I. Three Exemplary Intellectuals

Intellectuals of the left need to do more than dissent—or praise. We need to see the world steadily and see it whole: to see without blinkers, to explain how things came to be as they are, to sharpen values and make them explicit, to sketch visions, to connect with publics in such a way as to suggest where our limping democracy might go. All this is our calling, even—or especially—in a time when most of the people one would expect to be paying attention, the morally alert young, are otherwise occupied.

"Ideology is a brain disease," said Jerry Rubin in the late 1960s, when he was riding high as a media-fueled, drug-fueled, shoot-from-the-lip Yippie celebrity, and virtually everyone in the United States outside the right wing would today agree. So-called movement conservatives harbor grand ideas of robust entrepreneurship that thrives on the outskirts of shriveled government—"the ownership society" is their phrase—while they selectively rely upon robust government to enforce moralist discipline. These, at least, are big ideas, if contradictory ones. But outside the right's ranks, big ideas and methodical thinking are out, specifics and practicality are in. The end of ideology (meaning the end of left-wing ideology) prematurely heralded by Daniel Bell in 1960 did eventually arrive, leaving the few activists of the left who aspire to sweeping change either sentimental about one or another variant of the Marxist iconography or stranded without even nostalgia to fall back on. When I see young people of a leftish bent fumble

for a big picture of America in the world, they seem both earnest and marooned, and then once again I am dismayed at the left's (and not just the left's) intellectual default, all the more wrenching when we contrast it with the ambitions of the foremost intellectuals of the decades of my youth. Part I of this book is a tribute to three of the steadiest—their scope, their humanity, the intelligence of their efforts to make sense of a whole America.

True, the few young activists who do long for coherence may be starry-eyed about what ideology can accomplish and in their eagerness may not sufficiently appreciate the benefits of being liberated from the dark side of coherence. For a century, after all, there has been no more murderous force in the world than totalist ideologies. When Marxist-Leninists performed their parody of intellectual confidence, they wagered that the gods of consistency wouldn't mind their sacrifice of intellectual integrity. (Today's Islamists demand the same sort of sacrifice and offer other styles of devoted self-immolation.) The Leninists, Stalinists, Maoists, and Khmer Rouge enthusiasts need not disrupt their thought patterns to take account of inconvenient facts. Whatever happens, they always have an answer—because it is the same answer. (In the words of an old joke, when a Communist found out about Stalin's gulag, he was ready with a rejoinder: it was necessary, it didn't happen, and they're not doing it anymore.)

In fact, the few who long for ideology may actually be pining for something different: for a cogent morality, or a steady application of will, in other words, for stamina. Fighting desolation, bewilderment, and other forms of entropy, they resort to a parody of Enlightenment faith—a fusion of Enlightenment and religious fanaticism. Uncomfortable in the world as it is—and who possessed of a brain ought not to feel uncomfortable, given the last hundred years?—they devise a grid more to their liking, a world in which only the rational is real, as Hegel liked, but the rational is what the sacred texts decree to be rational, so that once the pattern of the future is clear, only a dose of ferocious will must be injected to tie up the world's loose ends. What they call ideology, in other words, is a sensibility—the sort of mind-melting, fevered tunnel vision that Dostoyevsky brilliantly described with awe and horror. It would seem like the triumph of intellect to conjure a

mental scheme so comprehensive as to provide an exit from every conundrum. But in the end what the totalists have in mind is intellectual suicide.

When I began this book, or what turned out to be this book, before September 11, 2001, I had in mind a series of tributes to a number of American intellectuals who had influenced me in my youth. I was working on the third of these essays when the jetliners smashed into the World Trade Center. For a while my book was derailed. We had been slammed into a new era and I felt that bygone intellectuals of the left were largely useless, for they had been asking the wrong questions, offering little in the effort to come to grips with apocalyptic suicidal-homicidal Islamist fanatics. Of course it was not strictly the intellectuals' fault that the old systems of thought failed as prophecies: the explosive events had not yet occurred to discredit traditions, and it would be absurd to blame them for having failed to do Nostradamus duty. Yet this would not be the first time that Marxism, liberalism, and the other modern traditions had reported for intellectual duty empty handed. As Ira Katznelson argues in his stimulating book *Desolation and Enlightenment: Political Knowledge After Total War, Totalitarianism, and the Holocaust*,[1] the main traditions in political theory were also mute on the awful twentieth-century experiences of total violence. And as Susan Neiman maintains in her splendid *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy*, the history of modern philosophy also needed to be rethought: while epistemology—the question of how we know what we know—has become philosophy's central subject, a deeper concern has been submerged, namely, the problem of evil that has haunted the main line of intellectual tradition since the seventeenth century.[2] Violence and evil: these are huge lapses, not minor omissions. It was as if a theory of air flight failed to leave room for the possibility that a plane whose engines slowed below a certain speed would lose lift and crash.

What do you say when bankruptcies of thought keep recurring? You conclude that you are dealing with a case of chronic impecuniousness. So the aftermath of the terror attacks was a fitting time to ask what we should now understand about the flaws—fundamental flaws—in our inherited intellectual sys-

tems. For several months I felt that we had been plunged into an emergency and that it was not solely a problem of security but an intellectual emergency as well. One piece of prime work to be done was an act—or, rather, two—of sweeping away. The foreign policy of George W. Bush was a multiple disaster—its own apocalyptic threat. ("Either you're with us or you're with the terrorists," a line he repeated scores of times.) But meanwhile the fundamentalist left stood in the way of what Michael Walzer, my former teacher and now colleague at *Dissent* magazine, called "a decent left." So I had a twin set of polemics to write and a lot of rethinking to do—and I am not finished with either.

In the process I came to recognize that most of the intellectuals I had set out to write about in the first place, generalists who had done their strongest work in the fifties and sixties, still mattered, and so did their conundrums and tensions. For one thing, their scope remained an inspiration. Of course, the breadth and lucidity of these intellectuals were part of what never ceased to impress me. But they weren't dilettantes. Without sacrificing scope they paid close attention to the fine grain of their subjects. Without confining themselves to minutiae, in the manner criticized by C. Wright Mills as "abstracted empiricism," they kept their feet on the ground even as they looked to the larger movements of history. With a largeness of vision now largely abandoned by social scientists and literary historians alike—among the rare contemporary exceptions are Walzer, the political theorist, and the political sociologist Michael Mann—they aspired to a coherent vision of the world as it was (and might be).

It wasn't just that David Riesman, C. Wright Mills, and Irving Howe wrote accessibly, even stylishly—this was certainly an attraction, but their lucidity by itself would not have commended them as exemplary. Nor was it just that they were, in their distinct ways, committed to changing the United States. They were activists, to be sure. But they were activists with a difference: activists who, in much different styles, and disagreeing, sometimes vigorously, about American predicaments, aspired to a coherence that would also, at the same time, make room for something new under the sun—or, if not altogether new, new in its weight and effect on the hitherto known world. Usually, without succumbing

to received formulas they liked "taking it big," to use the phrase Mills used with his students, yet remained alert to the danger of grandiosity. Two sociologists and a literary critic, they extended themselves, whatever their work's ostensible subject, beyond it.

In the term made famous by Russell Jacoby before overuse made it banal, they were public intellectuals.[3] Note: *public* doesn't mean *freelance*. All three taught at universities (though Mills, toward the end of his life, thought he wanted to leave: Columbia would not permit him to teach a course on Marxism, and he was impatient with students). Their teaching positions were, whatever their besetting sins, more than convenient day jobs: they were, rather, hospitable platforms for free-ranging careers where a serious writer did not have to worry about how to please commercially minded publishers. The notion that writers for profitable magazines are somehow free of institutional commitments cheerfully overlooks all the ways in which the market functions as an institution (complete with gates and pressures), although its brick and mortar is harder to locate than a campus.

Mainly, Riesman, Mills, and Howe wanted to make the world more comprehensible to readers who were not professional intellectuals. The three free-ranging writers published in large-circulation general magazines as well as tiny ones, and their books made best-seller lists. In their time substantial figures like Hannah Arendt and James Baldwin wrote the higher journalism for the *New Yorker*. But none of them were, in Michael Bérubé's aptly wicked phrase, "publicity intellectuals," scattershot pundits promiscuous in their momentary appearances in the electronic media.[4] Even had they been invited more frequently, they probably would not have played. (Riesman considered television a debased forum and would not appear at all. Mills, on the other hand, suffered a major heart attack while cramming feverishly for a television debate.) They liked having audiences but refused to offer up caricatures of themselves. They believed in sustained argument, not punditry. No accident, since they cared about the whole of society and culture, they sometimes argued with each other. Each doubtful, in his own way, that intellectuals were entitled to rule, they did not veer over to self-loathing and take walks on the sound-bitten side. They would write clearly because making an

effort to explain themselves was not only a public duty but a help to their own thinking. And they thought that thinking clearly was, in fair times or foul, a worthy enterprise for its own sake.

Notes

1. Katznelson, *Desolation and Enlightenment: Political Knowledge After Total War, Totalitarianism, and the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).
2. Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002).
3. Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).
4. Michael Bérubé, "Going Public," *Washington Post Book World,* July 7, 2002, p. BW03.

1

David Riesman's Lonely Crowd

In an age that views books as quaint artifacts on the fringes of the entertainment business, we may find it hard to recall that books ever guided national conversations in the United States. Sometimes the effect on history has been direct. Upton Sinclair's 1906 polemical novel, *The Jungle,* galvanized public sentiment in behalf of the Pure Food and Drug Act. In the 1960s Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring,* Michael Harrington's *The Other America,* Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique,* and Ralph Nader's *Unsafe at Any Speed* helped the antipoverty, environmentalist, feminist, and consumer movements get under way, and subsequent reform-minded conservative books, notably George L. Kelling and James Q. Wilson's *Fixing Broken Windows,* have had an equivalent effect.

But practical essays in advocacy are not the only books that count in public life. Sometimes books have mattered not by provoking action but by recognizing patterns, offering big interpretations of life, providing names for what, until the volumes appeared, were nothing more than hunches or diffuse sentiments. A serious book comes out, crystallizes a fear, a knack, or a hope into a big idea, a sweeping interpretation of reality that strikes a collective nerve in a large general public.[1] As in the case of Friedrich Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* (1944), Milton Friedman's *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962), and Charles A. Murray's *Losing Ground* (1984), a book may become a spur to a major ideological turn. In the case of Marshall

McLuhan's *Understanding Media* (1964), a book can furnish the media themselves with a vocabulary of self-recognition. Rarest of all is the book that penetrates popular consciousness so deeply that its insights become clichés, its wisdom conventional—to borrow a phrase devised, in fact, in one such book, *The Affluent Society* (1958), by John Kenneth Galbraith.

More than half a century ago Yale University Press published the first edition of *The Lonely Crowd,* by David Riesman, with Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney, a book that contributed its own conceptual phrases to the American vocabulary.[2] The book's subject was nothing less than a sea change in American character: as the United States was moving from a society governed by the imperative of production to a society governed by the imperative of consumption, the character of its upper middle classes was shifting from "inner-directed" people, who as children internalized goals that were essentially "implanted" by elders, to "other-directed" people, "sensitized to the expectations and preferences of others."[3] In Riesman's metaphor the shift was from a life guided by an internal gyroscope to a life guided by radar. The new American no longer cared much about adult authority but rather was hyperalert to peer groups and gripped by mass media. Father might be reputed to know best, but if he did, it was increasingly because a television program said so.

