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CRESSET

A review of Literature, the Arts, and Public Affairs
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Above: Composition in Mahogany (Growth), c. 1964, 23 ½ x 19 x 11 inches.

Cover: Sprites, undated, walnut relief, 20 ½ x 57 x 3 ¼ inches.

The Cresset
Of Poverty, Race, and Politics

During the just completed presidential race, we heard a good many complaints to the effect that the candidates were avoiding some of the most difficult problems facing the nation. Critics regularly decried the unwillingness of George Bush and Michael Dukakis to take on in explicit detail such politically sensitive issues as the budget and trade deficits. Yet the critics of avoidance did some significant avoiding of their own. They were no more likely than were the candidates to draw attention to what is arguably the most critical domestic issue of American politics: the already desperate and still deteriorating situation of the urban underclass.

Reasons for the anti-avoiders' avoidance are not difficult to find. The underclass issue touches on some of the most sensitive and intractable matters in our public life. It involves, first of all, the subject of race (the composition of the underclass is disproportionately black), and it has become virtually impossible to discuss racial matters in America without causing offense and without suspicions and charges of racism—or, at the very least, racial insensitivity—coming immediately into play. No one wants to talk frankly about racial matters today because one cannot do so and come away unsullied.

Racial sensitivities aside, media commentators and politicians alike hesitate to address the problem of the underclass because they are by now so baffled as to what might be done to find solutions for it. Americans characteristically approach public policy issues with the often naive but also often salutary assumption that there exists no problem for which we cannot solve we would just as soon ignore. But two categories of programs have failed conspicuously and consistently: large federal programs intended to change behavior (as opposed to dealing out commodities or cash), and any program, small or large, local or federal, trying in particular to change the behavior of a clientele that is not already socialized into norms of working-class and middle-class society. Federal programs to help the underclass fall into both categories. We have spent vast amounts of money on these programs over the past decades, but no matter how much we spend, we still do not know how—let me repeat and emphasize these words, we do not know how—to change the behavior of significant proportions of the urban underclass through social engineering.

Murray's pessimism stems from the experience of recent years. Reformers, he says, have supposed that the problem of unemployment has to do with the absence of jobs. The problem, that is, is supposedly structural: either there are no jobs at all, or those that do exist "require qualifications which members of the underclass do not have, or are located in places where they do not live, or offer such dispiritingly low wages that they are not worth the effort." Yet the evidence of the recent economic recovery, Murray argues, suggests otherwise. Many urban labor markets are now approaching conditions of full employment, and blacks active in the labor market have benefited accordingly. But therein lies the problem: a large number of young black men who are neither in school or in ill health appear to remain outside the category of those working or actively looking for work. Murray concludes that the argument that "there just aren't any jobs" is ringing increasingly hollow, and that the problem of young black men remaining outside the labor market "seems to be extremely resistant to improvements in the economy."

From all this, Murray draws gloomy conclusions. He anticipates that a new liberal consensus will gradually emerge on the problem of the underclass, one that will dismiss as futile efforts to bring large
numbers of its members into the mainstream of American life and that will therefore conclude that the only humane path is simply to provide food, housing, medical care, and other social services to the underclass much in the way that such services are currently provided for American Indians who live on reservations.

Should such a despairingly paternalistic consensus emerge, it would of course mark a signal failure for society in general and liberalism in particular. During most of the period since the New Deal, liberals have argued that under the leadership of an affirmative national government people can be rescued from poverty and life on the margins of society for full participation in all aspects of American social life. Despite conservative charges to the contrary, the liberals' dominant ideal has not been that of a nation of dependents provided for by a custodial elite but of a society of equals who have to some extent been brought to the possibility of equal participation through the prudent, humane, and limited intervention of activist government.

Murray and others contend that over the past two decades liberals have gradually edged away from that traditional vision in the direction of a more paternalistic ideal, one that in the face of Great Society failures is skeptical of the ability of the poor to provide for themselves (even with some government help) and yet whose passion for equal outcomes has intensified even as its faith in the ability of people to achieve equality on their own has withered. Thus the drift to an ever more interventionist, collectivist, and custodial style of liberal politics. Murray and his friends may exaggerate the extent of the drift, but the current disarray within the liberal community itself as to the proper definition of liberalism suggests that they are on to something.

