

ROBERT NISBET

## The Nemesis of Authority

IN our day "authority" is not a popular word. We tend commonly to confuse it with power or coercion, and generally give it low ranking among the civil virtues. Not for a long time in the West has "authority" come close to "freedom" in acceptability to creative minds, especially those carrying high influence in the letters and arts. There have been notable exceptions, of course. Shakespeare, as we know, yielded to no one in respect for, almost reverence for, authority in society. And no one can read Boswell's *Life of Johnson* without vivid recognition of the passion for order and authority that dominated so much of Johnson's view of the world. In our century, interestingly, some of the writers who, by common assent, have been the boldest and most original minds of the age — Eliot, Yeats, Pound, among others — have had a profound feeling for authority in society.

And they have been right. Civil society, in whatever degree it may be said to exist at all, is a tissue of authorities, however loosely knit these may be in times of stress. Authority, unlike power or coercion, is not rooted in force, or threat of force. It is built into the very fabric of human association. Authority exists in the very roles and statuses of the social order. It is no more than an aspect, though a vital aspect, of the social bond. It is closely related to function, to membership, and to allegiance, in any degree whatever. In any reasonably stable

community or association, function, authority, and membership form a seamless web. Freedom, in any positive, creative sense, is inseparable from a structure of authority — of rules, norms, roles, and statuses — which can alone give the stamp of character to the free mind. No mistake could be greater than that of counterposing freedom and authority. Freedom and power, freedom and coercion, yes. But not freedom and authority.

So too is there an indispensable element of authority in culture — and I use the term throughout this essay in the sense of high culture, of works of imagination in the arts, of scholarship, of science, and of artistic performance. Without the authority of taste and learning there can be no culture. Pushpin, in Bentham's phrasing, is indeed as good as poetry unless there is an authority — call it consensus if you will — that makes the distinction a firm one. There is the authority of a Shakespeare, Goethe, Einstein, or Picasso just as surely as there is any other kind of authority. So too is there an authority of logic, of reason, taste, and genius, as well as the authority of the moral judgment and of the conscience that is its internal manifestation.

The early nineteenth century social philosopher, Saint-Simon, divided history into "organic" and "critical" periods which, he thought, have succeeded one another endlessly since the beginning of human society. The first type is characterized by a high degree of social and moral authority; the second by challenge to authority. The distinction is a useful one and preferable to any unilinear trajectory in time such as that implied in the idea of progress. Whether for civilization as a whole or any single civilization or nation, it is possible to discern both organic and critical periods in its history. Manifestly our present age in America is a critical period; some would think the term anarchic not extreme for what we have around us in the arts and literature, in culture generally. Revolt against authority has already reached a higher point than

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in any other period in the West since perhaps the final years of the Roman Empire. Apart from this revolt it is impossible, I believe, to understand the spreading failure of nerve, widening cultural sterility, the general spirit of absurdity and degradation that characterizes so much of what is called the arts at the present time. If it were revolt solely against government, against war, against economy, the problem would not be acute, at least in our large, diverse, and plural society. It is, however, revolt against any and all forms of authority, even those which manifest themselves as the simplest of techniques in the arts, the most elemental of canons of judgment. When revolt against all ordinary, traditional authorities had worn itself out, had become the object of boredom, there was nothing left but revolt against even the idea of revolt — principles revolt, that is — and the results are to be seen in worship of the absurd, in consecration of the trivial and inane, and in a state of language and culture that leaves psychedelic experience almost the only way out.

## II

LET us begin with the authority of language. It is, of all forms of authority, the most fundamental to both the social bond and to culture. No community, no association, no culture can exist above the most primitive level without language and all the complex judgments and prejudices, as well as words and syntax which compose it. Language need not be verbal, of course. There is the so-called silent language of facial and other physical expression which can, as we know, convey extraordinarily complex and subtle states of feeling. There are music, painting, sculpture, and mathematics, all forms of communication in which verbal language cannot carry us very far in reaching their meanings. Nevertheless, in all great ages of civilization, language in the verbal sense has been crucial. One need but think of the ways Greek philosophers and poets of the 6th and 5th centuries B.C. gloried in, loved, caressed, and explored in the ways of lovers.