The Lonely Crowd went on to become, according to a 1997 study by Herbert J. Gans, the best-selling book by a sociologist in U.S. history, with 1.4 million copies sold, largely in paperback editions.[4] (The first abridged edition, a pocket-size paperback, was one of the first beneficiaries of the wave of mass-market paperback editions.) For years the book made *inner-direction* and *other-direction* household terms, canapés for cocktail party chat. It was read by student radicals in the making, who overinterpreted its embrace of the search for autonomy as a roundhouse assault on conformity, when in fact Riesman was at pains to point out that any society ensures "some degree of conformity from the individuals who make it up," the question being how it secures that unavoidable conformity.[5] In the 1960s *The Lonely Crowd* was read as a harbinger of alienation leading to affluent revolt. Its title phrase even cropped up in a Bob Dylan song of 1967, "I

Shall Be Released." By the time he wrote his introduction to the 1969 edition, a more conservative Riesman was regretting that *"The Lonely Crowd* had contributed to the snobbish deprecation of business careers."[6]

The hoopla, the public embrace, not to mention misinterpretation, were all a far cry from original expectations. On publication in 1950 the book was greeted with respectful but frequently critical reviews in professional journals. When it came out in a paperback abridgment three years later, Riesman and Yale University Press expected the book to sell "a few thousand copies as a reading in social science courses."[7] Instead, it caught on. Why? With unerring hindsight we can see that it sympathetically exposed the anxieties of a middle class that was rising with the postwar boom, suburbanizing, busily availing itself of upgraded homes, machines, and status, relieved to be done with the depression and the war but baffled by cultural and psychological upheavals beneath the surface of everyday life.

Not least, *The Lonely Crowd* was jargon free (while inadvertently contributing its own either-or, quiz show style to the vocabulary of a culture that relishes bipolar categories, as with introvert/extrovert, hip/square, marginal/central). Today, sociological writing has all the public appeal of molecular biology, having substantially earned its reputation as a specialty for number crunchers and other pseudoscientific poseurs. By immense contrast, *The Lonely Crowd* was lucidly written, with a knack for puckish phrases: "inside-dopester," "the whip of the word," "from invisible hand to glad hand," "from the bank account to the expense account," "ambulatory patients in the ward of modern culture," "the friendship market," "wildcatting on the sex frontier," "the featherbed of plenty," "each life is an emergency." It was decidedly unpretentious, unforbidding in tone, omnicurious, with a feeling for recognizable types. Although demanding of the serious reader, and scarcely written in sound bites, it had the sound of an agreeable human voice, by turns chatty and approachably awkward, graceful and warm, nuanced and colloquial, sober and avuncular but frequently casual and good humored. Unlike most academic treatises, it did not get bogged down in definitional chatter. It was the book of a sympathetic citizen who wanted to counsel so-

ciety, not lecture it.[8] It spoke directly to the people—Americans, largely, but not exclusively—whom it concerned (in both senses). It commiserated as it chastised, and even when it did chastise, it reassured the reader that one was not so lonely in one's anxieties as one might have imagined. It could be read with the reassurance of recognition. The style of speaking *to* rather than *about* has, since the mid-1950s, devolved into the self-help style, at the cost of intellectual seriousness, but *The Lonely Crowd* is proof that intelligent analysis can be directed to intelligent readers without treating them strictly as egocentric self-improvers.

Accessibility was not altogether unique in sociology in those years. In the 1950s even the professional journals were written so that any decently educated person could read them; books by C. Wright Mills made the best-seller lists, too. A large readership was willing to read something demanding that sensitively explored its condition and meditated on its costs. The popularity of *The Lonely Crowd* must also have owed something to the supple way that it ranged far and wide for its evidence, trotting through novels, children's books, movies, and anthropology. Although Riesman and Nathan Glazer were conducting formal interviews at the same time,[9] Riesman emphasized that he drew on them only slightly, that *The Lonely Crowd* was "based on our experiences of living in America—the people we have met, the jobs we have held, the books we have read, the movies we have seen, and the landscape."[10]

Though he was writing when television was still a new medium, Riesman took seriously the fact that Americans had been plunged into a media bath. He did so with concern but also without scorn. Even as television was still taking shape, he understood that the mass media were powerful in both content and form, and yet he did not succumb to the hype that characteristically greets each wave of technological marvels in American history.[11] He did not suppose that television would be able to rewrite the national character from scratch. As he put it, "Americans were ready for the mass media even before the mass media were ready for them."[12] A careful rereading of *The Lonely Crowd* shows, in fact, how sympathetic it is to mass media virtues—mainly, to television's challenging of provincialism and its cultivation of hybrid taste. With a sophisticated grasp of the cultural production

process, *The Lonely Crowd* understood that the major reason for these benefits was that the media were headquartered in large metropolitan centers "where the pressures toward other-directed tolerance are greatest."[13] (This would remain the case even as the giant media corporations later spun off specialized channels for demographic niches.) In fact, although *The Lonely Crowd* was frequently read as an assault on other-direction, Riesman bent over backward to find virtue in the "considerateness, sensitivity and tolerance" characteristic of a society no longer gazing upward, toward elders and traditional authorities, for guidance.[14]

Interestingly, *The Lonely Crowd* survived the early collapse of one of its central hypotheses. This was the idea that each phase of social character (traditional, inner-directed, other-directed) corresponds to a rate of population growth. In her review of *The Lonely Crowd* in the *American Journal of Sociology,* Margaret Mead early observed that Riesman's evidence for the population theory was weak. She was not the only skeptic on this front. Riesman himself was aware in 1949, when the book was still in proofs, that the population model was seriously contested.[15] By the time of the book's 1969 reissue, Riesman had already renounced his demographic model. The revision didn't—and doesn't—matter. The book is so rich in observation that divergent readers will attend to different passages and feel themselves instructed. Mead herself pointed to a passage noting that other-directed conformism has predisposed Americans to project power centers outside the self—a reason that the paranoid streak in American life loomed so large and perhaps also a reason Americans were excessively afraid that the Russians would take them over. Myself, I have been struck by the prophetic quality of Riesman's discussion of the "inside-dopester" as a social type, whose goal is "never to be taken in by any person, cause or event."[16] Sam Donaldson, Cokie Roberts, Chris Matthews, and Company were imagined long before smirking became the lucrative style for Washington pundits. In sum, as Margaret Mead put it, "Almost every paragraph in this book incites one to theoretical speculation and . . . suggests to the reader additional lifetime programs of research."[17]

Inevitably, the book reads differently than it did half a century ago—although just as incisively. The starkness of the transition

from inner-direction to other-direction was more evident to readers of the 1950s, caught up as they were in a sudden tide of affluence. Today, the book may not resonate in the same way. In the mid-1980s, while teaching *The Lonely Crowd* to freshmen and sophomores at Berkeley, I discovered that they had trouble grasping the key distinction between inner- and other-direction. Intuitively, it made little sense to them. This was not because, as Riesman had suggested, "the shift from inner-direction to other-direction [seems] unimportant by comparison with" the momentous shift from tradition-directed life to *both* inner- *and* other-direction—because, in other words, the shift from traditional society to the whole of modernity is *the* momentous transition in human history.[18] No, the distinction between inner- and other- was lost on students born after 1960, born into a world of rock music, television, and video games, because these students had lived their entire lives as other-directed, with radars. They took other-direction for granted. By the 1980s the "exceptional sensitivity to the actions and wishes of others" that Riesman held to be typical of other-direction had long since been institutionalized into the norms of talk shows and "sensitivity training."[19] The very category of "inner-direction" fell outside their experience. A life equipped with a psychic gyroscope had become well-nigh unimaginable.

Still, the open reader returns to *The Lonely Crowd* feeling many aftershocks of recognition. After the turn of the twenty-first century, the alert observer is made aware every day that the shift that Riesman discerned in the educated upper-middle classes of metropolitan centers has swept the country. In recent elections presidential candidates have been expected to answer the questions of ordinary men and women (Bill Clinton ingratiatingly, George H.W. Bush less so) and chat with reporters on camera during long bus trips (John McCain, Howard Dean, John Edwards). The remote, Wizard-of-Oz-like presidential aura belongs to a vanished yesteryear, along with a White House like Lincoln's, open for casual presidential chats.

Popular culture itself registers the sea change. Consider the differences between the quiz shows of the 1950s, *The $64,000 Question* and *Twenty-One,* and the hit series of 2000, *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* On *Twenty-One* the contestants were sealed

off from influence in "isolation booths," with no hints, no multiple-choice questions; they were literally "inner-directed." On *Millionaire* in 2000 they stood out in the open, were given four prefab options from which to choose, and got to throw out "lifelines" to family, friends, and audience members. On the earlier shows questions concerned areas of special expertise like opera, boxing, and European royalty. Paul Farhi, an enterprising reporter for the *Washington Post*, put the difference this way:

> On "The $64,000 Question" (1955–58) . . . a contestant was shown six portraits and asked to name not just the artist and the subject, but also the teacher with whom the artist had studied. Another contestant was asked to name the Verdi opera that started Arturo Toscanini's conducting career, as well as the date of the performance and its location. In 1957, a young college professor named Charles Van Doren was asked on "Twenty-One" to name the kings of Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Jordan. Herbert M. Stempel, the contestant who faced Van Doren and eventually exposed the rigging on "Twenty-One," was eliminated from the show when he could answer only two parts of the following three-parter: What was the name of the anti-populist Kansas newspaper editor of the 1920s? (William Allen White.) What was the name of his newspaper? (The Emporia Gazette.) What was the name of the column he wrote? ("What's the Matter With Kansas?")[20]

On *Millionaire,* by contrast, contestants could win huge sums by knowing "what two colors make up an Oreo cookie" or decide to pass up the chance to win by $500,000 by not taking a chance with, "How many von Trapp children were there in *The Sound of Music*?" In other words, the authority of knowledge derives largely from popular culture, knowledge shared with one's peers, not knowledge derived from the idiosyncrasies of personal mastery.

Granted, television today is far more widespread than in the late 1950s, so the educational level of viewers today is, on average, lower than before. But this factor by itself cannot explain the extent of the shift. It is likely that not only the knowledge base but the cultural aspirations of most Americans have changed.

No longer do Americans take pleasure in being stumped (except about the trivia of *popular* culture). Running into the limits of their knowledge would suggest (in gyroscopic fashion) that there is more to learn in the course of their lives. Today, in the name of "self-esteem" they are "sensitive" to their own weaknesses; they need to demonstrate how much they already know. "I am somebody" replaces "I will someday be somebody."

One longs for appropriately ambitious, germane studies of today's mentalities—books with the reach and approachability of *The Lonely Crowd* and its partial successor, *Habits of the Heart* (1985), by Robert Bellah and colleagues.[21] One wonders, in particular, how the concurrence of boom and growing inequality (and attendant anxieties) is playing in the consciousness of Americans, those who have benefited greatly as well as those who have benefited little or not at all. Sociology ought to be news that stays news, but few sociologists today extend their imaginations beyond narrow milieus to the biggest questions of social structure, culture and conflict. Their elders, hell-bent on professionalization, do not encourage range. It is worth noting that, like another of our outstanding sociologists, Daniel Bell, Riesman never was trained into writing a doctoral dissertation. He earned a law degree, clerked for Justice Louis Brandeis, and taught law school before relaunching his intellectual life.[22]

If I may close on a personal note: I met David Riesman during my sophomore year, in 1960, when he was a faculty adviser to the Harvard-Radcliffe peace group, Tocsin. A long-time critic of nationalism, Riesman had become deeply involved in writing and speaking against reliance on nuclear weapons, and I was amazed to learn that he, one of the most famous professors in the United States, was lending his station wagon to transport groups of peace activists to Vermont, to campaign for a pacifist member of Congress. Practicing the attitude that he commended, harboring both utopian hopes and practical ideas, Riesman always had time to chat about U.S. politics and society. He helped us raise money, contacted luminaries in our behalf, brought us to conferences, wrote follow-up letters after conversations. In fact, he famously wrote letters around the year and around the clock, sometimes more than one a day (he might have been the most prolific letter writer since

Thomas Jefferson), and while it was decidedly flattering for an undergraduate to be on the receiving end of such attention, Riesman did not take his mentoring lightly—that is, he was not afraid to disagree with us, sometimes vehemently, about some of our decisions. In those years he was also editing a journal of political commentary, the *Committee* (later *Council) of Correspondence Newsletter*. For decades he was, in fact, a one-man committee of correspondence. He was interested in everything. He picked up tiny references and gave back paragraphs of rumination and reference. The world is far-flung with hundreds of his correspondents, men and women of several generations who over the decades had the daunting experience of writing him a letter or sending him an article, only to receive back, often within a week, a much longer letter, two or three pages' worth at times, perhaps apologizing for a delay.