Be that as it may, the problem of the underclass endures, and while judgments as to the probable causes and cures of the problem may legitimately differ, it does seem clearly to be the case that deep cultural forces are involved, forces that will not alone be overcome either by welfare-reform legislation or by the stimulus of an expanding economy.

A recent study indicates the direction toward which change should aim. That study suggests that the likelihood of winding up in poverty dwindles to near zero among people who accomplish three things: finish high school, get and stay married, and hold on to a first job for at least a year. It's easy to lay out the desired ends but less easy to prescribe ways of achieving them. Government intervention will necessarily play a part, but our recent history strongly indicates that government by itself will not get us where we want to go. Indeed, studies like those of Murray suggest that excessive government intervention can be counterproductive.

One thing is certain. The current situation is intolerable, and requirements of both social stability and moral decency demand that the new President place this issue at the top of his agenda.

**Save Us the Whales**

There is no criticism of American public life more pervasive, Left to Right, than the charge that our priorities are out of joint. Conservatives argue that we dribble away our resources on government projects of marginal benefit to the public good, while liberals express outrage over private indulgences that persist in the face of desperate public needs. Dispassionate observers can readily find instances of misallocation of commitment and effort on either side, but there are occasions when the problem is not misallocation according to ideology but looniness by any estimate.

So it has been, at least from our angle of vision, in the situation of the stranded whales near Barrow, Alaska. Because of an unseasonable growth of pack ice, three California gray whales (only two of which survived) found themselves trapped some five miles from open water and freedom. For reasons we cannot fathom, the news media of the world turned the plight of the whales into a major event and followed in minute detail efforts made to rescue them.

The matter took on extraordinary importance. President Reagan indicated a personal interest. The Russian navy got involved. So did several large oil companies. So also did the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the Federal Aviation Administration, the Commerce Department, the Air Force, the Coast Guard, and the Army National Guard. The town of Barrow announced expenditures of over $300,000 on the project, and with all the other groups involved, we are obviously talking about total costs in the tens of millions of dollars. For two whales. It was the equivalent of the city of New York deciding to mobilize the full weight of its resources—and focus the attention of the national media—on the problem of a cat (all right, two cats) caught up a tree.

The story has an apparently happy ending. The surviving whales have found their way to open water, freedom, and presumed good health and long life. We wish them well. We hope at the same time that the next human/animal interest story that the media and the public take up has more intrinsic significance to it than this one did. There really are more important things under the sun.
BLOOM AND THE COLLEGE TEACHER

Christian Reflections on the Limits of a Modern Classic

Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (Simon and Schuster, 1987) is now a genuine American phenomenon. The book's long and still continuing run on the best-seller lists has made Bloom perhaps the first professor of political philosophy to become a millionaire by writing in his field. But the book is not only popular; it is respected.

Bloom has emerged out of relative obscurity to become one of the authorities on American education. When former Secretary of Education William Bennett speaks of the virtues of the Great Tradition and the Great Books, and condemns American universities for ignoring them in their trendiness and greediness, most leading scholars sneer. When Bloom does the same, they respectfully disagree, conceding that he has made any number of thoughtful and erudite observations in support of his case.

My purpose is simply to consider a few things college teachers can learn from this book. Following Bloom's fine example, I am not going to do so in a "value free" way. In the great tradition of "instant classics," Bloom's book already has become in some respects altogether too authoritative. Yet Bloom is an authority who cries out to be questioned.

*The Closing of the American Mind* seems to be an after-the-fact description. The American mind, from Bloom's view, is closed. His most compelling evidence for this conclusion is his account of the present stage of the history of Western thought. The human mind, actually, seems to be closed, because the European mind is no longer distinct from America's, and Bloom's silent assumption is that everything Eastern will eventually be Westernized.

This homogenization of "mind" (as in "American mind") is one telling sign of its emptiness. Liberated or philosophic thought must emerge out of and express itself in opposition to a particular culture and political community. Without such particularistic opposition, the universalistic vision of philosophy has nothing to question, and by which to be questioned. The success of the philosophers' practical project beginning with Socrates or Plato, to make the world safe for philosophy, has achieved too much success for its own good. The world is now too domesticated, too tame. The radical questioning which is indispensable for the genuine pursuit of wisdom has come to an end.

