Contributors

3 The Editor / IN LUCE TUA
4 Edith Borroff / THE PLAGHT OF AMERICAN MUSIC
10 Michael Sexson / EROTIC RHETORIC
14 Michael Becker / HAiku FROM THE BUSINESS COLLEGE (Verse)
15 Paul Bietzke / EASTERN EUROPE
18 Julie Meyer / LETTER FROM PARIS
21 Alfred Cismaru / THE NEW LA COUPOLE
23 Travis Du Priest / LA MAEDELEINE, NEW ORLEANS: CAFE AS TEXT (Verse)
25 James Combs / FULL METAL RACKET
28 Edward Byrne / CHAMPIONSHIP DEFENSE
31 Renu Juneja / WHO’S TO BLAME?

Departmental Editors

Eric Wignall, Assistant to the Editor
Richard H. W. Brauer, Art Editor
Sara Combs, Copy Editor
Kathleen Mullen, Poetry Editor

Advisory Board

James Albers
Richard Baepler
James Caristi
Christine H. Lehmann
Alfred Meyer
Frederick A. Niedner, Jr.
Mel Piehl

Business Manager

Wilbur H. Hutchins

THE CRESSET is published monthly during the academic year, September through May, by the Valparaiso University Press as a forum for ideas and informed opinion. The views expressed are those of the writers and do not necessarily reflect the preponderance of opinion at Valparaiso University. Manuscripts should be addressed to the Editor and accompanied by return postage. Letters to the Editor for publication are subject to editing for brevity. The Book Review Index and the American Humanities Index list Cresset reviews. Second class postage is paid at Valparaiso, Indiana. Regular Subscription rates: one year - $8.50; two years-$14.75; Student Subscription rates: one year - $4; single copy - $.75. Entire contents copyrighted 1989 by the Valparaiso University Press, Valparaiso, Indiana 46388, without whose written permission reproduction in whole or in part for any purpose whatsoever is expressly forbidden.

Above: Harpist
Front cover: Fife and Drummer
Back cover: Conductor
Page 24: Pianist and Singer
Page 34: Tuba Players
Page 35: Trumpeter

These 16 x 11 1/4" black-and-white woodcuts are by the Reutlingen, Germany artist Gerhard Grimm (b. 1927). They are from his 1978 thirteen print Music Series. In 1988 he included this series in a group of sixty prints he gave to Valparaiso University in honor of the twenty-year VU overseas program in Reutlingen. An exhibit of these handsomely bold and sometimes amusing prints will be held at VU Jan. 14 through Feb. 20, 1990.
There may be some among the readers of this publication who fear that we will never review a book other than *The Catholic Moment* and *Continental Drift*. Let us hasten to reassure you, gentle reader, that such is not the case. We have discovered, however, that no human faith exceeds that of the editor who, smiling naively, hands out review copies to agreeable reviewers. These fiends in human shape take books, and then use them to who knows what unspeakable purpose of their own, since the books are never seen again, nor does any piece of writing about them ever cross the editor’s desk. But we are learning to be wary. Fighting fire with fire and two can play at that game are clichés that come to mind. The next person who gets a review copy from us will have to sign a deed whose composition is based on Act I of *The Merchant of Venice*.

In the meantime, since we have now left the old year, we can at least mention in these pages two books that seemed to us among the most valuable we read last year. Both are by Wayne C. Booth, the George M. Pullman Distinguished Service Professor at the University of Chicago. The first is *The Vocation of a Teacher*, which consists largely of a number of Booth’s lectures to teachers, or to groups interested in teachers. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.) Some of these have been in print before, in conference proceedings, or in journals, but they make a stirring collection, and they read well. The best part of the book is a long section, not published before, a journal of a year of teaching, including comments on student papers, notes from conferences with students, musings on attempts to put together a reading list for a course, questions about the meaning of it all, doubts about advice given to aspiring teachers. As an eloquent and forthright record of the thoughts of a great teacher about his own teaching, it belongs in the category of inspirational writing. To know that Wayne Booth is nervous before class, worries that “this semester they’re going to find me out,” and fights off the insidious desire to be liked by students as the worst of his temptations is more than heartening. It is almost a commonplace in academe that those who profess at small colleges are liable to regard the stars of the profession with envious suspicion, and to assume that their lives are so different and privileged that they seem to inhabit a different galaxy. Listening to Booth on teaching is to recover a sense of the joy of a profession we share with such leaders. It is a perfect book to read in February, when the spring semester has you down and nearly out.

The other book is larger and more important. *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* is the book one would expect Booth to write at the culmination of his career. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.) It is ambitious and provocative in its thesis that art matters ethically. Exploring this thesis, and developing the evidence to support it, Booth is at his best. His knowledge of books is immense, his grasp of history, especially the history of ideas, is thorough, his ethical perspective sharp and focused, his writing admirably personable and clear. In some respects, the book records Booth’s own changes of heart about matters of critical importance in literary theory, expressed in such a way that we cannot mistake his meaning: “When I first read [Jameson] I thought he was just plain wrong. But as I have looked further, I have had to conclude that he is quite right.” Who could resist the company of a critic so straightforward?

But in the main, the book brings to fruition the intimations about literature which have undergirded everything Booth has written and taught for decades. Here, he makes overt and exterior what has been between the lines of all his other work: “what kind of company are we keeping as we read or listen? what kind of company have we kept?” He is careful to describe how he uses the terms ethical, character and virtue, but refuses to apologize for their appearance. "Would anyone wish" he asks, "that I had chosen to call this study 'the axiology of psycho-and-politico-poiesis as it is problematized by narratology'?"

Those who have read enough of the above to last them awhile will read Booth like eating a crisp apple or drinking cold spring water. His re-assessments of Twain, Austen, Lawrence, and Rabelais should be read before you put them on a syllabus another time. In the best tradition of the closing sentence, eighth grade book report: you will enjoy this book and be glad that you read it.

Peace,

GME
THE PLIGHT OF AMERICAN MUSIC

Edith Borroff

It seems hardly necessary to remark that American music has problems, that American music is in a predicament—as a cornered murderer said to my hero Perry Mason, “It’s real complicated and tricky.” For American music is, through no fault of its own, in the position of having to prove itself, when it has nothing to prove. And let me say this once and for all: American music lacks nothing: its predicaments do not include lack of quality. American music has been sinned against more than sinning.

I am first and foremost a composer; that is, I am a musician who has been dominated all my life by a creative imperative. Second, I am a contemporary composer; I have been contemporary all of my life. Oh, I’ve had thoughts of the past and the future, but I have lived my life, willy or nilly, in the present.

Third, I am a female composer. I have been that all of my life too. I was brought up by a professional father and a professional mother, both of whom had been brought up by a professional father and a professional mother. Nobody ever expressed any surprise or alarm that I am female—like Nadia Boulanger, I have recovered from my astonishment long since.

And finally I am an American composer; I have been that all of my life too. The influence of that happy chance has been terrific—I was brought up within the swirl of American sounds that was, I believe, the finest aural ambiance that a future composer could have had. With these things said, let us move to our subject.

The word plight comes from the Latin plicare, to fold. It is cognate with complicate and the plex words such as perplex and complex. The folds are the elements that pile up and interact and lead to the involvements of the problem.

The first fold of the plight of American music is the problem of being a composer. Our composers make our music, in partnership with performers, and composers are as essential to our musical lives as chefs are to cuisine. The creative triangle of music is that made by the composer, the performer, and the audience. In my role as historian, I know that these have only recently been separate people.

More to the point, until recent times most performers composed the music that they played. And professionals have always found it to their advantage to be showmen and to compose music for themselves as showmen. Arcangelo Corelli was such a yeasty figure in early Baroque composition that it’s hard to remember that he was an electrifying performer. Domenico Scarlatti wowed Europe with his spectacular appearances at the harpsichord, but he wrote his music down only in retirement. Nicolo Paganini presented very much the same pattern, save that he lived seventy-five years later when the cult of the genius was at its height. He circulated rumors that he had bargained with the devil to buy his phenomenal technique, and he was capable of virtually anything onstage; in one number he pulled a huge pair of shears from his back pocket, severed three strings of his fiddle with a great flourish, and finished the piece on the remaining single string.

To sort out what Paganini did as performer, what he did as composer, and what he did for his audiences would be absolutely impossible; more dangerously, it would misrepresent his art to the point of distortion. Paganini’s art was public: he saw his work as astonishing his public, enlarging his public, and con-
firming his public. Not an ignoble goal.

The same is true of Ludwig van Beethoven. He didn’t apply to be Goethe’s Faust, as Paganini did, but he did apply to be Goethe’s genius, the hero-figure atop a lofty mountain of creative effluvium, a man in the toils of a creative force beyond human comprehension or control. He was a hard worker; like Mozart he wrote piano works for himself to play, and his note-books show that he nursed musical ideas with long tenacity, imagination, and skill, and tailored them not just to his own keyboard techniques but to his piano. But don’t underestimate Beethoven the showman. Contemporary descriptions of him very much resemble those of Corelli. “When he plays,” said an eyewitness, “the muscles of his face swell and its veins stand out; the wild eye rolls doubly wild; the mouth quivers; and Beethoven looks like a wizard overpowered by the demons he has called up.”(Anton Schindler, quoted in Harold Schonberg’s The Great Pianists.)

Beethoven’s was probably the last generation to take improvisation for granted as a public skill, though slightly later we have the vision of the young Johannes Brahms, still beardless and looking about twelve, coming to the home of the Schumanns and ripping off his own f minor Sonata: what a wonderful, youthful work! Brahms was the composer and performer, the Schumanns were the audience; I think of them as two couples, the composer/pianist in his adolescent enthusiasm quite the match of the older pair.

The trouble is that performers think they don’t need composers any more. The young pianist today goes to the home of his mentors and performs—the Brahms f minor Sonata. What is our problem? Do we believe that a performer can simply perform, without any music?

The separation of the performer and composer has caused enormous problems, the most serious of which is the imputing of genius now only to performers. Today’s composers believe in work. They believe in skill. They no longer believe in trying to sell the public on the idea that they are geniuses in the toils of demons or seraphim; we are proud to be journeymen.

I happened to be present not long ago when someone asked composer Vaclav Nelhybel, who has composed some wonderful music for band, if he likes his own music. Now that is really a peculiar question, but I am asked it fairly often. I don’t know why someone would ask it, for I think nobody could stand to write work after work if she didn’t like what was coming out. I always answer, “Oh yes, I love it. If I don’t like something very much, I don’t release it.” And, if my questioner is put off by that, I explain that it would seem to me to be the height of dishonesty and inconsideration to say, “I don’t think much of this piece, but I think you people should all spend several hours plus eight or ten dollars to go someplace and listen to it.”

So I was on tenterhooks to see if Nelhybel would reply as I do. But he gave a better answer. He is a striking man, with riveting eyes; he looked at his questioner. “Young man,” he said, “I cannot speak for taste. But I know my craft.”


Another problem of composers today is that we don’t look like composers any more. I don’t think I look like one; I am not in the toils of demons, and my eyeballs do not roll wildly as I write. Today we look like everybody else: I know some composers who look like bankers, though none, unfortunately, who can live like bankers on what their music earns. Composers today want to concentrate on their work and not be professional geniuses—that takes a lot of time and theatrical effort.

The problem is that performers still want to be geniuses, particularly orchestra conductors and pianists. And, in trying to seduce the public, they play over and over again what they believe the public wants to hear. They are not just playing, they are playing it safe, and the bigger their names, the safer they play it. I sometimes have a nightmare that they’ll keep playing the same music until the world runs down. They still want to astonish the public, but—do they no longer hope to enlarge the public or confirm the public? Do they not realize that in not needing composers any more, they define their medium as closed, their art as obsolete? And that sets me down firmly in the second fold of our plight, the second element of our predicament: the problem of being contemporary. For everybody knows that all real composers are dead and have been dead for years. In fact, people—even enlightened people—express surprise, bewilderment, and even resentment at the very idea of a live composer. For live composers are a nuisance; they want us to open our minds, stretch our repertoire, perhaps even decide for ourselves what we want to perform, and let audiences make choices about what they would like to listen to a second time.

It strikes me as interesting that a production on Broadway of a show from 1942 is called a revival, whereas a performance of a concert work from 1842 is plenipotentiary, one from 1892 is practically hot from the griddle, and one from 1942 is modern! Once I found found a program that Paderewski had given in Milwaukee in the late 1880s, just a century ago: it contained three Scarlatti sonatas, a Beethoven sonata, then some big Chopin works; it ended with a group of Brahms pieces. That program would be unexceptionable today, but there is a big difference: when
Paderewski played that Brahms, it was hot off the griddle.

There is a real reluctance on the part of some performers to deal with fresh music. Part of it is very human: the disinclination of any animal to approach that which is new and strange. But being human also implies that if we will it, we can overcome this fear.