In his later years he became grumpy about many democratic changes in American life. His Tocquevillian fear of the "soft despotism" of the majority became more pronounced. His suspicion of authorities receded. His love of precision and detail led him toward an accommodation with mainstream sociology as it grew narrower, more quantitative and technical. Even so, he kept his distance from the doctrinal neoconservatism that attracted many generalist social scientists of his generation. (He told me once that curiosity had drawn him to travel in the Soviet Union in the thirties, but he was never a Marxist and had never flirted with communism or Trotskyism. Therefore he felt no need to invert his youthful commitments.) Well into his eighties he remained a stimulating, omnicurious observer and critic.

Max Weber, the century's greatest sociologist, famously deplored "specialists without spirit." Riesman, who was ninety-two when he died in 2002, gave of both mind and spirit without specialization. He deserves to be reread and his model honored.

Notes

1. Shallow books may strike comparable chords in the media, too, but they are more likely to be bought today, shelved tomorrow, and unread forevermore (though frequently alluded to).

2. If the question of authorship—that is, both credit and responsibility—should arise, partly because various editions of *The Lonely Crowd* appeared with varying credit lines, it should be noted that there is no dispute among the author and his collaborators. As Nathan Glazer has put the matter, *The Lonely Crowd* is "David Riesman's book. He conceived it, wrote most of it, and rewrote it for the final version. Contributions from the two listed co-authors in the form of initial drafts and research reports and rewritings of Riesman's first drafts may have spurred him to expand, revise, and extend his own thinking, but in the end it is his book" (Glazer, "Tocqueville and Riesman: Two Passages to Sociology," David Riesman Lecture on American Society, October 20, 1999, Department of Sociology, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., p. 1). It would seem that the frequent citation of Glazer and Denney as coauthors without Riesman's complaint is another instance of his generosity. Nonetheless, in introducing the book, I have kept to the original listing of the authors.
3. David Riesman, with Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd* (1950; reprint, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1969), p. 8.
4. Herbert J. Gans, "Best Sellers by American Sociologists: An Exploratory Study," in Dan Clawson, ed., *Required Reading: Sociology's Most Influential Books* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), pp. 19–27.
5. Riesman, Glazer, and Denney, *The Lonely Crowd,* p. 5.
6. Riesman, introduction to *The Lonely Crowd,* p. xviii.
7. Ibid., p. xli.
8. I borrow some phrases here from my "Sociology for Whom? Criticism for Whom?" in Herbert J. Gans, ed., *Sociology in America* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1990), p. 221.
9. Later published in David Riesman with Nathan Glazer, *Faces in the Crowd* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1952).
10. Riesman, introduction to *The Lonely Crowd,* p. lxi.
11. His few sentences on the impact of print and its profusion (pp. 89, 96) are a concise marvel anticipating some of Marshall McLuhan's stronger ideas.
12. Riesman, introduction to *The Lonely Crowd,* p. liii.
13. Riesman, Glazer, and Denney, *The Lonely Crowd,* p. 192.
14. Riesman, introduction to *The Lonely Crowd,* p. xxxii.
15. Ibid., p. xlii.
16. Riesman, Glazer, and Denney, *The Lonely Crowd,* p. 182.

17. Margaret Mead, *American Journal of Sociology* 61 (1951): 496—97.
18. Riesman, Glazer, and Denney, *The Lonely Crowd,* p. 13.
19. Ibid., p. 22.
20. Paul Farhi, "Ask a Stupid Question and Millions of People Will Tune Right In," *Washington Post,* January 6, 2000, p. C1.
21. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986).
22. Bell received a doctoral degree from Columbia for his published book, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1960).

2

C. Wright Mills, Free Radical

1

Whether the rest of this sentence sounds like an oxymoron or not, C. Wright Mills was the most inspiring sociologist of the second half of the twentieth century, his achievement all the more remarkable given that he died at forty-five and produced his major work in a span of little more than a decade. For the political generation trying to find its bearings in the early sixties, Mills was a guiding knight of radicalism. Yet he was a bundle of paradoxes, and this was part of his appeal, whether his readers were consciously attuned to the paradoxes or not.

He was a radical disabused of radical traditions, a sociologist disgruntled with the course of sociology, an intellectual frequently skeptical of intellectuals, a defender of popular action as well as a craftsman, a despairing optimist, a vigorous pessimist, and, all in all, one of the few contemporaries whose intelligence, verve, passion, scope—and contradictions—seemed alert to most of the main moral and political traps of his time. A philosophically trained and best-selling sociologist who decided to write pamphlets, a populist who scrambled to find what was salvageable within the Marxist tradition, a loner committed to politics, a man of substance acutely cognizant of style, he was not only a guide but an exemplar, prefiguring in his paradoxes some of the tensions of a student movement that was reared on privilege amid

exhausted ideologies yet hell-bent on finding, or forging, a way to transform the United States root and branch.[1]

In his two final years Mills the writer became a public figure, his tracts against the Cold War and U.S. Latin American policy more widely read than any other radical's, his *Listen, Yankee,* featured on the cover of *Harper's Magazine,* his "Letter to the New Left" published in both the British *New Left Review* and the American *Studies on the Left* and distributed, in mimeographed form, by Students for a Democratic Society. In December 1960, while cramming for a television debate on Latin America policy with an established foreign policy analyst, Mills suffered a heart attack, and when he died fifteen months later he was instantly celebrated as a martyr.[2] SDS's Port Huron Statement carries echoes of Mills's prose, and Tom Hayden, its principal author, wrote his master's thesis on Mills, whom he labeled "Radical Nomad," a heroic if quixotic figure who, like the New Left itself, tried to muscle a way through the ideological logjam. After Mills's death at least one son of founding New Left parents was named for him, along with at least one cat, my own, so called, with deep affection, because he was almost red.

Mills's writing was charged—seared—by a keen awareness of human energy and disappointment, a passionate feeling for the human adventure, and a commitment to dignity. In many ways the style was the man. In a vigorous, instantly recognizable prose, he hammered home again and again the notion that people lived lives that were deeply shaped by social forces not of their own making, and that this irreducible fact had two consequences: it lent most human life a tragic aspect with a social root but created the potential—if only people saw a way forward—of improving life in a big way by concerted action.

In *The Sociological Imagination* and other works Mills insisted that a sociologist's proper subject was the intersection of biography and history. Mills invited, in other words, a personal approach to thought as well as a thoughtful approach to persons, so it was no fault of his that he came to be admired (and sometimes scorned) as a persona and not only a thinker, and that long after his death he still demands to be taken biographically as well as historically. In SDS we did not know Mills personally, for

the most part, but (or therefore) a certain mystique flourished. It was said (accurately) that Mills was partial to motorcycles and that he lived in a house in the country that he had built himself. It was said (accurately) that he had been divorced more than once and (inaccurately) that he had been held back from a full professorship at Columbia because of his politics. If his personal life was unsettled, bohemian, and mainly *his own* in a manner equivalent to his intellectual journey and even his style, the fit seemed perfect.

Mills himself was not a man of political action apart from his writing, yet it was *as* a writer that he mattered, so his inclination to go it alone was far from a detriment. "I have been intellectually, politically, morally alone," he would write. "I have never known what others call 'fraternity' with any group, however small, neither academic nor political. With a few individuals, yes, I have known it, but with groups however small, no. . . . And the plain truth, so far as I know, is that I do not cry for it."[3] His own biography and history met in the distinctly American paradox first and most brilliantly personified by Ralph Waldo Emerson: the lone artisan who belongs by refusing to belong. "Intellectually and culturally I am as 'self-made' as it is possible to be," Mills wrote.[4] His "direction" was that "of the independent craftsman"—*craftsman* was one of his favorite words, borrowing, perhaps, from the "instinct of workmanship" derived from another great American frontiersman social scientist, Thorstein Veblen.[5]

Mills's forceful prose, his instinct for significant controversy, his Texas hell-for-leather aura, his reputation for intellectual fearlessness, and his passion for craftsmanship seemed all of a piece. A free intellectual tempted by action, he served as an engagé father or uncle figure, an outsider who counterposed himself not only to liberal academics who devoted themselves to explaining why radical change was either foreclosed or undesirable but also to the court intellectuals, the fawning men of power and quantification who clustered around the Kennedy administration and later helped anoint it Camelot. The Camelot insiders might speak of a New Frontier while living in glamour and reveling in power, while Mills, the loner, the antibureaucrat, was staking out a new frontier of his own.

II

Mills's output was huge in a short life, and here I can pick up only a few themes. He produced his strongest work in the fifties—*White Collar* (1951), *The Power Elite* (1956), *The Sociological Imagination* (1959)—banging up against political closure and cultural stupefaction. These books were, all in all, his major statements on what he liked to call "the big questions" about society, preceding the pamphlets, *The Causes of World War Three* (1958) and *Listen, Yankee: The Revolution in Cuba* (1960), along with an annotated collection, *The Marxists* (1962). (He also left a plethora of unfinished ambitious projects, some polemical, some deeply empirical.) A posthumous collection, *C. Wright Mills: Letters and Autobiographical Writings,* edited by Kathryn Mills with Pamela Mills, serves as a superb accompaniment to Mills's published books precisely because with him—as with Albert Camus, James Agee, and other exemplars of radical individualism—the personal and the political embraced each other so closely.

For all his debts to European social theory, one thing that stands out in the letters is Mills's raw Americanness. Growing up in Texas, schooled in Austin and Madison, living in Maryland and New York, Mills was full of frontier insouciance: "All this national boundary stuff is a kind of highway robbery, isn't it?"[6] "I am a Wobbly, personally, down deep and for good. . . . I take Wobbly to mean one thing: the opposite of bureaucrat."[7] In the midst of his activist pamphleteering, he still wrote: "I am a politician without a party"—or to put it another way, a party of one.[8] So it only reinforced Mills's reputation that he proved to be a martyr of a sort—not a casualty of jousts with political enemies but, in a certain sense, a casualty of his chosen way of life. This physically big, prepossessing, hard-driving man was more frail than he would want to let on or know. That he suffered a grave heart attack while feverishly preparing for his television debate on Latin American policy felt like a scene from *High Noon,* except that Gary Cooper is supposed to win the gunfight.

His prose was hard driving, the opposite of frail, and this was not incidental to his appeal. His writing was instantly recognizable, frequently emulated, and properly labeled muscular. It was frequently vivid and moving, often pointedly colloquial, though at times clumsy from an excess of deliberation (Mills worked hard for two decades to perfect his style). He was partial to collisions between nouns of action and nouns of failure—"showdown" and "thrust" versus "drift" and "default." He was partial to polemical categories like "crackpot realism" and "the military metaphysic." This style was, in the best sense of the word, masculine, though hardly macho—a macho writer would not be haunted by the prospect of mass violence or write that the "central goal of Western humanism [was] . . . the audacious control by reason of man's fate."[9]

Mills's willingness to go it alone ran deep. In a letter to the student newspaper at Texas A&M, written in his freshman year in the thick of the Great Depression, the nineteen-year-old Mills was asking: "Just who are the men with guts? They are the men . . . who have the imagination and the intelligence to formulate their own codes; the men who have the courage and the stamina to live their own lives in spite of social pressure and isolation."[10] Rugged stuff, both democratic and noble, Whitmanian and Hemingwayesque, in a manner that has come to be mocked more than practiced or even read. A quarter of a century later the stance implied by the teenage Mills, which actually borrowed from the liberalism of John Stuart Mill, was called existentialism and, when transposed into a more urgent prose translated from the French, became the credo of teenage boys with the audacity to think they might change the world. Later this style was burlesqued as macho, brutal, distinctly (and pejoratively) "male." But the accusation of male exclusivity would miss something central to Mills's style, namely, the tenderness and longing that accompanied the urge to activity—qualities that carried a political hopefulness that was already unfashionable when Mills used it.[11] To be precise, the spirit of these words was in the best sense adolescent.

