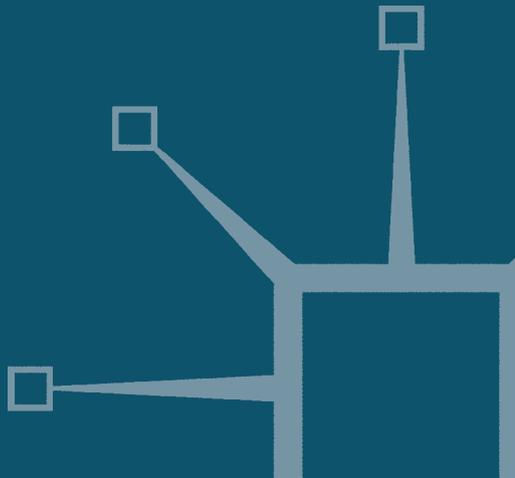


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The Politics of Sex and Other Essays

On Conservatism, Culture and Imagination

Robert Grant



The Politics of Sex and Other Essays

Also by Robert Grant

OAKESHOTT

The Politics of Sex and Other Essays

On Conservatism, Culture
and Imagination

Robert Grant

Foreword by Raymond Tallis





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*Grau, teurer Freund, ist alle Theorie,
Und grün des Lebens goldner Baum.*

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Foreword

Raymond Tallis

Cyril Connolly said that George Orwell's personality shone out of everything he wrote. The same is true of the author of *The Politics of Sex and Other Essays*. He is genial, sceptical, humorous – but also profoundly serious. His convictions are deep; but one of his deepest is our need to maintain a responsive openness to actuality. His prose, accordingly, is punchy, witty (in all senses), lyrical, impassioned and engaged. A perfect instrument of communication, it rises at times to artistry of a very high order.

The Politics of Sex and Other Essays is the first instalment of a planned three-volume collection of Robert Grant's papers, articles and reviews. Grant, though a teacher of literature, is a recognized authority on the philosopher Michael Oakeshott. He will also be familiar to the ordinary educated reader from publications such as *The Times Literary Supplement*. Few, however, will be acquainted with more than a fraction of his *oeuvre*, which is otherwise scattered through little-known magazines, encyclopaedias and heavyweight academic journals and symposia. The scope of the present volume alone – *Viz* magazine, opera both real and soap, Jane Austen, a self-styled freak show, sex, death, interior decoration and more – is astonishing.

There is no shallow polymathy here, but a coherent vision: that, I would say, of a 'conservative intellectual', were the words not so apt to mislead. For Grant's intelligence is truly hospitable, and imbued with a critical common sense which examines the world around it without fear or prejudice. Further, unlike so many intellectuals, he is not prepared, in the words of his lethally accurate judgement on Raymond Williams, to sacrifice his critical sensibility on the altar of ideology (see Essay 5, §2). Moreover, his writing is consistently lucid (something that post-1968 French intellectuals have taught many to despise) and peppered with observations which, to adapt a metaphor of Wittgenstein's, reduce a roomful of steam to a drop of clear water.

Like Burke and Oakeshott (see Essays 2–4), Grant is not hostile to ideas as such, and certainly not to the application of intelligence or reason to human affairs. His objection is rather to high-level abstract

thought untouched by common sense and common experience, and its most dangerous product: top-down, theory-driven, goal-directed politics. In a short passage on Burke almost every variety of revolutionary is implicitly captured, from real-life political monsters to ivory-tower would-be 'subversives'. This unflattering group portrait is rounded out, in Grant's brief, compassionate notice of Elie Wiesel's Holocaust trilogy, by his comments on terrorism's ethical self-delusions (Essay 20).

In Grant's understanding of it (see Essay 1), true conservatism is no more hostile to change than to ideas. Some change is inevitable, some positively necessary; but it must be properly informed, preserve continuity and respect tradition ('embodied practical knowledge'). Grant's conservatism is not a matter of party, nor confined to politics. It grows out of his perception of the interconnectedness of human concerns, and his respect for whatever has evolved peaceably and naturally out of our long-term dealings with each other. Such things, among them culture, elude a narrowly technological, rationalist perspective.

This interconnectedness is literally enacted in Grant's dictionary article 'On Culture' (Essay 7), a masterpiece of compression, synthesis and judgement. The article traces 'culture' from its ground-floor sense of socially transmitted thought and behaviour generally, up through its various layers and subdivisions, to high culture, showing its underlying continuity and its (positive) political implications. (In another dictionary entry, Essay 11, rejecting the communitarian nostalgia usually associated with the 'organic society', Grant shows that in a genuinely organic society individuals *do* matter.)

Grant's distrust of overbearing 'theory' resurfaces in his criticisms of operatic 'concept productions' (Essay 6, on *The Magic Flute*). Directors of this stamp fail to understand that, ideally, a work of art is already complete and self-sufficient. The director's job is not to suppress its surface meaning in favour of its alleged underlying 'ideas' (or any others), but, as in Ingmar Bergman's truly 'magic' film version of Mozart's opera, 'to realize the work at its maximum of transparency... with its various strands of significance as harmoniously and intelligibly displayed as the work itself permits'.

This too is the critic's task. Grant's observations on Jane Austen are revelatory because they illuminate her by a light that is her own. Unpacking her implicit ethics, he assists at the process by which, as Austen says, great books read us. Grant's courteous receptivity is the antipodes of the 'theory' industry's rape of literature and literary studies (including Jane Austen) in recent decades. (He shows similar respect to Trollope, rescued in Essay 17 from a well-meaning but too programmatic interpreter.)

Grant's correspondence with Isaiah Berlin on Tolstoy (Essay 18) throws fascinating sidelights on the nature of great fiction. In fact, the young Tolstoy's claim that 'the aim of an artist is not to solve a problem irrefutably, but to make people love life in all its countless, inexhaustible manifestations' also describes Grant's own intellectual project (as does the volume's overall epigraph, from Goethe).

It seems a far cry from Tolstoy to *Viz* and The Jim Rose Circus Sideshow, both featured in 'Four Cheers for Normality' (Essay 12). Jim Rose's repulsive stunts are described in comic, loving detail. The piece provokes a comparison with Hazlitt (with whom Grant shares more than a love of Burke), and a contrast with Roland Barthes. Barthes' celebrated account of wrestling is skewed by his prior conviction that wrestling must validate the 'bourgeois' world picture. Grant's report on Jim Rose, on the other hand, though necessarily first-personal, seems to emerge from the spectacle itself.

From Jim Rose to Charles Rennie Mackintosh is an equally far cry, but Grant's principle remains the same, that judgement should be rooted in, not imposed upon, particulars. Essay 13, 'Home Truths', is a *tour de force*. From a wonderfully imaginative description of the High Victorian (i.e. 'bourgeois') interior and Mackintosh's austere reaction against its excesses, Grant traces the sequel through Modernism to boardroom chic and 1980s Habitat. Throughout, as Nabokov would say, he 'caresses the details'. He not only thinks himself into the mentality of those to whom Mackintosh must have seemed totally unintelligible, but also refrains from adopting a posture of superiority to them. After all, he says, 'commercial callings need not be hostile to culture (think of Venice)'. Here again he condenses a roomful of steam to a drop of water. If only Barthes and other bourgeois-haters had thought of Venice, rather than of their own superiority!

Questions of taste open on to other things: politics, for example. As indeed do things deeper than politics, among them sex and death. So much is apparent from two major disquisitions on those topics, Essays 8 and 9. In 'The Politics of Sex' Grant grounds the distinctive wonder of human sexuality in the mystery of incarnation. The object of erotic love, as opposed to lust, is not a person's body but a person *in* a body. The distinction is explored with great perceptiveness, sensitivity and wit, in the service of an impassioned defence of decency against pornography and the public debasement of sex – a defence all the more persuasive for being undertaken *on behalf of* the erotic, and not at all from a puritanical revulsion against sex itself.

The relationship between the body, self-consciousness and the person is further investigated in 'The Politics of Death'. In the dark mirror of

death our value-systems, liberalism and radicalism among them, are exposed to the most searching of examinations. The essay is a moving gloss on Forster's observation that, while death may destroy a man, the idea of death saves him. It also illustrates the truth of Rilke's remark, which Grant quotes, that 'only from the side of death is it possible to do justice to love'. The ultimate political significance of death is that, by putting all our values to the supreme test, it shows us which of them most point to a life worth the name, that is, to a truly civilized society.

The most impressive and moving of these pieces, to my mind, is Essay 15, on 'Statecraft and Metapolitics in Shakespeare'. For Shakespeare, says Grant, 'politics, morals, manners and civil society are mutually-reinforcing parts of a single whole'. When they part company Hell breaks out – disorder, tyranny and the disintegration of reality itself. The most truly evil characters in the Tragedies create, or already inhabit, a world in which law, morality and the state are divorced; in which the cultural context that alone lends justice to power is stripped away; and where legitimate hierarchy, or 'degree', is replaced by the brutal domination of the weak by the strong.

A photograph in Orlando Figes' *A People's Tragedy* shows Lenin, wheelchair-bound and mute after a stroke. But his terrifying gaze – charged with all the megavoltage hatred, the unsleeping rage, the narrow obsession with a grossly simplistic and cynical idea of human society, the ceaseless pursuit of total control and the utter ruthlessness that laid his country waste and visited unspeakable suffering on millions – is undimmed. Again and again that picture haunted me as I read Grant on the Tragedies. He may have strayed far from his home discipline, but he has not lost his faith in great writers and in reading them properly: that is, on their own terms.

Grant's 'conservatism' is not a pigeon-hole into which he can be safely thrust, thereby excusing more Left-inclined readers, such as myself, from paying attention to him. Indeed, his writings make one question the usefulness of the conventional Left-Right axis. Two of Grant's closest affinities are with authors, both already mentioned, whom nobody would call 'right-wing'. With Hazlitt he shares his generosity, and his lively imaginative empathy with the varying human scene. And, as with Hazlitt, it is those qualities that prompt his occasional outbursts of anger, which are rarer and more temperate than that great hater's. With Orwell he shares a profound regard for that elusive (but politically indispensable) quality, decency; a preference for empirical truth over intellectual certainty; a respect for the particulars of people's lives and a sensitivity to the multitude of things which really motivate them; and

a corresponding suspicion of abstractions, especially in politics, where they do the most damage. But all this only goes further to show that some things lie deeper, and are more important, than politics.

This is a wonderful collection, humane, brilliantly crafted, informed by a distinctive and distinguished intelligence, and compulsively quotable. Besides illumination it offers (as I began by noting) another, almost physical, pleasure, the sheer delight of reading it. *The Politics of Sex and Other Essays* not only deals, in part, with literature, it is itself literature, and, along with Figes' great history, one of the best new books I have read in ten years.

Manchester, November 1999

Author's Preface

Each of this collection's three parts opens with what was originally a separate, independent dictionary article. But a dictionary article is dry, dense and sober, and more like a conclusion than an introduction. Its subject-matter can be fully grasped only in detail, in the manner of the other, and I hope livelier, pieces here. My advice to the reader, therefore, is to read the said 'introductions' only when convenient, and to work round otherwise wholly *ad lib.*, except that it might be sensible to read Essay 3 before Essay 4 (both on Oakeshott).

Since these pieces are only very loosely continuous, I have called them not chapters but essays, even though some are actually compilations. Though never delivered as one, Essay 13, on Charles Rennie Mackintosh, was first written as a radio talk, whence its occasional stylistic oddities. Many are essays in the original sense of intellectual excursions. Some, for example those on vast general topics (such as Essay 8, on sex, and 9, on death), were begun in total ignorance of where they might lead. When first engaged to produce it, I expected 'The Politics of Sex' to turn out politically almost the opposite of the way it did.

That essay was written in the autumn of 1982, and, apart from 13 and 17 (both written over the summer of the same year), is the earliest here. I have used it as the title essay, not because of its tiny blip of bygone notoriety (which involved, among other things, being set up for several weeks' denunciation in a prospective polytechnic course dedicated to it); nor because a feminist philosopher, as she then told me, found it moving (as I did her saying so); nor because, even today, the word 'sex' in a title still compels a certain bored attention. I have done so because it is the first of these pieces to expose at length what I now see has been the implicit target of them all, the twin evils of reductionism and mechanical explanation.

Those may be fine in science, where they belong. But they also underlie both the pornographic and the totalitarian outlooks, which jointly degrade the human world and its inhabitants to the passive stuff of fantasies, whether of lust or power. It is surely no accident, as Marxists used to say, that Nazis and their paraphernalia feature so regularly in pornography. (Or so one is told.)

A few points about presentation: though many first appeared in academic contexts, these essays are addressed primarily to the ordinary

educated, non-specialist reader. For that reason, as for another – the instant availability nowadays on the Internet of nearly all significant bibliography – I have eschewed the usual panoply of scholarship. Editions are specified only where necessary.

Some of these essays, as I have said, are nearly two decades old. I have tinkered slightly with the texts as first printed (or reprinted), sometimes cutting and sometimes restoring, sometimes adding notes and afterthoughts unannounced, so long as they were consistent with the original drift. But where I have had a substantial change of mind, or where radically different circumstances (e.g. the Internet) now prevail, I have registered the fact, in Essay 8 with a separate Afterword, and in the notes with this prefix: [1999].

As for what now seems an almost comically civilized, donnish exchange with the late Sir Isaiah Berlin (Essay 18), we made only one alteration apiece when revising our originals for joint publication. Each was so minute and inconspicuous as not to be worth mention. I also broke up Berlin's rambling epistolary paragraphs into something more suited, as he himself amusedly conceded, to a general readership.

One final stylistic point: I have given an initial capital, Victorian-fashion, to the word 'State' when referring to the abstract agency (*the* State, or body politic), reserving the lower-case equivalent for particular, historic states or polities. But for various reasons I doubt whether this can be done with absolute consistency, and therefore cannot swear that I myself have done so.

Lastly, acknowledgements. The details of its previous publication are given at the end of each essay. Macmillan Press Ltd and I owe thanks to all the publishers there named for their permission to reprint. Where the source is a dictionary or collection, I wish to thank its editor or editors (also named there), first for their commission, and secondly for their ensuing patience or assistance. In the case of journals and newspapers, every single editor has been not only a valued adviser, but also a perfect saint regarding content, deadlines and the rest. Since they are mostly not named, I thank them here: Michael Church, Derwent May, Ferdinand Mount, Heather Neill, Eileen Reid, Roger Scruton and Peregrine Worsthorne. I must also express my gratitude to Dr Henry Hardy and the Trustees of the Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust, not only for their permission to reprint Berlin's share of Essay 18, but also for most generously waiving any claim to royalties.

I owe a most particular debt to my friend and colleague Dr Seamus Perry, who first assured me that these pieces were worth collecting, that someone would publish them (he was right there, at least), and that

some few deluded souls might even be found – alternatively, that every person with pretensions to taste and refinement would be clamouring with one voice worldwide – to read them. Further, unprompted, and without the slightest reward or prospect thereof, he read virtually my life's output, sorting it first into categories, and then into possible volumes. I have stuck pretty much to his blueprint for this one, but have slimmed it down somewhat to suit the publisher.

Speaking of whom, special thanks are due to two people at Macmillan (both, alas, lately departed; the one to retirement, the other to pastures new): Tim Farmiloe, for his immediate, enthusiastic offer to publish, out of what he had seen, whatever I cared to select; and Charmian Hearne, for her patient, good-humoured, point-by-point supervision of the project. I was first directed to Macmillan by two of their authors, those being none other, in fact, than Seamus Perry and Professor Raymond Tallis.

To Ray Tallis I owe another enormous debt, for his blush-making Foreword. Regarding that, all I can say is that (a) he has understood and expressed better than I ever could the core of my thinking; (b) most authors would kill to secure such sentiments in a review, especially from him; (c) I wish those sentiments were better deserved, and will try henceforth to make them so.

I have many other debts. To Frank Miles, a great educator, who imparted to us fortunate schoolboys a lesson as much moral as intellectual, namely, that we should let the text speak for itself, and neither dictate to it nor shout it down. To my College neighbour of thirty-six years ago, Terry Eagleton, from whom, informally and for several years, I received much intellectual encouragement and learnt a great deal, for all the subsequent divergence in our views.

So I did also from a later acquaintance, Roger Scruton, for the last twenty years a close friend, mentor, unpaid literary agent and much else. Without him this book would not exist, since, although he commissioned and first published only just over half of the essays in it, virtually all the rest resulted either directly from that, or from his recommendations to other editors. There are still others whom I should thank for their friendship and intellectual support, and I shall do so in subsequent volumes, with whose contents they are more closely associated; but two in particular deserve mention here, Professors John Gray and Christopher Ricks.

Finally, I must thank the Directors of the Social Philosophy and Policy Center at Bowling Green State University, Ohio – that is, Professors Fred Miller, Jeffrey Paul and Ellen Frankel Paul – for appointing me

Visiting Research Scholar at their splendid institution. This book was assembled, revised and sent off during my earliest weeks there, in January and February 1999. I owe particular thanks to the Center's Executive Manager, Dr Kory Swanson, whose anticipation of my minutest practical needs verged on clairvoyance; and to my research assistant Mahesh Ananth, who did the same for me in the bibliographical sphere.

Glasgow, November 1999

Part One

Practice versus Theory

1

Conservatism: an Outline

Unlike its main rivals socialism and liberalism, and notwithstanding the efforts of Aristotle and Hegel to provide one,¹ conservatism is notably reluctant to equip itself with any fully worked-out intellectual justification. Indeed, a sceptical aversion to doctrine and ideology generally is the most distinctive feature of modern conservatism, which began with Burke as a reaction to the French Revolution,² and later became a significant strand in Romantic anti-rationalist thought. Of all political outlooks conservatism is the least self-consciously 'political', and is rooted (according to Oakeshott)³ in a widely shared, extra-political disposition to prefer an established, well-tried manner of doing things to its ideal or theoretical alternatives. Hence conservatism is to a large extent independent of party. Its opponents, however, usually regard it as a disingenuous, self-interested defence of social imperfections on the part of those who stand to lose most by their abolition.⁴

The conservative will typically reply that imperfections attend every human arrangement, and that to attempt to eliminate them at a stroke, rather than cautiously and piecemeal, will not only bring greater imperfections in its train, but will also destroy the genuine amenities which have grown up alongside them. For example, the socialist's attempt to 'abolish' inequalities not only destroys hard-won existing liberties, but also introduces a worse, because more systematic, inequality, on account of the huge increase in governmental power needed for the purpose. On the other side, the liberal's impatience, in the name of freedom, to discard moral and economic constraints weakens the socio-cultural norms which make freedom a value, and along with them the motive to defend it.

Though not natural democrats, conservatives usually regard the *status quo* as just (or at any rate acceptable) so long as the majority are visibly

content with it. (It was on some such premise that, in 1867, the Conservative politician Disraeli 'dished the Whigs' by greatly extending the franchise.) But conservatives will often claim also that, in a mature society, the *status quo* serves the interests even of the least advantaged better than any alternative. For all have an interest in social order, social order requires political order (Hobbes), political order is the creature of power (Machiavelli), and power is made both more acceptable and more secure by its gradual diffusion. By a series of historical compromises, emergent interests are granted official recognition (e.g., as an opposition, an electorate, a professional or trade association) and thus absorbed into an ever-widening establishment. In this manner power is at once domesticated, made the object of consensus, and to some extent removed from the directly political arena. Property is both an immediately tangible form of power and a security against other, more coercive kinds. Since the owner has an overwhelming interest in his property, and thus in the political order which secures his rights in it, conservatives have always seen wider ownership as a means to future political stability.

Conservatives, nevertheless, do not support any given social order merely because it exists (unless the sole alternative is anarchy). What counts are the terms on which it exists, and the means by which it is maintained. Communists in the collapsing Soviet empire were not genuine conservatives (despite being so labelled), because the order they defended had proved incapable of compromise. Since it could be maintained only by force, it was unable ever to acquire authority, i.e. to secure its subjects' consent. (Conservatives would normally define consent as unforced obedience, irrespective of whatever current beliefs – in divine right, say, or in universal suffrage – may chance to underpin it.)

Contrary to general opinion, therefore, change is central to the conservative outlook. Conservatives are for change so far as it leads (or has led) to consensus, against it only as it leads away from it. Stability lies neither in promiscuous innovation nor in immutable rigidity (which may provoke the very unrest it is meant to avert, and is also a feature of most utopias), but in continuity. In a 'normal' society the *status quo* is actually a slowly shifting aggregation of diverse but interconnected phenomena which retains its organic unity even throughout long-term changes in its identity.⁵ The conservative conception of change is not one of progress towards some ultimate goal (since goals, like societies, change over time), but one simply of a process, to be managed or accepted as circumstances, established wisdom and the foreseeable future dictate. Hence conservatism is often described as essentially pragmatic.

Conservatism is particularist and context-specific. Its concern is always with *this* society and *these* values. Hence it is as various in its content and priorities as the societies in which it appears. Nevertheless, conservatives everywhere prize what may be called 'natural' patriotism (including that of rival nations), but generally despise the ideological nationalisms concocted by parvenu dictatorships. They may, however, find themselves seriously at odds with their own state, if the state is at odds with society and culture. The underlying intuition is that the individual, even to himself, is strictly inconceivable apart from those things, a fact which must give him the strongest possible motive to preserve them (as his property does to defend the state which protects it). Abstracted from society and culture, he becomes the atomic, undifferentiated individual of liberal theory, who lacks the definitive uniqueness of real-life individuals, and whose universal 'rights' are matched by no substantive duties, since every historic context in which they might disclose themselves (and rights be meaningful and effective) has been discounted *a priori*.

Conservatives believe in 'my station and its duties' rather than in Kant's 'duty for duty's sake' (F.H. Bradley's distinction). With Hume and Burke, they associate duty less with reason than with sentiment, and wherever possible seek political recognition for the immediate attachments which (in their view) provide the individual with his deepest fulfilment and sense of purpose. Among them are his attachments to country, locality, family, class, role, profession, religion, friendships and wider voluntary associations. Each, in the normal case, is a source of security and an object of duty and loyalty, and each, accordingly, is more or less imbued with personality, in other words, is conceived in moral terms.

The State (at least in principle) is generally thought of as the guardian of all these subordinate 'natural' allegiances and the embodiment or completion of their ideal unity (Voegelin's 'existential representation').⁶ Hence it too is quasi-personal, deserving of praise or blame, love or hatred, accordingly as it does or does not fulfil its office. The State cannot impose this or any other unity *ab extra*, in the totalitarian manner, without destroying its own authority. Rather, it must be permeable to cultural influence, which is only another way of saying that its authority, or right to command, ultimately depends upon consent. (As Simone Weil observed of rights generally,⁷ an authority which no one acknowledges is not worth very much.)

Formal democracy and universal suffrage are not so much productive of consent, as evidence (when they work) of its prior existence. In the

absence of underlying consent (or consensus) they may actually sharpen social conflicts to the point that a society so situated becomes ungovernable except by force (dictatorship). And abstractly regarded, as the touchstone of legitimacy, they concede too much to the idea that political society is a contract (Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau), and that the subject's only obligations are those he has deliberately chosen. They tend moreover to call into question the legitimacy of other generally accepted arrangements, past and present. What is not in doubt is that for the State to represent (and protect) the culture from which it stems requires something like parliamentary government, the rule of law (which is to say, a relatively stable body of law and an independent judiciary to which the administration and all other powers are accountable), and a multiplicity of subordinate institutions and associations each possessing some degree of officially recognised autonomy.

The State and its laws are ideally an outgrowth of civil society. Indeed, unless it also is such an outgrowth in fact, the State cannot either properly represent or presume authoritatively to regulate civil society. State and society are nevertheless distinct, and should remain so. For wholly to conflate them is to remove their mutual constraints, and so deliver the subject, and all subordinate associations, to the absolute tyranny of majorities. Wholly to separate them, on the other hand, is by definition to make the State's power unaccountable, and to deliver culture, society and the individual to an alien autocracy, which will not long suffer such alternative objects of duty to exist.

The animating principle of liberalism is freedom; of socialism, equality. That of conservatism is order, and perhaps also, as Roger Scruton has suggested,⁸ happiness (cf. Aristotle). In conservative eyes liberalism signifies too little order, and socialism too much. Too little order results in moral pluralism and anomie (i.e. existential rootlessness, the perception that, being underwritten by no objective authority or necessity, what one does and is are superfluous). Together with so-called 'disenchantment' (the evacuation of human meaning from the cosmos and its replacement by value-free scientific understanding), anomie is widely regarded by sociologists such as Durkheim, Weber and Berger as the endemic disease of modernity, and a major source of unhappiness.

Too much order, on the other hand, is destructive of freedom. The conservative's 'order' differs as much from the socialist's as his 'freedom' does from the liberal's. As construed by conservatives, freedom and order are not contraries, but complements. For socialism, at least at its totalitarian extreme, order lies in the imposed pursuit of premeditated collective goals, which necessarily conflict with those of individuals.

The 'order' which conservatives prize is neither monolithic nor formulable as any kind of 'goal'. It is merely whatever emerges from the multitude of spontaneous choices made in response to culture's informal promptings and constraints, and under the formal constraints of law; in a word, culture itself, in its ongoing, mobile totality. Hence, though cultural values can and should be upheld, as law can only be made, by government (which thus secures an initial or provisional order), government can neither predict nor impose the order which results.

Although conservatives have traditionally been suspicious of both capitalism and economics, their conception of society bears a strong structural resemblance to the market economy as described by F.A. Hayek. The difference lies in conservatism's insistence (shared, in fact, by the later Hayek)⁹ that politics is prior to economics and that, whatever may be the case in the market, choices in the socio-political sphere are prompted by other considerations than individualistic self-interest. Furthermore, neither economic nor (still less) moral *laissez-faire* is any guarantee of a happy or desirable society. The freedom which counts is not that celebrated by Mill, and satirized by Matthew Arnold,¹⁰ of simply doing as one likes, subject only to others' equal right to do the same. Nor is it that merely of doing what is harmless (which for Mill was the same thing). It is rather the freedom to pursue, with the endorsement of State and culture alike, one's deepest and most permanent attachments. This freedom, spontaneously to fulfil the unspoken common destiny by doing as one knows one ought, is denied by the totalitarian state, where the only duty is to, and determined by, itself. And it is also undermined by liberalism, which, declining to uphold any particular values, relegates all such to the sphere of arbitrary private 'conscience', where (the conservative will say) they must eventually wither for lack of support.

Were they not already familiar, conservative views on other issues could easily be deduced. A conservative will rather entrust his country's security to traditional alliances and the balance of power (and when those fail, to war) than submit its sovereignty to any supposed international authority. He will understand crime and punishment in the everyday language of moral agency rather than in neutral, quasi-scientific terms. He will support the welfare state, but not one so extensive as to erode private initiative and responsibility and confer undue political influence on its employees. He may be indifferent to hierarchy, or support it as a natural concomitant of authority; but he will neither destroy it where it is appropriate nor pursue it for its own sake. He may countenance and even celebrate ethnic and cultural diversity, so long as

it nurtures an underlying moral consensus and a common allegiance. And the same goes for religion, which, believer or not, he will always respect and must always take seriously. For he will recognize it as at once the most integrative and the most disruptive of all social forces, and as resting, like his own otherwise sceptical politics, on a pious acceptance of the given, of a way of life which carries its meaning within it, and (for those immersed in it) needs no justification.

Addendum: Conservatism and Theology

Some thinkers have linked the conservative's acceptance of imperfection with the doctrines of the Fall of Man and Original Sin. But this need signify no more than that the conservative, not anticipating humanity's overnight transformation, is inclined to be tolerant. The radical may be more disposed to authoritarianism, precisely because he believes in the malleability of human nature and the possibility of secular redemption. It should however be noted that in very modest, unassertive versions these same beliefs are also not wholly foreign to conservatism.

St Augustine's position is interesting. He sees government less as evidence, in its imperfection, of man's innate sinfulness than, like slavery, as a providential, exemplary punishment for it. (Compare de Maistre's yet more gloomy metaphysical rationalizations of coercion, cruelty and violence.) But even a pagan government may establish an 'earthly peace' which permits undistracted devotion among its Christian subjects. They then owe it obedience, so long as it demands no observances contrary to Christian conscience.

None of this seems especially conservative when set beside the genial Aristotelianism of St Thomas Aquinas. For Aquinas, if this world were all-in-all, the good state would indeed be the highest good, since, by guaranteeing justice and security, it enables men's natural sociability to achieve its full secular *telos*. Moreover, in the light of eternity, the good state, even if pagan, does not cease to be a good. For, in improving men morally, it also puts them on the road to salvation.

Apart from its contractual basis, which makes it an ancestor of liberalism, Hobbes's generic defence of government is usually regarded as conservative. Its central assumption of universal egoism has led some to see it as a secular politics of Original Sin. What makes this view less than wholly persuasive, however, is the reflection that, in the absence of a protecting authority, no one has any option but to put himself first.

From *A Dictionary of Ethics, Theology and Society*, ed. Paul A.B. Clarke and Andrew Linzey (Routledge, 1995).

Notes to Essay 1

- 1 Aristotle, *Politics* (c.335–322BC); G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right* (1821).
- 2 Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790).
- 3 See Essays 3 and 4 below, and Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (1962), especially 'On Being Conservative'.
- 4 E.g., Ted Honderich, *Conservatism* (1990). The allegation must obviously be hard to square with conservatism's distrust of individualism and its respect for patriotism and other forms of selflessness.
- 5 See Essays 7 and 11 below.
- 6 Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (1952), 1, especially §§ 4, 8.
- 7 Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots* (1952, posth.), I, 1.
- 8 *The Meaning of Conservatism* (1980); also introduction to R. Scruton, ed., *Conservative Thinkers* (1988).
- 9 E.g., in *Law, Legislation and Liberty* (1982).
- 10 J.S. Mill, *On Liberty* (1859); Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (1869).

2

Edmund Burke

There are many obstacles to a contemporary understanding of Burke. For a start, as Hazlitt dauntingly observed, ‘the only specimen of Burke is, all that he wrote’. His total output was enormous, and for reasons shortly to follow, none of it is lightly to be discounted. Only one major work is easily available (the Penguin *Reflections on the Revolution in France*),¹ and neither it, nor any other, can stand proxy for the rest. Again, all Burke’s writings are highly topical, and each approaches his characteristic preoccupations from a slightly different angle. Thus his thought is not only cumulative and unsystematic, it is also never definitive. The only constant is Burke’s methods and presuppositions, so it will be best to start from there.

The ideas of Karl Marx are complex and perhaps profound. But they have at last found their natural medium in the strip cartoon, in a booklet called *Marx for Beginners* (and typically designed to keep its readers beginners in everything but Marxism). Marx’s own political journalism is itself no mean example of the genre. Its lively, graphic cogency, its quaint clarity, derive from its quality of caricature. Historical events, since they require interpretation even to be identified, are malleable. They are easily distorted, to comic or melodramatic effect, to fit the requirements of what one might call the plot. Marx’s is essentially Punch-and-Judy history, as befits a theory which ultimately reduces human beings to the puppets of unseen forces. But who could imagine a *Burke for Beginners*? Here is Burke, in his early work on *The Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), on the question of method:

In considering any complex matter, we ought to examine every distinct ingredient in the composition, one by one . . . We ought afterwards to re-examine the principles by the effect of the composition,

as well as the composition by that of the principles. We ought to compare our subject with things of a similar nature, and even with things of a contrary nature . . . If any inquiry thus carefully conducted should fail at last of discovering the truth, it may answer an end perhaps as useful, in discovering to us the weakness of our own understanding.

Principles, therefore, are continuously subject to modification. Does that make them unreliable? Not at all, says Burke:

A theory founded on experiment, and not assumed, is always good for so much as it explains. Our inability to push it indefinitely is no argument against it.

Such theory as Burke admits is in fact better called 'principle'. His political ideas resist summary largely because their whole tenor is explicitly *anti*-theoretical. Burke is an empiricist, though in a very special sense. He is no 'methodological individualist'. By itself, stripped of its relations, anything, and particularly any political thing, is bound to seem useless or unintelligible, and hence dispensable. To be truly understood, it requires to be exhaustively characterized, which is to say, to be appreciated in its full context. That means in its moral, historical, sentimental and aesthetic aspects, as well as in its formal outlines. Burke's legendary poetic and rhetorical resources were not deployed merely to galvanize a torpid House of Commons. No less than his other works, his speeches were meant primarily to be read and pondered. Only by viewing a subject from all sides, by capturing its chiaroscuro, can one bring it properly alive, and only then can one be said literally to 'know' what one is talking about.

Burke is the first great modern critic of what his intellectual descendant Michael Oakeshott calls 'rationalism in politics'. The most damning expressions in Burke's by no means meagre lexicon of abuse are 'metaphysics', 'theory', 'dogma', 'abstract', and even on one occasion (though he invisibly retains the quotation marks) 'truth'. To these he variously opposes 'convenience', 'prescription', 'habit', 'taste', 'prejudice', and an Aristotelian 'practical happiness'. All are sustained by 'solemn plausibilities' and 'pleasing illusions', 'furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination'. Burke argued, in effect, for the naturalness and necessity of what Marx was later to condemn as 'ideology', and himself condemned ideology in its other sense (the sense in which Marxism is an ideology): 'in the groves of *their* academy,' he

wrote of the French *philosophes*, 'at the end of every vista, you see nothing but the gallows.' In the 'theoretic dogma' or 'armed doctrine' of the Rights of Man, Burke perceived the solvent of all civilized order, the certain abolition of all hitherto enjoyed or merely existing liberties, and the dawn of a new Dark Age, all the darker for its pretensions to Enlightenment.

Burke's initial reaction to the French Revolution was characteristically cautious, and not perceptibly hostile. In many respects he regarded it as a great opportunity missed. But within a year he had predicted the murder of the King and Queen, the Terror and (what closely followed his death in 1797) the rise of a Napoleon. As events bore him out, the *Reflections* became a best-seller at home and abroad. The retired statesman, ailing, bereaved and politically disgraced, found himself invested with a prophet's mantle and the toast of reactionaries everywhere, the wise and the foolish, the just and the unjust alike. ('It is a good book,' said his old enemy George III, 'a very good book, and every gentleman should read it.')

Burke had been noted for his championship of liberty, moderation and tolerance; in America, in India and in his native Ireland. He frequently appealed to the 'Glorious' Revolution of 1688 as a masterpiece of statesmanship. Thus it was that the revolutionary French Assembly sought his support. What then happened to the 'liberal' Burke? This question has perennially been asked by Burke's more innocent left-inclined critics. But the answer is, precisely nothing. His alleged 'inconsistencies' are inevitable from an empiricist standpoint, being those of life itself. On being sounded, they almost invariably prove superficial. Burke had never advocated 'natural' liberty, or the Rights of Man. He was as aware as Hobbes that, even if it were desirable, such a liberty could not survive in practice. Throughout, Burke had supported a 'manly, moral, regulated liberty', to be enjoyed only in society and under government. He intended no Rousseauesque paradox about being 'forced to be free'. All liberty, he says, is a form of *power*; and whether power is good or bad depends upon who wields it, to what purpose, and at whose expense. Burke's hatred of despotism and his critique of 'natural' liberty are the same. Tyranny, or unrestrained will, is the same in a lawless democracy as in an absolute monarch. As for 'natural rights', the only ones worth (in Ronald Dworkin's phrase) 'taking seriously' are those which, having come to take them for granted, men *regard* as 'natural'. The Revolution of 1688 was no novel aspiration to hitherto unheard-of rights. It was rather a restoration, in the teeth of arbitrary power, of traditional liberties.

Burke believes with Aristotle that society is itself 'natural'. It is natural also that there should be no single approved pattern of it. For, as in Montesquieu, every society takes its shape and principles from its peculiar history, geography, popular temper, and local circumstance. Thus there is no infallible, abstract yardstick of freedom:

If any ask me, what a free government is, I answer, that for any practical purpose, it is what the people think so; and that they, not I, are the natural, lawful, and competent judges of this matter.

(*Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol*)

It follows, I think, that authority (without which there is no liberty, nor any other good, worth having) must also rest, like freedom, on opinion. But who are the people, and among them whose opinions should we listen to?

Because half a dozen grasshoppers under a fern make the field ring with their importunate chink, whilst thousands of great cattle, reposed beneath the shadow of the British oak, chew the cud, and are silent, pray do not imagine, that those who make the noise are the only inhabitants of the field.

(*Reflections*)

Burke believes that deep, solid, unvociferous opinion is the source of authority, and what attaches a man to his society (if it is worthy, as most are, of his attachment). In the *Reflections* he defiantly calls it 'prejudice'. Prejudice is a difficult and important concept, and Burke (perhaps testifying to Hume's influence) is the first to offer it as a virtue *in the appropriate circumstances*. (Ireland, where Burke fought Protestant bigotry, presumably did not count. What did count was the deep prejudice of the Catholic majority against being oppressed.) The appropriate circumstances, we might hazard, would not be in the discussion of means (to an agreed end), but in the matter of ends themselves. Some things are either desired for their own sakes – that is, are ends – or, though originally means, have become so deeply worked into a culture as to share its end-like character. In other words, a prejudice in their favour requires no extrinsic, metaphysical grounds for its defence. Such grounds might be, indifferently, the Divine Right of Kings ('to govern wrong', as Pope said), the revolutionaries' putative Rights of Man, or even, perhaps, Bentham's indiscriminate 'utility'. The objects of just prejudice are concrete desirabilities and require no additional justification.

In his most sustained piece of close reasoning, *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (largely a defence of the *Reflections*), Burke shows that the Rights of Man must be self-destructive:

If men dissolve their ancient corporation, in order to regenerate their community, in that state of things each man has a right, if he pleases, to remain an individual... If any of these is forced into the fellowship of another, this is conquest and not compact. On every principle, which supposes society to be in virtue of a free covenant, this compulsive incorporation must be null and void... By what they call reasoning without prejudice, they leave not one stone upon another in the fabric of human society. They subvert all the authority which they hold, as well as all that which they have destroyed.

It follows that a bald majority does not automatically represent the 'will of the people'. It will only be authoritative where there is a *prejudice* in the minority (and thus unanimity) in favour of majority decision. (Such might be the case where antique republican 'virtue' prevailed, an idea explored in Rousseau's analysis of democracy.) But where, as in France, property is up for grabs, no such unanimity can be looked for. Nor are the poor's possessions any more secure than those of the rich. Such a society can only be ruled by force. Burke's last writings, especially the awesome *Letters on a Regicide Peace* (1796), project an apocalyptic, nightmare vision of lawless, relentless power, a horrible inversion of the hitherto 'natural' order in civilized states. Here coercion dispenses with allegiance, as do requisition and extortion with exchange: 'the will, the wish, the want, the liberty, the toil, the blood of individuals, is as nothing... The State is all-in-all.'

It is variously said that by this time Burke was misinformed, or 'paranoid', or (evidently something to avoid being) 'hopelessly reactionary'. Only the first charge deserves an answer. Burke's empirical temper, and his astonishing industry, usually impelled him to seek out eye-witness accounts, not least from among his political adversaries. At the time of the *Reflections* he numbered among his Parisian correspondents both Tom Paine and the preposterous 'Anacharsis' Clootz, self-styled 'Orator of the Human Race'. Like the *Reflections*, however, the *Regicide Peace* may well be an unreliable guide to contemporary events. What single history of its own time could ever be otherwise? Nevertheless, it signals with prophetic accuracy the arrival of a new era in politics. Burke's horrified imaginings were realized to the letter in the slave-states of the twentieth century.

Burke shows how the complete dissolution of anything like genuinely human *society* can nevertheless coexist with a powerful, stable and (by its own lights) successful *State*. His account of the normal relations between the individual, society and the State, is (as ever) hard to summarize. But it is subtle, profound and persuasive.

Though it exists for their benefit, people do not create society by an act of conscious choice. They consent to it (as Locke would have said) 'tacitly', by their *de facto* acceptance. Of course some will 'get more', or seem to get more, out of it than others, but all, by the mere fact of acceptance, are deemed to get more out of it than out of any practicable alternative. Only under unendurable desperation (usually political in origin, but when not, beyond political remedy) will they be driven to revolution. Burke trusts greatly, as a source of stability, to the citizen's material stake in his society. Property is not, as in Locke, an unqualified natural right, but rather a reasonable expectation which all, when they possess it, see as a legitimate object of State protection. Even those without property still depend on it for their livelihood, so (unless duped into thinking otherwise) they are similarly bound to the social order.

Society, in fact, is a confluence of ever-shifting, mutually adjusting *interests*.² Compromise is nearly always a better bargain than the uncertainties of conflict. Whatever facilitates it, in particular law and justice, secures the citizen's loyalty by safeguarding his interest. Thus justice is 'the great standing *policy*' of a society (my emphasis). It is not so much that the primary object of society is to protect material interests (as Locke thought), as that if they are not engaged on its behalf they are likely to destroy it. Excluded from what they cannot buy, honour, privilege and consideration, the disgruntled rich, like the ambitious bourgeois intellectuals, are more dangerous than the helpless poor, and indeed (as in the French Revolution) may temporarily make common cause with both groups. Thus, from prudence as well as justice, wise statesmanship will always admit powerful interests to some share of formal power and representation.

Burke, however, is not just an egoistic thinker of the Hobbesian type. The duty of a representative, elected or not, is not simply to press his constituency's selfish claims against the competition. He is to address himself also to the common interest, which is no less an interest for being moral rather than material. In the matter of the so-called social contract, Burke is quite unlike Hobbes or Locke. People's allegiance can never be a straightforward, commercial *quid pro quo*. Nor are material interests straightforwardly selfish. The material interests of others are a man's moral concern. So indeed are his own. For if he neglects them, he

cannot perform his duty. They are important also to his creditors, his dependants and the objects of his charity. Thus (as in Hegel or indeed in Jane Austen) the material and moral orders are actually interwoven. If society is a confluence of interests, it is also a system of duties. Duties bear only on individuals. But they, even more than material interests, are what prevent society from disintegrating into 'the dust and powder of individuality' (*Reflections*).

Burke's account of obligation is both convincing and original. His picture of the gradual growth, from the family outwards, of the individual's sphere of duty resembles Aristotle's, and accordingly anticipates Hegel's. But Burke's account of the *ground* of obligation is wholly novel, and resembles that of his contemporary Kant, of whom he could have known nothing.

On the basis of a few rhetorical flights, conservatives of a certain stamp have frequently applauded Burke for positing (as they see it) a religious foundation for social duty. But this interpretation seems to me altogether topsy-turvy. Rather, as in Kant, man's religious awareness grows out of the brute empirical, psychological fact of his innate moral subjection. It is true that Burke often invokes Providence, but Providence is immanent, a *Deus sive natura*:

That great chain of causes...linking one to another even to the throne of God himself, can never be unravelled by any industry of ours. When we go but one step beyond the immediate sensible qualities of things, we go out of our depth.

(Sublime and Beautiful, IV, 1)

Burke rarely speaks of God, and never of revelation. Though officially Anglican, he was notoriously tolerant in religious matters, and was strongly sympathetic to both Hinduism and Roman Catholicism where they were, so to speak, the 'established' religion.³ If he appears to associate obligation with divinity, that is merely to indicate that (like prejudice) it is absolute, an heuristic terminus. Man has no more created his obligations (as Hobbes would have it, 'by some act of his own') than he has 'chosen' his society. He knows merely that they exist, not whence they come. Burke's view of obligation is to all intents and purposes naturalistic. It also suggests Shakespeare's 'degree':⁴

We have obligations to mankind at large, which are not in consequence of any special voluntary pact... The force of all the pacts which we enter into...depends upon those prior obligations. In

some cases the subordinate relations are voluntary, in others they are necessary – but the duties are all compulsive. When we marry, the choice is voluntary, but the duties are not matters of choice . . . Dark and inscrutable are the ways by which we come into the world . . . Out of physical causes, unknown to us, perhaps unknowable, arise moral duties, which, as we are perfectly able to comprehend, we are bound indispensably to perform.⁵ Parents may not be consenting to their moral relation; but consenting or not, they are bound to a long train of burthensome duties towards those with whom they have never made a convention of any sort. Children are not consenting to their relation, but their relation, without their consent, binds them to its duties; or rather, it implies their consent . . . Men come in that manner into a community with the social state of their parents, endowed with all the benefits, loaded with all the duties, of their situation. If the social ties and ligaments, spun out of those physical relations which are the elements of the commonwealth, in most cases begin, and always continue, independently of our will, so, without any stipulation on our own part, are we bound by that relation called our country . . . Nor are we left without powerful instincts to make this duty as dear and grateful to us, as it is awful and coercive.

(An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs)

The beginning and end of the above extract should suggest how little Burke has in common with vulgar Romantic nationalism.

Political obligation, then, like prejudice (its characteristic garb), is *sui generis*, self-subsistent, and opaque to rationalist criticism. We know 'nature' only as it exists in the interlocking culture, habits, customs and institutions of our particular society. It is to those that our 'obligations to mankind at large' direct us, not to the Rights of Man. We have no right, in defiance of our immediate duty, promiscuously to tinker with them in the name of some 'higher' duty, or of the supposed requirements of an allegedly pristine 'nature', mysteriously disclosed (as if by divine revelation) to 'Reason'.⁶

How then does social change come about, and is it desirable? Burke was no enemy to spontaneous change, nor to the reforms which might be necessary to contain, accommodate or ratify it. He himself sweepingly reformed the Civil List virtually singlehanded, though, as he said, he 'heaved the lead every inch of the way'. He conceded that there might be occasions (France not being one) when revolution was a regrettable but inevitable necessity. He could not fully explain the dynamics of revolution (who can?). But he was rootedly hostile to the revolutionary

vocation, and his various portraits of the revolutionary and his radical fellow-traveller have not dated one bit. The peremptory assumption of bad faith in any established authority or office; the restless hyperactivity, as though to sit still were to concede one's insignificance; the hidden scorn for those one pretends to act for; the frenzied, purblind, half-witted theorizing, not even believed in by the genuinely intelligent and ruthless; the cunning, the energy, the tunnel vision; the hatred of the very order and its privileges that have made one what one is, for not making one what one wished to be; the complete corruption of the ordinary moral sense; the bogus humanitarianism; the exploitation of genuine distress, and, lest that fail, the manufacture of imaginary grievance; the clamour, provoked as if by reflex action, for the most truckling appeasement of one's country's known and professed enemies, and the secret sympathy with their cause, even when superficially adverse to one's own;⁷ the enormous, implacable, pathological vanity, able to brook no normal claim on its affections or rival to its self-consideration, able least of all to love God, that ultimate, odious and menacing emblem of everything outside the closed circle of self;⁸ the hatred, in short, of reality and humankind: we have supped full of these horrors, which Burke had merely tasted. Yet he correctly identified them all. He may have been 'wrong' about the French Revolution. But he was certainly right about the revolutionary will. He, who most humbly accepted man's bondage to time, was – perhaps for that very reason – the least bound himself.

Reform, Burke thinks, differs from revolution *toto caelo*. It may, indeed, be necessary to prevent it. But however radical, reform must be cautious and effected with the least possible disturbance. Ideally, indeed by definition, it should preserve continuity, both of the institution reformed, and of all the other things (some perhaps unknown) which have grown up around it. Vested interests should be minimally alienated. They too may be more extensive than they seem, so that (for example) to attack wealth or property in the name of equality, or because (what no one denies) they can be subject to abuse, is not only palpably unjust but may actually worsen the lot of the poor as well. To interfere with one part is to send repercussions, some unforeseen and not all of them desired, throughout the whole system. When to do so, and how far, is a matter for cost-benefit analysis. It is only here that Burke comes at all close to Bentham (or perhaps Bentham to sense).

The multifarious activity which constitutes a society's day-to-day existence is not thereby an anarchic, unregulated thing. People pursue their purposes under the guidance of morality and sentiment ('prejudice'),

and within a common framework of laws and institutions which embody, reinforce and shape both sentiments and purposes, working all together into a virtual identity. It is thus impossible to separate society from the State, as modern liberals would like. For ideally the State is society, but in its conscious, political aspect.⁹ To make sure that it remains so is the object of parliamentary government, so that power is always constrained by opinion to act in concert with it. It is where the State diverges from society that evil, of one kind or another, makes its appearance.

Thus for Burke the State, society and individuals are an organic complex. Liberals decry the 'organic State', doubtless because totalitarians have professed to uphold it. But in an organism the whole emerges from, and sustains, the life of the parts. For it to maintain itself, they must flourish, not in total independence (for they are not independent, and cannot thus flourish), but according to their customary, conditioned, but nevertheless self-moved nature.¹⁰ The whole is not a self-constituted external agency, arbitrarily determining what the life and purpose of the parts shall be. That would be not an organic, but a mechanical system, and a totalitarian State. Unfortunately, the liberal too nowadays treats the State as a machine. Where the totalitarian sacrifices individual and society to the State, the liberal sacrifices State and society to an imaginary, ideal and rootless 'individual'. Like the totalitarian he dismisses society as a sphere of unwanted, dangerous opinion, and admits the State on sufferance only, as a mechanical guarantor of 'rights' from which it is itself excluded. But an institution that cannot be a subject of duty cannot exact loyalty. Thus it can neither flourish, nor, in the long run, survive. (It should now be clear that the word 'State', when bandied about in political controversy, must mean entirely different, indeed incompatible, things according to who is using it.)

Many liberals, however, reject the organic society but accept an 'organic economy', namely *laissez-faire*. Burke, as it happens, supported *laissez-faire*. And there are respects in which his traditionalist society, even despite its self-consciousness, its community of values, its complexity of motivation, and its anti-individualist character, nevertheless suggests the liberal economic paradigm. Providence, after all, is an 'invisible hand'. Is there a necessary connection between political conservatism and economic liberalism, or is it rather a contradiction? Can one be both a free-marketeer and a champion of State authority?

In answering both questions, we can discount C.B. Macpherson's preposterous suggestion that Burke's defence of traditional society, because that society guaranteed order and mythologized subordination, was

actually an ingenious cover for those tireless levitationists, 'rising' capitalist interests. Such supposed interests would either be intolerably subordinate themselves to a similarly guaranteed network of duties, or, in accepting them, would be transformed out of existence. So the Burkean order can hardly have been devised for their benefit. In any case Marxism – in essence, Macpherson's position – frequently attributes the French Revolution to those very same interests (as Burke was in part also inclined to do). A theory which traces both a thing (revolution) and its opposite (Burke) to one and the same cause may be thought not very illuminating.

In Burke's thought there is neither a *necessary* connection, nor any contradiction, between market freedom and State authority. Burke contends, in his excellent *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* (1795), that, so far from augmenting its authority, the State actually *weakens* it by discretionary economic intervention (in agriculture, specifically), or as he calls it, 'meddling with the subsistence of the people'. If a government, for whatever reason, or by whatever means, forces the terms of exchange away from their natural equilibrium, it is (whatever it may suppose) acting against the interest of *both* parties to the exchange, and against that of society at large. Pretending to a knowledge it can never possess (of the transacting parties' real interests, which only they can know, and which converge in the act of exchange), it 'lays the axe to the root of production', creates disorder, and brings itself into contempt.

Burke has some splendid observations on the proper limits of State competence. The vice of the French monarchy was 'a restless desire of governing too much': 'The hand of authority was seen in everything, and in every place. All, therefore, that happened amiss in the course of domestic affairs, was attributed to the government.' There is no contradiction between Burke's championship of the free market and his support of the State. The first rests upon no absurd notion of natural rights, but upon the duty of government to provide for the welfare of the people. Thus in supporting the market, the State, so far from abrogating its social responsibility, is actually discharging it. There is of course no reason *why* the market should be better than the alternatives. That it is so is not a metaphysical truth, but an empirical fact, which Burke demonstrates clearly, succinctly and with an impressive display of first-hand evidence. Burke sees the market as a gift of Providence. But that is not, as it were, to sanctify the capitalist order. He would have done as much for socialism, if it had been tried and worked.

In some ways Burke is the greatest of all political thinkers; incidentally, the only one of first-rate importance, apart from Machiavelli, who

was also a working statesman. I have had to ignore much besides Burke's literary achievement: his defence of monarchy and aristocracy as necessary elements in the representational process; his belief in 'mixed government' and countervailing power; his commitment to limited politics, as the condition of an authoritative, and the obstacle to an authoritarian, State. Nevertheless in these matters, as in those I have touched on, he still has much to say to us today. The citizen's pursuit of his (duly qualified) 'own' business that Burke took for granted as an ideal, is an aspiration, and one by no means ignoble or spiritually impoverished, still shared by most citizens, if not (and why not?) by their democratic representatives. In this respect human nature has changed little.

But as Burke understood far better than Marx, human nature is an historic artefact. Could it really be possible, by seizing the levers of history, to unfix nature from its traditional foundations? How could a whole nation rebel against one arbitrary government, only to submit willingly (as Burke thought) to a despotism more savage than any the world had seen? Is this not also some mysterious dispensation of Providence? We are reminded of Zinoviev's recent provocative claim that 'new Soviet man', whatever we would prefer to think, is a perfectly viable form of life.¹¹

Burke stood on the threshold of modernity, whose more horrible aspects he foresaw with the accuracy, not of clairvoyance, but of profound wisdom. Though matchlessly equipped to answer the questions above, he was both too early in history, and too late in life, to have the opportunity of doing so. None but he could have posed them, however, and if we wish to come at the answers, we cannot afford here, any more than elsewhere, to ignore what he had to say.

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Notes To Essay 2

- 1 [1999] This is no longer true. Other texts and editions have since appeared, from the grandest and most scholarly to the affordable. In the latter category is a collection of so-called *Further Reflections* by Daniel E. Ritchie (Liberty Fund, 1992), which includes *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*. The same publisher, a charity, is reissuing at a giveaway price E.J. Payne's three-volume 1898 OUP edition of Burke, which includes the ordinarily unobtainable *Letters on a Regicide Peace*.

- 2 The differences between the eighteenth-century doctrine of interests, in which they are publicly avowed and openly registered in party, and Marxism, where they are putative and often unrecognisable to the person who 'objectively' embodies them (and who hence cannot defend himself against any such imputation), are suggestive.
- 3 It is true that latterly Burke opposed the relief of Dissenters from their civil disabilities, a measure he had once supported. But this was because he had convinced himself that their beliefs were, and were meant to be, politically revolutionary.
- 4 See Essay 15 below.
- 5 Cf. Sophocles, *Antigone*, 456f. (Antigone to Creon, on the gods' laws as opposed to the city's.)
- 6 'How can we come to know ourselves? Never by speculation, but by action. Try to do your duty and you will know at once what you are worth.' 'But what is your duty?' 'The demand of the day.' (Goethe, *Maximen und Reflexionen*, quoted in E. Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, p. 204.)
- 7 It will be recalled with what awesome predictability, after his invasion of Britain's Falkland Islands in 1982, Argentina's General Galtieri was transformed almost overnight, in the eyes of the British Left, from a fascist ogre into an injured innocent.
- 8 'If there were gods, how could I endure not to be a god! Hence there are no gods' (Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, II, 2).
- 9 [1999] This is perhaps too simple. The comments in Essay 1 on State and society should serve as a corrective.
- 10 Note Kant's definition of organism in the third *Critique*, quoted in Essay 11 below.
- 11 Alexander Zinoviev, *Homo Sovieticus* (1985).

3

Michael Oakeshott

The political philosopher Michael Oakeshott died in December 1990, a few days after his 89th birthday. He had enjoyed a fair if controversial reputation in his lifetime among his colleagues, but he never became a global guru in the manner of (say) Gunnar Myrdal, J.K. Galbraith, F.A. Hayek, Milton Friedman, or his own predecessor in the Chair of Political Science at the London School of Economics, Harold Laski. (It is perhaps worth noting, as a sign of the times, how many of these eminences are or were economists.)

Oakeshott's death, and the almost universally glowing obituaries which followed it, sparked off a veritable explosion of interest in his work. There were, I believe, several reasons for Oakeshott's low public profile during his lifetime. The first is purely personal. He was a modest, unassuming man, with a deep aversion to the limelight. By modern academic standards he published little. I always supposed that he had been passed over for public honours, but it now appears he had more than once declined them, on the grounds (one obituarist quoted him as saying) that public honours should be reserved for public people.

Secondly, throughout most of Oakeshott's life the prevailing intellectual atmosphere was contrary to both the spirit and the substance of his work. In a word, it was socialist or at least sympathetic to socialism, and, though Oakeshott's precise location on the political map is a matter for debate, no one will claim that it was anywhere in the socialist quarter. Oakeshott called himself a conservative, and, whether or not he was strictly right to do so, it has to be admitted that to be, or claim to be, a conservative was until very recently virtually to exclude oneself from serious intellectual consideration. (Unless, like Aristotle, Hobbes, Hume, Johnson, Burke, Hegel, Coleridge, Newman and Eliot, you happened to be safely dead.) Also, Oakeshott had little enthusiasm for day-to-day

politics, and next to no respect for modern politicians. Asked long ago why he supported the Conservative Party (so far as he actually did, which was tepidly at best), he is supposed to have replied, 'Because they do the least harm.' Oakeshott was a romantic in many respects, but emphatically never in politics.

Thirdly, Oakeshott's thought is peculiarly elusive. It cannot be condensed into a slogan, inscribed on a banner, or readily incorporated into anyone's political programme. In short, it does not lend itself to formulation. Not that there is anything mystical about it (contrary to what some of Oakeshott's critics have alleged); it is simply of a piece with the traditional, experience-based practices and procedures which it offers to justify as being uniquely appropriate to morals and politics, and which have their familiar equivalents elsewhere (riding a bicycle, for example, a skill which no knowledge of mechanics could ever suffice to impart). Oakeshott's thought has little partisan appeal. It promises no short cuts to wisdom or right action, let alone to moral salvation. It is hardly too much to say that its appeal (or at least, its political appeal) is mainly negative.