It is this way with all of the greater ages of cultural efflorescence. In the 12th and 13th centuries in Western Europe the languages passed from what was scarcely more than a kind of pidgin-speech to instruments of ever greater subtlety and versatility, making possible the beginnings of English,

French, and other literatures in Europe. Again in the late 16th and early 17th centuries we are in the presence of thousands of new words, words rich in meaning as they are beautiful to ear and eye. Shakespeare, as we know, was intoxicated with language, and he could not have been the popular playwright he was had not a great many of his listeners been almost equally intoxicated by the Elizabethan language that came tumbling in freshets and rapids from the pens of Marlowe, Bacon, Shakespeare, Jonson, and dozens of others who, in founding the greatness of modern English founded also a form of cultural authority that was in its way as great as anything that came from the Greeks and Romans.

As there are ages of cultural efflorescence, so are there, on the evidence of history, ages of cultural sterility and degeneration. Such ages have a number of common characteristics. One of them is a retreat from language. It is more than retreat. It is, often on a wide scale, a repudiation of language and of the modes of thought which go with richness of language. Linguistic corruptions abound along with cultivations of feeling and emotion in which language, as such, is regarded almost as an enemy, its ordinary discipline as no more than sterile coercion. Under the guise of search for the simple or colloquial there is sabotage of all that is authoritative in language. In such ages, very commonly, there is a turning to the child, the noble savage, the barbarian, to those who may lack language in any full sense of the word but who possess — so it is declared by those bored with the disciplines of language — a form of wisdom, a purity, a natural morality that is alien to language.

Is our age such a one as I have just described? It is too soon to be sure. There are, however, more than a few of the familiar signs of such ages in our midst. The erosion of the authority, and community, of language can be seen in the semi-literate and hence language-hating ranks of militants for whom a single four-letter word, endlessly repeated, can be the stock of political attack and also, at the same time, of withdrawal from the toils and traps of a language they fear. The erosion can be seen in the language-rejecting circles of encounter and sensitivity in colleges and universities. It can be seen in a growing number of books and articles written by academic intellectuals of affluence and tenure in our major university departments of literature. I find it hard to conquer belief that

for more and more such intellectuals bad writing is a conscious, if rather absurd, mode of militance, of activism, comparable to the female delinquent's revolt against authority through sexual promiscuity.

Before me, as I write, is a volume of essays by Professor Richard Poirier, chairman, we are informed, of the "federated" departments of English at Rutgers. Professor Poirier is also an editor of *Partisan Review*, a magazine that has in recent years become a steady round-up of the kind of writing I refer to here. It may be taken for granted that Professor Poirier is earnestly radical; as radical, that is, as it is possible for an ivy league English professor to be. The title of his book — and it is as apt a title as I have seen in a long time — is *The Performing Self*. From beginning to end the book is of the performing self, *by* the performing self, and *for* the performing self. I shall come to its message shortly. For the moment it suffices to say that it falls among the works Goethe had in mind when he spoke to Eckermann of the kind of writers each of whom "tries to make his Self observable, and to exhibit it as much as possible to the world."

The style alone of Professor Poirier's book is sufficient indication of the prominence of the "performing self." That the book's style of writing and thought is on the whole bad — ranging from the leaden and slovenly at one extreme to the inflated and pompous at the other — is not, however, what is chiefly at issue here. One could overlook the style, as one tries to avoid looking at some physical disfigurement in another person, were it not for the conclusion one is drawn to almost irresistibly that Professor Poirier has cultivated this style, has made it a calculated objective in some larger plan of attack. As I shall shortly indicate, the larger attack is upon the "waste" which is Professor Poirier's word for the whole of the literary heritage that has reached our age from the past. And within this, there is, one is obliged to believe, the tactical assault upon language and its authority. Calculatedly bad writing is, of course, one way of showing contempt for, or seeking to degrade, the authority of language.

At one point in the book, Professor Poirier refers disdainfully to a recent example of Saul Bellow's love of, his care for, language. I would myself think such love and care admirable. *Eccel* A man who is devoted to syntax, to style, to the word, and who at the same time does not deprive us thereby



Richard Poirier

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of rich insight into the human condition.

I do not want to distort or exaggerate here. The current revolt against the word, against the authority of language, may be no more than an eddy; large to us close to it but small in the longer and wider view. It is possible, though there is little if any evidence for this, that side by side with assault on what I call here the authority of language there goes the germination and, shortly, development of new, more vital and expressive language. After all, what some once called Whitman's "barbaric yawp" may be seen today to be a language of singular richness. But Whitman loved language; he rejoiced and luxuriated in it. Whatever he was revolting against was assuredly not language; only certain highly formalized, even fossilized, uses of language, metre, and subject. If those who today declare language an enemy of true feeling and innocence, who refer to the authority of language as waste, could themselves be seen to be fashioning new ways of language, expressive of areas of human experience, of depths of meaning, of reaches of imagination, as the old ways are perhaps not expressive, we could take more comfort in "the performing self."