I speak of adolescence here deliberately and without prejudice. The adult Mills himself commended the intensity and loyalty of adolescence: "I hope that I have not grown up. The whole notion of growing up is pernicious, and I am against it. To grow up

means merely to lose the intellectual curiosity so many children and so few adults seem to have; to lose the strong attachments and rejections for other people so many adolescents and so few adults seem to have. . . . W. H. Auden recently put it very well: 'To grow up does not mean to outgrow either childhood or adolescence but to make use of them in an adult way.'"[12] Mills could never be dismissive about ideals or, in the dominant spirit of his time, consider idealism a psychiatric diagnosis. If he veered off toward the end of his life into black-and-white zones, sacrificing intellectual complexity for moralistic melodrama, he would probably have insisted that it was better to err in the direction of passionate intensity than gray judiciousness.

III

"I have never had occasion to take very seriously much of American sociology as such," Mills had the audacity to write in an application for a Guggenheim grant in 1944.[13] He told the foundation that he wrote for journals of opinion and "little magazines" because they took on the right topics "and even more because I wished to rid myself of a crippling academic prose and to develop an intelligible way of communicating modern social science to non-specialized publics." At twenty-eight the loner already wished to explain himself; the freelance politico wished to have on his side a reasoning public without letting it exact a suffocating conformity as the price of its support. Mills knew the difference between popularity, which he welcomed as a way to promote his ideas, and the desire to live a free life, which was irreducible, for (he wrote in a letter at forty) "way down deep and systematically I'm a goddamned anarchist."[14]

Not any old goddamned anarchist, however. Certainly not an intellectual slob. In his scholarly work he respected rigor, aspired to the high calling of craft, was usually unafraid of serious criticism and liked responding to it, liked the rough and tumble of straightforward dispute. Craft, not methodology—the distinction was crucial. Methodology was rigor mortis, dead rigor, rigor fos-

silized into esoterica of statistical practice that eclipsed the real stakes of research. Craft was work done with respect for materials, clarity about objectives, and a sense of the high drama and stakes of intellectual life. Craft partook of rigor, but rigor could not guarantee craft. A mastery of craft required not only technical knowledge and logic but a general curiosity, a Renaissance range of skills, a grasp of history and culture. It was the craft of sociological imagination, not a hyper-refinement of method made to appear scientific by declaring it "methodology," after all, that produced the other great sociological survival of the 1950s, *The Lonely Crowd*.

The Sociological Imagination (1959), Mills's most enduring book, ends with an appendix, "On Intellectual Craftsmanship," that in turn ends with these words (which, as it happens, I typed on an index card in college and posted next to my typewriter, hoping to live up to the spirit):

> Before you are through with any piece of work, no matter how indirectly on occasion, orient it to the central and continuing task of understanding the structure and the drift, the shaping and the meanings, of your own period, the terrible and magnificent world of human society in the second half of the twentieth century.[15]

Some mission for pale sociology!

Like *The Lonely Crowd,* Mills's major books were driven by large topics, not method or theory, yet they were also driven by a spirit of adventure. (He moved so far from the main line of sociology as to prefer the term *social studies* to *social sciences*.[16]) That a sociologist should work painstakingly, over the course of a career, to fill in a whole social picture should not seem as remarkable as it does today. In *The Sociological Imagination* Mills grandly excoriated the two dominant tendencies of mainstream sociology, the bloated puffery of Grand Theory and the microscopic marginality of Abstracted Empiricism, in terms that remain as important and vivid (and sometimes hilarious) today as they did more than forty years ago. All the more so, perhaps, because sociology has slipped still deeper into the troughs that Mills described. He would be amused at the way in which postmodern-

ists, Marxists, and feminists have joined the former grandees of theory on their "useless heights,"[17] claiming high seriousness as well as usefulness for their pirouettes and performances, their monastic and masturbatory exercises, their populist cheerleading, political wishfulness, and self-importance. He would not have thought Theory a serious blow against irresponsible power. I think he would have recognized the pretensions of Theory as a class-bound ideology—that of a "new class," if you will—to be criticized just as he had exposed the supervisory ideology of the abstracted empiricists in their research teams, doing the intellectual busywork of corporate and government bureaucracies. I think he would also have recognized, in the grand intellectual claims and political bravado of Theory, a sort of Leninist assumption—a dangerous one—about the exalted mission of academics, as if, once they got their Theory straight, they would proclaim it to a waiting world and consider their work done.[18]

Of course, Mills had a high sense of mission himself—not only his own mission but that of intellectuals in general and social scientists in particular. He was committed to disciplined intellectual work guided by fidelity to what Max Weber (following the Lutheran spirit of faith) had called a "calling," a vocation in the original sense of being summoned by a voice. Not that Mills (who with Hans Gerth edited the first significant compilation of Weber's essays in English) agreed with Weber's conclusion that "science as a vocation" and "politics as a vocation," to name his two great essays on the subject, needed to be ruthlessly severed. Not at all. Mills thought the *questions* ought to come from values but the *answers* should not be rigged. A crucial difference. If the results of research made you grumpy, too bad. But he also thought that good social science became good politics when it moved into the open and generated public discussion. He came to this activist idea of intellectual life partly by temperament—he was not one to take matters lying down—but also by deduction and by elimination. For if intellectuals were not going to break the intellectual logjam, who would?

This was not, for Mills, a merely rhetorical question. It was a question that, in the Deweyan pragmatic spirit that had been the subject of his doctoral dissertation, required an experimental

answer, an answer that would unfold in real life through reflection upon experience. For his conclusion after a decade of work was that if one were looking for a fusion of reason and power—at least potential power—there was nowhere else to look but to intellectuals. Mills had sorted through the available history makers in his books of the late 1940s and 1950s—labor in *The New Men of Power,* the middle classes in *White Collar,* and the chiefs of top institutions themselves in *The Power Elite*. Labor was not up to the challenge of structural reform, white-collar employees were confused and rearguard, and the power elite was irresponsible. Mills concluded that intellectuals and only intellectuals had a fighting chance to deploy reason. Because they could embody reason in addressing social problems when no one else could do so, it was incumbent upon them to try, in addressing a problem, to have "a view of the strategic points of intervention—of the 'levers' by which the structure may be maintained or changed; and an assessment of those who are in a position to intervene but are not doing so."[19]

As he would write in *The Marxists,* a political philosophy had to encompass not only an analysis of society and a set of theories of how it works but "an ethic, an articulation of *ideals*."[20] It followed that intellectuals should be explicit about their values and rigorous in considering contrary positions. It also followed that research work should be supplemented by blunt writing that was meant to inform and mobilize what he called, following John Dewey, "publics." In Mills's words, "The educational and the political role of social science in a democracy is to help cultivate and sustain publics and individuals that are able to develop, to live with, and to act upon adequate definitions of personal and social realities."[21]

To a degree that only later came to seem controversial, Mills credited reason—and its attainability, even as a glimmering goal that could never be reached but could be approximated ever more closely, asymptotically. He wrote about the Enlightenment without a sneer.[22] He thought the problem with the condition of the Enlightenment at midcentury was not that we had too much Enlightenment but that we had too little, and the tragedy was that the universal genuflection to technical rationality—in the form of scientific research, business calculation, and state planning—

was the perfect disguise for this great default. The democratic self-governance of rational men and women was damaged partly by the bureaucratization of the economy and the state. (This was a restatement of Weber's great discovery: that increased rationality *of institutions* made for less freedom, or least no more freedom, *of individuals*.) And democratic prospects were damaged, too—in ways that Mills was trying to work out when he died—because the West was coping poorly with the entry of the "underdeveloped" countries onto the world stage, and because neither liberalism (which had, in the main, degenerated into techniques of "liberal practicality") nor Marxism (which had, in the main, degenerated into a blind doctrine that rationalized tyranny) could address their urgent needs. "Our major orientations—liberalism and socialism—have virtually collapsed as adequate explanations of the world and of ourselves," he wrote.[23] This was dead on.

IV

Forty-five years is a long time in the social sciences (or, better, social studies). Not only does society change but so do scholarly procedures. The cycle of generations alone would guarantee some disciplinary change, for each generation of young scholars must carve out new niches in order to distinguish itself from its predecessor, and the material from which young scholars must carve is the old discipline itself. So do styles and vocabulary transmute, so do the governing paradigms turn over. In the 1940s and 1950s, when Mills wrote, and through the 1960s, administrative research was a growth industry; Mills accordingly singled it out for attention—and scorn—in *The Sociological Imagination*. In the thick of the Cold War, Abstracted Empiricism was useful not only to corporations but to government agencies. But the money ran out, as did the confidence in government-sponsored planning and what Mills called "liberal practicality." Accordingly, today's Abstracted Empiricism is not as prestigious as in Mills's days. Likewise, the Grand Theory that would make him chortle today would less likely be Talcott Parsons's than Michel Foucault's, in

which power, having been virtually nothing in the structural-functionalism of the 1950s, turns out to be everything.

This makes it all the more remarkable that most of *The Sociological Imagination* remains as valid, and necessary, as ever. In 1959 Mills identified the main directions of sociology in terms largely valid today: "a set of bureaucratic techniques which inhibit social inquiry by methodological pretensions, which congest such work by obscurantist conceptions, or which trivialize it by concern with minor problems unconnected with publicly relevant issues."[24] It remains true, as he noted in defending the high purpose of sociology, that literature, art, and criticism largely fail to bring intellectual clarity to social life.[25] The sense of political limbo is once again palpable. In the West, as Mills wrote, "the frequent absence of engaging legitimation and the prevalence of mass apathy are surely two of the central political facts."[26] "Prosperity," however unequally distributed (and it is far more unequal today than in 1959), once again presents itself as the all-purpose solution to all social questions. Unfortunately, these declarations of Mills's have proved largely prophetic.

Still, four and a half decades are four and a half decades—the length of Mills's life—and, not surprisingly, tangible social changes require that his outlook be updated. First, Mills was concerned about hidden authority, tacit, veiled, and therefore not controversial in public life. In the muddle of Eisenhower's America the clustering of powerful corporations did not meet with much cogent criticism. (Recall that *The Sociological Imagination* was published more than a year before Eisenhower warned against the "military-industrial complex.") The left was defunct, the right more preoccupied with the dangers of communism than the usurpation of power by centralized institutions. Moreover, the population was largely content with the reigning combination of affluence and Cold War. When government power intervened to build interstate highways, finance suburbs, or subsidize research universities, few objected.

Today, authorities of all sorts are more likely to be suspected, mocked, and scorned than invisible. The Cold War is no longer available as a rationale for government power, though the war on terrorism has emerged as a surrogate framework. As a result of

the cultural upheavals of the 1960s and the uninterrupted fascination with personal liberation through commodities, what has become normal is disrespect for almost all institutions and traditions—the branches of government, business, labor, the media, the professions. Such political faith as there is honors the mythology of the market, an institution that is more a mystique than a firm structure, since it represents the coexistence of many partial institutions—including government preferences and subsidies. The ideological wars pit fundamentalist reverence against the anti-institutional liberalism that Robert Bellah and his colleagues have called "expressive individualism."[27] Since the Vietnam War, Watergate, and the elections of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, the faith in liberal practicality that Mills sought to overcome has been considerably tarnished, since government action has been largely delegitimized except when police and incarceration are at issue or local pork barrels remain to be disgorged.

Today, too, it cannot be said—in the words of *The Sociological Imagination*—that "much private uneasiness goes unformulated."[28] To the contrary. In the United States complacency about most social arrangements curiously coexists with widespread anxiety about them—or rather, anxieties in the plural, since the varieties of dissatisfaction and estrangement do not coalesce around a single axis of conflict. To the extent that "malaise and indifference . . . form the social and personal climate of contemporary American society," they coexist with many dispersed antagonisms, a vast proliferation of interest groups and labels with which Americans believe they can name those responsible for their troubles.[29] For conservatives it is the liberal media, or secular humanism, or moral relativism, or a breakdown of patriotism, or uppity minorities. For liberals it is the conservative media, or resurgent capital, or racism, or market ideology paid for by right-wing foundations. For feminists it is patriarchy; for patriarchs, feminism. When *The Sociological Imagination* was published, public demonstrations were jarringly uncommon; today, they are everyday. Expressions of political sentiment have been professionalized, organized through the technologies of opinion mobilization. The insurgencies of the 1960s, having succeeded in taking up Mills's call to

convert private troubles to public issues, have often been plasticized into "Astroturf" and "grass-tops" pseudo-movements.