Relativism, applied constantly, paralyzes action. No one would ever die or even attempt to prevail over others in speech for a prejudice known merely to be a prejudice.

Americans are now, from Bloom's perspective, too prejudiced against prejudice really to question prejudice. They are liberated from firm moral attachments or convictions for moral emptiness. All the essence has been sucked out of human existence. It is unreasonable really to believe in or devote oneself to anything in particular. The truth is understood to be the truth of "relativism"; all beliefs are equally untrue. In principle, of course, one is free to choose any particular conviction, but there is no reason for any such choice.

Relativism, applied consistently, paralyzes action. No one would ever die or even attempt to prevail over others in speech for a prejudice known merely to be a prejudice. Relativism is the great enemy of racism, it is true, as well as sexism (including, as Bloom shows, the natural differences between the sexes that may really be morally and politically relevant). It is also the enemy of patriotism, including all the duties of citizens. It is, more generally, the enemy of all human distinctions and hence, ultimately, of humanity itself. That I am not certain enough or passionate enough to
act is the enervating truth underlying a consistent understanding of relativism's "virtue" of tolerance.

Bloom seems to see nothing but this virtue in today's students. They are "nice," he says, or politely unassertive. They neither love nor hate Bloom or that for which he stands. They are polite about him. They are too unerotic to love Platonic ideas. They are not spirited enough to hate them. But they will memorize them, if necessary, on their way to their M.B.A.s.

Today's students, as Bloom presents them, are, although he does not say so explicitly, caricatures of Socrates. They imitate his practical detachment without his theoretical devotion. They are products of the conviction that all human beings ought to imitate Socrates, that Socrates is the model human type. They unconsciously believe themselves to be wiser than Socrates. They extend the relativizing or rationally destructive power of the "Socratic method" to Socrates himself. His "thing" has no more validity than anyone else's. His moral or vocational seriousness is no less ridiculous than anyone else's. Socrates was not nice. Niceness requires a wholly consistent detachment from human life's drama of moral choice by mortals.

Bloom has many ways of showing how American education—conceived as a perverse product of the project of the philosophers, with American professors viewing themselves as continuing and radicalizing Socrates' work—has emptied this drama of its content. But one of these in particular is most striking, because it most simply and directly challenges the prejudices of most professors. Bloom describes the moral richness which permeated his grandparents' life and home; the moral drama of the Bible was alive for them. His cousins, each of whom possesses a doctoral degree and is better educated technically than the grandparents, speak of morality in egoistic clichés. For them, there is no moral drama. Their view of morality is laughable. They are inferior morally to their grandparents because they have lost contact, as a result primarily of their education, with a profound moral tradition.

American professors today typically view freedom from tradition or "orthodoxy" to be humanly desirable moral liberation. A professor with an office near mine displays on his door the Socratic slogan, "Question authority." Once questioned, the thought goes, authority is no longer authoritative. The result is human autonomy.

The professorial task, so conceived, is to teach students to "think critically," to discover and to reject their prejudices. But there is no denying that in most cases the most powerful effect of such teaching is the production of rationalizations for the rejection of stern moral demands. The theoretical view that all limits on self-expression that are not freely chosen, that are not in accord with one's own critical thoughts and idiosyncratic feelings, are illegitimate is, of course, in accord with the untutored tastes of young people. They have to be taught, against the grain, to view what is authoritative as authoritative. If they are to be taught, they need teachers who do not believe that relativism is true. They need teachers with the courage of their convictions.

Even Socrates, not to mention Aristophanes or Rousseau, knew that the Socratic method could not produce a nation, particularly a democracy, full of Socratic men and women. Its popularization produces the easygoing, democratic thought, "do your own thing," without any reason for choosing a difficult or ennobling thing over an easy or degrading one. The ugliness of democracy, for Plato, was that it did not teach mortals that they must use their time well. In its unwillingness to consider any restraints on individual freedom, it refuses to come to terms with the human reality of the scarcity of time. Socrates, in an amazing, seemingly inhuman way, seemed to confront his mortality without any hopes or fears. But his example, Plato thought and experience confirms, cannot become the general rule. The rational destruction of the mythic foundations of what most human beings hope for and fear from death produces people like Socrates except without his animation.