In 1964 I was commissioned to compose a work for band. It was to be premiered in Washington by the U.S. Army concert band. I was tired of the typical band scoring, and I excitedly envisioned the sound of feisty medieval interactions, full of vivid juxtapositions; I also envisioned the crisp rhythms so characteristic of that colorful minstrelsy. It was a long labor, but I completed the score in 1965, calling it Variations for Band. I was invited to Washington for the premiere; I was in business.

I am not sure that the U.S. Army Band is hot for new music—one can posit as a rule of thumb that the bigger and more official a group, the more they tend to play it safe. But they were doing another premiere on that same program, so they were facing two live composers, which may simply have been too much for them.

The Washington trip was a fiasco. When I got there, all excited and eager, I discovered what probably is the greatest hazard for the live composer: the law of inertia. The leader of the band had told the corporate executive, who had commissioned the work, that it was unplayable. Why? Because the rhythm in the last movement was in a signature he had never heard of.

There was nothing so radical in the rhythmic life of the Variations except that the two elements of the rhythm, the 6/8 measure and the 3/4 measure, appear freely at the various levels of the score, frequently with both of them at different levels at the same time. Notation should always use the simplest, appear freely at the various levels of the score, frequently with both of them at different levels at the same time. Notation should always use the simplest, and I excitedly envisioned the sound of feisty medieval interactions, full of vivid juxtapositions; I also envisioned the crisp rhythms so characteristic of that colorful minstrelsy. It was a long labor, but I completed the score in 1965, calling it Variations for Band. I was invited to Washington for the premiere; I was in business.

I am not sure that the U.S. Army Band is hot for new music—one can posit as a rule of thumb that the bigger and more official a group, the more they tend to play it safe. But they were doing another premiere on that same program, so they were facing two live composers, which may simply have been too much for them.

The Washington trip was a fiasco. When I got there, all excited and eager, I discovered what probably is the greatest hazard for the live composer: the law of inertia. The leader of the band had told the corporate executive, who had commissioned the work, that it was unplayable. Why? Because the rhythm in the last movement was in a signature he had never heard of.

There was nothing so radical in the rhythmic life of the Variations except that the two elements of the rhythm, the 6/8 measure and the 3/4 measure, appear freely at the various levels of the score, frequently with both of them at different levels at the same time. Notation should always use the simplest, most direct means possible to convey the musical intention, and to have hundreds of needless signature changes hanging on the page, like so much Spanish moss, seemed an exercise in pedantry. So I had taken the direction of clarity and simplicity.

The double 6/8-3/4 signature had looked like a 63-over-84, and he had never heard of it. He must have thought I was asking for sixty-three eighty-fourth notes to a measure, I guess. Anyway, inertia was brought to bear; it was easier to call me incompetent than to take the trouble to learn what the signature might mean; it was easier to blame me than to admit to either ignorance or sloth; it was easier to stick with what he knew than to try something different; it was easier to cancel than to postpone. He canceled.

The other composer on the program was Vaclav Nelhybel. I think it was also easier for the band director to go with a known composer than an unknown one, though we can also surmise that he really would have preferred a dead one. At any rate, both Nelhybel and I were guests of honor at a dinner following the concert, and needless to say, I was mortified. I was to sit with Nelhybel, and when he asked my name I replied "Sine nomine," Latin for "without a name,"—a musicological response, since that term was used in the 16th century for masses not based on an already-known work.

That was the worst of my experiences being contemporary. But there have been others, galling to me because they impugned my competence. It is perfectly all right if you don't like my music. Nobody can produce music that everybody likes. And it is perfectly all right for a young composer to bear the burden of proof; if we can't demonstrate that we are competent, that's our own hard luck. But such performers as these didn't offer me the chance of proving anything.

A horn player who had played my horn sonata once told me that he never in his wildest dreams could have imagined that it was the work of a woman. And that brings us to the third fold in the plight of American music, the third element of our predicament: the problem of being a woman.

When I was seventeen I had an audition at Oberlin, where I wanted to study composition. I was a good pianist in those days, and I played a high-level program for a jury of three men: the Beethoven Sonata Opus 101, some pieces from Brahms' Opus 118, and two by Debussy. After all of that, they asked me to play a prelude and fugue. I knew they meant one by J.S. Bach, but they didn't say so, so I played one of my own. When I finished, they dismissed me. On my way out, I heard one of the men say, "That's funny; I don't know that one," and one of the others replied, "Don't be silly; it's from Book Two."

But I was not allowed to study composition at Oberlin. Women can't write music, said the dean. I was innocent and enthusiastic and I knew in my bones that I had been put into the world to compose music, so I simply asked the dean what would be the most difficult thing to compose. He said it was the string trio, so I cheerfully got to work, composed a string trio, and got three friends to play it on a student recital. Then I went back to the dean, certain that now he would admit me to the composition program.

I learned a hard lesson that day, for the dean simply repeated that women can't compose. I felt invisible; the fact that I had been composing since I was three years old, had already amassed a stack of works, and had composed a string trio, which he considered a test of skill, never stopped him for a moment. He denied me admission to the composition program. So
I am happy to be a woman, but not happy to be a woman composer or a woman musicologist. I don’t think these are sexual concerns: if grey matter has gender I haven’t heard of it. I don’t get into a black negligee to compose or write an article any more than a man puts brilliantine on his hair and writes in a tuxedo. I resent having my music performed only because I’m female, though I don’t resent it half as much as I resent not having my music performed simply because I’m female.

I am happy, however, to have my work performed because I am American. Yes, and proud too because ours is a proud heritage, from Billings and Morgan, Hewitt and Carr, Gilliat and Foster, Heinrich and Paine, Beach and Chadwick, Gottschalk and Ives, Sousa and Gershwin, Joplin and Berlin, Chasins and Price, to Hadley, Hovhaness, Fischer, Walker, Crumb, Zwillich, and a host of others that span a range of style and as wide and as wonderful as a peacock’s tail in full panoply.

With such a legacy it would seem unlikely that I can have had problems as an American. It may seem unlikely but there it is: the fourth fold of the plight of American music, the fourth and final element in our predicament, is the problem of being American.

When I was eighteen I took my Third String Quartet to a well-known group. The cellist gave the score a full five-second flip-through and handed it back with three words: “Beethoven it isn’t.” I was stunned. I was too young and too taken by surprise to answer him, but I ask you now: was he under the impression that I thought I was Beethoven? Why would an artist want to paint a picture that has already been painted? Heavens! I knew it was not Beethoven: I had worked eight years on it. I was proud that it was not Beethoven. I had worked very hard to make it my own work.

Well, I can’t speak for that cellist, nor do I want to. But I think it is not a coincidence that the performers most afflicted with this difficulty are those whose mediums were at the height of the 19th-century romantic art: pianists, operatic singers, string players, and orchestra conductors.

Of my four string quartets, only two have ever been played, and those two were done only once each. I have been commissioned to compose a concerto for marimba, but not for piano, in spite of the fact that there are a hundred concert pianists for every concert marimbist. Woodwind quintets and mallet percussionists are building a repertoire; pianists, violinists, opera singers, and orchestra conductors are protecting a repertoire. And the composers of that repertoire were not only from other times but they were all from other places; they are not only dead but foreign.

More than that, they were named by foreign scholars who saw no problem in superimposing their own patriotism upon us, demanding from us a fealty to their own ideals and hence to their own music. And to our sorrow, where the arts are concerned, we are a dutiful people.

In 1971 my history book, Music in Europe and the United States, was published, and I was both roundly praised and sharply attacked for daring to include our music in such a survey. A young man congratulated me at a national meeting some time later: “It’s a wonderful book, and I’m using it in my history class,” he said. Then he added, “They don’t read the American chapters, of course.”

Of course? What in the world would cause an otherwise rational young man, charged with the enlightenment of American youth, to summarily deprive them of the heritage of their own music? That the young man was ignorant is without doubt; that he wanted to pass his ignorance along to his students is equally without doubt. He is not alone.

The premise implicit in his remark is wrong on two counts: first, America’s music does not represent a lesser tradition; further, his thinking is morally shabby: it goes against every ideal of the teaching profession willingly to promote ignorance and rejoice in unenlightenment. As a composer I am horrified by this intransigence and stymied by my seeming incapacity in the face of it. In other words, I am up against the well-known brick wall—not ignorance, which is an empty glass waiting to be filled, but prejudice, a jar with the lid clamped tight.

So we have to look elsewhere. As a historian I can shed light on these dark forces that work upon us here. The history of music is a young discipline, in its modern form barely a century old. Musicology had the misfortune to be established at the height of a West-European madness, in which West-Europeans defined themselves as the pinnacle of evolutionary excellence and everyone else in the world as stumbling around trying desperately to emulate the West-European model. Nietzsche called this model the Ubermensch, which we translate as the Superman. Along with this Darwinian madness, the times were suffering from the apogee of the Romantic aesthetic: the cult of the genius, the worship of the sententious and the pompous, and, in
music, the adulation of big harmony, big sound, and big forms. A powerful music, to be sure. But it was in fact only different from any other, not better than any other.

The problems of American music stem in large part from this happenstance, for, relative to the Übermensch, Americans have been double outsiders: first, the Europeans barred their way, and they couldn't get in; and second, most Americans didn't want to get in—the only use America has had for the Superman is to make it into a comic strip.

America never accepted European Romanticism; we had our own brand, a heroic New World Romanticism, as exemplified by the novels of James Fenimore Cooper and the folk ballads about such larger-than-life pioneers as Daniel Boone, Davey Crockett, and Sam Houston, or mythic figures like Johnny Appleseed and Paul Bunyan. And we had parallel musical concepts, like those of Anthony Philip Heinrich, who worked early in the 19th century in Bardstown, Kentucky—with marvelous sweeping titles, such as *The Dawning of Music in Kentucky, or The Pleasures of Harmony in the Solitudes of Nature* and *The Wildwood Spirit's Chant, or Scintillations of Yankee Doodle, Forming a Grand National Heroic Fantasia Scored for a Powerful Orchestra in 44 Parts*. It was in many ways a healthier, more innocent Romanticism than its European counterpart, and it was neither as intense nor as self-aggrandizing.

These characteristics kept American musical Romanticism from being the equal of European musical Romanticism in musical size: the huge orchestra; the sea of harmony; the word-centered, portentous tone poems; the huge operatic productions—America lacked those elements of European Romanticism. But American musical Romanticism was lean and clean; its smaller orchestras were pungent and rhythmically exhilarating; the zestful musical theatre, of incredible variety and scope, defined the revue, the musical comedy, and the musical play for the entire world; the splendid blazing vitality of jazz, with its incisive individuality of line and color, and its rhythms—bold and nimble, a living water. Europe lacked these elements of American Romanticism.

I think my favorite element of American Romantic music is its high surface texture, the non-legato that assures melodic clarity, rhythmic animation, linear independence, and strong instrumental color. The love of smooth, connected sound was characteristic of European music—a European definition of love, in the 1840s, was of “unbearable ecstasy indefinitely prolonged” (I think Wagner went for it). I remember hearing the Bruckner Fifth Symphony conducted by Paul Hindemith; it was so totally legato that I wanted to run from the hall crying “Air! Air!”

The German metaphor is that music is architectural; the Italian metaphor is that music is rhetorical; the French metaphor is that music is choreographic; and the American metaphor is that music is energy made audible. We can learn from all of them, but I am a true American: I love energy made audible.

The point is that the people in charge of history and criticism were oath-taking subscribers to the European virtues and gave no points to American strengths. We had to emulate something we did not find congenial as a nation (though some composers as individuals joined that stance, some of them successfully), we had to join or be put down as lesser mortals. Europeans demanded that we enter their musical life as inferiors; why have we not countered with a demand that Europeans enter our musical life?

A final difficulty with being American is the prejudice of university composers, theorists, and musicologists against American composers trained in the apprenticeship system, especially in the last seventy-five years. The chief result of this prejudice has been the attempted erasure from history of more than half of the composers of the last century. This is a huge loss to us all. The music has not been lost because it is lacking anything; it is not. The four volumes of piano preludes by Abram Chasins, for example, published in 1928, are marvelous works that lack nothing except pianists to play them, but Chasins was an apprenticeship composer, and those works are not known today. It is the pianists' loss; it is everybody's loss; losses like that are a body blow to American music. Chasins's preludes are in the Chopin/Scriabin tradition, so in university terms they are conservative; but in pianistic terms they are inventive and exciting. One myth of the university tradition is that modernity is entirely a matter of pitch organization; apprenticeship composers know better.

Chasins is just one example of many. He illustrates the point in general. But there is a much more serious problem here, one not so easy to see. For the university was for a thousand years a bastion of the white male, and the unclaimed music of the apprenticeship composers includes all the music of Black Americans and all the music of female Americans. If these disenfranchized composers are not reinstated, the cost to American music will be astronomical; if they are to be reinstated, it must be through an understanding of that system which the university absorbed and suppressed.