Hopeful about a revival of democratic engagement, Mills did not fully appreciate just how much enthusiasm Americans could bring to acquiring and using consumer goods. He underestimated the degree to which, starting in the late 1960s, majorities in a democratic society would find satisfactions, even provisional identities or clusters of identities, in the proliferation of commodities produced for the market. His America was still sheltered from hedonism by the Puritan overhang of the work ethic. Still, he did prefigure one of the striking ideas of perhaps his most formidable antagonist, Daniel Bell—namely, the centrality, in corporate capitalism, of the tension between getting (via the Protestant ethic) and spending (via the hedonistic ethic).[30] Mills would have been struck by the fact that most Americans not only have money to spend, or are willing to borrow it, but that they have channeled the spirit of fun and leisure into technological wizardry. Still, he did pioneering work on the institutionalization of popular culture. The chapter on celebrities in *The Power Elite* is one of the first major approaches in the history of sociology to their ascendancy.

Which brings me to another transformation postdating 1959, namely, the growing presence of the media—not only what used to be called the mass media, with single corporate senders beaming their signals to tens of millions of receivers, but the whole dynamic, synergistic welter of television, radio, magazines, toys, the Internet, the Walkman, linking up multinational conglomerates with demographic niches, saturating daily experience in manifold ways, and, in sum, taking up a vast portion of public attention. This transformation, still under way, requires a new application of the sociological imagination, as Mills well knew. (His projected volume on "the cultural apparatus" was a casualty of his untimely death.) Amid the enormity of popular culture he would have been aghast, but not surprised, to see how the language of private life has penetrated into conflicts of public value. It remains true, in Mills's words, that "many great public issues as well as many private troubles are described in terms of 'the psychiatric.'"[31] If today "the psychiatric" is less likely to be dis-

cussed in psychoanalytic terms and more likely in the language of self-help, twelve-step programs, confessions, and the like—as on television talk shows—this is nonetheless not what Mills meant by the conversion of private troubles to public issues; it is more the other way round.

Mills also did not sufficiently apply himself to the vexing central problem of race. He hated racism, but though he lived through the early years of the civil rights movement, he wrote surprisingly little about the dynamics of race in U.S. life. The students of the civil rights movement interested him as one of many groupings of young intellectuals rising into history around the globe, but the way in which racial identification shaped and distorted people's life chances did not loom large for him. Today, race has become so salient in U.S. social structure and discourse as, at times, to drown out other contending forces. Since Mills's death other dimensions of identity have also reared up in importance—as scales sorting out privileges and opportunities, and as prisms refracting reality, bending the rays of light that Americans (and others) use to see the world. Sex and sexuality, religion, and region, in addition to class, are other factors that the sociological imagination today must reckon with, and centrally. Such advances as sociology has made since the 1950s, in fact, emerge precisely here: in analyses of the dynamics of sex and gender, of race and ethnicity, some of them inspired by Mills's own call to understand private troubles as public issues.

A curious fact about contemporary culture is that sociological language has, in many ways, become a normal element in commonplace talk as well as political speech, though often in a degraded form. By a dreary irony of a spongy culture, the sociological gloss on ephemeral events is, by now, a routine component of popular journalism. This is, in part, a tribute to the success of sociology in entering the academic curriculum. Journalists and editors have taken the courses and learned to talk the talk; they are no longer confident that, without expertise, they can follow the main contours of social change.[32] But the result is that, in popular conversation and in the media, as in the academy and the behind-the-scenes work of advertising agencies and political consultants, the sociological imagination has been trivialized by

success. Not a commercial movie or toy or television series succeeds today without commentary springing up to "explain" its success with references to the "strains" and "insecurities" of the contemporary era. Corporations hire consultants to anticipate, or shape, demand with the benefit of a once-over-lightly reading of social trends. I am frequently called upon to make such divinations in sociological lingo, and I have watched the media appetite for plausible-sounding, expert-delivered tidbits stretch since the 1980s to become a staple of conventional entertainment coverage. What does it mean that two movies of type X are suddenly hits or that a new toy or fashion or term or candidate is hot? In the media a pass at sociological understanding became an acceptable—eventually, almost obligatory—element in the trend story, certifying the reportage (however unwarrantedly) as something more serious than fan gossip. The same happened in the field of cultural studies, where popular ephemera were elevated to objects worthy of the most ponderous scrutiny.[33] Pop sociology is sociological imagination lite, a fast-food version of nutriment, a sprinkling of holy water on the commercial trend of the moment, and a trivialization of insight.

V

It goes without saying that Mills felt urgently about the state of the world—a sentiment that needed no excuse during the Cold War, though one needs reminders today of just how realistic and uncrackpot it was to sound the alarm about the sheer world-incinerating power that had been gathered into the hands of Washington's national security establishment and its Soviet counterpart. It cannot be overemphasized that much of Mills's work on power was specific to a historical situation that can be described succinctly: the existence of national strategies for nuclear war. Mills declared intermittently in *The Power Elite,* and more bluntly in *The Causes of World War Three,* that the major reason that America's most powerful should be considered dangerous was that they controlled weapons of mass destruction and were in a posi-

tion not only to contemplate their use but to launch them. Mills's judgment on this score was as acute as it was simple: "Ours is not so much a time of big decisions as a time for big decisions that are not being made. A lot of bad little decisions are crippling the chances for the appropriate big ones."[34] Most demurrers missed this essential point.[35] To head off pluralist critics Mills acknowledged that there were policy clashes of local and sectoral groups, medium-size business, labor, professions, and others, producing "a semiorganized stalemate," but he thought the noisy visible conflicts took place mainly at "the middle level of power."[36] As for domestic questions, Mills exaggerated the unanimity of powerful groupings. He was extrapolating from the prosperous, post–New Deal, liberal-statist consensus that united Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy more than it divided them. Like most observers of the fifties, Mills underestimated the potential for a conservative movement.[37] But about the centralization of power where it counted most, he was far more right than wrong.

One has to recall the setting. Mills died a mere seven months before the Cuban Missile Crisis came within a hair's breadth of triggering a nuclear war. Khrushchev's reckless shipment of missiles to Cuba triggered the momentous White House decisions of October 1962. Enough time has passed since then without thermonuclear war that an elementary point has to be underscored: the decision of Kennedy's inner circle to back down from the brink of war was not inevitable. It was, shall we say, contingent rather than structural. A handful of men—they *were* men—had full opportunity to make the wrong decision and incinerate millions. They made the right decision, as did Khrushchev, in the end, and the superpowers clambered back from the precipice. At that world-shattering moment when eyeballs faced eyeballs, the men in charge had the wisdom not to blow their eyeballs and millions of other people's away. *They had the opportunity and the means to make other decisions. They were hair-raisingly close.* That they did not make the wrong decisions does not detract from Mills's good judgment in taking seriously this huge fact about the U.S. elite: they were heading toward a crossroads where they might well have made a momentous, irreversible wrong turn. Who these men were, how they got to their commanding positions, how there had turned out to

be so much at stake in their choices—there could be no more important subject for social science. Whatever the failings of Mills's arguments in *The Power Elite,* his central point obtained: the power to launch a vastly murderous war existed, in concentrated form. This immense fact no paeans to pluralism could dilute.

Mills not only invoked the sociological imagination, he practiced it brilliantly if partially. Careful critics like David Riesman, who thought Mills's picture of white-collar workers too monolithically gloomy, still acknowledged the insight of his portraits and the soundness of his research.[38] Even the polemical voice of a Cuban revolutionary that Mills adopted in *Listen, Yankee*—a voice he thought that Americans, "shot through with hysteria," were crazy to ignore—was quietly shaped by Mills's ability to grasp where, from what milieu, such a revolutionary was coming from.[39] In a sense, Mills's stirring invocation to student movements at the turn of the sixties stemmed from this affirming side of his sociological imagination, too. He was deeply attuned to the growth of higher education and the growing importance of science in the military-corporate world. More than any other sociologist of the time, Mills anticipated the ways in which conventional careers and narrow life plans within and alongside the military-industrial complex would fail to satisfy a growing proto-elite of students trained to take their places in an establishment unworthy of their moral vision. If he exaggerated the significance—or goodness—of intellectuals as a social force, and underestimated the force of a conservative recoil that had barely begun to show itself at the time of his death, this was also a by-product of his faith in the powers of reason. Believing that human beings learn as they live, he was on the side of improvement through reflection. Thus he thought that Castro's tyranny, and other harsh features of the Cuban revolution, were "part of a phase, and that I and other North Americans should help the Cubans pass *through* it."[40] In his last months he was increasingly disturbed about Fidel Castro's trajectory toward Soviet-style "socialism" and restive in the vanishing middle ground. Two fates afflicted free-minded radicals in the twentieth century: to be universally contrarian and end up on the sidelines or to hope against hope that the next revolution would invent a new wheel. On the strength of Mills's letters, my guess

is that he would have passed through the second fate to the first yet without reconciling himself to the sidelines.

Of course, no one can know where Mills might have gone as the student movement radicalized, grew more militant, more culturally estranged, reckless, and self-destructive, partly from desperation, partly from arrogant self-inflation. Of the generation of intellectuals who thrived in the fifties, Mills more than any other was in a position to grasp not only the strength of what was happening among students, blacks, and women but also the wrong-headedness and tragedy; he might have spoken of it, argued for the best and against the worst, in a voice that would have been hard to ignore—though it would probably have been ignored anyway. I think it likely that, had he lived, he would have said about the New Left what he wrote in 1960 about the Cuban Revolution: *"I do not worry about it, I worry for it and with it."* [41]

For all that his life was cut short, more of Mills's work endures than that of any other critic of his time. His was an indispensable brilliant voice in sociology and social criticism—and in the difficult, necessary effort to link the two. He was a restless, engaged, engaging moralist, asking the big questions, keeping open the sense of what an intellectual's life might be. His work is bracing, often thrilling, even when one disagrees. One reads and rereads with a feeling of being challenged beyond one's received wisdom, called to one's best thinking, one's highest order of judgment. For an intellectual of our time, no higher praise is possible.

Notes

1. In referring to "exhausted ideologies," I am deliberately using a word from the little-noted subtitle of Daniel Bell's *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1960).
2. His debate opponent was to have been A. A. Berle Jr., who was not only a top adviser on Latin America to President Kennedy but also a major exponent of the view that management in the modern corporation had taken control from stock owners. Mills had criticized Berle, the influential coauthor of *The Modern Cor-*

poration and Private Property (New York: Macmillan, 1933), for his views of corporate conscience (Mills, *The Power Elite* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1956], pp. 125n, 126n). For those who knew this history, the forthcoming debate looked even more like a showdown.

3. From an essay in the form of a letter written in the fall of 1957 and addressed to "Tovarich," whom Mills imagined as a symbolic Russian opposite number. *C. Wright Mills: Letters and Autobiographical Writings,* edited by Kathryn Mills with Pamela Mills (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 250.
4. Mills, "To Tovarich," fall 1957, p. 29.
5. Ibid., p. 252.
6. Ibid., p. 26.
7. Ibid., p. 252.
8. Mills note in a notebook intended for "Tovarich," June 1960, p. 303.
9. Mills, *The Causes of World War Three* (New York: Ballantine, 1958), pp. 185–86.
10. Letter to editor, *Battalion,* April 3, 1935, in *C. Wright Mills,* p. 34.
11. Paul Goodman, another exemplary public intellectual who inspired the New Left, later wrote a piece for the *New York Review of Books* (December 30, 1971) on what he called "the sweet style of Ernest Hemingway," just as the strong silent style was about to pass into the netherworld, thanks to Kate Millett and other feminists. Goodman, even more than Mills, practiced an instantly recognizable prose style that found grace in lumbering.
12. Mills, "To Tovarich," fall 1957, p. 248.
13. Mills to John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, November 7, 1944, *C. Wright Mills,* pp. 83–84. To the credit of the foundation, he got the grant. This would make for an interesting subject: the way in which, while sociology was hardening into the molds Mills righteously scorned, it had not altogether hardened—which permitted the leaders of the field to honor Mills and take him seriously, at least in his early work, while recoiling from his later.
14. Mills to Harvey and Bette Swados, November 3, 1956, in *C. Wright Mills,* p. 217–18.
15. Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 225.
16. Ibid., p. 18n.
17. Ibid., p. 33.

