know what I am supposed to be doing.

* My brother's case, plus the late reflection this brings on John Bunyan, convinces me again that there may have been such a thing as the Protestant or even Puritan revolution. Christopher Hill's attempt to Marxify the idea might not exactly work, but the concept of a time before kings and lords and bishops and popes is an ancient yearning. You can find it in Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson, and in poems like Macaulay's magnificent pastiche *Naseby*, as well as Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*, where humble Smith's struggle against "Newspeak" and the Inner Party is the moral equivalent of those of Wyclif and Tyndale and Coverdale to have the Bible translated out of arcane priestly language and into plain English. Orwell's own favorite line—"By The Known Rules of Ancient Liberty"—was from John Milton. This might also go to support the satisfying idea of there being such a thing as a Protestant atheist. Much

easier to imagine Peter Hitchens as an atheist than as a Muslim, let alone as a Jew or a Catholic. (When William Tyndale first went to school in medieval Oxford, I'm pleased to note, his family name was Hychyns.)

* Her story is rather preferable to the one told me by Eric Hobsbawm, who at the time of his resignation from the Communist Party was probably the only member of any academic or intellectual or scholarly repute that it still possessed. Running into him shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, I asked him if he'd retained his membership and was told "no." What then had finally precipitated the separation? "They forgot to send me the form asking me for the annual renewal of my membership," he said with perfect gravity, "and so I decided not to write to headquarters and remind them." Just like that, then.

* Julian, for example, was much quoted for saying that the whole battle over Iraq wasn't worth the life of a single British soldier, which echoes what Otto von Bismarck said — "not worth the balls of a Pomeranian grenadier" — about the whole of the Balkans. Yet why is that sort of realpolitik considered to be "left" rather than conservative? Attacking me in one of the magazines of the American isolationist Right, Peter Hitchens denounced the war in Afghanistan as the sort of "stupid, left-wing war" that only people like his brother would endorse. That seemed to me nearer the mark than Julian.

* This is why Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront*, which suggests that decent people should break the Mafia's law of omerta, is still regarded as morally dubious by many on the American Left.

* Some time later, I was invited by Bernard-Henri Levy to write an essay on political reconsiderations for his magazine *La Regle du Jeu*. I gave it the partly ironic title: "Can One Be a Neoconservative?" Impatient with this, some copy editor put it on the cover as "How I Became a Neoconservative." Perhaps this was an instance of the Cartesian principle as opposed to the English empiricist one: it was decided that I evidently was what I apparently only thought.

* Chomsky has since said some things to suggest that he never thought I was any good anyway: I possess several inscribed books from him that prove the contrary. As it happens I don't think it's kosher to pay him back in the same coin. In the late 1970s he wrote to me praising something I'd written about the need to try and keep *Encounter* magazine from going under: his libertarianism (and his rare-on-the-Left admiration for Orwell) has been relatively consistent. If you look back at the essays that made his name — on the incipient stages of the Vietnam War, on B.F. Skinner, on the memoirs of Kissinger, on East Timor, and on the Kahane Commission on the Sabra/Shatila massacres—you will find a polemical talent well worth mourning, and a feeling for justice that ought not to have gone rancid and resentful.

* Reflecting on this now, I think perhaps that she wanted to be sure, and also for me and others to be on notice, that she wasn't to be taken for granted and that there was always to be some demarcation between friendship and agreement. Quite probably a good thing. Many truths or useful remarks go unspoken for fear of rupturing intimacy,

and after all, there never was a Sontag “circle,” or clique. This is the point that Edmund White rather fails to apprehend about her in *City Boy*, his free-hand memoir of the higher naughtiness in New York.

* You really cannot win with everybody at once: the CIA’s historically more high-brow offspring Encounter ran a piece by Melvin Lasky accusing me of having removed the relevant words on purpose from her own text.

* In spite of the general nullity of the Left on this question, Susan was only the best known of several, including Bernard-Henri Levy, Peter Schneider, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Adam Michnik, and others, who in their way traced a line from 1968 through 1989 to future combats with the totalitarian.

Acknowledgments

I HAVE TRIED TO DEFRAY some of my debts of acknowledgment in these very pages, but I must not omit those who made it possible for me to set down the work in the first place. Much nonsense is talked in our day about the decay of publishing, and it will remain nonsense while people like Jonathan Karp, Colin Shepherd, Bob Castillo, Cary Goldstein and Toby Mundy have the ordering of things at houses like Twelve and Atlantic. I have been especially fortunate in boasting a friend and comrade, Steve Wasserman, as, at different times, my editor for reviews, my editor for books, and last and perhaps best of all my agent. I have to thank Robin Blackburn of the New Left Review for effecting my introduction to Steve thirty years ago, and for much else besides.

Maciej Sikierski, the unsleeping archivist for Polish affairs at the library of the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, went to uncommon trouble to assist me in tracing my families' lineages in the arduous history and geography of his indomitable country.

I sometimes like to think that I could have been one of those I praise in this book, who, like Victor Serge, had the intestinal fortitude to write "for the bottom drawer, and for history." But I know damn well that without certain editors and publishers I would have drooped like a wet sock. Undying and moist thanks, then, to Paul Barker, Anthony Howard, Harold Evans and Tina Brown, Charles Wintour, Alexander Chancellor, Charles Moore, Jeremy Treglown, Sally Emerson, Peter Stothard, Victor Navasky and Richard Lingeman and Hamilton Fish and Betsy Pochoda, Barbara Epstein, Michael Kelly (RIP) and James Bennett and Cullen Murphy and Ben Schwarz, David Rieff, Jon Meacham and Mark Miller, Jacob Weisberg, David Plotz and June Thomas, Lewis Lapham and Gerry Marzorati, Perry Anderson and Robin Blackburn, Mary-Kay Wilmers and Inigo Thomas, Deirdre English, and Conor Hanna. All of them are heroes and heroines of the "first draft" and of the work in progress, and the readers of many other authors should not omit to thank them as warmly as I do.

Many thanks to Windsor Mann for help on archives and photographs.

To thank my adored father-in-law, Edwin Blue, and my delightful daughter for their expert assistance to a techno peasant would be to say the least of it.

Impossible, though, not to make the most special and snuffingly moist noises about Graydon Carter, Aimee Bell, Walter Owen, and David Friend. It's quite something for a writer, whose promiscuous mandate is to be interested in everything, to know that he possesses friends and backers and colleagues who are determined to give him latitude while scrutinizing every line, providing every help in the field, noticing every weakness,

and enhancing every paragraph. (One short passage in this book was originally written for them.) If it were not for their intensive care and meticulous attention, I would want to call them my luck.

The Ted K Archive

Christopher Hitchens
Long Live Hitch
God is Not Great/Hitch-22/Arguably
2012

www.thetedkarchive.com