I began with the word *plight* in reviewing the predicament of American music. But *plight* also means to pledge, as in *I plight thee my troth*. The remedy for the plight of American music, which is, in fact, "real complicated and tricky," lies in our pledges, our plights for the future of that art.
We can plight our good will. We can promise to listen to American music with American ears. I know we can do that; it can’t be as difficult as listening to European music with European ears, for we are, after all, Americans.

We can plight our effort: we can get to work to build our future with some good-old American energy. We can work to get back into our music that fifty percent of our composers who have been lost to us through our own cussedness. We can reassess the nature of our heritage: this country has never been the side-car of a European motorcycle. It is beyond doubt now that, whatever the past may have been, the future of European music will devolve upon American leadership.

We can plight our support to our Black brothers and sisters. They do not need our charity, as I have learned during my service on the Board of the Black Music Symposium. They need ask only that we listen with open ears and open minds, that their work be examined fairly and taken on merit, for it is whole and beautiful and fully worthy of our study and performance and of an honored place in our heritage.

We can plight our support of good music wherever we find it. We don’t need to fight for women if we fight for fairness and if we will realize that good music does not come to us pre-labeled and pre-shrunk, and that it is often to be found in the most unexpected places. But we must pledge ourselves to look for it. It will not walk up to us and hit us in the face.

We can plight the establishment of new channels for dealing with live composers and with new music. We can seek a new rapport with audiences, who have been the chief sifters of new talent in the past—and let it be said that audiences have a much better track record over the years than either critics or musicologists. Right now we are letting composers judge themselves, which, in a nation so intent upon preserving the separation of executive, legislative, and judicial branches of governance, is surely scandalous. Performers can champion composers again—they are partners, after all, and if in the new system they are not one person any more, they can still see themselves as two hearts that beat as one, and they can make beautiful music together.

We can plight the integration of American music in our courses; it should be a staple for American students, an unexceptionable, pride-building component. We should take our work with non-music students very seriously; for we can build—or lose—audiences in music appreciation class. Above all we can let our students see us rejoicing in American music for the splendid stuff that it is and not try to force it into some foreign template in which it will inevitably be found wanting.

Nobody wants to eliminate European music from our curricula; European music is a great part of our heritage. But until recently it has been common for an American student to study music through to the Ph.D. and never encounter an American work; that is unconscionable.

And we can plight our faith in the future of American music. I believe in it absolutely. Give this mettlesome music, if you perform, to your public; they will be glad in it. Give this radiant music, if you teach, to your students; they will be grateful for it. And give this rich music, if you listen, to yourselves; you will find joy in it. It is, as I said, a living water, and Americans have a right to it, nor do you have the right to withhold it.
EROTIC RHETORIC: Rediscovering the Soul of Language

Michael Sexson

One of the great neglected textbooks on freshman composition was written twenty-five hundred years ago. The *Phaedrus* of Plato is a work read today only in philosophy and humanities classes and perhaps in graduate courses in ancient rhetoric. The *Phaedrus* is something like the elephant in the famous parable of the blind scholars. Each of the scholars feels a different part of the creature—its ear, its leg, its tail—and comes to a definitive conclusion as to what it is—a fan, a tree trunk, a rope. To the speech student, the *Phaedrus* is a treatise on rhetoric, the use of language to achieve certain effects. To the philosopher, the *Phaedrus* is a commentary on epistemology; to the religious studies scholar, the dialogue is a text on the nature of the soul; and to the mystic, the *Phaedrus* is a guidebook to achieving the ultimate vision of reality. And to the browser free of preconceptions, it appears to be a series of speeches about the nature of love.

What then is the *Phaedrus*? Like the elephant, it is all of these things—as odd as it might at first seem to scholars who see no organic relationship between an elephant's ear, trunk, and tail. Scholars have been perplexed about the major disjunction in the dialogue—that between erotic love and proper methods for giving speeches. How, they wonder, can you go from graphically erotic passages about the stumps of the soul's wings swelling and throbbing like this:

Then, as you would expect after a cold fit, his condition changes and he falls into an unaccustomed sweat; he receives through his eyes the emanation of beauty, by which the soul's plumage is fostered, and grows hot, and this heat is accompanied by a softening of the passages from which the feathers grow, passages which have long been parched and closed up, so as to prevent any feathers from shooting. As the nourishing moisture falls upon it the stump of each feather under the whole surface of the soul swells and strives to grow from its root; for in its original state the soul was feathered all over (Hamilton, pp. 57-58)

to discussions about how to give a speech:

The first point, I suppose, is that a speech must begin with an 'introduction'... Next must come a 'statement of the facts' supported by the evidence of witnesses; after that 'indirect evidence'; fourthly 'arguments from probability'; not to mention the 'proof' and 'supplementary proof' distinguished by that expert in rhetorical subtlety from Byzantium. (p. 83)

What, in short, has the erotic to do with rhetoric? What does language have to do with soul? I suspect that Plato thought they had a lot to do with one another, and I firmly believe that their reuniting might take us a long way toward rediscovering the language of soul and the soul of language in these pragmatic and prosaic times.

There is little doubt that Plato understood eros to be the driving force behind knowledge. Desire begets love and love generates knowledge. It is sometimes difficult for some of us to believe that at times in the history of our world, the desire to know was as intense as the most powerful sexual drive. But we have to be mindful that to Plato knowledge was not the accumulation of information or the mastery of certain mechanical skills; knowledge was the beholding of what is Absolute and Good. And there is also little doubt that Plato believed profoundly in the existence and the immortality of the soul. Before we were born, Plato holds, we were all winged souls flying about blissfully in the state of perfect knowledge beholding the eternal forms of things. But some souls lost their wings and fell into the world, and got born as human infants. (In Plato's scheme of reincarnation, incidentally, those who have forgotten least are monarchs and financiers while those have forgotten most are poets, tyrants, demagogues, and popular teachers.) In any event, far from being a blank slate, as the later empirical philoso-
phers would argue, the child comes into the world possessing eternal and perfect knowledge, which is hidden to him only because he has forgotten it. The human being’s task on earth, then, is to recall what he has forgotten, to recollect what it was like “in illo tempore,” the great time of the beginnings.

How do we begin to remember? Plato says that whenever we behold something beautiful in this world, we are reminded of the perfect beauty of the prior world. A genuine lover, gazing upon his beloved, feels the stumps of his wings begin to grow, to itch, to throb. And when the two become philosophers and not mere creatures of carnal lust, their eyes become mirrors through which the beauty of ideal forms are reflected, and so, the myth goes, they sprout wings and soar off into heaven.

One cannot become a philosopher, however, without language, and so Plato, after discussing love, knowledge, soul, and memory, devotes the remainder of the Phaedrus to commenting on the kind of language appropriate to genuine recollection of the eternal forms, language suited to the soul. What the soul does not like, Plato insists, is the kind of speeches given by most of the rhetoricians of the day, including one named Lysias, who argues unconventional ideas about love merely to demonstrate that it can be skillfully done. These are sophists interested only in what seems true and whose art is a mere knack. The genuine writer or speaker masters technique but goes beyond that mastery to a constant quest for truth and concern for the soul. “The function of speech,” Socrates says, “is to influence the soul” (Hamilton, p. 91). The end of writing and speaking is not to please oneself or one’s audience. It is to please (the) god(s) by tapping into the springs of eros, that erotic power that drives us to know. And so what seemed incongruent—Eros and Rhetoric, Soul and Language, is brought into relationship in Plato’s Phaedrus.

But how is language to influence the soul? How is language an aid to recollection of all that we have forgotten? How is language to discover its own rootedness in eros, desire? What is genuine writing and speaking? Plato’s answers to these questions are not only not clear, they are profoundly ambiguous and paradoxical. Plato stood at a crossroads in the history of western culture. The mythological past was dissolving into a future ruled by rationalists and empiricists, and an oral society was metamorphosing into one dominated by a new, fascinating and yet terrifying technology—the written, and later, the printed, word.

There are two episodes in the Phaedrus which expose most emphatically Plato’s concern about these cultural changes and his paradoxical attitude towards them. The first is when Phaedrus, a young and naïve lover of speeches, asks Socrates as they walk down a country road, if the spot nearby isn’t the place where Boreas abducted Oreithyia. No, says Socrates, it’s somewhere farther on. Then Phaedrus asks, “But seriously, Socrates, do you believe this legend?” And what Socrates replies has enormous consequences for subsequent western culture and its paradigms of reality. He first provides allegorical explanations for the myth explaining that Boreas is really a personification of the west wind. Then he dismisses even this kind of allegorical treatment as a waste of time. For once you finish with Boreas, you have to move on to other fancies such as the Gorgons or the Pegasuses, or the Chimera. “I have no time for such work,” he says, “and it seems to me absurd to consider problems about other beings while I am still in ignorance about my own nature.”

With these words, Socrates cuts loose the entire mythological tradition, which, up till then, provided the dominant paradigm of reality. Socrates severed mythos (story) from logos (reason). Prior to this time, logos and mythos were joined together, particularly in the thought of the presocratic philosophers or the composer of the fourth gospel. Mythos provided the deep creative spring in which logos, which seeks to order, is steeped. Logos then was not only reason but that which causes reason, not simply the word as an instrument of communication but the Word as that which generates existence, or “flesh” as the writer of the fourth gospel says. But when taken out of the animating fluid of mythos, logos becomes mere reason, thinking in concepts rather than pictures, abstract, eviscerated, lacking blood. Mythos, bereft of logos, becomes mere fiction, fantasy, idle entertainment. And this understanding of logos is at the core of a new vision of reality which has dominated to this day. Myth is synonymous with that with is untrue; logic is the cornerstone of truth and reality.

But what is of interest here is that Plato’s attitude wavers. On the one hand he rejects the mythical activities of poets and artists, assigning them not only a low place in the hierarchy of reincarnated souls but banishing them from his ideal republic. On the other hand, Plato knows that the madness of the poet is a heaven-sent affliction, akin to that of the lover. Most revealing, he doesn’t practice what he preaches. When he seeks to speak of things which language has no adequate words for, he invents myths. The heart of the Phaedrus itself is a myth, the myth of the winged soul and the charioteer with his two horses. And the most memorable of Plato’s words are almost always stories, the parable of the cave, for example, or his great cosmogonic myths of the Timaeus.

The same dilemma is revealed in his discussion late in the Phaedrus concerning the invention of writ-
ing. To discuss this subject, Plato has Socrates invent a story about how the king of Egypt, in examining various technological gifts given him by the inventor Thoth, points out that the one invention, writing, is only an apparent boon. Writing, King Thamus says, purports to establish outside the human mind what can only be established within the mind. He goes on to say that writing destroys memory. With this presumed gift, we don’t have to exercise the gifts of Mnemosyne at all but can refer to exterior marks written in ink. Moreover, writing is unresponsive. It doesn’t talk back to you. Unlike a speaker, there is no give and take, no opportunity to retract or take back. Written language is dead language. Writing happens when Logos commits suicide. “What you have discovered,” says the King to his inventor in Socrates’ myth, “is a receipt for recollection, not for memory. And as for wisdom, your pupils will have the reputation for it without the reality; they will receive a quantity of information without proper instruction, and in consequence be thought very knowledgeable when they are for the most part quite ignorant. And because they are filled with the conceit of wisdom instead of real wisdom they will be a burden to society” (pp. 96,97).

This is a remarkable passage and one that anyone interested in “communication technologies” should commit to memory. It remains to this day the most thorough condemnation of the technology of writing that we have. Plato defends the old, dying, oral tradition with its spontaneity, honesty, flexibility and closeness to the soul against this new-fangled technology which freezes words and will not respond to dialectical questioning. He fears that writing will encourage the worst aspects of speechmaking—reverence for technique rather than genuine craft; concern for opinion and not for truth, and worst of all, a profound forgetting of what language is really about—an expression of, from, and in, psyche, or soul. We have sold our souls for a box of 26 letters which we can configure in an infinite variety of ways.

As with the earlier episode, Plato is of two minds. On the one hand he laments the passing of the old oral, mythic tradition, but while he is lamenting, he is promoting this brave new world. After all, we can read Plato’s great condemnation of writing today only because it has been written down. Plato needs the technology to condemn the technology.

If these are contradictions, they are great, instructive contradictions. It is not uncommon to lament the loss of something while participating in the very thing that creates the loss. The world was changing from an oral to a writing culture, and Plato was a crucial player in that metamorphosis. Yet he also understood that technological progress involves inevitable loss, and what he feared most was that the loss would be a loss of soul, a forgetting of being itself. And so that extraordinary and eloquent plea at the end of the Phaedrus that we never lose sight of what is most important—the immortal, human soul.

It is now 2500 years later. The anguished cry of Plato has been a thin, small voice, heard perhaps only by those who, as the Phaedrus would know, are touched by madness. A man is teaching freshman composition at university in a remote place in the Northwest. A woman watering her plants asks him if he is teaching “quality” to his students. He says nothing but then begins to wonder what she meant. What is Quality? Can you teach it? And then spends hours wondering what she meant by that remark. It was three o’clock in the morning that he discovered that he didn’t have a clue as to what quality was and so he went home, and insane. Robert Pirsig wrote a book about his madness and his quest for Quality and he called it Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.