18. I have elaborated on the implied politics of the Theory Class in "Sociology for Whom? Criticism for Whom?" in Herbert J. Gans, ed., *Sociology in America* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1990), pp. 214–26.
19. Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, p. 131.
20. Mills, *The Marxists* (New York: Dell, 1962), p. 12, emphasis in original.
21. Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, p. 192.
22. See the great chapter "On Reason and Freedom," in Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, pp. 165–76.
23. Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, p. 166.
24. Ibid., p. 20.
25. Ibid., p. 18.
26. Ibid., p. 41.
27. Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985).
28. Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, p. 12.
29. Ibid., pp. 12–13.
30. Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976). For one of many examples of Mills's anticipating this important argument, see *The Power Elite* (1956; reprint, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 384. Bell wrote a scathing critique of *The Power Elite* (the review is reprinted as "Is There a Ruling Class in America? The Power Elite Reconsidered," chap. 3 in *The End of Ideology)*, properly chastising Mills for scanting the differences between New Deal and Republican administrations but also charging him—in the middle of the twentieth century!—with an overemphasis on power as violence. Mills dismissed "Mr. Bell's debater's points" in a letter to Hans Gerth of December 2, 1958, writing that he would not deign to respond publicly (*C. Wright Mills,* p. 268). This is too bad, because Mills could have straightforwardly and convincingly rebutted most of Bell's points.
31. Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, p. 12.
32. On the popularization of sociological terms, see Dennis H. Wrong, "The Influence of Sociological Ideas on American Culture," in Gans, *Sociology in America,* pp. 19–30.
33. See chapter 5, "The Antipolitical Populism of Cultural Studies."
34. Mills, *The Causes of World War Three,* p. 21.
35. Irving Howe's harsh critique of *The Causes of World War Three (Dissent,* spring 1959, pp. 191–96) berated Mills for claiming that the United States and Soviet Union were converging into a "fearful symmetry" *(Causes,* p. 9). Howe charged Mills with coming "un-

comfortably close" to defending "a kind of 'moral coexistence'" (pp. 195–96), and the two men broke off their relations after the review appeared. In fury at the complacency of U.S. leadership, Mills did at times veer toward the cavalier. Despite his sympathy for East European dissidents, Mills could indeed be, as Howe charged, slapdash about Soviet imperialism in the satellite countries. But subsequent scholarship makes plain just how great was the U.S. lead over the Soviet nuclear establishment in the late 1950s, when Mills was writing, how fraudulent was Kennedy's claim of a "missile gap," and therefore how much greater was the U.S. responsibility to back down from nuclear strategies that could easily have eventuated in an exterminating war.

36. Mills, *The Causes of World War Three,* p. 39.
37. In the chapter called "The Conservative Mood" in *The Power Elite,* Mills did write that "the conservative mood is strong, almost as strong as the pervasive liberal rhetoric" (p. 331), but he did not anticipate that opposition to civil rights and general antistatism might fuse into popular movements that would eventually take over the Republican Party.
38. Riesman, review of *White Collar, American Journal of Sociology* 16 (1951): 513–15. Mills's "middle levels of power" was a concept aimed directly at Riesman's "veto groups" in *The Lonely Crowd*. Despite their analytical differences, however, Riesman was devoutly antinationalist, and his active commitment to the peace movement of the early 1960s converged at many points with Mills's suspicion of the power elite.
39. Mills, *Listen, Yankee* (New York: Ballantine, 1960), p. 179.
40. Ibid., p. 183, emphasis in original. It should be remembered that his misjudgments came early in the revolution. He wrote, for example: "The Cuban revolution, unlike the Russian, has, in my judgment, solved the major problems of agricultural production by its agrarian reform" (*Listen, Yankee,* p. 185). Such are the perils of pamphleteering.
41. Ibid., p. 179, emphasis in original.

3

Irving Howe's Partition

Irving Howe edited the left-wing quarterly *Dissent* for more than thirty-eight years. He had coeditors, but *Dissent* was *his* magazine: he was its public face and it was his primary outlet. He was, at the same time, probably the most prolific literary critic of his generation, the one most attuned to political surroundings, to the burdens that they placed on writers, and to the possibilities that they opened up. Yet his criticism hardly ever appeared in his own magazine. It was as if he had two sets of relatives, loved them both, but knew better than to seat them at the same dinner table.

Around 1990, not long after I joined the editorial board of *Dissent,* I told him that I thought the journal should publish literary criticism, cultural commentary, even a poem or short story now and then. He grimaced. "No, once we start publishing poems, the mailbox will never be empty. We'll get hundreds, none of them good, and we'll still have to read them. I don't want to have to write to a shop steward in Detroit explaining why we don't want to publish his bad poem." Once he had published a bad poem by a political hero (I forget who) simply to honor the author. The circumstance was special, but he still felt some embarrassment at having made any exceptions. I respected his arguments but pressed the case a bit further. If the left was going to be not just a place for confirmed politicos but a sort of ideological home, I

argued, the journal had to be a place that felt more encompassing—"a world more attractive," in the title of one of his essay collections. No, no, Irving said, there were other places for that. *Dissent* needed to focus on what it did best, what it was indispensable for. The literature and criticism that the journal could attract would not be the best. Perhaps he knew that his own rare exceptions published in *Dissent* were not his strongest work. He sounded as if he had made this case before. (In fact he had done so, to the young editor Brian Morton, among others.[1]) Each repetition only hardened Irving's rejection of sentimentalism. So we left the matter.

It was striking: America's best-known left-wing critic, one of its most celebrated critics of any persuasion, explaining why the literature he loved with a fierce burning love, and the criticism he practiced as his profession—his calling, actually—should be kept out of his own magazine.

As much as he was committed to analytical intelligence, Irving was equally committed to good writing. He worked hard to get sentences right. His own work he edited unprotectively, and when he gathered his articles into book form, he was still fiddling with individual words. He was a gifted polemicist even in a generation of gifted polemicists (early Trotskyism did not hurt) who strained hard to purify his style, strip it of ornament, even of the brilliance that he identified, with decided ambivalence, as the characteristic manner of the New York intellectuals. (This style, which for a while qualified as a cult, was "highly self-conscious . . . with an unashamed vibration of bravura and display, . . . nervous, strewn with knotty or flashy phrases, impatient with transitions and other concessions to dullness, willfully calling attention to itself . . . fond of rapid twists, taking pleasure in dispute, dialectic, dazzle," conveying, at its best, a view of the intellectual life as "free-lance dash, peacock strut, daring hypothesis, knockabout synthesis" but at bottom "a sign that writers were offering not their work or ideas but their persona as content."[2]) In his thirties he was already beginning to aspire to the plain style commended by his beloved George Orwell. On me and other younger writers, he urged directness: trim those adjectives! (For a while I had a penchant for three in a row. He knocked them back to two. He was right.)

Accessibility was a democratic responsibility, so plainness was a political act. But literature had a different obligation: to excavate beneath the level of consciousness. Literature might well sabotage the author's intentions. So the literary act subverted reason. It was always, irreducibly, dangerous—an interference with the strategic hope and rational prayer of political advocacy. As Brian Morton has put it, "Irving saw politics as the realm of responsibility, literature as a realm where eruptions from the unconscious were not only permissible but necessary."[3] What needed saying was at odds with what was good to say. Imagination, he wrote, is "implicit in the literary act." "The novelist's risk" was "that the imagination will bring to awareness more than he means it to."[4] This is not a new thought. But it has a special poignancy in the work of a man who was equally committed to the socialist's reason and the novelist's risk.

Moreover, the literary appraisal might work against one's fealty to truth or justice. Up through his last essays, he repeatedly wrestled with the problem of the tension between literary achievement and the novelist's political values. Again and again he acknowledged facing what he called "a severe problem, some would say confusion: How can you say that *The Possessed* is both a great work of literature and also a work that offers a distorted, even malicious treatment of its subject?" In his late manner of facing difficulties bluntly, he went on: "How to answer this question I am not at all sure: perhaps by recognizing that the imperatives of literature and history are at deep variance."[5]

Deep conflicts of value are not rare. An industrial polluter amasses a great art collection. A war criminal is charming. To acknowledge such "deep variances" is to reconcile oneself to the multiplicity and incommensurability of human realms. There are no straight lines in human affairs, no formulas for making the crooked straight. It is a mark of literary sensibility, perhaps, to abide these conflicts, even to relish them, rather than seeking to overcome, let alone dissolve, them. A novelist is not in the business of cutting Gordian knots but lovingly traces the string in its twists and turns. What's tracery for the novelist is also tracery for the critic. Howe concluded this discussion: "In any case, I am entangled in this difficulty, and the tangle is exactly where I want

to remain, since I believe it is faithful to the actual experience of reading such novels."[6] Writing in his critical persona, he defended his view not morally or politically but on the ground of literary experience. Literary power trumped historical infidelity as it might just as easily eclipse a character's (or the novelist's) moral iniquity. You could not maximize all values at one time and place, and you should not try. Yet again the place to honor such conflicts was in your critical writing, not in your political magazine.

If anything, criticism pursues higher values than politics does. Criticism cherishes an aesthetic in which the crooked cannot be made straight. The overriding principle is fidelity to contradiction. This may well require not only unearthing an irreducible conflict but deepening it. What it assuredly does not require is resolving the conflict. Here, too, criticism is like literature. The epigraph to *Politics and the Novel* comes from Max Scheler: true tragedy arises "when the idea of 'justice' appears to be leading to the destruction of higher values."[7] Such tragedy is sublime—obviously, a literary judgment, not a practical commendation. Tragedy can hardly be the objective of politics (though it may well be the result).

Howe, in other words, honored two gods by separating them. Like any sensible child of two incompatible, envious, and demanding parents, he made his peace by rendering to each what each was due, cautioning against judging "one area of experience in terms of another, which is almost always a dangerous kind of judgment to make."[8]

So to segregate literary-critical from political work helped Howe to order his life. In his own books he could mix his realms, while *Dissent* would keep his politics fenced off. But I discern another reason, deeper, more personal, why he partitioned his commitments. It can be found in some of his critical observations themselves. In literature he disapproved of excessive control. He liked the friction of the unexpected against the system. He had kind words for great writers—Dostoyevsky and Hardy, particularly—who are partial to astounding coincidences, coincidences that decisively jolt their plots, as long as such moments feel like eruptions in the grain of everyday life rather than products of the author's ideological scheme. Once when I praised Cynthia

Ozick's *The Messiah of Stockholm,* he deplored the puppeteer that he saw managing her plot. In an essay on Flannery O'Connor he writes approvingly of—indeed he "find[s] himself moved by"—moments in fiction when the "unexpected happens, a perception, an insight, a confrontation which may not be in accord with the writer's original intention and may not be strictly required by the logic of the action, but which nevertheless caps the entire story. This moment of revelation gains part of its power from a sharp and sudden brush against the writer's evident plan of meaning—it calls into question all 'structural analysis'; the writer seems to be shaken by the demands of his own imagination, so that the material of the story 'acts back' upon him."[9] In some of O'Connor's work he spots an ideological (in her case, Catholic) mechanism at work, but in a lesser-known story, "Revelation," he approves of her "vision of irremediable disorder." Here she does not duck the irrational depths with "the kind of last-minute acquisition of understanding with which literature has so often tried to get around life."[10] Here she has the courage of the holes or antinomies in her convictions.

But these are moments he wants *in books*. He does not want them in the flesh and he does not want them in politics. There, they unnerve him.

II

Howe wrote voluminously on the politics of literature, most systematically in his 1957 book *Politics and the Novel,* where he succeeded best in letting his passions rub up against each other. But almost without exception—a note on Silone here, a tribute to East European dissident writers there—he kept *Dissent* clear. On the rare occasion when Howe mixed realms and imported his literary criticism into his political magazine, the result was not happy. Politics trumped literature.