George Orwell said of Dickens that 'it is not so much a series of books, it is more like a world'. Something similar is true of Oakeshott. His works are really a kind of imaginative vision: one, I should say, of great scope, depth and, in its undramatic way, power. Oakeshott's world, because it contains few dragons, is apt to prove a disappointment to the dragon-slayer. But that will not worry those who have given up knight-errantry; who are inclined first to hear what life has to say on its own behalf, before offering to improve it.¹

There is a long-standing myth which it will be as well to debunk at the outset. In a famous essay, 'Rationalism in Politics', widely construed at the time (1947) as an attack on the post-war Attlee government, Oakeshott voiced a distrust of the democratic *arriviste*, who lacks the instinctive 'feel' for government of a long-established political class. As if this were not bad enough, he gave as an analogy the house-guest who is out of his *social* class, and the well-known ability of butlers and housemaids to spot his embarrassment. On the strength of all this it was decided that Oakeshott must be too much of a toff, or 'Tory dandy' (as Professor Bernard Crick put it), to be taken seriously. (It will doubtless not have helped that Oakeshott had also written a book with the sub-title 'How to Pick the Derby Winner'.)

In fact Oakeshott's origins, like his subsequent life-style and aspirations, were modest. His mother, a nurse, was daughter of the Rector of Islington; during the First World War she commanded a small military

hospital. His father, the son of a Newcastle postmaster, left school at sixteen and worked all his life in the Inland Revenue at Somerset House, where he eventually rose to the rank of Principal. (His father's professional world, Oakeshott told me, was straight out of Trollope's *Three Clerks*.) The family were, or had become, about as 'upper' in the 'middle-middle' class as it is possible to be: that is, unaffluent but liberally educated professionals. They were also, in the manner of their kind, notably public-spirited: Oakeshott's mother took a lifelong interest in charitable work (she had met her husband through it, at the Hoxton Settlement), while his father, a founder-member of the Fabian Society, was a friend of George Bernard Shaw and the author of a Fabian pamphlet on the Reform of the Poor Law. Such things apart, the Oakeshott parents devoted themselves almost wholly to the education of their three children (all boys), moving house several times to be within reach of their schools.

Oakeshott was sent to a new and for those days unusually 'progressive' experimental school, St George's, Harpenden. It was co-educational; the founder and Headmaster, Cecil Grant, was an Anglican clergyman, socialist, art-lover and friend of the educational reformer Maria Montessori (who twice visited the school). Some pupils complained in later life that Grant had tried to indoctrinate them with his enthusiasms, and that they had been left in consequence with an abiding prejudice against religion and socialism. Oakeshott, however, appears to have been very happy. (Indeed, he denied, when I questioned him on this point, that his later opinions were a reaction against either his schooling or his upbringing.) In a revealing memoir of 1967, Oakeshott wrote as follows:

I do not think that my happiness depended upon ... the immense amount of freedom we were allowed – or what it really was at times, being neglected and allowed to roam. It did depend, however, on the huge range of quite informal opportunities. St George's was a place surrounded by a thick, firm hedge, and inside this hedge was a world of beckoning activities and interests. Many of them emanated from Grant himself, many of them were the private enterprise of members of staff, some one made for oneself. There was a great deal of laughter and fun; there was a great deal of seriousness.

Here Oakeshott's fundamental creed is expressed in a simple metaphor. Freedom, choice, invention and individuality (all things he prized) are impossible without security, the 'thick, firm hedge'.² For Aristotle,

such security was conferred upon the cultivated or leisure classes, physically by the labour of slaves and artisans, and politically (upon all) by law. For Oscar Wilde, as for Marx, it would be provided by a socialist system of production, upon the abundance of whose output the edifice of freedom and individuality would subsequently be raised. But for Oakeshott, as for one of his masters, Hobbes, the security which counts is neither material nor existential, but is simply such as law can provide.³ If freedom, pluralism and individuality follow, they do so spontaneously. They cannot be actively engineered by government, nor delivered in any other way than by guaranteeing, through law, the necessary conditions for their emergence.

Oakeshott was just too young to serve in the Great War, an event which impressed him greatly by so swiftly claiming the lives of many of his senior schoolfellows. In 1920 he went up to Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, to read History, taking the Political Thought option in both parts of the Tripos. He graduated in 1923, and was elected to a Fellowship at Caius in 1925. He had spent both the intervening summer vacations at the German universities of Tübingen and Marburg in order to pursue his twin interests at the time: theology and German literature. While there he went tramping off with the *Wandervögel*, an informal student movement dedicated to nature-worship, camping out and (according to D.H. Lawrence, of whom Oakeshott thought highly)⁴ 'free love'. Though very much of its time and place (Weimar Germany), the movement also embodied a traditional vein of German Romanticism, harmless enough and even valuable in itself, which the Nazis were later to exploit. Its main legacy to Oakeshott, however, was his lifelong taste for solitude and the simple life.⁵ Typically of him, however, this in no way precluded a love of company, conversation and all the sophisticated artifice of a mature liberal civilization, of which, incurable bohemian though he was, Oakeshott was a stern and loyal defender.

Heidegger was lecturing at Marburg when Oakeshott was there, and it seems likely that Oakeshott heard him, though he cites Heidegger only once in his works. I mention Heidegger here simply to note the three-way link between him, Oakeshott and the Oxford philosopher Gilbert Ryle, one of the very few academic philosophers with whom Oakeshott maintained a personal acquaintance. (Oakeshott never belonged to a university department of philosophy. At Cambridge his official subject was History; at LSE, Politics.) In 1929 Ryle had scandalized the analytically inclined readership of the journal *Mind* by favourably reviewing Heidegger's *Being and Time*. This work, despite its vast difference in point of lucidity from Ryle and Oakeshott, nevertheless has much in

common with them, as it also has with the later Wittgenstein. It is characteristic of Oakeshott that, although he and Wittgenstein were in Cambridge together for twenty years, they never met. He also claimed never to have set eyes on F.R. Leavis, to whose literary journal *Scrutiny* he contributed four times in the 1930s. And yet Leavis was a lifelong Cambridge resident, who, even well after his retirement in 1962 and as I myself recall, was still a familiar figure about the place. Intellectually, Oakeshott shunned schools, at least if they were contemporary with himself. His affinities with individual contemporaries such as those just mentioned seem not to have been generally remarked until lately.⁶ He was in his way a natural loner, both behind his times and, given the propensity of intellectual fashions to rotate, ahead of them.

Oakeshott's first book, *Experience and its Modes*, appeared in 1933, when he was 31, and is the basis of all his subsequent thought. It received highly enthusiastic notices from R.G. Collingwood and T.M. Knox in Oxford, but was reviewed very sniffily in *Mind* by L. Susan Stebbing, who observed that 'those who have not been convinced by Bradley are unlikely to be converted by Mr Oakeshott'.⁷ The fact was, quite simply, that the philosophical Idealism of Bradley, Collingwood and Oakeshott was out of date, and Logical Positivism had come into fashion. The first edition of *Experience and its Modes*, a mere 1,000 copies, took over 30 years to sell. It is noteworthy, however, that Oakeshott's return to serious philosophical consideration (e.g., by Richard Rorty)⁸ has coincided with the recognition of the importance of Wittgenstein's later, so-called Idealist phase. *Experience and its Modes* has been reprinted three times since the 1960s.

The book is a work of systematic metaphysics, with no immediate application to politics. The fundamental idea behind it is Hegelian, to the effect that for all practical purposes the real is the same as the knowable, and that only that can be known which can in some sense be experienced. To be real is simply to belong to experience, and every experience is an 'idea', that is, a part or content of consciousness (whence the name Idealism). Furthermore, consciousness cannot ultimately be distinguished from its contents, since to be conscious is always (as Hume pointed out) to be conscious *of* something. It follows that both the realist notion of there being an 'external' world, and the empiricist notion that our experience is distinct from it, must be erroneous.

Obviously such matters, which have occupied philosophers since philosophy began, cannot be thrashed out here, so I must ask the reader simply to accept the Idealist position for the sake of argument. One thing that must be said is that the real, though identical with experience, is

not identical with *immediate* experience. The immediate is inevitably both incomplete and subjective; partial, one might say, in both senses. Only experience as a whole is fully real, and, according to the young Oakeshott, only philosophy can give us access to it. Reality is what remains once partial perspectives have been reconciled, contradictions resolved, and the lot finally subsumed into and apprehended as the Whole.

All this is supposedly the business of philosophy which, being the experience of the Whole, is (implausibly) identical with it. Ordinary life, however, is entirely composed of partial perspectives and fragmentary experience. Your experience, for example, is different from mine. And there are also partial perspectives, distinct ways of experiencing or understanding the world, which (in principle) are common to all of us. Following Bradley, Oakeshott calls them 'modes' of experience. In our culture, three predominate: Science, History and Practice. (Oakeshott later added Poetry, by which he meant aesthetic experience, to their number. In *Experience and its Modes* art, like religion, is part of practical experience.)

Oakeshott's predecessors Collingwood and Croce had seen such modes as constituting a hierarchy of Hegelian 'moments' – that is, successive steps or platforms – in the self-unfolding of reality. Oakeshott, however, follows Bradley in making the modes autonomous and equal. None contains the full truth about experience; but each participates equally in the whole, and is equally 'abstract', in the sense of literally being abstracted from it. Logically speaking, the modes can neither overlap nor contradict each other, though in fact each modal activity, when pursued unqualified by a simultaneous awareness of other kinds, has a natural propensity to invade its neighbours' territory.

The practical view of things is utterly different from the scientific and the historical. It sees the world under the aspect of desire and aversion, pleasure and pain, as also of good and bad. Morality, like religion, is central to it. Science and history, however, are value-neutral. They seek not to manipulate their objects but to understand them. Science does so under the aspect of regularity and generality, so that every phenomenon appears as an instance of an all-covering law. History does so under the aspect of particularity, so that every historical event is perceived first and foremost as contributing to, and being determined by, some unique, immediately contiguous pattern of events (which are themselves contiguous with others, and so on outwards).

The office of philosophy is not to supersede the modes. It can never finally deliver us from the Platonic Cave of modal experience. (Nor

would it be a good thing if it could, at least so far as the practical mode is concerned. For the whole purpose of the practical mode is survival.) Philosophy is neither a necessary nor a universal activity; indeed, Oakshott claims with Hegel that it is actually a symptom, in its way, of decadence, of innocence lost.⁹ What it can usefully do is police the modal boundaries. The greatest intellectual sin is to transgress them, for example by interpreting history in the light of one's own current moral, religious or political principles; by offering to establish morals and politics on a 'scientific' basis; or by forcing scientific theory (which then immediately ceases to be scientific) into an approved political mould.¹⁰

Oakshott was unconcerned by the reception of *Experience and its Modes*. He knew who his friends were, and despite his subsequent eminence seems never to have been academically ambitious. Nor, in modern academic eyes, productive (as already noted). But every one of Oakshott's later essays alone is worth a couple of hundred books in any contemporary academic publisher's catalogue, and represents as much real thought. Like Goethe, or any of the great Victorian intellectuals, he was a superlatively educated mind. By that I mean that not only was he a man of impressively wide and various learning, but he knew also how to deploy it. In his view, the cardinal intellectual virtue is relevance. We inhabit many different universes of discourse, each governed by its own unique rules, norms and principles. Ignorance of what these are, the blundering habit of applying the assumptions of one discourse to the conduct of another, leads to moral barbarism, intellectual chaos, and, in politics, war.

Oakshott's own experience of war clearly underlies his diagnosis of the political disease of modernity, which he famously calls Rationalism. In 1939 he compiled an anthology called *The Social and Political Doctrines of Contemporary Europe*. Of these, he finds what he calls Representative Democracy the least unattractive, despite its muddle and incoherence, because its central principle (also his own) is that 'the imposition of a universal plan of life on a society is at once stupid and immoral'.

Such a universal plan is exactly what war makes imperative. Oakshott had what is called a 'good' war. He joined the Army immediately on its outbreak, and eventually commanded a squadron of the GHQ Liaison Regiment (alias 'Phantom', a quasi-freelance battlefield intelligence force) in Holland. However, in sharp contrast with most post-war socialists (who, impressed by the nation's wartime singleness of purpose, would speak, e.g., of 'winning the peace' in the same spirit), Oakshott thought war and military organization the worst possible

model for peacetime society.¹¹ Not only does war necessitate collectivism (since the society has only one goal, to survive, and all resources and energies must be forcibly bent in that direction), but the reverse is also true. Like a society at war, a collectivist state is dedicated to a single end (the realization of some overall scheme); and when, owing to its citizens' natural propensity to prefer their own ends, its goal proves impossible to achieve without massive coercion, such a state is driven to war in order to make its ideology and methods seem legitimate.

Oakeshott returned to Cambridge after the war, and in 1947 he and a few colleagues started a lively and wide-ranging humanities review, *The Cambridge Journal*. Before long Oakeshott had become its star turn and general editor. In a striking series of essays, notable for their eloquence and literary grace, he set out the essentials of his ethics and politics. The theme of them all, in their different ways, was the absurdity, inappropriateness and hubris of comprehensive planning, when applied to social, ethical, political and economic life. They attracted a good deal of attention and a certain amount of outrage among the enlightened classes, who took them (as I have already said of one) for an attack on the ethos and methods of the Attlee government, which to some extent they were.

True, they are probably the nearest Oakeshott ever came to genuine political activity, and one detects in them both a whiff of satire and a certain barely suppressed exasperation. But it would be wrong to regard them simply as up-market pamphleteering. Oakeshott was not attacking socialism specifically, still less any particular items in the Labour administration's programme, but the whole post-Enlightenment style of thought to which socialism belongs. This Oakeshott calls Rationalism, and in his view it has also spread to socialism's political rivals.

According to Oakeshott, the Rationalist believes that there is only one kind of 'reason', and that it is external to, and valid independently of, the activities to which it is applied. Furthermore, his possession of it gives him both the power and the right to reorganize the world in accordance with its dictates. These dictates find articulation in an 'ideology'; that is, in some comprehensive and (usually) pseudo-scientific programme of action, the 'plan', together with its intellectual justification.

The planning mentality, of course, is not wrong in itself. Like all conceptions, it has its roots in practice. It would be perfectly appropriate, say, to an engineering project (which is why social planning is often pejoratively called 'social engineering'). What is wrong is the idea that 'planning' is the appropriate form of organization for a *society*. For a

society is not a machine, consisting of inert components whose interrelations are meaningful only in the light of the external force which impels them and the external purpose which they jointly serve. It is, rather, a living thing whose common life and fulfilment derive from the unforced convergence of its members' self-chosen purposes. In short, if society is not literally an organism (as Bradley claimed it was),¹² it at least resembles one. (Oakeshott, as a matter of fact, nowhere uses this familiar Romantic analogy.)

Oakeshott's objection was not so much that 'planning' is a threat to freedom (though it is that), as that the whole Rationalist approach is misconceived. Because it is, and even boasts of being, external to the activities it offers to supervise, it can never acquire adequate knowledge of them. The only relevant knowledge is contained in the unselfconscious traditions which have emerged from them, and which govern their constant evolution. The Rationalist's plans are bound in practice not only to fail (or to 'succeed' only by the constant application of force), but also to destroy both future activity and its spring. The pretended 'efficiency' of planning turns out to be a sham. So Rationalism is actually irrational.

Oakeshott's inaugural lecture at LSE (1952), called 'Political Education', though widely recognized as a distinguished utterance, provoked the same puzzlement and outrage as his previous *Cambridge Journal* pieces. (His appointment to the socialist Laski's chair in 1951, of course, had a certain symbolic quality, noted by the newspapers at the time, not least because it coincided with the end of the Attlee period.) The burden of 'Political Education' was that politics has no substantive goal, that history is unpredictable, that there is no infallible recipe for our collective happiness, salvation or even security, and that the least unsound of our guides is tradition, since it is the fruit of our continuing historic experience. 'In political activity,' Oakeshott announced, in words which have since become famous,

men sail a boundless and bottomless sea; there is neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting-place nor appointed destination. The enterprise is to keep afloat on an even keel; the sea is both friend and enemy; and the seamanship consists in using the resources of a traditional manner of behaviour in order to make a friend of every hostile occasion.

The message was ill received, and, as Oakeshott had predicted in the lecture itself, treated as at best a counsel of despair. He was accused of

irrationalism, and even (as earlier noted) of mysticism. But his point had never been more than this: that every activity naturally generates its own kind of rationality (that is, the principles, articulate or otherwise, appropriate to its successful pursuit), and that it is foolish and futile to apply the techniques and assumptions appropriate to one kind of activity to others for which they were never designed and from which they never emerged. To do so, in Ryle's terminology, is essentially a 'category mistake'. (Oakeshott had recently given Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* an exceptionally favourable review.)

For Oakeshott tradition is not necessarily anything romantic, decorative, legendary, symbolic, changeless or nostalgic. Doubtless tartans, May Day, Trooping the Colour, the Durham Miners' Gala, the apes of Gibraltar and opening doors (or not) for ladies are all traditions of greater or lesser venerability, but they are not the only sort. A tradition in itself is no more than a particular way of doing or conceiving things (including oneself and one's membership of a society) which can only be learnt by immersing oneself in them. It is a form of embodied practical knowledge which, though concrete, is not amenable to rationalization, but which can and (since there is no alternative) must be handed on through a process of induction and apprenticeship, in the manner of a physical skill.

In fact, every practice, including even intellectual activities such as Science and History, possesses this traditional character. In all, the core knowledge, however important the additional informational component (which Oakeshott somewhat misleadingly calls 'technical knowledge'), is of this tacit, irreducible kind, which Ryle would call 'knowing how' as opposed to 'knowing that'. The Rationalist's error is to imagine, first, that technical knowledge, which can be written down (notably in the form of rules and methods), is the only genuine sort; secondly, that those practices (especially of a scientific or technological kind) which depend upon a large stock of technical knowledge should furnish the model of all understanding, particularly in fields such as morals and politics, which have traditionally been understood otherwise, through habit, experience, taste, flair and rule of thumb.

The Rationalist thinks that abstract intelligence, when suitably backed by the necessary technical or factual knowledge, is a superior substitute for wisdom or humane understanding. To him the latter are mere fancy titles for prejudice or inertia. And his delusion is such that he can never learn from his failures, since wherever the fault lies it cannot be in him, his approach being uniquely 'rational'. Rationalism, Oakeshott observes, is in some ways the relic of a belief in magic. Or to

put it another way, it involves a fantasy of control, a dream of instrumental reason.

What, in contrast, are the proper relations between the various discourses which make up the human world? The ideal relationship, Oakeshott tells us in his writings of the late 1950s and thereafter, is 'conversational'. Conversation in its literal sense was something highly prized by Oakeshott, and he used it as an all-encompassing metaphor for the ideal structure of education, social life generally, politics and much else. The traditional liberal university, in which different disciplines are brought together, not in a common substantive inquiry, but in a common *spirit* of inquiry, which involves no sacrifice of any of their autonomy, is for Oakeshott another model of the conversational relationship, and very probably a further source of his later all-embracing pluralism.¹³

The whole essence or definitive ethos of conversation is anti-teleological. Argument, which presses forward to a conclusion, is the pattern of many single intellectual disciplines or undertakings, just as planned endeavour is of a business enterprise (or a Rationalist state). But universities, friendships, clubs, fraternities and the common life pursued within them are, like love and art, as pointless and inconclusive as conversation; which is only another way of saying, with Aristotle, that the most important things in life (which all our material efforts in the end subserve) are simply ends in themselves, intrinsically or uninstrumentally valuable, literally useless.¹⁴

Once we read Oakeshott's conversational paradigm into politics we have what looks like a sophisticated version of liberalism. It is conservative only so far as it is seen to have emerged from a specific historical inheritance which is thought worth preserving. This is what Oakeshott presents us with in his last large-scale work (which in fact was only his third 'serious' book), *On Human Conduct* (1974). *On Human Conduct* is the densest of Oakeshott's longer works, and for the most part is devoid of his usual elegance. Curiously, its obscurity seems the result of a dogged effort not to be misunderstood, as though its author were issuing his final intellectual testament to the world. It is certainly the first of his books that can reasonably be expected to baffle, or even repel, the common reader. (For that reason I do not recommend it to the would-be student of Oakeshott; *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* is far and away the best from that point of view.)

On Human Conduct consists of three long, interconnected essays. In the first, Oakeshott now divides the world into two grand categories or 'orders', the realm of 'processes' and the realm of 'procedures'. The first

is nature, which is inert, unconscious, mechanically ordered and open only to scientific understanding; the second is what Kant would call freedom, that is, the world of intelligent, self-conscious action, the specifically 'human' world. There seems to be no possibility of 'conversation' between the natural and the human orders, of the kind which allegedly took place between the modes. (Indeed, the neo-Kantian Dilthey, who was something of an influence on Oakeshott, allocated wholly different kinds of study to each, which he called the *Naturwissenschaften* and the *Geisteswissenschaften*, the natural and the cultural sciences.)¹⁵

It follows that attempts, such as sociology and psychology, to treat the human world in a natural-scientific manner must simply be enormous category-mistakes; or would be, if that were nowadays actually what those disciplines tried to do. In fact most social scientists have taken serious note of criticisms in the Dilthey–Oakeshott vein, and would deny that they were in any sense seeking to reduce human conduct to a 'process'. To explain manifest regularities in the aggregate outcomes and unintended consequences of individual human decisions is to say nothing about those decisions in themselves.

All conduct is a form of utterance or (as Oakeshott calls it) performance. Every performance belongs to a 'practice' (that is to say, mode, discourse, language-game or whatever) and is to be understood only by reference to its local rules and conventions. Performances are of two kinds. A self-disclosure simply announces that the self in question is open for business. Here it advertises its wants, invites co-operation in securing them, and either does or does not succeed in completing a transaction. Though bound by external moral considerations as to what kinds of transactions may be made, self-disclosure in itself is ethically insignificant. A self-enactment, on the other hand, is a revelation or even a deliberate display of character, and is subject to moral evaluation in point of its motive. The only moral consideration relevant to a self-disclosure is whether or not it is lawful. The kind of consideration relevant to a self-enactment is whether it is honourable or shameful. Oakeshott does not hesitate to assimilate virtue so understood (i.e. as compelled by considerations of honour, grace, generosity, appropriateness, etc.) to the aesthetic, to treat it as a kind of poetic utterance.

In the second essay Oakeshott expounds two ideal types of human association, enterprise and civil association. Enterprise association is purposive, voluntary, subject (like self-disclosure) to external moral considerations and managerial, the management being deputed to act according to the association's general policy. It is the commonest form

of association, and the only one adapted to the satisfaction of our material needs.

Civil association is association in terms not of specific wants or purposes, but of generally acknowledged rules, that is to say, of law;¹⁶ and though its features clearly derive from those of voluntary (but externally purposeless) associations, it belongs wholly to politics. A state constituted entirely in terms of civil association is almost unheard of, but if it existed it would be governed entirely by law and never by policy, except so much as was necessary for its survival (which would presumably include legislation to suit new circumstances). Its legislature and executive might be democratically elected or they might not. All that matters is that the citizen's wishes should find formal representation, and that the administration be accountable to its own laws. The bond of society will be nothing more substantial than the citizen's common acknowledgement of the authority of the laws; no further cement is required, in the shape (for example) of national, ethnic or tribal sentiment (though doubtless a degree of cultural homogeneity will help). The sentiment which really counts is the sentiment of civility, the disposition to respect others simply as fellow-members of the same legal community, even if one happens to dislike them personally or disapprove of their particular life-style.

Just how much in the way of morality such a society's laws should attempt to reinforce is doubtful. The more culturally plural the society, the more the bond of civility will be strained by either excessive moralism or excessive liberality, since both are likely to offend some substantial segment of society and tempt it into disobedience. A social bond as tenuous as civil association almost presupposes, and will certainly depend upon, a homogeneous liberalism of sentiment among its subjects. It may therefore be put at risk by the very pluralism it appears to foster. The reason is that among the diverse human types and cultures which civil association purports to accommodate side by side, there will always be some whose freedom to live as they desire is actually threatened by liberalism, as we can see from the acts and pronouncements of religious fundamentalists of every stripe worldwide. It is all very well for liberals to condemn such people, especially when they break the law or behave obnoxiously (to the liberal way of thinking) in defence of their values and convictions, but what is to be done about them? These are questions, I am afraid, to which Oakeshott, like liberalism, returns no answer.

The third essay in *On Human Conduct* illustrates the historical emergence, in European culture, of two different conceptions of the State,

one corresponding to civil and the other to enterprise association. Much of the substance had appeared earlier, in an article entitled 'The Masses in Representative Democracy';¹⁷ it is by far the raciest, least technical, and most immediately intelligible part of the book. Oakeshott's fundamental contention is that when the State is construed as an enterprise association the outcome is something not far removed from slavery. For the State cannot be a true enterprise association, precisely because citizenship, in most important respects, is not a voluntary or optional condition. It is one thing to be obliged to acknowledge the authority of the State's laws, but quite another to be forced to participate in its projects. Needless to say, the great totalitarian experiments of modern times are attempts to turn the State into an enterprise association.

A civil association, however, is just what the State ought to be, and what only a state can be. What will life be like in the 'civil' State, and why should anyone prize it? We know already that it will be united by a sentiment of 'civility'. But it will lack the stifling intimacy of traditional societies, for which Oakeshott, traditionalist though he may be in some respects, expresses no affection whatever. It will also lack the 'solidarity' and 'fraternity' prized by socialists (and universally absent from actual socialist states). In short, Oakeshott shares none of the communitarian sentiment of certain recent political thinkers on both the Left and the Right. His outlook is individualist, but without the abstract quality generally found in liberal thought. The freedom which he cherishes can exist only in society, and only under law. It is not a right, still less a natural right, but a collective historical accomplishment which the citizen comes to value and to cultivate both for its own sake and as the precondition of self-enactment. The free man or Oakeshottian individualist is not a lawless pirate, a neurotic rebel or a banal egoist, but rather a virtuous explorer of his moral, cultural and intellectual inheritance.

As people are now increasingly coming to realize, Oakeshott occupies a distinguished place in contemporary thought, even if it is a tricky one to specify. Superficially he belongs with that group of post-war anti-totalitarian thinkers which includes his near-exact contemporaries Popper and Hayek. Purely as a political thinker, however, he seems to me superior. The reason is that unlike those two he endeavours to give a complete account of human experience, and his conception of politics emerges both from that wider understanding and from a detailed historical awareness, neither of which is the case with the Austrians. For it is undeniable that Hayek's politics are modelled primarily on economics, with all the limitations that implies, as Popper's are on the philosophy of science. It is not surprising that Oakeshott regarded them both as

crypto-Rationalists. ('A plan to resist all planning', he wrote of Hayek's wartime tract *The Road to Serfdom*, 'may be better than its opposite, but it belongs to the same style of politics.') And of course Oakeshott has nothing in common with more recent liberal thinkers such as Rawls and Nozick, since the Kantian thought-experiment on which Rawls bases his theory and the confessedly dogmatic Lockean rights from which Nozick begins are both quite frankly Rationalist, in that they view political questions – which they reduce largely to the ethics of distribution – from an Archimedean standpoint wholly removed from the day-to-day realities of government and citizenship (though not from the day-to-day concerns of the democratic politician competing for votes). It would not be altogether unjust to describe their efforts as exactly the sort of 'crib' to politics that Oakeshott once accused Marxism of being.

On one thing, however, Marx and Oakeshott are agreed, namely that theory is the shadow of practice. From what practice, then, does Oakeshott's own thought derive, and must not its being thus derivative diminish its claim to be taken seriously? The two questions may be answered together: Oakeshott's thought derives from a tradition of freedom and pluralism, and precisely for that reason, because (though conditional) it is not compelled but chosen, it deserves to be treated with respect, on its own terms. Characterizing the political heritage he shared with his readers, Oakeshott wrote:

Our need now is to recover the lost sense of a society whose freedom and organization spring, not from a superimposed plan, but from the integrating power of a vast and subtle body of rights and duties enjoyed between individuals (whose individuality, in fact, comes into being by their enjoyment), not the gift of nature but the product of our own experience and inventiveness; and to recover also the perception of our law, not merely as a body of achieved rights and duties, the body of a freedom in which mere political rights have a comparatively insignificant place, but as a living method of social integration, the most civilized and the most effective method ever invented by mankind.

Those words were written in 1948. But they are not less relevant in our own politically hyperactive times. For what they point to is a cultural inheritance under which 'mere' politics was once kept severely in its place, that place being primarily to protect the cultural inheritance and ensure both its survival and its future development. Whether the cultural inheritance of which Oakeshott speaks can actually be

recovered, and the role of politics accordingly reduced, in the face of the fact that, notwithstanding the fall of Communism, nearly all modern states are still at least partly enterprise associations, are questions which Oakeshott does not consider, and which one would have to be a considerable optimist to answer in the affirmative.

From Richard Mason, ed., *Cambridge Minds* (Cambridge University Press, 1994). Adapted from a lecture given in the Cambridge International Summer School series of the same title, 1993.

Notes to Essay 3

- 1 Oakeshott more than once quotes or alludes to Butler's *Hudibras*, the seventeenth-century satire on political and religious activism as personified in the eponymous anti-hero, a ridiculous Presbyterian squire, moral crusader and general spoilsport, deliberately conceived as a latter-day Quixote. (Cervantes was one of Oakeshott's favourite authors.)
- 2 For fuller accounts of the early Oakeshott, see Robert Grant, *Oakeshott* (Clarendon Press, 1990), and the same author's 'Inside the Hedge: Oakeshott's Early Life and Work' (editor's title), *Cambridge Review*, 112 (Oakeshott memorial number, 1991).
- 3 I return to this point towards the end of Essay 4 below.
- 4 In his first book, *Experience and its Modes*, published only three years after Lawrence's death, Oakeshott cites him as a notable exponent (along with Kant and Hebbel) of the idea of 'the integrity and separateness of the self'. And in an essay of 1949, 'The Universities', he unconsciously borrows the pejorative expression 'the plausible ethics of productivity' from Lawrence's *Women in Love*, where it is applied to the industrialist Gerald Crich. (The essay was republished in Oakeshott's *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, 1989.)
- 5 [1999] And perhaps also (I suppose it may now be added) his taste for 'free love', or at least for what one would even today have to call love of a highly disencumbered kind. Oakeshott was a notorious romantic and often 'in love', not infrequently with somebody else's wife. He told me he had been married twice, but I have subsequently heard it was three times.
- 6 See, e.g., Paul Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*; Robert Grant, *Oakeshott* (both 1990). W.H. Greenleaf, however (*Oakeshott's Philosophical Politics*, 1966), usefully details Oakeshott's affinities with his more narrowly politico-economic contemporaries, such as Hayek, Jewkes, the Mont Pélerin Society and the Chicago school (relative to the last of which, see Oakeshott's 'The Political Economy of Freedom', in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*).
- 7 In her own book, *Philosophy and the Physicists* (1937), there is much concerning the impossibility of reducing macrophysical phenomena to their (notional) microphysical foundations. Oddly enough, this echoes ideas found in *Experience and its Modes* and much later in *On Human Conduct*, where their debt to Dilthey is obvious.

- 8 In his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979).
- 9 See Hegel's famous epigram about the 'owl of Minerva', which 'takes wing only with the falling of the dusk' (*The Philosophy of Right*, preface).
- 10 The following would all be examples of modal irrelevance, or as Oakeshott calls it in scholastic idiom, *ignoratio elenchi*: Whig history; Marxism; Hitler's view of Einstein ('Jewish physics'); Nazi race theory generally; Lysenkoism; Basil Fawlty 'punishing' his car for not starting; covering piano legs in the interests of decency; accusing a cabbage of theft (Oakeshott's own example).
- 11 Some British wartime conscripts were not actually demobilized until 1949. And of course many controls (e.g., rationing) remained in force long after there was the slightest justification for them (a contrast, incidentally, with their early abandonment in post-war Germany by the Adenauer administration).
- 12 See F.H. Bradley, 'My Station and its Duties', in *Ethical Studies* (1876), and also Essay 11 below.
- 13 There are radical difficulties in Oakeshott's conversational paradigm. The most striking is perhaps this: since Oakeshott's whole central idea of relevance depends on the recognition and maintenance of modal boundaries, how can conversation be possible, since (a) in it nothing can be irrelevant, and (b) it postulates communication, or some community of subject-matter, between the modes? I have attempted to answer such questions in Chapter 5 ('The Conversation Paradigm') of my book *Oakeshott* (see note 2 above).
- 14 Oakeshott shows a marked hostility to the whole Western and (some might say) masculine ethos of 'achievement' (it goes along with his scepticism concerning 'progress' and the like). He had an amusing, tongue-in-cheek affectation, when out hill-walking with friends, of refusing to go the last few feet, protesting that it was 'vulgar' to get to the top. See the discussion of Oakeshott's view of religion in Essay 4 below.
- 15 See Essay 7 below, §1 (end).
- 16 Legal rules differ from moral rules, though the subject's obligation to observe them is (like any other) a moral one. Moral rules are sustained mainly by their subscribers' collective conviction. They are not formal, and though they change, they do so spontaneously, not in consequence of any deliberate decision. (For a start, there is no procedure for changing them.) The authority of a legal rule, however, is independent of the subject's moral approval. He obeys it, not because it is good or right in itself (nobody can morally approve of every single law to which he is subject), but because it is 'the law' (i.e. is formally authoritative), and because to obey 'the law' generically is the good and right thing to do.
- 17 [1999] And also, as it later appeared, in some lectures given by Oakeshott at Harvard in 1958, and discussed in Essay 4 below.

4

The Unknown Oakeshott

Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays (New and Expanded Edition), by Michael Oakeshott, ed. Timothy Fuller (Liberty Press, 1991)

Religion, Politics and the Moral Life, by Michael Oakeshott, ed. Timothy Fuller (Yale University Press, 1993)

Morality and Politics in Modern Europe, by Michael Oakeshott, ed. Shirley Robin Letwin, introd. Kenneth Minogue (Yale University Press, 1993)

The Achievement of Michael Oakeshott, ed. Jesse Norman (Duckworth, 1993)

Even before Michael Oakeshott's death in 1990 the Oakeshott industry's output amounted to more than a trickle, and, if these books are anything to go by, we may expect shortly to see a sizeable stream. He himself withheld more than he ever published, and never reprinted many excellent but scattered and otherwise inaccessible pieces. Some of this unknown Oakeshott is now put before us in the first three works listed above. The fourth is largely a collective memorial tribute.

Judging by its year of publication, it is conceivable that this 'new and expanded' edition of *Rationalism in Politics* had the author's imprimatur. If it did, one can obviously raise no objection on principle to Professor Fuller's additions and rearrangements. The first edition (1962) collected in rough chronological order all but one (now included) of Oakeshott's longer essays from 1947 to 1961. It had no index and was full of printer's errors, which in some cases had simply been carried over from the original source (*The Cambridge Journal*, as often as not). Other minor irritants were unattributed references, quotations, and the like.

The first thing to say about the additions is that one is obviously glad to have them, though not necessarily where they are. As Oakeshott

himself observed in his 1962 preface to *Rationalism in Politics*, the original ten essays were homogeneous in theme and style. They marked a definite, self-contained epoch in his thinking. To my mind Fuller's additions, especially those from the 1970s (one in the rebarbative idiom of *On Human Conduct*), disturb this pleasing, unplanned coherence. Then there is the division into sections. Of course, publishers nowadays insist on this sort of thing, as though readers were too stupid to find their own way about.¹ However, obscured along with the chronology is the subtle, leisurely evolution of Oakeshott's thought, which is simultaneously a slow rotation around a central complex of interrelated ideas.

Since nearly all of those feature at some level in every essay, almost any thematic division would look plausible, and Fuller's is no exception. However, there seems no reason why the famous essay on historiography, 'The Activity of Being an Historian', should appear under 'Dissecting Rationalism', when the title essay (which does exactly that) does not. 'The Tower of Babel' follows hard upon 'Rationalism in Politics' in both date (1948) and subject-matter. It could as easily have been called 'Rationalism in Morals'. Yet it now appears, its only companion being Oakeshott's single contribution to aesthetic theory, in a section called 'On the Human Condition'.

These particular bracketings do make a kind of sense. For instance, Oakeshott explicitly prefaces his aesthetic theory with a more general theory of experience, so one could say that 'The Voice of Poetry' does after all deal with the human condition. (Much the same is true, however, of 'The Activity of Being an Historian'. And so it is, more generally, of all Oakeshott's writings, which is why he is now the object of serious study.) But the fact is that the whole taxonomic exercise is more or less superfluous. It might have been done differently with equal justice and plausibility, and something worth keeping would as surely have been lost. 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it,' is the Oakeshottian moral.

What really cried out for fixing was the text. As Russell Price notes in *The Achievement of Michael Oakeshott*, Oakeshott was a remarkably careless editor, albeit only of his own work. Here, I am afraid, Professor Fuller has followed him to the letter. In the new *Rationalism in Politics* the old misprints, cruces and obscurities flourish unabated. On p. 33 we have *anquels* for *auxquels*, unchanged since the *Cambridge Journal*. On p. 414 *omnes eodem cogemur* survives from 1962; Oakeshott certainly knew that, not least for metrical reasons, it should be *cogimur* (see below). On p. 7 (p. 3, 1962) 'a training in a technique of analysis' is suspect since the last two words pervert the sense (Oakeshott is talking about the Rationalist's worship of technique generally, any technique).

They never appeared in the *Cambridge Journal* version, and are obviously inadvertently carried up from the phrase 'with no thought of analysis' two sentences later. (For another possible dittographic error, see 'pieties are fleeting, loyalties evanescent': pp. 174 and 177 in the 1962 edition, pp. 414 and 417 here.) Among the new material, 'the idea itself served from the grounds and reasons which lie in in the mind of the thinker' (p. 147, 'The New Bentham') actually reads *severed* in the original.

These things are trivial, of course, but it is depressing to see so many persisting from previous printings, to say nothing of a new one creeping in. Some annotation would have been welcome, too. Textual variants are few but worth recording (Oakeshott's revisions were often rather turgid). Oakeshott was an exceptionally cultivated man, and many readers will have been both baffled and fascinated by his allusions. Surely today it would not be too insulting, having first given it correctly, to footnote *omnes eodem cogimur* as being Horace (*Odes*, II, iii), and even (possibly) to remark that the whole stanza is quoted in one of Oakeshott's favourite pieces of Montaigne (*Essays*, I, xix; inaccurately referenced in *On Human Conduct*). *Spartam nactus es; hanc exorna* (p. 60) is one of Erasmus's *Adages*, but what was Erasmus's source? What is *nur für die Schwindelfreie* (ibid.)?² A warning to Alpine sightseers? Is the cricket writer 'N.A. Swanson' (p. 68) really E.W. Swanton, as Russell Price suggests and I have long suspected?

I do not say we have to know these things, but it would be nice, even useful, if we did. So would it to know who the writers were whom Oakeshott habitually quotes, at length but anonymously, as typical of this or that mode of thinking. (The author, for example, of the Owen Falls passage on p. 499, which has now resurfaced in an earlier piece, to be found in *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life*).³ For anyone with access to Oakeshott's papers, such as Professor Fuller, the information should be easy enough to find, since for seven decades Oakeshott (so he told me) entered such passages into his commonplace books.

To come now to the two Yale volumes: *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life* contains ten pieces, six previously published, written between 1925 and 1955. *Morality and Politics in Modern Europe* consists of eight lectures delivered at Harvard in 1958. Oakeshott never published them, doubtless because much of the substance had already appeared, in German, in 'The Masses in Representative Democracy' (1957; English version, 1961, now reprinted in Fuller's new *Rationalism in Politics*).

Until now, a few *obiter dicta* have been our sole clue to Oakeshott's religious outlook. Oakeshott had been sent in 1911 to a brand-new 'pro-

gressive' school. Its Headmaster, though an Anglican clergyman and deeply pious, apparently cared almost nothing for Christian doctrine. 'Religion did not appear as a set of beliefs,' Oakeshott wrote in 1967, 'but as a kind of *pietas*; morals was knowing how to behave . . . These things were very little "intellectualised".' *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life* contains three essays specifically on religion, very much in this vein, and all dating from the 1920s. They throw a revealing light on Oakeshott's youthful ideas, and indeed on all his later intellectual career.

Many of Oakeshott's earliest writings (two of them reprinted here) appeared in a journal called *The Modern Churchman*. According to Dr Fagan in *Decline and Fall*, the 'modern churchman' is apparently 'a species of person . . . who draws the full salary of a beneficed clergyman and need not commit himself to any religious belief'. ('This seems to be a great comfort to him,' he adds, concerning the unfortunate Mr Prendergast.) But on the evidence before us, 'modern churchmanship' was a serious and sustainable position, and, in Oakeshott's (perhaps untypical) case, one perceptibly related to his anti-rationalist politics.

Religious 'belief', in the normal Western sense, involves intellectual assent to certain objective historical and metaphysical claims about the world.⁴ This lays it open (unlike religious practice) not only to refutation, but also to anti-rationalist criticism, such as Oakeshott's in 'The Tower of Babel' (already mentioned). There he implicitly deplores the change in early Christianity from 'faith in a person' to 'belief in a set of abstract propositions, a creed' (*Rationalism in Politics*, p. 484). This change, he says, was accompanied by the decline of 'a habit of moral behaviour' in favour of a proto-rationalist 'pursuit of moral ideals'. Oakeshott appears to have thought religion strictly tenable – if 'tenable' is the word – only when pre-theoretical and non-dogmatic (some might call this mere religiousness).

Unbuttressed by any formula, a purely experiential faith will be unstable. However, it will also (like aesthetic experience, to which it is likened in *On Human Conduct*) be immune to subversion, being an immediate, personal revelation of cosmic meaning, a continuing 'I-Thou' exchange (so to speak) with the universal Other. According to 'Religion and the World' (1929), authentic religion amounts in the end to a man's pious, uncalculating self-commitment to the historic ethical present.

Authentic religion is not belief in a set of doctrines, still less a guarantee of eventual salvation. All that, says Oakeshott, is actually the worst kind of worldliness. It is rather an orientation of the soul, a dimension of experience which is also experience at its fullest. To adopt or enter upon it is to be 'saved' here and now, delivered from the treadmill

of egoism and the Faustian tyranny of 'achievement' which in another idiom has been the bane of European politics.

The above might seem to suggest otherwise, but for Oakeshott there is no Feuerbachian 'essence of Christianity', no 'core' Christian experience, nor even, in the end, any definitive historical belief on which to hang it. There is simply the endless diachronic mutation of whatever at any time chooses to call itself Christianity. 'The Historical Element in Christianity' (1928) anticipates *On History and Other Essays* (1983), where history (in the title essay) is no more than the gradual modulation of each situation into its successor, a process exhibiting no central, unchanging element. To Jews, Christians, Whigs and Marxists, history is *durchkomponiert*. But for Oakeshott there is no 'ripping yarn', but only a quasi-literal one, of variable thickness and length, composed of short, overlapping fibres (events, episodes, occurrences), held together solely by interfacial friction (their immediate, quasi-causal relations).

If religion can subsist purely as practice, can there not similarly be a politics disjoined from political theory? Oakeshott addresses this question in both Yale books, and also in 'Political Discourse', published for the first time in Fuller's new *Rationalism in Politics*. Politics, he says, may be reflected upon at various levels: that of *policy*, whose concerns are practical and immediate; that of *doctrine*, concerned to justify (and perhaps also to frame) political decisions in terms of some general principle; and that of *philosophy*, the attempt to understand the permanent character of political phenomena.

Rationalism, it might be said, is not theory itself, but the belief (or theory) that theory can and should determine practice. Oakeshott thought that the only theory likely to advance a practice (in this case, politics) is one which has grown out of it, and that the philosophy of anything (Oakeshott's included) can have no bearing on its conduct. Here I fancy Oakeshott is somewhat disingenuous, for his analysis, if accepted, does have serious implications for policy, even if they are only negative, to the effect that philosophy and theory generally are best left out of it.

Politics in the practical sense includes not merely the conduct of policy, but also the lives of all of us whom it affects. In 'The Nature and Meaning of Sociality' (1925), self-identification with a society's highest moral goods is tantamount, as in F.H. Bradley, to 'God', and also (less extravagantly) to love of country, which Oakeshott rightly distinguishes from nationalism, jingoism, and the like. In 'The Authority of the State' (1929) the State is 'the social whole which government implies and

requires for its explanation'. (Both pieces are in *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life*.)

Obviously society, country and state here signify something both pre- and post-political; in a word, culture. Government, or political activity generally, is more the guardian of culture than its expression. It can protect it and perhaps (as in Hobbes) create its minimum conditions, but it cannot create it. Politics is at best a necessary evil, and always involves a certain moral coarseness and self-deception.

So much is the burden of 'The Claims of Politics' (1939), designed to explode the vulgar and hysterical notion, then in vogue, that (indiscriminate?) political 'commitment' is somehow obligatory. It is not politicians, but poets, artists and (up to a point) philosophers who furnish a society with its deepest values and clearest self-awareness. The contrary belief, says Oakeshott (recalling 'Religion and the World'), is like the 'false and irreligious' idea that 'the true, unhindered service of God was possible only to members of a religious order or officials of the Church'.

Religion, Politics and the Moral Life contains two welcome 'middle-period' reprints. The later, 'The Customer is Never Wrong' (1955) unsurprisingly declines Walter Lippmann's clarion call to a new 'public philosophy', based on Natural Law. The earlier, 'Scientific Politics' is a first-rate review discussion, from the *Cambridge Journal*, of Hans Morgenthau's *Scientific Man versus Power Politics*. Timothy Fuller gives the date as 1947, and suggests that 'Rationalism in Politics' was an attempt to remedy Morgenthau's defects. But in fact 'Scientific Politics' appeared in March 1948, four months after the opening instalment of 'Rationalism in Politics'. I can find no evidence to suggest either that Oakeshott had read Morgenthau's book before writing 'Rationalism in Politics', or why, if he had, he should so long have postponed his review.

I would also contest Fuller's dating of two hitherto unpublished MSS, to whose contents I have already alluded. He suggests 1946 (the date of Oakeshott's edition of *Leviathan*) for 'The Concept of a Philosophy of Politics', on the grounds that in it Oakeshott says he has recently been considering Hobbes. But the piece is unquestionably 'early'. Both style and substance recall *Experience and its Modes*. As for Hobbes, Oakeshott had written on him once in 1935, and also, in connection with Leo Strauss, thrice in 1936–7. We might reasonably date the piece somewhere between the Strauss reviews and Oakeshott's article in *Politica* for 1938, 'The Concept of a Philosophical Jurisprudence'. Presumably Fuller does not know this article, which reproduces several pages from 'The Concept of a Philosophy of Politics' virtually word for word. At any rate, I take 1938 to be the *terminus ad quem*.

As for 'Political Philosophy', which Fuller dates 1946–50, the *terminus a quo* must be at least 1948. Using the analogy of a spectator climbing a tower, the historian, Oakeshott says, retains his memory of the ground-level view, unlike the philosopher, who does not. This figure, he says, was 'inspired by a passage in a book which recently came my way'. The passage occurs, in fact, in Chapter 1 of J.D. Mabbott's *The State and the Citizen* (1948), which Oakeshott twice reviewed in 1949.

Morality and Politics in Modern Europe fills the gap between 'The Masses in Representative Democracy' and Part III of *On Human Conduct*. Like them, these lectures set out Oakeshott's Burckhardt-inspired account of individuality, its historical emergence, its associated morality, and the counter-morality of the reaction, collectivism. Accompanying this narrative are vignettes of various 'individualist' and 'collectivist' thinkers.

There are two key points in Oakeshott's story of modernity, especially as he tells it here. The first is that it was the new centralizing, modernizing European sovereigns ('sovereignty' being a recent invention) who freed aspiring 'individuals' from feudal loyalties and local custom. One might note an incipient conflict with his earlier emphasis on limited government and medieval common law as the seed-beds of freedom and individuality (see, e.g., 'The Political Economy of Freedom' and 'Scientific Politics').

The second is that individuality, merely by being visible, convicted of inadequacy those who had failed to rise to its challenge. Such people found 'leaders' ready to exploit their insecurity by offering them, in exchange for their obedience, collective redemption in either theocracies (Calvin's Geneva), or productivist utopias (Bacon, Owen, Saint-Simon), or egalitarian socialist welfare-dispensaries. Possibly influenced by J.L. Talmon and Norman Cohn,⁵ Oakeshott draws graphic parallels between seventeenth-century millenarianism, Jacobinism and Marxism.

These are gripping pages, but even 17 years later in *On Human Conduct* Oakeshott's substantially unchanged account seems excessively schematic. It is rather as though *The Communist Manifesto* had been recast to celebrate the bourgeois. Moreover, some of Oakeshott's sketches of 'individualist' thinkers are decidedly tendentious. Oakeshott had once seen Locke as a harmless ideologue who distilled English political practice into abstract principles to justify James II's deposition. But Locke now resurfaces as a serious apostle of individualism and harbinger of Oakeshott's 'ruler as umpire' in 'On Being Conservative' (1956). (That essay and Oakeshott's lecture share several paragraphs.) Bentham, exposed in 1932 as a naïve rationalist in 'The New Bentham', is here

implicitly commended for his atomistic individualism, since at least it is anti-collectivist.

As for Burke, Oakeshott says he thought of associations in contractual, individualist terms. So he did of some, but not of the most permanent, family and country. Here, Burke explicitly says, we have no choice, either as to our membership, or as to the 'natural' duties it entails. And he spoke also of a society where such obligations had lapsed as prone to dissolve into 'the dust and powder of individuality'.⁶

Both Yale volumes reinforce the impression that Oakeshott grew progressively more 'individualist'. His aversion to collectivism seems to have led him eventually almost to believe, with (allegedly) Mrs Thatcher, that 'there is no such thing as society'. Yet he was neither an atomistic nor an 'abstract' individualist, nor a philosophical egoist. His political ideal was 'civil association', a thing defined by a common recognition of the authority of law, and held together by the mutual respect said to flow from the citizen's awareness that others share his recognition.

We are not told whence law itself derives its authority, nor what its content is likely to be. But might not its authority derive from 'society'? Is not political society ordinarily held together by its members' instinctive sympathy for those who share its deepest values, among them a belief in its own unique worth? In sharing them, are the members not 'of one mind', and *pro tanto* properly to be hypostatized as a 'society'? And will not the law, in embodying and protecting those values, be perceived to possess a *moral* authority? In 'The Claims of Politics', Oakeshott saw politics as ideally the servant and guardian of culture. Something similar might be the case with law.

But if all that is so, what becomes of Oakeshott's conviction that law should not be concerned actively to promote morality? Can that, one of the cornerstones of liberal belief, also, without contradiction, feature among a society's deepest values? Such questions (which I have tried not to beg) are impossible to settle here, as are the following, which somebody might like additionally to ponder. It is because Oakeshott's work constantly provokes them that it seems likely to achieve classic status, if indeed it has not already done so.

First, Oakeshott associates individuality with invention, adventurousness and independence of mind. But are all those not equally associated with the despised Western ethic of 'achievement', which is central to both collectivist *and* individualist rhetoric?

Secondly, Oakeshott rejected the socialist goal of 'security', which (e.g.) Oscar Wilde regarded as the *sine qua non* of individuality, but not

the Hobbesian version, which he champions for reasons identical to Wilde's. What is the difference?⁷

Lastly, having preferred everyday *Sittlichkeit* to rationalist *Moralität*, he tells us even as early as 'The Tower of Babel' that predominantly customary moralities after all exhibit a certain 'hollowness of moral character'. But if, then, morality proper demands a certain deliberative distance from the actions which fall under it, where then does that leave the instinctive virtuousness of 'knowing how to behave', the spontaneous 'self-enactment' celebrated in *On Human Conduct*?⁸

Oakeshott was a bohemian, a lily of the field in both politics and (as it now appears) religion. Though serious-natured, he was generally suspicious of the toilers and spinners. For him, as for Yeats, life overflowed without ambitious pains. It would have amused him to think that such questions as the above (which I believe can be answered, but not without raising others) might fuel thousands of earnest graduate seminars in the future. Or, come to that, an Oakeshott industry.

The Achievement of Michael Oakeshott needs only a few words. Its contents vary from personal reminiscence to serious exposition. Josiah Lee Auspitz, for three decades a leading Oakeshott scholar, combines both. Noël O'Sullivan's obituary from the *Independent* is, relative to its length, almost the best thing ever written on Oakeshott. Along with his scholarship I would commend Russell Price's pleasingly quirky observation. There are good essays by Kenneth Minogue and Timothy Fuller (whose introduction to the first Yale volume is also good, for all that I have criticized his shortcomings as a textual editor), and a charming memoir by John Casey.

The most self-effacing contribution of all is John Liddington's heroic 36-page bibliography of Oakeshott and Oakeshottiana. I cannot see how its first section, Oakeshott's publications to 1991, will ever be superseded. Even if the rest of the book had been worthless, Dr Liddington's efforts would have made it indispensable to anyone seriously interested in its subject.

Compiled from *The Salisbury Review*, XII, 4 (July 1994) and *The Times Literary Supplement*, 15 April 1994.

Notes to Essay 4

1 [1999] No aspersions intended on my own publishers, who could not have given me a freer hand to do as I pleased.

- 2 [1999] I hope it is equally not too insulting to offer literal translations: 'we are all being driven' (i.e. to the same place, death); 'you have obtained Sparta; adorn it'; 'only for the vertigo-free'.
- 3 The passage, evidently by a late Victorian traveller or explorer, is supposed to typify the viewpoint of 'practice'. It deplores the spectacle of 'so much power going to waste, such a coign of vantage unoccupied, such a lever to control the natural forces of Africa ungripped'.
- 4 Cf. Essay 7, n. 3, and Essay 14, below.
- 5 In *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (1952) and *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957) respectively.
- 6 See above, Essay 2.
- 7 See Essay 3 above, which does not answer this question, but may suggest how it might be answered.
- 8 On these topics, see Essay 17.

5

Writers and Ideology: Three Case Studies

1. Václav Havel

Living in Truth, by Václav Havel and others, ed. Jan Vladislav (Faber and Faber, 1986).

A playwright by trade, Václav Havel is better known over here as Czechoslovakia's leading dissident. After 1968, under the Soviet-imposed 'normalization', he was charged with subversion and his works were banned. He was finally imprisoned in 1979 for his activities in connection with Charter '77 (founded to monitor the Government's observance of its own laws) and VONS, the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted. He was released, seriously ill, in 1983. Now fifty years old, he still lives under constant surveillance. What that means may be gathered from Tom Stoppard's play *Professional Foul*.

Stoppard celebrates Havel's plays in the present volume, noting their 'gentle refusal to indulge a sense of grievance, the utter lack of righteousness or petulance or bile'. The same is strikingly true of Havel's essays, which occupy two-thirds of the book's considerable bulk. Nevertheless, Havel is no holy fool or epileptic saint. On the contrary, like Milan Kundera (who also pays him a splendid tribute), he is tough, wry, sober, patient and realistic, and much disposed, given the opportunity, to enjoy life. His quiet, anti-utopian, and altogether un-Slavic ruminations are firmly rooted in the day-to-day, inescapably political experience of his countrymen. Starting from such local topics as ecology, the 'peace' movement, consumerism, and dissident strategy, Havel develops a profound, continuing inquiry into politics, culture and ethics,

into the nature and fulfilment of the human being, and the future of civilization. The Czech perspective on these grander issues, he would say, so far from being marginal, is central.

The reason is that Havel sees contemporary communist society as the realization of a deep-seated Western fantasy, variously known as 'technology', 'utilitarianism', 'ideology', 'mechanism' and 'system'. His *bête noire* is essentially what Michael Oakeshott has dubbed 'rationalism', the target of an impressive line of thinkers, running from Pascal through Burke and the German Romantics up to Oakeshott himself. 'Rationalism' is simply the (irrational) approach to human things according to which they are best understood 'scientifically', which is to say, purged of their value-saturated complexity (i.e. of their humanity), and reduced to a set of formal 'problems', each awaiting its corresponding 'solution'. Its key feature is impersonality, so that the horrors of totalitarianism (handily exemplified by Hitler's Final Solution) and the anonymous, manipulated hedonism of modern liberal democracies are more closely related than they seem. Havel suggests, *à propos*, that in the Soviet bloc 'consumerism' could well supersede the traditional incentives to conformity.

Though there are a few exceptions on the Left, such as the poet Blake and the philosopher Martin Buber, rationalism's critics tend to be politically conservative. All, however, invariably appeal from its bloodless algebra to the 'real' world. But rationalism has become sophisticated, and is now not so easily put down. For the radical Sartre, the primary reality is my unconditioned 'freedom'. When the so-called 'real' world demands that I feel (say) love or concern for any of its contents, it asks me to surrender that freedom, and with it my authenticity. Marxists such as Althusser complete this (in truth, paranoid) self-portrait by identifying 'reality' itself as a 'bourgeois' construct, and hence an instrument of class rule. (An interesting admission that Marxism, whatever else it may be, can be nothing so vulgar as true.)

Without explicitly referring to it, Havel effectively pulls New Left orthodoxy inside (or right side) out. His philosophy, embodied in a style which is fluent, graceful and free from technicalities, is appropriately indirect and unsystematic. Nevertheless, it is coherent, and can be summarized something like this.