Bloom's cousins are liberated from traditional morality. They are free to choose their own "lifestyles," but they do not have the spiritual resources to choose well. They have not been improved as human beings by American education; they are, in the crucial sense, not educated at all. Although Bloom, perhaps out of personal delicacy, does not do this explicitly, he invites the reader to consider their relationships with and their education of their children.

Bloom's cousins, no doubt, excelled in school because they were well-reared by their "authoritarian" parents. Their children, one suspects, are not likely even to be disciplined enough to benefit from a first-rate technical education. Consider the Americans who excel in disproportionate numbers in such education today: Asian-Americans. They are motivated primarily, they say, out of honor and fear, both qualities rooted in the unquestioned acceptance of their parents' traditional authority. As Americans become more Americanized, as they lose real contact with pre-modern culture, they actually become less open to higher education. Parents lack any moral content to pass on to their children. They cannot tell them why they must possess the self-restraint necessary to be open to serious education.

There is an equally Socratic rejoinder scribbled in by some perspicacious commentator below the slogan on
the Socratic professor's door: "Why?" Why should authority be questioned? Have we professors typically forgotten the questionableness of such questioning? The answer to the first question that comes to mind most readily is that we question in pursuit of the truth. But are Bloom's cousins, never mind their children, closer to the truth than his grandparents? Their alleged wisdom did not come to them through their actual imitation of Socrates. They do not genuinely question the truth of relativism. Their dogmatism or orthodoxy, moreover, surely reveals less about the true possibilities of human life than that of their grandparents. Determinedly anti-authoritarian education does not lead students to the truth. It instead closes their minds in an unprecedently complete way.

**Bloom seems to complain that there is no moral majority with teeth to strike out against his Socratic, amoral detachment, which is considerably more flagrant than was that of Socrates.**

In Bloom's experience at the best universities, today's students enter class already convinced that relativism is true. They are already aware that it is the culture's mark of sophistication and common decency. They do not have to be taught to be prejudiced against prejudice, and professors who teach with that goal in mind are simply reinforcing prejudice. (One must add that such professors probably receive outstanding student evaluations, as long as they can entertain, too. Unadorned relativism, after all, is boring.) Bloom, disconcertingly enough, does not report on his considerable success in getting today's students to question the truth of relativism. He gives the impression that they are too closed-minded for significant success to be expected.

Bloom endorses the Great Books method of instruction, despite its limitations. These books embody the Great Tradition of the West, the vigor of which has always depended upon the intensity of the conflict between philosophical and traditional education or, to put the dispute somewhat differently, between reason and revelation as the source of moral authority. In the great works of the philosophers, poets, and theologians, the human drama of moral choice still lives. Every choice is questionable in light of its fundamental alternatives, but, given human nature or the human condition, choices must still be made.

But, as presented by Bloom, this method seems reactionary. The great books were written in the context of real, spirited political and cultural hostility to philosophy. Their teaching is shaped and inspired by the character of the opposition. America, lacking such spirited hostility, has taken all the fun out of free thinking, and the drama out of the choice for or against philosophy. Bloom says he had to learn from his American experience the degree of dependence of philosophy upon culture. He experienced the necessity of its presence by its absence.

Bloom believes that he, as a philosopher, has missed something quite fundamental because he has no real experience of Socrates' practical predicament. He seems to complain that there is no moral majority with teeth to strike out against his Socratic, amoral detachment, which is considerably more flagrant than was that of Socrates. The traditional problem for philosophers has been the powerful hostility of religion to their atheism. Hence, fearing the fate of Socrates, they presented themselves publicly as believers. But the traditional problem is not Bloom's; America has no objection to his atheism.

Bloom does not bother to present himself as a good family man or a good citizen, and his personal atheism is never denied. He makes it clear that he is not part of the moral majority or even its friend. He does not even pay it the compliment of believing it to be strong enough to be feared. Bloom sees no need to be a hero, even a Socratic hero, and he does not flatter his audience. He might say that the enthusiastic reception his book has received from allegedly cultural conservatives is not evidence that he is wrong about the American mind, after all.