After he is given shock therapy and released from further incarceration, Pirsig decides to return to the place where he went mad, and so he and his son, Chris, and some friends, get on their motorcycles and head for Bozeman, Montana. One night, Pirsig has a dream in which a dim figure appears. He wants to call it to him, but then does not, knowing that to recognize it by any gesture is to give it a reality it must not have. It is a figure he knows. It is his other self, the one who went mad, the one whose name was “Phaedrus.”

Pirsig called the self he was before he went mad “Phaedrus” because he was obsessed by the figure of that name in Plato’s dialog, the naive, analytical speechmaker, the student of rhetoric who could divide and classify, the master of logic who knew nothing about the mythos hiding beneath the surface. In his book, speaking to others, Pirsig said that “Phaedrus” was “an ancient Greek... a rhetorician, a ‘composition major’ of his time. He was one of those present when reason was being invented” (p. 166).

The book is about the anguish of a man questing for a connection between language and soul. Here language is once again rhetoric, for “Phaedrus” is an English teacher, but soul has become Quality, a safe, secular term that doesn’t carry all that distracting baggage along with it. Like the word soul, Quality is a term that suggests something intangible and indefinable, but clearly denotes the deepest and the most genuine aspects of life itself.

There is something terribly wrong with the way we teach writing, “Phaedrus” discovers. “Correct
spelling, correct punctuation, correct grammar. Hundreds of itsy-bitsy rules for itsy-bitsy people. No one could remember all that stuff and concentrate on what he was trying to write about. It was all table manners, not derived from any sense of kindness or decency or humanity, but originally from an egotistic desire to look like gentlemen and ladies" (p. 177). In other words, this contemporary "Phaedrus" discovered himself to be, like his ancient counterpart, a sophist, and his profession was the dispensing of technique, not truth, the appearance of wisdom and not real wisdom.

The book details Pirsig's hard-fought journey back beyond Plato to the Presocratics, whose ideas were sensual images—to Thales, water, to Pythagoras, numbers, to Heraclitus, fire. For the first time, he saw freshly that the soul, the psyche, was primarily and fundamentally image. Picture. He understood that there are pictures in our ideas, persons in our concepts. That personification and imagining were not simply part of some separate discipline called "creative writing" but essential elements of insight and understanding appropriate to all uses of language. Such a vision led to Pirsig's discovery of his own monstrous egotism and his inability to relate to other human beings. For the first time, he learned something about eros, love, and he felt no longer estranged from his son, Chris.

Pirsig's breakthrough to a fresh vision lying behind the logocentric world view of much of western culture is mirrored half way through the book when he tells of a freshman writing student who wanted to write a 500-word essay about the United States. He suggested that she narrow her topic to just Bozeman. When the time came for the paper, she didn't have it, complaining that she couldn't think of anything to say. He told her to narrow it down to the main street of Bozeman. She got really distressed this time. He got furious. "You're not looking!" he said. Then he demanded that she "narrow it down to the front of one building on the main street of Bozeman. The Opera house. Start with the upper left-hand brick" (p. 185). Pirsig's words here are worth quoting at some length:

She came in the next class with a puzzled look and handed him a five-thousand-word essay on the front of the Opera House on the main street of Bozeman, Montana. 'I sat in the hamburger stand across the street,' she said, 'and started writing about the first brick, and the second brick, and then by the third brick, it all started to come and I couldn't stop. They thought I was crazy, and they kept kidding me, but here it all is. I don't understand it.'

She was strangely unaware that she could look and see freshly for herself, as she wrote, without primary regard for what had been said before. The narrowing down to one brick destroyed the blockage because it was so obvious she HAD to do some original and direct seeing (p. 186).

Like Pirsig himself who had to unblock his vision by getting behind Plato to the mythos-centered, image-rich thoughts of the Presocratics, this girl had come to see. She had an idea, a word which originally meant that which one sees and that by means of which one sees. An idea, to Plato, was the eye of the soul.

What Pirsig and this girl who had "the eyes of a drudge" discovered is what I call "the iconic imagination." By treating the abstraction Quality as an idea in the original sense of the word, a "seeing of the soul," and by obsessively pursuing it through the labyrinth of western thought, Pirsig came to be "one person again" (p. 404). And by looking at a brick, and seeing it distinctively as itself, the girl experienced what the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins calls "inscape," the phenomenon whereby a thing beheld as itself is paradoxically connected with everything else. It opened up the floodgates and, as the girl said, "it all started to come and I couldn't stop." She had momentarily shattered her own logocentric world view and entered one shared by children, archaic peoples, and the Presocratics, where everything is alive and connected, and where the core of reality is profoundly sensual. Plato would say that their wing passages became unblocked and they began to feel the sexual twitching of feathers seeking an outlet.

The iconic imagination (or, if you will, erotic rhetoric) stands in opposition to the logocentrism of western thought, which, from Plato onward valued the word over the picture, the concept over the icon, the abstract over the sensual. The fear of the image and of images and people inside words is clearly seen in the writing prophets of ancient Israel who warned against "graven images" and in the violent iconoclasm of the Protestant Reformation which wanted to smash all pictures and icons, particularly the rich and elaborate iconology of catholicism. The sensuous image is a powerful thing and can exert dangerous influences over our minds and souls.

The opposite of logocentrism is mythology, a return of the word to its sensuous origins, a valuing of images and of images and people within words. Mythology does not sneer at psychic technologies such as Renaissance astrology or neoplatonism, or alchemy, or arts of memory; these systems were genuine erotic rhetorics, engaged in allegorizing, personifying, fantasizing, and imagining. They knew the soul of words, that words as images have great power; that words play with one another and take on many unexpected shapes and forms.

Mythology, mythos reunited with logos, tells us that everything is a story, a fiction. We only ever have
stories; there is nothing else. There is the story of technology, the fantasy of history, the imagining of truth, the fiction of literacy.

A genuine understanding of erotic rhetoric will enable us to place our concern with clerical literacy in a broader, deeper context. If we only define literacy as the mechanical skills of reading and writing, then we deserve Plato’s censure in the *Phaedrus* for we are falling victim to a technology which freezes, isolates, kills, and causes forgetfulness of being. If we envision our goals as getting students (to echo a title of a book by Edwin Newman) to do some “plain speaking,” if we use Strunk and White and Hemingway as models of composition, then perhaps we deserve to lose our souls.

What we should be striving to achieve is not clerical literacy—the development of uniform language skills in students, which will make them productive and obedient, and harmless—but literacy in a much broader context, which involves a critical attitude toward language and an awareness of its possibilities—including the way it is used not only in what we disparagingly call “fiction,” but in the great systems of psychic technologies—alchemy, maybe, or dream interpretation, or gnosticism.

This exposure to language by recovering the word’s link to the soul will not create obedient, harmless functionaries who all know how to spell correctly, and whose passionate concern is with career advancement, but rather great lovers of texts who value eros and error, play and polymorphousness and, most of all, pictures. They will return language to the soul, eros to rhetoric, and worlds to words.

References:


**Haiku from the Business College**

Spring rains germinate
the seeds, sprouts mount to red flower,
buy seeds, sell blossom.

Melon sun lurches
from winter’s slump, melts frozen
assets, cash flows free.

Sweets in bright wrappers
captivate the heedless hand,
ambush consumer.

Cranes soar, hinged wing bones
leveraged by concise muscles,
cash in L.B.O.

Golden trout sparkle
in blue pools, brown blemish gone,
increased market share.

Pink lotus and purple
plums in market stalls go cheap;
bonds will rise today.

Michael Becker
Like many people who think themselves busy, I have a "to be read" stack of books and articles on my desk at home. The article that reached the top of this stack today set me to thinking. George Kennan's "The German Problem" was written only a few months ago, yet has been murdered by a gang of subsequent events. You remember that George Kennan is the brilliant young State Department official who formulated our post-War deterrence strategy toward the Soviets in Europe. He has been consulted by American leaders ever since, and his opinions command great respect among academics. Yet Kennan got his German Problem (full of Berlin Walls and stronger NATO's) badly wrong, simply because he assumed continuation of the past events he knew so well. There is a useful lesson in this, about how America should respond to fast-paced events it cannot control and probably would not want to control in any event.

I presented a paper in Munich last October, just before the Berlin Wall came down and while East German refugees were streaming across the Czech border into Bavaria. At my conference, I met a Hungarian professor who is on the commission revising their constitution. He was obviously excited by the prospect of creating a multi-party democracy out of a communist-party state. These are heady yet worrying times for West Germans, too. Called to make good on their promise that West Germany is for all Germans, they will likely see a short-term deterioration in living standards until the refugees are absorbed.

As you can imagine, my friends and the West German media (often broadcasting or quoting from East German sources) were preoccupied with predicting the future. Two theories seemed especially popular. The first revises and expands upon the old idea of a Middle Europe. It rejects the American tendency to think about an "Eastern Europe" which is nevertheless "part of the West culturally." The idea is that some or all of Sweden, Norway, Finland, Switzerland, East and West Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, and maybe Bulgaria can stand as a neutralist or middle buffer between East and West, to rival or maybe cooperate with the European Economic Community. One problem with such geopolitical imaginings is that there is no logical stopping point. What if the Baltic States and the Ukraine also wish to neutralize? Will the Soviet Union permit the departure of these Republics? Should the neutralists assist rebels in Rumania or Albania who wish to become Middle Europeans? Would we and/or the Soviets fear Middle Europe as the vehicle for a German economic, political, and maybe even military revanchism—in a replay of World War I?

The second theory is simpler but possibly more worrying: a Federation of the Three Germanies, including Austria. What, then, of German minorities, often somewhat repressed, in other Middle European countries? Mention the Sudetenland and Silesia, and this theory begins to look like the runup to World War II. But history is never a replay like those shown on televised football games. If it really were the case that "those who do not understand history are condemned to repeat it," American, French, and British foreign policies would be in much worse shape than they are. It seems that nothing is ever the same, or maybe even similar, twice. Mitterand and Thatcher seem unable to
provoke much fear and loathing of a German Menace and, for once, Bush's practice of smiling and saying nothing (the photo opportunity that passes for policy these days) is well founded.

Saying nothing is good policy when we know nothing. Yet knowing nothing seems only to increase the Volubility Quotient among the experts. You apparently become an expert by making a lot of predictions; mistakes get forgotten or forgiven, while good guesses get rewarded. (George Will is still widely read, despite the fact that his egging Reagan on to sending troops into Lebanon was a pathetic miscalculation.) A high Volubility Quotient was much in evidence while I was in Germany. Weary of puzzling out the German media on the basis of my exceedingly limited German, I would turn to the B.B.C. or the Voice of America. There was some astute analysis on the B.B.C. but the Voice of America offered only pure bunkum. American diplomats, presidential advisors, and media mavens were all too busy crowing over "the demise of communism," and fighting World Wars over again, to ponder what was really going on. How can Bush smile all the time, when this is the kind of advice he apparently gets?

Bush's Thanksgiving Message proved that he is not immune to a bit of crowing, and to subtly (for him) taking some credit for recent events in Middle Europe. Kenneth Adelman, a disarmament (really rearma­ment) advisor to Reagan, was not so subtle on National Public Radio. According to Adelman, it took failed communist regimes to make German and Chinese people unproductive. This is nonsense. East Germany is more prosperous than large stretches of England and smaller (we hope) stretches of the U.S., to say nothing of a staunchly Western country like Portugal. (Radio Portugal used to play the opening bars of Beethoven's Fifth, with a voice-over chanting that "the West will win"; Beethoven was, of course, a quintessential Middle, not Western, European.) The Chinese communists eliminated starvation and achieved a fairly rapid economic growth, admittedly with plenty of glitches and backsliding, when compared to the (bureaucratic or state) capitalism mismanaged on the mainland by Chiang Kai-shek and subsidized by the U.S.

Crowing over the demise of communism, neo-conservatives like Adelman think that they have removed the question mark from "The End of History?" This article, written by State Department planner Francis Fukuyama, appeared six months ago. It has already proved enormously influential, despite its being based on an obscure French academic's interpretations of the German philosopher Hegel. The Middle European Hegel reasoned that history had ended at the Middle European Battle of Jena in 1806. Fukuyama admits that much has happened since "1806—abolishing slavery and the slave trade, extending the franchise to workers, blacks, and other racial minorities, etc.—[but] the basic principles of the liberal democratic state could not be improved upon. The two World Wars in this century and their attendant revolutions and upheavals simply had the effect of extending those principles spatially, such that the various provinces of human civilization were brought up to the level of its most advanced outposts. . ." (Lenin, Mao, and Ho Chi Minh apparently played right into our hands.)