Unhappily, what we are seeing today is

a manifestation, if not result, of an older, deeper, more powerful movement that has been going on now, as George Steiner tells us in his superb book, *Language and Silence*, for close to three centuries. I do not know when I have read a more illuminating piece of historical analysis than Steiner's chapter in this book titled "The Retreat From the Word." In brief compass it tells us a great deal about the background of the contemporary erosion I have been writing of. The following passage, taken from midpoint in his essay, is important:

*"What I have argued so far is this: until the seventeenth century, the sphere of language encompassed nearly the whole of experience and reality; today, it comprises a narrower domain. It no longer articulates, or is relevant to, all major modes of action, thought, and sensibility. Large areas of meaning and praxis now belong to such non-verbal languages as mathematics, symbolic logic, and formulas of chemical or electronic relation. Other areas belong to the sub-languages or anti-languages of non-objective art and musique concrète. The world of words has shrunk. One cannot talk of transfinite numbers except mathematically; one should not, suggests Wittgenstein, talk of ethics or aesthetics within presently available categories of discourse. And it is, I think, exceedingly difficult to speak meaningfully of a Jackson Pollock painting or a composition by Stockhausen. The circle has narrowed tremendously, for was there anything under heaven, be it science, metaphysics, art, or music, of which a Shakespeare, a Donne, and a Milton could not speak naturally, to which their words did not have natural access?"<sup>1</sup>*

This historical contraction of the sphere of language, of the authority of language in society, that George Steiner describes for us so valuably must be seen as the indispensable background of present assaults on language. It is unlikely that current primitivism of vocabulary, a flaunted primitivism indeed, in many areas of youth, among intellectuals and artists on talk shows, and elsewhere would be possible were it not for the prior displacement of

the majesty of language in the spheres Mr. Steiner writes of.

Steiner takes note of the fact that no later writer has ever displayed the vocabulary that Shakespeare did. He observes too that "the King James Bible, although it requires only 6,000 words, suggests that the conception of literacy prevailing at the time was far more comprehensive than ours. The essence of the matter, however, lies not in the number of words available, but in the degree to which the resources of language are in actual current use." Steiner suggests, acknowledging the difficulties of all such estimates, that as much as fifty percent of modern colloquial speech in England and America comprises only thirty-four basic words: "and to make themselves widely understood, contemporary media of mass communication have had to reduce English to a semi-literate condition."

"The language of Shakespeare and Milton belongs to a stage of history in which words were in natural control of experienced life. The writer of today tends to use far fewer and simpler words, both because mass culture has watered down the concept of literacy and because the sum of realities of which words can give a necessary and sufficient account has sharply diminished."<sup>2</sup>

STILL another sign of the crisis of language in our day is the deepening and widening use of abstractions and generic terms for which no ready referent is easily found. We see this most plainly in the writing of the political left, but Tocqueville long ago declared it a product of the democratic revolution. Democratic peoples, he observed, are "passionately addicted to generic terms and abstract expressions."

"These abstract terms which abound in democratic languages, and which are used on every occasion without attaching them to any particular fact, enlarge and obscure the thoughts they are intended to convey; they render the mode of speech more succinct and the idea contained in it less clear. But with regard to language, democratic nations prefer obscurity to labor."

And then, with his usual astonishing insight, Tocqueville indicates some of the consequences of this specific form of debasement of language:

1. George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature and the Inhuman*. New York: Atheneum, 1967. Pp. 24-25.

2. *Ibid.*, P. 25.

"I do not know, indeed, whether this loose style has not some secret charm for those who speak and write among these nations. As the men who live there are frequently left to the efforts of their individual powers of mind, they are almost always a prey to doubt; and as their situation in life is forever changing, they are never held fast to any of their opinions by the immobility of their fortunes. Men living in democratic countries, then, are apt to entertain unsettled ideas, and they require loose expressions to convey them. As they never know whether the idea they express today will be appropriate to the new position they may occupy tomorrow, they naturally acquire a liking for abstract terms. An abstract term is like a box with a false bottom; you may put in it what ideas you please, and take out again without being observed."<sup>3</sup>

George Orwell, himself a lifelong partisan of political causes but a notable literary craftsman, described, a generation ago, the debasement of the English language he could see going on around him. "This mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence is the most marked characteristic of modern English prose, and especially of any kind of political writing. As soon as certain topics are raised, the concrete melts into the abstract and no one seems able to think of turns of speech that are not hackneyed: prose consists less and less of words chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of phrases tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated henhouse." Orwell goes on: "Political language — and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists — is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable."<sup>4</sup>

The fault is by no means a recent one. Think only of Rousseau and his General Will, of his declaration that the requirement of absolute obedience to the General Will is no more than "forcing individuals to be free." Think of Marx and Capitalism and the Proletariat. Think of the changes which have been rung on the single word "People", not to emphasize "democracy", "human rights", and "freedom". Few would

doubt, I think, that the debasement of language has increased enormously in recent years. Only such debasement could have made it possible to convince a national audience for a time that the hoodlumism of a small group of students on a tiny number of campuses, albeit major ones, was a "revolution" by "youth" and its "new culture".