Bloom identifies himself with Socrates, while showing his fellow teachers the limits of this pedagogical approach. Socrates needs a healthy cultural and political order to oppose, but he himself cannot participate in the creation of such an order. Bloom cannot tell his students what must be done to revive human life. He ironically disdains all activism, whether liberal, radical, or conservative, especially under contemporary conditions.

Bloom's Great Books education gives students a sense of what has been lost and offers ways to ask the permanent human questions. But it is very short on answers. It does not provide the certainty about the human good that must be at the foundation of political and cultural transformation. For the philosopher, the only genuine community, says Bloom, is the community of deracinated thinkers. But he also says that most human beings and, it turns out, even the philosophers require non-philosophic communitarian roots. The educators and statesmen of the future, Bloom suggests, need teachers other than Bloom.

The modern philosopher who seems to intrigue
Bloom the most is Nietzsche. Nietzsche saw that the spirit of philosophy—its will to truth—had turned against human life. He saw what really ailed the modern world: too much Socrates and, as a result, not enough courage and not enough faith. Culture or human community is rooted in a shared sense of the sacred, and nothing is sacred in Socrates’ eyes. Nietzsche attempted to revive, using Aristophanes’ acute criticisms, the case against Socrates. He attempted to create, out of the nothing the West was about to become, a culture worthy of human beings, including philosophers, by redefining philosophy as creativity.

Nietzsche failed. He did not overcome but only intensified the sickness of relativism. It has become even more the case that nothing is sacred. The lesson to be learned, according to Bloom, is that philosophy is not fundamentally creative. The efforts of thought to invigorate action by subordinating itself to it, as the extreme case of the early Nazi Heidegger (Nietzsche’s best student) showed, produce perverse, destructive, and, ultimately, ridiculous results. Heidegger and Nietzsche, according to Bloom, were not ironic enough.

Bloom is plenty ironic. He is too much so to strike out against Socrates himself. He goes through the case against Socrates with the attitude of a prosecuting attorney on the public payroll, not with passionate, personal conviction. The only thing that matters to him is that philosophy have a future. He leaves it to others to teach today’s students how to be parents, citizens, and Christians or Jews under the circumstances they encounter. He creates the false and debilitating impression, in fact, that such “commitments” are no longer possible.

The most striking omission from Bloom’s book is a real appreciation of the case for revelation. He gives no evidence that he reads the Bible as he says it must be read, “with the gravity of a potential believer.” In this respect, at least, he is no different from his cousins and the characteristic, contemporary, closed-minded American professor.

Bloom never discusses, for example, St. Augustine’s biblically-based criticism of the self-deceptive pride of the philosophers, of their willful inability to see the true foundation of the freedom of the human person. He is virtually silent on the biblical-Christian experience of the createdness of the human person, and he underestimates greatly, I think, the power of this experience in shaping the modern world. He also underestimates, perhaps because of the limited range of his experience with students, the extent to which the experience of a personal God maintains the reality of American freedom and democracy even today. For Bloom, as for his cousins, as for Nietzsche, God, particularly the God of the Bible, is dead, and Bloom does not pretend to be able to create a morally adequate replacement.

Bloom, the philosopher, can admit in principle that he may be wrong on God. But he needs to be challenged by teachers and students who really believe he is. Can it be true that the future of American openness-mindedness is dependent on teachers who can show today’s students the continuing credibility of the experience of belief, of the creature?


ROBERT NISBET'S AMERICA

A Conservative Jeremiad on the Modern Age

For much of his professional career Robert Nisbet has been a lonely example for those who insist that the phrase "conservative sociologist" must be something other than an oxymoron. With The Present Age: Progress and Anarchy in Modern America (Harper & Row, $17.95) Nisbet has provided further evidence of his rather isolated status within a discipline overrun by—and overpopulated with—Marxists, feminists, and other assorted utopians. While less a sociological treatise than an historical essay, The Present Age is pure Nisbet, if not pure sociology. So much the better for both.

In fact, Robert Nisbet has long been writing essays masquerading as full-blown books. The Present Age is no exception. It is a personal statement of his untempered objections to the century during which it has been his misfortune to be alive and thinking. The Present Age, however, is not an exercise in presentism. According to Nisbet's definition, the age extends at least from the Great War to, well, the present.