Neo-conservatives seem keen to elevate Fukuyama's neo-Hegelian thesis into a first principle of American foreign policy: the triumph of liberal democracy is inevitable because history has already ended in the heartland of Western and Middle Europe, but let's hasten this process in such "provinces" as Nicaragua, El Salvador, and maybe China and the Soviet Union. Please note that this thesis is really a Hegelian antithesis: Fukuyama stands Marx's interpretation of Hegel on its head (once again, perhaps) and reverses it Left to Right. What makes liberal democrats think they can succeed where Marxists have apparently failed? Isn't all of this too much idealism for the real world to bear? Fukuyama's answer is that "we" have a superior ideology linked to a universally popular "consumerist culture" defined as "easy access to VCRs and stereos." But can we end history by throwing stereo and VCRs at it, or will it go on into fuller forms of social democracy and who knows what else?

The neo-conservative/Fukuyama (anti)thesis may comfort some Americans, but it is patronizingly and dangerously simplistic. Are other useful ideas being bandied about? I hoped that George Kennan had addressed recent events and, computer-assisted, I found his 12 November article, "The Wall Falls: This is No Time for Talk of German Reunification." Kennan writes of the "momentous, irreversible and truly epoch­making" changes that have ended "four decades" of "a status quo." Unfortunately, Kennan's solutions are rather lame. A "new status quo" must be designed, he argues. Does he think that events will hold still long enough for a new balance-of-power equilibrium to form up? This is the chimera diplomats have chased ever since the 1815 Congress of Vienna, a Congress which implemented a century-long defeat for liberal democracy and which proved, if proof is needed, that history did not end in 1806.

Kennan would now involve NATO and the Warsaw Pact in a new status quo that seems to deny the need for these institutionalized militarisms. He would also require time-consuming study and negotiations,
within a new system of alliances designed to "absorb" German "energies" and thus to "give reassurance to Germany's neighbors." Yet Kennan must know that revolutions delayed are usually revolutions destroyed, especially when brave reformers are displaced by an experts' (diplomatic and military) talk-shop. Further, the reunification imperative is so strong that East and West Germany may not consent to having their "energies" absorbed. Would we or the Soviets go to war over German reunification, a beginning of the end to the Cold War? No, Warsaw Pact and NATO forces would be meekly withdrawn from a Germany convincingly declaring itself neutralist, and neither France nor Britain would have the will to expel Germany from the EEC.

There, I've made some predictions; they certainly do not make me an expert, but they seem at least as plausible as Kennan's or Fukuyama's. For another prediction, Anthony Lewis hopes that reductions in tyranny in Middle Europe may cause a corresponding reduction in the fear of communism at home. This would make a J. Edgar Hoover-type paranoia less popular, and there would thus be less support for, e.g., the Friends of Death Squads in El Salvador. After all, if a dozen Green Berets can be trapped on the treacherous terrain of the El Salvador Hotel by twenty guerillas, isn't it time to leave bad enough alone? Fearing the Soviets and a nuclear war, we left Middle Europeans alone to solve their own problems. They now seem to be doing quite nicely, admittedly only after years of trying.

Uprisings, beginning in East Germany in 1953 and Hungary in 1956, used to push the Soviets to the brink. Having encouraged these "captive nation" rebels initially, John Foster Dulles got scared by his own brinksmanship and he let the rebels suffer the consequences. Solidarity and other subsequent Middle European movements thus learned the need for self-reliance. By way of contrast, the Contras and their ilk act like welfare queens (to adapt a vivid Reaganite term) who hang around Washington or Miami and wait for their next check. America will inevitably pick up much of the tab for reforms in Middle Europe. But this after-the-fact support for demonstrably popular and fairly democratic movements is a much more sensible policy than is promoting the dependency of undemocratic, unsupported, and unsupportable groups like the Contras and a succession of oligarchies in wartime Vietnam.

But what, you may ask, will the Soviets do? The Bush-Gorbachev Malta summits may not tell as much, at least in the short run. Regardless of what the neo-conservatives say, Malta is no modern-day Yalta, where an ailing Roosevelt allegedly gave the store away to a wily Stalin. There is little to give away, since Americans and Soviets do not control events. Kenneth Adelman argues that Gorbachev does not know what he wants to do and that he is little more than a "master of the soft landing." This sounds strange, coming from a former servant of that perfect master of soft landings, Reagan. It also shows that Adelman cannot have given serious thought to Gorbachev's Perestroika. This remarkable book details exactly what Gorbachev wants to do, and he currently seems to be only a little behind the pace he set for himself. No recent American President would or could have been so candid or thoughtful.

Gorbachev may or may not implement Perestroika fully; American neo-conservatives certainly will not help him. More sophisticated than previous Soviet leaders, Gorbachev will not rush to the brink. But let's not revive Dulles' policies and push him to that brink. Disfavored and disproved by recent events, neo-conservatives are grasping at Fukuyama and other fragile straws. Deprived of opportunities to destabilize other countries, neo-conservatives will try to destabilize the growing consensus over ending the Cold War. This is natural, since a new consensus would force them back into think-tanks and leave the military with little to do. Unless you enjoyed the Cold War, insist that our leaders work toward a saner consensus based on sound new ideas; otherwise, nuclear war could still mark the real end of history.

References:


The big problem for Jack Lang, minister of culture, and Jean-Noël Jeanneney, president of the Bicentennial project, was to locate the lowest common multiple of the French Revolution, among and for its heirs, something suitably uplifting and respectable. The Rights of Man was uplifting, agreed, but not all of the Revolution was as respectable. One might use the word divisive, a violent twist in history, at once the cure and the cause of great suffering. And so a bunch of Social Democrats running France in the age of the Fifth Republic decided to remember a Revolution occurring between 1789 and 1792. Certain untouchable historical personages have not been invited to the soirée. After all, it is the marketing opportunity of the century and so much nicer to think about

parades and tricolor culottes. Yes, there has been a lot of grand and silly stuff at the proud forefront of the celebrations, especially this past summer.

As the decent, moderate French Socialists of the late twentieth century choose their history, and as American citizens led by their president campaign for a constitutional amendment to prohibit desecration of the stars and stripes following the Supreme Court ruling that burning the flag is a legal form of free expression, the memory lingers of student demonstrators in Beijing, being executed for crimes the repressive regime had itself committed. Twisted. Juxtapositions make life interesting.

_Patriotism._ The word has been surfacing in too many contexts for me lately. It swirls inside my head as I set out with hesitation to reply to a question that I often hear concerning the literary scene in Paris and that I have had put to me when I have been elsewhere: what's happening in expatriate circles today?

_Patriots; expatriates._ Nuances abound. Who are American expats today, and what does it mean, if anything, to be one, other than no longer to live in your native land? In the past, expatriatism carried some weight: rejection, disillusionment, boredom, disgust, spiritual decay. Is the term valid any longer?

The question has stale table wine on its breath. Expatriate, avant-garde, rive-gauche—the old notions won't die, nor do the images, the favorites, the legends, or the wish to make them survive, and not only by those of a literary leaning. An echo, although real, often outlasts its source, the substance. Such is the case with light travelling from far off and now-dead stars. It's not that gifted and serious poets and writers no longer live and create in Paris; it's that the term _expatriate_ doesn't belong in the description of what's here now as it did during the waves of the 20s and 50s. The notion doesn't apply in the same way and needs to be recovered. I recently learned that even the largest telephone company in the United States—corporate America quintessentially symbolized—has labelled its international market _Expatriate._

Time to redefine the beast. The illusions and clichés are tempting; they have a viable, even insatiable, reader and viewership, and thereby a sufficient economic base. It's not hard to remember the last bit in the media somewhere about American expats in Paris. The old story goes on about Hemingway, Stein, Sylvia Beach, and then, later, Henry Miller, Durrell, Ferlinghetti. For one living in Paris now, it becomes a natural thing to ask what one's own story is in relation to the past American presence here: what we have inherited, what we have in common.

So what is happening
The writers and artists have been priced out of the market. As one young Joyce who composes on his Toshiba or forges a redefinition of reality around crowded marble tables late at night in the cafes. But this is not what I've found. Regrettably, we don't talk about burgeoning schools and bourgeois-shocking movements. We/I don't even really know what we/I mean when we/I say "we." We come and go whenever, return to the States once a year or more if the flights are cheap, call overseas like it was ordering take-out, and speak, perhaps, too much English. No cheap standard of living is ours here. How often have I heard: "No cheap standard of living is ours here, which won't go away. A sense of self seems to multiply in the energy one gives to the proclamation: I want to be a writer.

What is it then about Paris that won't fade? For the non-Paris based anglophone, the curious western "outsider," Paris remains a mythic, pivotal place in the creative imagination. The city itself functions as a dream-like, cobble-stoned, timeless Nirvana where the real self—the writer, poet, painter, sculptor, dancer, actor, musician, photographer, designer, lover, drinker, chef—in other words, the artist, can surface and breathe, creating without (as much) guilt, compromise, or deadening responsibility. This is the feast that Hemingway wrote of: away from the comforts of suburbia, home, family, car; removed from the familiar rules, defining objects, structures, and career tracks; lost gloriously amid the anonymity of cultural-linguistic alienation.

Without the belief that this zone of freedom exists at least somewhere, our vie quotidienne grinds on ever more desperately into the thickest stage of the mundane. Ah, Parree. All this stuff, I suspect, at least in part, hides within the question: what's new with the new expatriates—whether they're/we're "real" expats or not. The expatriate is the part of us that wants to be something else.

What I have read of the current expats' books (admittedly only a sampling) and in several smaller literary publications, notably Frank, has rarely been set in Paris. Living in Paris is wonderfully creative, but it's as if one comes here not to write about living here, lest we all go live in a Doisneau photo, but to sharpen the senses, to search the self more thoroughly, to distance oneself from the native culture only to find that one is destined to write about what one knows best after all. Didn't Joyce put serious space between himself and his homeland only to evoke Ireland in thousands of pages? So I seriously doubt that living in Paris is a prerequisite for much of the expat lit. Some sort of non-definable catalyst, probably. Writing as well as reading are acts of travel; therein lies the beauty. We can leave. We can get out of ourselves.

True, it is impossible to speak dispassionately about this amazing city, or a clear dusk on the Pont Des Arts. And a neophyte could, I suppose, discover continents of experience, stripped free of any trace of latent Puritanism, in this sensually saturated culture. He/She could grow accustomed...
to smoking more blond tobacco than he ever wanted to. (Yes, Parisians, like all Europeans, still think it's chic to smoke.) And then he could write about a few revelatory months. But this would produce juvenilia and convey nothing of the expatriate sensibility. Those who have made Paris home have their own reasons for doing so. Edmund White and Mavis Gallant don't live in Paris for the same reasons.

The larger point is that Paris is no longer essential, if it ever was, to write or make art. A generation is not about to be lost again; indeed it is not looking for this collective status. More than Paris, the contemporary writer seeks time minus distractions, his own space, and enough local currency to get by and then some. But paramount must be the interior knowledge that this is what he or she is to do. Beyond this, one picks one's pleasures: real coffee with a good sidewalk view, jazz, abundant galleries, red, red wine, your neighborhood traiteur's specialties, the Seine, or other things elsewhere. But disillusioned Americans, or DA, will also find in Paris: outrageous housing prices, the piston system—the French variation on "It's who you know," the Parisian veneer of friendliness, and though carefully beautified, an urban center nonetheless with the corresponding annoyances and disappointments. Even the Guardian Angels must wander the Paris Metro these days. So the escape isn't to Paris. Instead, there are little towns (Valparaiso?) and other pockets in our nation where adventure and sanity coexist, higher consciousness is known to be possible, the mail and the newspaper are daily, bookshops exist, and your neighbors are friendly and read. Perhaps DA should go there.

The Paris-on-the-mind syndrome that attracts the yearlings, the hacks, the runaways, all categories of would-be and actual DAs, that Paris has been replaced with a thousand lesser-known Meccas of liberty: Montana, a campus in Iowa, Missoula, an honors college in Indiana, a farm in Oaxaca, a grant-subsidized apartment with high ceilings in Berlin, Mallorca, a program in Utah, a Chicago-based magazine. In short, it is unimaginative to expect Paris to be for you what it has been for others.

This part of our century has undergone centrifugal force rather than a coming together. It's noted no concentration of bodies and talent, but a dispersion, a casting off, to search for peace and ease more singularly. TV and CNN, AT&T calling cards, Federal Express and American Express, Frequent Flyer, and FAX keep us together, close enough. We are united by technological means while remaining apart and not in accord. This obscurity fuses with a profound disbelief in systems of belief. Those of my generation generally accept, whether or not they have been witnesses to the history, that the larger-than-life isms, maxims, and other orientations to life have broken down and broken up: capitalism, communism, deism, atheism, realism, romanticism, nihilism, post-modernism, even deconstructionalism, and post-deconstructionalism. Manifestos are meaningless; treaties are disregarded. Statements of aesthetic intent are no longer written. We disbelieve or suspect them as we draft them. Or worse, we get the feeling that we're in a film. Life seems arbitrary and that twitch for Parree starts up again. Who hasn't felt how limp the passion of discussion has fallen? Who isn't jaded by everyday news of tragedies and catastrophies? Belief and disbelief have meshed into one overworked and sickly gland called mere comprehension.