Assault on language and its authority has gone beyond the political left, of course. A generation ago Franklin Roosevelt, as President, could seek to pack the Supreme Court with words that disguised utterly this intent for many millions of persons. Abstractions took care of that. So too did abstractions conceal each of the series of belligerent acts of the Roosevelt government which preceded Pearl Harbor. Apart from boneless abstractions and a public long since dependent on them, it is scarcely conceivable that the Kennedy and Johnson governments would have been able to hide so completely the acts and decisions which were taking us with rising military force into Viet Nam between 1961 and 1964. The steady diminution of confidence in what any President of the United States, or any high official in any of our governments in this country, has to say about a given matter cannot be reduced to simple chicanery. It is an aspect of the degradation of language that became first really apparent in government during the Roosevelt administration — though the student of Wilson can find a due share of this degradation in his parading of high-flown academic abstractions.

Nothing so aids the advance of corruption and power alike as does prior degradation of not merely the ideas but also all the words and phrases making up language; for then the processes involved in corruption, power, and atomization may be said to have begun. It was with full and sensitive awareness of what he was doing that George Orwell made the corruption of language, the final breakdown of the authority of language, indeed, the key to the terrifying society he described for us in *1984*. And what is Newspeak but a rather easy development of the language around us today in America?

A generation that has formed itself linguistically around the primitivism of "like," "cool," "man," "feel," and, above all, "you know" will not be a difficult generation to enslave politically, socially, and culturally. Weaken, corrupt, dissolve the authority of language in a society, and the rest follows rather easily.

3. *Democracy in America*, Vol. 2, Ch. 16.

4. "Politics and the English Language" in *Shooting an Elephant*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1950. This essay was first published in 1946.

### III

TURN now to the culture — that is, the high culture — of our age, the culture of which literary imagination is the core, and we see, of course, a comparable, even related, erosion of authority. Here too we are in the presence of what Professor Poirier has so aptly called “the performing self.” We all know what the performer is in the arts — in, say, ballet, music, or theatre. Display is assuredly involved, but it is display of technique, of form, and of discipline beyond the will or capacity of most of us. Even when the performing artist seems to be most natural and at ease — and such is the seeming effortless-ness of great performances that “natural” becomes our common word of praise — we require only a split-second’s reflection to be reminded that few things in life call for the subjection to authority, the self-discipline, and the mastery of technique that “being natural” does in a performance.

But Professor Poirier’s “performing self” is very different from the performance of the artist as we have known this generally. “By performance,” he writes, “I mean, in part, any self-discovering, self-watching, finally self-pleasing response to the pressures and difficulties I’ve been describing.” By “pressures and difficulties” Professor Poirier means, of course, the disciplines and authorities which are the very sinews of culture and its traditions but which to the mind in a state of barbarism, as Matthew Arnold thought of that word, can seem only a hopelessly impenetrable thicket. Professor Poirier is no barbarian, but he is wonderfully sympathetic to those who, by virtue of childhood or youth, have not yet had the time or opportunity to pass from the barbarism in which we are all born to the culture that has been, ever since the Greeks, the highest of values for this life.

Professor Poirier regards the techniques, the forms, the styles, and structures — which is to say, the authorities — of our inherited culture as so much “waste.” Disorder is the thing: disorder in and for itself, disorder as the highest creative necessity of the artist or thinker. In an essay in *The Performing Self* titled “The Politics of Self-Parody” he identifies for us a genre of contemporary literature, one that very clearly he finds delicious and self-pleasing, that “makes fun of itself as it goes along.” With a little practice anyone, he implies, can get in the game, even individuals of substantial talent or

genius, if only they will follow the two simple rules of, first, making the naked self the arbiter of all delights and, second, declaring everything in culture, *everything*, to be no more than “waste.”