As he hurriedly surveys this seventy-year swath of time, Nisbet finds precious little that pleases him—and a lot that doesn't. Too old to be an angry young man, he is too angry to be a contented old man. Instead, he is an example of another rare bird in full fight: the angry old man. Not one but two previously oxymoronic pairings collapse when confronted with the not always pleasant persona and not always pleasing thoughts of one Robert A. Nisbet.

We might expect that Nisbet would be less the curmudgeon today than he was prior to the arrival of a conservative administration in Washington. Morning in Ronald Reagan's America, one would think, could not have failed to brighten at least some of the recently present days for his conservative. In two words, however, it did. Why? Not because the Reagan revolution failed, but because Nisbet's idea of a revolution was never considered, much less attempted.

Robert Nisbet is a conservative with a small "c," who believes in community with an equally small "c." Nineteenth-century America, or better yet, America at any point before the Wilson Revolution which accompanied the American entrance into World War I, did have, in Nisbet's view, a genuine sense of community with a small "c." There was, Nisbet cannot avoid suggesting, an American Golden Age which preceded the present age. There was a time when local interests prevailed over national interests, when family life was vibrant, when neighborhood was more than a sociological construct, when bureaucracy did not threaten to strangle us, and when the demands of the garrison state were not such that it stood to destroy those whom it would protect.

Whether those who lived during Nisbet's designated time of few troubles thought they were so blessed is beside the point. Nisbet simply assumes that the pre-1917 world must have been the best of times for its inhabitants, because the post-1917 world has proved to be the worst of times for those so unblessed as to be alive and struggling during this present age.

Nisbet offers no history of American life before Woodrow Wilson other than to borrow at will from Tocqueville's observations on the state of life in essentially stateless America, circa the 1830s. Tocqueville, however, is less important to Nisbet for his sociological insights than for his predictive powers. It was Tocqueville, after all, who not only detected the seemingly contradictory American commitments to individualism and equality, but who warned his American readers that a powerful federal government would be the inevitable—and ironic—consequence of our desire to preserve the former and achieve the latter.

Nisbet, the communitarian, is not a spokesman for the alleged virtues of the self-reliant individual of nineteenth-century American mythology or for the supposed vices of the "loose individual" of his version.
of twentieth-century American reality. And Nisbet, the conservative, is no proponent of the virtues of a thoroughly egalitarian America, much less of government efforts to produce it. To this extent he is in sympathy with the alleged intentions of the Reaganites and their criticisms of earlier American politicians and thinkers who built and defended the omnipresent state. Alleged? Yes, insofar as Nisbet is concerned, since he doubts that they possessed either the historical sense or political will to effect the kinds of changes he thinks necessary.

Before examining Nisbet's wish list or his rogues' gallery of American villains let it be revealed that his ideological enemies list is headed by a Frenchman, one J.J. Rousseau. Architect of the "most powerful state to be founded anywhere in political philosophy," it was Rousseau who laid the groundwork for the modern despots who have used the rhetoric of freedom and community to legitimate both their hold on power and themselves as the personal embodiments of Rousseau's "general will."

Nisbet finds incipient Rousseaus scattered across the American political landscape, but he more precisely locates them on the left wing of the American political spectrum. From Woodrow Wilson to Franklin Roosevelt to Mario Cuomo there is, in Nisbet's view, a disturbing pattern of Democratic leaders willing to put forth the dubious idea of a national community at the expense of more legitimate local communities in all their great variety. Nisbet is equally appalled by the dimensions of Wilson's "war state," by the intrusions of Roosevelt's New Deal state, and by the distortions of Cuomo's rhetoric in defense of the state as family. At first glance the current occupant of the New York statehouse might not deserve to be ranked with his fellow governors, but Nisbet would insist that Mario Cuomo is of a piece with them. His use of the "family" metaphor in his much-celebrated 1984 Democratic keynote address to redefine what Nisbet deems to be the "centralized, collectivized, and bureaucratized" national state is, to Nisbet, loose and dangerous talk.