So why have we all gone to Paris? We who've stayed on for more than an extended vacation or a semester abroad have entered a middle zone; we've fallen out from the rhythms of daily American life, but we'll just never be French. This is the land of the expatriate: a psychological territory, wherever you be or hail from, that constantly needs to be appropriated. And the only real way to participate in its life—after one pays the rent and does the shopping—is to keep asking what's important and who we are.
The New La Coupole

Alfred Cismaru

The restuarant-cafe-dance hall La Coupole was first opened in 1927 by a rich benefactor and businessman called Rene Lafon. The intention was to draw artists, of all kinds, cinema and theater stars, politicians, and affluent foreigners who would want to rub shoulders with the famous domestic clientele. It took no time for the dream of Monsieur Lafon and of those running La Coupole to realize that reality was even more beautiful than dreams. The rich celebrities of the day came and spent money they had, and aspiring celebrities came too and spent money they did not have. In the 30s it was more chic to be seen at La Coupole than at any other Parisian establishment of its kind. Josephine Baker came there for dinner, her pet lion cub on the banquette beside her. Picasso and Giacometti argued there into the wee hours of the morning, engaged in many public fights and reconciliations, and even practiced their art in full view of the other customers, who would order wine, coffee and other drinks for them. Isadora Duncan, Colette, and Papillion came to eat (the specialities then were cassoulet, choucroute and fish which had been swimming less than twelve hours earlier) and then go dance in the tango parlor. There is a legend that not in Argentina and not anywhere else in the world was the tango so relished as within the walls of La Coupole.

The cafe's greatest appeal, though, probably lay in its distinctive 30s style. There was a gaudy neon signature with frosted curlicues promising "Dancing" and "Bar American." The awning was a brash red skirt on a broad terrace at the center of the Bohemian Montparnasse. The menus sported drawings by Picasso, Dali, Man Ray, Chagall and Calder, who did not charge Lafon for their work but were occasionally allowed to tear up their addition and pay the waiters only their tip. The interior decor was massive wood, lined with shelves containing the books of the Lost Generation, while the walls themselves were spattered with drawings and paintings of late Impressionists, Cubists and Dadaists.

It was not unusual for writers to read their work aloud to their colleagues and other customers, and for heated debates to ensue as to meaning, appropriate use of grammar, and suggested changes. Among those who shared their thoughts with the public were Pound, Stein, Saint-Exupery, Miller, Dos Passos and Beckett. Even now Fitzgerald is remembered for his complete reading of Tender is the Night to an awed reception. He and Hemingway were considered the two Americans who should have been born French, who thought, spoke, wrote, ate and drank Gallic. They were adopted by the locale and became beloved members of the family. In fact, after the liberation of Paris, Hemingway temporarily abandoned his duties as soldier-reporter, ran some two kilometers to La Coupole and burst in shouting, "I'm back!" He proceeded to give Lafon a bear hug, then sat at the bar and promptly ordered the Hemingway Bloody Mary—four ounces of vodka.

After the war La Coupole became the meeting place of the Existentialists. Sartre drank whiskey there for decades, and Simone de Beauvoir Coke at first, then whiskey also. Of course, both had come to La Coupole during the German occupation, writing there for hours on end. Often, because of early curfew times, they were allowed by the management to remain after the bar closed, and the two would settle at tables on the second floor, writing by candle light even after the power had been cut off by frugal Parisian authorities. In the morning they would still be there, sleeping on the floor, and the bartender would awaken them with the smell of strong ersatz coffee.

After the war La Coupole became the home away from home of such luminaries as Francoise Sagan, Marguerite Duras, Eugene Ionesco, Art Buchwald, James Jones, Simenon, various members of the Rothschilds clan, and even Hemingway when he was in Paris. Just as in the 30s the establishment had somehow suggested to customers that it was all right, even prestigious to be a Bohemian, so too in the 40s and 50s it put its stamp of approval on
Existentialism. It was there that the advocates of the inevitable nausea could nevertheless find solace and shelter. Sartre and de Beauvoir continued to write there, to lunch and dine there three or four times a week. The “Bar American” section of the restaurant always had people waiting in line, especially after ten at night, when it was fashionable to be seen in the company of writers, artists, and celebrated foreigners.

Later, in the 60s, La Coupole no longer fared so well. Existentialism became a tired, if not tiring philosophy, and although its exponents still came, others stayed away because they did. Moreover, in the 60s, just like the theatres and cinemas, La Coupole began to suffer from the competition of television. Yet, its prices were still higher than most Parisian restaurants, and the management refused steadfastly to bring them down to attract new customers.

In this period, too, the establishment became a sort of scapegoat of the Left, just like the famous Patisserie Fauchon, which was bombed twice by Communist terrorists. La Coupole did not suffer such extreme fate, but often, when there were demonstrations (and when isn’t there one in Paris?) rioters would stone the windows of the restaurant and launch catcalls at the customers seated at sidewalk tables. The management was forced to enclose that part of its business with bullet-proof glass, and not surprisingly the aura of a sidewalk cafe was lost. Still, often, demonstrating students would find a way to break even such reinforced barriers, scaring patrons from the outside tables to the safety of the inside. Whenever this kind of incident would occur the management would have to apologize for the inconvenience by tearing up the tabs of those who had been touched or injured by the glass. Yet, there were many lawsuits against the business, and out-of-court settlements became so costly that the unthinkable turned into a widespread rumor—La Coupole would close.

Many among the well-to-do looked upon its impending demise with stunned disbelief. Legend has it that Sartre, de Beauvoir, Duras, and other leftist writers quietly tried to persuade the students to abandon the Boulevard de Montparnasse as their favorite place to demonstrate, and vent their anger in other Parisian neighborhoods. This attempt apparently backfired, for in the 70s and early 80s most of the action was taking place directly around La Coupole. It became difficult to have a quiet breakfast, or to indulge in expensive shellfish appetizers at lunch, when cars were overturned and set on fire outside, and glass flew dangerously close.

In addition, the restaurant became an anachronism in a neighborhood that was changing. High rises spread around it, and developers offered huge sums of money for its site. There were rumors that a cinema would open in its place, or an immense supermarket. Only a few days after its sixtieth anniversary, in 1987, La Coupole closed.

The event took on catastrophic proportions among older Parisians. For years the Cafe de la Flore and the Deux Magots Cafe had already taken the overflow from their more prestigious rival, while the Cafe de la Paix, for decades, had been almost exclusively a tourist hangout. Where was one to go? Cries of despair appeared in the newspapers, funeral wreaths were placed anonymously on the door of the shut establishment, and even in Parliament a number of members inquired if there was something that the federal or city government could do. There were complaints which bemoaned the death of a tradition, and the surge of a punk generation whose preferences in food, drink and entertainment were as uninformed by taste as by history.

Lurking in the background, however, was Jean-Paul Bucher, a former chef at Maxim’s, who already owned a number of restaurants in France, and who had three million dollars to spare. By December of 1988 he had accomplished the impossible, and reopened La Coupole, which he called “the crown jewel of my collection.” The new Montparnasse establishment appears to respond to the nostalgic desires of the older generations and to the bizarre preferences of the new bon chic bon genre (the French term for yuppies) as well as the punk layers of Parisian society. New paint was applied all over, and sparkle was added to tradition: interior decorators ripped away the still loud, but now faded red of the bar (as well as the punk layers of Parisian society). New paint was applied all over, and sparkle was added to tradition: interior decorators ripped away the still loud, but now faded red of the bar (as well as the punk layers of Parisian society). New paint was applied all over, and sparkle was added to tradition: interior decorators ripped away the still loud, but now faded red of the bar (as well as the punk layers of Parisian society). New paint was applied all over, and sparkle was added to tradition: interior decorators ripped away the still loud, but now faded red of the bar (as well as the punk layers of Parisian society). New paint was applied all over, and sparkle was added to tradition: interior decorators ripped away the still loud, but now faded red of the bar (as well as the punk layers of Parisian society).
restaurant, there have been no recorded attacks against it or its clientele. Perhaps this has to do less with politics than with the image that La Coupole now exudes. Even though tea dancing has been revived on weekends, there is nothing grande dame about it anymore. One hears jazz on some evenings, but more and more hard rock, and no sooner is a new dance experimented with in the United States than it becomes the vogue in Paris, and even in La Coupole. The under-thirty crowd outnumbers the over, especially in the evening. However, between noon and three, the stars of the cinema, the theater and the artistic worlds still drink patiently at the bar, waiting for a table to become available.

The meals are not what they used to be either, especially at night. The cassoulet remains, for lunch, the best-selling dish, but in the evening there is more than a touch of nouvelle cuisine, and one can even have a hamburger with, alas, frozen French fries. Lunch for two without wine can easily cost 120 dollars, which is not at all unusual in prosperous France at the present rate of the dollar; but at night one can get by with 30 dollars or less per person and still dance for hours. Of course, no famous contemporary painter will do a fresco, anymore, for the price of a meal, and the paintings which had previously adorned the walls of La Coupole have disappeared: some say that the old management had sold them when cash flow was diminishing; others that the new owner disposed of them in order to come up with the three million dollars invested. There is no record of writers reading their work anymore, but much writing is still done at its tables. Francoise Sagan and Marguerite Duras are present almost every day they are in town, and so are younger, aspiring novelists, poets and philosophers who scribble at length for the two dollars or so price of an expresso.

Ceremony of tea service, then, at least on weekends, and frozen fries at night. Is the new owner trying to please everybody? If he is, until now, a full year after the reopening, he has been quite successful. The detractors, both on the right and on the left, had claimed that it would be impossible to retain the interest of the old and attract that of the young, thereby catering at the same time to opposing expectations. Jean-Paul Bucher paid no attention to them, certain as he was right from the beginning that his management was correct because of the huge initial revenues of the restaurant, now reputed to bring him more profits than any of his others. In fact, since the reopening the crowds have grown steadily, so much so that on weekends there are lines and would-be patrons are turned away.

The new La Coupole, then, has been reestablished as the Parisian institution it once was, in spite of the differences, or perhaps because of them. Jacques Chirac, a frequent patron, has met Madonna, to whom he asked an introduction one evening when she was seated near his table. After the introduction she joined him at his table for brandy and coffee. The topic of their conversation is not known, but the fact of their communication is significant. The arch-conservative politician and the pop rock star in animated conversation over coffee and brandy—could anything be more indicative of a new world? 

---

La Madeleine, New Orleans:

Cafe As Text

Pretext: Streetcar named St. Charles only runs today to Metairie, transfer over to Baronne to Canal, down Royal passing Bourbon to La Madeleine. Read: Beignet, croissant, fromage and, for All Souls, Bon jour T-shirts. Context: Small round table, two short ladder-back chairs, rush-caned seats, dark oak on cast iron. Subtext: une croissant et une beignet et une tea. Footnote: milk glass vase, three daisies, one yellow mum and a peppermint carnation. Text: Talk. The more you learn about life, the more questions there are, sound of wooden legs on brick floors, cups on saucers. Came Back from the Dead concert, silver against silver. Subtext two: a young carpenter from Mississippi worries about his brother on drugs, wants, himself, to move to Miami. A Belgian lady and a limousine driver. Deconstructed ending: An old couple seeking security. Turn the page. He speaks, Remember, the inevitable will happen. She responds: First of all you've got to eat.

Travis Du Priest

January, 1990
Full Metal Racket
James Combs

Yep, folks, there is now no doubt about it: we live in an aging society. As a country, we are definitely getting older, and are much aware that there just isn’t as much time as there used to be. We elect as president aged men more appropriate to the political conventions of a passing age, and hear them wane nostalgic for the good old days of World War II and the Cold War. We lunch on fruit and salad, sharing gloomy news of our latest cholesterol numbers. Instead of enjoying the golden years in relaxed comfort, we huff and puff around running tracks and try to hold our own in aerobics classes run by spartan instructors who would exhaust a platoon of Marine recruits. Alcohol and meat sales decline, while people seek, like Ponce de Leon, the lastest ghastly inedible that will assure them of eternal life: oat bran, fish oil, fiber, beta-carotene.

The statistics show that in the early twenty-first century, we will have a vast army of the aged and retired, who will form a mighty voting and lobbying bloc, defending pensions and entitlements, and expecting the young in the work force to pick up a lot of the tab in supporting them (us).

It is likely, then, that one of the traditional conflicts in virtually any society—the old versus the young—will take on even more intensity, since it will involve who gets the money. But obviously the sources of conflict between old and young are more complicated than that. Often the old will envy the young their youth, and fear that the young will change things and thus “destroy all that we have built.” This is obviously not true of all old folks, and it is surely one of the marks of successful maturity when the old can enjoy and forgive the young. But the tension works both ways: the young may resent the power and advice of the old, and dislike being reminded by the aged that the same thing is going to happen to them someday. It is also surely one of the marks of successful youth when the young can enjoy, and respect, the old.