Clearly, when you have become adept in the game of self-parody, you can make the whole world your oyster. For Professor Poirier, loving self and disorder above all things, seeks even to show us that not merely he and other present editors of *Partisan Review*, but, when you come right down to it, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Nabokov and equally creative writers of the recent past can be best understood, best interpreted, in terms of their having treated literature “as a kind of enemy.” Despite the well attested, even commonplace, facts of Nabokov’s, Eliot’s and Joyce’s profound knowledge of and respect for the traditions of culture, and, above all, for the riches of language, and of scholarship in the study of language, it is possible for Professor Poirier to jettison all of this and declare that in attack on culture alone and in consuming passion for disorder are to be found the true springs of the genius of these minds.

Professor Poirier has not the remotest notion, seemingly, that creativity — and this is as true in science and scholarship as it is in the imaginative arts — is never the consequence of nihilistic rejection of the forms and structures which the creative mind finds around him. It is invariably a *working from, and generally through, these to new forms and structures*: forms and structures that may be so original indeed as to make their relation to past seem highly tenuous. That creative minds do indeed reveal capacity for liberating themselves in some degree from accepted modes of intellectual order, as a means of quickening the search for other modes, in no way means that passion for disorder, for “waste” is overriding. Least of all does it mean passion for “self-watching.”

There is nothing strange in the fact that in such a book as *The Performing Self* we should find the hero to be — Youth! During the past decade or two in America, youth has served much the same function to the romantic literary and political mind that the noble savage served in France in the late eighteenth century, that the child, the peasant, and, in due time, the worker served a later romanticism, including that peculiar form of romantic pastoralism that was the proletarian novel of the 1930s. No one would expect an editor of *Partisan Review* to be concerned with peasants or workers, not at

the present time anyhow, and that pretty well leaves only Youth. For the joys of caressing, fondling, and murmuring of sweet nothings to Youth Professor Poirier will, it would appear, pay any price short of felicitous English.

And what is Professor Poirier's Youth? Is it the aggregate of all young persons in America today? Clearly not. Is it rather the tiny minority that frequents places like Rutgers in search of feeling, sensitivity, encounter, maybe even a degree? Possibly. A Platonic idea against which all empirical reality of the young in America is totally irrelevant? Almost certainly. As I suggested above, Professor Poirier's fondness for the word "youth" is but a single example of a fondness of abstractions in general which so often resemble wet sponges strung together.

I think it would be difficult to find a single decade in the history of Western culture when as much barbarism, as much calculated onslaught against culture and convention in any form, and as much sheer degradation of both culture and the individual passed into print, into music, into art, and onto the American stage as the decade of the 1960s. Daniel Bell has recently reminded us, in a thoughtful and penetrating examination of the matter,<sup>5</sup> that the barbarism of the decade has roots—some of them, as Bell notes, in the period, 1895-1914. Bell writes:

"The modernist innovations that flared so effulgently between 1895 and 1914 wrought two extraordinary changes in culture. First there was a set of *formal* revolutions in the arts—the breakup of poetic syntax, the stream-of-consciousness in fiction, the multiplicity of the picture plane on the canvas, the rise of atonality in music, the loss of sequence in temporal representation and of foreground and background in spatial pictorialization. And second there was a new presentation of the self which Roger Shattuck (in *The Banquet Years*) has characterized in terms of four traits—the cult of childhood; the delight in the absurd; the reversal of values so as to celebrate the baser rather than the higher impulses; and a concern with hallucination."

As Bell writes, all of this (which was really a rather small movement, an eddy, in the earlier period) assumed grander proportions in the 1960s. The *infantilism*, with its stress on feelings, pains, and ecstasies of

5. "Sensibility in the 60's," *Commentary*, June, 1971. P. 63.

the young, the *absurdity*, as in the plays of Ionesco, the naked display of the most private parts of one's *self*—I am referring here to psychological self; display of genitalia has never seemed to me to be more than a harmless, if juvenile, enterprise—in every sphere of art, the *reversal of values* through which the consciously ugly and banal were glorified in visual art, the carefully contrived obscene in literature, and the raucous and loud in music, as in much rock (though I am not dismissing all rock here, only citing the rage for deafening sound), and, of course the varied drug and psychedelic forms of *hallucination*—all of these, whatever else may be said of them, are plainly and indisputably assaults on the authority of culture.