The authentic 'me' cannot be abstracted from the 'real' world and set up in opposition to it. Rather, it is myself precisely as immersed in that world (Husserl's *Lebenswelt*) and bound to it by various ties of sympathy and moral obligation. It is when I deny those ties, either voluntarily, out of hubris or stupidity, or involuntarily, because the daily 'existential

pressures' of Soviet bloc life force me into real or pretended indifference, that I become inauthentic. Either I positively accept the lie (and become a zombie), or, for the sake of my family and job, or simply for a bit of peace, I pay the minimum lip-service to it (no enthusiasm is expected) and 'live within the lie'. (Havel depicts such an existence – with a dramatist's skill, be it said – in an imaginary greengrocer who eventually rebels against his demoralization by simply not putting up any more Party slogans in his shop. This personage is ten times more illuminating and memorable than Sartre's notorious waiter.)

Such is the 'peace', Havel notes exasperatedly, which Western unilateral nuclear disarmers really offer us. It is, indeed, the unhealthy obsession with mere physical survival – ultimately, the fear of death – that forces people generally into untruth. (Compare Heidegger; and indeed for Sartre love and affection are foretastes of dissolution, like drowning in treacle.) For what is the point of saving your skin, if you thereby lose your humanity? The only answer (obviously not a 'solution' nor conceived as such) is a kind of martyrdom: to offer your skin, repudiate the lie, 'live within the truth', and, like the greengrocer, take the consequences (which far exceed any endured by Western 'peace' protesters). In doing so, the 'dissident' – who actually aspires to no such title – bears witness to his true humanity and to the spontaneous, living culture of which he is a part. Civil society, culture, humanity – call it what you will – survives despite all official attempts to suppress it or (something equally impossible) to incorporate it into the 'system'.

Culture then, in its widest sense, from moral understanding to genuine education, and from unofficial pop music to high art, is the real enemy of post-Stalinism, which fears spontaneity, as it must fear truth, above all else. (The Jazz Section's activities were especially anathema, for having emerged from within an official structure.)¹ So far from culture's being an instrument of power, power itself is illegitimate without culture's approval. That is to say, for Havel politics is grounded, as it was for Aristotle, in man's social nature, which (to use his own expression) is 'pre-political'. Though (or rather because) he is an acute political analyst, he wastes no time devising political 'solutions'. His is essentially a moral protest, and in the circumstances the only politically effective sort ('the power of the powerless', Havel calls it). Of course, any civil disobedient in the West makes the same claim. And liberalism cannot answer him, since it affects to know no better than he does what is true or good. Havel, however, can do so, since for him 'conscience' is not a private but a public thing, the voice, essentially, of culture. But

that puts him, and culture, and any protester who genuinely speaks for it, at odds with Western enlightenment.

In trying to extract their central philosophical message I have made Havel's essays sound rather dry. But actually they are as pregnant as two graffiti under the gatehouse of Charles Bridge in Prague, hard by the statue of the Emperor Charles IV (a great Czech hero). AVE CAESAR IMPERATOR, says one, MORITURI TE SALUTAMUS;² the other, in the same hand, reads BEATLES. Those, if not by Havel, are entirely in his spirit, and that of his country.

2. Raymond Williams

What I Came to Say, by Raymond Williams (Hutchinson Radius, 1989)

This is the second volume of Raymond Williams's previously uncollected essays to appear since his death last year. Of the 28 pieces in it, all but two date from the 1970s and 1980s, and, as their overall title³ suggests, they are indeed typical of what their author stood, or came to stand, for. The subjects are all familiar Williams territory, ranging from autobiography through education and media studies to Marx and Marxists. They disclose less a fully worked-out intellectual position than a certain habit of mind.

From 1966 I knew Williams fairly well for some years, first as my research supervisor, and later as a very senior colleague. Wherever one looked, there were two of him. There was the literary critic and the socialist intellectual; there was Williams early and late; and there was the man and the message. The first of these, in every case, was (I thought) far superior to the second. Williams on tragedy, modern drama and the novel was full of insights, and is still worth reading. So is his *Culture and Society* (1958).⁴ His reflections on a common culture in that book would nowadays seem quite at home in *The Salisbury Review*. Like many British socialists of the older generation, and everyone who has thought seriously about culture, the early Williams was a conservative at heart.

Terry Eagleton once complained to me, in a revealing metaphor, that Raymond had not yet 'broken through' to Marxism. Williams accomplished this feat in due course, with no very beneficial effect on either the substance or the style of his writings. The turning point was *The Country and the City* (1972).

Here for the first time Williams addressed himself less to the general educated public than to the readers of *New Left Review*. He threw in his

lot unequivocally with *les damnés de la terre*. Unlike Marx, Williams nowhere thought it necessary to argue that the historic poverty of the many (which it has, in the event, taken capitalism to abate) was a *consequence* of the wealth of the few. He simply took it for granted, and, Lear-like, vented his anger in clotted, innuendo-laden menaces against the fortunate of every age and clime.

What moved him, I think, was less sympathy with the idealized 'have-nots' than an accumulated hatred of the 'haves'; a hatred not only of wealth and power, but also of anything that could plausibly be assimilated to them: health, beauty, wit, learning, grace, even, in the end, ordinary happiness.⁵ Perhaps accordingly, the later books – and *What I Came to Say* is no exception – are written, for the most part, in a grey, slab-like prose, as inexpressibly dreary and lifeless as a Soviet-bloc housing estate. The argument ploughs wearily round in circles like some crippled old battleship glimpsed at intervals through the fog, its enduring presence marked only by the occasional muffled salvo loosed off at an equally invisible enemy.

Williams sacrificed a once lively critical sensibility on the altar of ideology. Some of *What I Came to Say* unwittingly suggests that a mixture of working-class nostalgia and upwardly-mobile guilt may have been to blame. In one piece, 'My Cambridge', Williams ironically affects to note that it was never 'his' Cambridge. Yet, as I know from a decade spent there myself, and as many others will confirm, it was as much Williams's as anyone's. At least by Cambridge standards, which were not high, he was a good and popular lecturer, with a large student following. His chair in Drama was certainly deserved. Moreover, in that hotbed of acrimony and dissension, the English Faculty, he was universally respected and appealed to as (what he was) a cool, fair-minded administrator and (later) Chairman.

One might say of the later Williams what the earlier said of George Orwell: 'it is not so much a series of books, it is more like a case.'⁶ *What I Came to Say* perfectly exemplifies the 'case', though it also, like everything in Williams, contains the odd independently ponderable thing (e.g., an essay on communications, and another on Marx's view of culture). Williams was very much a Sixties man. Torn between his irrecoverable working-class past and his incomprehensible ambition to join the European Marxist élite (Brecht, Lukács, and the 'green' communist Bahro are all dealt with here, though in characteristically lacklustre fashion), he constructed an ideal, heroic, dissident persona for himself, in which the unlikely unity of high theory and popular practice was finally to be achieved.

Though the laziest of supervisors (as the playwright David Hare has recently testified),⁷ at the personal level Williams was a decent, likeable man: mild, modest and avuncular. Nevertheless, if his books are any guide, he was also profoundly self-obsessed. Solzhenitsyn, on the evidence of two 1972 essays in the present volume, obviously held a deep, troubling fascination for him. For Solzhenitsyn, endowed with the authority of long suffering, reopened the terrible possibility that a man might, without contradiction, be both a great writer (that is, in Williams's terms, a humane, truth-telling realist, such as he took Solzhenitsyn to be) and that unspeakable, unforgivable thing, an enemy of socialism.

Williams desperately attempts to clear Solzhenitsyn of the latter charge. For if it were true (as we now know it is), and Solzhenitsyn no less great, then socialism must be false, and nothing could be more ludicrous, dated or tasteless than Williams's own cost-free, pseudo-dissident posturings on its behalf, sincere though they undoubtedly were.

3. Salman Rushdie and the Politics of Credulity

The Jaguar Smile: a Nicaraguan Journey, by Salman Rushdie (Picador, 1987)

Fascism in Britain: a History, 1918–1985, by Richard Thurlow (Blackwell, 1987)

The unnamed hero and first-person narrator (call him R) of Salman Rushdie's latest work of fiction is a successful English-educated writer of Indian origin. The setting is a small Central American state called (rather confusingly, since there actually is such a place) 'Nicaragua'. Here a virtuous Leftist régime defends the Revolution against a counter-revolution conjured out of thin air by a huge, malign Northern neighbour. At least, that is how R sees it. As pompous, sententious and innocently conceited as poor Kinbote in *Pale Fire*, he is likewise the constant butt of the text's wicked irony, being the perfect specimen of Lenin's 'deaf-mute' or 'useful idiot'.

From Shaw and the Webbs to the present, such people have been a priceless asset to tyrannies (usually of the Left, though Shaw, never the dupe of mere labels, was not fussy). To be useful an idiot needs three things: first, access to the Western media; second, a relative ignorance of the régime to be cried up; third (which makes the ignorance permanent and absolute), a quasi-religious disposition to ignore, excuse or forgive almost any of the said régime's cruelties or shortcomings.

R begins by celebrating the (to him) significant fact of his son's birth *exactly one month* after the Revolution: 'I've always had a weakness for synchronicity,' he explains disarmingly, evidently supposing himself to have just given an example of it. His critical faculties doze on similarly (and happily) undisturbed when the revolutionary government, through a front organization, invites him to 'Nicaragua'. The author's account of R's ensuing freebie owes a great deal, by the look of it, to Paul Hollander's exhaustive study of totalitarian hospitality, *Political Pilgrims*.

One thing that amusingly emerges from R's constant denials – though in real life such things are far from amusing – is that, true to form, the Communists have hijacked the Revolution. 'The land was owned and farmed by individuals,' R recites dutifully, 'and the government's role was *limited* to supplying them with *power, water, health care and distribution facilities*.' So bottomless was the government's benignity that it '*even acted, at peak harvest times, as a supplier of labour*'. Ponder those (by me) italicized expressions. They point, ironically, to nothing less than a total government armlock on producers. Suppose the government decides *not* to supply you with the labour, or water, or power, or distribution facilities you need? And why might it so decide? Will it permit you access to any alternative suppliers, or them even to exist? If that's R's 'mixed economy' (so the text implies), who needs socialism? And when socialism finally arrives, will it have been more fun for a farmer to be starved, rather than beaten, into obedience?

R's style varies between Topsy and Tim for the politics ('those were things Mary was trying to change with her health care programmes') and Graham Greene for the topography, as also for the wooden, curiously unseeing descriptions: someone 'saunters toothlessly by'; 'the downpour became a pin-cushion stabbing into my face'.⁸ Wherever he can, R resorts to Spanish. No banausic, smelly old 'peasants' for him, but romantic (and semantically indistinguishable) *campesinos*. Sometimes, dumbfounded in full, rapturous spate by something flagrantly unremarkable, he can manage only disc-jockey superlatives: A's party, like B's cooking, is 'great'; C's coconut bread is 'sensational'; D's dancing is 'magical', and so on.

Despite having, like his creator, lived and prospered under more than one imperfect, but still functioning, democracy, R is morally more demanding than your average grudging democrat. Once arrived in Nicaragua, 'for the first time in my life', he announces majestically, 'I had come across a government I could support.' So when these 'men of integrity and great pragmatism' (where have we heard that before? Geoffrey Dawson on Hitler?) close down the sole privately owned,

and already censored, newspaper, R can only bleat pathetically on about this being some silly, utterly inexplicable 'mistake'. A paralysed victim of the so-called 'Contras' unexpectedly tells him, to his minders' faces, that the Revolution stinks. What he sees, though, is not a bitter, defiant young woman, who, having lost everything, has no more to lose by telling the truth, but simply more circumstantial evidence for what can only be his hosts' saintly toleration of dissent.

Scenes like that vividly recall us to the real Nicaragua. There, like it or not, the Contra armies are led largely by liberal-constitutionalist ex-Sandinistas, who oppose their former comrades' attempt to turn the country back into a dictatorship, and a Muscovite one at that. Historical facts, of course, are irrelevant to Mr Rushdie's purpose. Judiciously introduced, however, they could have lent extra weight to his satire. Instead he rather weakens it by suggesting, with his publisher's collusion, that the hero, R, may after all be himself, and the work a sincere documentary. But in such matters whimsy is surely out of place; as, perhaps, is irony.

Richard Thurlow's *Fascism in Britain* is guiltless of any such lapse, being a relentless drizzle, in inoffensive bureaucratese, of names and dates. Its compendious data are not without interest or value to the reader prepared, unlike the author, to interpret them. If you want to know, for example, who belonged to which *groupuscule*, and what its specific articles were, Mr Thurlow will tell you. But to bring the facts to life; to characterize a person or a movement; to tell us what brought together, from all political quarters and none, scientists, shopkeepers, suffragettes, unemployed people, aristocracy and riff-raff; to tell us whether the doctrines and the people have changed, and if so how and why: these lie largely beyond Mr Thurlow's chosen remit. One almost sighs for a bit of old-fashioned Marxist scholarship, for, though baffled or even refuted by so obstinately classless (and various) a phenomenon as 'fascism', it at least addressed the real issues.

An enjoyable feature of the book is the photographs. Colin Jordan's sheepish grin as his bride (Françoise Dior) performs a Hitler salute is priceless.⁹ So is a posed shot – Mr Thurlow calls it 'horrific' – of Mosley at his desk. The self-styled Man of Destiny seems to be trying, for some stern occult purpose (telekinesis?), to focus on a point inside his own head, his pineal gland perhaps. Apart from the severe squint thus induced, he could pass for an otherwise perfectly plausible waxwork, representing (supposing there were such a thing, and that anyone wished to see it) a cross between a stage hypnotist and a demented brush salesman. Why are there no laughs to be had from Communism?

Perhaps the waggish Mr Rushdie can tell us. Is it because, unlike ‘fascism’, it is still a force to be reckoned with?

From *The Times Educational Supplement*, 22 May, 1987; 8 September, 1989; and 18 July, 1987.

Notes to Essay 5

- 1 In 1971, the Czech Musicians’ Union established a ‘Jazz Section’ which began to publish, as internal memoranda, new studies of art and literature and to reprint old ones (e.g. Nietzsche on Wagner). It also staged uncensored cultural events. Eventually the Communist authorities raided the Section’s offices and prosecuted its Council, twice unsuccessfully, on wholly absurd charges, and finally, in February 1987, on a third set, this time specifically designed to ensure conviction. The case excited Western interest, which was still active when this review was written.
- 2 ‘Hail, Emperor Caesar, we who are about to die salute you’ (the gladiators’ greeting on entering the arena).
- 3 Taken from a phrase in the book, and presumably bestowed by the publisher. No editor is named, though the introduction is by Francis Mulhern.
- 4 [1999] I would now say that those four books are all worth reading *once*. Williams had genuine perception, but not much analytical bent, argumentative persistence, or overall intellectual grip. Nor did he need them, since he seemed to have made up his mind, or rather his emotions, in advance.
- 5 Williams himself enjoyed several of these advantages, though not wit. In his scheme of things there was little to laugh at, or about.
- 6 Williams was parodying Orwell’s observation about Dickens: ‘It is not so much a series of books, it is more like a world.’
- 7 [1999] In *Guardian* ‘Weekend’, shortly before this review appeared. I had already confirmed my own similar impression by consulting two contemporaries who, like me, had been doctoral students of Williams’s. Two of Williams’s Jesus College undergraduates told me in the magic year *soixante-huit* that they and other placard-wielding students – including, I fancy, Sir David (Hare) – had besieged him in his rooms (once Coleridge’s) demanding simply to be *taught*. But he had a revolution to make, and no time to spare.
- 8 Surely it was R’s face, rather, that was the ‘pin-cushion’? One recalls Macaulay’s magisterial put-down of the poetaster Montgomery’s conceit to the effect that Nature is God’s mirror, on which He paints His image: ‘The use of a mirror, we submit, is not to be painted upon.’ The use of a pin-cushion is precisely *not* to stab, but to be stabbed. As for ‘toothless’ sauntering, the transferred epithet is totally pointless. As well say of a bald athlete that he effortlessly, but baldly, vaulted a five-bar gate.
- 9 [1999] In case no one remembers them: she was a scion of the noted fashion house, while he, a former schoolteacher, was leader of the National Front, later reconstituted as the British National Party.

6

The Disenchanted Flute: Opera and the Rule of the Concept

Much of what follows was first provoked by Jonathan Miller's 1983 Scottish Opera production of *The Magic Flute*, which has subsequently enjoyed three revivals, including a prolonged London run in 1986. Nevertheless, productions of Mozart's great work nowadays come so thick and fast that no sooner has one's view of it stabilized, than one is obliged to revise or extend it to accommodate, or more usually denounce, some new 'angle' on offer.

One reason why *The Magic Flute* lends itself to so many different interpretations – if we think that 'interpretations' rather than mere performances are called for – is simply that, at least on the surface, it is a work of genuine, and deliberate, ambiguity. Another is that Schikaneder's libretto – greatly admired, incidentally, by Goethe, who wrote a sequel to it – is so familiar that it can survive, and therefore invites, a great deal of directorial abuse. More especially, Mozart's miraculous score, alternating between catchy Viennese vaudeville and the most awesome, soul-transfixing sublimities, can keep almost any production afloat. I say 'almost', because recently the American director Peter Sellars – it was his notorious 1990 Glyndebourne production, on tour in Glasgow – succeeded in driving me out at half-time; not, to be sure, in rage (forewarned, I had installed myself in a cheap seat), but simply because there seemed no particular point in staying.

I shall return to Mr Sellars, Dr Miller and their respective 'angles' in due course. But the general objection to all such so-called 'concept productions' is worth stating at the outset. Art, so Hegel asserted, is 'the sensuous embodiment of the Idea'. The universe is the one great Thought of the one great Mind, thought and mind are identical, and it

is only through art and other self-objectifications that the universal Mind rises into full self-consciousness. But we need not share, or even wholly understand, Hegel's tortuous metaphysics to see that a work of art is actually more complete, more fully real, than the unformed, embryonic ideas and impulses which have (supposedly) sought expression in it.

It follows that to interpret a work of art by reference to the 'concepts' from which it allegedly derives, let alone any extraneous ones, must be fundamentally mistaken. For, in its detailed concrete embodiment, the form which the artist has given it, the work has already achieved its maximum identity, articulation or expressiveness. So far from clarifying or expanding its meaning, the 'concept production' actually narrows and obscures it. Even when not forcing the work to voice his own opinions (the worst kind of 'concept production'), the director reduces it to meanings necessarily more abstract and hypothetical, and hence less determinable, than those it bears on its surface.

'Concept productions' are the artistic equivalent of ideological politics, and are often 'political' themselves. In the end the appeal of the 'concept', in both life and art, lies in the fact that, to a certain disposition, abstractions are more comforting, because more easily grasped, than concrete experience.¹ The treasure-house of experience is accessible only to wisdom and humility. It is not to be unlocked by some simple piece of ideological ironmongery. For some, however, that counts for nothing compared with the feel of the key in one's pocket.

But surely, it will be said, *The Magic Flute* deals precisely in 'concepts' of this kind, and on its surface, too. What else, for example, are the Reason, Wisdom and Nature to which Sarastro's three temples are dedicated? *The Magic Flute*, we may reply, is one of the few works of its period that can actually breathe life into such apparently desiccated Enlightenment abstractions. The reason is that they were never dead in the first place. In *The Magic Flute* at least, they are not abstractions, but distillates; certainly from the life imagined in the work, and very probably from the 'real' world also. Here we understand, as we do in Goethe or Jane Austen, how those things might govern our own lives, and why it would be good if they did. Like Shakespeare's *Tempest*, which it somewhat resembles,² *The Magic Flute* movingly celebrates nobility, rationality and self-command as the true ends of human life and the highest happiness for either sex.

Contrary perhaps to appearances, *The Magic Flute* is by no means 'sexist'.³ If the vengeful Queen of the Night represents the supposedly 'feminine' vice of ungoverned passion, she has her masculine counterpart in

the lustful Moor Monostatos, her natural, and eventual, ally (Goethe, by the way, married them off). Pamina, the Queen's daughter, but in love with the virtuous Tamino, is admitted as an equal to Sarastro's enlightened brotherhood (despite some of the brothers' grumblings about women), while Papageno, the well-meaning but unheroic and monotonously earthbound representative of the 'common man',⁴ is excluded.

Papageno (it may be added for those unfamiliar with the opera) is the Queen's bird-catcher, ordered by the Queen, despite his vigorously expressed reluctance, to accompany Tamino on his mission. This mission is to 'rescue' Pamina from the supposed wicked tyrant Sarastro, to whose care, as it turns out, Pamina's late father has committed her, and who has accordingly abducted her from her mother. Papagena, as her name indicates, is Papageno's female opposite number, given him to wife by Sarastro. Their goal in life is the mass-production of endless miniature versions of themselves in cosy domestic bliss. *The Magic Flute* is obviously inegalitarian, in that it emphasizes degrees of moral worth, and sees power as most properly to be bestowed on the higher. Nevertheless, as befits a work of wisdom and humanity, it awards consolation prizes to the morally less gifted, so that each may be happy in his own way.

In all of this there are obvious Platonic echoes. Yet *The Magic Flute* is not rigidly authoritarian in the manner usually imputed to *The Republic*. It stresses the importance of authority primarily as being a necessary prelude to the subject's autonomy, and as something ideally to be exercised only in a spirit of love and humane concern. In short, what we have is a fable about education; specifically, moral education. For all its pantomime vivacity, *The Magic Flute* is at bottom deeply serious, what one might call a *Bildungsoper*. The goal of such an education is the harmonious development, virtue and rational freedom of the recipient, his or her Aristotelian *eudaimonia*.⁵ That is our inner *telos*, the destiny implanted in us by Nature, a goal which it is both our duty and our fulfilment, through our social institutions and relationships, to realize. Thus, at least in its ideal form, authority, like society, is merely another name for Nature.

The idea of moral (or as the French would say, sentimental) education is central to all Mozart's mature operas, which include three to libretti by Lorenzo da Ponte. In those, more explicitly even than in *The Magic Flute*, relations between the sexes, and our erotic constitution, are the focus of the educational endeavour. The da Ponte operas lack any central, all-wise Sarastro-figure to direct things. But they too are Aristotelian

in outlook, even though, in *Don Giovanni* and *Così Fan Tutte*, the *telos* is not made explicit. Nevertheless, in those two works as in all the others, the erotic ideal is that attributed by a Victorian critic to Jane Austen, viz. 'intelligent love'.⁶ It is disclosed, not directly, but through its manifest contraries: the heartless promiscuity of Don Giovanni; the self-indulgent romantic idealism of the sisters in *Così* (compare Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility*); the mercenary realism of Despina (excusable, however, as the natural survival-morality of the servant class); and the worldly cynicism of Don Alfonso.⁷

None of these, no matter how lyrically expressed in the music, is really love, and in the last instance (though it concerns love) obviously not. On the other hand, Donna Elvira's magnanimous, hopeless loyalty to her seducer, though it is love, can hardly be called 'intelligent'. Nor, surely, can the ordinary, unideal peasant loves of Masetto and Zerlina (who after all very nearly succumbs to Don Giovanni, and at her own wedding feast too). As for Donna Anna and her fiancé Don Ottavio, their devotion (which on one reading stems primarily from their shared, high-falutin devotion to the proprieties) is surely too callow, moralistic and untried to serve as any sort of ideal. (It is still less suitable if we imagine that she is using it to conceal Don Giovanni's attempt to seduce her, and particularly if, as some think, his attempt is supposed to have been successful.)

The Marriage of Figaro, however, is a different matter. All the major characters, in the end, come out the better for their ordeals (the 'ordeal' is a constant Mozartian device, whether or not, as in the *Flute*, it forms part of an actual ritual). Consequently the erotic *telos* is more visible. Unlike Zerlina and Masetto, Figaro and Susanna are intelligent, capable and aware, and neither clownish nor impressed by rank. Their master, the philandering Count, regards his servants' novel claim to be treated as individuals and moral equals simply as arrogance (his word, though the arrogance is of course his). Their unpretentious 'normal' love survives both his lascivious schemings and the confusions and jealousies spawned by their counter-intrigue, which they have undertaken in alliance with the Countess, and partly out of sympathy for her.

The Countess is bourgeois by upbringing, but her simple, stoical yearning for her unfeeling aristocratic husband's affection is vindicated not only by its intrinsic nobility (she shows none of Elvira's intermittent, if excusable, vengefulness), but also by its sheer power of endurance and by its reward, the recovery of his love. The Count, because he has not abandoned all shame, proves to be a morally educable Don Giovanni. His honour overpowers the arrogance with which it is otherwise

naturally entwined, and compels him, when his designs are exposed, publicly to humble himself before his wronged wife and movingly to seek her forgiveness.

With the sole exception of Don Giovanni (who is a special case),⁸ love in Mozart is always potentially educable. The reason is that, unlike for Freud (who saw things the other way round), the higher love is implicit in, and thus acknowledged by, the lower. The lower consequently aims at, or (in Goethean phrase) is 'drawn upwards' towards, the higher, to whatever level it proves capable of sustaining. It is, so to speak, justified by the overall *telos*, even though it may never attain to it. It would be (literally) preposterous to see, say, Papageno's love as a 'sublimation' of Monostatos' lust for Pamina, and Tamino's love as a further 'sublimation' of Papageno's. That way, everything reduces to lust. As Monostatos himself is aware, the truth is that even his lust contains the seeds of a mature love. Lust and love, as in Wagner's *Ring*, are not radical Platonic opposites, but points on a single ascending scale; one, however, calibrated from the top, not the bottom.

Perhaps the most compelling illustration of this principle is Cherubino, the page-boy in *Figaro*. Kierkegaard called Cherubino a youthful Don Giovanni. It would be truer to say that Don Giovanni is a coarser, more calculating Cherubino grown yet more so with age: one who has failed to mature, yet who is too old any longer to plead innocence. Actually, and amusing though it also is, Cherubino's frenzied infatuation with every woman in the cast, even at a pinch (he says) the decidedly seasoned Marcellina ('ogni donna mi fa palpitar'), is a tender and exquisite thing which cannot fail to move anyone who has ever been in love. For love is what Cherubino's passion is, even if it has not yet learnt fully to individualize its object. One cannot doubt his eventual ability to achieve that *ne plus ultra* of the erotic life.⁹

All Mozart's later stage works, but particularly his last, *The Magic Flute*, testify to the complexity of human things. *The Magic Flute* transforms the popular Viennese *Zauberoper* (magic opera) from a simple fairy-tale entertainment into genuine, proto-Symbolist music-drama. (It stands to it roughly as *Hamlet* stands to Elizabethan revenge-tragedy: it uses the conventional materials, but diverts them to different, or even contrary, ends.) No enlightened thinking, not even of the kind commended in the opera itself, could reduce it to a play of mere 'concepts'. The work is full of superficially puzzling inconsistencies. One of the most notorious is that the magic flute itself, Papageno's magic bells, and the Three Boys, though employed in the good Sarastro's cause, were originally gifts of the Queen of the Night. (The flute was actually made by

Pamina's father.) Several critics, among them Brigid Brophy, have adduced this as evidence of a last-minute change of plot. Such a midstream *volte-face*, if it were believable, would indeed make nonsense of the work as we have it, and fully justify Tolstoy's and others' strictures.¹⁰

But we need not appeal to Hegel's 'cunning of Reason' (which can be used to resolve any paradox whatever) to dismiss all such suppositions as groundless. One might just as well ask why the villainous Monostatos is found in Sarastro's service. In fact, Monostatos' servitude, like Caliban's to Prospero, seems doubly justified: it is useful in itself, and also holds his more dangerous propensities in check. It also suggests that even Sarastro's wisdom cannot be wholly pure or effortless, for it depends upon his continuously mastering the residual Monostatos-element in himself and putting it to use in the form (if this is not too Freudian) of his justified anger against Monostatos and the Queen. And in fact Monostatos, the slave-master, is a kind of parody-Sarastro, though one who rules, as he perceives himself to be ruled (and as Sarastro is compelled to rule him), solely by fear, where Sarastro's rule over his more 'rational' subjects is based on love (and hence consent).

Per contra, it seems similarly intelligible that some of the Queen's instruments – of which, after all, Tamino was originally one – should prove apt for higher purposes. She represents, no doubt, unregenerate 'natural' humanity, the animal endowment which we share with the giant snake from which Tamino has to be rescued, with the wild beasts tamed by the flute, and with the lions yoked to Sarastro's chariot; but this 'natural' endowment, as I have already suggested, contains within itself the means and the principle of its own redemptive transformation, even in Monostatos' case.

The Queen herself, however, appears to be uniquely incorrigible. She exploits her daughter's instinctive filial attachment by trying emotionally to blackmail her into murdering Sarastro, subsequently promising her to her assailant Monostatos (as she has earlier done to Tamino) in return for his assistance. Pamina's love of her, though, does conform to the overall pattern, since, though finally abandoned as too good for its object, it is recognizably the prototype of her attachment to Tamino, Sarastro, humankind, and the ways of wisdom generally. The insight is thoroughly Burkean and Hegelian; which is only to say, Aristotelian all over again.

As for the flute, the bells and the Three Boys, in a purely historical perspective they are no more than stock *Zauberoper* devices, used to effect apparently arbitrary *deus ex machina* escapes from this or that narrative impasse. In the context of *The Magic Flute*, however, they are more plausibly to be seen as a recognition of the sheer incalculability

of human affairs, or, if you prefer, of the role played in them by providence.

Here one might well invoke the 'cunning of Reason', which (to speak fancifully) can turn even the *Zauberoper* to its own purposes. *The Magic Flute* is the fountainhead of the whole subsequent central tradition of German opera. In it, as in *Der Freischütz*, *Tristan* or *Hänsel und Gretel*, magic signifies less a means of manipulating Nature to our advantage, than Nature's ultimate refusal to be so manipulated, its propensity in the end to redouble our selfish designs upon our own heads, to reward our constancy and trust, and generally, through its secret workings in the very depths of human choice, to liberate or to bind us as we deserve, or even as we have unconsciously willed that our lives and fates shall turn out. This popular 'magic' dimension becomes a symbol of how our destinies are each mysteriously interwoven with the others, in a manner and by an agency which, except through such symbols, we cannot hope to understand. The real magic is Nature itself, and our part in the never-ending drama it enacts.¹¹ (The same principle, recast in explicitly religious idiom, can be seen in *Parsifal*, where, much as the Queen's superstitious 'darkness' is finally put to flight by the 'sunlit' forces of enlightenment, Klingsor's unholy instrumental magic is annihilated in the all-encompassing miracle of the Christian dispensation.)

Hence the necessity of art, if such things are really the case, and its interest if not. Hence also the folly, in such matters, of attempting to replace it by some totally inadequate 'concept'. The consequence of so doing (as also the cause) is that rationalizing 'disenchantment of the world' which Schiller was the first to remark, which Weber subsequently identified as the essence of the modern condition, and which only art (or religion, if we can bring ourselves to believe in it) can nowadays successfully avert or reverse.

Let us now return to Mr Sellars's *Magic Flute*. The location was not a legendary Ancient Egypt, but his native California. Tamino, a denim-clad drifter, appeared amid an asphalt jungle of interweaving Los Angeles freeways, a near-enough equivalent, in some ways, to the rocky wilderness specified in the text. Mr Sellars had him rolling around in some kind of agonizing, doubtless drug-related, trance. The giant snake pursuing him, therefore, presumably existed only in his head, since it was nowhere to be seen, unless the Spaghetti Junction-like surroundings had somehow suggested it.

There being no snake, the Three Ladies obviously required no silver javelins with which to kill it. As in the original, they were veiled, but merely in a token sense, sporting as they did little broad-mesh nets

beneath their smart plum-coloured toques, which matched their smart plum-coloured twinsets, shoes and stockings. I could not decide whether they signified female Middle America on its way to church, or some camp warehouse parody of the same. No doubt, since their sex appeal is dramatically important, Mr Sellars (and here, perhaps, even the authors) would say that I had got precisely the point.

With Papageno's entrance, the scene changed in a twinkling to a Californian beach, that no doubt being meant to suggest the hedonistic, unexamined life he is supposed to typify. (The life which, unlike Papageno's creators, Plato said was not worth living.) The Queen of the Night (the scene, bewilderingly, now being a filling station, doubtless indicative of transition) wore the same outfit as her Ladies, only appropriately enough in royal blue. I fancy she carried a prayer book. Pamina's portrait (with which Tamino falls in love at first sight) appeared on a portable TV set, not a thing you expect to find suddenly materialized on the floor of a garage forecourt.

I suppose if your suburban daughter has been abducted by some hippy patriarchal guru it makes sense to approach someone roughly from that class of humanity for help in finding her, as Mr Sellars's Queen did. Sarastro turned out to be just such a personage (hippy patriarchal guru, I mean). He inhabited what looked like the basement of a multi-storey car park, and mysteriously wore some sort of gilded phylactery, displaced Wotanesque eye-patch, or possibly miniature radar nacelle, on his forehead. His disciples (some of them saffron-clad) suggested the Hare Krishna movement, or followers of the infamous Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh; in the intervals of roughing Pamina up a bit, Sarastro appeared to rule them too with a rod of iron. And so on. I myself had begun to drop out earlier, when my prediction that the Three Boys could only appear on skateboards was less than miraculously fulfilled. I did not stay for the second act; someone told me later that Papageno, when she appears to Papageno disguised as an ugly old woman, entered in the near-statutory wheelchair.

Its narrative details are absolutely crucial to an understanding of *The Magic Flute*. Most are divulged through the spoken dialogue (which, incidentally, makes the *Flute* technically not an opera but a *Singspiel*, or as we would say, a musical). Indeed, it is hard to see how they could otherwise be got across with the requisite force, speed and clarity. However, during his first act, Mr Sellars dispensed entirely with dialogue. Instead, and as befits the rule of the 'concept', imprecise and often crudely debunking summaries of the action were thrown up from time to time on an electronic bulletin board at the foot of the stage. I do not

see how any one unfamiliar with *The Magic Flute* could have had the faintest idea of what was going on, either in Mozart's version or in Mr Sellars's paraphrase.

Mr Sellars's 'concept' certainly made a kind of internal dramatic sense. If, for whatever reason, you insist on setting the opera in modern California, your equivalents for the original characters and locations must be both an atrociously bad fit with what Mozart and Schikaneder intended, and something like what Mr Sellars actually offered. The simplest solution to this problem, I submit, is not to set *The Magic Flute* in modern California at all. (Although California is more plausible than the usual 'alternative' *mise en scène*: a nuclear submarine, say, a nudist colony, a concentration camp, on the moon.) As things were, the overall effect of Mr Sellars's settings, and of the characterizations they necessarily entailed, was to inoculate everything in the original with a rootless, typically Modernist (or rather postmodernist) irony, at once vaguely jokey and vaguely nihilistic, so that not merely the Queen of the Night, but Sarastro too, and their respective camps, seemed equally disreputable.

But how far, it may be asked, are we obliged to observe the author's intentions when producing a dramatic work (or indeed when reading or viewing a non-dramatic work, where the element of performance is absent)? Some learned ink, and an infinitely greater amount of pretentious drivel, have been lavished upon this topic. Suffice it to say here that, although both a work of art and a work of nature may have aesthetic properties, the difference between them is the recognizable, explicit presence in a work of art (as its name implies) of human intention. (Thus poststructuralists and others who deny the reality, or relevance, of intention obliterate the fundamental distinction between art and nature.)

Of course, it is very hard to pin down exactly what artistic intention is. A work of art is not a declarative or indicative utterance, but a fictional. It is not meant to be 'true', at least not in the normal, referential sense. Its illocutionary structure is not of the kind 'S', where S is a proposition or the like, but something more akin to this: 'Imagine that S'. In the latter case there is no presumption whatever that S is either true or possible, and no literal or 'serious' attempt to persuade the audience that it is. Nevertheless, 'Imagine that S' is a perfectly genuine utterance: someone chose to utter it, and decided also that S should be constituted thus and not otherwise, should exhibit these features rather than those. He counted, moreover, on his audience's recognizing that he was trying to do something, and what it was. Of course, he may have misjudged

his audience, he may have miscalculated his means, his whole project may have been incoherent, and his audience in any case are in no way obliged to endorse what they imagine him either to have wished to do or actually to have done. They are, however, obliged to acknowledge that his intention exists, and to ascertain to the best of their abilities what it is.

Once we have identified the so-called 'author's meaning', however, our understanding of a work of art is far from exhausted. The work has other perfectly real, but unintended, meanings. Some will be internal, consisting of visible features to which the author himself may have attached no special significance, or might even, when they are pointed out, deny having intended, but which are nevertheless there. In fact, were it not for their being substantially unintended, we might almost include them under 'author's meaning', since the only 'author's meaning' which can concern us is the one perceptible in the work, and the work, as I have said earlier, already represents its notional underlying 'idea' in the highest possible degree of articulation. No recourse to the author's independent testimony as to what he supposed he 'meant' (should any be available) can ever be more authoritative, interpretatively speaking, than the work itself, though it may of course be a valuable adjunct to interpretation.

Other meanings will be external, consisting of whichever among the work's observable relations to other events and utterances are not (so to speak) self-conscious, built into it, or simply taken for granted, and which the author consequently could not have intended. To take an extreme example, the aforementioned resemblance of *The Magic Flute* to its successors obviously could not have been 'intended' by its authors, but it is a real fact about the opera and (I hope) throws genuine light on it, being part of both its objective and its wider significance.

The anti-intentionalist New Critics were right thus far, that a work of art is a public object, over which the author has no absolute proprietary rights and no monopoly of interpretation. But none of this affects the fact that there *is* an 'author's meaning', that it is a real, central part of his work, and that, if we discount it, we in effect denature his utterance, and substitute for it some convenient fiction of our own. Why we are obliged to determine what the author meant, or (on the evidence of the work) thought he meant, is in the end simply this: that if we do not, we shall be talking not about the work as it is, but about something else.

Modernism characteristically treats all utterances, fictional and non-fictional alike, as though they were, precisely, something else: as passive, quasi-natural products, symptoms or indices of some determining

process wholly external to, and exclusive of, the intentions of their supposed 'authors'. Generally speaking we call such approaches reductionist. On such a reckoning a play or a novel, like any other human expression (a simple statement, say, or a whole philosophy of life), may be simply an epiphenomenon of economic relations and forces, of the author's supposed genetic inheritance, or of his 'unconscious' psychobiography. I do not say that all such explanations must be absolutely false, though most are (and many, in their insistently depersonalizing approach, clearly reflect the totalitarian current in twentieth-century thought). What I do say is that even when otherwise plausible, as (so to speak) secondary explanations, if they persist in regarding utterances as no more than 'products' external to the utterer's intention (or in regarding his intention as somehow not 'really' his, i.e. as external to himself), they have nothing important to tell us. Quite simply, they have mistaken their object. An explanation which begins by discounting or 'bracketing out' the self-understanding, where it exists, of the thing explained is no explanation at all, since such a self-understanding (or 'author's meaning') is part of its intrinsic nature. Explanation cannot even begin until it is known what is being explained, and that is precisely what an understanding at the primary or spontaneous level establishes, however much such an understanding may (as usually happens) be modified by subsequent explanation.

I have already suggested that Mr Sellars's conception was postmodernist rather than Modernist proper. The parallel he drew between *The Magic Flute* and modern California was purely decorative; it led nowhere, it illuminated nothing, and its 'point' consisted only of a would-be playful distortion of merely formal similarities into a kind of spurious, mocking identity ('California is full of gurus; Sarastro is a sort of guru; so hey, what say we make Sarastro a Californian guru?' etc., etc.). It was, to outward appearances, the well-worn formula of 'relevance', but a 'relevance' stripped of the frenetic, newsreel urgency with which an old-fashioned Marxist director such as Götz Friedrich would have endowed it. (Friedrich it was who, in the final chorus of *Fidelio*, equipped his freed prisoners with PLO headgear and Kalashnikov rifles.)

This much, at least, could be said for the Marxist vision: whenever one lived, and particularly now, the times were (as the ancient Chinese curse has it) unfailingly 'interesting'. Everything bristled with significance, or simmered, however distant the imagined catastrophe, with a sense of impending crisis. Life became a heady blend of thriller and soap opera; it possessed the hieroglyphic pregnancy appropriate to what, in Marxist hands, it actually was, a work of fiction. Much of

Marxism's imaginative appeal, indeed, lay precisely in its ability to treat life as art and art as life. But even before the collapse of Communism, the coach, in which we were to have sped along the high road of history to its dimly glimpsed but festive terminus, had reverted to a pumpkin. 'Relevance' had already become irrelevant, before Mr Sellars woke up to and celebrated the fact. So far was he from finding his own times 'interesting' (except as a pile of oddments for collage) that one suspected he really found nothing of any consequence except himself, his kind, and his ideal audience (the real one booed him vigorously).

So much for postmodernism. But, alongside it, for the past decade, and (at first) almost entirely inside the academies, another approach has been developing which at first sight seems to be the natural alternative, or even antidote, to 'relevance'. I mean the attempt, familiar from 'authentic' musical performances, and necessarily dependent on scholarship, to restore the work of art to its original context. (The so-called New Historicism – when not simply a revamped Old Marxism – is a variant of this impulse.) But this may be less a cure than yet another manifestation of the reductionist disease. For when we say 'restore', do we not often mean 'reduce' all over again? Are we not really saying that a work can now be 'relevant' only to its own time, and as such imaginatively opaque to every other?

Which brings me at last to Jonathan Miller. Some of Dr Miller's essays on Mozart have been by no means unattractive or unpersuasive. (He has directed, as I recall, two good *Così*'s and a more than passable *Don Giovanni*.) The production of which I speak, however, was a very un-magic *Flute* indeed. It was a veritable festival of disenchantment, worked out with admirable consistency and a desolating, pitiless intelligence. It was not a performance, but an explanation.

Dr Miller saw *The Magic Flute* deliberately from the outside, as a bookish Enlightenment fantasy, a quite literal dream of reason. A young *philosophe* had fallen asleep, exhausted, in a colossal eighteenth-century library (the latter suggested by Boullée's visionary designs for a Bibliothèque Nationale). All the ensuing action, which the library framed throughout, was presented as his dream, in which he became Tamino, and his fellow-scholars Sarastro's initiates.¹²

It is well known that the opera is in part an allegory of the Empress Maria Theresa's battle against Freemasonry – the Egyptian backdrop, the rule of silence, the initiation rituals, the brotherhood, etc., are all recognizably Masonic¹³ – but by explicitly cashing these and other allusions, Dr Miller excluded every wider resonance. Thus Sarastro and his followers were not Egyptian priests, but (as one reviewer pithily put it)

'Zoffany gentlemen', actual eighteenth-century Masons, complete with insignia; the Queen of the Night and her Ladies became pious Catholic frumps, heavily upholstered in funereal black, with not a spark of the blazingly unscrupulous femininity that first seduces Tamino into the Queen's party. For sheer non-sexiness, however, they were far out-classed by Sarastro's womenfolk, a bunch of earnest rationalist scarecrows in pointedly shapeless, utilitarian garb. Invited to choose between these competing value-systems, any normal Tamino and Pamina would have settled for a Caribbean holiday instead, or just taken the money. (Thus Dr Miller succeeded quite as well as Mr Sellars in flattening out the essential ethical distinctions.)

Dr Miller's *Magic Flute* contained *marxisant* and Freudian elements, but they were peripheral, plausible enough as far as they went, and neither crude nor obtrusive. His main achievement was to put the work under historical house arrest, forbidding it, on pain of irrelevance, ever again to make its regular way to our distant modern hearts. His aim was not to transmit or to recreate its meaning, but simply to account for it, by locking it elegantly and immovably into its period context, so that, curiosity once gratified, nothing remained to disturb our Olympian indifference. The overall effect indeed resembled that of an 'authentic' performance, though the approach was entirely different, suggesting rather the methods of Lucien Goldmann improbably translated to the stage. Emotionally speaking, the work could hardly have been made more inaccessible had it been tortured instead (by Friedrich, say) into a shriek of up-to-the-minute 'relevance'.

Explanation is the business of the historian and the critic. Even they can overdo it, and explain things to death, or quite literally away. The director's task is not to explain, but to realize the work at its maximum of transparency, so that we perceive it not as an arbitrary intersection of causes and circumstances, still less as fossil fuel for today's various political 'struggles', but as a complex intentional utterance, with its various strands of significance as harmoniously and intelligibly displayed as the work itself permits. (It follows that where a genuine ambiguity exists, whether or not 'intended', the director should as far as possible incorporate it into his production as it stands, and not come down on one side or the other.) A crucial explanation which even Dr Miller forebore to provide is why, if *The Magic Flute* is no more than a quaint memorial to bygone ideology, it should still retain its immense power to move us. Could it not be that Mozart and Schikaneder – like Goethe, who so admired them – espoused Freemasonry because for them it embodied certain universal values, and that those values, rather

than Freemasonry specifically, are the subject of the opera, and why we still respond to it?

That, at least, seemed to be Ingmar Bergman's message in his 1975 film of *The Magic Flute*, which contained no Masonic references, and none of them overt, beyond those already specified in the libretto. For the most part, and despite Bergman's masterly use of specifically cinematic techniques (cuts, close-ups, and so on), the film depicted a straightforward stage performance, in Swedish, in a replica of the eighteenth-century palace theatre at Drottningholm, using what looked like period sets and props. (Though these seemed in no way dated, being like the work itself directly continuous with modern pantomime, even to the pull-down song sheets.) We saw the stage machinery at work, and the performers coming and going behind the scenes. In the interval Sarastro was seen backstage conning the score of *Parsifal*, while one of Monostatos' slaves read a comic book, a perfect nutshell summary of the opera's dual aspect. The Queen of the Night, meanwhile, was smoking defiantly underneath a no-smoking sign.

So far from producing a Brechtian 'alienation effect', these apparent obstacles to dramatic illusion were raised only in order that the work itself, transcending its immediate historical circumstances and the deliberate provincialities of the performance, should triumphantly bear them all down before it to take us by storm. We saw a lot of the theatre audience. They were young and old, children and adults, male and female, black, white, brown and yellow, some in exotic national dress. Pensive or ecstatic, all were shown as enthralled.

Perhaps, if we had not grown accustomed to stupefy ourselves with clever explanations, Bergman could have left the universality of great art to speak for itself. But this is to cavil: Bergman's is not only, I believe, one of the few very great films in existence (and one which, simply *qua* film, will repay almost endless study), but also irresistibly moving and 'right'. Everything, from the comic to the sublime, is unerringly treated at exactly the appropriate level of seriousness, with no sense of strain when switching between modes. Like the original, Bergman's film (unusual in being tied to a text, that is, in being also, or for the most part, a performance), is a work of enormous humanity and intelligence. It is surely the definitive *Magic Flute* for our time or any other.

Which makes Dr Miller, and even more so Mr Sellars, somewhat superfluous. In both the surface ingenuity is the index of a peculiar underlying faithlessness, of a failure of grasp that is also a moral failure. (As Martin Buber would say, to them *The Magic Flute* is not a 'Thou' but an 'It'.) Though not one to advertise the fact, Bergman is no less

sophisticated than they, and much more accomplished. His *Magic Flute* is a work of true love, and of the intimate understanding which proceeds from it. Mozart and Schikaneder would surely have agreed, had they somehow survived to see it.¹⁴

From *The Salisbury Review*, IX, 4 (July 1991).

Notes to Essay 6

- 1 Cf. Pascal, *Pensées*, §1.
- 2 A resemblance first noted by E.J. Dent, *Mozart's Operas* (1913). It appears that Mozart had actually taken sketches for an operatic version of *The Tempest* shortly before his death.
- 3 Nor, I think, racist. On encountering Monostatos the otherwise complacently unenlightened Papageno, who has never heard of, let alone seen, a black man, affably reflects that since there are black birds, there is no reason why there shouldn't be black men too. Monostatos himself momentarily rises into grace, and gains our sympathy, when (like Shylock) he reflects that he too is flesh and blood, and knows what love is (see main text). Monostatos' fatal error is to suppose (as many, perhaps most, racists do, though there seem to be none in the opera) that it is his blackness which makes him repulsive rather than his manners, and that he can therefore dispense with them. Sarastro's 'your soul is as black as your face' would be racist only if the word 'necessarily' could plausibly be inserted. But there seems no reason to think that it can.
- 4 Papageno's name, of course, derives from the German and Italian for parrot (*Papagei*, *pappagallo*). He is a chatterer or chatterbox, and thus ignominiously fails the brotherhood's initiation ordeal of enforced silence.
- 5 For a rootedly ironical view of this conception of freedom (a view which also seems to me to skate over absolutely crucial distinctions) see Isaiah Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', V ('The Temple of Sarastro'), in *Four Essays on Liberty* (1969).
- 6 Cited by Lionel Trilling, 'Emma and the Legend of Jane Austen', in his *Beyond Culture* (1965). Trilling's 'anonymous' author was in fact Lord Acton's friend and collaborator Richard Simpson, writing in the *North British Review*, Vol. 72 (1870), pp. 129–52.
- 7 Don Alfonso nevertheless has his uses, since it is through his devices that the lovers are finally brought down to earth. A pretty rum kind of earth, however, since each of the men while disguised has wooed and been accepted by his future sister-in-law. No one, I believe, has ever found the resolution of *Così* satisfactory.
- 8 The Don's erotic obsession may not be very admirable in itself, but it is pursued with superb, unrepentant integrity. He has a charm and vitality which (as well as being brilliantly realized in the music) owe their authenticity to their being unflinchingly maintained even in the face of death and damnation. Don Giovanni can say, like the 'Refined Man' in Kipling's 'Epitaphs of the War', that 'I have paid the price to live my life on the terms that I willed'.

- 9 It is worth adding that while da Ponte self-consciously borrowed Cherubino's 'Voi che sapete' from Dante's *Vita Nuova*, he likened his Don Juan story to something out of the *Inferno*. He knew he was dealing with two different things.
- 10 See Brigid Brophy, *Mozart the Dramatist* (1964); Tolstoy, *What is Art?*, Ch. 13 (1898).

11 Viele Geschicke weben neben dem meinen;
 Durcheinander spielt sie alle das Dasein;
 Und mein Teil ist mehr als dieses Lebens
 Schlanke Flamme oder schmale Leier.
 (Hofmannsthal, 'Manche freilich . . .')

(Many destinies weave next to mine; / Being plays them all through each other; / And my portion is more than this life's / Slender flame or sorry tale [literally 'narrow lyre']. The title, also the poem's opening words, means 'Many, to be sure . . .' ['must die below', etc.]

- 12 Those words, and the whole Jonathan Miller section of this essay, were written in 1986, when they formed part of a Radio 3 talk. But, however high-handed Dr Miller may be with others' intentions, that my reading of his own is substantially correct has been borne out by the account of this production, and the thinking behind it, which he himself has given in his book *Subsequent Performances* (1988). And that, of course, is a tribute to the clarity and dramatic expressiveness of his conceptions. His talents and accomplishments are real, for all that what he does with them sometimes verges on charlatanism.
- 13 The source for these details and much else in *The Magic Flute* is a Masonic romance by the Abbé Terrasson, *Sethos* (1731; German tr. 1778).
- 14 Bergman has taken a few liberties with the text, but in my view entirely justifiably. First (and to mention only the most important), the Papageno scenes have been pruned and in one instance even transplanted (like Pamina's suicide attempt, which was obviously in the wrong place). To these the opera initially owed its great popular success, but many now seem like little more than encores. Morally and dramatically, Papageno remains one of the work's major axes.

Secondly, Bergman dispenses with Pamina's late father, making her Sarastro's daughter directly rather than simply his ward, and the Queen, consequently, Sarastro's estranged wife. There is no hint, however, that the antagonism between Sarastro and the Queen is merely personal; their ideological differences are as real, fundamental and objective as before. One wonders only how the authors failed to spot this obvious opportunity for economy.

Finally, in Bergman's version Sarastro has all along intended that Tamino and Pamina shall not only join the brotherhood, but shall also, by general consent, rule jointly in his place when he retires at the end (at which point the flute is returned to him). There is no suggestion of this in the original, but it makes perfect dramatic sense, and of course assimilates *The Magic Flute* even more closely to *The Tempest*, in which the victorious Prospero abdicates in favour of his daughter and son-in-law, retires from the world and renounces his magic. Apart from the rearrangement of scenes, all the above changes have been effected solely through the spoken dialogue. I doubt if more than 200 words in all are involved.

Part Two

Culture and Society

7

On Culture

In the contexts relevant to the present work, the word culture has at least half a dozen distinct, though related, meanings, each successively narrower than the last:

(1) Culture, generically speaking, is the distinctive feature of human as opposed to animal life, and forms part of the subject-matter of so-called philosophical anthropology. It denotes the whole realm of thought and behaviour whose patterns are not genetically, but socially, transmitted. Thus while the social animals interact (even when their behaviour is learnt) in more or less rigid, species-determined ways, human societies, over and above whatever 'natural' endowment their common characteristics may indicate, show almost infinite variability. Animal behaviour is explicable directly in terms of its biological function; but, while human behaviour may have a biological foundation (humanity being an animal species), it is not clear that it invariably has a biological explanation (as, for example, sociobiology postulates).

Several reasons may be advanced for scepticism in this regard:

- (i) much, perhaps most, human behaviour seems surplus to immediate biological requirements, e.g., in the matter of food, whose consumption is circumscribed by all kinds of non-alimentary considerations (religious, aesthetic, social, etc.);
- (ii) unlike animal behaviour, human behaviour possesses a dimension of self-conscious meaning which itself constitutes an important source of motivation for the agent, and furnishes him with articulate reasons for his actions; barring the very simplest ('I am hungry',

- etc.), most of those are not easily reducible to 'biological' imperatives; the latter, moreover, when allegedly 'unconscious', could never, by definition, constitute a reason for the agent himself;
- (iii) animal behaviour may reasonably be treated as a pattern of biologically adaptive responses to a relatively constant natural environment; human beings, however, continuously modify, in ways whose consequences are unpredictable, both their natural and their social environments, so that, although their ability to respond to a changing environment is innate, their actual, specific responses cannot be, in the sense that no genetic programme incorporating them could ever have had time to evolve.

'Culture' in this sense is conventionally contrasted with biological 'nature' (the so-called 'nature/nurture' distinction). But that is not to say that culture is not 'natural'. In Aristotle's view, for example, the essence of culture is reason (in that it consists of things done for reasons, however misguided), and reason is as biologically 'natural' to man as instinct is to the animals, being, in fact, its functional equivalent. Culture is similarly opposed, in the sense of not being usefully reducible, to physical 'nature', even though, as in the case of biology, it must be presumed ultimately to be rooted in it. This distinction lies behind the idea (articulated most notably by Dilthey) that cultural and natural phenomena require for their explanation two quite different kinds of study, the *Geisteswissenschaften* and the *Naturwissenschaften* respectively (see also (3) below).¹

(2) Cultures specifically, as defined by their differences, not from 'nature' or animal societies, but from each other; the province of sociology and social anthropology. 'A culture', rather than 'culture' indifferently as in sense (1), denotes a distinct, historic group of people – a society – together with all its tools, artefacts, possessions, and characteristic ways and conceptions of life; indeed, 'culture' in this sense is often used interchangeably with 'society'.

Built into this usage are various presuppositions:

- (i) a culture is not a heap of unrelated phenomena, but a more or less organic whole, so that each feature of it, however obvious its biological explanation, also has meaning in relation to the others;
- (ii) so far as its features are unique, or, if shared with other cultures, so transformed by their context as to 'mean' something substantially different, it too is unique;

- (iii) it is extended in time, as it must be to be transmissible between generations (even an emergent culture has emerged from something);
- (iv) it is also conscious of the fact, so that it conceives itself (in varying degrees) in terms of its past, present and future;
- (v) in all the foregoing respects a culture resembles an individual, and thus possesses a quasi-personal identity, even though its self-consciousness may be located nowhere but in the minds of its individual members, and though it may lack any unitary 'will';
- (vi) though a response to circumstances (some of them of its own creation), a culture is a spontaneous growth (cf. (i)), and (unlike a purely socio-political order) cannot be invented, planned or imposed.

Without positively entailing it, (i) and (ii) tend to favour 'cultural relativism', the idea (which stands in the way of any genuinely comparative social science) that cultures are to be judged, not by any external standard, but only in relation to their own avowed or implicit aims. In one of its senses, so-called 'functionalism' ministers to this idea, in that every feature of a culture is seen (by Evans-Pritchard, for example) as conducing to the maintenance of the whole as a self-conscious and self-contained system. Functionalism in another sense (typified, say, by Radcliffe-Brown or Malinowski) runs counter to cultural relativism, in that it judges cultural features, and cultures as a whole, by their success or failure in meeting certain ulterior, universal, or independently conceived goals (happiness, utility, biological survival, etc.).

(3) A culture's 'consciousness', or purely ideational component; a society's ideas, beliefs and values considered as a whole, and as distinct from its political, economic and technological structures. In this sense one can speak of the culture *of* a given society, of its being (under certain circumstances) at odds with society, or even (as with immigrant or ethnic minority cultures) of its being dislocated from its society of origin and subsisting independently.² Confusingly, in this usage also 'society' is often substituted for 'culture', so that some other word than 'society' has to be found for a society's material or non-ideational components, or as Marxism (which regards them as the ultimate determinants of 'consciousness') would call them, its 'base'. 'Culture' in this sense is often used to signify 'common culture', that is, whatever ideas, beliefs and values are generally shared by all members of a society (or culture) and are thus regarded as definitive of it.