So is the willingness of his fellow Americans to buy it. But one wonders at this point why Nisbet should be so surprised by these developments. After all, if the idea of a national community "burns brightly in the American consciousness at the present time," it is not the result simply of misguided policies put in place by a few overly zealous Democratic presidents or presidential pretenders. True, Wilson did tip his hand when he intoned that it is a "nation, not an army that we must shape and train for war." But it is also true that Wilsonian repression did not stem solely from the White House; it came as well from the herd-like voluntarism of thousands of "neighborhood watchers," four-minute men, and textbook censors.

In any case, the newly-aroused attachment to the state did not disappear during the less than normal Twenties. To Nisbet, this was not an era of a restored normalcy, but rather a time of nationalizing constitutional amendments (prohibition and women's suffrage), of Hoover-inspired national planning in everything from agriculture to social work, and of the continuing popularity of such nationalist thinkers as John Dewey (whom Randolph Bourne ridiculed as a "war intellectual" and whom Robert Nisbet disparages as a leading example of a then new and now permanent phenomenon, namely the "political intellectual"). Why, even Ronald Reagan's favorite non-statist chief executive, Calvin Coolidge, comes in for the Nisbetian glare for turning the Bureau of Investigation over to one J. Edgar Hoover with "clear instructions" to convert it into the "first federal police force in American history."

**Nisbet finds incipient Rousseaus scattered across the ideological landscape, but he more precisely locates them on the political left.**

But the soon-to-be FBI subsequently proved to be a very small cog in a Cold War machine which Nisbet finds indefensible from a military, intellectual, or moral standpoint. Here Nisbet wants to have it both ways. After establishing his anti-Communist credentials, he proceeds to tear apart the official rationale for the Cold War and the defense establishment which supports it. The Soviet Union, he concedes, may be a "highly militaristic, imperialistic nation," but its existence alone cannot explain why the United States has become a militarized, imperial power as well. (Nisbet is careful not to employ such loaded words to describe Cold War America, but the thrust of his argument nevertheless forces him in that general direction.)

Why, then, does the United States possess an "ever-larger" military? Here Nisbet resorts to the twin evils of that old war horse, the "military-industrial complex," and a recurring Wilsonian impulse which seems to have infected virtually every American, save Robert Nisbet, at one time or another. "The Soviets just won't pass muster as the cause of everything . . . that we have on our post-World War II record." Our meddling ways are inevitably rooted in our tendency to sacrifice our national interest to national morality. And our failures are invariably attributable either to a bloated military or to our acceptance of the "Great American Myth" (which Nisbet describes as a "can-do
attitude" when it comes to military engagements, an attitude which itself doesn't pass Nisbet's muster given his insistence that the American people are at best uninterested and at worst incompetent when it comes to carrying out military enterprises.

In the final analysis Nisbet must be labeled a conservative isolationist of the Robert Taft variety. One would have thought that post-1945 Soviet behavior would have been sufficient reason to consign that phrase as well to the permanent status of the oxymoronic. But Robert Nisbet is apparently nothing if not a continuing series of contradictions, and perhaps dangerous contradictions at that. Which, after all, is worse: a liberal isolationist who argues for a reduced American presence in the world either because he regards Communism as a progressive force or not a great threat to western interests, or a conservative isolationist who claims to understand the evils of Communism, but is more intent upon castigating Washington for over-reacting to this evil?

Writing in the spirit of George Kennan, whom he invokes but once, Nisbet is spooked by the spectre of Woodrow Wilson, from whom neither he nor his country apparently can escape. Wilson's is the "key mind" governing past and present American foreign policy. Wilson's "passionate moralism" was the occasion for the American disaster that resulted from involvement in the Great War.

But if Woodrow Wilson on the American stage was "pure tragedy," Franklin Roosevelt's longer run was simple "farce." After 1939 FDR was a "compulsive" Wilsonian who was determined to bring the United States into World War II in order to "clean up the world after the war was won." Wilson had failed to carry out his crusade, thought Roosevelt, because he lacked a faithful partner. Enter a nation free from the taint of imperialism. Enter a wartime ally which had sacrificed much in the fight against fascism. Enter Stalin's Russia. Enter the farce of an American President placing his trust in a dictator contemptuous of Roosevelt personally and the west generally.