In any event, this demographic rift in American society is something that all of us will need to get used to. This will include an attempt on the part of the old to understand, and in some measure tolerate, the popular habits of the young. Most elders are far removed from the popular culture that youth consumes, and may find such culture puzzling, shocking, and threatening. We may be genuinely concerned that the young turn out to be all right (which usually means to be much like us), but can be scared by the unfamiliar and bizarre expressions of the young. Veterans of the 60s can recall the generational conflicts over dress, skirt length, hair style, sex, drugs, and freedom. Since then, we have accorded the young a good bit more freedom, and in most cases we tolerate their more harmless popular habits, such as the music they listen to.

Or do we? There are certainly plenty of us among the older group who would like to control more directly the habits, and limit the freedom, of the young, as we always tell them, “for their own good.” I sometimes suspect that an unspoken feeling behind the many reports, studies, and political rhetoric telling us how ill-educated and uninterested in civic affairs are the young is the feeling that reassures the old, including the authorities, how vastly superior they are to the fallen state of today’s youth. Armed with such generational reassurance, youth-bashing becomes a popular sport in a society dominated by a gerontocracy. Intolerance toward the young then fuels the usual reaction from them: defiance. What they believe to be their own culture then becomes a bastion of defiant expression, made all the more outrageous by its unrespectability. In such a situation, we may see increased efforts to control not only what the young read in and out of school, but also what they listen to.

Any parent or school teacher can tell you just how important music is to the young. At home, the kids will spend hours in the realm of their stereo or watching music videos. Walking or running or even in class, they will listen to music through their earphones. They consume millions of magazines—from Rolling Stone to Rip—about the music world. It is a world with which they have both vast and intimate knowledge: many kids are encyclopedias of knowledge about the endless evolution of groups, styles, lyrics, and equipment, and they can hear nuances of sound lost on the
uninitiated. Popular music is a source of learning, as well as a form of expressing their thoughts and feelings with themselves and their peers. I have witnessed teenage kids, unable otherwise to communicate with their parents, sit them down to listen to a song or album important to them, believing that such a shared experience might give them common ground for a change.

But, ah, the music of the peers! The kids in the late 80s are putting us to the test. Among the most important musical trends of the last few years has been the legitimation, as it were, and vastly increased popularity among younger age groups of what is termed "heavy metal" or "hard rock" music. With the possible exception of black rap music, this is easily the most controversial (read outrageous and bizarre) of all the many forms of rock 'n' roll. It has been condemned from pulpit and press, by Tipper Gore and Mike Royko, excluded from radio stations and burned as satanic verses in autodafe conducted by fundamentalist ministers. The kids love it. But wait! Aren't these the selfsame boys and girls who all want to grow up to be stockbrokers? Aren't these the kids who tell pollsters that they are patriots, believe in God, and want to make a lot of money in a successful career? Are these the same young people who turn out in droves to enjoy the gentle rhythms and sweet lyrics of Motley Crue, Kiss, Junkyard, Iron Maiden, Whitesnake, Nuclear Assault, The Cult, Deaf Gods of Babylon, Poison, Princess Pang, Metallica, and Megadeth? (If you are unfamiliar with the wonderful world of heavy metal, the next time you're at a magazine rack, glance through Metallix, Rip or the other metal mags; the pictures will convince you that Rousseau was more correct than he knew: man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.) Heavy metallists are the carny folk of rock, reveling in their status as grotesque freaks, gypsy wanderers, and shameless dilettantes.

The tattoos and black leather outfits, the offensive lyrics, the strident cacophony of the music, the obscene and desecratory gestures onstage are complemented by the ardent support given them by their concert fans, our future stockbrokers in spikes and studs, metal earrings, necklaces, and rings, spandex boa silver muscle shirts, removable tattoos of skull and crossbones or the grim reaper, and black leather coats that display such sewn-on messages as "Die Yuppie Scum" and "You can send me to college but you can't make me think." Heavy metal concerts and albums have the air of an "immorality play," a brazen rejection of convention and a celebration of the carnal and antisocial. Hard rock stars carefully maintain a public image of rampaging brats, and the Metal News sections of the metal mags are replete with fights, parties, riots, arrests, accidents, stunts, conflicts with the law, and the pouts of bruised tender egos. Their public stance might be described as one of anomic tumescence, the bombastic desecration of all things valued by polite society. They are, to the delight of their fans, totally devoid of couth, less in need of lectures on the evils of blasphemy by George Bush, than of instruction on the virtues of gentility by Miss Manners.

So the love of the music and the antics of the heavy metal bands become yet another source of annoyance and concern among the elders, and moral guardians of the young. But perhaps we should not be so quickly censorious. After all, every new form of popular music has been greeted with official condemnation. In 1899, the newspaper Musical Courier editorialized about a "wave of vulgar, filthy and suggestive music" that "has inundated the land...with its obscene posturing, its lewd gestures...It is artistically and morally depressing and should be suppressed by press and pulpit," speaking of ragtime. In 1915, the New Orleans Times-Picayune railed against a new form of "indecent" and "syncopated and counterpointed musical vice" of no value, but held that the "possibilities of harm are great," speaking of jazz. Many of us among the aging can remember the furor created by the introduction of rock during the 60s. Now many of us use and appreciate a wide variety of popular music, and it is heartening to see among young and old alike new appreciation for jazz, and interest in such new age music as the work of Philip Glass. This eclecticism does not, however, explain the contemporary appeal of heavy metal, and whether we should worry about possible harmful effects.

I suspect for many of the current young fans of heavy metal, attending to that world involves entry into a symbolic universe, an alternative time and place in which the normal rules of conduct and decency are abandoned. One is reminded of Northrop Frye's discussion of "themes of descent" in his The Secular Scripture, involving a romantic journey into a nightmare or demonic world. For the middle-class young person, descent into the world of head-banging hard rock is a trip into a nether world, the lower depths,
the *demi monde*, Nighttown, Pinocchio’s sojourn on the island of forbidden pleasures, a punky Alice in a metal wonderland. It is behavior we might term negative play, flirtation with the negation of normalcy, a temporary celebration of the shocking and unacceptable. But it is a world one can enter with a minimum of harm, since it is a play universe: one can be turned for a night into the equivalent of Pinocchio’s braying ass, but in the morn ascend to the computer in your room and the routines of School, made palatable by dreams of being that successful stockbroker.

In his book *Religion in Public Life*, Edward Norbeck wrote about “rites of reversal,” those known rituals that feature an “upside-downing during which the social hierarchy is inverted, customary rules of moral behavior are suspended, and other ordinary behavior is done ‘backward.’” What we may be seeing in the rites of heavy metal is another version of the tradition of the Saturnalia, suspending the rules of conduct in the “positive universe,” reversing in play form the nomic and anomic worlds between which the young person moves. Some have even argued that such modes of expression of rebellion against authority are socially useful, serving as a safety valve for aggressive or even demonic impulses through the catharsis of the heavy metal experience. Robert Jewett and John Lawrence, in their article on demolition derbies wrote that “by letting off steam, such rituals end up reinforcing the very norms which are flaunted [sic] and then cheerfully reinstituted at the end of the prescribed festival” (*Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 9, 1976).

Or so we may fondly hope. We may also be sure that the current devotion to heavy metal will probably wane in the future, as popular attention moves elsewhere. But we also should speculate about the incongruity of allegedly conservative kids so drawn to the music and—you should pardon the expression—musicians whose major ideological statement is one of unrestrained and licentious celebration of rebellion against the very universe of norms to which these young expect eventually to adhere. It is as if they think that not only does life—defined as having fun—effectively end with youth and the entry into the world of work, family, and responsibility, but also that freedom only exists in an imagined state of irresponsible and outrageous rebellion, at odds with a thoroughly unfree normal world. The price they seem to think that they must pay for the securities and creature comforts of normal life is the abandonment of freedom.

Following such writers on popular culture as John Cawelti, perhaps we can infer something important from contemporary heavy metal. Humankind, the argument goes, is characterized by two deep and competing needs: on the one hand, the need for order and security, and on the other, the desire for disorder and insecurity, as it were, in the experience of the dangerous, risky, or novel. Perhaps it is the case that our young associate the rational world that they will join as one radically at odds with the latter, so expressions of freedom can only occur in the context of anarchic rebellion. If this is true, they—and many of their elders—are equating freedom with incivility, the right to be loud and offensive. Further, heavy metal communicates a message that freedom is the province of juveniles, something in danger of being lost when you grow up and get serious. It is as if respectability and freedom are totally incompatible, a conclusion that excludes the possibility of the major individual product of civility, citizenship. In that sense, the rampaging furies of the heavy metal world alone should probably not concern us elder moral guardians. But if, as some polls indicate, we are witnessing an eclipse of citizenship as a value among the young, then attraction to heavy metal or other popular universes of discourse becomes an effect, a by-product, rather than a cause. From whom did they learn the truly subversive message that one cannot be at once free and civil, liberated and respectable, mature and vital? Is it possible that they learned that from us, observing a stagnant and complacent world of politics, business, and education? We of the older generations may have made the world they will soon enter to be orderly and secure, but have failed to convince them that there they will be free. Heavy metal at least reminds them, and maybe us too, that freedom is supposed to be risky and novel and, yes, even dangerous, and it is the exploration and expansion of the limits of freedom that keeps individuals and nations vital. We may rescue our children from heavy metal; who will rescue them from us?
I saw Hamlet and Duel in the Sun when I was six. I guess I'm between the two someplace.
—Martin Scorsese

You talkin' to me?
—Robert DeNiro as Travis Bickle in Taxi Driver

So, here I am, sitting in my office sipping Pepsi, chewing on a day-old doughnut, staring at the reflection of my own face on the blank, black screen of my word processor, and thinking once again what a wonderful metaphor this would offer for the blending of one's self with the words by which one expresses that self if only I were attempting a poem perfectly suited for an academic exercise in post-modernist, deconstructionist literary criticism. But I'm not. Instead, I'm filled with trepidation. This apprehension is caused not by the ghostly look on the mirror image before me, but by the apparent expectations indicated by friends, colleagues, and students, that, as the 1980s come to a close, I ought to be able to report on the collective health of cinema in the past ten years, as well as an opinion on the best film of the last decade.

Fair enough. I've had tougher tasks to handle. Try writing a 5,000-word paper, "suitable for publication," on a two-day deadline, about a lame nine-line poem (that the poet probably should have shortened to six—if not deep-sixed) sometime and you'll know what I mean. Still, at first, I wonder how I should tackle this assignment. Even by labelling this article as an "assignment" I realize I've given myself away. After all, an assignment is something appointed, given out as a form of labor, not a voluntary function performed out of sheer desire. Once, while teaching a course on legal writing at a law school I came to understand that an assignment according to the courts is the transfer of a claim, right, interest, or property. I was amazed to discover that in this sense an assignment connotes ownership. Therefore, the question asked by a number of acquaintances in these last days near the end of November, 1989, might better be phrased, "Which of the films of the last decade would you be proud to possess?"

Now here is a question I can answer, since a number of films released since 1980 are already part of my videotape collection and others soon will be. In fact, as I begin my mental catalogue of titles for inclusion, I'm pleased to arrive at a conclusion that there are just too many to even list in a short review. Perhaps a narrowly developed list might easily include 100 films or more, which I'm sure will surprise those who've been reading year-after-year the depressing downgrading of the American film industry by flocks of film critics, birds of a feather flying together. Maybe the constant carping by critics over this past period of filmmaking, however, has served to create some positive results.

Recently, polls of film critics about the movies of the 80s have revealed that numerous candidates for "the best films of the
decade” do exist. What may have been at work in film criticism since the 1960s is an aesthetic version of destructive distillation, that process of simultaneous decomposition by heat and distillation of substances such as wood and coal to produce useful by-products. The heat of criticism the last 25 years has led, although not as directly as one would hope, to the useful by-product of higher expectations and finer filmmaking. Some of the many films of the 80s which fulfill the criteria created by heightened expectations and which one might feel proud to possess would certainly include the following (in alphabetical order): Amadeus, Back to the Future, The Big Chill, Blue Velvet, Diner, E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial, Gandhi, Hannah and Her Sisters, The Killing Fields, The King of Comedy, The Last Temptation of Christ, My Dinner with Andre, On Golden Pond, Ordinary People, Out of Africa, Platoon, Prizzi’s Honor, Raiders of the Lost Ark, Rain Man, Reds, Risky Business, Who Framed Roger Rabbit, Wall Street, Witness, and Zelig.