Add to the above, as Daniel Bell also requires us to do by the cogency of his article and wealth of detail, the concern with violence and cruelty, the preoccupation with the sexually perverse, (the worship of this indeed), the verbal and substantive fascination with human excrement, the apocalyptic view of everything in American society, and it is plain that the 1960s was a good deal more than the earlier period: more in content, intensity, and in sheer impact on culture. "The great aim of culture," Matthew Arnold wrote in the preface of his *Culture and Anarchy*, "is the aim of setting ourselves to ascertain what perfection is and to make it prevail." But the great aim of the imaginative writing—with rare and remarkable exceptions, of course—in the 1960s was assault on perfection in any reasonably objective, or at least external, sense of this word. What Lionel Trilling, in a now historic phrase, had referred to as "adversary culture" became, by the 1960s, an all-out nihilism against culture, against the authority of culture, defined by Professor Poirier as being, in very large part, "waste."

For all the liberation achieved by the "performing self" in the 1960s, liberation from laws against pornography and obscenity, liberation from the constraints of style and structure, from the disciplines of hard work and objective theme, the 1960s proved to be as Bell writes, in understatement, "empty of originality." Everybody wished to be totally free to write exactly as he wished; but alas, on the evidence, none of those in the vanguard of modernity had anything to say. Ironically, amusingly, those most obsessed by the self and its liberation from authority of any kind, those most clamantly concerned with revolt against conformity, are the ones who have in fact

told us the least about human nature, who have, in their writings, manifested the least individuality and have shown themselves to be the most easily captured by the kind of conformity that lives in the fashions of the hour. One might have expected, given the adulation of Youth that was everywhere to be seen, at least a few of the qualities so often associated with youth, such as boldness, buoyancy of style, thrust of originality. But one rarely found these in any degree. It is one more illustration of the fact that when revolt against authority proves so successful as to dislodge authority, and then has only itself to feed upon, the result is commonly banality, boredom, and the inane. Worship infantilism and the absurd long enough and one will himself become just that: infantile and absurd. So the 1960s would suggest.

#### IV

SO too is there a revolt against the authority of reason to be seen in our age<sup>6</sup> that may well exceed any known before, even during such an age as that of the final century or two of Rome. Any age in which "feeling" has the ascendancy that this obscure value has in ours is bound to be an age of not merely irrationality but of assault on rationality. Clearly, I am not implying there is no merit or reality in feelings and emotions. It is only when they are elevated, as they have so manifestly been elevated during the past two decades, above reason and rationality, and above scholarship and science, that we may speak properly of the cult of feeling, and of the assault of feeling on reason.

In many places this repudiation of the authority of reason is to be seen: in those circles of university and college youth where feeling, through sensitivity and encounter sessions, is exalted, in those wide spheres of the arts, just referred to, where preoccupation with self, with display or exhibition of self, takes the almost invariable form of display of the least rational, the least reason-oriented, reason-aspiring, elements of the self, and in the New Left where the

politics of assault required demolition of any remaining faith in objectivity, of dispassionate reason.

It is so easy to be scornful of objectivity. Who, after all, is ever wholly objective? No one, of course. Nevertheless, whatever authority reason has had in the West since the time of the pre-Socratic philosophers, whatever successes have attended it in many spheres of life, have followed acceptance of objectivity as at least a worthy goal. To declare that there is a form of knowledge that is not rooted wholly in self-interest, in some interest group in society, in greed, avarice, passion, or apocalyptic obsession, that is rooted instead in a desire to observe one's world as honestly and dispassionately as is humanly possible, and to reach conclusion accordingly, is, surely, to declare something of superlative nobility — no matter how often we may fall short of declared purpose. The philosophical literature of the West filled with notations of the idols of the mind, as they were called by Francis Bacon, which seek incessantly to engage our attention and to make difficult the route of reason. Everybody knows this. What else are the pursuit of method, of logic, of form, of intellectual and linguistic discipline about except the struggle to find means which will protect us from the most insistent of Bacon's idols. But to consecrate, make an idol of, to worship pure subjectivism, and to deny utterly the possibility or importance of objectivity, this, plainly, is something novel.

I am not, however, nearly so concerned by the political radical's assault on the role of reason as I am by the deeper and more widespread assault that comes from what I can only call the cult of individuality in American colleges and universities. By its very nature this cult — so well described, and also exalted, as a part of "Consciousness III" in Reich's *The Greening of America* — is bound to gain far more members than any movement of political radicalism. For, so little is required in the way of preparation for or membership in this "greening": not mind, nor learning, nor discipline. To be able to *feel*, to be able to communicate one's *feelings* to others — non-linguistically, so far as possible, save only for the ubiquitous "you know," certainly non-rationally —, to be fascinated by others' feelings and emotions, to conceive of life as a kind of psychedelic theatre, all of this, if it becomes much more widespread, will surely prove to be the greatest single assault on reason in the modern West. Drugs, for all their undoubted impact, seem to me but a