A culture as a distinct, coherent and self-supporting system of beliefs is peculiarly difficult to 'explain', since it seems to its subscribers to

need no explanation, being self-evidently 'natural' and 'true'. For this reason, epiphenomenal interpretations (e.g., those of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud), which conceive culture in the Platonic manner, as a shadow thrown by something of which the subscribers are unaware, but which is supposedly more fundamental and works through and in them, seem questionable, since in substituting the observer's perspective for the believer's, they remove from the thing to be explained its most essential feature. On the other hand, to claim that a belief can be 'understood' only by its believers opens the door to, and justifies, almost any kind of absurdity. Dilthey and Weber recommended a kind of imaginative empathy, whereby, as in artistic or historical appreciation, the observer projects himself into beliefs he does not necessarily share (in the sense of not literally believing in or acting on them), but unfortunately this so-called *Verstehen* is more easily practised than defined.

(4) The word 'culture' is frequently used to mean 'sub-culture', e.g., 'youth culture', 'regional culture', 'working-class culture'. Such a culture is not fully autonomous, since it is defined, and defines itself, by reference to the wider culture surrounding it. Only from the global perspectives of anthropology, science, international sport and high culture does it seem plausible to see an otherwise autonomous culture and its products as sub-cultural: Polynesian society, German chemistry, Australian rugby, English painting. (The noun signifies the wider culture, and the epithet the sub-culture.)

(5) The cultures (e.g., 'high', 'popular') pertaining exclusively to leisure (Aristotle's *scholē*); those elements of a culture in sense (2) which transcend all its explicitly practical, utilitarian, or survival-related concerns (and, to the extent that they bear on those concerns, its morality and religion too); the realm of of purely spontaneous or 'useless' activities, and the ideas, objects and institutions associated with them. Useless, however, does not mean worthless, since an end in itself is both useless (by definition) and the underlying source of value in all those 'useful' things (work, for example) necessary to its realization.

Culture in this sense comprises:

- (i) sport, entertainment and recreation ('popular culture', roughly speaking);
- (ii) the world of liberal intellect (i.e. the cultivation, at an advanced level, of knowledge for its own sake);

- (iii) 'the arts' and the 'higher' aesthetic realm generally ('high culture', a category which perhaps also embraces (ii), at least so far as to include the humanities; see (6) below).

It may be noted further that (i) remains essentially utilitarian, if thought of merely as a rehearsal for, or relief from, work; that, notwithstanding their 'uselessness', such pursuits (especially sport and high culture) may demand a high degree of effort and dedication; and that although, in recognition of their 'private' and superficially unserious character, their purely domestic conduct is seldom thought (except in totalitarian societies) to need political supervision, it is frequently governed by an internal ethic of great severity.

Many thinkers, e.g., John Ruskin and William Morris, have acknowledged the importance of leisure, in recommending that work, or the labour necessary for physical sustenance, should also so far as possible seem worth performing for its own sake (as in crafts, the applied arts, and the liberal professions). To that extent its 'real' value will be wholly independent of its market value. The intuition is that a man's personality, fulfilment and self-respect are most deeply bound up with his voluntary pursuits. This is perhaps why, in gregarious activities of the kind, the chief penalty for 'unethical' behaviour (as in the professions) is disgrace.

(6) 'High' culture specifically; 'culture' in this sense, in addition to its characteristic ideas, values, institutions, objects and artefacts, is or signifies:

- (i) an important sub-division of culture in sense (5);
- (ii) a personal accomplishment, often accompanied by a certain social grace;
- (iii) a quality more of taste and sensibility than of intellect, though it presupposes a fairly high degree of intelligence (as it does also of aptitude and motivation);
- (iv) the product of an appropriate education, formal or otherwise, over and above that necessary simply for ordinary unreflective membership of society; the education itself;
- (v) an unending process of development (German: *Bildung*), both in the individuals undergoing it and in the collective product, possessing an identifiable tendency and certain immediate aims, but no final goal other than itself;
- (vi) the possession of a minority or élite, yet not of a sub-culture proper, since it implicitly offers to speak for culture as a whole;

- (vii) accordingly, an object of esteem or, more rarely, of resentment among those who do not share it, when they are not simply indifferent;
- (viii) a thing unavoidably local in its immediate origin, and perhaps in its ultimate loyalties, but generally outward-looking and open to cosmopolitan influence (though it has often, particularly in music, shown a nationalist or self-consciously 'ethnic' tendency, marked by an interest in 'roots' and by borrowings from 'folk' culture).

Large claims have been made for high culture, particularly since the Romantic period and the rise, during the eighteenth century, of the discipline of aesthetics (see Essay 14 below). High culture, or more particularly art (its central concern), has been thought to provide the intimations of unity, value and meaning in experience which were once provided by religion, and are now threatened by the triumphantly 'disenchanted' scientific *Weltanschauung*. (The term 'disenchantment' was first used in this connection by Schiller, and has entered sociological discourse through Weber, who thought disenchantment the essence of modernity.) Aesthetic experience, indeed, whether of art or nature, may actually be superior to religion. For its immediacy secures it against doubt, while (in the case of art) the purely imaginative 'belief' it demands is inexpugnable by argument, since nothing is literally being asserted.³

In short, aesthetic experience is not a belief as to fact (and hence fallible), but a fact itself (and thence not). It reveals, not the world's physical structure, but its human significance. Its 'truths' are not enunciated, but simply enacted and confirmed in the subject's consciousness. In this respect it resembles, not religious doctrine, but religious practice. In other words, and like many other cultural practices, it seems to carry its meaning within it; and, not being dependent on substantive belief, it is also much less easily eroded by 'explanation' (see (3) above). In Arnold's view, moreover, the 'cultured' outlook to which it conduces – sensitive, tentative, catholic, scrupulous, empirical, at once pious and sceptical – not only issues in 'gentlemanly' behaviour (i.e. minimizes social friction), but is of the greatest value in other fields, especially morals and politics, where unchallenged dogmatism and self-confident ignorance otherwise run riot.⁴

In short, and despite (or even because of) having no such aim, 'culture' turns out to be positively functional. Arnold, in fact, makes much the same claim for it as Mill had made ten years earlier, and as Hayek

was to make over a century later, for liberalism (its chief enemy, in Arnold's eyes).

This conception of high culture, of course, lacks neither its difficulties nor its critics. For example, how do we persuade someone that his tastes are low or perverted, when their very 'immediacy' seems to justify them? And what if he accepts our judgment, yet persists in his preference? How far can we count on support from the 'common culture' (even supposing it would settle matters if we could)? And how could we expect any, given that high culture is almost by definition the preserve of a minority?

Only the last two questions admit of a short answer. High culture is opposed only to 'low' culture; that is, to (complacent) ignorance, crudity and bad taste. It is not opposed to popular culture *per se*, since its purpose is essentially different; the two, moreover, have something in common (see (5)). But, except at its 'aestheticist' extreme (where it is largely a recreation for culture-snobs, and, as has often been pointed out, is also compatible with the greatest cruelty and unscrupulousness), high culture may be thought of as a rediscovery, reworking and justification at the aesthetic level, where they are void of any contingent (and irrelevant) instrumental value, of the common culture's deepest, most 'serious', and most definitively 'human' purposes. Where a culture lacks those things, therefore, it is likely also to be 'Philistine', that is, deficient in high culture, or hostile to it.

If further proof be required that common and high culture are interdependent, the following reflections may suffice. High culture's most prized artefacts are frequently popular in origin, in subject-matter, in perennial appeal, or in all those things together (Dickens, Verdi). Again, high culture may seem exclusive, in that not everyone has an equal aptitude or affection for it, but it is not the property of any particular socio-economic class. Whatever their origins and remaining ties, its representatives are quite literally 'in a class of their own', one which is open to anybody appropriately qualified, and which confers no *ex officio* membership upon the rich, the powerful or the well-born (who are not, in any case, universally concerned to seek it). Finally, the suppression of high culture (usually in favour of an *ersatz* 'official' version) by the former Communist régimes of the Soviet bloc merely underlined the natural continuity between high and common culture (which was also suppressed). Never has high culture been held in greater popular esteem, or spoken, to the educated and uneducated alike, of their common concerns, and with a voice that seemed more like their own, than when, as then, it was the voice of the oppressed.

This last example, moreover, should finally lay to rest the Marxist (and especially neo-Marxist or 'New Left') idea, that culture generally, but particularly high culture, is merely and always the ideological servant of 'power', the heavily disguised utterance of a dominant class intent on remaining so. No doubt ruling aristocracies have always commissioned (and, so far from disguising them, openly displayed) flattering artistic representations of themselves; but so, on account of their collective purchasing power, have humbler classes such as the eighteenth-century novel-reading public, or (humbler still) Elizabethan theatre audiences and the readership for popular ballads. Which of these, especially in view of the comparative audience sizes involved, constitutes 'dominance'? And where, among these products taken as a whole, is the unanimity in moral values and (particularly) political outlook which the theory would lead one to expect?

It is true that among those few products (of any provenance) which have come to enjoy serious high-cultural esteem, an incipient community of sentiment may be detected. And it is plausible to assume that the values concerned, whether or not they form the 'real' basis of this ostensibly aesthetic estimate, are at any rate not disagreeable to the sympathies of the high-cultural élite, or even to their interests (though those may amount to no more than the will to protect what is most valued and to secure the best means of doing so). But it is implausible to attribute this rough consensus to the insidious workings of 'power', whether political or economic. As has just been pointed out, high culture is often intensely critical of rulers, is by definition indifferent to utilitarian (that is, to economic) considerations (see (5)), and, under Communism, was in the custody of people who not only had no property, but, in many cases, no jobs either. That many 'ruling-class' artefacts (and people) have nevertheless secured high-cultural approval points only to their consonance (explicit or implicit) with the aims of the common culture for which high culture professes to speak.

Recast in political form, that consonance is actually the test of any government's legitimacy. Thus if rulers seek acceptance, a thing they have every incentive to do, since, both psychically and materially, rule by mere force is highly diseconomical, they will do well to adopt their subjects' perspective. The process is the reverse of that diagnosed by Marxists. So far from being an instrument of legitimation, culture is itself the source of legitimacy, as democratic governments make yet more obvious by explicitly suing, as they must, for its approval (e.g., by professing to support whatever 'values' they think will keep them in

power, and sometimes even doing so). Both this example and the earlier, of totalitarian governments' suppressing what they can neither enlist nor control, illustrate in different ways what Václav Havel, a distinguished champion of both high and common culture, has called 'the power of the powerless'.

It might be argued that, though autonomous, and no matter how broad-based, cultural values are still 'power' of a kind, and thus, at least from an anarchist or extreme individualist standpoint, objectionable. But such matters, though worth mention, lie beyond our present scope.

Addendum: Culture, Power and the Canon

The New Left identification of culture, and especially high culture, as the mere product or shadow of power has recently resurfaced in the so-called 'canon wars'. Criticism (which etymologically signifies judgment) has traditionally ascribed greater value to some works than to others, as indeed have ordinary readers, listeners and spectators. Opponents of the alleged 'canon' thereby created frequently stigmatize it as both élitist and Eurocentric (to say nothing of sexist, racist, etc.). The charge is so patently absurd as to call its very sincerity into doubt. For the greatest high-cultural value has almost invariably been accorded to works of 'universal' import: i.e. to those (European or otherwise) with the widest observable cross-cultural and trans-historical appeal. The idea was that such works, however parochial their fictional setting or actual provenance, must somehow speak to, and for, 'human nature' at large.

Two further points deserve note. First, apart from that of ends-in-themselves, values are comparative. Most things valued, consequently, show at least some disposition to group themselves into a canon. Some opponents of the supposed literary canon, anti-Eurocentrists and the like, must presumably agree, since they have an 'alternative' canon on offer. What they would contest is that any canon, and any values, can be other than fundamentally political. In their view, aesthetic or literary values are an ideological illusion, designed to entrench political hierarchy at the very heart of culture, and to do so the more effectively by concealing their true (conservative) origin and purpose. It follows that 'subversion' must be the order of the day.

What is not, as a rule, disclosed is why subversion is politically preferable to establishment (which after all includes opposition); how, other than in its subversiveness, the 'alternative' canon is superior; and why, once aesthetic 'autonomy' has been (allegedly) exposed as a sham, one

should continue to wage proxy political war at the aesthetic level at all (where the alternative canon is bound to be at a disadvantage). Further, if art and culture are no more than politics in disguise, why have they survived where politics are permitted, and disguises are therefore unnecessary?

Others reject canons and canonicity *per se*, and with them any notion of objective or quasi-objective value. The result, as in the radical post-structuralist Jacques Derrida, is an extreme subjectivist relativism. Yet it is impossible seriously to advance any position, including the last-named, without implicitly claiming for it a certain objective value (the Sceptic's Paradox). Hence it appears that extreme relativism, like extreme scepticism, is self-contradictory, and can only be entertained – as Derrida in fact entertains it – as a kind of joke. There is thus no reason why, if it cannot be advanced seriously, anyone should be obliged to take it seriously.

Secondly, aesthetic judgments do not necessarily entail a formal canon. Although they aspire to objectivity, they are neither made, nor validated, by reference to any ideal and inflexible standard of perfection, since none exists. (If one did, artistic change and development would be neither visible nor possible, while criticism would consist entirely in the mechanical application of rules.) Like people and cultures, works of art may be prized precisely for their uniqueness and individuality, which is to say, for their incomparability. (And they are often virtually incomparable anyway, in point of differences in genre, medium, period, etc.)

In which case, they cannot be ranked in any absolute hierarchy. Shakespeare may reasonably be rated above his contemporary and fellow-dramatist Webster in the areas in which they invite comparison. But this is not to derogate from Webster's own idiosyncratic, if lesser, achievement, nor to allege that Shakespeare somehow makes Webster superfluous. Indeed, although it is clearly absurd, except in some very abstract or formal respects, to put *Batman* and Shakespeare (along with their respective cultural 'kinds') on a level, it is certainly not unreasonable to allow even to *Batman* its characteristic uses and merits.

The implications of the controversy for the scriptural canon are not altogether clear. A scriptural canon can easily be seen as an instrument of political control, since, unlike art and literature, it both claims divine authority and lays down an explicit rule of life. Thus any government which can command a monopoly of scriptural interpretation has its legitimacy guaranteed. At the same time, however, scriptural

religion, like both high and common culture, has often found itself radically opposed to the temporal power.

Artistic values can and do survive in the absence of a formal canon. Where scripture is concerned, however, what counts is not its aesthetic worth but its authenticity, viz. whether it is, or is not, the revealed Word of God. First formalized at the Council of Laodicea (363), the Christian canon emerged more or less by custom and consensus out of three centuries of religious practice, and has continued to be modified.

In this respect it resembles a literary tradition. But to challenge the very idea of a scriptural canon is to challenge the whole concept of 'scripture' as such, and thus any religion based on it. On the other hand, since a text's divine inspiration must ultimately, like God himself, be a matter of faith, and as such independent of empirical proof or disproof, the scriptural canon seems no more vulnerable today than religion as a whole, or than any of its other fideistic components.

Compiled from entries, both entitled 'Culture', in David E. Cooper, ed., *A Companion to Aesthetics* (Blackwell, 1992), and in Paul A.B. Clarke and Andrew Linzey, eds, *A Dictionary of Ethics, Theology and Society* (Routledge, 1995).

Notes to Essay 7

- 1 Usually translated as the 'cultural' and the 'natural' 'sciences'.
- 2 For an alternative interpretation of the latter phenomenon, see §4 following (sub-cultures).
- 3 Christian thinkers such as Newman and Eliot have fired impressive broadsides at the essentially pagan (and largely Aristotelian) idea that high culture – art and philosophy, in effect – suffices fully to realize its devotees' human *telos*. The reason is obvious, namely that, if true, the idea must make Christian belief superfluous. The problem of 'belief' seems not to arise in less rationalistic or intellectual religions, such as Hinduism, Confucianism, Shinto and the largely civic cults of ancient Greece and Rome. There belief is virtually indistinguishable from practice, and no formal subscription to any definite schedule of articles is required. The consequence, as in medieval popular Christianity, is to invest everyday life and culture with a more numinous, less 'disenchanted' quality than they will display under some more modern, self-consciously theological version of Christianity (Protestantism?). On the connection between Christianity and disenchantment, see both Milton's *Nativity Ode* and the chorus from Shelley's *Hellas* which deliberately echoes it. The one celebrates the passing of the 'enchanted' pagan worldview, the other deplures it.
- 4 See below, Essay 12, §1, 'Arnold's Cultural Politics'.

8

The Politics of Sex

Les plaisirs avaient si piétiné sur son coeur, que rien de vert n'y poussait.

Flaubert

The liberal in all of us would like to keep sex and politics apart. But it is not possible, in the end, to do so. Human sexuality concerns encounters not between organs, but between persons; relations between persons are the stuff of morals; and morals, through the shared concept of 'justice', seek dramatic confirmation and support in law (not to enforce them is to make the good look fools).¹ Moreover, law and culture reinforce each other: culture is underpinned by law, and law, at bottom, is simply culture in the guise (or as the radical would have it, the disguise) of necessity. Sexuality, then – no matter how much the liberal may deplore the fact – is intimately bound up with matters that are ultimately political. For the conservative this is no cause for regret. Facts and passions alike are his allies in the maintenance of a world of meaning already present in them and in their product, himself. His advantage over his ideological rivals lies in the fact that nothing human is totally alien to him. Accordingly, his view of sexuality will be neither puritanical nor unduly repressive. At least, what he does offer to repress should elicit no sympathy. For it is nothing more or less than the pretensions to legitimacy of a sexual idiom at odds both with society and, as we shall see, with itself.

'Sex' is a fairly recent misnomer for all that we understand by human sexuality. It properly designates the copulation, and its associated phenomena, which we share with the animals. As such, it is both value-free and, except to science, uninteresting. But it seems to have been introduced into ordinary human discourse precisely to sidestep the old

moral distinction (to be resurrected here) between 'lust' and 'love'.² In abolishing this distinction, or submerging it under some wishy-washy utilitarian concept of 'pleasure', the value-free becomes, effectively, the value-less. This pseudo-scientific view is a major enemy of culture. It is pseudo-scientific because no serious scientist, aware of the way in which scientific concepts adapt themselves to and take their cue from their respective fields of study, could possibly subscribe to it.³ Nevertheless it is a potent contemporary superstition, and I shall return to it.

What I shall call 'high' liberalism (the ethos of the Williams Report on pornography)⁴ is more respectable. It may be reluctant to claim that all 'pleasure' indifferently ('whatever turns you on') is an unconditional good. Nevertheless, it succeeds quite as thoroughly as vulgar liberalism and the 'scientific' view in abolishing the distinction between lust and love. Believing that 'sex' is a private matter (and that privacy is a value in itself), it supposes that the value of any sexual experience is appreciable only by the participants. Being thus inaccessible to judgment, any sexual experience between consenting adults in private must be regarded as at least morally *acceptable*. But to exclude nothing is to permit everything, and so to remove the question from the moral sphere. So, for all its pseudo-moral sentimentalizings about the inviolability of the 'personal,' high liberalism is finally left, like its poor relations, with no other criterion of sexual value than 'pleasure'.

The personal, properly understood, is the distinguishing feature of human sexuality. Animals are not persons. Even when sexually selective they are not so on 'personal' grounds, and they are frequently promiscuous. Presumably this is why human lust has often been stigmatized as 'animal'. But this is just a figure of speech. For lust is like all human sexuality in that its immediate object has to be a person (or, as in fetishism, something fantastically endowed with personality). The extremity of lust is content with any person whatever.⁵ But even if lust should require as its object a *specific* person, that person is seen not as an end in himself (or, more usually, herself) but as a means to something else: pleasure, conquest, punishment or self-punishment, insult, the exaction of tribute or dependence, and so on. Lust, that is, is curiously symbolic.

Some, accordingly, have regarded it (as they have rape) as being simply a special case of the lust for power. Like slavery, lust reduces *persons* to *things*. But here it becomes caught in Hegel's paradox of despotism,⁶ namely that a thing, unlike a person, cannot grant one the recognition and approval one desired, to say nothing of (what the subject may really have been seeking) the love.⁷ Lust leaves the subject in a

solipsistic void: the same, perhaps, in which he began. There are some who seem content with this. But for the others there is the solace only of promiscuity (an incessant, futile renewal of the personal object) or the lewd solidarity of their own unhappy kind. Lust is far from irredeemable: one can be educated, or educate oneself, or simply grow, out of it. But when confident, unabashed and hardened in its self-complacency, it is clearly the antithesis of both society and culture. The conservative, therefore, who prizes those things, will obviously not want to encourage it.

Erotic love resembles lust in being sexual. It also begins with a person and a body. It is true that in love I desire a person's body. But what I desire is this person *in* his or her body. (A remarkable fact about lust is the degree to which the self can actually be *dissociated* from the body and so to speak 'float free' of it.) Our bodies have, as it were, expanded to accommodate the whole of us: they are not means, but ends, total persons incarnate. So what we discover, give and receive in the act of love is not just our bodies, but ourselves. And only sexuality makes this possible. Thus erotic love, even though it thinks of the person loved as 'mine', has nothing to do, unlike lust, with 'possessive individualism', nor even with ownership. It does not 'seize' or 'take' anything, but offers itself, and accepts what is offered in return. The body, yours or mine, is not just property, a mere material appendage, a commodity, a trophy or a status symbol: it is me or you. The true analogy with property is with the sort, charged with human meaning, to which we accord 'sentimental value' (gifts, heirlooms, and the like). In the act of love, and particularly in the physical incorporation in which it culminates, the other becomes the focus of my trust and the vessel of the only identity I now require.

So, despite the old metaphor, there is no real analogy with commerce. There are not, as in mere mutual lust or so-called 'recreational sex', two discrete benefits accruing to the individual parties and simply *brought about* by an act of exchange.⁸ On the contrary, the satisfaction, like the parties, is one, and lies in the exchange itself, which might be more aptly described as a mutual self-surrender to a new, third, emergent thing (as in Donne's 'The Exstasie'). It should be clear, then, that erotic love has a number of structural affinities – which are also affinities of meaning – with the fundamental bond of society. But so great is its power that unless institutionalized – which is to say, satisfied and guaranteed – it is unappeasable: a threat, backed by its own inner, peremptory moral force, to the very social order from which it has sprung. A view of marriage, of course, follows from this, but I have no space to consider it here.⁹

To see the erotic (or human sexuality in general) as purely carnal or physical, then, is to mistake the part for the whole. On the physiological level alone one would have thought such a view impossible. For the sensations accompanying sexual contact obviously depend on the prior affective state. A lovers' kiss and its exact simulation by a pair of actors will produce entirely different sensations in the participants. But even if these sensations should be objectively measurable, it is still the affective state – the intention – that is the clue to their significance. This is unchanged by the fact that in love the intention has actually encroached on the sexual act and become one with it. The latter both *means* something and *is* that thing. Erotic love is not symbolic, but literal.

In the light of these observations such practices as 'sexology' and 'sex education' must seem deeply Philistine and offensive, and in fact to verge, anaphrodisiac though they are, on the obscene or pornographic. The physical phenomena to which they alone refer are meaningless without a knowledge of their meaning for the participants. That meaning is cultural, undetectable by recording instruments, dissipated or perverted by the presence of an observer, and not in itself to be conveyed by any crude rehearsal of physical details. Perhaps nothing is so striking about the footling Masters and Johnson experiments (and about the whole Kinsey tradition) as their intellectual imbecility.

If sexual meaning were entirely subjective, we should all be liberals. But there can no more be a wholly private meaning in sexual acts than in anything else upon which the 'private' world is founded. Sexual acts take place in private, but their very privacy, and the sexual ritual itself, are defined by the public world which bounds them. The *value* of privacy is itself a public, explicit conception. It is, in fact, to the injunction that they be publicly concealed that the sexual act, sexual gestures and the naked body owe their meaning, which lies in the revelation or exposure of what is normally kept covered (and not just physically covered). So far from being 'repressive', decency (which after all literally means no more than appropriateness) is precisely what gives sexuality its value. Yet this value has nothing to do with the thrill of forbidden fruit, nor, similarly, with the value of virginal innocence to the predatory rake whose pleasure lies in destroying it. What decency represses is not sexuality *per se*, but its untoward or excessive public display. It is probable that it also forbids some things absolutely. But properly understood decency is the true safeguard of the erotic.

The public world is portable. Two people alone together but not intimate inhabit it as fully as if they were in the market-place. Acquaintance

between the sexes needs some formal rationale if conversational openings are not to be construed as directly sexual advances. So nascent erotic interest always adopts one or more of a number of well-understood disguises. They must be well understood, or the race would die of celibacy; but they must also be acceptable at face value, so that unwanted attentions may be deflected without offence. To conduct any relationship so begun to the level of erotic intimacy some similarly amphibious gesture is needed.

The Wagnerian 'love-gance' is one such. It may be anything from an open, cloudless smile to a troubled, serious gaze, but it is instantly recognisable to a like-minded recipient. It differs entirely from Miss World's orthodontic grimace, the coquette's winsome leer, or the closed, resentful stare of the fashion model (which suggests nothing so much as a juvenile delinquent interrupted in the act of self-abuse). It is completely involuntary, the more obviously so the more it is fought down by modesty (the process is matchlessly and most movingly depicted by Shakespeare in the courtship of Ferdinand and Miranda). What it announces is the fact of incarnation: I am here, my inmost self, in my face.¹⁰ The rest of my body, it says, my private parts, and therefore I myself, all are yours, if you will have it so.¹¹ Being unguarded, like the naked body whose uncovering it foreshadows, the love-gance is a pledge of innocence, and an innocence not subsequently destroyed, but fulfilled, in the sexual act.

As for physical shame, the 'enlightened' view is as absurd as that quaint figure, the old-fashioned nudist. Of course, as he would claim, my body is 'nothing to be ashamed of': quite the reverse. But it is just because it is a thing of value, able to embody my whole self and commit it to another, that I am disinclined to expose it to a stranger's gaze; *that* is where shame lies.¹² It is, as a matter of fact, the human capacity for total self-embodiment that makes men and women psychologically different. For the body and the self must 'fit' exactly, and the body is not subject to modification. The compulsive slimmer, the body-builder and the transsexual try to deny the latter proposition. But they bear pathetic witness to the truth of the former.

All this is borne out further by the customary roles adopted in sexual intercourse (although, except in lust, they are not 'roles' at all, but 'for real'). A man's body – at least stereotypically, which is what matters – is hard, rough and rectilinear. It bears the signs of precocious sexual arousal in a dramatic and visible form. A woman's body, on the other hand, like the landscape to which poets have endlessly compared it, is soft, smooth and rounded. Its moist, veiled, secret centre, the vulva,

which has no exact masculine equivalent, is explored and aroused by the man's caresses until it too speaks of a self totally focused, discovered (uncovered) and ready to be 'known' in the act of penetration. In love, this act is not symbolically aggressive, nor symbolically anything. For it is complemented by the woman's enclosure, encompassment and 'knowledge' of the man. Here at last they become a single self, in which there can be neither active nor passive.

The genuinely erotic is distinguished by its sincerity, its explicitness, its final and complete freedom from fantasy.¹³ So far from dispelling its mystery, those things actually heighten it, and are also fully compatible with the spirit of play – that is, of fantasy which, being recognized as such, has no power to bind the subject or determine his actions – which is so important an ingredient, or adjunct, of the erotic. Eros, like art, is both serious and delightful; lust is monotonously grim, solemn and ridiculous by turns.

Erotic innocence and innocence as a whole seem to depend on each other. Of course, a society *may* manage to confine corruption to its sexual life alone, but only so long as lust continues to carry a moral stigma. Such so-called 'hypocrisy' is very far from ideal, but it is better than lifting the taboo on lust. Bad faith is a good thing if it preserves the outward value of innocence, even if it thereby sentimentalizes what has largely been lost. For erotic innocence remains possible. And innocence as a whole, the hallmark of any tolerable society, survives.

It is idle to ask *why* we value innocence. It is simply that without it the trust implicit in the social bond, which consists in seeing one's fellows as at least potential intimates, becomes impossible. Dissolve that, and society is reduced to an aggregate of angry, self-seeking, defensive individuals, as in Hobbes's 'state of nature'. In such an 'age of prudence', love again becomes 'the awful daring of a moment's surrender', the dubious privilege of the saint and the fool. Confusion and insecurity will seek the perilous consolations of dictatorship.¹⁴ Decency, as I have said, dictates the language of love. When it is successfully and repeatedly assaulted, the tokens of intimacy and privacy suffer an inflationary collapse. Keynes said that the quickest way to bring a country to its knees was to debauch its currency. And for once, what is true of money is also true of love, except that the process is more insidious.

Under the rule of lust our greatest art – indeed our whole past – would become incomprehensible. For innocence, being a civilized product, is actually akin to taste. *The Tempest* is already almost inaccessible. Schumann's 'Wenn ich in deine Augen seh' (*Dichterliebe* no. 4: the

'love-glance' again) might still seem pretty enough, but it would cease to be heartbreakingly erotic. 'I am a fool,' says Miranda, 'to weep at what I am glad of.' But if this is folly, it is a wise folly. The current parading, as a mark of liberality of spirit, of moral indifference as between lust and love – the understanding of them, as it were, as at most mere 'lifestyle preferences' – in fact shows the death of the spirit. It must see Miranda's vow to Ferdinand (and his to her) as only foolish, and be wholly blind to the depth of her gladness at thus having finally, and freely, 'closed off her options'.¹⁵

There seem to be three main threats to innocence. The first, not a present danger, is puritanism. Puritanism deserves some respect, if only because the damage that it causes is confined. However, the damage affects the erotic, which puritanism lumps together with lust as an obstacle to the love of God. It has correctly seen that the true object of sexual desire is the incarnate other, the person, and that the love of created beings may occlude a higher reality and a higher love (things it believes exist). Hence it represents every sexual act, even in private, as – what every sexual act unpoisoned by guilt must then self-consciously become – a gesture of rebellion.¹⁶ This creates a public order fraught, like that in *The Scarlet Letter*, with an overwhelming sense of concealed personal sin (or of rage, which is almost as bad). Even our own ordinary, unambitious concept of decency needs to maintain a due discrimination between lust and love if it is not similarly to defeat its ends.

The second threat is sexual 'enlightenment'. Of course, most adults will find this fatuous outlook, in the short run, only a major irritation and a depressing reflection on the culture which allows it to flourish. With children, however, the case is different. Traditionally, the 'facts of life' were withheld until children were capable of understanding them, that is, until they were finished persons capable of sexual self-embodiment. Premature revelation, it was felt, would issue only in damaging half-knowledge. This half-knowledge is now officially provided by 'sex education'. The latter either encourages a cynical knowingness; or, by portraying sexuality in a phenomenological vacuum, makes it into something alien, grotesque and absurd (qualities shared, appropriately, with its stock-in-trade, the condom). In the interests of 'balance', no doubt many sex educationists throw in some pious twaddle about 'love'. But what are children to make of that, whose love grows from dependence, not from free erotic commitment?

But the biggest threat to innocence, I think, is pornography. Even the Williams Report found it at best dismal and dehumanizing. A less finicking age would have found that sufficient reason for banning it.

Pornography requires no exhaustive definition. As Lord Denning once said, a Customs Officer knows pornography when he sees it. (And even if he doesn't, a few genuinely erotic works may well be sacrificed to a cause – decency – without whose prosecution they would in any case soon become meaningless.)

Pornography effectively legitimizes lust, by freeing it from moral scruple. It does this in two ways: first, by insulating the consumer from the situation depicted, so that he himself actively participates in nothing. But privacy is no mitigation, since the more solitary the indulgence, the less any misgiving or embarrassment can control it. And secondly, the mere fact of objective representation confers a kind of legitimacy on pornography. Pornography is bad art writ menacingly large: private fantasy not only *made* flesh, but depicted as *nothing but* flesh; the whole being sustained, validated and almost normalized by the consumer's knowledge that unknown millions out there are consuming it too, and nowadays, crucially, doing so by permission.¹⁷ Pornography advances no proposition (except, implicitly, that of its own innocuousness), yet its power to convince goes way beyond argument, being fuelled entirely by lust, which notoriously brooks no argument. So the question of the legitimacy of pornography has no real bearing on 'freedom of expression'.

Pornography is bad for the consumer (and only in lust is one a 'consumer'). Even 'soft porn' dilutes the language of love (revelation, intimacy, disclosure) to the point where it becomes unusable. If it is admissible, indeed obligatory, to protect children from pornography, why not adults too? Besides, there is nothing 'adult' about pornography, and its coy alias, 'adult publications', is merely a sick joke. Even more importantly, pornography is bad also for everyone else, that is, for the culture in which we all have to live. Would one not wish to protect not only children (especially one's own children), but society at large too, from people – who now, it may be, constitute a sizeable minority – to whom decency, and love, at least to judge by their appetite for depictions of the opposite, had become unintelligible or even odious?¹⁸

Restriction (advocated by the Williams Report) is clearly no answer, even if it could be guaranteed to work. The liberal case against pornography turns mostly on the protection of the unwilling spectator. The world is divided into public and private not because this division has a cultural significance absolutely fundamental to both social and sexual intercourse, but simply because it guarantees the joint 'freedom' of consumers and objectors alike. Lacking an adequate concept of decency (as of love), liberalism can only understand the objection to pornography

in terms of some 'offence' offered to somebody's 'personal taste'. What pornography really offends, however, is not my personal taste, but the objective moral sense in me and nearly everyone else. It offends against a far weightier cultural imperative than 'freedom', namely, an idea of what we ought to be, of life's ultimate significance, an idea of the good. Not to repress pornography is to connive at the degradation of love; it is to unhinge a culture, and a whole much deeper conception of the personal than any known to liberalism. Lust may be contained, even rescued, by moral disapproval. But pornography is not subject to the same constraint, and can be contained only by the absolutes of law.

This suggestion is neither novel nor unworkable. It has worked tolerably well in the past. The Williams Report, which speaks for an educated minority, considers that some things definitely ought to be banned, in particular the pornography of violence. This, apparently, is an 'objective' judgement, unrelated to 'general issues of morality' (*sic*), and to do with the supposed fact that the 'aggressive impulses' (whatever they are) are more socially disruptive than the sexual. But the real reason, I suspect, is this (given in favour of the existing film censorship): 'What clinched the argument for some of us was the sight of some of the films with which the censorship presently interferes.' It seems that when the liberal élite actually succeed in being shocked then something must be done. They must now surely come to see that the 'social effects' they deplore derive not from the 'stimulation' of any 'impulses', but from the erosion of the very moral idea they have surprised in themselves. Working back from there, they might come to see all sexual pornography as a sort of violence in miniature.¹⁹

The intellectual battle, then, seems like a pushover (if anyone can be bothered to push). But intellectual debate, however important, has already been overtaken by events. The advent of the video cassette and cable TV makes any practical distinction between restriction and prohibition harder to maintain. It has been the prevailing assumption that censorship must be applied, either at the point of 'consumption' (the theatre or the circus), or at the point of distribution (the publisher and his market). But the modern family is now permanently plugged in to a vast network of distribution, which can provide seemingly infinite possibilities of diversion at the touch of a switch. It is no longer practicable to maintain vigilance over the entire system of communications, from some central office whose denizens will no doubt themselves be media men, steeped in the ethos of licence upon which their careers depend. Censorship must therefore be applied at the point of production: and severely. It must be made criminal to produce

pornographic material, even for 'home' consumption.²⁰ Moreover, many new opportunities for corruption are provided by the video market, and a serious consideration of them will involve a radical reassessment of the nature and value of video entertainment. The video telephone, for example, will introduce new possibilities which pornographers will not hesitate to exploit. (Already the New York newspapers contain advertisements for masturbatory fantasies offered for sale over the telephone.)²¹ It is hard for many would-be conservatives, being saturated with liberal economic theory, to acknowledge the overwhelming strength of the argument for state control. Too much is at stake to allow the ethos of the free market to dominate absolutely. Constantly to expand 'alternative' networks, subject to no control except that which the market provides, is to create a monstrous octopus of communications, whose tentacles reach into every living room, and whose interest in the moral life of the entire nation may be wholly malign.

This is not the place to examine the extent and nature of the necessary controls. Public support for their introduction would be enormous,²² and nothing forbids the present government from opening an inquiry into their feasibility. Nothing, that is, apart from the power exerted by the international market in pornography, and by the influential liberals who apologize for it. The Williams Report, which showed liberalism on the defensive, is already obsolete. But one should never underestimate the power of the old liberal establishment to enforce its world-view. It provides the natural philosophy of the half-educated, and the half-educated inevitably dominate the media.²³ The media will therefore be vociferous in opposing control. But the time has now passed when the issue can be dismissed as of limited political importance. Only when we have reasserted through law the claims of the normal conscience, will the law be able to safeguard our future. With luck and resolution, we might hope to rebuild for our posterity a world that should be to them, as Wordsworth's shepherd Michael said to his son of their sheepfold,

An emblem of the life thy fathers lived,
Who, being innocent, did for that cause
Bestir them in good deeds.

From *The Salisbury Review*, 1, 2 (January 1983). Reprinted in Roger Scruton, ed., *Conservative Thoughts* (Clarendon Press, 1988).

Afterword (1999): the Internet, and other matters

On the Internet the production and consumption of pornography are in principle wholly private, even though vast fortunes are also being made there from intermediary, publishing-style distribution. Whether he charges or pays for the privilege, or not, anyone can post on or retrieve from the Net any text or images he pleases, with virtual impunity. He does not have to go to a shop and be seen browsing the top shelf, look the assistant in the eye, carry the stuff home, or hide it afterwards. This makes Internet pornography, even more than postal, totally immune to non-users' disapproval or ridicule, except as those are imagined (which only makes it more important that they *be* imagined).

But maybe 'dedicated' pornography is not after all the immediate problem, since for the most part it is still kept, or keeps itself, out of sight (it is no less a problem for that, though). The real curse is the wholesale, trivial, stupid, monotonous 'libidinization' of everyday culture by the media, and in particular by screen entertainment. As I have said, this necessarily involves the depreciation of things not only which are pleasing and admirable in themselves, but upon which any worthwhile, durable civilization depends, viz. sexual delicacy, taste, restraint and fidelity. But all that, being a question largely of display, is something which, given the will, *can* (at least in principle) be controlled.

Where, however, is the will to come from? Not from the media; their commercial interests alone see to that. And not from the liberal intelligentsia, who never ask (a) whether we do not actually have a duty to preserve erotic meaning for future generations; and (b) how our doing so would differ from supporting (as they do) similar restrictions designed to make our world habitable, pleasant and a source of enjoyment and pride, such as anti-pollution laws and aesthetic controls over the appearance of buildings. As for politicians, they depend so heavily for their public image on the liberal and media establishments that nothing can be expected from them.

That is not to say that the situation is hopeless. As formal sanctions have crumbled, a moral one has reasserted itself, albeit imperfectly and in disguise. I mean the growing perception, particularly among young people, that pornography, and even the sub-pornographic chatter in their magazines, is quite simply 'gross', or 'naff', or 'sad'. The same strictures, topped up with explicit condemnation, should now be applied to the sexual attitudes and practices promoted, or at least treated as normal, by the media, and applied preferably by the young people to whom the media suck up. If lust were ever widely to be seen as 'uncool', it would

soon cease to be promoted. And if, as we frequently see, people addicted to (say) prostitution or pornography are still sufficiently ashamed of their weakness that they dissociate themselves from it, denying even to themselves that their actions are really 'theirs', then, hypocrisy notwithstanding, it is still good that they do so, that they are ashamed, and that others think they have reason to be. Something decent has survived, and there is still a chance that it can be built on, though whether it will ever again issue in legislation may be doubted.

Notes to Essay 8

- 1 [1999] This is too dogmatic. In practice, most moral sanctions can be no more than informal expressions of social disapproval, but they generally suffice. Regarding sexual morals, it is obviously neither feasible nor desirable to install a policeman in every bedroom. Nevertheless, sexual matters *are* a legitimate moral concern; and at least some, notably pornography, should be subject also to legal controls (as, outside the Internet, 'hard porn' still officially is). What remains true is that law and morality (or 'culture') need to keep in step. On this, see esp. the discussions in Essays 3 and 4 concerning Oakeshott's (possibly self-contradictory?) view of law as possessing moral force, yet being unconcerned to promote morality.
- 2 See Lionel Trilling, 'The Kinsey Report', in his *The Liberal Imagination* (1950).
- 3 See the excellent discussion by Wolfgang Köhler in Ch. 2 ('Psychology as a Young Science') of his *Gestalt Psychology* (1929).
- 4 *Obscenity and Film Censorship* (1981), by Bernard Williams and others.
- 5 'When a man is in that state,' wrote the Victorian sexual diarist 'Walter' in *My Secret Life*, 'he is ready to fuck anything from his sister to his grandmother, from a ten-year-old to a woman of sixty' (quoted in Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians*, Corgi edn. [1969], p. 179).
- 6 *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §178ff. (the parable of the Master and Slave).
- 7 The adolescent need for love, for lack of a suitable object, frequently expends itself in lust (see St Augustine's *Confessions*). One (characteristically aristocratic) solution, greatly disapproved of by Tolstoy when he heard it commended by his aunt ('rien ne forme un jeune homme comme une liaison avec une femme mariée comme il faut'), is that featured in *Der Rosenkavalier*, viz. the erotic tutelage of a young man by an older, married woman.
- 8 Casual or recreational sex, one might say, is a form of sexual barter or reciprocal prostitution, the payment on each side being not in cash but in kind.
- 9 One such is sketched by Roger Scruton in *The Meaning of Conservatism* (1980), and amplified in his *Sexual Desire* (1986).
- 10 Hence the significance of the kiss (usually accompanied by a closing of the eyes, indicating that the 'glance' has done its work). Cf. also Christopher Ricks's analysis of blushing in *Keats and Embarrassment* (1976).
- 11 It is presumably significant that a Victorian euphemism for the pudenda was one's 'person' ('I apprehended the accused, your Worship, exposing his person on the public way').

- 12 [1999] I should explicitly have exempted the now *passé* cult of 'streaking' from this stricture, demanding as it did (and what more could one ask?) courage, speed, beauty and a sense of humour. The point about it was that the spectator's gaze was not permitted to linger, all being over, so to speak, in a flash. (Still, who does not remember rather more about the Twickenham streaker, Ms Erika Roe, than her name?)
- 13 [1999] Here, in the 1988 reprint of this essay, I added two paragraphs suggesting that (male) homosexuality was 'erotically incomplete or unconvincing' because there seemed always to remain an element of fantasy, and thus 'a curious residue of lust'. I am less persuaded now, and have removed them. If, as I even then speculated, there might be 'fully erotic homosexual possibilities', well and good. But homosexuals seeking greater public acceptance need to show that they too distinguish between the decent and the indecent, the normal and the perverted, and love and lust; and – a related point – that even without parental or conjugal duties, their way of life contains serious incentives to sexual restraint.
- 14 See Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933). Reich was absurdly vain, and a crackpot even by psychoanalytical standards. Nevertheless, despite his Freudian roots, he is among the few radical writers on sex to understand the nature and value of the erotic. See, e.g., and despite its doubly off-putting title, *The Function of the Orgasm* (1940).
- 15 There is doubtless some overlap, but a vow and a promise are not the same. A promise is an undertaking to do or not to do something; a vow is a free, unconditional dedication of one's entire being (and therein conceivably analogous to Newman's 'real assent').
- 16 Cf. the Winston–Julia relationship in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. [1999] It is no longer true that puritanism is not a present danger. All its worst aspects have been revived in the cult of 'political correctness', one of whose chief targets is 'normal' sexual behaviour in all its forms, from the gross to the mannerly and refined.
- 17 [1999] I had in mind mainly so-called 'soft porn', which had somehow come to be legally tolerated since the later 1960s, first in magazine form and then, in the 1980s, in video. But the biggest pornographic medium and archive in history is now the Internet. For various reasons it cannot be effectively policed, so permission and prohibition alike are simply irrelevant. See the Afterword.
- 18 [1999] I may have underestimated the importance, and the sheer power, of dissociation here (see the Afterword). As for the numbers, the Williams Report estimated a monthly readership for pornographic magazines of some four million people. It must be many more now.
- 19 Those words were written in 1982. I see no reason to retract them now that (1987) they have become something of a feminist cliché.
- 20 [1999] This was hard enough to enforce then (1982) and is virtually impossible now in respect of the Internet (see note 17 above, and Afterword).
- 21 As nowadays (1987) every British tabloid does, since the privatization of the telephone system.
- 22 [1999] Would it now, I wonder, 17 years on?
- 23 [1999] Some programme-makers and even department heads are very highly educated. But (as they will usually confess after a few drinks) in order to

succeed in their profession they have had to put at least 50 per cent of their taste, culture and intellectual integrity into cold storage. That puts them effectively on a level with their competitors who, though equally graduates of the best universities, never were more than half-educated. (Half-education is as much as anything a state of mind, and voluntary.) Both classes of person are nearly always exceptionally intelligent.

9

The Politics of Death

*Und so lang du das nicht hast,
Dieses: Stirb und werde!
Bist du nur ein trüber Gast
Auf der dunklen Erde.*

Goethe

If life has no value, then we might as well be dead. Some deaths suggest that we might even be better off dead. So death may not be the worst we have to fear. But suppose it is death that robs life of value in the first place? Or suppose the contrary, that life is precious only because the supply of it is not unlimited? Such questions are unanswerable until we have some idea of what we mean by 'life', 'death' and 'value'.

Every application of the word 'death' connotes a corresponding conception of the 'life' to which it puts a stop. At the organic level, life and death are simply, in Nietzschean phrase, 'stupid physiological facts',¹ and, as such, proper objects of neither value nor dread. Unlike the animals, we never experience organic existence in its pure state; like everything else, it reaches us only through the filter of self-consciousness. Thus it is only as the earthly prerequisite of self-consciousness that it matters to us. But even self-consciousness is not an end in itself. If it were, there would be neither suicide, nor self-sacrifice, nor, indeed, peaceful acceptance of death. So what we fear is not biological death as such. And what we value is not bare psychic subsistence, but a meaningful life. Our self-consciousness seeks a fulfilment transcending, and sometimes precluding, mere survival, here, or perhaps even elsewhere.

'The meaning of life' sounds portentous, but is only a figure of speech. A thing has meaning when it is related to something else, and

where there exists an observer capable of perceiving that relationship. Thus a cause, a product, a component and a symbol, when so identified, are all types of the meaningful. Some think that life as a whole has meaning only in relation to some extra-human order, and that without such a ground the individual life must also be meaningless. One such view – religion – is of momentous importance. Though its validity lies beyond the scope of the present inquiry (perhaps, as Kant thought, of any inquiry), it obviously has the closest bearing on it, whatever its truth.

In recent times religion has had a rival in something for which we may appropriate the name 'positivism', viz. misapplied science. This claims our attention only because it is still a master-dogma of modernity. It is a kind of travesty of political order, indeed a substitute for it (though I had rather call it cosmic masochism). The positivist sees himself as related, through his subjection to scientific law, to the whole community of similar natural events. But such a view (as I have already suggested concerning organic existence) is radically confused. It is not *himself* that is thus subject, but his body; and his body can no more 'see itself' as being anything than can any other natural object. Until the positivist specifies the precise connections between his self-consciousness and his biological identity (and perhaps not even then), we have no reason whatever for taking him seriously. The appeal of positivism is not rational, but emotional, and is probably responsible for the enormous political crimes of our century. For, in offering to relieve us of our existence as persons, positivism relieves us also of our attendant obligations (and rights).

The individual life is certainly meaningless without its immediate reference to a community of persons, that is, to society. Animal interaction is quasi-economic: it consists of the exchange of functional requisites together with the information, encoded in a precise and rigid semaphore, necessary to facilitate it. Culture, by contrast, has as its object the generation of personal identities. It is not only inconceivable without language, it is itself a language, whose true significance lies not in the practical reference (if any) of the utterances it contains, but in the reciprocal self-recognition it effects between its users. To understand oneself and to be understood are simply two sides of the same coin. Each is as vital a human need as physical sustenance. If this be doubted, consider how even the alienated (who have yet to be persuaded of the impossibility of a private language)² persistently complain of being 'misunderstood'.

This linguistic analogy, and it is of course more than an analogy, lies at the heart of conservative thinking. If the understanding of self and

others is a vital need, and if it is conceivable only within cultural forms, then those forms must be kept up; kept, not rigid, but sufficiently continuous between generations for a man's life, and all that it includes beyond its temporal boundaries,³ to achieve stability and coherence. Even if these forms were not under political threat, it is doubtful whether they would be wholly capable of self-maintenance. Thus it occurs that, wherever cultural authority especially needs reinforcement, a more emphatic authority steps in to provide it, inserting itself into even the most 'private' areas of life such as love, sexuality and grief. (Such authorities are the State or the Church; the Church particularly where, as in Eastern Europe, the State has power but no authority.) The Marxian, of course, will see this as one means whereby 'power' seeks legitimation.⁴ The conservative need only reply that, even if this is true, such intrusions clearly do answer, and successfully, to a genuine need, occur substantially by invitation, and are therefore already legitimate. Legitimacy is not less itself for having a history.

Culture most needs reinforcement in the major crises of human life. A crisis occurs when a man's tranquil, voluntary purposes are disrupted or set at nought by some event which by himself he cannot reduce to intelligibility, but can see only as an alien 'force'. Such events may be natural misfortunes, or (what is often the same thing) sudden incursions of our biological constitution, such as incurable illness, death, or sexuality. They throw the subject into inner turmoil. Others have suffered crises (he thinks), but they have not suffered *mine*, so how can I expect genuine sympathy, from the inside, as it were? Feelings like these detach the subject from himself and his culture. They break the chain of mutual understanding, allowing fantasy to range unchecked, and thus widen the breach still further. Hence there is almost no traditional society that does not surround such occasions with elaborate rules and rituals, prescribing not only what shall be done, but even what shall be felt.⁵ In primitive societies cultural and political authority are indistinguishable. So, at bottom, they are in ours: legitimacy has no other name. But with us, the State's presence at a crisis is largely (though not entirely) symbolic. It reassures the subject that he has not been forgotten, that he is still a citizen (and will be even in death), and that the cultural ordinance is right. Thus State and culture, ever invisibly in tandem, here formally unite to reclaim the sufferer from his solitude, restoring him to reality, to society and to himself.

Misery, unlike joy, is fundamentally at odds with society. There is redress for injustice, but only consolation for misfortune. In the absence of ready consolation, misfortune incurs a mysterious guilt.

How, asks the victim, shall I cope with the consequences for others? Perhaps I could have avoided it. Perhaps I am being punished for something. Any explanation is better than none. But the sweetest relief of all is to construe my misfortune precisely as an injustice, and thereby to shift the guilt on to others. Looking round for enemies, perhaps I find none. So my enemy must be hidden, or abstract; an evil spirit, say, or the System. Or those I pick on are so obviously innocent that they can only be dissemblers of fabulous cunning; so much so, perhaps, as to have hidden their guilt from themselves the better to deceive others. But they don't deceive me...and so on. Nightmares like these are familiar to us from anthropology and the madhouse, but they are also at large in our society. Ill-will and resentment are the most powerful social solvents, and so long as natural misfortune persists they will never lack occasion. Nor will they lack a troop of malcontents eager to put them to work, having first roused them from their innocent slumbers beneath the suffocating blanket (as Barthes called it) of 'bourgeois ideology'.

Sedition can be dealt with, and some misfortunes can be prevented. No sensible society will neglect either course, in the interests of both prudence and justice. But neither course tackles the problem at the root, which is the provision of effective and lasting consolation. Two things, mutually dependent, are required: authoritative explanation, and emotional reassurance. Common sense and religion maintain, respectively, that misfortune is natural and inevitable (it is certainly inevitable once it has happened!), or that it is the will of God. Both contentions are strictly inscrutable. Thus they are not strictly explanations, serving rather to forestall more easily graspable, but nevertheless false and superstitious, alternatives. But each *functions* as an explanation, setting the mind at rest with the central, unquestionable truth, that misfortune is a proper occasion of *nobody's* guilt. All that remains is to represent misfortune – again, truly enough – as the badge of our common humanity and the occasion for its exercise. The subject comes thence to perceive his suffering not as separating, but as reuniting him with the world. The consequence is to strengthen the cultural understanding originally put under strain. Suffering thus vaccinates against its own disruptive effects. Purposes return to their mutual transparency. In a society united by trust, resentment and suspicion are stifled at birth by a lively realism and a vigilant sense of their unworthiness. And both these, of course, foster the self-respect that the sufferer, humiliated by calamity, so much needs.

Death, I have said, may not be the worst misfortune to befall the individual, but it is certainly the second worst. And, although collectively

we can avert meaninglessness, even collectively we can not avert death. Consider the shock it administers, in the first place, to everyone's egoism. Accustomed to exercise some control over the course of our lives, here we are powerless. My dependants may lose their material expectations and amenities. My colleagues lose a daily landmark and a harmless butt of their humour or malice. As for me, my pretensions to *Geist* are gone. I am simply the lump of helpless matter I always really was. Even the physical discomforts of dying (bearable enough if I were certain of recovery) bear in upon me how inexorably hostage I am to my wretched body, once the source, or the conduit, of all my delights.⁶

Body or not, I still persist as a mental object to myself. What is to become of this 'me', and why is all this happening to 'me'? Such egocentric questions have been the starting point of almost all serious reflection on death. The anguish of Tolstoy's Ivan Ilych stems from his inability to see himself from any angle other than the Cartesian, that is from the inside.⁷ Homer's heroes never suffered in this way, seeking only honourable death, whenever it should be fated to them. Ivan Ilych has kept up appearances for *his* sake, where the Homeric hero avoids shame, and pursues glory, for their *own* sakes. The hero *is* his appearance, and his 'soul' is 'saved' simply in honourable action itself, not as a consequence of it; he conforms, not prudently, to the rapid requirements of a selfish and stupid society like Ivan Ilych's, but dramatically, to a common moral perspective, to which audience and actor alike are bound, and through which each sees himself. Some such vision comes to Ivan Ilych at the very last, when he grasps the necessity of love and, in feeling it, is miraculously freed from both his Cartesian prison and the fear of death. But for us, who are not Homeric heroes, the exclusively first-person perspective is not less anxiety-inducing for being false. For what fear is worse than that of ghosts, particularly of those believed to haunt machines?

So much for egoism. But most of us have learned not to be wholly selfish. Where there is love, and its object is mortal, there must also be grief.⁸ When I die, I grieve as much as my survivors, for I too must part with them. More, I grieve for their grief, and they in turn for my grief on their behalf, and so on. I feel an irrational guilt for the suffering I have brought upon them, particularly when their resentment seems to confirm it. Even if they try to conceal their resentment, I can see through them, or fancy I can. Perhaps they see their own grief, obscurely, as a punishment for loving me, and thus hate me for the love I have been able to command. Maybe there are ugly scenes: someone closer to

them than to me – an in-law, say – will shriek at me thus: ‘Oh, for God’s sake, why don’t you just die and put them out of their misery!’

Death, like a vortex, sucks everybody into its ever-tightening spirals of intermingled love, hate and guilt, the one as helpless and poignant as the others are fruitless and absurd. It is a upas-tree of emotional confusion, poisonous itself and invisibly poisoning everything in the further vicinity. Such conflicts might appear purely domestic. But to defuse, and if possible to prevent them, is not only a humane duty, but a political necessity.

The prime need is for reconciliation; almost, one might say, for forgiveness. If the dying and the living can be reconciled to themselves and each other, then the living can be reconciled in advance to their own deaths; but only so long as cultural beliefs and practices have retained their validity. The dying need to feel that they have done right by the living, and the living that they have done right by the dead.⁹ Spontaneous forgiveness is possible, but if it were to be relied upon, the need for it would never have arisen. Only objective authority can maintain culture against time and the sceptic, and only objective authority can validate the reassurance that culture dispenses. Indeed, unless it does these things, it will be neither objective nor authoritative.

The State is involved in death to a surprising extent. That it is surprising only shows how much this involvement is taken for granted. Obviously it answers to a natural demand for prescription, in which our moral intuitions seek public enforcement. The State alone can lawfully take a man’s life or compel him, in war, to endanger it. (The thought is, that though a man owes his biological existence directly to nature, it is to society, and its organ the State, that he owes his life as a person.) The various Burial Acts decree that, whatever he himself might prefer – and one can well imagine the kind of lewd charivari that (say) an unregenerate Lord Rochester might have preferred – a man’s body must be disposed of in a decent and orderly manner, and that to dispose of it otherwise, to disrupt or obstruct a funeral ceremony, or to deliver any address other than the authorized kind, is not just morally offensive, but a crime, punishable by law. When a man dies, the law secures to him his wishes regarding the disposition of his property. His will and the State’s become more obviously one than at any time during his life. If he is a great man, the identification is literally dramatic. The great man lives in the State, dies in the State, ‘lies in state’, and is accorded a State funeral. His individuality is mourned and celebrated not as a private, but as a public asset, as a proper occasion of every citizen’s personal grief, which, in being felt, reaffirms allegiance.¹⁰ In vindicating all

its dead, great or humble, the State renews its own life and that of its subjects.

Whatever their prospects in another world, it is in the gap they leave, no matter how modest, that the dead survive. In the reverence accorded to his wishes, his memory, and his mortal remains, the dead man succeeds to an esteem that in life he may have done little to deserve. This too is a sort of forgiveness. It is sufficient that he has lived, that someone has loved him, and that (whatever his view of the matter) he belonged to his society. Though in life all are not equal, in death all, even the worthless, have dignity. (A great, unquestionable barbarity in capital punishment, as we have known it, was the undignified treatment of the corpse.) In their common subscription to this fact the bereaved, and society at large, are united or reunited. That the dead possess, as it were, this objective *value* is as much as to say that death invests itself with a moral nimbus, casting its radiance back over the life that has so chosen to honour it.