However, a constant has arisen in the various polls published in recent months. One movie has far and away outdistanced all the others of the 80s in the opinions of most observers, and deservedly so. Martin Scorsese’s Raging Bull, released in 1980, has been acclaimed repeatedly as the outstanding picture of the decade. This film has been hailed as the finest of the 80s by critics as diverse as Roger Ebert (Chicago Sun-Times), Gene Siskel (Chicago Tribune), Richard Schickel (Time), Mike Clark (USA Today), J. Hoberman (Village Voice), Stephen Harvey (associate curator of the Museum of Modern Art), as well as Jim Jarmusch (independent director), Richard Price, (the novelist/screenwriter) and Don Simpson (producer).

Many others, such as Peter Travers of Rolling Stone and Sheila Benson of the Los Angeles Times have ranked Raging Bull close to the top of their lists. The polls which have designated Scorsese’s biopic of former heavyweight boxing champion Jake LaMotta the championship title among films released during the last decade have been conducted by film journals such as American Film and Premiere.

As presented by Scorsese, the character of Jake LaMotta is a tragic figure in the classical sense, falling from a position of highest esteem as a result of personal flaws. In fact, LaMotta is more like the royal tragic figures of classical literature than one might possibly guess, since he is involved in a profession which still bestows a figurative crown. The character defects which lead to LaMotta’s downfall are also those traditionally associated with the works of Sophocles or Shakespeare—poisonous jealousy, excessive pride, unbridled ambition, and reckless violence.

Perhaps because this film was released in 1980 and has been a standard by which other realistic films have been measured for the last ten years, Raging Bull has acquired already a classic stature in American film history, a reputation among critics as a film of singular achievement. However, Raging Bull is only one bead in a string of pearls Martin Scorsese has strung together through the last two and a half decades, and the character of Jake LaMotta only one of a gallery of tragic figures and social misfits Scorsese has brought to life on the screen. As Scorsese has explained: “I like neuroses, and I find so-called neurotic people more interesting than so-called well-adjusted persons.”

In many ways, the LaMotta character resembles the original tragic figure played by Harvey Keitel in Scorsese’s first feature-length film, Who’s That Knocking at My Door (1967), a street kid from New York’s Little Italy section unable to fit in with society, or the two young hoodlums (Keitel and Robert DeNiro) employing antisocial behavior to obtain through criminal action some degree of respect that they could not possibly attain through acceptable social accomplishments in Mean Streets (1972). Scorsese’s portraits of social outsiders desperate to be accepted, or at least recognized, are considered by many to be the best American film” in the 25 years Roger Ebert has declared Taxi Driver “the best American film” in the 25 years he’s been reviewing films, noting that “Travis Bickle, the lonely, violent taxi driver, has entered into folklore.” That Scorsese has retained the crown in the 1980s with Raging Bull is equivalent to a heavyweight successfully defending his title for two decades. Equally significant, Scorsese has two other films about social misfits seeking attention near the top of the decade’s list of fine films: The King of Comedy (1983), again star-

January, 1990
ring DeNiro, this time as Rupert Pupkin, a nerd who believes his only way of being accepted and recognized by society is to kidnap a Johnny Carson-like character, played by Jerry Lewis, and substitute for him as America's beloved late-night host; and The Last Temptation of Christ (1988), which displays the human character assumed by Christ, with the accompanying conflicts, enticements, and rejections.

Although other directors are represented more than once on the roll call of fine films of the '80s (most notably Woody Allen, Barry Levinson, Steven Spielberg, and Oliver Stone), and with these directors out front the 1990s may provide more strong films, it has become clear in the last two decades that Martin Scorsese is our foremost director of dramatic films. When I sit in the theatre at the end of a Scorsese film and watch the closing credits descend the face of the screen, I'm reminded of that image of a face reflecting off the screen of a word processor, the visual self mingling with the words meant to express that self. In Scorsese's films the portraits of his characters linger as images in the mind throughout the extended cataloging of credits and much longer. They are indelible. Scorsese becomes the auteur, the author of a visual literature. Scorsese's films are the perfect post-modernist poems, mingling fiction and reality, the artist and his art, the vision of one's self and society's view of the self. The audience doesn't enter the lives of Scorsese's characters so much as the characters enter the lives of the audience members.

Unlike the five films of the '80s listed earlier in this article as ones which any viewer of films could be proud to possess, Scorsese's films take possession of the viewer, and they never let go.
To think critically about one’s own culture often involves comparisons. The contours of this world are somehow sharpened when we set it against that other, different world. Fortunately, most of us have access to these different worlds through our readings, through the various pasts that have shaped our present but now stand so remote from present ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. Let me then start with one such past—that of Dante’s *Inferno*. Images from Dante’s hell are perhaps still a living part of our cultural tradition. Even if we have not read Dante, we are likely to recognize the chilling inscription on the gate of hell: “Abandon every hope, who enter here.” While most of us are more likely to conjure up the Miltonic hell of fire, we may still remember the Dantesque scheme of fitting the punishment to the sinner. In that vast panorama of hell, the sinners are as various as the sins they represent. But they do have this one thing in common: they have a general tendency not to accept full blame for their actions. Nor are they a forgiving lot.

This is true of even the most likeable of sinners, Paolo and Francesca. Still together, still loving, these two inhabit the circle of lust. Francesca had been married to Paolo’s older brother, an ugly man and much older than she. The marriage was a convenient, mercenary arrangement, where Francesca was no more than a pawn. We can certainly understand why she was attracted to Paolo and Paolo to her. But Dante does not absolve them of sin, and holds them doubly guilty for not acknowledging their guilt. When Francesca says, “Love, that releases no beloved from loving,/took hold of me so strongly through his beauty,” we note the passive construction which implies that she is a victim of love rather than an active agent. When she describes the actual moment of transgression, she blames the book they have been reading, a book that describes the illicit love of Lancelot and Guinevere. Finally, even God may be to blame for not being their friend. For her husband who murdered her, Francesca reserves a revengeful snarl: “Caina one of the lowest circles of hell awaits him.”

Our response to modern day Paolos and Francescas is bound to be very different. Few of us would blame a young woman for transgressing when trapped in a situation not of her own choosing, a situation which offers no recourse, only a lifetime of suffering submission. But the primary difference may be that we now no longer hold people so fully accountable for their actions because we have begun to recognize how profoundly and uncontrollably we are shaped by circumstance, upbringing, genetic makeup, glandular balances, hormonal secretions, unconscious drives and who knows what else. Our judgments of human weakness and folly are tempered because we know so much more, and it is this knowledge that makes Dante’s medieval world appear so distant.

If on the one hand our new knowledge makes it difficult to believe that we humans are fully responsible for our actions, then, paradoxically, it also makes it difficult to believe that there are any profoundly mysterious, out of this world causes for what happens to us. When on a winter morning I find no hot water in the tap, when on the same day my car breaks down, and my computer eats up my manuscript, I may be perfectly willing to assign blame but not to witchcraft. In my rational world of cause and effect, supernatural agencies seldom constitute a direct cause. And when I hear of people speaking of the AIDS epidemic as God’s curse, I quickly
consign them to the Middle Ages.

One major difference between the pre-modern way of thinking and our way of thinking must be our overwhelming belief in material causes which are, we believe, in the long run susceptible to human management. It is a way of thinking we owe to the triumph of the natural sciences and to the application of the scientific way of thinking to all branches of knowledge. It is a way of thinking that we, for the most part, legitimately regard as progressive. The Indian from the untouchable caste who passively accepts his woeful lot as his karma should be reminded of the palpable social structures created by humans that determine his suffering. There are causes which can and should be addressed through political and legal action. Whatever happens in our world has a direct material cause, and our greatest effort is now expended in discovering, understanding, and then dealing with these causes.

Lately, I have begun to wonder, however, if our insistence on finding material causality has not gone too far. Has it, for instance, made us incapable of accepting, like Dante's sinners, full responsibility for our actions? Has it made us a kind of people who now feel compelled to find something or someone to blame? Has it made us incapable of accepting the role of chance in our lives? Has it made us incapable of simple, graceful, and sometimes necessary acceptance of the shape of our lives? And is there some tangential evidence for such habits of the mind in the kind of lawsuits now frequently reported in the media? Lawsuits, I have always thought, are a cry for help, a plea for justice, a way of asserting and recovering rights, a way of mitigating the baleful control of the rich and the powerful, a means of achieving just compensation and even just revenge. But today many lawsuits seem impelled by a persistent desire to hold someone accountable for our misfortunes.

The case I have to make is not an easy one, for often groups being sued are precisely those that earlier escaped accountability. Take, for instance, medical malpractice suits. Our reverential attitude to physicians had allowed gross incompetence and negligence to go unchecked. Now physicians too are accountable like the rest of us and that is good. But if we had earlier elevated physicians to a godhood are we still not demanding too much from them? And what we demand from physicians reveals something disturbing about ourselves. When things go wrong, when the results are not exactly what we expected or wanted then surely someone is to blame. A recent Newsweek reports that doctors are increasingly being sued for wrongful life and wrongful birth. Of course, sometimes the doctors are accountable for negligence. But in some instances it may even be that the doctor, exercising his or her best judgment, does not think it necessary to ask, let's say, for an amniocentesis because the mother in not in the risk-bearing age group, is reasonably healthy, and there are no known genetic factors to raise a warning flag. When the baby is born "defective" the doctor is sued for wrongful life because he or she did not predict such an outcome within the first trimester, thus not making available the option of abortion for parents.

Or take what might be the case in "wrongful birth." During the process of birth there are complications which could not be predicted, which do take place occasionally even with the best of precautions. The child is deprived of oxygen while traveling through the birth canal, a situation no fetal monitoring can avoid, a situation not even the most skillful doctor can fully control. Parents have still sued doctors because the doctor could and should have avoided the possibility of complications through a cesarian section. It is almost irrelevant that such suits are not usually won because to me this impulse to sue is what is significant. People who are hapless victims of such unfortunate circumstances deserve sympathy and help, and perhaps we as society have not done enough to assure such help. But why does it seem so necessary to find someone to blame? Why is it so hard to accept that human life is subject to chance and mishap that may be beyond anyone's control? If in our past there was too passive a resignation to God's will, in our present we seem to make no room for operations of God or chance or fate or destiny or uncontrollable events. A basic and universal fact of human existence is its imperfection. To do nothing to ameliorate this imperfection is wrong but it may be equally wrong not to make any room for imperfection.

This shift in our cultural consciousness that I am recording is reflected in the shift in liability law and liability insurance. In a recent lecture at Valparaiso University, Peter Huber explained how our civil liabilities system has changed. According to him "we have removed more and more of the alternative defenses that used to exist in the legal system." It
used to be a viable defense, according to Huber, to say that the liable party did not cause the harm, or that the harmed person had assumed the risk, or that an informed choice had been made, or that the liable party had done his or her best, or that society at that time allowed such practices and that all the local standards and precautions had been met. But now more and more it seems enough to establish that harm has been done to hold another party liable. It is sufficient that a material cause exists; we have been harmed and even if no one is to blame by ordinary human, reasonable standards someone else is still to blame in the sense of being accountable.

About such developments I have very ambivalent feelings. Big business and big corporations in pursuit of big profits so often wreaked havoc on people's lives without the legal restraints and accountability now available through the consumer activism of those like Ralph Nader. Who would not want some compensation to be paid to the thousands stricken by the leaking of deadly chemical gases from the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal? But when does the pursuit of liability become self-defeating? For example, most physicians in emergency rooms deal with hundreds of head injuries and have sufficient experience to tell a minor, superficial injury from a more serious one. But, again, all human judgments, even the most informed ones, are subject to some error, and the physicians can no longer risk such an error. So hundreds of unnecessary skull x-rays are done each day. As we are aware, such practices have raised medical costs so high that a substantial portion of our population can no longer afford medical care. Who, indeed, is responsible, and for what?

It seems almost as if we are shaping a culture where people will find it easy to evade, transfer or refuse full responsibility for their lives. Certainly, we are already becoming a people who have trouble assuming responsibility for any one else's life. Let me end with yet another illustration. A United Airlines plane was diverted because of bad weather to an airport an hour away from the original destination causing a delay of several hours for the passengers. One man got very irate at this delay, so irate it seems that when he got home he quarreled with his wife and beat her. The wife has now brought a lawsuit against the airline and the pilot alleging that they are responsible for her being beaten. My lawyer husband says that she will not be able to establish proximate cause and will lose her case. I am reassured by this and also by the fact that such cases are still infrequent. But did the husband (and his wife) not consider that however provoking the circumstances he alone should have been held responsible for his behavior? Or was it his endomorphines? Or his unloving childhood? Or the excessive violence on T.V.? We are creatures shaped and determined by forces beyond our control. We cannot be held accountable for ourselves. But someone else can. In Dante's world such a negation of free will, such an avoidance of blame would have paved a sure road to hell. In ours it takes us sometimes into law courts, sometimes to psychiatrists—which may, now that I think of it, provide our version of hell.

Next month in The Cresset

- The editor interviews Theodore Woolf of the Christian Science Monitor
- William Olmsted on Modernism: Is It Dead Yet?
- Bruce Berner asks, "Why are so many Americans in jail?"

January, 1990