6. These paragraphs are no more than paraphrase of an essay I wrote a year or so ago for *The New York Times Book Review* on objectivity and rationality. Then I was naive enough to suppose that praise of either was like praise of mother or ice cream. The bulk of hate mail I received convinced me otherwise.



minor current in the large reality of the cult of feeling and of self. Samuel McCracken has made this point among others in his brilliant article "Drugs of Habit and Drugs of Belief,"<sup>7</sup> showing correctly that the monumental distinction between the former — such drugs as the familiar alcohol, cigarette, and variations on sleeping pills, all drugs of habit — and the latter, which include marijuana, "speed," and LSD, lies in a cult-like affirmation of the latter, with consequences clearly understood toward an entire culture, and the utter absence of cult-dedication in the former.

There is, and has been for more than two decades now, a visible erosion of the authority of the university in America, to be seen in the substantial degradation of the role and mission of the university in American life. Inside the academy — and my words apply to colleges of the liberal arts type as well as universities — there would appear to be a widening indifference to the authority of curriculum, which is, after all, along with scholarship, just about all the academy has had to contribute to Western culture for nearly eight centuries. I take this indifference, this boredom, this *contempt* for curriculum to be, in a very large part, the result of the academy's decision, made in various ways and at various times over the past several decades, to abdicate its authority in those areas for which it is alone fitted to wield authority and to seek novel ways of interesting, then diverting, and, in due time, amusing students. The fascination with the "relevant" and with the imagined needs of "the student" began, really, not in the 1960s in the manifestoes of the New Left on the campus, but in faculty reports, experiments, and other novelities during the period beginning just after World War II when the cult of individuality in the academy began to spread, to be succeeded, of course, in due time by the cult of feeling. From the first expressions of faculty contempt for curriculum at such places as Harvard and Berkeley to the kinds of student contempt to be found in sensitivity sessions and encounters of visceral communion, where feeling is sovereign, there is, one must conclude, a direct line.

The collapse of academic authority in the 1960s was but the surfacing of a collapse

7. McCracken's article is in the same issue of *Commentary* (June, 1971) that contains Daniel Bell's article, referred to above.



Robert Nisbet

that had become real during the 1940s and the 1950s when the mission of the university was so profoundly changed from that of education to that of serving, saving, healing, reforming, even revolutionizing, the social order. The dogma of knowledge for its own sake became a degraded dogma in the university during the period after World War II. New conceptions of the uses of knowledge flourished, a new breed of academic man assumed power and influence in university circles, the research institute and the "project" succeeded in importance both the scholar's study and the classroom. Given the degradation of the historic academic dogma, it is hardly strange that there would have been, at one and the same time, a degradation of each of the roles which had been, for so many centuries, associated with the academic dogma: the roles of teacher and scholar foremost.

No single manifestation of the erosion of authority in American society seems to me quite as symptomatic of the larger problem as does the erosion of academic authority and, with it, the dissolution of the academic community. For in America, unlike Europe where nonacademic traditions of learning tend still to be rather strong, the tie between the university and the intellectual community as a whole, between the academic dogma and the arts and sciences generally, has been a very nearly vital one.

Clearly, the individual seeking, through every possible means, escape from authority is one of the central realities of our age in American society. Such escape, or effort to escape, does not have to be universal in a population, not even of majority dimension, for it to have great possible significance. It is enough if it be located among the intellectuals, among those who, in one way and degree or other, supply the larger society with its controlling images, its dominant patterns of belief. This has always been the case in the transition of societies from what St. Simon called "organic" to "critical" epochs. The roots of social change, including revolutionary change, are to be found invariably among dominant minorities, and of all minorities in history the minority constituted by intellectuals is the most fraught with significance to a society's institutions, its cherished values and its crucial allegiances.

If a substantial number of persons in society come to believe that, for whatever reason, from whatever cause, society is in trouble, has lost its way, has become in some degree corrupt or degenerate, the results are not very different from what they would be if all or most members of society were open participants in the revolt against authority. And some very recent polls have told us that a majority of the American people do believe at the present time their society has lost its way, has become entrapped in corruption, imprisoned by false values.

Matters would perhaps be very different, even among intellectuals, if there were the slightest evidence that a scene dominated by "the performing self," by the individual who, in Goethe's words, "tries to make his Self observable, and to exhibit it as much as possible to the world," were for very long a tolerable scene, a feasible one in social and psychological terms. No such evidence exists in history. For invariably what we find accompanying the performing self is the community — or power-craving self — and within the same individual, among the very same minorities.