Mourning customs, without legal support, have fallen into almost total disuse.¹¹ But they are no less important for that, and their abeyance is much to be deplored. Well into the present century calendrical degrees of mourning were faithfully observed in matters such as dress and social attendance. Their advantage to the mourner was in bringing constantly home to him what it was appropriate to feel and when, compelling him in some measure to live up to the appearance he presented, and thus moderating the excesses of grief to which he might otherwise have succumbed. Mourning garb, even if only the armband of recent memory, exacted a tender solicitude even from strangers: the inclined head, the gentle inquiry, the softer, prolonged, or double handclasp. It completely forestalled the agonizing *faux pas* so common nowadays. 'I sympathize,' said the world mutely, 'even though I know neither you nor the one you mourn. It is not for me to inquire into his merits. It is sufficient that he was a value for you. Your grief makes its object worthy, and worthy, in turn, of you. In recognizing the claims of grief, I endorse your love, and thereby love in general.' Publicity alleviates grief, precisely by deferring to it. Through the sympathy it excites, and the mourner's gratitude, recognized grief speeds its own dissolution and re-establishes the world as a friendly place. A formality that thaws all formalities, it rescues the most contingent acquaintanceship from indifference.

Thus to recognize grief is to recognize death; to recognize death as the occasion of love; to turn the love of individuals outwards from its exclusiveness, throwing over all association the same luminous character of

necessity. Feeling emerges from privacy into meaning. But all that has changed. The brutalization of modern life – barbarity of manners, unimaginative blindness to others' feelings, even motiveless crime and violence – surely these things are somehow connected with the decline in the respect paid to grief. And that decline is most certainly an expression of our contemporary squeamishness, which, though itself a form of brutality, is singularly ill-equipped to deal with brutality's grosser manifestations. For squeamishness cares, not for the sufferer, but for its own embarrassment when faced with him.¹² It would rather not know.

Death, accordingly, is driven into the closet. Dismissed as 'morbid', repressed in public (and if possible in private), and dis severed from love and concern, it surfaces in the genuinely morbid curiosity pandered to by the 'video nasty'. Everyday screen violence is bad enough: it provokes either squeamish or callous dissociation, even from the real thing, when we ought to be putting a stop to both the real thing and its simulacrum. But unless he has prodigious powers of dissociation – and if so, why is he watching? – the consumer of this pernicious trash comes to view death as simply an anatomical disintegration, void of all human significance. The craving for verisimilitude leads finally to the 'snuff movie', an insane fantasy in which, nevertheless, living people, procured by fraud or force, are tortured, mutilated and killed under the blank, unseeing eye of the camera.¹³ What could be more truly lethal than such wilful ignorance of death?

We live in a liberal society, which, with every appearance of sincerity, officially deplores such horrors. Maybe it is not directly to blame for them. But, from a variety of confused motives, it lacks the will to repress them as energetically, and, if need be, as ruthlessly as they deserve. Liberalism, however, does seem directly responsible for the repression of death. Just as there are few abominations it will not countenance (at least in theory), so there are few decencies at whose neglect or suppression it has not connived, and all in the name of 'freedom'. Death, and all that pertains to it, has no place in the liberal universe. Liberalism is less the ideology of youth than of those who, like Racine's Jezebel, would vainly pretend to it, *pour réparer des ans l'irréparable outrage*.

Death is the most categorical negation of a world which sees the ultimate value in unfettered choice. That is, if we can talk of *value* at all. For, where each (barring certain sophisticated constraints) is substantially a law unto himself, there is no distinguishing value from preference, or rational preference from the prudent indulgence of caprice. There will be cliques, but no single common language in which such distinctions

can be enshrined and made permanent. How then, if I form a serious attachment, shall I recognize it as love, and so represent it? And how, when it is gone, shall I be consoled? How will genuine fellow-feeling be possible? Who, myself included, will understand the circumstances, and know which are the right expressions of sympathy? I shall suffer, not grief, but a raw, amorphous misery. Returning to my Cartesian prison, I shall, in Tocqueville's memorable phrase, be confined within the solitude of my own heart.

The etiquette of the emotions lent grief a shape. It at once justified it, and by making it intelligible to all, enabled it to be overcome. To object, in the name of 'spontaneity', that conventional expressions of feeling must somehow be false, is the exact opposite of the truth. For to be forced to improvise the expression is in large part to improvise the feeling too. Being unable to bring one's emotion under description, one would be separated from it. Thus, if it were not truly 'mine', it could be neither sincere nor 'spontaneous'. 'How but in custom and ceremony', wrote Yeats, 'are innocence and beauty born?'

Where the liberal has sown, the radical reaps. Liberty, pursued to its limits, ends in an abyss of meaninglessness. Death, always a fear, becomes a veritable bogey. The radical solves both problems at a stroke. Death will be abolished, and meaning minted anew, in a comprehensive gesture of 'liberation'. Liberalism has shown (he says disingenuously, though his own experience, and mine of him, may well bear him out) that personality is ultimately unbearable. So away with it and its conditions, especially time and love. Yet he knows as well as the conservative that the self is a long-term social artefact ('product', he would say). So to abolish it (he continues) we must complete the liberal's work. First, by force or moral subversion, the individual must be severed entirely from his past and future, his roots and expectations. Then, desperate for connection, he will clutch at our offered eternity, though he has got it coming to him anyway. In place of love he shall have equality. For to be attached to none specifically, is to be attached to all alike. His need for power, and for meaning, will be met by his total absorption into an abstract, impersonal collectivity, which, just because it is all these things, will also be immortal.

Where there is no self, there is neither death nor grief. There remains only biological death, a 'stupid physiological fact', and a bagatelle compared with the great work afoot. There will be enough of it and to spare, for (between ourselves) some will have to be sacrificed. But reflection should console them. For, to surrender one's birthright for a slice of Utopia – where, because in equality there is no division, every

slice is simultaneously the whole cake – what is that but true, undying selflessness?

The radical's prospectus is singularly unattractive to those who seek no liberation from the human condition. It is also profoundly confused. In a totally transformed society whatever consciousness existed would have no link with our present consciousness. Since it would not be *my* consciousness, neither I, nor the radical could rationally desire to 'be' it. His overpowering sense of meaning is a flight of pure fallacy, whereby he projects himself now, as he now is, into a future in which (he forgets) his present self will no longer exist. And meaning, in any case, is not satisfied by absorption into the One. For I cannot be related to something with which I am identical. I do not wish to be absorbed into anything; I wish to remain me. The whole thing is as absurd as reincarnation. Christianity, for which my soul is identical with my person, offers me something I might reasonably desire. For according to Christian doctrine, it is I, and not some mysterious inner principle unknown to me, who survive death, appropriately equipped with the vehicle of my personality, my resurrected body. But the radical project leads merely to extinction. It is, in fact, a premature death-wish; a private hallucination in which, to secure it against the incursion of reality, we must all be forced to participate.

I have depicted radicalism in its ideal, revolutionary form. But the ordinary, old-fashioned socialist does not want us all to be somebody else (that is, to die). He wants us, in our present persons, to enjoy different social arrangements. But it is precisely because I shall not be different that I doubt whether I should enjoy them. If he could persuade me that they were intrinsically desirable, that I could have them without giving up what I already know and like, or even that I ought, willy-nilly, to accept them for the sake of the benefits they would confer on the least fortunate (and those would have to be unquestionable), then I might go along with him. But since he can do none of these things, I rather feel that socialism would be pretty miserable for everyone except him.¹⁴

So, indeed, would the consequences of nuclear pacifism. Unlike the extreme radical, the Peace Movement does not make light of physical death. In fact, it feeds, as it plays, almost entirely upon the age-old fear of it. A few half-hearted realists (E.P. Thompson among them) admit that the probable consequence of unilateralist policies would be Soviet domination in some form. They know also that, much more than socialism (which they favour), it would be the end of most of what we, and even they themselves, value. But that, apparently, is less important than saving our own skins. However, even if their calculations were

correct, what would be the point of saving nothing but our skins? As Jan Patočka has persuasively argued,¹⁵ the life which is not prepared to stake itself on its own meaning is not worth living anyway. I am not saying that we should stand up to commit nuclear suicide. But without a sense of what one cannot relinquish (as one could relinquish physical existence), one cannot even enter into meaningful negotiations with an enemy, since one has nothing to negotiate. Knowing that one has nothing to defend, he will also perceive that one has no real will to survive, let alone resist. But how can such considerations weigh with the sentimental herbivores of the Peace Movement, for whom no virtue surpasses the selfless patience of a vegetable?

We respect physical life on principle, just as we do death. That is why we proscribe murder, no matter how 'objectively' dispensable the victim (such as the old moneylender in *Crime and Punishment*, at least in the eyes of her killer Raskolnikov). But it will be well if the individual knows when to renounce his own life. Death is the law of our nature; and, as with all laws, it is better to see its necessity and obey willingly than simply to be coerced. Suicidal protest (so long as it is altruistic), martyrdom, self-sacrifice; all affirm or restore to the world that meaning which, simply as physical existence, it lacks. And the same is true of the natural death for which, even as we shrink from it, we all hope. To accept death is to catch a glimpse of the transcendent, to see how nature furthers human purpose even when it most seems to frustrate it. (No doubt this is one reason why almost all funerals, by choice, involve a religious ceremony, unlike births and marriages.) By making the alternative so frightful, nature has made it to our advantage to die at peace with ourselves. And when we do so, we make peace also among ourselves. This peace (not the Peace Movement's) is love, and if we can learn to accept its conditions, it is our natural destiny to enjoy it. Philistine and ignorant like Ivan Ilych, we might still come to understand it at the very last. But if we can be educated to accept our mortality from the start, we shall be spared his agony, and fill our lives, as well as our deaths, with meaning.

'Only from the side of death,' wrote Rilke, 'is it possible to do justice to love.' There is no higher value than love, and it is predicated on mortality.¹⁶ Thus, if death did not exist, it would be necessary to invent it. Eternal life is no longer medically inconceivable; but if we had it, we would soon beg for deliverance. For, had we but world enough and time, both would be wasted in trivialities. But, someone will say, that would not matter: values are merely a fiction, devised to make death bearable.

To which I would answer as follows. It may be that neither we, nor death, are the source of value. Whatever decreed we should die, decreed also that we should seek, in discovering value, to transcend death, or the fear of it. Physical existence and ethical life are a single gift from the same source, a source which, even while we speak, and know we speak throughout, in unavoidable metaphor, it seems not totally absurd to describe as wise and beneficent. Death and value are as intrinsic to a proper humanity, as humanity itself is to the order of nature. Whatever embodies and affirms these truths – or rather, as Burke would call them, these solemn plausibilities – is not less natural for being a human product. Culture deserves our acceptance, our loyalty and our effort. We must repair it where we can and renew it where we cannot. Some conservatives have seen culture as the work of God; others, as the work of nature. Such claims, as noted earlier, defy analysis. Yet neither, ultimately, seems in the least strange.

From *The Salisbury Review*, III, 2 (January 1985). Reprinted in Roger Scruton, ed., *Conservative Thoughts* (Claridge Press, 1988).

Notes to Essay 9

- 1 *The Will to Power*, ed. Kaufmann, §916.
- 2 See Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, c. §§202–94 *ad lib.* (and see ‘private’ in index).
- 3 See Thomas Nagel, ‘Death’, in *Mortal Questions* (1979). Nagel’s point is developed by John Casey, ‘How Can We Have a Duty to the Dead?’, in *Salisbury Review*, II, 3 (April 1983), reprinted in Roger Scruton, ed., *Conservative Thoughts* (Claridge Press, 1988).
- 4 See e.g., the anthropological collection *Death and the Regeneration of Life* (1982), ed. M. Bloch and J. Parry.
- 5 See Roger Scruton, ‘Emotion and Culture’, in *The Aesthetic Understanding* (1983). In a recent television documentary, Stravinsky observed of the peasant wedding in *Les Noces* that ‘the bride weeps, not because she wants to, but because she must’.
- 6 Michelangelo’s beautiful *Dying Slave* (Louvre; sometimes called the *Dying Captive*) resigns his young life with a shrug of exquisite lassitude. This air of triumph, of near-orgasmic release, accounts for the work’s almost unbearable pathos. To be simply his own body, and not the property (perhaps the sexual property) of another, is freedom at last. Yet, viewed aright, it is suggested, our situation, however great in worldly terms, is substantially his. (The work was meant for the Pope’s tomb.)

A profound modern variation on the theme of ‘Death and the Maiden’ is to be found in George Eliot’s matchless portrait of an egoist, Gwendolen Harleth,

who can accept neither death nor sexual love, but only the dependency of childhood (*Daniel Deronda*, I, Chapters 3, 6, 7).

- 7 See *The Death of Ivan Ilych* (novella, 1886).
- 8 This applies not only to love between individuals. Lord Falkland's reaction to the Civil War showed all the symptoms, including the physical symptoms, of grief. See Clarendon, *History of the Rebellion*, VII, §§231–3.
- 9 See Casey, cit.
- 10 [1999] These reflections were prompted by the extraordinary scenes of public grief following the assassination of the Indian Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi, and later at her funeral.
- 11 See Geoffrey Gorer's admirable *Death, Grief and Mourning in Contemporary Britain* (1965). Dating it from about 1917, Gorer attributes the sharp decline in public mourning to an awareness of the demoralizing effect that the sight of so many young widows was having on troops away from the front.
- 12 Cf. the following, after Brenda's son has been killed:
 "It's really rather embarrassing for us all, Brenda coming," said Veronica. "I do think she might have chucked. I shan't in the least know what to say to her" (Evelyn Waugh, *A Handful of Dust*, III, viii).
- 13 An excellent film by Paul Schrader, *Hardcore* (1979), deals with this theme, and with the whole sex industry sub-culture.
- 14 For some, doubtless, socialism (like virtue) is its own reward, and hence requires no justification. To the convinced socialist, Schumpeter observes, socialist bread *as such* simply tastes sweeter than capitalist bread, even if he finds mice in it. See *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (Allen and Unwin, 1976), p. 190 and note.
- 15 See Václav Havel on Patočka in his 'Politics and Conscience', to be found in *Living in Truth* (reviewed in Essay 5 above). Havel's 'living in truth' (sc. 'authenticity') derives from Patočka and Heidegger. Roger Scruton gives an account of Patočka in *The Philosopher on Dover Beach* (1990).
- 16 See Rilke, *Briefe an eine junge Frau*, 21–2, quoted in J.B. Leishman and Stephen Spender, eds., *Duino Elegies* (Chatto and Windus, 1975), p. 151. Also cf. Wagner to Roeckel, 25 January 1854: 'We must learn to die, and to die in the fullest sense of the word. The fear of the end is the source of all lovelessness; and this fear is generated only when love begins to wane. How came it that this love, the highest blessedness to all things living, was so far lost sight of by the human race that at last it came to this: all that mankind did, ordered and established, was conceived only in fear of the end! My poem [i.e. *The Ring*] sets this forth.'

10

Culture, Technology and Value

Some years ago the 'white goods' manufacturer Zanussi used to advertise its products as 'the appliance of science'. (Since 'application' was evidently meant, I take it there was also a feeble allusion, exploited for the sake of the rhyme, to the notion of a 'domestic appliance'.) Zanussi's catchphrase might seem a plausible enough definition of technology, at least to anyone unfamiliar with Lewis Wolpert's book *The Unnatural Nature of Science* (1992). I mention Wolpert here, not because his observations are crucial to my argument, but merely for their intrinsic interest and obvious truth, to the effect that historically most technology, for example that of ancient China, derived from no genuinely scientific knowledge, simply because there was no such thing. However sophisticated it may have been, ancient Chinese technology was fundamentally serendipitous, empirical or *ad hoc*. (Thus much Wolpert.)

We might speculate further. Where new techniques did not just emerge spontaneously or at random, but were actively developed, they must have been developed not by recourse to any theoretical foundations (since there were none), but simply by the extension, direct or analogical as may be, of current successful techniques. If we consider some ordinary examples of the latter (and we need not confine ourselves to China) it is evident that both they and any subsequent spin-off from them need owe nothing to science. The builders and joiners of ancient Egypt knew nothing of Pythagoras, and were probably wholly ignorant of anything like the appropriate geometry. Yet when (as they constantly did) they needed a try-square, they used a 3–4–5 triangle, simply because they had observed that it contained a right angle.¹ Even today (I am told) there is no physiological explanation of the pharmacological properties of aspirin,² a drug derived from a folk remedy (willow bark), yet which technologically speaking must be

accounted a brilliant success. Ehrlich is supposed to have discovered Salvarsan, his so-called 'magic bullet' against syphilis, by the patient, purely mechanical screening of hundreds of chemical compounds, most of them dyes. (Salvarsan's alternative name, 606, derives from its being the 606th substance Ehrlich tested.) None of these practical discoveries can really be called scientific. *Per contra*, much genuine science – radio astronomy, say – has no practical application, and is unlikely ever to find one.

Contrary to common belief, then, technology is not the same thing as applied science, though it clearly overlaps with it. Two things seem essential to a basic, non-metaphorical, and I hope non-controversial definition. First, technology proper. Technology proper takes as its object the material or physical world. In other words, it is directed towards and upon those things which, since they possess neither self-consciousness nor will, can with both linguistic and moral propriety be called manipulable. (The objects of the *esprit de géométrie*, says Pascal, *se laissent manier*.)³ To the extent that it has a similar object of attention (though not a similar purpose in respect of it), technology does indeed overlap with science. In Martin Buber's terminology, technology engages not with the world of 'Thou' but with the world of 'It'.⁴

Ideally considered, technology has a human subject but a material object. Its relationship to the world, though intentional, is also mechanical, in that it involves an active 'I' and a passive 'It'. A spider's web is a marvellous, complex and manifestly functional construction. Nevertheless it would be extravagant, or at best a figure of speech, to call it a piece of technology (as one would, e.g., a fisherman's nets). For, serendipity notwithstanding, technology seems to imply at least some element of ingenuity or deliberate contrivance. It might even be plausible, in the human case, to regard serendipity, or chance technological discovery, as a kind of retrospective invention. In the world of biological nature evolutionarily profitable opportunities arise by chance, but no non-human organism is capable actually of recognizing one when it occurs. If it takes advantage of it and thrives, it does so unknowingly. But in the human case the potentialities of a chance technological discovery will be grasped, pondered, exploited, and made a springboard for further discovery.

So far, that is, as there remains any incentive to further discovery. I say this because most civilizations, notably those based on slavery, serfdom, or storable surpluses, have possessed a built-in ceiling or upper profitable limit to technological development. As Ernest Gellner has pointed out, where labour is plentiful and coerced, or its product easily

confiscated, there is no incentive to economize on it.⁵ So, a few basic tools apart, why bother with machinery, except for fun, ornament, or pure scientific curiosity (i.e. for the purposes of leisure)? I am thinking of such things as Yeats's mechanical songbird in his *Byzantium* poems, or the Greek inventor Hero's aeolipile, a hollow rotating vessel driven by steam issuing from nozzles tangentially mounted on its circumference. Hero's was the first device to embody the principle of jet propulsion, which till then had been the property only of certain molluscs, but whose belated application has subsequently transformed the world. Yet jet propulsion would have been of no practical use or interest to the Greeks, who despite their pre-eminence in science and mathematics were uninterested in technology, and thought even foreign languages a waste of time. And it is not obvious that jet propulsion has been an unmixed blessing to their descendants, when you consider the annual invasion of the Aegean by British lager louts.

The second key feature of technology is that it treats the world as a means, not as an end. Technology is the animating impulse of *homo faber*, productive, tool-using man. It not only works upon nature with instruments, it treats nature itself as instrumental. And this, of course, is another respect in which it differs from science. The aim of science is theoretical understanding, irrespective of practical utility. The aim of technology is practical utility, irrespective of theoretical understanding. Technology cultivates theoretical understanding only so far as theoretical understanding contributes to present or future production. Whenever production can be improved without it, technology can perfectly well dispense with theory. Indeed, its intrinsic labour-saving tendency more or less guarantees that it will do so.

In identifying production or practical utility as technology's ultimate rationale we come to the question of value. Value is of two kinds. Either a thing is valuable in itself, or it is valuable because it enables us to obtain or achieve something else which is intrinsically valuable. In other words, a thing is valued either as an end or as a means. The value of the means derives from the value of the end, and is, moreover, secondarily determined by how efficiently it serves it. It is conceivable that some means, when absolutely indispensable to the achievement of a given end, may attract to themselves some or all of that end's intrinsic value and thus come to share its end-like character. (It seems possible, for example, that for Mill liberty was some such hybrid, half-means and half-end.)⁶

Value, therefore, may be either intrinsic or derived (instrumental). Certain objects will possess both kinds of value.⁷ For example, basic literacy and numeracy are valuable almost entirely as means. Where the

end is wrong, as in the case of libellous publication or crooked accountancy, it is accordingly possible to speak of such accomplishments as being subject to abuse. An end in itself, however, cannot be abused, because it cannot be used either. (I must ignore the exceedingly difficult question as to whether ends in themselves must necessarily be 'good'.)⁸ Full intellectual culture, the Aristotelian contemplative life, is valuable almost entirely as an end (though Arnold, like Newman, believed that it also improved our manners). But most of the intermediate educational stages are at once necessary steps to higher levels, and plateaux of achievement which, though defective in comparison with the higher, are also still worth reaching for their own sake.

The secret of education, one might add *à propos*, is to invest as many levels of it as possible with this aura of intrinsic worth, particularly the earlier ones. Where this is not feasible, the student must simply be impressed as dramatically as possible with the worth of the end towards which his currently fatiguing labours tend. A child bored with scales and arpeggios will persist with them once he is accustomed to hear proper performances of real music, and understands the connection between his drudgery and the performer's art. In fact, the sooner he is given some real music of his own to perform, no matter how simple, the more obvious the connection will be.

Roughly speaking, technology means the devising of 'solutions' to independently specified 'problems', the search for optimal means to given external ends. It is not and could not be competent in an even more essential human activity, the choice or scrutiny of those ends. Nevertheless, as a skill, it contains its own intrinsic satisfactions, and so far (but only so far) may be said to constitute a value in itself.

For an exaggerated example, consider a crossword puzzle. Here the point is not the actual solution (as it is in technology), but the intellectual challenge and effort involved in finding it. In a crossword puzzle (as opposed, say, to a piece of police detective work) the apparent means has become the real end. A detective will take any route to his goal, and the shorter and quicker it is the better. He will be grateful for undercover tips, and overjoyed by an unsolicited, fully corroborated confession. By contrast, though the crossword normally takes me a whole hour, and I know that my friend Snooks can usually do it in ten minutes flat, I should nevertheless think it peculiarly pointless to ring him in order to get the answers. If the solution were the real object, however, Snooks would be my best and most economical route to it.

Technology, like any other skill, may exert this kind of aesthetic or athletic fascination. (It has often dazzled intellectuals incapable of tying

their own shoelaces.) To that extent it will come to resemble an end, or (as we might say) a value, in itself. And, when this occurs, it will not always or necessarily be a bad thing. Indeed, the absence of any such 'spiritual' satisfaction or challenge in one's work is very largely what provoked nineteenth-century thinkers from Carlyle and Coleridge to Morris and Marx to criticise the new industrial capitalist order.

Nevertheless, the primary value of technology is instrumental, and is determined by its ultimate end. So far, but only so far, as that end is to free us from drudgery, thus liberating us, if we wish, for more creative and less alienating pursuits, technology is almost wholly to be welcomed. Who would not rather own and use a washing machine and tumble drier than spend, or see his wife spend, a couple of days a week on the family's laundry, as in Edwardian times (and even in my own childhood)? Of course technological advance, like most goods, does not come without a price tag, even if we leave out of account the temporary unemployment of labour made obsolete by new technology, as also the fact that some of our fellow-citizens appear to fill their increased leisure with activities (or should one say passivities?) of stupefying vacuity. I am thinking rather of such things as waste disposal, the depletion of energy resources or indeed (if that problem were to be solved, say by nuclear power) the thermal build-up resulting from increased energy use.

Technology has other costs too, as spoilsports such as the late Fred Hirsch (*The Social Limits to Growth*) seem almost indecently eager to point out. Until nearly every family had one, the motor car, like the railway, represented an enormous extension of human possibilities. But the social costs and practical inconveniences of present-day motoring have nothing to do with its crude, or so to speak abstract, technological benefit. They have to do purely with its being what Hirsch tendentiously calls a 'positional good'.⁹ In thinly populated areas, however, it is not a positional, but a simple, unqualified good. There, running costs apart, the disadvantages of car ownership are negligible, whereas those of non-ownership are enormous.

On balance, I should say, technology's most outspoken critics are either in error, or insincere, or possessed (just as its most fanatical enthusiasts once were) of a hidden, *dirigiste* agenda. Certainly they are rarely to be seen denying themselves any of its genuine benefits, especially in the medical sphere. However, there is a really serious criticism to be made, not of technology *per se* (for how can a means be criticized, except in point of its adequacy to its end?), but of its perversions. Strictly speaking, technology as such can hardly be perverted. Only its end can,

and that, being external to it, must stand or fall by independent, non-technological criteria. We do not fault a hammer, say, for being improperly used as a murder weapon. We lay the blame where it belongs, with the murderer (or perhaps, as D.H. Lawrence would say, with the murderee). Nevertheless, there exists what we might call an uncritical spirit or culture of technology. It is not part of technology itself, but consists rather in a particular climate of opinion concerning it and its place in human society. I refer to what is now widely called 'technocracy'.

This word was coined in 1919 by the engineer W.H. Smyth, an admirer of Veblen, to denote the so-called, and by him eagerly awaited, 'rule by technicians'. Nowadays it means something more like rule by believers in technology, especially those who believe in the extension of technological methods and assumptions to social and political matters and the conduct thereof. This is the real perversion of technology: the application of it to human rather than material objects, and the consequent necessity of treating humanity as an unqualified 'It' (against which, of course, Kant's Second Categorical Imperative explicitly warns us). A further, even more sinister perversion must inhere in the substantive, virtually material transformation of the human object, as found in (say) chemical technologies of mind and mood control, certain kinds of genetic manipulation, etc.¹⁰ All this was foreseen by Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World*,¹¹ and amounts to something of what C.S. Lewis called 'the abolition of man'.

The technocratic ideal was not in fact new. In one sense it was a century old: one thinks of the early utopian positivists and social engineers such as Comte, Saint-Simon and Fourier, many of whom actually were engineers by profession. Such people spoke quite blithely of what they imagined to be the coming transformation of human nature, as indeed did Marx, who was by no means as remote from them as he liked to think. A nature which can be wholly transformed is tantamount to pure artifice, that is, to no nature at all. Everybody agrees that natural rights and the like are contentious, but it seems clear that if they exist, they can attach only to something which belongs to nature (since it is nature which confers them), and therefore also *has* a nature. In a good many utopias humanity will be so radically transformed as to stand in no need of rights, and not merely because all possible occasions of conflict will have been removed, but also because, since none will desire freedom, there will be no freedom to protect.

In another, only slightly extended sense, technocracy harks back to the rule of experts recommended by Plato. His Guardian class is not literally made up of technicians or engineers. But their right to rule is

supposed to derive from their rationality, of which, for Plato, the ideal type is, if not exactly instrumental, at any rate mathematical. For Plato moral and political knowledge, the knowledge of intrinsic values, is barely distinguishable from mathematical truth. Accordingly mathematics forms the chief ingredient of the Guardians' education.

The liberal relativist objection to Plato, to the effect that moral and political values are not and cannot be firm, objective or absolute, in the way that mathematical truths are supposed to be, is sound enough as far as it goes. But the weightiest objection is, I think, this: that even if moral and political values were as mathematically unequivocal as Plato supposed (and certainly, like aesthetic values, they pretend to objectivity of a kind), a ruler has no business trying to impose them on his subjects, or setting out to realize them in some imaginary perfect social end-state. It is not that he lacks the right (which, being a deliberately selected, literal aristocracy of the 'best', the Guardians must possess pretty well by definition), but simply that he will fail, and also wreak an immense amount of havoc before he realizes he has done so.

To be sure, socio-political values are ends of a sort. They are not means, certainly, or if they are, they will hardly be effective (in fostering social cohesion, say) if they are frankly treated as such. For to see them in an instrumental light is to reduce them to mere prudential maxims or hypothetical imperatives, and thus to strip them of their moral force. But to call them ends is not to say that they can be finally realized in some programmatic, quasi-technological 'solution'. Perhaps the term 'end' (or goal, or *telos*) is after all a misleading synonym for everything that possesses (or should one say constitutes?) an intrinsic value. For it is hard to see moral values in the light of a substantive purpose to be accomplished, without sensing a category mistake somewhere. Moral values, normally, are not things we actively pursue,¹² but rather conditions to which, in our pursuit of other goods, we are obliged to subscribe.¹³ They are not so much a goal as a guiding principle.

An individual may set out to amass a fortune, be a concert pianist, or achieve religious salvation, without falling into obvious absurdity. Even a society may reasonably pursue certain modest collective goals (winning a war, say). But it is not clear that either an individual or a society can actively pursue happiness, or the good, or justice. Those things are ends, in the sense of not being means, of being intrinsic values. It is doubtful whether, without a certain sentimentality or self-indulgence, they could be self-consciously entertained as goals. It is more likely that they are the outcome, or reward, of pursuing something else (duty or others' interests, for example), or of governing one's conduct by certain

general moral considerations or side-constraints. Justice, of course, belongs to this latter category (only utopians *aim at* justice, in the sense of a comprehensive end-state, and in so doing are constrained to commit much injustice along the way); the good, however, is rather too general to serve as a moral benchmark; while happiness or *eudaimonia*, though it may be the end of virtue (so long, that is, as virtue is pursued as an end), cannot in itself generate any specific constraints. Though it may result from vice, unhappiness is not itself a vice, nor to be avoided for that reason.

Morality, then, though both intrinsically valuable and conducive to human happiness (which is why moral behaviour is rational) is not properly to be understood in quasi-technological terms, as a goal. (I will not need to enlarge on the observation that utilitarianism, however persuasive it may be in furnishing the underlying principle of certain usually military or administrative decisions, is the moral technology *par excellence*.) And there are further reasons why technology is an incomplete or inappropriate model for conduct generally.

One has already been indicated. It will be helpful here to refer to the greatest of all political quasi-technologies, Marxism. Under communism, said Engels, the government of men will be replaced by the administration of things. The phrase was not happy, since what communism actually did was turn its subjects into things. That, however, is just what technology demands, and why, so far as its materials really are material (that is, passive) it succeeds within its own narrow sphere of competence. But that is also why (to say nothing of the tens of millions of corpses) its political extensions have always been a resounding failure. No political technology can take account of people's propensity to prefer their own goals, projects and values to those which unwise rulers have defiantly elected to impose on them. And it can only discount this propensity by extending sufficient coercive power to suppress its manifestations, an enterprise which genuine, material technology, in the shape of weaponry, electronic surveillance, and so on, has proved only too ready to assist. (Wise rulers, of course, will as far as possible support their subjects' goals, projects and values. Political consent, as opposed to mere sufferance, is always reciprocal. The good ruler 'consents to' his subjects' values and preferences, and that is why they consent to his government. They see it as representative of themselves, whether or not any electoral mechanism exists to make it so formally.)

To say that technology, which is after all in one sense purely impersonal, a mere tool, is nevertheless 'only too ready' to assist in the work of repression recalls us once more to the fact that it is actually a human

activity, an expression of human will, which, like all others, is subject to moral permissions and constraints. It is precisely because technological processes and procedures are neutral – that is to say, employable in principle in any cause, good or bad – that they, or more accurately the ends they subserve, require moral scrutiny. That is simply to say that no matter how efficient, elegant, productive or functionally beautiful a technology may be, it is no more self-justifying than any other means, and is always subject to Solon's demand that we should 'regard the end', or at least not violate superior ends (call them rights if you must) in pursuing it.

And the same goes for bureaucracy, which is simply and inescapably the technology of government in advanced societies. There is a radical difference between the so-called 'desk killer' Adolf Eichmann (to whom Hannah Arendt devoted an entire book) and a now endangered species, the traditional British mandarin. It is not just the difference between technological impersonality and civilized impartiality, nor that between blind, obsessive obedience and responsible, educated loyalty. Nor is it simply the difference between the orders each was or is likely to receive, from a Führer on the one hand or the Crown in Parliament on the other, the difference, one might say, between arbitrary power and properly constituted, legally limited authority. It is something to do with the perception that, though specialization and hierarchy (the division of labour, in other words) are necessary for the smooth functioning of government, they are not by themselves sufficient. For civilized government, more is required, namely culture or liberal education, which is a thing much wider than government itself.

We are speaking now of a knowledge beyond that of means, namely a knowledge of ends. If we ask in what it ought to consist, we could do worse than look at what our Victorian forebears, the founders of the modern civil service, prescribed for their rulers and administrators. Classics, mathematics and sport; perhaps we would not nowadays seek to duplicate the recipe exactly. What is disconcerting, however, is the fact that, given a few adjustments, these are substantially what Plato put on the Guardians' curriculum. Maybe Plato was less totalitarian than we have been led to believe. Or perhaps his mistake was to imagine that the Guardians, though selected and educated according to his prescription, would necessarily wish to rule over the Republic as he had originally conceived of it. If truly wise and humane, they might have seen the sense in limiting their own discretionary power, establishing a rule of law and governing in accordance with it. They would doubtless also have abolished the special conditions imposed upon their own lives, sexual communism and the ban on trade, not only as onerous, but also

as too obviously separating them from their subjects. In short, they might have turned the original Republic into something like a civilized liberal state, and been content to live with its inevitable imperfections.

From *Philosophy and Technology*, ed. Roger Fellows (Cambridge University Press 1995). Originally given as a paper at a Royal Institute of Philosophy conference so named, Bradford University, 1994.

Notes to Essay 10

- 1 I hope my information is no less respectable for being derived from J. Bronowski's television series of the 1970s, *The Ascent of Man*.
- 2 [1999] No longer, it appears.
- 3 *Pensées*, §1. I refer to Pascal in similar vein elsewhere, in Essays 5, 18 and 19.
- 4 See *I and Thou* (1923), tr. Ronald Gregor Smith (1966).
- 5 Ernest Gellner, *Plough, Sword and Book: The Structure of Human History* (1988).
- 6 The true ends of liberty, he tells us, are truth, autonomy, self-realization and the rest, but since none is attainable without it, liberty itself becomes almost an end (if indeed it is not one already).
- 7 Though perhaps only when seen in different contexts. Here and now, it may be, in any single perspective, a thing is either a means or an end, but never both at once. We may be considering a duck/rabbit phenomenon.
- 8 I have tried implicitly to answer it in 'Must New Worlds Also Be Good?', *Inquiry*, 38 (1995). The answer, such as it is, is largely in the negative, at least in the case of ends in themselves which are no more than subjectively perceived as such. (For example, torture, for a sadist, might very well be considered an end in itself.)
- 9 A positional good is one whose value or utility depends on others' not having it (e.g., access to a private beach).
- 10 A distinction should be made between the use of chemicals (a) to restore the normal balance of mind in psychiatric patients, and (b) to upset the normal balance (as formerly in the psychiatric 'treatment' of Soviet dissidents). The same distinction holds between genetic engineering used to relieve hereditary disease in individual cases, and the same employed wholesale, say to produce a race of obedient Huxleyan 'epsilons'.
- 11 A complex, scrupulous and rather pessimistic attempt to devise a naturalistic ethic for the technological age in the light of its increasing Huxleyan possibilities and ecological threats is Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility* (1984).
- 12 In *The Wild Duck* Ibsen depicts the kind of fanatical idealist (Gregers Werle) who believes that they are, and the disastrous consequences for others of acting upon this belief.
- 13 Oakeshott's *On Human Conduct* offers a reading of morality in such 'adverbial' terms. There is conceivably an affinity with Nozick's conception of morality as a set of 'side-constraints' (see main text, to follow).

11

Organic Society: a Note

The philosophical contention that society as such is an organism goes back to Plato and Aristotle. Since the Romantic period, however, many aesthetes and literati have used the term 'organic society' to denote a specific, idealized kind of society against which modern civilization is to be judged. For them the 'organic society' is local, rural and traditional rather than cosmopolitan, urban and mobile. Its central feature is that in it all human relations, including and especially the economic and political, are in some sense personal. This distinguishes it from both 'market' and totalitarian societies, which are rejected, along with industrialism, as 'mechanical'.

Kant defined an organism as a whole of which 'every part is reciprocally both means and end'. In the philosophical sense, an 'organic' society is one in which individuals (the parts) are not only indispensable to society (the whole), but are also regarded, in turn, as its Aristotelian *telos* (goal, purpose, consummation). In a 'mechanical' society, by contrast, either the individual exists to fulfil a 'social' function wholly external to himself (collectivism), or, conversely, society exists purely to satisfy his egoistic needs and desires (individualism). The organicist contends that neither 'society' nor 'the individual' should mechanically 'determine' the other, since the two are mutual correlatives.

Seen in this light, a collectivist society is a mere monolith or ant-heap, while an individualist society is not only aesthetically and morally unpleasing, but also cannot command the allegiance necessary for its survival. Individualism, Plato observed of Athenian democracy, will always tend to collapse, first into anarchy, and then into collectivism (tyranny).

Organicists emphasize the value of spontaneity – i.e. of non-mechanical organization, change and development – in social arrangements. However,

they see the individual's spontaneity as an expression of his social essence, and hence as primarily altruistic. Thus they regard its more egoistic manifestations as 'unnatural' or even as coerced, for all that formal coercion may be relatively lacking. Indeed, where their Eastern counterparts have criticised collectivism, post-Romantic Western champions of the organic society have overwhelmingly concentrated their fire on *laissez-faire*. They have done so on account of the materialism and 'alienation' (of society and the individual from each other and from their respective 'true' natures) which *laissez-faire* is supposed to foster, and have reaffirmed the freedom, autonomy and spiritual wholeness which it is similarly alleged to repress or deny.

The accusation is of course paradoxical, and smacks of Berlin's 'positive freedom'. But the implication is serious, to the effect that, as in modern theories of collective choice, the unforeseen aggregate outcome of 'free' individual choices may be a social system, or a cultural climate, which either the choosers do not desire, or which, even if they do, is not objectively desirable.

As a cultural rallying-cry 'the organic society' has united people and movements as politically diverse as Coleridge and Cobbett, Ruskin and Morris, Hardy and Lawrence, Yeats and Rilke, F.R. Leavis and E.P. Thompson, the New Left and the Old Right, Eastern European dissidents, and the recently emergent 'Greens'. Many observers see this striking concurrence of opinion as evidence that something is indeed wrong with the modern world. Others, however, regard 'the organic society' at best as utopian nostalgia, and at worst as a feudal-authoritarian reaction to spontaneous socio-economic development. The latter, they would say, liberates precisely because it depersonalizes all relationships except those which the parties involved have expressly decided shall be personal. ('Contract', in Maine's terminology, has superseded 'status'.) Durkheim, indeed, applied the term 'organic society', not to some self-conscious, traditional, close-knit order, but to its opposite, the infinitely complex, unfolding world of modern urban capitalism, governed by Adam Smith's 'invisible hand'.

From Nigel Ashford and Stephen Davies, eds, *A Dictionary of Conservatism and Libertarian Thought* (Routledge, 1991).

12

Four Cheers for Normality

1. Arnold's Cultural Politics

Matthew Arnold, the English poet, educationist and critic, was born on Christmas Eve, 1822. He died in 1888. His father Thomas was the famous headmaster and Oxford historian, whose reforms at Rugby initiated the wholesale transformation of the previously brutal English 'public' schools into something like genuine centres of learning and manners. (Some say that the real object was to manufacture an imperial governing class.) Less zealous, the younger Arnold idled, aesthetically but not unprofitably, first at Oxford and later in Paris. In 1847 he became secretary to the Whig politician Lord Lansdowne, a post which brought him into high society and also left him leisure for writing. His first published poems (1849) surprised all his acquaintance by their distinction, serious-mindedness and elegiac melancholy. Arnold continued to write poetry until 1867. Its subject-matter is distinctively modern: alienation, disenchantment, isolation, purposelessness, the collapse of faith, and (as in 'Dover Beach') the barely adequate solace afforded by love and friendship.

In 1851 Arnold was appointed H.M. Inspector of Schools, a position he held for 35 years. It involved extensive domestic and foreign travel, and furnished him with copious material for his social, political and cultural criticism. His thought has often been attacked for its impressionistic, unsystematic character. Nevertheless, its salient features, most notably as seen in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), may be summarized as follows.

Following Burke and (presumably) Hegel, and in sharp contrast to his anti-statist Liberal contemporaries, Arnold conceives of the State as 'the national best self', 'the nation in its collective and corporate character',

and (in 'Democracy', 1861) its 'representative acting-power'. The State is the formal expression of what Rousseau (though not Arnold) called the General Will, being the organ, repository and guardian of the nation's (and also of humanity's) highest and most definitive spiritual values. Political by definition, it is also, like constitutional monarchy, 'above' day-to-day, partisan politics. It cannot be reduced to the individual and sectional interests of which, to orthodox Liberal eyes, it appears to be composed and which, if it really were so composed, would destroy its claim to centrality and authority.

At the same time, and though fiercely critical of extreme inequalities in property ('Equality', 1878), Arnold is no socialist. He nowhere claims that the State should organize society, monopolize and direct production, or the like. Arnold's State is perhaps best seen as fulfilling some of the functions of a traditional aristocratic class (e.g., ruling, 'setting the tone' of society, etc.) whilst avoiding the latter's tendency to pursue the interests only of its 'everyday self'.

All classes, in fact, have this propensity. Arnold gives the satirical nickname 'Barbarians' to the aristocracy, and (following the German usage) 'Philistines' to the commercial, religiously nonconformist middle class. (The working class he labels merely the 'Populace'. While sincerely deploring their poverty and hopelessness, he views their increasing power with apprehension.) The solution, as in Plato, to this inevitable class self-interest is to take power away from every class individually and (somehow) transfer it to a superior, because disinterested, centre of authority. Every class, Arnold believes, contains a number of 'aliens' motivated, not by class interest, but solely by humane principle. Such people aspire to realize the collective 'best self', and it is to the progressive realization, Aristotle-fashion, of this 'best self' that Arnold's 'culture' (by which he means 'high' culture) impels us.

However, Arnold stops well short of Plato's (and, some would say, his own father's) prescription. He does not recommend the systematic recruitment of a 'cultured' class (whether of 'aliens' or otherwise), still less its direct political empowerment. This is because the cultured outlook – cool, mannerly, tentative, inquiring, empirical, non-partisan, disposed to see all sides of a question, loving truth rather than craving certainty – conflicts with the blunt, coarse-grained urgencies of government. Like business and the cruder forms of religion, politics (at least, day-to-day politics) cannot help but focus upon the immediate and the practical. In so doing, however, it blinds us to other, less instrumental considerations, and thus far, albeit unintentionally, narrows and corrupts consciousness. It follows that culture is both truest to itself, and politically

most effective, when standing critically somewhat aloof from practice (*'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time'*, 1864).

Why then should politics listen to culture at all, and not simply go its own blinkered, self-confident way? Arnold does not say so explicitly, but it appears that, in exchange for official recognition and support, culture both legitimates and humanizes the political order. In alliance, culture and power can dignify and enrich each other. Thence arises the fact of establishment, which is central to what Arnold would call any national life worthy of the name. Establishment amounts, in effect, to granting quasi-political status to certain spontaneous cultural values and institutions, whilst continuing to respect their essential autonomy. This checks their centrifugal, sectarianizing tendency, anchors them firmly in high culture, with all the attendant prestige and authority, and thereby secures their allegiance. Thus, scandalously to Protestant ears, Arnold recommends that the Roman Catholic Church be officially established in Ireland, where it is overwhelmingly the majority's religion and informs the entire public consciousness. (Arnold's view of religion is evidently not a believer's, but by turns a pragmatist's and an aesthete's.)

Culture, we are told plausibly enough, stands for 'a free play of mind'. Valuable in itself, it ought also, Arnold says, to be directed upon our 'stock notions and habits'. But how can either religion or authority survive such interrogation? How different at bottom is the pejorative epithet 'stock' from the laudatory 'established'? Why should not the politically Liberal 'Philistines', illiberal in culture though they may be, equally celebrate their cherished 'mechanical' (Arnold's word) freedom, that of 'doing as one likes', especially in religious matters? Should culture's 'free play of mind' itself be subject to question? If not, then might not 'culture' also be something of a 'stock' notion, and none the worse for being so?

Such ambiguities can probably be clarified, but it is doubtful whether Arnold himself even noticed them. Though acute and perceptive, Arnold had little gift for argument and (by his own admission) little faith in it. Many of his key formulations – 'the best that is known and thought in the world', 'sweetness and light', 'right reason', 'the pursuit of perfection', 'reason and the will of God', etc. – are damagingly vague, and not less so for being endlessly repeated in talismanic, quasi-incantatory fashion. Arnold, it has been said, is persuasive largely in proportion to the reader's pre-existing disposition to sympathize with him.

Nevertheless, Arnold's overall message was profound and humane. His conception of establishment is both novel and important. So too is his antithesis of Hellenism (right thinking, liberal culture, all-round

human development) and Hebraism (right conduct, vigorous action, moralistic one-sidedness). His prejudice in favour of the former, given his (and our) historical circumstances, seems entirely just, as does his attack on religious and political nostrums (each, to its Hebraistic devotee, being the 'one thing necessary'). Arnold's socio-political writings were overwhelmingly topical, but their fundamental seriousness (which always shows through, despite his rooted hostility to puritanism and his often playful manner) has ensured that they remain living literature. No one interested in the same or similar questions, either today or in any likely future, can afford to ignore them.

From *The Salisbury Review*, XVI, 1 (October 1997). Originally written as a dictionary article.

2. The Politics of Soap (1987)

Three weeks before Mrs Thatcher's recent election victory, a senior Scottish clergyman publicly lambasted for their 'materialism' both the Prime Minister and the vastly popular American TV soap operas *Dallas* and *Dynasty*. Labour's campaign prudently spared the soaps, but kept the same brickbats (all it had left) for Mrs Thatcher. But what exactly is 'materialism', and do the soaps encourage it? Was it really Alexis Colby who won the election?

Only the miser prizes wealth for its own sake. The genuine materialist values it neither for its own sake, nor (like the ordinary sensible person) for the useful or agreeable things it can procure, but for the power, status and influence associated with it. Those things are a permanent feature of any human society. Hence it is idle to deplore them. What matters is that they should go to the right, not the wrong, people.

But to the materialist any such talk is humbug. For him, power and the rest are simply the highest objects of consumption, and, as such, self-justifying. Rather than pursue them directly in (say) politics, he will take the indirect and far less hazardous route to them of wealth. But even that smacks of effort. So, in the end, your average sensual materialist is content, with the rest of us, to identify himself with wealth at a distance, preferably with his feet up.

That, one might think, explains the appeal of *Dallas* and *Dynasty*. But does it? Are they really no more than hymns to materialism, fantasies of self-centred, irresponsible wealth and the power it supposedly either confers or signifies?

Without his wealth (as Mrs Thatcher once truly observed) the Good Samaritan would have had no wherewithal to be generous. To be sure, *Dynasty's* oil patriarch Blake Carrington is no Good Samaritan. He does little except minister to the internal combustion engine (without which civilization would collapse) and employ an army of domestics on the proceeds. But if Blake does nothing visibly altruistic with his wealth, neither does he abuse it. Wealth in *Dynasty*, though conventionally desirable (in the sense that any normal person would prefer it to poverty), is morally neutral. Blake's wealth is the modern equivalent of kingship in Shakespeare. Like a plinth, or a gilt frame, it serves merely to emphasize his dramatic and ethical importance. His real role, together with his wife Krystle, is neither economic nor political, but symbolic: to stand, in some ill-defined fashion quite independent of wealth or power, for love, loyalty and integrity, in contrast to his ex-wife, the vengeful siren Alexis.

If wealth were virtuous (as materialists believe), so too would Alexis be. But just as Blake's wealth simply underscores his pasteboard goodness, so does Alexis' wealth underscore her pasteboard wickedness, which mostly consists of ever more fantastic attempts to bring Blake and Krystle to destruction. Her extravagant sexuality (like the Ugly Sisters' in *King Lear*) adds a traditional, even a puritanical, touch to the ensemble, being a deliberate contrast to the cut-glass, wifely fidelity of the aptly named (if vilely spelt) Krystle. (And if it's genuinely sexy as well, what of it? How else is a *femme* to be *fatale*?)

Despite its title, *Dynasty* is less strong on the family than its folksier rival *Dallas*. The late Jock Ewing and his wife 'Miss' Ellie – a name eloquent of barn dances, gingham, pigtails and virginity – were a monument to Middle American monogamy. The infamous J.R. will continue to roam, but he will always return to Sue Ellen (if only because no one else can stick either of them) and their infant hope John Ross. Indeed, even during his long-drawn-out tussle with the virtuous Bobby, J.R.'s villainy seemed always to be engaged less on his own behalf than, in some obscure way, on the family's. Moreover, all that murderous strife was enacted within a clan who continued to live almost literally on top of one another at Southfork, and whose collective welfare always took final precedence.

But, the moralist will say, that welfare is still materialistically conceived. I would say, rather, that it is symbolized in material terms, a very different proposition. In any case, is it selfish, or materialistic, to wish to secure material benefits to those whom nature commands you to love? During their strike of 1974, the miners were constantly abused

for their 'greed', 'materialism' and 'holding the nation to ransom'. Certainly that strike, unlike its successor in 1984, was about wages. Yet not one miner in a hundred will have been seeking the extra money for anyone's sake but his family's, whose interests, on any genuinely Tory reckoning, he is pre-eminently bound to promote. The language of the miners' critics, had they but known it, was substantially that of socialism, the uncritically accepted foundation of most public policy between 1964 and 1979, and now – a hangover from that dismal, stupid epoch – the hidden premise, as it seems to me, of all this claptrap about 'materialism'.

Materialism exists and is obviously bad, but it is not identical with the proper pursuit, enjoyment and use of wealth. Once, when the educated classes knew their Aristotle and Cicero, such distinctions were well understood. Indeed, they were simply the distillation of that popular wisdom which, though notably absent from pulpit and academy today, still survives in soap opera. Garish and simplistic *Dallas* and *Dynasty* may be, but they do not glorify the wealth they so lavishly depict. (According to a recent IBA audience survey, indeed, the wealthiest soap opera families are seen as the least happy, and hence inspire no envy.) No less than *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street*, but simply using different conventions, they address themselves, rather, to what millions of ordinary people (together with Aristotle, Cicero and Shakespeare, who in effect spoke for them) have always recognized as the serious issues in life: family, loyalty, love and jealousy, honour, ambition and power.

The soaps, in fact, are modern morality plays, ultimately differing little in their values from the traditional Christmas pantomime. Thoroughly to enjoy them, of course, you need a mental age of about 12. But under the officious rule of their detractors – a prospect now happily receding – we would soon all have needed either a mental age of 12, or the equivalent in alcohol, to find enjoyment in anything.

From *The Sunday Telegraph*, 13 September 1987.

3. In Defence of *Viz*

A little over a year ago, in 1990, the so-called 'adult' comic *Viz* sold more than a million copies,¹ giving it the highest circulation of any British magazine apart from the TV guides. The University of Connecticut, meanwhile, had just banned 'inappropriately directed laughter'.

Whatever that may be, *Viz* must surely exemplify it, to judge by the chorus of disapproval which greeted its achievement.

The high-minded *Independent* spoke for its fellow detractors in calling *Viz* 'sexist, crude, juvenile'. More surprisingly, Auberon Waugh had already stigmatized it as 'the authentic voice of modern Britain'. He is, after all, a formidable rival to *Viz* in the lavatory humour and general bad taste stakes, as anyone must concede who recalls his (I thought very funny) mock-defences of whaling ('people complain about dog mess, but . . . these fearsome creatures roam the seas defaecating wholly at random') and public breast-feeding ('enables gentlemen to compare ladies' charms in this respect without first buying them dinner or listening to their political opinions'). Perhaps he is right about *Viz*; but if so, modern Britain may be by no means so deplorable as he suggests.

I first saw *Viz* a couple of years back, when some of my students presented me with a copy. 'We thought you might like this,' they said without apparent irony. It is true that *Viz* is (at best) undergraduate humour, and therefore perilously hit-and-miss; true also that in some of its material the events depicted, and the language used, are not for the fastidious; true again, judging by the advertisements it carries for plastic turds, tape-recorded farts and so on, that at least some of its readers must find the mere mention of such things screamingly funny.

But it is not altogether obvious that *Viz* itself does. (It describes its advertisements, over-charitably, as 'tat'.) No doubt those who enjoy smut for its own sake can find enough in *Viz* to keep them going, though obscenity features, in fact, only in a minority of skits. But what *Viz*'s critics fail to see is that even its obscenity subserves a wider purpose, which is simply parody, satire, or ordinary mainstream humour.

This has not always been so, as can be seen from a perusal of all six hardback anthologies of *Viz* (an exercise I would not recommend, having just performed it at a single sitting). *Viz* has been going for eleven years and fifty-odd issues. Its original ethos survives in the unlovely titles (e.g., *The Dog's Bollocks*) given to even the more recent compilations. It is too much to say that *Viz* has grown up of late (how 'grown-up', after all, is *The Miller's Tale?*), but it is more sophisticated than it seems, and immensely more so than it was.

The early issues of *Viz* would more than vindicate its current critics. Gratuitous obscenity and violence (albeit of the 'cartoon' kind) were the staple fare, the story-lines were too feeble to be sustained for more than a few frames, and the draughtmanship was as primitive and lavatorial as the humour. It did not deserve to survive, and it is doubtless a black mark against Eighties culture that it did. On the other hand, it

may have been necessary for *Viz* to get the worst playground crudities out of its system before it could develop into something better. (Its pathetic and repellent imitator *Gas*, by contrast, is beyond redemption.)

The crudest of the early strips have gone. Johnny Fartpants' peculiarity was necessarily of limited appeal.² And despite their spoof science-fiction provenance, the only laugh (apart from the adverb) I ever got out of Buster Gonad's Unfeasibly Large Testicles was the parkie's comment at the municipal tennis court: 'You'll have to pay double, son. Those testicles constitute a person.' (An interesting sidelight on St Augustine's observations concerning the penis.) The schoolboy Finbarr Saunders was wont to extract the grossest *double entendres* (it rhymes, see?) from every harmless exchange between his mother and their neighbour Mr Gimlet. But the joke was really on him, since, despite his relentless smutty-mindedness, the one thing he was too innocent to imagine was that the two of them were actually having an affair right under his nose. (The famous *Monty Python* 'nudge-nudge, wink-wink' sketch made a similar point, though with an added pathos, the protagonist being adult.) The strip was tiresome, however, because the ironic climax was invariably swamped by the sheer volume of smut preceding it. The simple-minded might be excused for supposing that the latter was the real point (as perhaps it was).

The only full-time smut-merchant still in business is the TV presenter, Roger Mellie ('The Man on the Telly'). Roger's brutish on-screen language and behaviour, his sexist gaffes, and his ingenious schemes for perverted game shows are the permanent despair of his mild-mannered studio chief. They are occasionally amusing, but only because they outrage the decorums specifically associated with television. And up to a point rightly so, because the medium has always assumed a ridiculous self-importance which masks its intrinsic tendency to trivialize. Such as it is, the humour resembles that of Barry Humphries' 'Australian cultural attaché' Sir Les Patterson, lying largely in the incongruity between the supposed dignity of the office and the grossness of the actual incumbent.

But the dog has now caught up with its own tail, in that Roger, in an animated version, is actually appearing on Channel 4. Even though the story and dialogue are taken from the original, the result is desperately unfunny. One reason, perhaps, is that the imaginative scope of the original is constricted by the fact of performance; another is that real TV obscenity is embarrassing, so that the spectator who thought the mere idea of it amusing is suddenly confronted with his own failure of imagination.

Some things are permanently beyond mockery: genuine piety, love, grief, heroism, helpless physical affliction. I cannot discover that *Viz*

has ever seen fit to rubbish them. For Nicholas Farrell of the *Sunday Telegraph*, however, *Viz* lacks 'real nerve': 'it does not make fun of blacks and Arabs'. But why should it? There is much wrong with thinking that being black or an Arab (or white, likewise) gives one the right to make a nuisance of oneself. But since there is and could be nothing wrong in itself with being either, there is nothing one might justifiably make fun of. Even in a one-off strip with the *risqué* title 'Thieving Gypsy Bastards', the target was not the gypsies themselves, who were more like scamps than villains. Their astonishing effrontery (camping in a hapless citizen's front garden and blithely helping themselves to his goods) was comical rather than odious. The target was rather our official humbug where 'minorities' are concerned, as represented by the 'Council Gypsy Patronisation Department' who rewarded them with free booze and fags, an instant 'toilet and washroom block', and a rubbish skip as empty at the week's end as their unwilling host's garden was full.³ All crude, no doubt, but surely harmless, and certainly preferable to whatever is meant by 'real nerve'.