"Black Boys and Native Sons," published in *Dissent* in the fall of 1963, displayed the critic as border guard, issuing visas for literature. Irving's chief culprit was James Baldwin, who had

sought, in an essay called "Everybody's Protest Novel," to disburden himself of the assumption that an African American writer must serve as a political—indeed, racial—ambassador. The world, the young Baldwin wrote (he was twenty-five when he first published in a 1949 issue of *Partisan Review)*, "tends to trap and immobilize you in the role you play"; he hoped "to prevent myself from becoming merely a Negro; or even, merely a Negro writer." What Baldwin conceived as refuge, Howe conceived as delusion. As we shall see in a moment, he campaigned persistently—obsessively—against the presumptions of the self-made man of action. He scorned the romance of self-creation as defended by Baldwin and embodied by Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man,* a novel that Howe had considered "brilliant though flawed" in a largely favorable review published in *The Nation* in 1952. The novel's chief flaw, he wrote then, was

> the hero's discovery [toward the end of the book] that "my world has become one of infinite possibilities," his refusal to be the "invisible man" whose body is manipulated by various social groups. Though the unqualified assertion of self-liberation was a favorite strategy among American literary people in the fifties, it is also vapid and insubstantial. It violates the reality of social life, the interplay between external conditions and personal will, quite as much as the determinism of the thirties. The unfortunate fact remains that to define one's individuality is to stumble upon social barriers which stand in the way, all too much in the way, of "infinite possibilities." Freedom can be fought for, but it cannot always be willed or asserted into existence. And it seems hardly an accident that even as Ellison's hero asserts the "infinite possibilities," he makes no attempt to specify them.[11]

Against such willed and fanciful declarations of freedom, Howe sided with the Richard Wright of *Native Son,* whose naturalism, however limited as a literary form, at least refrained from false promises. Wright, Howe maintained, was admirable because he told the necessary truth about black experience and the costs of racism. "What, then, was the experience of a man with a black skin, what could it be in this country?" Howe asked. "How

could a Negro put pen to paper, how could he so much as think or breathe, without some impulsion to protest, be it harsh or mild, political or private, released or buried?"

To the contrary, he wrote, Baldwin "evades, through rhetorical sweep, the genuinely difficult issue of the relationship between social experience and literature."[12] Curiously, Howe here violated his own literary standards. If this issue was "genuinely difficult," it was also too difficult to be solved by the literary formula: add protest to realism. Under ordinary circumstances this formula defeats literature. It is literature's bear trap. Indeed, in other settings Howe vividly dismissed programmatic writing. In his book on Thomas Hardy, Howe referred to "literary tact" as the solution to "the most difficult and elusive problem faced by a writer: to what extent should he yield himself to his unavoidable urge for shaping his work in accordance with his beliefs, and to what extent should he resist that urge in favor of the autonomy of the world, the *difference* of everything beyond his self?"[13] His admiration for Hardy's equipoise was boundless. Why couldn't Howe muster such admiration for Baldwin's prose at its most delicate?

Partly, he tells us, because he suspected its "brilliance of gesture"[14]—as we have seen, a glitter that Howe suspected was really a proof of intellectual fool's gold. But this cannot be the whole story, cannot account for the odd fact that he was violating his own strictures and publishing this essay in *Dissent* in the first place. Why did he break his own rule? And why at this juncture (when Baldwin's essays dated from more than a decade before, and *Invisible Man* from 1952, and Howe's own writings about both, recycled verbatim in the *Dissent* of 1963, from 1952 and 1962, respectively)? There is a mystery.

But note the historical moment. It was 1963: the civil rights movement was surging. Howe's essay appeared just after the momentous March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. In the Negro—soon to be black—revolt James Baldwin was not only an important writer, he was the single most visible black intellectual. No longer published in little magazines like *Partisan Review,* he now heralded, from the unexpected pulpit of the *New Yorker,* "the fire next time"—the name of one of those essays where Baldwin, Howe wrote, reached "heights of passionate exhortation

unmatched in modern American writing," with "a grave and sustained eloquence."[15] Baldwin had heard the call of the moment and graduated from the baroque and "somewhat lacquered" intricacy of the young essayist to the declamatory mode of the public spokesman, making him "one of the two or three greatest essayists this country has ever produced."[16]

In the process, however, Baldwin now fell into Richard Wright's dilemma. "One generation passes its dilemmas to the next." It would no longer do for Baldwin to dismiss the strenuous, militant spokesman role cavalierly. He must "struggle with militancy"[17]—an odd infelicity, or perhaps an unintentional indication that Howe didn't know whether he wanted to call Baldwin a militant or to declare that militancy poses problems with which a writer must struggle. In any case Baldwin now ran the risk of collapsing into politics with an unwarranted coarsening certitude. To run that risk was, to use the title of a later Baldwin book, "the price of the ticket" whenever a writer took to the soapbox. Astutely, Howe noted that "Baldwin's most recent essays are shot through with intellectual confusion, torn by the conflict between his assumption that the Negro must find an honorable place in the life of American society and his apocalyptic sense, mostly fear but just a little hope, that this society is beyond salvation, doomed with the sickness of the West."[18]

Historical moments do not stand up on their hind legs and announce themselves in their own voices. They require interpreters—indeed, we recognize (or misrecognize) their sound and shape only because interpreters name them (and quarrel about the right names). Howe was filtering 1963 through his own intense sense of political purpose. The question of the black writer's mission arose for Howe at what was not only a burning historical juncture for the country but a moment that for him was both promising and treacherous. To his mind, the mission of James Baldwin might have echoed his own—to make the essay an instrument of guidance for a political movement, retaining a critical edge and a temperate hope, even as Howe began to fear that his own moment was passing.

For 1963 was also the moment of the New Left—to Howe both a vindication and a menace. Students for a Democratic Society was on the move, and a group of SDS leaders, of whom I was one,

were invited to meet that fall with Howe and other *Dissent* editors, only to find that the collision between our two groups was more vivid than the solidarity we both hoped for. This is not the place to review the particulars. The occasion has been amply described—Howe wrote about it twice, once in an article in the *New Republic,* then in his memoir, *A Margin of Hope;* I wrote about it myself, in *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*; it crops up again in recollections by Howe, Tom Hayden, and me in Joseph Dorman's documentary film *Arguing the World* and in the book of the same name that Dorman drew from his interview transcripts.[19] This encounter shows up again and again because the collision was emblematic and haunting. Suffice to say that *Dissent* welcomed SDS and just as quickly bridled at us. Howe found Tom Hayden outrageously strident, "rigid," "fanatical." Howe thought Hayden not so much naive as authoritarian and deployed against him his favorite adjective for dangerous willfulness: "He spoke with the clenched authority of a party leader."[20] Hayden, for his part, found Howe overbearing, paternalistic, high decibel—Hayden might well have used the word *clenched* himself. By the time I interviewed Howe about this encounter in 1985, he had realized that what he was objecting to in Hayden was not warmed-over Bolshevism but Howe's old nemesis, the self-made, historically innocent, thrusting transcendentalist style of Henry David Thoreau.

Considering the temperature of the moment, then, we may surmise that "Black Boys and Native Sons" represented Howe's struggle with his own duality—an attempt to group all his commitments in one place. It failed. When his politics swamped his literary sensibility, he was asking for trouble. And it came from a formidable source: Ellison. (Nicely enough, from Ralph *Waldo* Ellison.[21])The charged jarring quality of this historical moment probably helps explain Ellison's fierce rejoinder, soon followed by his rejoinder to Howe's rejoinder—all in all, possibly the most trenchant attack ever directed at Howe's criticism. In the *New Leader* Ellison lashed out:

> Why is it so often true that when critics confront the American as *Negro* they suddenly drop their advanced critical armament and revert with an air of confident superiority to quite primi-

> tive modes of analysis? Why is it that sociology-oriented critics seem to rate literature so far below politics and ideology that they would rather kill a novel than modify their presumptions concerning a given reality which it seeks in its own terms to project? Finally, why is it that so many of those who would tell us the meaning of Negro life never bother to learn how varied it really is?[22]

Ellison was relentless: "Appearing suddenly in black face . . . evidently Howe feels that unrelieved suffering is the only 'real' Negro experience... . One unfamiliar with what Howe stands for would get the impression that when he looks at a Negro he sees not a human being but an abstract embodiment of living hell." Most pointedly, Ellison accused the critic of a breach of critical faculties: Howe, he wrote, seemed to have missed the irony that the narrator of *Invisible Man* spoke of his life as one of "infinite possibilities" "while living in a hole in the ground."[23] In reply, Howe protested that Ellison had got him wrong in many particulars (not, however, apropos his having missed the context of the "infinite possibilities" remark) and accused Ellison of playing to "the liberal audience." But Howe sounded uncharacteristically fastidious and defensive.

In truth, Ellison and Howe in 1963 were secret sharers. Ellison was fending off pressure from militant black writers like Baldwin. Defending his ground against younger, more "clenched" rivals,[24] Ellison gritted his teeth, ready to tangle with anyone who would presume to lecture him, like Howe, with "Olympian authority." Ellison fending off militant writers resembled Howe fending off New Left activists. They were both fighting with heirs who would wound them—and whom they would outlast.

To return to my primary theme: Having evoked such a blazing reaction when he violated his own rule against literary discussion in *Dissent,* is it any wonder that Howe would refrain from violating it again? Not only had he permitted politics to swamp literature—and thus his own critical sensibility—but he had been authoritatively chastised for it, even if he later reprinted his article more than once and on the surface seemed to think he had fought Ellison to a draw (at least). Why run the risk of more such

imbroglios and embarrassments? And if he didn't trust himself to connect politics and literature in *Dissent*, why would he trust anyone else? Once badly burned, forever wary.

III

Every modern intellectual has a pet bête noir—perhaps more than one but one that stands out. George Orwell's, for example, is the obfuscating apologist for totalitarianism, hiding servility beneath a show of moral toughness, freely laying gifts at the feet of the powerful while pretending to cultic knowledge of historical inevitability. Jean-Paul Sartre's is that bastard of a bourgeois whose rigor of taste and assurance of superiority are no more than disguises for callousness. For C. Wright Mills it is the smiling courtier who rationalizes inaction, teamed up with the crackpot realist and the abstracted empiricist.

A bête noir can be useful, someone to think against—up to the tic point, when the barbarian, in the words of Cavafy's great poem (a poem of which Howe was fond, by the way), emerges as "a sort of solution" to the problem of freedom, which in a writer is the problem of what to do with the next blank page. The strongest minds probe their obsessions, wonder whether the devil is a brother under the skin; the merely compulsive repeat themselves out of sheer pleasure of habit or incapacity to do anything else. For them the beast is unchanging and unchangeable, ever and always the same—the essential bourgeois or, for that matter, Jew—and so one always knows what to say about it. One can be chained to one's bête noir, sacrificing freedom to a ideal of rectitude that becomes an excuse for intellectual laziness. When to know this has happened is hard.

It is difficult to resist the idea that a bête noir is the man or woman whom one hates with special intensity *because one has known the temptation*. I hope this does not strike the reader as cheap psychologizing. I mean it as expensive psychologizing—not only because it is useful to understand one's obsessions, but because it undermines one's self-satisfaction to discover that

hated foe, corrupt, brutal, and treacherous is, after all, *mon semblable, mon frère*.

Irving Howe's bête noire was the man of action—an interesting choice, given that his hero was also a man of action. People may, "in the end," represent social formations—Howe was, after all, some sort of Marxist most of his life—but the end is not where people live. On the actual terrain where people live out their purposes, they may do their representing either slackly and unconsciously or forcefully and consciously. The man of action may be representative but that is not the striking thing about him. He must be outstanding. Howe was drawn to the forceful man (not so much to the forceful woman, as his feminist critics did not tire of pointing out, with the possible exception of Hardy's Tess), but he was fiercely antagonistic to the "clenched," fist-pounding, self-making type. To bask in a pool of "infinite possibilities" was delusional, but to go to the opposite pole, to "clench up," was worse. In the history of American writing—indeed, of American identity—he traced this type to Emerson's "active conquering 'self,'" though Emerson's own style was more relaxed than clenched.[25] In politics, clenching lent itself to what Howe called "radical posturing."[26] I have already noted that he found Tom Hayden "clenched," though Howe later confessed that he had been wrong to identify Hayden's style with quasi-Communist authoritarianism; Howe came to realize that what Hayden exemplified, rather, was the Emersonian temper, a home-grown ego-bound willfulness.[27] This haunting archetype was also visible in the self-inflated Jay Gatsby, who sprang, his creator, F. Scott Fitzgerald, wrote, "from his Platonic conception of himself."[28] In the arts it appeared as "clenched prometheanism" and the "inflamed" will. In modern life clenching was everywhere. You tried to break away from convention, order, responsibility, and you ended up clenched, even crippled.