If idolization of the natural, the untoured, the "free" self is the most obvious manifestation at the present time of what I call the nemesis of authority, not far away is idolization of that special form of the performing self that carries with it the lineaments of *power*: the kind of power that can seem redemptive to those in the fore-

front of assault on convention, on the authorities of language, reason, and culture. The appeal for certain types of intellectual in history of a Caesar or a Napoleon — even, a generation ago in Germany, of a Hitler — is not to be missed. Power too, when it is direct, intense, above all, personal, is the nemesis of authority.

Power of this kind can be, often has been, the basis of community: not, obviously, community in the common sense of the word; rather, of collective, especially mass community. To feel one's self bound to others, not through common fulfillment of a function in the social order, but through common devotion to a single individual possessed of nearly limitless appeal is the very cornerstone of what passed for political community under Caesar, under Napoleon, and, in more recent times, under totalitarian leaders of the mass states in Europe. More than a century ago, Jacob Burckhardt saw the affinity between the performing self and the craving for power:

*"The great harm was begun in the last century, mainly through Rousseau, with his doctrine of the goodness of human nature. Out of this, plebs and educated alike, distilled the doctrine of the golden age that was to come infallibly, provided people were left alone. The result, as every child knows, was the complete disintegration of the idea of authority in the hands of mortal men, whereupon, of course, we fall periodically victims to sheer power."*<sup>8</sup>

From Aristotle on among the wiser minds in Western history, with Tocqueville and Matthew Arnold, among others, joining Burckhardt in the 19th century, the affinity, the predictable affinity between social or cultural anarchy and craving for direct power has been well noted. Today one need look only to those around us who make up the very vanguard of assault on authority, whether it be the authority of the so-called Establishment, the authority of ordinary civility and decency, or the authorities of language, reason, and culture. Do we not find among these individuals the highest intensity of romantic fascination with the power of a Castro or Mao? I do not think even the American intellectual's

8. *The Letters of Jacob Burckhardt*. Tr. and Ed. by Alexander Dru. London: Routledge, Kegan and Paul, 1955. P. 147.

firtation with Stalinism in the 1930s was as much a sign of the seemingly effortless flight to power one finds among intellectuals generally as is current adulation of Mao — together with the nursery-like sayings of Chairman Mao, the universal utilization in China now of the army as the framework of national community there, and, ever-present, ever-ready to strike, the sheer personification of absolute power in one man.

“It is easy to minimize this, to take refuge in the obvious facts of militarization, despotism, and intellectual inanity of spoken and written utterances that we see in China and Cuba. These, surely, we find ourselves on the verge of saying, will shortly prove self-immunizing to those in American society who now worship at the shrine of Mao and who can find something uncorrupted, pure, clean, and new in Mao’s China; something buoyant and communal and endowed with purpose; something, in short, that is held to be irrevocably lost in America. Perhaps so. Perhaps the affair with Mao will terminate, and shortly, as did the affair earlier with Stalin. What is less likely to terminate, however, is the affair with power, the affair with the right kind of wielder of direct power.

We do not know, cannot know, of course, whether such a wielder of power will come on the American scene, to be courted American style as Mao is courted in China. All one’s normal impulses say such a personage is highly unlikely in America. No doubt he is as long as the two major political parties remain strong and the economy holds together reasonably well; and as long as some humiliating military defeat does not create mass feelings of insecurity greater than those normally present today.

But the steady accumulation of the erosions of authority in American society and culture, such as those we are witnessing today, the increasing sense of displacement of accustomed values, and the mounting perception of the social void among significant numbers of persons can create, very probably are now creating a condition where some single, major, seemingly catastrophic setback — a lost war, a depression, one more national wave of student violence, the possibilities are legion — can make a profound difference.

It is not difficult for many of us to remember the extraordinary appeal that Huey Long came to have for large numbers of Americans during the months leading up to his assassination; or the nearly equal appeal that Father Coughlin had through radio presence alone. Quite possibly we have become too widely educated, too sophisticated, for the special personal characteristics of a Huey Long to take effect today. Who can be sure? We shall know more when we have had a longer opportunity to observe, say, George Wallace. One thing, however, is certain. We have not become, as a people, too educated, too sophisticated, to welcome and court power: absolute, direct, overwhelming, personal power. No people in history ever has or ever could. And when such power comes in America, if it comes, it will not seem like power at all to a great many people, including large numbers of intellectuals, and perhaps especially of the young. It will be tonic, exhilarating, crusade-like, communal, even redemptive. Such power always has in history when it first strikes.

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