Obesity may reasonably be called an affliction. But it is only funny as the wages of gluttony. Even then its victims rise to heroic status, as do *Viz*'s Fat Slags and Tubby Johnson ('Is he fat? You bet your hat!'), in virtue of the inexhaustible energy and ingenuity with which, like Falstaff, Billy Bunter or Wimpy,⁴ they pursue almost anything edible. Substitute for food any other obsession – sex, lying, meanness, DIY, wanting to be a quizmaster or appear in *The Guinness Book of Records* – to generate the content of almost any strip. Comedy, for Bergson, lay in the spectacle of life overcome by mechanism. What these examples show, however, is that the mechanical has its own triumphant vitality.

The Royal Family feature regularly in *Viz*. The target, however, is not the real-life Royals (about whom we know nothing) but their tabloid simulacra. (The 'source' for a feature headed 'Has the Queen Lost her Marbles?' was a deranged Palace employee sacked for stealing cutlery; this is hardly the subtlest of ironies, but it certainly beats the random abusiveness of *Spitting Image*.) In fact, the tabloid parodies ('I Made Love to Esther Rantzen in a Previous Life') are usually among *Viz*'s best things. Tammy Cohen in the *Independent* instanced as particularly juvenile the 'Shag and Tell Revelations of Hollywood Stuntman' ('you name 'em, I've bonked 'em'). No doubt this piece would have deserved her strictures had it appeared, straight, in the *Sunday Sport*, but then it didn't. That it wasn't, in fact, very funny is nothing to the point. The point is, is to parody something juvenile itself juvenile?

The butt of the spoof Readers' Letters and Top Tips is less the grossness of the popular press than its incomparable British dottiness. As in real life, Top Tips range from the almost-credible ('an elastic band with a dab of toothpaste makes an economical substitute for chewing gum, and it's better for your teeth') to the surreal ('by making a simple periscope from toilet roll tubes and pocket mirrors it is possible to watch TV from under your floorboards').

Viz began and is still based in Newcastle. It assumes a semi-affectionate familiarity with popular, and in particular with Geordie, culture. The sub-text is *Beano* and *Dandy*, sport, the electronic media, the tabloids, and teenage romance and pop magazines. Nevertheless, *Viz* treats popular culture's more mawkish or yobbish manifestations to well-deserved ridicule. One issue, guying Franklin Mint and the like, offered a 'porcelain-style' Crying Gazza Doll (actually a paper cut-out, the tears to be supplied from a kitchen squeezezy bottle), so that readers could re-live the historic moment in the 1990 World Cup when 'an entire nation wept like willows' in sympathy with the 'roly-poly Geordie funster and football sensation' who 'showed the world he was big enough to cry'.

As for yobbishness, the Bacons (with whom the strip's header promises 'more swearing and violence') are so vehemently proletarian as to have fallen right off the sociologist's map. Such total, incorrigible double-essers in speech and manners could only, if there were such a category, be F2s. Yet they would not change their world for any other, because to them it makes perfect sense. Biffa Bacon's mental universe is bounded entirely by the purport of the queries 'Did you spill my pint?' and 'Did you call me a puff?'¹⁵ In one preposterous episode Biffa's 'Fatha', by telling him that 'my pint called you a puff', tricks him into smashing the said pint ('naebody calls me a puff'), so that Biffa then qualifies for the statutory punch in the face. In another Biffa (like Molière's miser arresting himself for the theft of his own cash-box) is driven to beat himself up in the chip shop for lack of anyone else to assault. Maybe those examples are too close to reality to be funny, but, like the sub-culture they mock, they certainly have a grim internal logic.

On a similarly unsavoury note there is Sid the Sexist, the 'silver-tongued cavalier' and hopeless virgin whose (utopian) motto is 'Tits Oot for the Lads'. Here it will be instructive to recall the *Independent's* charge of sexism, and to rope in also for the defence both 'Fat Slags' and 'Millie Tant and her Radical Conscience'. The whole point of 'Fat Slags' is that Sandra and Tracy (whose 'purple leg blotches' are part of their make-up, and applied from a tub so labelled) are *not* typical of their sex. They represent (so a female Geordie pupil and *Viz*-reader assures me)

simply a small but instantly recognizable sub-class. The loony feminist Millie would be funnier if she were a harder target, but she is deliberately contrasted with her long-suffering 'normal' flat-mate Jane, who bears the brunt of her interminable harangues. Sid the Sexist is perhaps a little too normal for some male readers not to feel uncomfortable at his invariably humiliating come-uppances. Nevertheless, a strip explicitly aimed at sexism, which exposes the inadequacies from which it stems, and which sides wholeheartedly with the objects of Sid's grotesque advances, can hardly be called sexist, even if Sid's amorous persistence, like the Fat Slags', verges on the heroic. (Unlike Sid, Sandra and Tracy always score. The distinction is no doubt 'sexist', but who can say at which sex's expense?)

Here is a selection of *Viz*'s so far unmentioned targets, all (to my mind) fair game: Euro-fanatics, featherbedded agribusiness ('Farmer Palmer'), selfish children and old people ('Spoilt Bastard' and 'Mrs Brady'), monomaniacal Greens, War Picture Library, firearms culture, Ben Elton and radical comedy ('Lenny Left'), pornography and automated sex, the Armed Forces' *macho* recruitment campaigns, Enid Blyton and the 'sneak' ethic ('Jack Black'). 'The Modern Parents', a new strip, is Posy Simmonds with the gloves off. Not content with forbidding Tarquin to join the Cubs, write to Father Christmas or go to church (all ideologically unsound), Malcolm and Cressida stuff the poor boy with 'whole earth products' and make him watch them 'having intercourse' when (understandably) he would rather play with his friends. You will be glad to hear that Tarquin gets a merry Christmas after all, to wit, parents in police detention, James Bond on the box, stacks of McDonald's, and a gallon of cola ('with extra E-numbers').

Despite its satirical element *Viz* should not be taken too seriously. Its overriding end is simply to raise a laugh. Some of the humour is purely formal, depending on simple bathos or the inversion of popular narrative stereotypes. 'Black Bag, the Faithful Border Bin-Liner', a poker-faced adventure series of sublime idiocy, burlesques the *Dandy's* 'Black Bob', while 'The Pathetic Sharks', a species of marine super-nerds, is a distant, ironic echo of *Jaws*. 'Nude Motorcycle Girl' and 'Topless Skateboard Nun' are *Wonder Woman* pushed to the limit of absurdity; while *Superman* and his like are guyed in 'The Brown Bottle', a bank clerk who, having guzzled a crate of Newcastle Brown in a telephone booth, emerges as civilization's last-ditch defence against Cider Woman, a fearsomely abusive and similarly inebriated bag-lady.

Such things carry no 'message'; their appeal, indeed, lies in that very fact. Nevertheless, *Viz* as a whole does have (if the expression is not too

grand) an implicit ideology, one suggested by the American essayist Joseph Sobran's (very contemporary) remark that 'humour is the revolt of the normal against the established'. (Not so long ago the two, as they should be, were the same.) The reader will have noticed that *Viz's* contents tend to be grouped in antithetical pairs: 'Fat Slags', for example, being balanced by 'Sid the Sexist', 'Modern Parents' by 'Victorian Dad' (another novelty, so far more sordid than funny), and the straightforwardly birdbrained 'Terry Fuckwitt' by the imbecilically dysfunctional philosopher 'Mr Logic' (evidently derived from Alan Bennett's Bertrand Russell in *Beyond the Fringe*). *Viz* and Aristotle, it will readily be conceded, are not natural bedfellows. Nevertheless, its humour, like his ethics, is based on the 'doctrine of the mean', that is, on the rejection of contrasted extremes. Though (on the whole) neither stupid nor brutal, *Viz* is resolutely unenlightened, by which I mean that it takes human nature pretty much as it finds it. Much in it is genuinely funny, because behind all the vulgarity there lies a simple, credible and still widely entertained ideal of sanity and normality.

As for lavatory humour, Milan Kundera has observed that the essence of kitsch, and the first premise of tyranny, is 'the absolute denial of shit'. This is not, of course, to say that taste and freedom must therefore consist in its monotonous assertion. The cultural historian Jeffrey Richards is quoted by Nicholas Farrell as saying that vulgarity on *Viz's* scale, though it has always existed in oral discourse, is validated by appearing in print, and thus 'leads to a coarsening of public taste'. This is important and true generally, and would also be true in this instance if public taste had not already been destroyed by Gilbert and George (the authors of 'Shit Faith', a painting depicting a crucifix composed of human excrement), Andres ('Piss Christ') Serrano, the sainted Mapplethorpe and two or three decades' worth of their predecessors.

Unlike *Viz*, such things are not only utterly humourless, but also purely and gratuitously offensive. They have been defended, moreover, applauded even, by the 'progressive' establishment, who are precisely the people most likely (since they are 'offended' only by the very concept of offence) to dismiss *Viz* as 'childish'. And indeed, few things are more disconcerting to pretentiousness, folly and insincerity than a child's clear-eyed, mistrustful gaze, or its telling response to them (frequently deployed in *Viz*): 'Mummy, I'm scared.'

In such a climate, what weapons remain to normality for its defence except the V-sign and the raspberry? And what serious person ever held their indecency against Chaucer, Rabelais and even Swift, once he understood the end – truth – to which it was directed? To close on an

Orwellian note, which brand of indecency is one to prefer, the perverted nihilism (as Orwell saw it) of Dalí, or the harmless saturnalian ribaldry of Donald McGill, and (as it seems to me) of *Viz*? Which is worse, the occasional humorous holiday from good taste, or the self-righteous pomposities which mask a sinister, sustained assault on all taste, all decency and all value?⁶

From *The Times Literary Supplement*, 7 February, 1992.

4. A Voice from the Fringe: Jim Rose

The Jim Rose Circus Sideshow, The Acropolis, Calton Hill, Edinburgh (Edinburgh Festival Fringe 1993)

In Sweden Jim Rose has fallen foul of animal rights protesters. Our own metropolitan broadsheets greeted his recent London run with fastidious liberal distaste. Less inhibited, Scotland's tabloid *Daily Record* is currently bawling for him to be banned. Anxious, therefore, for a parting glimpse of an endangered species, your reviewer caught Jim and his self-styled freaks in Edinburgh, on the last leg of their British tour (the show is American, from Seattle).

Scene: a dimly-lit circus tent of about 300 capacity, three-quarters full. Audience: mostly between 18 and 25, looking as nearly normal as such people can. On the dais, a top-hatted, black-veiled undertaker's mute, catatonically hunched over an electronic keyboard. Backdrops: centre, the show's title, with vignettes representing the acts; left and right, banners reading 'Be-yoo-tiful' and 'It's Science'. Spookily out-of-tune fair-ground music, as if written by Bartók for steam organ, bursts from the suddenly galvanized figure at the keys. In leaps Jim, thirty-something, slim, naked to the waist, slightly raddled but still good-looking. 'The most beautiful spot in the most beautiful city,' he announces sonorously, like a W.C. Fields mountebank, 'let's see if we can fuck that up.'

Enter Matt the Tube, a tall thin skinhead, nipple-ringed, with an incongruous facial resemblance to Noël Coward. He feeds a black condom up his nose and retrieves it from his mouth, then *vice versa*. Stretching it across his ten fingers' cage, he manoeuvres it, helmet-fashion, down over his head until it covers his nostrils. Then he inflates it through his nose, so that a huge smoked-latex cloche extends a foot or more above his shaven dome ('Dickhead!' shrieks Jim). He snaps one hand in a leg-hold trap, then slams a 2lb tin of beans down on to the other with a

sickening crunch, denting the tin. Cheered on by us all, he blows up a red hot water bottle to the size of a small sheep. It whitens to pink as the rubber stretches, the side panels bulging out into two vast lobes. 'Looks like a big bum coming out of his mouth, doesn't it?' says Jim, and it does. One final pulmonary heave and it explodes, rags of rubber scattering like fleeing bats. Matt collapses, exhausted. 'It's science,' says Jim.

Jim's wife Bebe, a perky biker's moll in hot pants, throws ordinary pub darts into Jim's bare back, where they bob and dangle like fuchsias. She plucks them out, and an audible *frisson* sweeps the audience. 'I did it for you,' says Jim beatifically, addressing us. (He says the same later, after pinning a banknote to his forehead with a staple gun.)

Next comes Mr Lifto, a young man smooth and willowy as a girl, with a beautiful, pensive face, a tomboy's crop, gigantic triangular earrings, and a satin cocktail mini-dress under his leather biker's jacket. He hooks two domestic irons, each attached to a short wire trace, into his earrings and whirls them about till his ear-lobes stretch a hand's breadth out. He thrusts a wire coat-hanger through his tongue and hangs his jacket on it. 'He hasn't come *out* of the closet,' shouts Jim exultantly, 'he *is* the closet!'

Stripping down to the statutory nipple-rings, he passes a chain through a perforated concrete block, shackles each end to a nipple, and slowly, with no hands, raises the block from the floor. It drags his pectoral skin out into two large triangular flaps, diagrammatic cubist breasts, which thrum dangerously, like close-hauled sails. 'Steady on,' says Jim nervously, 'we've got three weeks to get through yet.'

Finally, Mr Lifto turns his back, peels down his tights, swathes his sex modestly in a puffball of shaving foam from which only the inevitable ring protrudes, faces the audience, hangs the two irons from his member and swings them demonically to and fro between his legs to the accompaniment of a deafening, orgiastic cacophony of music, cheers, whistles, cries and groans.

Next comes the Torture King, a pony-tailed hippy with the face of a Counter-Reformation Christ. A brave girl from the audience feeds him with a broken light-bulb, which he crunches up reflectively. ('If you're hungry enough,' says Jim, 'you'll eat anything.') He lies down on a bed of swords. Matt piles two breeze blocks on his chest and shatters them with a sledgehammer.

Actually this is a time-honoured stunt. It is illustrated by an engraving in *Cassell's Book of Sports and Pastimes* of about 1870, in which an anvil stands in for the blocks (the inertia absorbs the shock), and two

moustachioed Captain Webb-style figures for the Torture King and his accomplice. Equally venerable is Jim's razor-blade routine. First slicing its wrapper with each to show it is sharp, he swallows half a dozen, chases them with some string, then draws them forth threaded, each one seemingly expelled by a ghastly anti-peristaltic spasm. It is obviously a trick, but I can neither see nor imagine how it is done.

After the interval the King returns, his torso stuck with enough pins for several St Sebastians. Solemn, intent, he threads a skewer through his cheeks and waggles a hatpin exploratorily through his apparently unpierced forearm ('I've seen junkies faint,' says Jim, 'but you don't get your money's worth unless you look'). Barefoot, like Lancelot on the bridge, he mounts and descends a ladder of swords. ('If he slips now,' says Jim, slicing a cucumber on the treads, 'we'll have *two* Torture Kings.')

Now comes the apotheosis: 'We're going to electrocute *your* Torture King tonight.' At Jim's command we raise both arms and bow down to our benefactor. 'Thank you, Torture King,' we chorus in unison, 'Hail, King of Torture.' A high-tension generator is brought in. Fiery snakes hum and crackle out of it in the darkness. The King puts a long pearl tube in his mouth, picks up a metal wand, plunges it into the glowing plasma, and the tube lights up. 'Christ,' exclaims Jim fervently, 'a fucking electric Jesus!'

He places a fluorescent ring (crown or halo?) on the King's head, and a fluorescent crucifix in the King's other hand. Transfigured, ablaze with light, his sad, patient face suffused with unspeakable pity and love, the King scatters his benediction over us even as he continues to suffer for our sake. Overcome with emotion, 'He gave you his balls,' Jim screams above the thunderous keyboard, 'now give it up for THE TORTURE KING!!!' And so we do, at a volume calculated to raise the roof, or the dead.

The two remaining acts have already attracted much publicity but are still worth describing. It seems that our musician ('thank his Mom for teaching him piano since he was six: he composed all the music') has a second string to his bow. There was reason to keep him veiled for, with his funeral garb removed, he is actually The Human Enigma, another skinhead, hideously tattooed, face and all, in a jigsaw pattern with pieces missing (enigma, see?), and wearing a cartoon bulldog's spiked collar. ('He's twenty-four now; what's he going to be like when he's sixty?')

The Enigma's speciality is live grubs and insects; eating them, to be precise. A front-row conscript presents him with a squirming ball of

maggots, which he wolfs straight off her palm. Some fall to the ground. 'Don't eat that one,' roars Jim, 'it's been on the floor!' A crunchy, leggy snack of grasshoppers follows ('A few escape his working jaws', Jim observes drily, 'to make their way into cricket history'). The Enigma gapes, revealing a mottled, lumpy grey and green mash. 'How many times must I tell you', grates Jim, smacking him, so that he shrinks back whimpering, like Caliban before Prospero, 'not to eat with your mouth open?' To end with the Enigma hooks some weights into his eye-sockets, closes his eyes, and swings them about. ('The tender orbit recoils, and the eyeball says, the brain says too, "Hey, this doesn't belong here"; but – such feats of human discipline! – it's science!')

To end with, Matt the Tube again ('the Earl of Hurl, and Duke of Puke'). Begoggled and stripped to the waist, a cigarette in his mouth, he bends to light it in the fountain of sparks from an angle grinder which Jim presses up against a chunk of metal on the floor. When he stands up he is speckled with tiny red burns. 'Don't ever smoke,' says Jim, 'it's not good for you.'

Next, the gastric lavage, as Jim (always the scientist) calls it. 'He loves to get drunk, but he hates the taste of beer,' Jim intones, 'the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom, William Blake said that.' A huge perspex syringe is produced, consisting of a plunger and a tank, with a long neoprene tube leading off it. Matt feeds the tube up his nose and down into his stomach, while Jim removes the plunger and pours a couple of bottles of the sponsor's lager into the tank. 'He's American,' Jim explains, 'so he likes ketchup with everything' (squirting some in); 'he likes mustard too' (likewise); 'and he gets indigestion, so how about some milk of magnesia?' In it goes, Jim stirs everything up and replaces the plunger, then, with a great deal of histrionics and mock-effort, the vile wort is shunted to its temporary destination.

But the climax is still to come. Straining at the plunger, Matt and Jim suck all the turbid mess back. 'Anyone for some Bile Beer?' asks Jim, dispensing a glass apiece to two mad volunteers. 'First you think it tastes like shit, soon you wish it was.' By this time pandemonium is erupting on all sides, and, before I can grasp what is going on and whether or not they have actually drunk the stuff, Jim is effusively thanking the company and the audience and saying, not for the first time and truly enough (fauna excepted), 'Remember, nobody gets hurt except us.'

What are we to make of all this? Why do they do it and we pay to watch them? Is it as obscene, perverted and blasphemous as it sounds, and should we be discouraging it, if necessary by law?

Nobody, I think, will claim that Jim Rose is good clean fun. By any external, which is to say normal, standard his show is childish, disgusting and altogether gross. However, it is also lively, witty, amusing, and even, at times, hilarious (which is to say, cathartic). I am sorry to say that I enjoyed almost every minute of it, emerging entertained, refreshed, light of step and even – a thing which obviously demands explanation – mildly moved. Of course much must depend, first, on going with someone else (as I did), and second, on being prepared, as with pantomime, to enter into the collective spirit of the thing. (As in every folk culture, and like his forebears in *Huckleberry Finn*, Jim knows how to work a crowd.)

So far as the show has a point, it is, precisely by transgressing them, to reinforce rather than erode the limits of the acceptable. The object is first to excite disgust and then to purge it in wonder and laughter. In short, disgust is an emotion, as normality is a condition, in whose maintenance Jim has an overwhelming interest. He cannot afford to abandon either of them to airy relativism or nihilistic indifference. It is to Mary Douglas, rather than Foucault, that we must look for an explanation of his appeal.

On their posters Jim's company call themselves freaks, but (unlike the unfortunate Elephant Man, who effectively had no option but to exhibit himself) none is so physically or by nature. (In that respect, indeed, they are for the most part a comely crew.) No doubt some have an inner compulsion to do what they do, and might otherwise do it in private for no reward. Nevertheless, unless they are also compulsive exhibitionists, their electing to perform in public makes their actions, at least to that extent, genuinely free. And freedom aside, suppose we adopt a Fourierist line, and ask what is more like happiness than being paid for what you want to do anyway?

Jim Rose testifies to both Say's Law and the invisible hand; in short, to the wise and beneficent economy of Providence. In such a world (which, alas, like art, is somewhat tangential to the real one) everything both has its appointed place and is spontaneously guided to it. Jim and his friends (for friends they clearly are) either wish or are driven to do bizarre things; while we, who think ourselves normal (which, though it is much, is all that normality means), pay them to confirm us in our self-opinion by doing so.

They do and suffer the things from which we shrink, empathetically satisfying our curiosity about them. On the one hand they allay our secret temptation (if any) to do such things ourselves; those, in any case, and by contrast with the substance of nearly all fiction, are aberrations

merely of taste. On the other, where pain is in question (and some of it is surely real), they show us how, through courage, endurance and a certain stylish nonchalance, its power, which resides almost entirely in the fear it inspires, can be broken.

And that, it seems to me, is why what might at first look like an obscene travesty of Christ's sufferings is actually (if I am right) no such thing. So far from being genuinely blasphemous, it borrows its disturbing power from the very heart of the Christian mystery, viz. from the idea of vicarious suffering, which it almost makes intelligible. There is, I think, a perfectly valid, unironical sense in which the Torture King could say, with Jim (and with one much greater), 'I did it for you.' Gross though it is, there is at the heart of the show a certain strange pathos.

But at the same time the enormity of the parallel amounts, not so much to a mockery of the Christian sacrifice, as to one, by the show, of itself. Looked at in the light of eternity, it says, and with a due sense of proportion, what are we really but a few weirdoes larking around in a tent, martyrs no doubt, but to no profounder cause than that of innocent, if decidedly off-colour, diversion?

If you live near enough, go and see it, before the puritans, party-poopers and politically correct make sure that it never returns.

From *The Times Literary Supplement*, 27 August 1993.

Notes to Essay 12

- 1 [1999] *Viz's* circulation, at least according to one report, is now nearly twice as large. (See note 6 below.)
- 2 [1999] Not limited enough, it seems. Johnny Fartpants reappeared not long after the present piece celebrated his demise.
- 3 Compare (and contrast) Buñuel's Olympian, utterly unsentimental portrayal of the beggars in *Viridiana*, who first exploit the idealistic heroine's Christian hospitality, then wreck her house, and finally try to rape her.
- 4 This minor *Popeye* character, who presumably gave his name to the hamburger chain, was a cultural icon of some interest, being the only fictional glutton who is (a) *nothing but* an alimentary machine, and consequently an ethical blank (b) *not* grossly fat, but physically entirely unremarkable.
- 5 [1999] 'Fatha' Bacon later added to these routine bellicosities the memorably horrible 'Did you call wor lass [i.e. 'Mutha' Bacon] a hoo-er [whore]?'
- 6 [1999] *Viz* today, to judge by the (admittedly few) recent issues I have seen, looks so uninspired and pointlessly distasteful as (alas) almost to bear out its more genuinely high-minded critics.

13

Home Truths: Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the House Beautiful

For Oscar Wilde, as later for Bloomsbury, the decorative or applied arts were paradigms of the purely aesthetic. Uncompromised by any representational aim, they rejoiced (so it was held) in their consequent moral and conceptual vacuity. In an ideological world such a view has undoubted attractions. It offers one a blessed, if temporary, escape from the despotic ubiquity of meaning. But nothing more obviously refutes it than the fact that people – and none more anxiously than its proponents – stake so much on what may seem to be minor aesthetic preferences. We may argue with a man about his reading matter, but to question his taste in clothes or furniture is the height of impertinence. His inner self seems to be much more closely implicated in them. Their semantic reticence, in fact, serves him as a much-needed existential armour. For there is an older critical tradition which asserts that the style, however inscrutable, is really the man himself. ‘Tell me what you like,’ said Ruskin ominously, ‘and I shall tell you what you are.’ And since no man is an island, our tastes reveal, not only ourselves, but also the society in which we live. Our interiors are documents, sometimes even manifestoes, of great cultural and political significance. The same is true of those very aestheticist doctrines which try to deny the fact. I propose to be inquisitorial about the meaning of interior decoration, and I shall take as my main text the domestic designs of Charles Rennie Mackintosh, who is currently much in vogue. I want also to show how he connects, for all the outward differences, with much of the taste of today.¹

Mackintosh was born in Glasgow in 1868 and lived there until 1913. From 1896 for about a decade he enjoyed a sizeable reputation as an

architect and designer. He worked closely with his wife, his sister-in-law and her husband, and together they became known as the Glasgow Four. Outside Glasgow, where he was in any case controversial, Mackintosh's reputation was almost entirely continental. He exhibited in Liège and Turin, and also in Vienna, where he joined the famous Secession movement. The four had contributed to the Arts and Crafts Exhibition in London in 1896, but they were never invited again. Their work, like Art Nouveau, was condemned as decadent and un-British.² In England they were nicknamed the Glasgow Spook School.

Mackintosh's celebrity was brief, but he stayed on in Glasgow until 1913, when he and his wife decamped, first for Suffolk (where he took up watercolours), then for Chelsea, and finally for the south of France. Here he began a series of extremely interesting landscapes somewhat in the Vorticist manner. He had hoped to complete fifty but, stricken by cancer, he returned to London for treatment, and died there in 1928, in complete obscurity.

It was not until the mid-century that Sir Nikolaus Pevsner and Professor Thomas Howarth put him back on the map. Since then he has become a positive cult. The notorious high-backed chairs are back in production for upwards of £400 apiece, and the final accolade has come with the superb interior reconstruction, as part of Glasgow University's new Hunterian Art Gallery, of the last Glasgow house he lived in (henceforth referred to as 'the Mackintosh house'). This was originally a modest Victorian terrace house, which Mackintosh remodelled and furnished from scratch. The furniture, all to his own design, can now be seen in a setting as close to the real thing as dedicated, creative scholarship can make it. The enthusiasm behind the whole enterprise may be judged from the case of Mackintosh's own mahogany desk which was purchased for the house, after an international appeal, for an astonishing £89,000.

Mackintosh's originality is so striking that his style may seem to be independent of any context. But I do not believe that this either is or could be the case. The meaning of a Mackintosh interior may best be brought out by a historical contrast.

Victorian Glasgow called itself, with justice, the Second City of the Empire. Curiously, though, it lagged several decades behind England in taste. The handsome Greek style of the British Museum was still alive in Glasgow in the 1880s. But so, less happily, was the High Victorian interior. This was still popular in the 1890s, when English taste was undergoing a vast process of simplification and refinement under the Arts and Crafts influence.

Imagine yourself in a High Victorian interior, remembering that you are actually in 1890s Glasgow. The furniture may be all new, but it consists, often in the one piece, of a fantastic jumble of historical styles, with nothing in common but their excessive ornament. Elizabethan and baroque, gothic and rococo, jostle for one's attention as furiously as forest plants competing for light and air. You can hardly move without barking your shins, catching your clothes on all manner of scrolls and crockets, or entangling yourself in the drapery. Fortunately, you don't have to, since everything announces the existence of a silent army of servants who will attend to your bodily needs in the intervals of their ceaseless battle against the dirt and dust such a room collects. Everything is festooned with swags and tassels, suggesting, perhaps, that a Tarzan-like mode of locomotion would be the least inefficient of any. Every flat surface is a tropical welter of naturalistic vegetation. The carpet looks like a cornucopia roughly levelled by a steamroller, and in the dingy plasterwork overhead the whole brassica family is on the march. The so-called ceiling rose is a huge hemispherical boss more like a cauliflower, and beneath it, at the end of a bedizened pole, a massive gasolier writhes like a speared octopus.

The most obvious point about such a room, perhaps, was made by Dickens, in his description of Mr Podsnap's hideous table silver ('Wouldn't you like to melt me down?'). One might invoke Veblen's Pecuniary Canon of Taste, were it not that any perceptible taste seems, with true entrepreneurial flair, simply to have been dispensed with.

Pecuniary display, however, by itself explains little. (Veblen's formula, like all reductionism, is in truth rather empty.) This style is the preserve of a particular class, the newly rich commercial bourgeoisie. They are especially partial, it seems, to three things: applied ornament, clutter and vegetable motifs. All bespeak an entirely unsurprising insecurity. Applied ornament, for example, does show some awareness of the importance of the aesthetic dimension. It is a relief from a workaday world, where profit alone counts and nothing whatever is redundant. But it also aspires to rival the magnificence of the leisured class. These gentry supposedly believe that trade and other utilities are vulgar. Hence ornament also becomes, like the ubiquitous drapery, a sort of shame-faced, euphemistic disguise, concealing the crude function of things.

Clutter, too, shows a mixture of motives. Beyond pecuniary display, it also means security. Fenced in by possessions, surrounded by the visible marks of your consequence, you can stand firm against a hostile and envious world. And, particularly when it mixes historical styles,

clutter stands proxy for culture. It is, as it were, instant tradition. A long-established household usually contains a higgledy-piggledy assortment of familiar objects prized mainly for their practical utility or their human associations. Such interiors are the archaeological deposit of generations. Sometimes they show no great refinement. But they reveal something without which the most exquisite taste is repellent, namely, an affection for human things, ugly and beautiful alike.³ It is understandable that a whole class of uprooted people should seek, in amassing clutter, to commemorate the stable identity they have left behind them and have yet to establish anew.

But the most striking ambiguities appear in the love of vegetable motifs. On the one hand (like the *Zimmerlaube*, or room-arbour, of the Biedermeier period), they are a kind of sentimental allusion to Nature, offering another refuge from the harsh utilitarian world outside. In fact, the naturalistic representation makes this not just an allusion, but an illusion. At the same time it symbolizes the very world that it is meant to exclude. This vigorous burgeoning, these thick fleshy stems, are virtually an allegory of business enterprise. Capitalism, after all, has often been likened to a jungle, in which only the strong survive. The natural world is itself a sort of *laissez-faire* economy, ceaselessly thrusting new forms into life and leaving them to take their chance. Adam Smith's 'invisible hand' is none other than the blind creative power of Nature, working away as furiously in practical affairs as in the organic domain. The split between nature and civilization, this style implies, is only a Romantic fancy, and what is civilization at bottom but economics? Economics *is* Nature, it *is* Reality. To question its deliverances is simply to refuse the earth's bounty. Forget your bloodless idealism, says all this rank luxuriance: what I offer, in all its grossness and apparent disorder, is Life: take, eat and enjoy. The bourgeois interior becomes a hymn to the very materialism that it tries to escape. And in this there is perhaps a kind of defiant honesty. For how, after all, it asks, are leisure and the things of the spirit to be procured, except by work? At least our work is our own, and our wealth the result of something worthier of respect than any mere accident of birth.

Two last points about our High Victorian interior. First, anything remotely suggestive of Death is rigorously excluded, at least from open display. The Victorians made a fetish of death precisely because they were unable to naturalize it. Nothing amid all this restless commotion invites the spectator to pause in contemplation. No *memento mori*, like those found in pious bourgeois homes of earlier periods, delivers its silent homily on the fragility of life.⁴ We are commanded to eat, drink

and be merry, not because tomorrow we die, but simply for ever and ever. And my second point is related. The High Victorian manner breathes the spirit of pure individualism. Yet one such interior is very like the next. This conformity is not the easy, unforced acquiescence in a public order characteristic of more civilized styles. It suggests more a suspicion, born of misgiving, that there may after all be safety in numbers. Everywhere we detect a desperate reaching out for connection, with one's own class, with nature, with history, with tradition. It amounts to a final admission that man cannot live by self-interest alone. Death has seen to that. It is the end of the bourgeois dream, the antithesis of freedom, the negation of choice, the final bankruptcy. Here at last you need the consolations of community, and you find to your horror that in the society you have invented for yourself they are the one thing you cannot buy.⁵

Now, of course, bourgeois taste need not be bad. Commercial callings are not necessarily hostile to culture (think of Venice). Over time, like all others, they evolve a subtle network of practices and institutions that may broadly be called ethical. Through these the bourgeois acquires self-respect and the respect of others, in other words the stable identity I spoke of earlier that makes culture possible. It is only where people are disorientated by *sudden* wealth that we find the crudity, self-doubt and insincerity that are the marks of real vulgarity. And such a state of affairs is only temporary. I mentioned earlier how English taste improved towards the end of the nineteenth century. Yet those who had it were just as bourgeois, in the economic sense, as the High Victorians. It is simply that once a man knows who he is – knows his place, if you like – he is less interested in telling us who he wants to be.

Now come with me into the Mackintosh house, or better still, visit it yourself. Superficially, as I have said, it is the complete antithesis of the High Victorian interior. With the other in mind, it is surely with the utmost relief that we greet these cool, uncluttered, airy rooms in muted monochrome. Everything tends to white or black. Ornament is sparse, if not exactly chaste. Most of the plaster mouldings have been stripped away. The dining-room walls are relieved only by faint lattice-like stencillings suggestive of a bamboo trellis or a Japanese screen. Otherwise the walls are bare, except for a few panels, plaques and mirrors in materials such as plaster and repoussé metal. These are mostly by the other members of the Four, and tend towards abstraction in design. Such pictorial content as they have suggests Beardsley reduced almost to pure geometry. The furniture and woodwork, where they are ornamented at all, are pierced with tiny recesses filled with paint or stained glass, in

square, heart or tear-drop shapes, like jewels, in colours to suit: purple and indigo, Prussian blue, mother-of-pearl, sugary pink, garnet or eau-de-Nil. Or the ornament may consist of floating or drooping curves in self-coloured relief, suggesting Celtic interlace, flowing treacle, or some straggling, etiolated plant. But the furniture itself is the most striking feature of the house. Much of it was not originally designed for domestic use at all, but for those uniquely Glaswegian institutions, the tea-rooms. These, with their atmosphere of exotic fantasy, were intended to seduce white-collar workers away from less salubrious lunchtime resorts. It is as though Mackintosh made no distinction between the two types of environment, for the house too is obviously meant – appropriately or otherwise – to induce a rapt and distant wonder.

The drawing-room is simply space punctuated by objects. Stained dark or painted white, they stand in a kind of brooding tension on an off-white fitted carpet, like chessmen in a mysteriously arrested endgame, or prehistoric megaliths of unknown function. I say this because clearly the last thing they are intended for is use. Furniture has become a kind of abstract sculpture, to be contemplated and even, perhaps, worshipped. Everything tends to extremes, but the unity of style is absolute. Not a single detail has escaped the designer's attention, with one exception, the original staircase. This is attractive enough, of a type common in Glasgow terraces of the period. It consists of a plain, elegant wooden handrail, supported by a modest cast-iron balustrade. It looks mournfully out of place, a humble and doubtless intentional foil to the magical transformation effected all around it.

Mackintosh's style is despotic and imperious. Nothing is arbitrary, random or unforeseen. To hang one's coat over a chair, for example, would be sacrilege. Time has been abolished: there neither is, nor could be, any furniture from other periods. The house, in fact, is a private vision of eternity, in which the spirit, freed at last from practical constraints, communes narcissistically with itself as mirrored in its own creations.⁶ It is not a house – still less a home – but a temple of art, a hermetic, ideal world permeated by a mortuary hush. If it has none of the grossness of life, it also has none of its vitality. It might do for ghosts or gods, but for human beings, never. Taking a friend round, I observed that you could see that the Mackintoshes had no children. 'Of course not,' he replied with some asperity, 'he couldn't have designed them himself.'

Now, if you call the High Victorian interior vulgar, the word for the Mackintosh house is precious.⁷ Wilde, the arch-Philistine-baiter, seems to have used it wholly as a term of approval. The so-called Aesthetic

Movement sprang up as an understandable reaction to the gross debasement of Victorian taste and (via such designers as Godwin and Mackmurdo) leads straight to Mackintosh. Ever since, as in Thomas Mann's stories, the aesthete and the bourgeois have glared at each other across a great gulf of suspicion and incomprehension. Nevertheless, just as one is a reaction to the other, and each is a product of the age, so, behind all the radical oppositions in stylistic detail, the same impulse is at work.

Socially speaking, both the bohemian aesthete and the wealthy parvenu are displaced persons in search of an identity. Both hope to acquire one by ostentation. The parvenu shows off his wealth and the aesthete his fastidiousness. Each in his way is a self-made man. The environment each has fashioned for himself is really a showcase for his ego, which he tries to impose on everybody else. In pursuit of this end, scant respect is shown for materials, or history, or real utility. For respect of this kind is essentially a mode of graceful submission to the right properties of things. And that is something, if he is to assert himself, the would-be individualist simply cannot afford. The Mackintosh house reveals less a lofty dedication to art than a lofty dedication to self. It shows that 'will to style' that Ortega y Gasset, in his 1925 essay appropriately entitled 'The Dehumanization of Art', approvingly spoke of as the hallmark of modernity. Being above the common man's head, he added, it enabled the élite to recognise one another and distinguish themselves from the vulgar.

This, I think, accounts for the Mackintosh cult. The Mackintosh house is certainly less unsightly than the High Victorian interior. But one could be forgiven for preferring the latter simply on account of its obviousness. Of course, one feels imposed upon, but no educated person will feel obliged to admire. The Mackintosh house, however, slyly insinuates that your obligatory rapture is a mark of your discerning judgment. The corollary is clear. Anything less than rapture is a sign of Philistinism. Some such covert blackmail must account for the reluctance of Mackintosh fans to hear any criticism of the Master. We face again the paradox of conformity at the heart of individualism, only this time among the élite.

Even the language of aestheticism is defensive. It is designed to shield the initiate, disarm the critic and exclude the human. In Mackintosh's time there was a lot of fashionable nonsense about tactile values, spatial values, Significant Form and the rest, and it has its modern counterparts. What it is really saying is that aesthetic experience is essentially abstract. Making no connection with human things – the province of language – it must therefore be indescribable. It follows that taste cannot

be reasoned about, cannot be taught or learnt, and cannot be communicated. It is something you just 'have', if you belong to the élite, and you get in largely by claiming to have it. Clearly, no genuinely public style can be founded on it. Instead of a real community based on shared values, we are left with a clique of dandies united only by their conviction of superiority to everyone else.

Of course, it was a major achievement on Mackintosh's part to have invented a uniquely personal style. But just because that is what it is, nothing seems more misguided than Mackintosh's belief that his mannerisms, however atmospheric in a tea-room, could ever give birth to a truly public style. An idiom so intent on being distinctive, so extreme in itself, and so careless of utility, is unlikely ever to find general favour. It will not fit in with existing styles, it is incapable of further development and, in the case of the furniture, it is neither comfortable nor practical.

This last point is worth drawing out. Some commentators have seen Mackintosh's austerity as foreshadowing functionalism and the Modern Movement. Simple functionalism alleges that the aesthetic qualities of a thing reside solely in its fitness for its purpose. It was never very plausible. A car assembly robot, a tapeworm and a bicycle shed are doubtless all admirably adapted to their various purposes, but no one, except figuratively, would call them beautiful (cf. Burke's *Sublime and Beautiful*, III, 6). And, in more complex cases, functionalism simply begs the question. What is the 'purpose' of a house, a chair, a cathedral? Specify it, says the functionalist, and you can then set about finding a 'solution'. 'A house,' said le Corbusier, 'is a machine for living in.' But 'living', in this formulation, is already so impoverished a concept as to make any so-called solution valueless in human terms. The only fit inhabitant for such a house – as Evelyn Waugh's Professor Silenus rapturously concluded in *Decline and Fall* – would itself be a machine. Human beings, by contrast, have a variety of needs, the 'higher' of which cannot be specified as design problems. The functionalist, like the utilitarian, is forced to rank them all on the same scale, and it is no wonder if he thus misconstrues, or simply fails to recognize, the more profound.

The inadequacy of simple functionalism, though, has led to something far more important, namely, the evolution of a wholly independent aesthetic of function. What is offered is not function proper, but the mere appearance of it; a perversion of Kant's 'purposiveness without purpose'. A building or a piece of furniture designed on such lines – and so-called High Tech might be an example – is not necessarily beautiful, is not necessarily practical and is certainly dishonest. Its real aim is to advertise the functionalist doctrine and to tell us that we ought to enjoy

living in a world that subscribes to it. Such a manifesto contradicts itself in the act of utterance, since the real purpose of a building is supposed to be not propaganda, but use. Here, in a peculiarly meretricious way, aestheticism and functionalism join hands. Each obtrudes its products upon our consciousness, proclaiming its indifference to ordinary human concerns. Each abases itself before some imaginary moralistic absolute and forces us to do the same. Art and the machine, conceived as abstract totems for human worship, are an inhuman bore.

It may be asked in what exactly the decorative quality of Mackintosh's furniture is supposed to consist. Take some examples. A chair back is necessary. But, unless we are speaking of thrones (as perhaps we are), it is unnecessary to make it twice the height of a seated man. The splats in a chair back are necessary. But there is no need to carry them down below seat level, in some cases actually to the floor (a trick also of Frank Lloyd Wright's). Chair legs frequently have to be strengthened by cross-pieces called stretchers. But instead of using single substantial rails for this purpose, Mackintosh will substitute parallel pairs of flimsy rods, each of which separately is easily broken. A table-top may be made of thin, butt-joined boards, without framing, and hugely wide in relation to its spindle-shanked base. It seems almost to flaunt its instability. By a process of elongation and multiplication, what would normally be functional structures have been transformed into decorative features in their own right, but in a manner conspicuously contrary to real functional requirements. Perhaps this is what a contemporary meant in referring to Mackintosh's 'sublimated practicality'. It was certainly not practicality as commonly understood. The chairs, in their tea-room employment, were subject to perpetual breakage, owing to the immense leverage exerted by customers' backs. Some were repaired with metal braces, while others were sawn down to a more sensible height.

What then is the 'meaning' of Mackintosh's designs? It is hard to see them simply as independent essays in form, though they might seem so to a Martian. It is possible that they are a kind of fling at the Philistine. First, by exaggerating structures that would normally be truly functional, they mock the bourgeois belief that ornament is something superadded to function to prettify or conceal it. Secondly, they proclaim that function, not to say comfort, is in any case a base, utilitarian consideration. Thirdly, they take their stand on the absolute primacy of the aesthetic. We, says the aesthete, are going to make martyrs of our backsides for the sake of Art.⁸ If I am right, then these gestures seem incredibly childish. But even if not, the fundamental criticism of Mackintosh's style remains, which is simply that whatever its point, it is trying

too hard to make it. It is like being cornered by a bore: you are expected to be interested in him, but he could not care less about you. The Mackintosh house simply demands more attention than any mere house has a right to exact. It is ironically appropriate that it has now become a museum, since that is what it always was. Such an interior cannot express decent, unaffected ease. It is the negation of hospitality. In fact, it is barbarism posing as hyper-sophistication; in other words, decadence. Worse still, it makes stylistic innocence impossible for those who come after. Once the dyke of self-consciousness has been breached, we are all carried along in the ensuing flood.

For a civilized contrast, consider almost any mid-eighteenth-century chair, side-chair, carver or easy chair indifferently. All of them both look, and are, comfortable. The curves are intrinsically pleasing, humanly suggestive, and also practical. There is none of the hidden tension between aggressive upward thrust and limp trailing forms that we find in Mackintosh's work, no victory of artistic will over human frailty or nature's impermanence. Flesh and spirit both find satisfaction in a perfect equilibrium. The downward pressure on the seat is balanced by the upward spring of the cabriole legs, like a horse and rider in harmonious accord. (Even straight legs, as in the 'country' styles, have a reassuring, business-like solidity.) If there are arms, they will be serpentine, with the handrests turned outwards in greeting, while, in the concave space behind, the same gesture modulates into an affectionate yet easy embrace. Such a chair positively invites you to sit in it. When you do, you find it perfectly adapted to the contours of the body, with the small of your back supported by the same curve in its back. The aesthetic and the functional are one, simply because they have never been considered apart (as components, for example of a 'design problem'). Neither masquerades as the other or asserts itself at the other's expense. Such furniture neither preaches nor provokes. It intimates a social order that is truly human. It is formal without pomp, graceful without affectation, and familiar without vulgarity. And there is significance in the fact that in all its varieties, from the grand to the humble, the basic forms remained the same.

The contemporary interior, unfortunately, is far from all this. Folksy or surgical, fussy or loud, it advertises as plainly as the Mackintosh or High Victorian styles the pretensions of its owner. In choosing any of the current styles one unavoidably displays not it, but oneself – simply because one *has* the choice. There *is* no public style. One might reasonably prefer the Woolworth's idiom as being the least offensive of any. With its hints of the snack bar and the airport lounge, it suggests, if not exactly a

public order, at least those aimless concourses in which one is under no compulsion to select an identity, and can therefore simply be oneself.

One typical modern maestro is the fashionable designer Mr David Hicks. He has furnished flats for pop stars and society hairdressers, refurbished castles, designed restaurants and boardrooms. The title (like much of the contents) of his coffee-table anthology, *Living with Design*, suggests that interior decoration is a kind of crippling disease. Mr Hicks is a sort of psychiatrist. If you have forgotten who you were, or never knew in the first place, he undertakes to tell you. Illustrating his point with pictures of his country estate, 'it is unusual,' he tells us, 'for anyone involved in farming to pay much attention to the appearance of barns, cottages and houses.' He has set out to remedy this situation by erecting a grain dryer in a colour he calls 'dark aubergine', and has reassured his tenants as to any doubts they might have had about their identity by affixing his company logo to their cottages. Indeed, he has consoled a whole nation for the loss of its identity by selling to the unfortunate Japanese, in distressingly large quantities, an assortment of slippers, wallets, handbags, scarves, belts, neckties and cigarette lighters all destitute of any ornament (or indeed of any distinctive feature) other than his signature, printed all over them in a dense pattern-repeat.

Those who cannot afford psychoanalysis must settle for group therapy. Perhaps our most successful practitioner is Sir Terence Conran, originally a designer of office furniture and now quartermaster-general to the new Sixties-educated middle class. His stores, called Habitat, sell not just furniture, but a whole way of life. Accordingly, I shall invent an ideal customer for Sir Terence and call him Habitat man.

Habitat is really as much a farrago of styles as High Victorianism. All they have in common, superficially, is their comparative recentness and the brittle vivacity of their finish. History, for Habitat man, begins in a sepia-toned haze round about 1880, too late, of course, to count as 'reproduction'. From Morris chintzes, the saga unfolds through wicker-work settees redolent of Edwardian picnics or croquet parties, makes a costly salute in leather and chrome (the bondage-fetishist's materials) to the founders of Modernism, and swells finally to its futuristic consummation in the tubular inanities of High Tech, whose imagery largely consists, for no very clear aesthetic reason, of simulated industrial pipe-work. Hearth and home feature briefly in High Wycombe chairs (from Eastern Europe). But domesticity in general is out of date, so we celebrate with plastic stacking chairs from the school hall, a desk from the office, factory lighting, and similar insignia of our panoramic sociological

awareness. Bright colours, with official titles such as turmeric, paprika and pimento, attest to more cosmopolitan eating habits. Yet amid all this affluence a thought is spared for the less privileged. One's floor, sanded (as it was never intended to be) to look 'natural', is decked with Indian durries, each costing enough to feed the family who made it for a month or two, or to see Sir Terence through a modest solitary lunch. As for the upholstery, it is frequently executed in a fabric commonly used for workmen's overalls, being a parting wave to employments Habitat man has said goodbye to forever.

All this treasure needs a cave. So Habitat man knocks down as many dividing walls as he can safely lay hands on: he disapproves of 'divisiveness' anyway. It is true that this leaves him with fewer rooms, but he does not want rooms, since who wants to be 'tied down' to doing regular things in regular places? What he wants is a 'living area'. He has heard (wrongly) that architecture is all about 'space', so he procures enough of it for a barn dance every night. Into it he thrusts the cult objects of his generation. And incredibly, out of this vile medley, this semiotic dog's breakfast, a meaning of sorts emerges. It combines the knowingness of the aesthete with the ignorance of the parvenu.

For a parvenu is what Habitat man is, as an interesting article in *The Observer* (of all places) pointed out on 20 December 1981. 'Class,' Janet Watts quoted Sir Terence as saying, 'is what one is involved in all the time.' What this means is that the *déclassé* have themselves come to compose a powerful class, numerous enough to make a fortune for anyone, such as Sir Terence, who helps them to a collective self-consciousness. Unlike the Victorian parvenu they have risen not by wealth, but by education, or something sufficiently like it to give the confidence education usually confers. The educated class has always, and rightly, replenished itself with individuals from uneducated backgrounds. (Nothing more forcefully argues the case for education's being an intrinsically independent, rather than a narrowly, i.e. socially, class-bound, ideal.) Such recruits were easily absorbed into the traditional educated class, as indeed was their wish. But what has happened lately is that the natural insecurity involved in the transition has been appeased, and the transition itself arrested, by shrewd marketing techniques. This would not matter, perhaps, if it did not call into question the whole idea of what being 'educated' means. For Habitat man's taste – indeed his whole consciousness – is impregnable in a way the Victorian parvenu's was not. He is no longer secretly anxious to be absorbed into the traditional order. It is part of his self-image to fancy himself marginal, and to sit in judgment on it. All he is anxious about is not to

seem an unaware, un-with-it, G-Plan sort of person: that's one social division he *is* keen on.

We are nearer Mackintosh than it might seem. Habitat man is usually a Mackintosh fan. Both styles make a point of radical gestures and deliberate modernity. Both imply a hostility to less self-conscious, more naïve styles, and a wish to proclaim oneself superior. But the differences are important too. The Mackintosh idiom has a severe internal consistency. Its challenge is primarily aesthetic, a kind of monastic rejection of the vulgarities of everyday life. But the Habitat idiom betrays larger, woollier, more overtly 'political' ambitions. In this it is the true, if vulgarized, heir to the Modern Movement. It is really a symbolic version of the world as seen through the mass media. These, in exploiting events solely for their dramatic potential, already deal mainly in symbols. In the place of real knowledge and understanding – both of which are unspectacular – the media encourage a shallow catholicity of outlook and the illusion of intimate engagement, and all without your having to stir outside your ludicrously misnamed 'living area'.

Habitat man's education will doubtless have been made to match. Educational policy since the 1950s has deliberately groomed him for power, frequently under a disastrously misguided conception of 'relevance'. Abstract disciplines of intrinsic intellectual difficulty might have given him a sense of the daunting intractability of things, and of the necessity for patience and humility. But he will very likely have been offered some pseudo-discipline of recent origin, dubious validity and grandiose ambitions, the sort of thing satirized in Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man*. (No doubt that was not 'real' sociology; but it continues to be taught as if it were.) His training, if so, will have been neither difficult nor relevant to anything but itself, since its presuppositions simplify the world in advance. This, again, might not matter if Habitat man really were marginal, but Habitat's success alone testifies to the contrary. Where Mackintosh and the aesthetes faded into obscurity, Habitat man has become the custodian of culture in our time. Decisions of the highest importance are taken in deference to his rootless but well-advertised prejudices. Yet his mind, like his house, is a fantastic, self-indulgent essay in inappropriateness. We may learn to endure his aesthetic preferences, but can we survive his cultural ascendancy? At any rate, let no one presume to say any longer that such things are 'only a question of taste'.

Adapted from a paper given at the Annual Conference of the British Society of Aesthetics (North) at Edinburgh University, 7 May 1983. It

originally appeared as 'The Politics of Taste' in *Salisbury Review*, II, 1 (October 1983) and was reprinted, first, in *Conservative Thoughts*, ed. Roger Scruton (Claridge Press, 1988), and secondly, under its present title, in Dudley Knowles and John Skorupski, eds, *Virtue and Taste: Essays in Memory of Flint Schier* (Blackwell, 1993).

Notes to Essay 13

- 1 [1999] 'Today' was 1982, since when fashions in interior design have shifted somewhat. The prices given for Mackintosh originals and reproductions are 1982 prices.
- 2 There is some justice in these accusations. But they are not true of Mackintosh's architecture, which belongs, particularly on its domestic side, to a Scottish vernacular tradition. Architecturally he is something like a Scottish counterpart of the English Domestic Revivalists.
- 3 A distinction brilliantly (and touchingly) drawn in Henry James's *The Spoils of Poynton*, in the contrast between the aesthete Mrs Gereth's two houses. Poynton is her own fabulous creation; Ricks her despised place of exile, furnished by an unsophisticated old lady, now dead. But James's heroine, the scrupulous Fleda, prefers Ricks for its 'ghosts'. His understanding, here and elsewhere, of our present subject remains unsurpassed.
- 4 The Victorians hoarded poignant mementoes of the dead (photographs, children's hair, etc.) not in order to reconcile themselves to their loss (still less to their own death), but simply, and endlessly, to renew it. The emotion was never tranquillized, universalized or (as in Wordsworth's 'The Ruined Cottage') absorbed into a wider, consoling framework of meaning. Rather, it was preserved intact, mummified, as though to overcome one's initial vivid grief were somehow to fail in one's duty or humanity. Being positivists, the Victorians had no concept of Fortune; they could never resign themselves to the inexplicable.
- 5 Some such pathos is found in Petronius' masterpiece, the *Cena Trimalchionis*. At the climax the host, a former slave and truly monstrous *nouveau riche*, stretches himself out, drunk, on an imaginary funeral pyre made of cushions. 'Pretend I'm dead,' he says to his cronies and hangers-on, 'say something nice about me.'
- 6 Except that the contents are Mackintosh's own creations, the Mackintosh house shows something akin to the collector's mania. The collector, wrote Walter Benjamin, liberates objects from the servitude of usefulness. But he omitted to mention that they are often thereby reduced to another sort of slavery. Stripped of their independence, they no longer speak for their makers, their periods or themselves, but simply for their owner's own exquisite sensibility. (Not a vice of Mrs Gereth's, however, as James makes clear; her aesthetic passion – see note 3 above – is almost wholly disinterested.)
- 7 Molière's *précieuses* complain of marriage that not only is it a low, tradesman-like business ('rien de plus marchand que ce procédé') but, worse, it means sleeping next to a naked man. Here perhaps we have the essence of the precious. The despised bourgeoisie having appropriated the 'natural' to themselves, in

order finally to distinguish oneself from them one is forced to repudiate the plain facts of life. Huysmans' dyspeptic aesthete in *À Rebours* resorts to feeding himself entirely with beef tea enemas because, he says, it dispenses with the vulgar and tiresome business of eating.

- 8 Or of customers' backsides, perhaps the tea-room proprietor says, for the sake of quicker turnover.

Part Three

The Truth of Fiction

14

Religion, Art and the Limits of the Sayable

In the Middle Ages, art, science, philosophy, history and practical life were all offshoots of religion, and so regarded theoretically. Nowadays, however, they are usually treated as separate universes of discourse. The most sustained attempts to chart their boundaries have been made within the Idealist tradition. Here each is assumed to be a particular mode, or phase, of *Geist* (the German word for both 'mind' and 'spirit'). Typical Idealist thinkers in this respect are Kant, Schiller, Hegel, Croce, Collingwood, Oakeshott and (up to a point, since he also has naturalistic leanings) Santayana.¹

The key tenet of Idealism is that reality is first and foremost mental. (Nature and the physical world are merely abstract aspects of it.) That is, it belongs to consciousness, from whose contents, or possible contents, it is scarcely to be distinguished. Anything wholly transcendental – i.e. permanently inaccessible to consciousness – might as well, at least for a strict Hegelian, not exist. A thing exists, ultimately, only so far as it can exist *for us*.

Nevertheless, for many Idealists, the phenomenal world (the world as it appears to consciousness) is shot through with intimations of transcendence. For Kant, since the transcendental is *ex hypothesi* inscrutable, traditional theology is impossible. The divine (which, whatever else it may be, is normally thought of as transcendental) cannot be known, 'proved', or reasoned about. At best it can be intuited from the manifest facts of ethical and aesthetic life.

Judgments in both spheres ('this is good', 'that is beautiful', etc.) possess a peculiar subjective immediacy which seems to confirm their implicit claim to objective, universal validity. The self is necessarily their focus,

but their intrinsic structure is such as to point away from it, towards the transcendental. The reality of the transcendental is underwritten by the fact that the experiencing self must logically belong to it, since it cannot simultaneously be an object of its own observation.

In ethical life, according to Kant, we feel ourselves to be governed by an imperative which no naturalistic or utilitarian considerations can fully explain. No doubt the cohesion of society, like our aggregate self-interest, is furthered by observance of the moral law, but that is not the reason, subjectively speaking, why we observe it. We observe it simply because we know we must; and that undeniable 'must', though (or rather because) it is inscrutable, points to a transcendent source. A command cannot issue from nowhere.

Aesthetic judgment similarly legislates for all observers. A thing can be pleasing, but it cannot be beautiful, for me alone. If it really is beautiful, you too are in a sense 'obliged' to see it as such. The beautiful, like the good, is not independent of the observer's subjectivity, since a thing's beauty, though objective, must be subjectively experienced. It cannot simply be taken on authority or accepted as a piece of information.

It is, however, independent of the observer's self-interest. This makes it apprehensible only by those, the good, who have the capacity to suspend their self-interest. On the other hand, unlike goodness, it is also independent of the observer's moral interests and enthusiasms. It is not its goodness which makes a thing beautiful, but its appearance of 'free' or self-governed purposiveness. (Not, be it noted, its appearance of serving some extraneous purpose. The latter is the principle behind the so-called 'functionalist' aesthetic, where beauty is not 'free', but dependent on function.)

Kant was notoriously indifferent to art, and has little to say about it, since he invariably regards its beauty as inferior to that of nature. But what he says about the relation of the aesthetic and the moral to the transcendental is clearly suggestive in respect of any joint consideration of art and religion, particularly in the case of his remarks on the sublime. Our response to the sublime in nature (or, one might add, in art, so far as art reflects nature) prefigures the religious attitude. It consists in the awareness of an awesome limitlessness and unbounded power, but one in which the subject's natural fear of such a power is qualified by his sense of his own righteousness and innocence when confronted by it.