Wherever it roamed, Emersonian self-reliance curdled individualism into an ideology, leading "toward a tragic sundering between democratic sentiment and individualist aggrandizement."[29] Emerson's Promethean streak metastasized in the abundantly talented but ultimately antisocial Thoreau, whose "commitment to an absolute selfhood—at its least attractive, a private

utopia for anarchic curmudgeons—implies an antipathy not only to the idea of government but to the very nature and necessary inconveniences of liberal government. Ultimately derived from liberalism, the Emersonian ethos has here been driven toward an antiliberal extreme."[30] All self-creating extremes were destined for the precipice. An individual striving to tear himself free of his past was like a whole society striving to "disentangle itself from historical conditions . . . the proclaimed goal of all serious revolutions."[31] Both were giddy, both delusional, both hazardous.

In Howe's writing over the years the adjective *clenched* shows up surprisingly often; so does its cousin, *coiled*. Richard Wright's posture is one of "clenched militancy."[32] T. E. Lawrence goes through "the cycle of exertion—a moment of high excitement, a plunge into activity, then sickness, self-scrutiny, the wild desire to escape and finally a *clenched* return."[33] A few pages later Lawrence's writing gives off a sense of "teeth clenched"; he is "a figure coiled with energy and purpose."[34] Hemingway's work offered "devotion to clenched styles of survival"; his stories had a "clenched shape . . . insisting that no one can escape, moments of truth come to all of us."[35] Even as physical description, *clenched* is a mark of confinement and punishment, as, early in Howe's intellectual autobiography, he describes the apartment buildings of the East Bronx as "clenched into rows."[36]

A clenched existence is not a happy state, but exactly what Howe meant by it is not very clear. Rigidified will? The state of suffocation that D. H. Lawrence called "cramp"? The suppression of wild freedom? Whatever exactly Howe was warning against, his prolonged preoccupation suggests that he felt the need to renounce and resist a certain temptation. The longing to break loose had to be managed. What to do? (This was Freud's question, too.) From time to time personal life might unleash the impulse to break the rules. Literature could let this impulse out to play, indulge it, and, if need be, give it the rope to hang by. But politics had to operate in the key of responsibility. Even at the cost of going gray, responsible politics had to keep the anarchic streak under control—clenched. Indeed, in public debates Irving himself impressed many observers as clenched. Clenching was tragically useful.

IV

Here is another partition in Irving Howe's life and work: he wrote extensively on political novelists (Stendhal, Dostoyevsky, Conrad, Silone, and Orwell, among others), but none of his three full-length literary studies is about one of them. None of his book-length subjects wrote much about politics at all. The differences among Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner, and Thomas Hardy are tremendous, but all wrote about worlds that are both local and densely imagined. All three cared deeply about the moral life, but none celebrated political action. To the contrary: all honored the ordinary flow of human existence.

This is perhaps to say no more than that Howe, as critic, played in more than one key. The "mania for totality" that he loathed in politics he admired in literature—in the integrity and decency of a unified character *(Tess of the D'Urbervilles)* or the unified style of narrative ferocity (*Michael Kohlhaas)*.[37] Politics, at least in the nineteenth century, can be a chance for heroism, and this is partly because the hero becomes whole by fusing with his plot, becoming an emanation of it.[38] In life the heroic moralistic will was hazardous (if fascinating, as with T. E. Lawrence), but in literature the ferocious will could electrify. Howe found "entrancing" Kleist's novella *Michael Kohlhaas,* about a character who disappears into his actions, his intensity and wholeness in the name of justice congealing into vengefulness. Kleist's relentless narrative method "permits a unity of experience which in almost every segment of our culture we know to have been lost."[39] Yet literature also did well to honor the antiheroic, antimoralistic virtues and textures of normal existence. Howe admired writers who apotheosized ordinariness, the rhythms of plain life. His son, Nicholas, tells us that Howe once considered a short book on such underestimated "poets of everyday life" as George Crabbe, George Meredith, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Thomas Hardy, and Edward Thomas, whose "restrained style and stubborn wisdom moved him."[40] About Hardy, Howe wrote: "In Hardy's refusal of moralism there is something morally exhilarating: it

is, I think, a source of that subdued glow of humaneness which brightens his pages."[41] These are not the virtues of heroes, but without this "subdued glow" heroism loses its raison d'être and becomes unbridled, or "clenched." Indeed, Howe wrote in his polemic against Kate Millett: "In the history of modern intellectual life nothing has been more disastrous than this hatred of 'the usual.'"[42]

Paradoxically, his appreciation of the usual sent him back to a literary appreciation of the hero. Thus his apparently strange attraction to T. E. Lawrence. On the face of it Lawrence was a curious choice as a major figure in the writings of a socialist critic—the "centerpiece," as Howe wrote, for one of his essay collections.[43] Lawrence was a nationalist, if by proxy. But like some of Hardy's, Anderson's, and Faulkner's heroes, Lawrence was a man who acted in the name of a settled community. He was a hero in search of a people in the name of whom to act freely and consequentially. Lawrence's heroism, Howe wrote, conveyed the possibility of stamping intelligence and value upon a segment of history. To leave behind the settled life of middle-class England, which seemed to offer little but comfort and destruction; to abandon the clutter of routine by which a man can fill his days, never knowing his capacity for sacrifice or courage; to break with the assumption that life consists merely of waiting for things to happen—these were yearnings that Lawrence discovered in the Arab revolt. And these are the motifs of his conduct that made him so attractive to an age in which the capacities for heroism seemed constantly to diminish.[44]

So, too, in his late works Howe turned back, generously, to the untamed individual. He even half warmed toward Emerson while retaining his suspicion of a writer who, he thought, had so little sociability and solidarity in him. Howe wrote sympathetically of an unclenched Emerson, the Emerson who did not want to depart from society but to "recompose" it, to "animate labor by love and society . . . [to] destroy the value of many kinds of property, and replace all property within the dominion of reason and equity."[45] Emerson was noble—the transcendent, lonely, apotheosized democrat who ultimately failed "because all such projects fail."[46] If Howe could applaud Stendhal for writing "devil's manuals for men

in revolt at a time when there is no possibility of revolt," he could come around to welcoming Emerson's revolt of withdrawal.[47]

Howe loved the "wild disorder" that undermined systematic structure in the novel.[48] In literature, eruptions and revelations were compatible with an affection for the everyday—Hardy's or Faulkner's, say. But such undermining belonged on the page, not in politics. In politics the prime virtue was steadiness. In the most ordinary circumstances a political organizer always had to find something useful to do. Politics, like waiting for the messiah, was, in a Yiddish punch line that Howe borrowed for the title of an essay collection, steady work. Yet late in his life Howe had come around to recognizing, with some chagrin, that politics—radical politics, anyway—required rather more excitement. In his intellectual memoir, *A Margin of Hope* (no giddy promise of breakthrough in that title), he quoted the political theorist George Kateb to the effect that the problem with social democracy was that it was *boring*. But so be it.

Politics, in other words, is intrinsically tragic. Without limits it is lethal. Respecting limits, it slides toward the tedious—which is why, by way of compensation, we require art. The sustaining style of politics affords no more than "a margin of hope." But when politics collapses into style, it overwhelms reason and becomes *bad* politics. The political equivalent of the New York intellectuals' "bravura," their "brilliance of gesture," was the New Left bravado that he roundly—somewhat viciously, somewhat prophetically—condemned in 1965 as the New Left's "new styles in 'leftism.'"[49] When style (as opposed to values, ideals, and strategy) became central to politics, it was because politics was dissolving into style and ceasing to be politics altogether—as with the grandiose deceptions of the Black Panthers and the desperado nihilism of the Weathermen.

Style masquerading as politics Irving Howe devoured in literature. It was his fascination. Even his suspicion of it deepened his fascination. Much as he was devoted to style, he strained to keep it in its place. So the partition he built up between his political and his literary life in the course of his thirty-eight years with *Dissent* was not incidental. It was not papier-mâché. It was solid—it had to be solid. But to keep it in place was—yes—steady work.

Notes

1. But around 1990 Howe told another board member, David Bromwich, that *Dissent* ought to review certain novels because of their quality and interest. Robert Stone's *A Flag for Sunrise* was an example. Such reviews did not materialize, however—I think because Irving's commitment to commissioning them was weak (personal communication, David Bromwich, September 8, 2003).
2. Irving Howe, "The New York Intellectuals," *Decline of the New* (New York: Horizon Press, 1970), pp. 240–42.
3. Brian Morton to Todd Gitlin, December 28, 2002.
4. Howe, *Politics and the Novel* (1957; reprint, New York: Avon, 1967), p. 180.
5. Howe, "History and the Novel: Variations on a Theme," in *A Critic's Notebook,* ed. Nicholas Howe (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1994), p. 196.
6. Ibid.
7. Scheler, epigraph to Howe, *Politics and the Novel.*
8. Howe, *Politics and the Novel,* p. 193.
9. Howe, *Celebrations and Attacks: Thirty Years of Literary and Cultural Commentary* (New York: Horizon, 1979), p. 100.
10. Ibid., p. 101.
11. Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," *Dissent,* Fall 1963, p. 364. Howe incorporated in his piece for *Dissent* material that originally appeared in his *Nation* piece eleven years earlier.
12. Ibid., p. 354.
13. Howe, *Thomas Hardy* (1966; reprint, New York: Collier, 1985), p. 173.
14. Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," p. 366.
15. Ibid., p. 367.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., p. 368.
18. Ibid.
19. Dorman, *Arguing the World: The New York Intellectuals in Their Own Words* (New York: Free Press, 2000), pp. 139–44.
20. Howe, "The Fleeting New Left: Historical Memory, Political Vision," *New Republic,* November 9, 1974, p. 26.
21. "While I am without doubt a Negro and a writer, I am also an American writer," Ralph Ellison, "A Rejoinder," *New Leader,* January 3, 1964, p. 16.

22. Ralph Ellison, "The World and the Jug," *New Leader,* December 9, 1963, p. 22.
23. Ibid., p. 23.
24. Curiously and, I think, erroneously, Ellison took Howe's reference to Wright's "clenched militancy" as a complimentary one (Ellison, "The World and the Jug," p. 26).
25. Howe, *The American Newness: Culture and Politics in the Age of Emerson* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 41.
26. Ibid., p. 32.
27. In a 1985 interview with me, parts of which are quoted in Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam, 1987), pp. 172–73.
28. Quoted in Howe, *The American Newness,* p. 7.
29. Ibid., p. 42.
30. Howe, *Celebrations and Attacks,* p. 247.
31. Howe, *American Newness,* p. 21.
32. Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," p. 360.
33. Howe, "T. E. Lawrence: The Problem of Heroism," in *A World More Attractive: A View of Modern Literature and Politics* (New York: Horizon, 1963), p. 17, emphasis added.
34. Ibid., p. 25.
35. Howe, "The Quest for Moral Style," in *A World More Attractive,* pp. 66, 70.
36. Howe, *A Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Autobiography* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), p. 2.
37. Howe, *Politics and the Novel,* p. 53.
38. Ibid., p. 41.
39. Howe, *A Critic's Notebook,* p. 61.
40. Nicholas Howe, introduction to *A Critic's Notebook,* p. 15.
41. Irving Howe, *Thomas Hardy,* p. 167.
42. Howe, *The Critical Point* (New York: Horizon, 1973), p. 229.
43. Howe, *A World More Attractive,* p. x.
44. Ibid., p. 18.
45. Howe, *The American Newness,* p. 22, citing Emerson's "Introductory Lecture."
46. Ibid., p. 26.
47. Howe, *Politics and the Novel,* p. 35.
48. Howe, *Thomas Hardy,* p. 98.
49. Howe, "New Styles in 'Leftism,'" *Dissent,* summer 1965, reprinted in *Selected Writings, 1950–1990* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), p. 194.