In this respect the awe provoked by the sublime differs from the superstitious, self-abasing terror of the savage. The civilized man's fortitude and self-respect – i.e. his own sublimity of character – at once enable him to triumph over a threatening nature (or his terror in the face

of it) and reconcile him with it (quite how is unclear), so that he not only participates in its power, but also gathers from it the intimation of an underlying, and ultimately benevolent, divinity.

Schiller's account of the sublime, as of the aesthetic generally, has much in common with Kant's. Hegel's aesthetics, however, like his metaphysics, are different. They are art- rather than nature-centred. Art is superior to nature as a vehicle of the divine, because, like the Absolute Mind (or Idea) of which the universe as a whole consists, and unlike nature, it too is self-conscious, or a product of self-consciousness. The divine, however, is not transcendent, since there is no transcendence. Hegel's 'God', therefore, is more or less a figure of speech, being simply the immanent Absolute risen to self-consciousness in the world which it has itself created or 'posited'. A prime medium through which it rises to self-consciousness is art, defined as 'the sensuous embodiment of the Idea'.

In primitive or 'symbolic' art the Absolute fails to achieve full articulation, being overwhelmed by the 'crassness' (as Hegel calls it) of the sensuous or natural world. This is because man, or incarnate Mind, is yet undeveloped, and is hence still too deeply enmeshed in that world. At the other extreme, in modern or 'romantic' art, form has been outstripped by content. Mind is now so self-aware that representations of nature (which is not self-aware) are inadequate fully to embody it. Art has finally been superseded by philosophy (most notably by Hegel's own), in which alone the Absolute is completely realized, and of which even religion is a mere shadow. (This is inevitable, and no cause for regret.) Only in 'classical' art, epitomized by Graeco-Roman sculpture, are form and content wholly in balance, since only then was the evolving Idea precisely matched to the natural forms available for its representation, that is, the human body, used to depict the gods.

Hegel's aesthetics, like his ethics, are a branch of his metaphysics. The Beautiful is essentially an 'appearance' of the True, of ultimate reality. The aesthetic Ideal is the Idea in sensible form. If it be asked why the Real should manifest itself in beauty, the reason lies in its essential organic harmony, or unity in diversity, which is also the principle of the beautiful.

The earlier Collingwood, like Hegel, sees religion as a more 'advanced' phase of spirit than art. For religion, though defective, deliberately aims at truth, while art (like primitive man) is indifferent to truth, making no distinction between fact and imagination. Religion is the prototype of science, history and philosophy. Other thinkers (including Santayana and the later Collingwood) have seen art as superior to religion, precisely

because, in its purest or most mature form, it actively asserts nothing. 'The poet nothing affirms,' said Sir Philip Sidney, 'and therefore never lieth.'

The idea that art (or the highest art) is essentially non-declarative points in two directions. On the one hand, it leads to aestheticism, the view, central to the so-called Aesthetic Movement (e.g., Pater, Whistler, Wilde), to Bloomsbury aesthetics (e.g., Fry, Bell), and to Oakeshott, that aesthetic experience, and thus art, is *sui generis*. A wholly distinct and autonomous province of experience, it is reducible to no other and is valuable precisely on that account, as satisfying a similarly unique human need.

On the other hand, art's non-declarative character is taken by some (mostly critics, such as Matthew Arnold and F.R. Leavis, rather than philosophers) merely to indicate that, unlike religion (or at least, dogmatic religion), it recognizes the limits of the sayable. Nevertheless, what cannot be said can still be suggested; and art's suggestiveness, for all that its medium is fiction, is actually truer to the complexities of experience than the cut-and-dried factual claims of religion or philosophy.²

A tacit presupposition of this view (which is essentially a secular Kantianism, disengaged from any explicit metaphysical theory) is that all art, even non-realist art, is in some sense representational. (So-called 'expressive' art may be thought to represent inner, 'subjective' experience, which eludes one-to-one pictorial or linguistic articulation.) Art points beyond itself to a reality apprehensible by no other means. It elicits meaning and coherence from experience. It reconciles us to life by exposing some of its mysteries as superficial, and persuading us humbly to accept the rest. In short, it does what religion offers to do, only better, because more honestly. It achieves symbolic 'truth' precisely by forswearing any claim to literal veracity.

All this raises the question as to whether religious art can be called art at all, unless religion itself is somehow to be regarded as an imperfect form of art. Clearly, on the Idealist view, both art and religion endeavour, by imaginative means, to discover structure and meaning in the cosmos. The difference is that art knows itself to be fictional (at least in form), whereas religion claims to be true. It demands active belief, where art demands at most Coleridge's 'willing suspension of disbelief'.

Excluding jokes such as *trompe-l'oeil*, where the delight lies precisely in the illusion's being detected, art which invites literal or near-literal belief is fantasy-art (what Plato supposed most art to be). Its aim is to excite pleasurable emotions by constructing, and sustaining, an illusory world more submissive to the subject's self-indulgent desires than the

real one can be. Accordingly it will usually employ more surface verisimilitude, and less obvious stylization, than art which has no such extraneous purpose, or whose purpose is simply to focus attention on the object for its own sake.

Hence there arises the paradox that fantasy-art often seems more 'real' than what Collingwood called 'art proper', or even than nature. An obvious example is pornography, which has come overwhelmingly to rely on photographic images. For a photograph seems to present the object directly, rather than depict it; to be not art, but fact. It thus exacts a minimum of imaginative effort from the spectator.

Collingwood stigmatized pornography as typical of 'amusement art', while regarding religious art as 'magical art'. Amusement art excites emotions simply in order that we may enjoy the sensation of having them without the responsibilities involved in acting upon them. It is, in Collingwood's view, a substitute for action.

This conviction is shared, incidentally, by many who defend pornography as harmless, because supposedly cathartic. The question is not usually addressed as to whether the emotions concerned would stand in need of catharsis if they had not first been stimulated to an unnatural degree; nor whether, since the whole point of pornography is to obliterate the distinction between fantasy and reality, the user can be relied upon to discharge them solely in fantasy; nor whether, even if he could, his craving for fantasy ought to be indulged.

These reservations, of course, could apply equally to sentimental or any other amusement art. Following Mill's somewhat erratic train of thought in his *On Liberty* and *Utilitarianism*, I.A. Richards suggested that any 'impulse' might legitimately be satisfied so long as its being so did not thwart the satisfaction of 'superior' impulses.³ Ignoring the question as to what 'superior' might mean, however, it may be felt in general that amusement art is tolerable or even valuable so long as the consumer himself understands it to be such, and is therefore in no danger of being mastered by his fantasy, i.e. of mistaking it for reality.

But clearly we have to do here not with fantasy in a pejorative or debilitating sense, rather with something like play (a category central to Schiller's aesthetics). Play may be considered either as a necessary liberation from the serious business of life, or as a rehearsal for it. (Indeed, both seem on reflection to be intrinsic to the idea.) In the first capacity it recalls the aestheticist view of art, in the second the Arnold-Leavis view, that is, of art as a means of grasping and mastering a complex reality, which will include the appropriate emotions. But either option must render dubious the distinction between amusement art and 'art

proper'. The real distinction is between 'art proper' and fantasy-art as previously defined.

Magical art stimulates emotions (martial, patriotic, revolutionary, religious, acquisitive, moral, etc.) with a view to their being discharged in the appropriate actions. Its value therefore will depend entirely on that of the ends it serves. The sole aesthetic criterion, if it can truly be called aesthetic, will be technical or pragmatic, concerning the efficiency with which a given art-work stimulates the required emotion. Beauty might conceivably do this (though not on Kant's view), but will otherwise be incidental. For crudity, either of execution, or of the emotion demanded, will not matter so long as the emotion is, in fact, evoked and acted upon. A vulgar advertisement may sell a product better than a sophisticated one. A sentimental religious print may conduce to piety as effectively as an artistic masterpiece, and more. From a religious standpoint, as from any other of a primarily purposive character, 'good' art, or 'art proper', is superfluous, except as a lexicon of proven techniques of emotional stimulation.

Indeed, in and for itself, 'art proper' might even be harmful. The object of religion is to open the mind to the possibility of transcendent things, and thereafter to close it. In the religious view the complexities of experience, transcendent or otherwise, to which 'art proper' exposes us are at best irrelevant, and at worst a return to the chaos and doubt from which, in virtue of its affirmative or even dogmatic character, religion rescues us.

It might be said, nevertheless, that 'art proper' is itself insufficiently distinguishable, except on pure aestheticist premises, from magical art. The attitude to the world which Arnoldians believe it to promote, and prize it for promoting, is effectively moral, even quasi-religious, and can scarcely fail to find expression in behaviour. Certainly nineteenth-century realists such as George Eliot, Trollope and Tolstoy claimed to be writing with a moral purpose, revealing the hidden order of things, and extending human sympathies. How much difference is there between an art which professes (and achieves) such aims, and explicitly didactic (i.e. magical) art?

The answer might be that whatever the authors themselves may have claimed, and whatever moral effects their work actually had, what made it 'art proper' was the fact that in practice it did not subordinate the immediate aesthetic aim (truth to the object, or fidelity to the integrity of the artistic creation as such) to any prior goal, moral or otherwise. This patient refusal to jump to conclusions, or to bend the artistic process into premature conformity with them, would itself constitute a moral phenomenon and a moral example.

Science and history present parallel cases. How far religion also does so – and here obvious political analogies suggest themselves – will depend on whether we see religion primarily as a ‘world-open’ receptivity to the transcendent, or as a ‘world-closed’ claim finally to have captured it in doctrine. If the first, how is religion to be distinguished from art, or from its supposed effects? Those are questions which can be answered neither simply, nor here.

From Blackwell’s *A Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. David E. Cooper (1992).

Notes to Essay 14

- 1 R.G. Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis* (1924) and *The Principles of Art* (1938); Benedetto Croce, *Aesthetic* (1909); G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1805) and *Introduction to Aesthetics* (1842, posth.); Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), *The Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) and *The Critique of Judgement* (1790); Michael Oakeshott, ‘The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind’, in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (1962); George Santayana, *Reason in Art* (1905); Friedrich von Schiller, *On the Sublime* (1793), *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* (1795), and *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1801).
- 2 See, e.g., F.R. Leavis and René Wellek, ‘Literary Criticism and Philosophy’, in *Scrutiny*, V, 4 and VI, 1 and 2; reprinted in Eric Bentley, ed., *The Importance of Scrutiny* (1964).
- 3 I.A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924).

15

Statecraft and Metapolitics in Shakespeare

To conscript the world's greatest dramatist into the conservative cause – it will be said – is impertinence enough. But by what right, in any case, do we assimilate drama to thought, political or other? Are these not two categorically distinct things?

It depends, I think, on what we understand by thought. Some thought is wholly abstract. Mathematics is certainly real, but it is not rooted (alternatively, no longer rooted) in the 'real' world. In mathematics, thought and object are identical. Gastronomy, by contrast, is concrete: here thought is a kind of cognitive nimbus directly emanating from its objects, the activities of cooking and eating. It is obviously 'appropriate'. But what, in politics, is the appropriate kind of thinking? What is a political 'object'? Is drama a form of thought, and if so, has it any categorical overlap with politics?

Drama and political thought both stand in some recognizable, if obscure, relation to the 'real' world. Lord Butler once aptly characterized politics as 'the art of the possible'. This civilized formulation finds a tantalizing echo in Aristotle's definition of drama as (in so many words) the art of the probable. Perhaps what makes drama plausible is also what makes politics – of Lord Butler's brand – 'possible', namely, a shared recognition as to the nature of human things and a common fidelity to their lived surface. But if so, we are committed no more to a slavish naturalism in drama than to a shallow pragmatism in politics. For in both spheres we typify and generalize; in both, our understanding is grounded (like our consciousness of self) upon a partial transcendence of the immediate. Both, to that extent, are modes of thought, even of abstraction. But in each we also recognize that to transcend all possible

circumstance, to transcend circumstantiality itself, is at the same time to take leave of the human (which I take it is what Aristotle meant).

In the understanding of human things, then, there is a natural limit to the degree of abstraction we may relevantly bring to bear. No serious political thought can begin otherwise than in a reasoned account of the experiences of ruling and being ruled, and of the social life or 'culture' of which they are a part. Political 'theory', however, all too often begins elsewhere, in some 'ghostly paradigm of things', to which the real world is supposed, or must be forced, to conform. There is something intrinsically undramatic, because abstract, about such would-be absolutes as 'social justice' or 'individual freedom'. Translated to the stage or to the theatre of practice, each must either lose itself in a maze of qualifications and contradictions, or produce not drama, but melodrama. Of course, a good dramatist may well have no explicit political convictions, or those that he has may not be conservative. But conservatism shares the presupposition of successful drama, that if the social, the human, fact has not been grasped in something like its full, concrete extension, then it has not been grasped at all.

Shakespeare shows a highly educated acquaintance with political theory, but – perhaps in consequence – he is not a political theorist. He is, however, an unmatched political observer. And that might well be sufficient. For his imaginative portrayal of political events constitutes a genuine, a decidedly 'appropriate', mode of thinking about politics. In his portraits of private life there is also, and most importantly, a sort of tacit politics. For Shakespeare is essentially an Aristotelian, for whom politics, morals, manners and civil society are mutually reinforcing parts of a single whole.¹ A standpoint in any one thus always implies a simultaneous perspective on the rest.

There are, as suggested above, two main kinds of political thinking in Shakespeare. It will be no more misleading than the alternatives to refer to them as involving a 'public' or 'objective' standpoint on the one hand and a 'private' or 'moral' standpoint on the other. The first is especially characteristic of the histories – in particular the so-called Second Tetralogy (*Richard II* to *Henry V*) – and one, at the very least, of the Roman plays, *Julius Caesar*. These dramatic documentaries deal with familiar issues such as legitimacy, authority, power, succession and office, but not on the abstract plane. Sir Edmund Chambers once suggestively observed that in these plays the real hero is the nation. Certainly, the official heroes are generally indifferent or unsympathetic. Shakespeare's favourites and ours lie outside the real mainstream of politics; almost inevitably, since where authority is lacking or contested, political life

and those who succeed in it will always be less than attractive. The only really likeable major characters in the tetralogy are Hotspur and Falstaff, both essentially 'private' men. They are the twin poles between whom the 'public' Prince Hal is suspended, and each is defeated, as it happens, by him. The madcap, freebooting nobility of the one and the engaging villainy of the other are equally out of place in the sober world of cold-blooded realism that does, and must, carry the day.

The Second Tetralogy depicts the rupture and restoration of social order, and the process whereby authority is lost and won. But Henry V's authority is different from that lost by Richard. The plays chart a progression from one sort of legitimacy to another; from a metaphysical, abstract *jus* to a more pragmatic, concrete *lex*; from a feudal to an essentially bourgeois order.² Each has its characteristic dramatic ethos.

The Ricardian idiom is a kind of *pourriture noble*. It is at its most fragrant in the unfortunate Mowbray, whose feudal loyalty has been reduced, by Richard's shameless exploitation of it, to a mere personal ornament. The robust Bolingbroke converses largely in vigorous insults. But Mowbray speaks in the naïve accents of a sad Christian gentleman, overtaken by events he lacks either the will or the capacity to understand. His lines have a ritual, incantatory quality, as though he needed to persuade himself of their truth:

My dear dear lord,
The purest treasure mortal times afford
Is spotless reputation – that away,
Men are but gilded loam or painted clay.
A jewel in a ten-times-barred-up chest
Is a bold spirit in a loyal breast.
Mine honour is my life, both grow in one;
Take honour from me, and my life is done.

But done it already is, since his sovereign engaged him to murder the Duke of Gloucester. Whether or not he has actually done so, either way his honour is compromised.

Even Richard's utterance acquires a certain charm, as his real empire of things gives way to a fantastic empire of words. He speaks in a precious *Jugendstil*, aimlessly spiralling off into euphuistic quips, curlicues and conceits. These frail tendrils, vainly seeking to root themselves in reality, clutch in the end only the shadow of a lonely, abandoned self. The whole is suffused with an effete moral lyricism, whose genuine pathos derives from its saccharine flavour of invincible self-pity. Governed by a

refined version of the pleasure-principle, Richard and his satellites take refuge in the omnipotence of thoughts. Theirs is the second childhood of political senility. Right, no doubt, is a gift of God, but it has subsequently to be deserved. Unless animated by a lively patriotism it proves defeasible. For patriotism, even in a usurper, generates its own kind of semi-divine right. To be patriotic is to uphold law, precedent, degree, succession, and that whole hallowed framework of settled expectations which constitutes a national culture. As the Duke of York observes, these things are in fact the ground of hereditary right, and a king who plays ducks and drakes with them gambles also with his title.

The Lancastrian order enacts a gradual realignment of the ruler's personal will with the national spirit. This is achieved through his reassertion of law: a law to which, if he is to embody it convincingly, he must himself be seen to conform. But he must first resuscitate it, and he can only do this effectively by sacrificing, not only the self-will that was Richard's downfall, but also his private personality. It is no wonder that, underneath all the public-relations glamour, Henry V should prove so very charmless. Julius Caesar is a tragic parallel. In order to re-create in his own will the constancy and impartiality of law, he must conceive himself only in the third person. He erects his family name into the title it has subsequently become. His enemies are indisposed to distinguish this noble artifice from ambition. They see through it only to its author, and what they see, by definition, can have little purchase on their affections.

The house of Lancaster, like E.M. Forster's Wilcox family, were never a very appealing lot. Their patriotism was not always distinguishable from opportunism. Their yeoman bluffness and beef-eating *bonhomie* (Bolingbroke) were intelligibly related to a certain prim narrowness and conventionality (Prince John). John of Gaunt apart, their highest flights of imagination were poetry of the war memorial kind, by which they sought to dignify the realism and expediency on which they really thrived. Masterly in the rhetorical use of *mauvaise foi*, they came honestly to believe their own fabrications. Yet in *Henry V* the Lancastrian ethos is vindicated, not in terms of its moral excellence or aesthetic seemliness, but simply in terms of necessity. Without the order it guarantees, the more civilized values it has temporarily obscured can never again flourish. (A point on which Forster is inclined to equivocate.)

Irony, of course, is unremittingly active at the local level. Henry's most stirring exhortations are no sooner delivered than burlesqued or otherwise qualified. Yet in the overall view irony seems to be lacking. What looks at first like an elegant triumph of authorial duplicity is perhaps no such thing. We know, of course, that national unity is being

secured, on Henry's father's advice, by a flagrantly unjust military adventure. (Pistol and his squabbling cronies accordingly enlist, reconciled in the common enterprise of plunder.) Sanctified by pliant clerics under threat of losing their privileges, the expedition is excusable only by the frivolous, snobbish and irresponsible – indeed altogether Ricardian – character of the French nobility. Morally speaking, the French-backed conspiracy, like the Dauphin's tennis-balls, is a godsend; both occur after Henry's decision to go to war.

Yet without national unity – of classes, interests, and regions – there is no end to the misery of civil war. The legitimist cause is long dead;³ tired of hypocrisy, the rebels against Henry IV had latterly sought no further excuse than private grievance. Where national survival is at stake, Shakespeare implies, a radical irony at the expense of the only plausible centre of authority is too much of a luxury. Accordingly, *Henry V* sees Bardolph hanged, Pistol thrashed, and Falstaff dead of a broken heart. A world permanently without an Eastcheap would be a sorry place: 'banish plump Jack, and banish all the world.'⁴ But an Eastcheap that breaks bounds, and does not know when to keep silence, does not know, either, which side its bread is buttered. It has become worse than tiresome.

I refer primarily to the wonderful scene in *Henry IV Part 2* where Pistol arrives to shatter the rural tranquillity of Shallow's orchard with news of Prince Hal's accession. This scene has an economy, a tact and a poignant beauty (to say nothing of the Pistol-shot) rivalled only by Chekhov. It is the still point of the turning world, a moment of dramatic stasis on which all else seems to hinge. It is, in fact, an idyll, but an idyll that only gathers force from Shakespeare's truly masterly refusal to idealize. We have just seen the new king submit himself, against all public expectation, to the paternal guidance of Falstaff's enemy, the admirable Lord Chief Justice. To what end is this grim, grand pledge of an Aristotelian 'government of laws, not men' (as Harrington called it)? For this, says the sequel: that a foolish country justice (himself an important instrument of law), a parvenu squire, may regale his visitors, neighbours and servants with wine, a dish of caraways and some apples of his own grafting, in a touching and much more than passable display of traditional hospitality.⁵ These, Shakespeare seems to say, are the true arts of peace, no less desirable for being temporarily embodied in a Justice Shallow.

In this artless merriment, punctuated by scraps of old ballads from Justice Silence, all differences are sunk: the differences between youth and age, town and country, master and servant. (So much for the class

struggle.) Even Falstaff, forgetting that he has come to rob his host, joins happily in the roster of healths, moved (one fancies) by a mildly envious wonder and regret at an innocence which, for all his generosity of spirit, he himself can never recapture. These, and much greater, things are made possible by the laws of England. It is a bourgeois dream, eminently predictable (some would say) of the glover's son who, having made his fortune hawking the same from the public boards, retires to his home town as a freeman of Stratford, there to dabble in local real estate. Its moral furniture, doubtless, is reproduction antique. But do those who would despise it know of anything more comfortable, of anything more admirably tailored to the human moral anatomy as we know it? Is it not because of its genuine antiquity, its enduring appropriateness to the human condition, that it continues to be reproduced?

If we have caught Shakespeare's drift, we cannot doubt the answers. We will see how Falstaff can be said to sign his own death-warrant when, at the end of the orchard scene, tenderly supposing that 'the young King is sick for me', he hastens to London with the lavish invitation, 'Let us take any man's horses – the laws of England are at my commandment.' 'Falstaff,' the Arden edition pertinently observes, 'arrogates a power which had been thought matter for deposition when claimed even by the legitimate sovereign.'⁶ The laws are no longer at anyone's arbitrary commandment, not even the king's.

Much has been written about Shakespeare and (the) law. All that needs saying here is that his allegiance to the rule of law is not of the liberal kind. The rule of law is neither an end in itself, nor merely a means (to such desiderata as 'freedom', 'privacy', or 'moral choice'). For Shakespeare, it would seem, as for the conservative, law, civil society and the State form a continuous circle. For it is not merely through, but *in* law and other institutions of state that private life seeks recognition for its deepest moral intuitions. Law otherwise, no matter how fairly administered, is not apprehended as 'just'. (One of the problems, incidentally, of empire.) And it is also through law that the state exacts from private life the active participation and obedience that these values require for their effective defence.

Thus law possesses at once the majesty of state, the moral immediacy of the private sphere, and the human density of both. Shakespeare's vision is in a different world from those Whiggish fantasies, the clockwork or the night-watchman state. Either might elicit one's theoretical admiration (so might a perpetual motion machine), but could either excite one's loyalty? No state can run itself: the virtue and loyalty of its citizens and functionaries (see *Measure for Measure*) are indispensable.

When the moral impulse fails, anywhere from the sovereign downwards, the seeds of disorder are sown. Order only re-emerges when power or constituted authority, as may be, realises that force alone is insufficient to secure it against competition.

Though he admires courage and the soldierly virtues, Shakespeare is no defender of the eristic principle. Unlike Nietzsche, or the Elizabethans' Machiavelli, or his own contemporaries Marlowe and Chapman, he has a deep distrust of the Renaissance individualist. In the words of his Ulysses, individualism is 'an envious fever / Of pale and bloodless emulation'. It finds its excuse in 'moral subjectivism'. But that threatens the common values without which no society can exist. It is also a source of tragic delusion, as Troilus, Edmund and the Macbeths variously discover. For individualism leads to something worse than secular defeat, namely, to the amazed discovery that one does not, in any properly human sense, exist. If one denies the ethical reality of society or other people (or, like Troilus, wilfully invests them with one's own), there remains nothing to illuminate one's own ethical reality but the brief candle of one's isolated, unsupported will.

The opposite of individualism is 'degree'. Substantially F.H. Bradley's idea of 'my station and its duties', it is a subject on which Shakespeare seems, more than once, to break his customary authorial silence. The most striking of these occasions is perhaps Ulysses' famous speech in *Troilus and Cressida*, I, iii. The immediate context is a commanders' conference called to determine why the Trojan War is going so badly. Ulysses' diagnosis (clearly the right one) singles out a general spirit of insubordination fostered by the example of the vain and sulky Achilles. But the speech's local dramatic relevance is soon exhausted, and it takes on an eloquent philosophical life of its own. Degree may well be 'the ladder of all high designs' such as war, or other forms of what Oakeshott (in *On Human Conduct*) has termed 'enterprise association'. But it is also something more. For without it, Ulysses observes,

How could communities,
Degrees in schools, and brotherhoods in cities,
Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,
The primogenity and due of birth,
Prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels,
But by degree, stand in authentic place?

This is more like Oakeshott's 'civil association', being the permanent institutions, from the spontaneous to the formal, of any civilized culture.

To the Marxist, of course, these things are means, namely, the masks of power. But for Shakespeare they are clearly ends in themselves, requiring neither explanation nor justification. Except perhaps this, that the only alternative, in the absence of degree, is 'mere oppugnancy', a Hobbesian state of nature, in which

Force should be right, or rather right and wrong,
Between whose endless jar justice resides,
Should lose their names, and so should justice too.
Then everything includes itself in power,
Power into will, will into appetite,
And appetite, an universal wolf,
So doubly seconded with will and power,
Must make perforce an universal prey,
And last eat up himself.

Shakespeare is as aware as Hobbes that, in the absence of authority, man's life is 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short'. But his conception of authority comprehends the complexities of human allegiance in a way impossible for the philosopher. For Shakespeare loyalty is more than prudence, because authority is more than force. If authority is conditional, its conditionality is not that of contract. And though hierarchy is involved, Shakespeare's *polis* is no Byzantium. To 'know one's place' is quite compatible with rising in the world; it is not necessarily to remain rooted to the social spot. Rather, it is to understand where one is at any given time, and the duties appropriate to that spot. Such duties are like law in this, that they embody the myriad moral intuitions of everyday life, and thence derive their legitimacy. They are not arbitrarily prescribed, but simply given in the human condition as it is here and now. They cannot be maintained without sovereign authority. But neither can authority be maintained if it ceases to maintain them.

Degree, in fact, signifies much more than rank; it signifies a whole complex of customary obligations, most of which are common to every social station: duties to youth and age, strangers and kin, the powerful and the weak, to children, spouse and the opposite sex, to the sovereign and his officers. Such things would be worthless (as well as impossible) if observed only under compulsion. So it is the business of authority, diffused throughout the social order, not to indoctrinate, but to educate; to develop and reinforce, not to supplant, humanity's spontaneous promptings towards order. It is for this reason that, in that remarkable political fable *The Tempest*, Prospero finally renounces his 'rough magic':

once his various subjects have all received their moral education (a thing possible in this imaginary world), force is thereafter superfluous.⁷ In T.H. Green's formula, 'will, not force, is the basis of the State'. (Of course, he does not mean by 'will' what Ulysses means, let alone what Hitler meant by it, but something like rational assent.)

To accept legitimate authority is to be morally educated. There is a circle here, but it is not a vicious one. For rational assent differs from acceptance under duress, which does not of itself confer legitimacy. To consent is not merely to submit to a 'common power', it is to mingle in the common life, to be understood by one's fellows, to speak the same language. It is to see them, not as potentially hostile fellow-clients, but as co-participants in culture, as potential friends. It is to exist, because one belongs.

Such a conception transcends the liberal or Hobbesian order, which merely guarantees each individual's right to a limited quota of egoism. A man whose egoism has been freely surrendered is released from the irritable necessity of defining himself through conflict, and released also for the better performance of his duties. He accepts limitation, because he does not experience it as such. He is neither servile nor blinkered. On the contrary, he will not only act gracefully, he will also cease to perceive the world through a distorting haze of self-interest. Being in touch with reality, he will be in touch too with that universal 'nature', of which the objective moral order is the most vivid and compelling manifestation, and of which civilization, so far from being the antithesis, is actually the crown.

Here we arrive at Shakespeare's second political perspective. It is, or rather might seem, more oblique than the first, and is found mainly in the tragedies. Someone may already have invented the word 'metapolitics' to express what is meant. The poet's immediate focus is not statecraft, but the 'politics' of the *oikos*, of the household gods. In the history plays, pending the restoration of law, morality wore something of a provisional aspect. Political order, being prior to effective moral order, logically occupied the foreground.

But in the tragedies this priority is reversed. Archaic settings affirm enduring values, subject to no historical equivocation, in which all political order is grounded. Such values, however, are not simply 'given in nature', in the sense of deriving from outside the human order. For outside that order there is only the chaos and nightmare of the world revealed to us in *Macbeth* and *King Lear*: a world of Hobbesian struggle, of a decapitated Nature, red in tooth and claw, which no one can invoke as witness to his activities without ceasing to be human. The 'nature'

which is the true source of our values and of the ends of human existence is a social and political artefact, but no less 'natural' for that. For it is 'human nature' to create such an order, and it is, in fact, in the human order alone that the wider natural order becomes articulate; is harmonized, realized, and completed.⁸

A legitimate politics stands to the human order in the same relation as the latter stands to the natural order: as its reflective and executive organ, and therefore as an integral part of it. Thus political order itself becomes an aspect of culture and an object of moral obligation as binding as the more specific loyalties it underwrites. A politics which seeks its justification elsewhere than in those loyalties must necessarily and permanently override them. In so doing it loses its only conceivable justification. Such are the various politics of expediency, utility, ideology, power and revolution. In offering to overleap the immediate human order, they reduce everything to a world of blind impulse where, in Macbeth's words, 'nothing is but what is not'. They are the politics not only of illegitimacy, but also of evil.

One of the hallmarks of evil in Shakespeare is precisely that freedom from the 'despotism of custom' which Mill was later to celebrate. Evil, said Martin Buber, is 'the impulse separated from the being'.⁹ Here the 'being' is human, and finds its true identity only in the acceptance of customary constraints, values and order. But Iago, Edmund, Goneril, Regan, Cornwall and Lady Macbeth – like many a 'Modern Master' – have 'seen through' such things. They are nothing if not 'rational'. Given their chosen purposes, they allow no traditional scruples to block the shortest and most economical route to them.

Macbeth, nevertheless, is not a problem. The protagonists secretly subscribe to the order they flout. They are destroyed primarily by a guilt which, having failed to recognize it for what it is, they have no means of expiating. Their tragedy begins less in the will-to-evil – for even the virtuous Banquo is tempted – than in moral self-ignorance. The worth of the murdered Duncan, and the order he stands for, is contested by no one, not even themselves. The ultimate triumph of good is almost a foregone conclusion. This is why, despite the attendant horrors, the general effect – appropriately heightened by a faultless economy of means – is positive, even tonic.

King Lear, on the other hand, is very disturbing. Compared with *Macbeth*, its Expressionist, pantomimic quality is more purely dramatic. It seems to communicate below the level of language and hence below the level of the familiar. It is both more universal and more subversive of traditional certainties. For what it dares to examine is the viability of

a new type of man.¹⁰ The new man is represented by the evil quartet, with the odious Oswald bringing up the opportunist rear. (I ignore Edmund's embarrassing deathbed discovery that he is, after all, human.) These people know exactly what they want and how to get it. Its desirability, to them, is so blankly self-evident as to need no justification; indeed, as even to justify a certain perfunctory self-righteousness in its pursuit. Unlike Iago's, their cruelty and selfishness have no spiritual dimension. Their own ethical reality interests them no more than others'. To them, others exist, as they themselves do to each other, only as tools or as obstacles. They are as incapable of genuine hate as they are of love. The blinding of Gloucester is more like policy than sadism, no sooner executed than dispatched into oblivion with a coarse jest.

Compromised by no real vanity, sapped by no self-doubt, their egoism is completely invulnerable. It moves towards its vacuous goal with the easy, disencumbered confidence, at times even the geniality, of the psychopath. It is true that they miscarry or (biologically speaking) prove unviable. But from their point of view, that no more argues against their being what they are than, from ours, Cordelia's death argues against goodness. Being (as Albany says) 'monsters', they afford ordinary moral condemnation no foothold.

The challenge they represent is intensified by our awareness that much of what they say is perfectly true. Theirs is tunnel vision, but of a pitiless clarity. If ever there was a vain, silly, capricious, irritating old man who wanted to eat his cake and have it, then King Lear is certainly he. He probably ought, as Regan says, to be taught a lesson. His right has been voluntarily alienated by legitimate transfer. Strictly speaking, it is non-existent: who ever heard of authority without responsibility? Yet Gloucester, another gullible old fool, is party to a foreign invasion undertaken largely in support of it. By the book he is unquestionably the traitor that Regan and Cornwall sincerely believe him to be. He can count himself lucky to be turned out of his own castle alive.

All this is true, yet, in ignoring so much else that is also true and much more important, it is off the point, reductionist, effectively false. It tells us nothing that we really need to know. What is being left out?

What is being left out is something, in a sense, gratuitous; as gratuitous, and as human, as charity, as Kent's unquenchable loyalty, as Cordelia's sublime forgiveness, as Lear's absurd hundred knights. It is unimportant that Lear is or is not what his daughters say he is. What is important is that he is also something stereotypical – that he is a poor old man, cruelly abandoned to the elements by his own flesh and blood – and that such things ought not to be. We know all this is important, for we

see another old man, with our admiration and approval, defy his sovereign Cornwall and risk death to succour his former king and master, who still retains sufficient royalty to exact unquestioning allegiance (even from those he has wronged). The integrity of the state is important. But it is not as important as this, in defence of which Gloucester loses his eyes, that the injustices we have seen and are yet to see should not go unpunished, or (what is even worse) simply go unremarked. Feudal loyalty is a fine thing. But we know that Cornwall's servant is ineffably right to set it aside in defence of Gloucester's remaining eye. Though only an obscure commoner, he speaks and acts with the whole weight of culture behind him, as Shakespeare's commoners frequently do.

All these are specific instances of 'degree'. But they show not that it is liable to self-contradiction, but that, like law, it binds only when its intrinsic moral requirements have been met. These lie within it, as an essential part of its specification, and are sustained, on occasion, by unilateral faith and trust – that is, by piety. Cornwall is disobeyed, as Richard is deposed, because he is not what the ideal characters of sovereign and liege lord prescribe. His servant is not, in fact, disloyal. Unlike his master, he fulfils his duty to the office that his master has vacated. He kills, not his liege lord, but a tyrannical impostor, a mere natural man. Cornwall is a traitor to his office, that is, to the immanent principle in virtue of which his office is valid, and which binds all offices together in a continuous web of legitimacy.

All this merely re-emphasizes that the order of degree is self-subsistent. But, it will be asked, what about 'Poor Tom', the 'unaccommodated man', who led Swinburne to offer us 'Shakespeare the Socialist'? Is not our 'common humanity' the thing to which he appeals, and are they not his 'human rights' of which Lear has previously taken 'too little care'? Do these amiable principles not lie outside the order of degree, and are they not the standard by which its specific provisions should be judged?

The answer in all cases is no. For nothing is more human than to believe in those specific provisions. They are immediate moral reality; 'common humanity' is the abstraction. They are Kent's 'holy cords' which are 'too intrince t'unloose'. Poor Tom himself, like Wordsworth's Old Cumberland Beggar, has a place in the order of degree. It is not his 'common humanity' that solicits relief, but his nakedness, poverty and lunacy. These things constitute his person or office, and entail rights to which even a Bedlam beggar may pretend (Edgar speaks of *enforcing* the charity of those whom, so disguised, he will meet). Kent is loyal not to Lear's common humanity, but to his specific person and his

dispossessed kingship. It is in such loyalties that common humanity resides, and in their failure to grasp such things that Goneril and Regan put themselves beyond the human pale.

Enlightenment will not help us to clarify such matters, since it all but refuses to admit their existence. It is a form of Philistinism, and the opposite of piety. All it seems safe to say is that the moral pieties both underlie and inform the political order. So far as it embodies them, the political order stands in no greater need of justification than they do, demanding only acceptance. Of course, both moral and political obligations are subject to change and reinterpretation. (They are more likely to change their object than their essence.) But either may properly be amended or adapted only in accordance with their common principle, which is *sui generis* and irreducibly human. This, for all the differences of emphasis and perspective, is also the message of the histories. It is a message which – to return to our starting point – since its truth is fully apprehensible only in particulars, drama is better fitted than any theoretical lucubrations to convey. It is also a conservative message; or if it is not so nowadays, then it ought to be. For conservatism alone, of all the major traditions of political thought, takes its stand on the fundamentals of the Shakespearean vision.

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Notes to Essay 15

- 1 Pace T.D. Weldon (*States and Morals*) and others, this view has no affinity whatever with totalitarianism. Totalitarianism subsumes the whole under politics, as puritanism would under morals, snobbery under manners, and so on. It is not even a narrowly *political* view, and is more like an observation than a 'theory'. See also Essays 2 and 7 (§2) above.
- 2 One should really say 'pseudo-feudal', since 'divine right' was largely a Tudor and Stuart invention. His support of genuinely feudal doctrine (the supremacy of common law, even to the king himself, which I have represented as 'bourgeois') caused Shakespeare's contemporary, Lord Chief Justice Coke, to cross swords first with James I and later with his son.
- 3 Shakespeare ignores the fact, mentioned in his sources, that the conspiracy against Henry V was Yorkist. See Arden *Henry V*, pp. 37, 44.
- 4 'It is surely obvious that to love Falstaff was a liberal education': William Empson on Prince Hal (quoted Arden *Henry IV 1*, xlix).
- 5 An anarchist (say) might see the orchard scene as symbolising an autonomous cultural tradition independent of politics, as indeed he might Iden's orchard

in *Henry VI 2*. But I think he would be wrong, and the complexities are too great to be argued here.

- 6 Arden *Henry IV 2*, p. 172, quoting Dr Harold Brooks.
- 7 See my 'Providence, Authority, and the Moral Life in *The Tempest*', *Shakespeare Studies*, XVI (1983), and also Essay 6 above (on Sarastro's rule).
- 8 Cf. Polixenes on gardening, *Winter's Tale*, IV, iii: 'The art itself is Nature'.
- 9 *I and Thou*, p. 48. L.C. Knights quotes this phrase in his essay on the Tragedies in the *Pelican Guide to English Literature*, Vol. 2 (*The Age of Shakespeare*).
- 10 See Edwin Muir, 'The Politics of *King Lear*', in his *Essays on Literature and Society* (1965).

16

Jane Austen: Ethics and Social Order

I have argued above that fiction (Shakespeare), or its imaginative resources (Burke), may paradoxically be the only means of doing full justice to political facts. No new apology, therefore, seems due for recruiting Jane Austen to the same ranks. It is true that she shows no interest in politics in its normal, everyday sense. But the quiet, implicit politics of private life – her novelistic universe – may very well have the strongest of all claims to our attention, as being the closest to the pristine cultural experience that politics generally – at least of the conservative stamp – exists to describe, understand, and defend.

There is no sharper test of a political understanding than its portrayal or embodiment in fiction. The closer a political understanding approaches to the concrete, the more the conservative is apt to prize it. Realist or not, good fiction constitutes a kind of ideal concrete environment which will always expose reductive ideologies for the ‘mere’ fiction (that is, the fantasy or lies) that they are. Good fiction abstracts from the actual neither to defy it, nor to ‘remould it closer to the heart’s desire’, but merely to typify it, and in so doing to elicit its latent order.¹

By ‘latent order’ I mean the ‘ideal type’, or tendency, of social phenomena as a whole (which, of course, as in a revolutionary situation, do not themselves have to be ‘orderly’). Weber defined an ‘ideal type’ as ‘a *utopia* arrived at by the analytical accentuation of certain elements of reality’.² He explicitly gave the term a positive rather than a normative sense. But I would suggest that Jane Austen’s ethical ideal is also a Weberian ideal type, no less ‘positive’, or rooted in reality, than the evils to which it stands opposed. It is utopian only in Weber’s strict sense of being nowhere fully manifest. Its enduring power to move and

to motivate us stems not from any sentimental yearning of the author's to transcend her own history and limitations, but from its basis in observed possibility; that is, in experience and human nature. If human nature exists, and if it incorporates its own intrinsic purposes and attainable goals, then values are immanent, grounded in fact. They converge into a unified conception of the good life, of human nature fulfilled, and to pursue them is not only right, but rational (since one has reason to seek one's own fulfilment).

The classic exposition of this outlook is Aristotle's. Jane Austen conceivably knew something of Aristotle.³ But it is hard to imagine a spirited (and Greekless) Regency lady voluntarily ploughing through his close-packed lucubrations. A more obvious source for her Aristotelianism is the eighteenth-century moralists, in whom she is known to have been well read.⁴ Dr Johnson, indeed, was her favourite prose author.

Fundamental to Jane Austen (as to Shakespeare) is the Aristotelian, or classical, conception of Nature and the 'natural'. Since everything is (non-trivially) part of Nature, all things at bottom must be interrelated and mutually explicable. (Such a conception seems generally to favour Jane Austen's art over, say, Blake's; an art of the known and the human; an art that is clear-cut, perspicuous, formal, finished and harmonious, rather than visionary, fragmentary or spasmodic. Both admirers and detractors have compared Jane Austen to Mozart.) Some things, however, are more truly 'natural' than others. They reveal Nature's ultimate purposes in the intuitively obvious fact of their self-sufficiency and permanent 'rightness'. They are what we call the good.

On the other side, the bad is essentially the 'unnatural'; that is, those things which have overshot, fallen short of, or been turned aside from their natural goal. The relevant concept here is Aristotle's *parekbasis* (perversion). Having the same original tendency as its 'right' counterpart, a perversion, at least ideally, can be redirected to its proper destination. Mr Darcy's excessive aristocratic *hauteur*, for example, is reclaimed for virtue because it was never, in fact, very remote from it. But the pride of his aunt Lady Catherine de Bourgh is literally monstrous, a *lusus naturae* (which is why it is funny). Not every travesty, however, is so diverting or so apt for caricature. Consider, in *Mansfield Park*, the categorical damnation of the charming, civilized Crawfords (if that is what you think they are). *Corruptio optimi pessima*.

Jane Austen showed, especially in *Mansfield Park*, some sympathy with the Romantics' Nature, not only as an aesthetic object, but also, as in Wordsworth, as a source and mainstay of moral sentiment. Accordingly the 'enlightened' metropolitan Crawfords are depicted as having

little or no feeling either for the beauty of the countryside, or for its traditional ethos, disciplines and constraints. Mary, accustomed to pay for anything she wants, cannot understand why no waggon can be spared from the haymaking to transport her harp (Ch. 6).⁵ But Jane Austen's championship of the 'natural' in no way resembles a Rousseauistic primitivism or the fashionable 'sensibility' cult (a target, of course, of *Sense and Sensibility*). The classical complexity of Jane Austen's 'nature' comes out amusingly in the following exchange between the odiously impertinent and affected Mrs Elton and the admirable Mr Knightley in *Emma*. Mrs Elton, as usual unmasked, is arranging Mr Knightley's forthcoming luncheon party for him:

'There is to be no form or parade [she says] – a sort of gipsy-party. We are to walk about your gardens, and gather the strawberries ourselves, and sit under trees; and whatever else you may like to provide, it is all to be out-of-doors; a table spread in the shade, you know. Everything as natural and simple as possible. Is not that your idea?'

'Not quite [he replies]. My idea of the simple and the natural will be to have the table spread in the dining-room. The nature and the simplicity of gentlemen and ladies, with their servants and furniture, I think is best observed by meals within doors. When you are tired of eating strawberries in the garden, there shall be cold meat in the house.' (Ch. 42)

(I cannot forbear to quote his parting concession: 'Come on a donkey, however, if you prefer it. . . . I would wish everything to be as much to your taste as possible.')

Jane Austen's point, of course, is not the iniquity of picnics. It is that affectation is no less itself for aping the 'natural'. What – apart from its being Mrs Elton's – makes Mrs Elton's project so objectionable is its embarrassing *fausse naïveté*.⁶ A Watteau-vision from the knowing Bristol suburbs, it is like Marie-Antoinette's model dairy without the pathos. What we have in Jane Austen, almost as explicitly as in Aristotle, is rather a doctrine of the appropriate. The sense of the appropriate, moral or aesthetic, is taste.

Taste is not a gift of the gods, but a human achievement. It no more fell out of the sky fully-formed into a grateful humanity's lap than did gentlemen and ladies, with their servants and furniture. What the gods gave was not taste but the capacity for it. To develop taste presupposes an acquaintance with, and respect for, the established forms and practices within which it is exercised, from which it is learnt, and of which it

furnishes (so to speak) the text. No doubt the capacity is as unequally distributed as the conditions favourable to its development, and without any automatic coincidence in the same person. In *Mansfield Park*, the 'innate taste' (that is, the aptitude for taste) of Fanny's sister Susan survives the soul-destroying squalor of the Price household, and needs transplantation to Mansfield to be realized, whilst the novels teem with characters for whom education, wealth and rank have done nothing or worse. But if nothing seems more spontaneous, or less studiously artificial, than Jane Austen's ideal of civility or decorum – that is, of appropriate conduct – it is because civilization and civilized behaviour, though products of time and effort, are more truly 'natural' than any notionally primitive or 'unspoiled' humanity. It is in civilization, and those who uphold it, that Nature most nearly perfects itself.

But who are these people, and in what does civilized behaviour consist? To judge by the idolatry of Janeites, or by the predictably symmetrical hatred that 'Austen' (*sic*) excites in the modern, self-proletarianized undergraduate,⁷ one might suppose her to have been peddling some invidious fantasy of 'gracious living'. Certainly, no work of literature can resist that *beau idéal* of modern critical theory, a really dedicated misreader. However, nothing is actually further from the truth than the 'gracious living' stereotype. To be sure, Jane Austen was no moral democrat, at least not in any simple sense. Her civilized ideal is fully realized only in an élite. Its members sometimes do, and sometimes do not, also belong to the élite of rank, wealth and fashion. (It is better that they should, because there they have more influence, and their example is more visible.) But what they stand for unquestionably emerges out of ordinary life, not in opposition to it. (Scott, indeed, marvelled at Jane Austen's ability to 'render ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting from the truth of the description and the sentiment'.)⁸ It is worth noting that Jane Austen takes seriously the opinion of 'an intelligent servant' (Mr Darcy's housekeeper) or, more strikingly still, that of a daily nurse (Mrs Rooke, in *Persuasion*; it should be remembered that the pre-Florence Nightingale stereotype of her profession is, roughly speaking, Dickens's Mrs Gamp).

Like Johnson, Jane Austen was a firm, even exultant, believer in Augustan common sense. (She often reminds one of Molière, and it is no coincidence that they are both very funny.) She can also celebrate, with her Romantic contemporary Wordsworth, the 'common feelings of common life' (*Northanger Abbey*, Ch. 2). Indeed, immature though it is, and though its purely formal aim is to satirize the Gothic-Romantic cult of the extraordinary, the whole of *Northanger Abbey* is a genuine,

spirited defence of everyday decency (Catherine) and even (in Mrs Allen) harmless mediocrity. They deserve not the contempt, but the allegiance and the protection, of the witty, the intelligent and the refined (as they do also of the powerful and influential). That is why Henry Tilney, a champion (like Michael Oakeshott) of conversation and its ethic of participation, takes an unexpectedly educated interest in poor stupid Mrs Allen's all-important muslins, and ends up married to Catherine. Had the great and generous Mark Twain not been put off Jane Austen by the 'gracious living' myth – she made him feel, he said, 'like a barkeeper entering the Kingdom of Heaven' – he might even have seen in Catherine a surprising forerunner of his own Huckleberry Finn:

Writing and accounts she was taught by her father, French by her mother: her proficiency in either was not remarkable, and she shirked her lessons in both whenever she could. What a strange, unaccountable character! – for with all these symptoms of profligacy at ten years old, she had neither a bad heart nor a bad temper; was seldom stubborn, scarcely ever quarrelsome, and very kind to the little ones, with few interruptions of tyranny; she was moreover noisy and wild, hated confinement and cleanliness, and loved nothing so well in the world as rolling down the green slope at the back of the house. (Ch. 1)

For Jane Austen 'goodness of heart' – the moralists' 'benevolence' – is in one sense the prime virtue, since it is the necessary condition of every other. It seems to be what distinguishes virtues from their corresponding vices or 'perversions'. For example, it distinguishes true sentiment from false (i.e. from sentimentality, affectation); civility from snobbery; rationality from cunning; and prudence from calculation. The fatuous Sir Walter Elliot in *Persuasion* is condemned for his 'heartless elegance';⁹ his quiet, unassuming daughter Anne, on the other hand, possesses 'elegance of mind', that is, 'true' elegance.

Jane Austen does not, however, suppose that 'heart', motive, or 'inner' disposition are all that counts. (Something which, in their very different ways, Fielding, Dickens, Nietzsche and Lawrence would all have us believe.) A truly benevolent person will also assess the consequences of his actions for others. To do so he will have first to call on his intelligence. Then to act accordingly he will require restraint, resolution, courage, and so on. The virtues, like the vices, ultimately form a unity, a circle of mutual entailment. Simple good-heartedness cannot be the whole of virtue, nor the universal answer to social problems

(what Dickens thought it, according to George Orwell). It is, for instance, fully compatible with old Mr Woodhouse's 'gentle selfishness' (*Emma*, Ch. 1). It does not secure a man against his own vices, which can neutralize it or even put it into reverse (see Elinor's reflections on Willoughby, *Sense and Sensibility*, Chs. 44–45). Again, combined with honest, indiscriminating stupidity and tactlessness (Sir John Middleton in the same novel), it can be almost more oppressive than malice, since there is no acceptable defence against it.

In short, good-heartedness is necessary but not sufficient. Fortunately, it is a popular and widely distributed virtue. It is, in fact, the social bond: the tiny society of *Emma* simply could not be sustained (or endured) without its ubiquitous well-meaning Westons, Coles and Bateses. But as we have seen, benevolence requires intelligence, self-knowledge and cultivation to be fully effective. The majority may be benevolent, but in them, as in the young, understanding is latent or inarticulate, and it is the task of the wiser and more reflective, by example, instruction, or even authority, to give it voice. 'You feel, as you always do,' says Henry to Catherine, 'what is most to the credit of human nature. Such feelings ought to be investigated, that they may know themselves' (*Northanger Abbey*, Ch. 25). Thence follows the importance of education, which is a work of love, and typically the act of a lover (Henry Tilney, Edmund Bertram, Mr Knightley). Elizabeth Bennet does much the same for Mr Darcy, with this difference, that when she tells him some pungent home truths, she is far from being in love.

It may be asked what role Jane Austen accords to the social élite, and how they relate to her moral and intellectual élite. The answer resembles that of Plato to the profoundest of all political questions. Either kings must become philosophers, or philosophers kings, or both, so that, as far as possible, power and virtue coincide. It is obvious that any joint solution must involve social mobility (then as now a distinctive feature of English life), and that wealth, being a form of power, must have an important part to play.

Wealth by itself is obviously no guarantee of virtue, since it makes vice easier. (Clandestine vice, that is: the publicity wealth entails makes flagrant vice harder.) But it will always exist, it leads to power and influence, certain obligations are attached to it which it is socially desirable to ensure are fulfilled, in the right hands it is a positive good; and therefore it may be incumbent upon such members of the moral élite as are not already rich to acquire wealth, or not to despise it.

Jane Austen is not in the least snobbish about 'trade' (see the admirable Gardiners in *Pride and Prejudice*), but seems to accept that wealth thus

acquired may take a couple of generations to make its way into the ruling class (Mr Weston). Leaving out the Church, which confers influence without wealth (and hence without independence), the quickest upward routes are marriage (more acceptable in a woman – Elizabeth Bennet or Jane Fairfax – than in a man, say Wickham) or, in *Persuasion*, the Navy. The Navy not only creates a moral élite simply from the nature of the employment, but furnishes them also with considerable leisure for self-cultivation (especially in peacetime), and with serious fortunes in prize-money.

Those who are rich but not virtuous are at least compelled to observe the *convenances*, and are either disgraced for overstepping them (Henry Crawford and Maria Bertram), or impoverish themselves by imprudent display (Sir Walter Elliot) so that their social position and influence (Kellynch Hall and all it involves) fall to virtuous aspirants from below (Admiral Croft). All in all, wealth, though independent of virtue, stands to it much as intelligence and the rest stand to benevolence. (Note however that Mrs Harville in *Persuasion*, though far from affluent herself, thinks a little early poverty no bad foundation for a marriage.) Wealth is purely a means, as it was for Aristotle. Pursued as an end – and the novels furnish endless examples – it is ‘perverted’. It seems to me no more sensible to commend Jane Austen for her proto-Marxist ‘materialism’, as the late Arnold Kettle did,¹⁰ than it would be to commend her own John Dashwood for the same thing, of which, though grotesque, he is a far more plausible example (see *Sense and Sensibility*, esp. Chs. 33, 41).

Jane Austen’s view of the duties of power is firmly Tory and conventional, and, as in *Mansfield Park*, has a rural, Romantic, ‘landed’ flavour. Squire, landlord and parson (as contemporary Radicals also understood) are the linchpins of society. Privilege entails heavy obligations, for reasons which Jane Austen takes wholly for granted, but which are, by implication, something like the following.

The powerful can obviously not be held to virtue or its requirements by power, but only by morality or the fear of censure. And they need more of such pressure than the rest of society, since their immediate freedom to defy it is greater. Their obligations must in any case naturally increase in proportion to their ability to discharge them. In other words, *noblesse oblige*. The weak or the ruled need protection, being unable to protect themselves. Only the strong can provide it, and therefore they must. So far as they do, so far their power and privilege, even if originally inherited, is deserved.

Of course, their obligations are easily enough shirked in the short run. Like the Crawfords or the Elliots, upper-class scrimshankers can

congregate in places like London or Bath, far from the sources of their income, the objects of their proper concern, and the general censure. 'Nothing fatigues me,' says Mary Crawford, 'but doing what I do not like.' Here, *avant la lettre*, is the authentic voice – and the context, affluence without responsibility – of modern liberalism. It is entirely characteristic that Mary, in an unpleasant and highly charged scene (*Mansfield Park*, Ch. 9), should wittily (and vulgarly) deride the custom of family prayers in the 'great house', in patently insincere favour of leaving people 'to go their own way – to choose their own time and manner of devotion'.

The gentle Fanny is made 'too angry for speech', but Edmund's heroically measured, Johnsonian reply (he is attracted to Mary) turns on authority, example and imitation.¹¹ But it is wasted. The Crawfords, though polished, intelligent, and familiar with the *convenances*, have been brought up without 'active principle'. That is, they have been trained but not educated; they can, to some extent, recognize the good, but have not been motivated to pursue it. They have been indulged by their uncle and corrupted by his loose-living example. (Thus Mary objects to her brother's adultery solely on the grounds of its imprudence.) They feel in consequence no particular ties towards him, making free, before strangers, with unflattering anecdotes at his expense.

Their offence, in fact – not unique in Jane Austen – is not against an 'individual' (the only offence in the liberal canon), but rather against a principle or sentiment, viz. that general, unquestioning presumption of family loyalty and respect which the Romans called *pietas*. Burke, Hegel and others have extended the idea to many occasions beyond family piety, so that (for example) conservatives usually consider patriotism a prime example of *pietas*. Mary Crawford's real offence in the chapel at Sotherton is thus not deliberate sacrilege, but a generalized impiety or carelessness that happens momentarily to have brushed against a religious object. It is, in fact, a failure of taste; even a form of moral ignorance. 'Your lively mind', says Edmund, 'can hardly be serious, even on serious subjects.' The nature of religion lies in part in its being one of those things – the sacred or the sacrosanct – to which mockery is permanently inappropriate. (Needless to say, it is not religion that Jane Austen mocks in Mr Collins or despises in Mr Elton.)

It will be pleasant to conclude this review of Jane Austen's 'political' ideas by quoting an incident from *Emma* in which they are virtually all illustrated, the deservedly celebrated Box Hill episode (Ch. 43). It occurs, significantly, the day after Mr Knightley's party at Donwell, where conduct and setting – despite the ubiquitous Mrs Elton – have combined to

produce what Lionel Trilling rightly called an 'idyll' of English life, a vision of rational and harmonious social order.¹²

The Box Hill episode centres on the voluble Miss Bates; not, however, on Miss Bates as an isolated individual, but as what Mr Knightley calls 'a woman of her character, age and situation'. Miss Bates is humble and unassuming; she is very good-hearted; and she is poor, with an aged, dependent mother. Those three things alone – and her own small charities – give her a claim on the charity of others, which is constantly (though tactfully) forthcoming. Miss Bates is in phatic communion with the universe. Her incessant chatter is a delirious jumble of remembered kindnesses, solicitous inquiries, and bizarre trivialities, amounting, in fact, to the world seen in the light of an overpowering gratitude, optimism and benevolence. She is, says Mr Weston, 'a standing lesson of how to be happy'. Hers are the predicament, and the virtue, of ordinary humanity at its best. In her unlikely way, she is a specimen of the sacrosanct, the focus of pieties that reach into the very heart of the social order; one of the unideal meek who, just because they never will inherit the earth, deserve a little consideration.

Emma, by contrast, is 'handsome, clever, and rich', the natural gravitational centre of any social gathering. Flattered into greater than usual vanity, she makes, for the company's benefit, what is in effect, if not in intention, a rather hurtful, pointedly witty rejoinder to an innocent, but irresistibly inviting, *niaiserie* of Miss Bates's. With great courage, for he secretly loves her, Mr Knightley takes her aside afterwards to remonstrate. Emma concedes that 'there is not a better creature in the world', but excuses herself with 'you must allow that what is good and what is ridiculous are most unfortunately blended in her.' Here is Mr Knightley's shattering reply:

'They are blended,' said he, 'I acknowledge; and were she prosperous, I could allow much for the occasional prevalence of the ridiculous over the good. Were she a woman of fortune, I would leave every harmless absurdity to take its chance; I would not quarrel with you for any liberties of manner. Were she your equal in situation – but, Emma, consider how far this is from being the case. She is poor; she has sunk from the comforts she was born to, and if she live to old age, must probably sink more. Her situation should secure your compassion. It was badly done, indeed! You, whom she had known from an infant, whom she had seen grow up from a period when her notice was an honour – to have you now, in thoughtless spirits and the pride of the moment, laugh at her, humble her – and before her

niece, too – and before others, many of whom (certainly some) would be entirely guided by *your* treatment of her. This is not pleasant to you, Emma – and it is very far from pleasant to me; but I must, I will – I will tell you truths while I can . . .’

No such reprimand would have been worth offering (say) to Mrs Elton or, for all her intelligence, to Mary Crawford. But it is not wasted on Emma, whose remorse is so prompt, generous and (yes) noble, as almost to make a *felix culpa* of the offence:

[The carriage] was ready; and before she could speak again he had handed her in. He had misinterpreted the feelings which had kept her face averted and her tongue motionless. They were combined only of anger against herself, mortification, and deep concern . . . She was most forcibly struck. The truth of his representation there was no denying. She felt it at her heart. How could she have been so brutal, so cruel, to Miss Bates! How could she have exposed herself to such ill opinion in anyone she valued! And how suffer him to leave her without saying one word of gratitude, of concurrence, of common kindness! . . . Emma felt the tears running down her cheeks almost all the way home, without being at any trouble to check them, extraordinary as they were.

Emma resolves to visit Miss Bates the very next morning, even if she should run into Mr Knightley: ‘she would not be ashamed of the appearance of the penitence so justly and truly hers.’ Returning from this mission she finds Mr Knightley in the house, looking severe, and taking his leave of her father. The old man aimlessly observes that she has just come from visiting the Bateses (‘she is always so attentive to them’):

She looked at Mr Knightley. It seemed as if there were an instantaneous impression in her favour, as if his eyes received the truth from hers, and all that had passed of good in her feelings were at once caught and honoured. He looked at her with a glow of regard. . . . He took her hand, pressed it, and certainly was on the point of carrying it to his lips – when, from some fancy or other, he suddenly let it go. . . . The intention, however, was indubitable. . . . she thought nothing became him more.

The above quotations are lengthy, but will have suggested better than any possible commentary the brilliance, the profundity, and the humane, richly educated understanding with which Jane Austen depicts a complete cycle of the moral life – from offence, through penitence, to forgiveness – as it must naturally accomplish itself in a civilized mind and a civilized society. The episode is deeply moving, and worth any amount of the morbid self-conscious agonizings to be found (say) even in the greatest Russian novels. What, in the contrast, is perhaps most astonishing and satisfying about it is its clarity and inevitability. (Notice, for example, how in Jane Austen such hypocrisy-laden catchwords as ‘compassion’ and ‘concern’ are instantly restored to full and vivid meaning.) These it derives from its cultural ambience, both inside the novel and (one must suppose) outside it, a world of tacit purpose in which obligations, complex and delicate though they are, are finally intelligible. Being known and understood, they can be fully discharged, without any obstinate, insoluble residue of guilt, anxiety or misgiving. Jane Austen’s, in short, is a pre-modern, pre-Modernist world.

What is imagined, perhaps even recorded, is the opposite, one might say, of alienation. It is a prospect of freedom, of an achievable innocence, built on tact and restraint, and being in itself the joyful, compulsive, self-sufficient meaning with which it irradiates our otherwise strange, dumb, animal – not to say vegetable and mineral – existence. Her nephew tells us that Jane Austen was a staunch Christian, and we have seen that she took spiritual things with Johnsonian seriousness. But she is in no sense a religious writer; her novels have no specifically religious dimension. Her fictional kingdom is wholly of this world; and it contains, like Aristotle’s, the means, the prospect, and even, in certain fortunate people or places, the fact of its self-redemption.

How far any of this can be of comfort to us today the reader must ascertain for himself. It has been said that Jane Austen’s politics are those of her class, sex and time.¹³ So they may be, but there is no reason why her underlying values should not be ours. My own feeling is that unlike, say, the idea of angels, Jane Austen’s conceptions would hardly move us if they had no basis in possibility, or continuity with our own. Perhaps, in Empson’s paraphrase of Wittgenstein, ‘what is conceivable can happen too’.

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Notes to Essay 16

- 1 Cf. G.H. Bantock, 'Literature and the Social Sciences', *Critical Quarterly*, XVII, 2 (1975).
- 2 See Max Weber, "'Objectivity" in Social Science', in E.A. Shils and H.A. Finch, eds, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (1949), p. 90.
- 3 Compare Wickham's description of Mr Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, Ch. 16, with Aristotle's *megalopsuchos* in the *Nichomachean Ethics*, IV, iii. Wickham's reflections on the social utility of aristocratic pride resemble Boethius's.
- 4 See Gilbert Ryle, 'Jane Austen and the Moralists', in his *Collected Papers* (1971).
- 5 The general point, that the exigencies of a rural economy naturally enforce a moral discipline and a sense of reality, is common in Emily Brontë, and especially in Hardy. The same is true of seafaring life, as celebrated by Conrad and also in *Persuasion*.
- 6 The amateur theatricals in *Mansfield Park* are a yet more complex instance of the *faux-naïf*. The objection (*pace* Lionel Trilling, cited at note 12 below) is not to theatre as such, but to a peculiarly modern hypocrisy or insincerity. Henry Crawford makes open love to Maria under the moral cover of the part he has successfully angled for. The ruling pretence, half-believed by some, that 'it's only a play', and that only the unsophisticated could possibly suppose otherwise, gives Crawford his immunity, crows the rest into complicity, and forces Rushworth, Maria's fiancé, silently to endure agonies of jealousy, humiliation and justified outrage for fear of seeming even stupider than he is. To have laid bare so long in advance the chief technique by which contemporary 'enlightenment' intimidates the ordinary moral conscience is a brilliant achievement. Doubtless the bovine Rushworth is chosen so that our vivid sense of injustice, and of the odiousness of its perpetrators, shall be independent of any personal *parti pris*.
- 7 [1999] No longer, I am glad to report, at least among my own students.
- 8 *Diary*, 14 March 1826. Quoted in J.E. Austen-Leigh's *Memoir* of his aunt, reprinted in Penguin *Persuasion*, p. 370.
- 9 Sir Walter Elliot's physical vanity and his obsessive disgust at anything suggestive of poverty, age, disease or deformity, together with his ludicrous family pride, which secures him immortality in the Baronetage (his only reading), have a common source. 'Heartlessness' and the fear of death seem to be connected.
- 10 See the chapter on *Emma* in Kettle's *Introduction to the English Novel*, reprinted in Ian Watt, ed., *Jane Austen* (Twentieth Century Views series). The originator of the 'Jane Austen-as-*proto-Marxist*' idea seems to have been Auden, who coined the famous phrase 'the amorous effects of "brass"' to describe her subject-matter ('Letter to Lord Byron, I').
- 11 See Johnson on Milton's exclusively private devotions, in his *Lives of the Poets*.
- 12 See his '*Emma* and the Legend of Jane Austen' in *Beyond Culture* (1965). His widely reprinted essay on *Mansfield Park* is also valuable.
- 13 Graham Hough, Afterword to *Emma*, Signet Classics edn. (1964).

17

Trollope, Tact and Virtue

The Gentleman in Trollope: Individuality and Moral Conduct, by Shirley Robin Letwin (Macmillan 1982)

Trollope is out of date. The whole trend of Modernist thought this century is against him. His spaciousness, his redundancy, his leisurely tolerance, his lack of 'commitment' (to anything except goodness), his unpretentious devotion to the surface of human things, his decency, his belief in the moral bearing and moral value of art – all these add up to what looks very like a culpable shallowness.

But what is this 'depth' he lacks, and why should it have come to be prized? The profundity of an explanation – so runs a modern superstition – is proportionate to its distance from the things explained. When people have lost, or repudiated, their immediate practical understanding of themselves and their world, they will run to charlatans for a cheap substitute: an all-purpose General Theory of Human Behaviour. Such theories, in abstracting from the particular, have a beguiling appearance of depth. However, to ignore the conscious aims, the particular circumstances, the individual responses in human behaviour is to ignore precisely what makes it human. As an explanation of *human* behaviour, therefore, any such theory is not deep, but shallow.

The 'depth' metaphor, in fact, had better be discarded. If human things articulate themselves intelligibly enough on the surface (as they do), why scrabble about 'beneath' it for ulterior significance, like some famished prospector goaded on (as he has been reduced to famine) by dreams of unimaginable wealth? The human world is not deep, but dense. To explore it is not to exchange illusion for truth, but rather to experience a steady accumulation of meaning. We require, not deliverance from it, but a knowledge of how to find our way about.

Trollope's world too is dense rather than deep, and his characters are enviably at home in it. They are preternaturally ordinary people by Modernist standards. Even when they rise to heroism they do not glory in rebellion but suffer in silence. In consequence they seem to have little interior life, but this in no way imperils their status as reflective moral individuals. (D.H. Lawrence illustrates all the foregoing in reverse.) Their speech is no more stuffed with nuance than their physical world is with symbols, but what, in the absence of 'depth', is there to imply? Trollope enjoys twitting us with his authorial omnipotence. Nevertheless, he sees his characters from the outside in, not *vice versa*. He renounces his privileged access to their hinterland. None has any secrets that would be unintelligible, if discovered, to his fellows. They have sexual and religious lives, but we are content to know little about them. Trollope has none of the 'backstairs psychology' that Nietzsche censured in the Goncourts, whereby

Man, as the prying housemaid of the soul,
May know her happiness by eye to hole.

His concern is not souls, but persons.

A person, etymologically speaking, is a social surface, a *persona* or mask. Yet he is no less an end in himself for being, as it were, public property and seeing himself as such (a political principle, incidentally, of great importance). It is therefore no slur on Trollope's humanity, no ironical paradox, to say that at his best – as in that touching little masterpiece *The Warden* – he is, like Turgenev, a master of the profoundly superficial. His incuriosity is merely tact, and the civilized intercourse it safeguards is no less 'profound' for being overt. Trollope, in short, and like his heroes, is a gentleman.

Starting from the obvious affinities between Trollope and Michael Oakeshott, one might offer some such account as the above. But how far can the comparison really be pressed? Dr Letwin's book is confessedly Oakeshottian. It is not a work of literary criticism. Its real object is to work out, as it were between the three of them, a moral theory of the 'dense' type.

Oakeshott's villains are nearly as familiar as Trollope's, and somewhat resemble them. We know the Rationalist and the Moral Idealist: enter now, courtesy of Dr Letwin, their displeasing offspring, the Self-Divided Man. This troublesome prig has not read his Sartre: he disavows his earthbound, practical, desiring self, rejecting it as 'passionate', 'animal', or whatever. His 'real' self aspires to a transcendental realm of 'reason', to which he would be welcome if only the rest of us weren't obliged to

grunt and sweat alongside him on his route to the stars. What he refuses to see is that *all* human behaviour is 'rational' in that it inexorably involves choice. We may be limited by circumstance but we are not 'driven' by any alien 'impulses'. If only he would accept his practical self as 'his', he would achieve Virtue Without Struggle and become, in effect, a 'gentleman'.

All this stands or falls with the (mostly 'late') Oakeshott it draws on.¹ It contains some undoubted truths, but is implausible overall. The Self-Divided Man is not a happy expression. In abolishing the conflict between 'reason' and 'passion' we do not thereby abolish self-division, we merely abolish a misleading metaphor. Self-division survives in the perennial conflict between right and wrong or (what comes to the same thing) unselfishness and selfishness. I can *choose* either of these with equal rationality, but I *want* each of them in very different senses. (Call that two selves if you like, but I know them both to be 'mine'.) In other words, I remain morally torn. Virtue Without Struggle is also a misleading formulation. I may learn to behave well (unselfishly), to do so naturally and unreflectively, but this spontaneity may have cost me and my teachers a life's work (compare musical performance).

Pace Dr Letwin, it never seemed likely that Oakeshott's *On Human Conduct* had overturned the whole edifice of Western ethics. For that book, like hers, appears to leave out the *sine qua non* of the 'moral', namely the agent's own belief that morality is 'objective', that his behaviour is referable to an impersonal concept of 'rightness'. If it does leave this out, the ensuing account will be as wide of the mark as any 'deep' explanation, no matter how 'dense' it may otherwise be. And it will certainly not square with Trollope, for whom duty is central.

The Letwin–Oakeshott version runs something like this. Because morality is really *process*, it is essentially optional. Out of the primordial welter of 'moral practice' so-called 'values' gather and disperse endlessly, like waves. We do not obey them, only 'take account' of them, since they only show us how to make choices, not which choices to make. My 'virtue', then, is actually virtuosity (and the gentleman has a lot of it), the finesse or taste with which I identify moral occasions and set about occupying them, my moral style. Certainly something is being described here, but I don't think it is moral conduct proper. I may suppose myself to be pursuing my duty, but this so-called 'duty' is no more, in fact, than a temporary curdling of the flux. (It looks as though one might have actually to believe in moral objectivity if one is not to misdescribe morality. That would be strange, though not more so than the facts.)

All this is a sort of aestheticism, and may well have some bearing on Oakeshott's increasingly opulent prose. It might also be snobbery. For it is hard to see how virtue (virtuosity) could appear in the absence of multiple choices (there is a Friedmanite tinge to this). Thus the more favourable one's circumstances (or intelligence, or education) the greater will be the scope, and hence quantity, of one's 'virtue'. Trollope admires scrupulousness. But he does not believe that a gentleman *qua* gentleman is morally superior to good people of another class or situation (his definition, of course, is to be morally better than cads of his own class, and – who knows? – than snobs and aesthetes as well). Trollope believes in 'my station and its duties'. Mrs Quiverful's options (*Barchester Towers*, Ch. 25) have been whittled down by poverty to a single choice: whether to make a scene at Mrs Proudie's (and she has been bred a lady) so that her husband shall not be cheated of his promised preferment and their fourteen children shall be fed, or not to do so. Her decision is hardly remarkable for its finesse, but it is courageous and right, and Trollope admires her for it. She has not 'taken account' of the state of moral play or anything so fancy. She has simply done her duty, and is more, not less, admirable for having had virtually no choice.

Once we discard the notion of objective rightness, or value it solely for its aesthetic appeal, we are into liberalism, which characteristically ignores, and frequently despises, the moral feelings of ordinary people. Like the theory I have been considering (assuming I have got it right), liberalism refuses to understand people as they understand themselves (that is, it fails to understand them). Fiction itself is invariably a severe (and hence valuable) test of any doctrine in this regard, even a doctrine, such as Dr Letwin's, purportedly derived from it. Would Trollope have recognized himself in her book? Here and there, perhaps, but no more.

Some final points on moral objectivity. Without it, the common citizen's belief in the objective rightness of the social order (the only non-frivolous description of political 'consent') and the things that flow from it become obscure. I mean things like: authority, justice, education, manners, the individual's self-respect and its explicit recognition in the custom of (universal) deference, without which there is only arrogance and insolence, servility and resentment. I could wish that Dr Letwin had touched on these matters: they should be discussed anyway, they are obviously central to her theme, and they would have helped her to clarify her own thought. But it is hard to see how she could have done so. Even in Oakeshott, for all the value he sets on tradition, most of the really tricky political questions – and particularly the nasty ones, such as coercion – get swept under the (decidedly Persian) carpet.

Her book is not, on the whole, well written. It looks as though it had been conceived at leisure but executed in near-maniacal haste. No one unfamiliar with its conceptual background could possibly be persuaded by it, since, though it frequently rises to an aphoristic vivacity, it almost never descends to argument. Her thoughts have a discernible tendency but (though often acute) no real sequence. In places ‘and’, ‘but’, ‘therefore’ and ‘because’ seem virtually interchangeable. (Wanted: a kind of all-purpose logical copula, or universal joint, to cover such underspecified relationships.) The chapters specifically on Trollope consist largely of soporific, aimless synopses in the past tense, and the book is as thickly bespattered with intellectual solecisms as with misprints. It will cause merriment in Great Turnstile,² if it hasn’t already done so. These things are very distressing, since we had come to expect good things from Dr Letwin and hope to see them again. Nevertheless, she has assembled some interesting and provocative ideas and provided an obvious starting-point for serious reflection on an important if unfashionable topic.

From *The Salisbury Review*, I, 1 (October 1982).

Notes to Essay 17

- 1 [1999] The view of Oakeshott taken here (in 1982) differs considerably from that in my book *Oakeshott* (1990), and in Essays 3 and 4 above. I advanced it at length in the chapter on Oakeshott in Roger Scruton, ed., *Conservative Thinkers* (Claridge Press, 1988), which I have not reprinted. Although (as I now think) mistaken, it is, I believe, neither wholly without interest nor without a certain plausibility.
- 2 [1999] Home to the editorial offices of the *New Statesman*, then much further Left than now.

18

Tolstoy and Enlightenment: an Exchange with Isaiah Berlin

(I) Life versus Mechanism,¹ by Robert Grant

Tolstoy, by A.N. Wilson (Hamish Hamilton, 1988); *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History*, by Isaiah Berlin (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988).

The three most written-about people in history, it is said, are Jesus, Napoleon and Wagner. One would expect to find Tolstoy somewhere in the vicinity. Yet full-scale Western biographies of him are curiously few: Maude, Rolland, Leon, Troyat and one or two others. It may be that his copious diaries and confessional writings, so far from stimulating biographers, have actually deterred them, by leaving so little for them to do.

There is, however, plenty of shelf-space for A.N. Wilson's readable and unpretentious study. It is no criticism to say that it contains few surprises (though I had certainly not realized before quite how large Tolstoy's debt to English writers was). A novelist himself, Wilson sticks appropriately (and like his predecessors) to the surface of things. Eschewing Freud, Marx and other champions of the occult, he explains the known in terms of the known, or at least of the probable (that is, of the knowable-in-principle). Folk psychology his may be, but it is also sound history and good sense.

The nearest Wilson gets to offering any central thesis is in his repeated suggestion that for Tolstoy art was a means of 'laundering' experience. It has long been recognized that nearly everything in the novels is taken directly from (somebody's) life. So far from being a deficiency,

this lack of invention is almost Tolstoy's greatest strength. It is surely what lends his best work its almost 'scientific' authority.

In one corner of his being, Tolstoy was certainly vain and egocentric. It is not obvious, though, that (as Wilson suggests) those were his motives for 'laundering' his past. They may well explain, however, why, after his notorious 'conversion', he went to extraordinary lengths not to launder, but to blacken it. That way, the irritable apostle of celibacy, non-violence and the simple life could at least purchase a hearing. In *A Confession* (1879), written only two years after *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy describes his (fairly normal) aristocratic youth as follows: 'Lying, robbery, adultery of all kinds,' (how many are there, for heaven's sake?) 'drunkenness, violence, murder – there was no crime I did not commit.' He began to write, he says, 'from vanity, covetousness and pride'.

Fourteen years earlier, however, while engaged on *War and Peace*, Tolstoy had given an altogether more plausible account of his activities. Writing (Wilson tells us) to a 'socially-conscious' novelist, Tolstoy observed that 'the aims of art are incommensurate . . . with social aims. The aim of an artist is not to solve a problem irrefutably, but to make people love life in all its countless, inexhaustible manifestations.'

Those are hardly the accents of vanity. Tolstoy's object in editing the past was, like any realist writer's, at once aesthetic, moral and scientific. It was to elicit from the stream of experience, by purging it of inessentials, its inner, spontaneous tendency, and in so doing to reconcile us to it and our place as participants within it. (The realist makes two assumptions: first, that experience is meaningful; second, that its meaning lies within, and not outside it. Thus if God exists, he is part of experience.)

As for Tolstoy's egocentricity, when combined with his immense powers of empathy, it was a positive asset. His uncanny psychological verisimilitude derives from his wholehearted self-projection into characters superficially quite unlike himself. (In this he anticipates Stanislavsky's ideal actor.) He reports, not what such people might conceivably feel, but what he, in their shoes, actually does feel. Tolstoy's characters, it is often said, are really all aspects of himself. It would be fairer to say that their variety testifies to the sheer capaciousness of his understanding.

One side of Tolstoy has inevitably been eclipsed by his latter-day role as prophet. I mean not only his ordinary *joie de vivre* (he was an accomplished and irresistible practical joker), but also, what is so prominent in his greatest novels, his innocent worldliness; his aristocratic delight in the whole 'champagne' side of life: in health, wealth, style, grandeur, display, sexual attractiveness, the *beau monde*. There is almost

as much of Tolstoy in his carefree Vronskys and Oblonskys as in his brooding Levins. It is not enough, with Wilson, to write all that off as snobbery.

Bergson (who owed more than a little to Tolstoy) identified the comic with the temporary victory of 'mechanism' over 'life'. Tolstoy's great achievement as a novelist, however, is to celebrate the normal case: the eventual, inevitable triumph of life over mechanism, or, to put it another way, of reality over ideology. Such things, of course, are the stuff of tragedy.

They are also the burden of Sir Isaiah Berlin's famous 1953 essay on Tolstoy, now happily reissued. The fox, says a Greek fragment, knows many things; the hedgehog, one big thing. Tolstoy, according to Berlin, was a (novelistic) fox who wanted to be a (moralistic) hedgehog. (One recalls Matthew Arnold on Hellenism and Hebraism.)

Berlin's analysis, though needlessly repetitious, seems to me profoundly true and important. I would, however, take issue over one thing. By illustrating his debt to de Maistre (that brilliant and disturbing thinker, whom no one who has read him can ever forget), Berlin firmly allocates Tolstoy to the counter-Enlightenment of Burke and the German Romantics. But finally to identify that tradition wholly with the hedgehog, and the Enlightenment wholly with the fox, is implausible, if only because it reverses the entire thrust of Berlin's previous argument.

What Burke, Tolstoy and the rest did, surely, was to turn against the Enlightenment its own much-vaunted empiricism. The profundity of their vision derived, paradoxically, from the very shallowness, or immediacy, of their primary data. By constantly comparing the *philosophes'* thin, abstract, 'scientific' absolutes with the dense, pullulating, multi-form reality of the living experience they purported to explain, the Romantics cut their opponents to ribbons. So far, they were foxes to the Enlightenment's hedgehogs.

But once they hankered after counter-absolutes, the Romantics became hedgehogs themselves. There is no denying that 'life', in the philosophical chapters of *War and Peace*, is finally hypostatized and homogenized into a blind, irresistible, mechanical process quite independent of any of the myriad individual wills which go to compose it. Similarly, de Maistre's incorrigible scepticism in secular matters both sought refuge, and found its ultimate justification, in religious dogma. What these examples show, perhaps, is either that no one can be other than a child of his time, react against it as he may, or that inside every fox there is always a hedgehog struggling to get out.

(II) A Reply, by Isaiah Berlin

Oxford, 14 September 1988

Dear Mr Grant,

Forgive me for writing to you out of the blue. Someone has sent me your article called 'Life versus Mechanism', on A.N. Wilson's *Tolstoy*, and on my *Hedgehog and the Fox*. With your views on A.N. Wilson's book, I entirely agree (still, it is the best since Maude).

Now, as to my own work. Thank you for the compliments you pay, but it is not merely gratitude that stimulates me to write to you. I think that you get me somewhat wrong. You think that I classify Tolstoy with the anti-rationalist hedgehogs and against the rationalist foxes (and think that I think he is a fox who believes himself to be a hedgehog – that is indeed my view of him as a writer, and perhaps as a man).

Let me explain, that while I think there is a strong parallel between Tolstoy and Maistre in certain unexpected ways, and that he is indeed hostile to nineteenth-century rationalism, scientism, etc. – hence his attacks on sociologists who account for facts and events by the use of scientific methods – that does not class him with, e.g., the German Romantics, who did not believe in explanations at all (he may have some connection with such English pantheists as Wordsworth or anti-industrialists such as Ruskin, but that is somewhat marginal). My point is that Tolstoy's mind was very like that of an eighteenth-century *philosophe* – lucid, sharp, ironical and dissatisfied with anything abstract or confused, or vague, or soft, and indeed mystical (as he is often mistakenly thought to be).

He wants, or says he wants, to speak of real experience – brass tacks – what man's outer and inner life actually provides, without stuffing these things into some kind of scientific or rationalist schema – he has nothing but contempt for the kind of visionary love of the occult which was characteristic of most Romantic writers, particularly in Germany; he notoriously denounces Shakespeare – the Romantic ideal – for being a fraud, or if not entirely so, for at any rate being wildly over-estimated by modern writers – re-invented by Goethe, who just because he happened not to like neo-Classicism decided to celebrate this rich source of ambiguities, coincidences and other nonsense.

He denounces Ibsen for obscurity; he hates modern painters for not being representative of reality in the old way, as the Russian painter Brullov, for example, was; and Wagner, for producing meaningless

cacophony – his taste in music is sternly classical – Haydn, Mozart, Weber and Beethoven even though he is dangerous.² His attacks on organised religion and the Tsarist state are couched in language which resembles nothing so much as the similar polemics of the 18th-century French Enlightenment.

I am saying all this only to show that the matter is not quite as dichotomous as you seem to imply – for me Tolstoy has the mind of a clear, not very profound, brilliant, incorruptibly honest, eighteenth-century *philosophe* (plus an unqualified admiration for Rousseau, who saw through the sophisticated nonsense) with the beliefs of a nineteenth-century Unitarian or member of the Ethical Church. His favourites among English essayists, for instance, are Ruskin and Matthew Arnold – the simple, the moral, the clear, the true, the universal – not at all the Romantic or transcendental.

I did not mean to write a piece on Tolstoy in this letter, only to tell you why I thought your classification was perhaps a trifle too absolute and neat. There is no need to reply to this. Please forgive me for this outpouring – not too clear itself, I fear.

Yours sincerely,

Isaiah Berlin

(III) A Reply, by Robert Grant

Glasgow, 5 October 1988

Dear Sir Isaiah,

Thank you so much for your letter concerning my piece on Tolstoy in the *TES*. I am sure you do right to correct me, and am flattered that you should think it worth the trouble. You must remember, though, that I was allowed to devote only a couple of hundred words to *The Hedgehog and the Fox*. It should, in justice, have had pride of place over Wilson's book, but the editorial policy is that in a joint review new books take precedence. Nevertheless I ought to have said outright, what I genuinely believe, that your book is a model of what intellectual history ought to be.

I don't think there is really so much difference between our views. I agree, however, that to cite the German Romantics wholesale, as I did, is misleading. I can't think of anyone less like Tolstoy than, say, Novalis. I think I had, e.g., Goethe more in mind, at least the Goethe of *Wilhelm Meister* (if he can really be called a Romantic). I was thinking how close

he and Tolstoy are in stressing the sheer unpredictability of things (yet at the same time the suspicion that they – things – exemplify also a secret, but not a transcendental, order); their resistance (as artists) to any premature schematization or rationalization of experience; in other words, their distrust of those who approach life with a ready-made bag of moral or political tricks. Karenin, for example, with his simple bureaucratic (and later religious) pieties; Koznyshev, with his progressivism and nationalism; Sviazhsky, with his ‘rational’ agriculture; Vronsky with his officer’s code; even Oblonsky, with his newspaper liberalism (though Oblonsky – who is not Anna’s brother for nothing – almost sees through that himself).

Tolstoy is wonderfully good at showing how such things misfire or fail truly to grasp or correspond to reality (though it is also true that Anna fares no better by simply trusting to her educated instincts; on the other hand, Levin does). That is what I meant by the Bergsonian contrast of Life (fluid, Protean, etc., but ‘real’) and Mechanism (the clumsy attempts to capture it of our abstract, rationalizing intellect, which might be appropriate in dealing with the physical world). I’d have cited Pascal (the *esprit de finesse* versus the *esprit de géométrie*) if I’d had the space to do so.

A pair of incidents I would naturally class together are the whole distressing Vronsky–Karenin scene at Anna’s supposed deathbed (which Arnold said was ‘not a work of art, but a piece of life’); and the scene in *Wilhelm Meister* when the boy survives by disobediently not drinking the laudanum the Harper had prepared for him (the sort of ‘subversive’ thing small-town C19th America might have wanted to ban along with *Huckleberry Finn*).

Perhaps these things are not very ‘Romantic’ in not being mystical, but they are not very Enlightenment either. What I was getting at is that the Enlightenment pieties (or impieties, if you prefer) are no more a skeleton key to things than the traditional assumptions they ridiculed, and in some ways less so. I think Tolstoy’s empiricism as a realist was much less rationalist and atomist than the shallow empiricism of the *philosophes*, which fed a naïvely mechanistic ideology. In this he seems to me like Burke (if you leave out the gorgeous rhetorical side of Burke, which Tolstoy would have thought ridiculous). Indeed, the Tolstoy of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* was generally stigmatized by the progressives as reactionary. But there is nothing very paradoxical, either, about his having also been thought dangerously radical by the ‘ideological’ conservatives, e.g., Pobedonostsev (who I dare say – I have never read him – had much in common with de Maistre in certain of

the latter's moods). To hammer away at the way things are, whether we will or no, will always offend those who think reality can be conjured into a more agreeable shape.

There is a letter from Tolstoy to Strakhov of about 1876, which I have not by me (though you will certainly know it), in which he speaks of the interlinking of separate ideas as expressing (and doubtless constituting) reality, whereas those ideas taken separately give a 'horribly debased' version of it. He says that 'shallow critics' will 'think I only wanted to describe what Anna's shoulders were like'. In other words, Tolstoy's realism is not atomistic, a sum of (to echo your letter) sociological details – what some people think Zola was – but holistic. He is interested only in experience – and in that sense indifferent to or sceptical of the transcendental – but not when fragmented and analysed, rather when taken as the whole it is, so that each part (as the Idealists, and later the *Gestalt* psychologists, stressed) has meaning and true identity only in its total context.

If there is anything 'mystical' about Tolstoy at all, it is only this, that he is dissatisfied with simple atomism (and a thing taken in its illusory separateness can be easily, if shallowly, described, since its outlines are clear). He knows that things make sense only in relation to the whole drift of (terrestrial) things, yet the words to describe them in that aspect are lacking, since we have words only for the particular, the isolated, the specific. Hence the importance of art, which though oblique and synthetic in its methods, is closer to the truth of human things than science, which is both atomistic and transcendental. (If I remember rightly, Tolstoy called science and religion the Scribes and the Pharisees.) But it is not mystical, I think, to imply that things are not unreal because they elude simple, and so to speak demonstrative, definition. They can be mysterious without giving us the excuse for mysticism.

In other words, Tolstoy the artist regarded simple empiricism as reductionist. That is why what I remember as being the horribly stupid account of the Mass in *Resurrection* is so annoying and so inartistic, irrespective of any religious beliefs one might oneself have. It seems to me the coarsest kind of sarcasm, and comes from Tolstoy the 'thinker'. If you describe merely the bald actions involved in a ritual, i.e. describe it entirely from a 3rd-personal or behaviourist standpoint, it is bound to look silly. Though I suppose it exactly illustrates what you mean when you say that 'his attacks on organised religion and the Tsarist state are couched in language which resembles . . . the C18th French Enlightenment'. Tolstoy the 'thinker', at least latterly, writes like a self-educated man, which in a sense anyone too clever for his teachers will always be. It is amazing that

those later tracts (*The Kingdom of God is Within You*, etc.) are so readable, given the boring, obstinate, table-thumping Philistinism that constantly intrudes. (Not that one of them isn't worth almost the whole of, say, Shaw.)

This is all very ill-expressed and dreadfully repetitious. What I wanted to say was that Tolstoyan realism, though empiricism is an important part of it, is different from Enlightenment empiricism (though I entirely take your point about the Enlightenment set of Tolstoy's mind as a thinker); and that (on the whole) his sense of the immanent 'drift' of things (in the novels) is, if not quite Romantic, very different from C18th Deism/mechanism, etc., which is implicitly transcendental.

If you can be bothered, and I shouldn't blame you in the least if not, I should be very happy to hear from you again on this matter, though I regret to say (and it probably shows) that I haven't read Tolstoy systematically – or at all, come to that – for a good many years.

Many thanks for writing anyway. It gave me a good deal to think about, and I'm sorry to repay you with such a long and fumbling answer.

Yours sincerely,

Robert A.D. Grant

(IV) Conclusion, by Isaiah Berlin

Oxford, 10 October 1988

Dear Mr Grant,

Thank you very much for your long and very interesting letter of 5 October. I do not think I really disagree with a word you say. I am far more deeply troubled about a question put to me by an eminent Soviet scholar of high attainment about what I could possibly have meant in a footnote in which I say that the comparisons of Tolstoy's views of history with those of Kautsky, Lenin and Stalin are a matter for politics or theology but of no interest otherwise.

I meant, of course, that there is no possible parallel. The scholar in question agrees and says that in the Soviet Union Tolstoy's historical views have been steadily denounced as non-materialist, anti-scientific, etc. – what could I possibly have been referring to? I have completely forgotten, and feel ashamed. Where on earth could a comparison of Tolstoy's historical views and Kautsky's have occurred? Perhaps in the writings of Sidney Hook. Lenin? Stalin? I think I shall have to eliminate

this footnote if ever that book is printed again, which for the moment does not seem too likely.

But to return to our main theme. Tolstoy, of course, thought poorly of Goethe – particularly because of his unfortunate praise of Shakespeare, which as you know Tolstoy attributed to the fact that Goethe was bored by the formalistic neo-classicism of the French eighteenth century, and simply advanced Shakespeare as a stick to beat it with, without any real admiration for him (who could possibly admire Shakespeare sincerely? the whole thing was a conspiracy). But I agree that there is a parallel between Goethe's view about the mysteries of reality, whether historical or otherwise, save that Tolstoy from time to time, as you know, keeps saying that he is a determinist, that everything does have a cause, but of course we shall never know them all because they are too small, too many, untraceable, etc.; but all the same, I think you are right, there is a parallel, save that this is not the Romantic but the anti-Romantic Goethe, who takes a 'sane', sober view of facts and events, and not as being an unfathomable and indescribable maelstrom – like the 'diseased' Friedrich Schlegel, or E.T.A. Hoffmann, or Schelling for all his talk of reason.

But you are right, the line taken about Karenin, or Koznyshev, and even Oblonsky, is precisely as you describe it. At the same time I don't think that Tolstoy would have thought well of Bergson's irrationalism. Tolstoy is, as we all agree, a mass of contradictions – he did want to believe in a clear, intelligible framework, in terms of which things could be analysed; not, perhaps, as isolated, Humean pebbles – but, of course, as you say, as a holistic, interactive, endlessly nuanced interflow of the unanalysable strands of life as we perceive it.

His acute dislike of 'scientific' sociology – Comte and Marx, etc. – as well as of Hegel, does lead him in the direction of enormous emphasis on intuitive grasp of reality (of which, after all, he is one of the very greatest masters there has ever been), and so there is not really any very clear doctrine. He terribly wanted to be tough-minded, so *esprit de finesse* wouldn't quite have done for him. You are quite right that the reactionaries like the Procurator of the Holy Synod and the official Church thought him dangerous because of his failure to accept dogma, hierarchy, history, tradition, government, law and justice as conceived by the Establishment, and this was clearly subversive.

So he remains on his own, as he has always been. He might have accepted *Gestalt* if he had understood it, but Idealism he would have rejected – too close to Hegel, too systematic, too transcendent, not bound to the earth sufficiently, connected with some kind of metaphysical

structure or World Spirit, which he would surely have rejected as mere obfuscation. Holism, brass tacks, intuitive sense of the texture of experience, demands for clear verifiability in the ordinary man's experience, admiration of the undeceived Stendhal and peasant wisdom, universal truth and hatred of science – all this doesn't go together.

You speak of his stupid account of the Mass – indeed, that, I think, comes straight from Voltaire, with whom he certainly felt himself in considerable sympathy – there are descriptions in Voltaire of religious processions as if written by somebody who had no idea what their purpose was, just men in funny garments carrying one stick crossed with another plus an effigy of a small man, etc., etc. – you can imagine the elaborate mockery of this kind of 'distanced' view, as it were by some Chinaman or visitor from Mars, of all these curious men with their totally unintelligible gibberish and ridiculous ceremonies and rites.

I think that appealed to Tolstoy very much indeed, I think there is this deep ironical streak about poor deluded human beings deceived by kings and priests and other self-interested agencies – that is what brings him close to the French *philosophes*, who engaged in this kind of ironical destructiveness. There is something of this in Herzen, whom, after all, Tolstoy admired to a degree. But you are right about science and religion – the Scribes and the Pharisees.

As for your PPS on the back of the envelope³ – you are right, rationalists are certainly for the most part hedgehogs – they do try and squeeze everything into a rational schema; and some Romantics, certainly Goethe (but he really is not a Romantic after the 1780s), Nietzsche – if you call him Romantic, I do – Schiller (much disliked by the Romantics, but still . . .) – some Romantics are foxes. I don't know whether it is such a valuable dichotomy, I enjoyed making it, but perhaps it omits too much. Great scholars in the humanities are, as a rule, hedgehogs – they cannot help developing some kind of monistic vision and seeing everything in what probably rightly seems to them to be a new light, original, true, discovered by themselves.

But I mustn't go on – if you are ever in Oxford do let me know and we could have a talk – I am sure I should enjoy that very much and perhaps you might too.

Yours sincerely,

Isaiah Berlin

From *The Oyster Club*, 6 (1995). Reprinted by kind permission of the Editor, the Editor of *The Times Educational Supplement*, and Dr Henry

Hardy and the Trustees of the Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust. The two letters by Berlin are © Isaiah Berlin 1995.

Notes to Essay 18

- 1 Editorial title (*TES*).
- 2 The allusion is to Tolstoy's novella *The Kreutzer Sonata*, in which an irrationally jealous husband who has murdered his pianist wife accuses the piece of music in question of stimulating uncontrollable sexual feelings (uncontrollable because they cannot be discharged in, e.g., marching, dancing or some other physical ritual). The author's view is by no means clearly distinguished from that of his central character. (RG)
- 3 [1999] I forget entirely what this was about, apart from what IB goes on to discuss. There must also have been a handwritten PS in the letter. (RG)

19

Aerodromes and Aspidistras: the Worlds of Thirties Fiction

The Will to Believe: Novelists of the Nineteen-Thirties, by Richard Johnstone (Cambridge University Press, 1982)

Ours has been a century of self-conscious ideologies or 'isms'. As traditional values have seemingly crumbled, various intellectual edifices, from the tawdry to the imposing, have been erected in their stead. The Thirties saw a general scramble to get one such roof or other over one's head. Two systems in particular tower above the fray. According to *Arena*, a Catholic journal of the time (quoted by Richard Johnstone), Marxism and Roman Catholicism were 'the only two views of life which count in the modern world'. This claim was characteristically portentous. But it was also the plain truth about the educated young. These gentry are Mr Johnstone's prime concern, above all as revealed in their fiction. His subjects are Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene (Catholic converts), Edward Upward (Communist), Rex Warner and Christopher Isherwood (fellow travellers, then defectors), and George Orwell (George Orwell). His book is sometimes a little colourless, but no more so than his texts. Nevertheless it stands out from the usual run of academic publications by being clear, informative, sensible, unpretentious, and short.

Thirties fiction, on the whole, has not worn well. But it is of some historical interest, if only because the impulses behind it are perennial. There is nothing new about the impatient presumption of the young. But for the first time it borrowed real countenance from the helpless perplexity of their elders. Traditional statesmanship and liberal illusions alike lay dead in Flanders. Versailles and the Depression had fostered a Continental menace of unignorable dimensions. But, fearing another

war, the older generation chose the way of the ostrich. At the most they flapped their hands feebly in a futile attempt to placate the implacable. They had their excuse. But so too did the young. Their intellectual complacency rested, like the 'peace' movement's today, on a justified but misdirected anxiety. Innocent as they were, they took Fascism, as they took Marxism, at its own preposterous valuation. Fascism was a universal Idea, a creeping conspiracy to be fought with ideological weapons, Spain notwithstanding. But the Nazi-Soviet pact put a stop to all that. When it came to the crunch, the younger generation found themselves fighting, not for an ideology, but for a traditional way of life that neither they, nor the Depression, nor Hitler had been able to destroy.

The modes of Thirties fiction throw some light on its content. According to Mr Johnstone, the genuine 'proletarian novel' (*Love on the Dole, A Scots Quair*) was a disappointment to the left-inclined bourgeoisie. Their patronage, like Mrs Jellyby's philanthropy, was telescopic. On closer inspection the working classes turned out to be just as 'bourgeois' as anyone else. Even under the worst deprivations, so it seemed, they obstinately preferred the conventional wisdom with its banal certitudes to the lofty historical role scripted for them by their betters. Accordingly, the youthful intelligentsia adopted other vehicles. Some affected the pseudo-Kafkaesque fable, prized mostly for the specious coherence and urgency it conferred on the sophomore's muddled intuitions. Isherwood, on the other hand, went in, like *Mass Observation*, for 'objective' reportage ('I am a camera'). This was something quite different from proletarian realism. For human facts are not to be recorded by cameras. Twenty years later Isherwood wrote a valediction to his Thirties novels which Mr Johnstone might usefully have quoted. It dismisses the allied cults of the fable and 'objectivity' in a single unanswerable criticism: 'What repels me about *Mr Norris* is its heartlessness . . . a heartless fairy-story about a real city in which human beings were suffering the miseries of political violence and near-starvation.' It is Orwell's merit, alone among the practitioners of 'reportage', never to have pretended to such so-called objectivity. His Thirties novels, like nearly everything he wrote, are little more than opinionated journalism.¹ Yet even the feeblest are still marginally readable. They smell, if not with an invariable fragrance, of the human.

The opposite of the human is the abstract. And it may be asked, what persuaded educated people to favour it, in fiction and belief alike? Simply this, I think: the human world is not fully apprehensible in propositional form. But all propositions, from the inertly factual to the most fantastically hypothetical, have an immediate appeal. Unlike the concrete

knowledge of human things, they are accessible to inexperience (cf. Plato's *Meno*). They flatter one's mental powers by the ease with which they can be grasped. However complex, they are, as Pascal says, 'manageable': *elles se laissent manier*. A philosophy compounded of authoritative-sounding propositions, true or otherwise, gives an illusion of mastery. And such will be the natural resort of youthful intellectuals when oppressed by political circumstances which, in defying simple explanation, seem to paralyse the will. The very clarity of an ideology will be taken for an earnest of its truth. Like the Emperor's new clothes, ideologies were tailor-made for the Thirties generation, who strutted importantly about in them, each being an Emperor in his own conceit and all alike being unconscious of their collective intellectual nakedness.

Johnstone takes his title from William James, but does not appear to have read him or any other relevant thinkers. Nevertheless, by sticking closely to his texts he illustrates something of what such thinkers say. His account of ideological commitment seems just. Belief, he notes, is an act of will, and therefore of self-assertion. At the same time it unites the individual with an objective order. But for some, the apostles of 'permanent revolution', even this solace was a threat. Such people could define themselves only by an unremitting opposition to everything. Utopia, while it remained the theoretical justification for action, was indefinitely postponed. Their immediate aims were as nebulous as the omnipresent Enemy. But their existential integrity could rest secure in the certainty of perpetual struggle. Such a schoolboy medley of narcissism and paranoia makes for tiresome fiction. Which is why no one now reads Upward, and why Warner's only useful legacy from the period is his anti-utopian fantasy *The Aerodrome* (1941), which Oakeshott called 'a poetic image of the politics of rationalism'.

Whether or not Catholicism is an ideology seems to depend on the manner in which it is adhered to. Newman emphasized that religion proper is based in knowledge of a Person, that is, in the concrete. A continuum between concrete experience and sophisticated reflection is frequently desirable – and nowhere more so than in politics or religion – but it is not a necessary condition of thought. Ideology consists in thought that has been severed from experience, while nevertheless still being held to be applicable to it. Speculative theology, therefore, which confines itself to the intrinsically unknowable, is not really ideology, or at least, not in the sense in which utopian schemes for the real historical future are.

Waugh's Catholicism began in intellectual assent. Thus far, unlike a secular ideology, it did not pretend to the status of concrete knowledge.

Such knowledge – which Waugh also had – is the stuff of the novel. *A Handful of Dust* succeeds, partly because, within its deliberate constraints, it is humanly plausible. It concerns, in fact, precisely the inappropriateness of an abstract moral code to changed human circumstances. Tony Last's gentlemanliness has become a form of nostalgic self-indulgence. He is horribly punished by having to spend the rest of his life reading Dickens to a greedier and less scrupulous sentimentalist than himself.² No doubt the book may be said to have a religion-shaped hole in the centre. But Waugh neither needs nor offers to fill it. *Brideshead Revisited*, however, like a jam tart, is deliberately constructed round such a hole. It is filled with all the sentimentality of true abstraction. The characters' Catholicism, though held up for our admiration, is dramatically unrealized. It is not the living motive of their actions, but a mere occult factor, an arbitrary-seeming concomitant of their somewhat repulsive eccentricities. It is as remote from palpable circumstance as Tony Last's passive, uncomprehending rigidity. In short, it resembles an ideology. But that is Waugh's fault, not Catholicism's.

In Greene's 'Catholic' novels sentimentality becomes melodrama. The absolute act of commitment – even to self-damnation – is secretly an occasion for reflexive self-display. *The Power and the Glory* is a laudable exception, in as much as the priest's self-sacrifice for the dying bandit is a genuine, other-directed act of charity, untainted by self-regard. But in general Greene belongs to an existentialist tradition that goes back through the tightrope walker in Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* to the spiritual acrobatics of Kierkegaard (whom Wittgenstein actually likened to a tightrope walker). *The Power and the Glory* apart, Catholicism in Greene's novels is really only a stage prop. He is the ideologue, rather, of a raw, unconditioned and essentially Protestant individualism. His settings, like his characters, are lurid, perfunctory and abstract. The individual is thus more readily detached from the human world and spirited away into a fantastic limbo inhabited only by himself and God. Here the real relationship is power: God's power to punish man, and man's to compel him to do so. Greene is a gifted and highly sophisticated writer. He has the less excuse, then, for the cruelty, the lovelessness, the disturbing cheapness of his conceptions. If we have to choose between ideologies, even Marxism seems preferable.

But no such choice is forced upon us. There is another way, and it is not that of the ostrich. Orwell took it, as eventually did Warner. Concrete knowledge is embedded in all culture. Like Wordsworth's Heaven, it 'lies about us in our infancy', and increasingly so in our maturity, for it may be refined, developed and reasoned about (and must be, if it is to

be defended). It resists precise formulation, but it is real enough, and as tough as Orwell's indestructible aspidistra. Greene, who knew and despised it, travestied it in the stout-sodden Ida Arnold (in *Brighton Rock*). That lady's mundane belief in justice and morality – which is to say, her knowledge of them – is made to seem as shallow, disgusting, and monotonous a reflex as her Guinness's propensity to repeat. But it may be that Guinness is good for you. It is certainly less harmful than tightrope antics. And, on the same note, Warner's village pub, perhaps for its very aimlessness, is seen as richer in human possibility than his murderous aerodrome, consecrated to the sinister end 'that the world may be clean'. Mr Johnstone has exhumed Auden's 'low, dishonest decade'. Let us re-enter it with Shelley's devastating epitaph on all who succumb to what he called 'thought's empire over thought':

their lore

Taught them not this, to know themselves; their might
 Could not repress the mystery within,
 And for the morn of truth they feigned, deep night
 Caught them ere evening.

And let us add a single clarification. Human reality, within or without, shares in the ultimate mystery of the given.³ But for most practical purposes it seems mysterious only to those who refuse to recognize it.

From *The Salisbury Review*, I, 3 (April 1983).

Notes to Essay 19

- 1 [1999] This sounds much more derogatory than it was meant to be. Orwell could sometimes be silly, but his 'opinionation' was generally worth any amount of others' quasi-scientific 'objectivity'.
- 2 Or so we are immediately prompted to think. 'In reality' (so to speak) Tony's gaoler Mr Todd is over 70, i.e. at least 40 years Tony's senior, and his death would certainly free his prisoner before very many years elapsed.
- 3 [1999] Shelley scholars now favour the reading 'mutiny', which is a pity, since it spoils my punchline.

20

The Survivor's Guilt: Wiesel and Sciascia on Terror and the Holocaust¹

1

Night, Dawn, The Accident, by Elie Wiesel (Robson, 1986)

The Moro Affair, by Leonardo Sciascia (Carcanet, 1987)

Elie Wiesel at sixteen was a veteran of both Buchenwald and Auschwitz. It is to him that we owe the 'Holocaust' metaphor, and that event and its aftermath are the theme of these novellas, first completed in French in 1961 and published in English in 1974. Not only the theme itself – which a word such as 'harrowing' is wholly inadequate to describe – but the knowledge that the details are autobiographical, make it easy to forget that his trilogy is, technically, a work of fiction.

The first story, *Night*, depicts the Holocaust through the eyes of the pious young Hungarian Jew Eliezer (obviously the author). Scenes fit for Dante's *Inferno* are here transcribed from real life, and (as Wiesel notes) eye-witness reports were actually treated as fiction by those who were shortly to re-enact them. Even we, who know the facts, still close our minds to them. But this is less callousness on our part than a natural defence against fruitless, unappeasable anguish. For, as Wiesel later shows, without some release from the dead life simply becomes insupportable.

The burden bore heaviest, and with terrible injustice, on those who survived. For the camps showed, and were perhaps devilishly designed to show, that when driven to it the innocent could be as bestial as their

persecutors. Eliezer several times betrays his dearly loved father to save himself, and, when his father dies of dysentery and a savage beating combined, his innermost thought is 'free at last'. It is a grim paradox that such 'freedom', even when unsought, turns out to be almost inexpiable.

The title of *Dawn* is semi-ironical. The hero Elisha (who may, or may not, be Eliezer) has survived the Holocaust, and has been recruited for anti-British terrorism in Palestine. What Wiesel shows, with immense courage – though perhaps only a Jew can say these things – is how a basically just ideal (Zionism), when pursued in defiance of normal humane scruples, comes to resemble its unjust but similarly Messianic opposite, Nazism.

Every self-deceiving trick in the terrorist book – the bad faith, the casuistry, the sickening, dewy-eyed sentimentality, the synthetic hatred, the shifting of blame on to others, the grotesque Benthamite arithmetic – is unblinkingly exposed, the more effectively for the author's ceaseless subversion of the reader's impulse to seek refuge in comforting rival absolutes (pacifism, for example, or simple-minded anti-terrorism). Tommy-gunning ambushed soldiers, Elisha suddenly sees himself in SS uniform; 'executing' a hostage, he realizes that he has finally excommunicated himself from the dead whom he thought to vindicate, and has thus both 'killed Elisha' and incurred further guilt.

The dead (God among them) can be neither buried nor avenged. So, without dishonouring them, their spell must be broken directly. In *The Accident* Eliezer, now a journalist in New York, is nearly killed by a cab, which he finally admits to himself that he had seen coming. His guilt at surviving his family (no Palestine interlude is mentioned) has destroyed his will to live, things which are incomprehensible, offensive even, to the decent, banal New World innocence of the doctor who saves and the woman who loves him.

He is finally rescued by the abrasive, unsentimental friendship of an artist compatriot who confronts him, through his portrait, with the image of his ancestral suffering, and seeing him tempted into renewed self-pity, burns it to ashes before his eyes. Taken in context, the painter's motto – 'Maybe God is dead, but man is alive' – is as remote from vulgar humanist uplift as can possibly be imagined. Profundity apart, Wiesel's trilogy is also a masterpiece of narrative organization. It is in every way more than equal to Conrad, and probably the nearest thing to great art that a civilization is likely to produce which has lost its innocence, its saving illusions, for ever.

The Sicilian novelist Leonardo Sciascia's book is good, but not on the same level. Neither is it fiction, but reflective, intelligent journalism. He

recreates the Moro affair of 1978, in which the president of Italy's Christian Democrats, having just negotiated an historic governing coalition with the Communists, was promptly kidnapped by the Red Brigades and held hostage for two agonizing months while he publicly pleaded with his own party for his life. The Government refused to treat with his captors, and Moro was murdered.

Sciascia does not say outright that the Government should have given in. Nor does he take the terrorists' part. What he does say – and he convinced me – is that the Government's disavowal of Moro, their pretence that the suppliant (who had always counselled flexibility in dealings with terrorists) 'was no longer the Moro they knew' – in other words, was a non-person – was hypocritical and disgusting. Reasons of state may be overriding, but it is unpleasant to have to reckon among them the need to placate the media, who, having first presented terrorism with its chief instrument, publicity, were now bawling for a show of intransigence.

In some ways Sciascia is naïvely anarchist. He seems to think that the Red Brigades' 'power' is qualitatively not very different from that of government. He should look again at his great countryman Machiavelli, and re-learn the important lesson that though right is not might, it is nothing without it. Better still, he should read Wiesel.

2

The Fifth Son, by Elie Wiesel (Penguin, 1986)

Elie Wiesel's newest novel will not disappoint admirers of his Holocaust trilogy. It has the same philosophical density and moral urgency, and its narrative structure is even more elaborate, being a complex polyphony of different perspectives on the same events, all mediated through a central consciousness and criss-crossed by constant trailers and flashbacks. Many episodes, accordingly, fall into place only towards the end. All of which means that a single reading of this profound and important book (my own, for example) is not enough.

The nameless narrator is a young Brooklyn-born Jew, the only child of Reuven Tamiroff, philosopher, Holocaust survivor and now librarian and recluse. When he is six, his mother disappears permanently into hospital with a mysterious affliction, connected, as it later turns out, with the murder, at the same age, of his hitherto unheard-of elder brother Ariel. The murderer (ironically nicknamed the Angel) was the Nazi commandant of the Polish ghetto into which his parents had been

herded before being despatched to concentration camps, though even before Ariel's death Reuven and his friends had sworn to kill the Angel for his massacre of Jews who refused to address their prayers to him at Yom Kippur.

Miraculously, the group survived to track the Angel down after the war and (as they thought) to carry out their sentence. All this, divulged gradually, explains what was earlier obscure: Reuven's armour-plated reticence, his unposted letters to an unnamed son, and his tireless disputations regarding the ethics of capital punishment, torture, and so on. (Those, incidentally, like the treatment of terrorism in the trilogy, are of genuine philosophical interest.)

An earnest, religious Jew, Reuven is haunted by what he has come to regard as his crime. But hardly has his son discovered the source of Reuven's malaise, when he discovers also, what Reuven does not know, that the Angel too has survived, and is now a West German industrialist. As the narrator sees it, the baton passes from his father to himself, and he becomes – what he now realizes he had always been in his parents' eyes – the reincarnation of his dead brother, and as such the instrument of the vengeance his father has effectively forsworn.

These new roles are at once his glory and his tragedy. For, though charged with moral purpose beyond anything his late-'60s generation can understand, he feels he has no identity of his own (we never learn his name). His personality has finally imploded under the pressures which previously served to shape and to integrate it. Drugs, sex and student radicalism (all personified in his rich, 'assimilated' Jewish girlfriend) are no answer. Bound instead, Hamlet-like, to his awesome destiny, he sets out for Germany to accomplish it.

The novel actually opens at this point, but only at the end does the narrator confront the Angel in person. The episode is complex, and cannot usefully be summarized. Unlike such obvious climaxes as death or forgiveness, however, it is entirely plausible.² Wiesel's work generally is characterized by a scrupulous, one might even say a tender and anxious, concern for justice as the hallmark of the truly human. Yet no one is a sterner critic of sentimentality or fanaticism. Justice, for Wiesel, is not some utopian harmony or mechanical equilibrium, to be achieved or maintained at all costs. Rather, it is an attitude: a constant, quiet, self-effacing and largely unreflective disposition, as disclosed in the just man's conduct, to do right by an ever-changing world. Like what the Romans called *pietas*, it is a 'God-fearingness' independent of religion, and even, as some (e.g., Kant) would say, prior to it. (Hence it survives, and makes less than final, that 'death of God' to which the Holocaust

trilogy testifies.) One aspect of it is a love of truth: a compulsion to see, to engage with, and to report people and things, not as they happen to suit one's convenience, but as they are; to do justice, in a way that is more than mere metaphor, to the full complexity of human circumstance.

Philosophy is a generalizing science, and that kind of truth to particulars will always elude it (though less so, paradoxically, the more it acknowledges its deficiency). Not so art, however; and significantly it is not philosophy, but art, that Wiesel, a professional philosopher, has been led by his ethical *daimon* to practise with such conspicuous mastery. It is a pity that his 1986 Nobel Peace Prize will probably have excluded him from an honour he even more unequivocally deserves, the Nobel Prize for Literature.

From *The Times Educational Supplement*, 24 July 1987 and 1 January 1988.

Notes to Essay 20

- 1 [1999] 'The Survivor's Guilt', an inspired catch-all title, was given to the first of these reviews (which also included Sciascia's *The Mystery of Majorana*, here omitted) by Michael Church, then Literary Editor of the *TES*. Since it also applies to all three protagonists in Wiesel's *The Fifth Son*, I have retained it.
- 2 [1999] I suppose I can reveal it now, though not in any way that will suggest its power. Simply during an interview, the narrator forces the Angel, if not to feel remorse, at least to confront and to admit his personal responsibility for what he did.

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