Nisbet, of course, is correct to question FDR's naive strategy. But again he would have it both ways. Roosevelt's moralizing produced an unholy alliance with Stalin. Reagan's (pre-Gorbachev) moralizing led to an excessively anti-Soviet foreign policy—and to a world divided into the "Good and the Evil"—and to the "relentless punishment of the (Soviet) Evil by the (American) Good."

In Nisbet's view Ronald Reagan is the "devoutest successor . . . to Wilsonianism as interpreted by Franklin Roosevelt." Like Wilson, Reagan is essentially a moralist, albeit a "moralist from the right." Nisbet, however, appears to have little time for moralists of any persuasion. There are moralists on the left who excuse the horrors of Stalinism specifically and Communism generally. There are moralists on the right who believe that the only enemy America faces is world Communism. And then there are Nisbetian moralists who automatically condemn what Charles de Gaulle dismissed as the universal American "itch to intervene."

Robert Nisbet, the anti-moralist, a moralist at heart? Of course. George Kennan, the realist, a moralist as well? Right again. And both preach a version of neo-isolationism as an antidote to that compulsive American itch. Unlike Kennan, Nisbet does not have to disavow any role he might have played in the creation of the Cold War American Leviathan. Like Kennan, Nisbet is convinced that the American attempt to manage "permanent war and a permanent military Leviathan" will inevitably destroy republican government at home.

So will the "democratic absolutism" of the post-New Deal state. Here Nesbit's arch-enemies remain Wilson and Roosevelt. Here Nisbet finds American bureaucracies more pervasive and intrusive than any advanced by a totalitarian state. And here Nisbet extends his list of those itching to intervene to include the Reagan White House and the Christian right, determined as they are to insert the "centralized state" into the "intimacies of the bedroom and the cloister of the church."

Instead of looking upon the Reagan administration as a part of the solution to the ills of the present age, Nisbet is convinced that the dominant strain of American conservatism is very much a part of the problem. If Reagan is not being accused of acting the part of an uncloistered Wilsonian, he is taken to task for thinking that unfettered capitalism is the answer to the economic and social problems which beset America and the world. And if Nisbet is not attacking the Wilsonian urge within Americans, he is disparaging the "cash nexus" that rules too much of American culture.

To his credit, Nisbet is aware that a bureaucratic state and free-wheeling capitalism are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Furthermore, he is probably right to argue that the demands of both produce atomized citizens or, in his terms, "loose individuals." Instead of community with a small "c," Nisbet finds a strained na-
tional community filled with free agents of all descriptions. Inspecting the littered landscape from the literal "free agents" of the professional sports world to the unhappily swinging singles of the world of America's other favorite sport, Nisbet can only shake his head in wonderment over the future of any American community.

And yet this anti-modern pessimist can conclude his modern jeremiad on a note of unabashed hope. Having traced the decline of community in America, Nisbet takes refuge in his belief that civilizations do not operate on the basis of "unalterable laws against which the human will is impotent." Decline there has been, but the trend which Nisbet both explains and condemns is, lo and behold, not irreversible.

Having found little evidence of individual or collective American willpower, Nisbet calls upon his fellow citizens to rediscover their long lost resolve. How are we to do this? By willpower alone? No. Ideas came first. Ideas, Richard Weaver once reminded us, do have consequences. And bad ideas, Robert Nisbet warns us, have worse consequences, whether the result is the "monetarization of the human spirit" or the "trivialization of culture."

But bad ideas can be replaced by a "revolution in ideas." At least Alexis de Tocqueville thought so and Robert Nisbet hopes so. According to Tocqueville, a society is most open to the "great revolutions of the mind" somewhere between the dominance of an "absolute separation of ranks" and the achievement of the "complete equality of the whole community." Tocqueville's America was closer to the former when, under an American caste system, the "imagination slumber(ed) amid . . . universal silence and stillness . . . (and) the very idea of change fade(d) from the mind." Nisbet's America is closer to the latter, but apparently not so close that we are unable to avoid the ultimate sterility of egalitarianism.

Nisbet finds "manifest revulsion" in America toward "moralizing militarism," toward "superbureaucracies," toward the "cash nexus." The time is ripe, he thinks, for a revolution in ideas. Americans are not the fatalists they were before the Great War when it was common to believe that a "special Providence guided American success" or when a Bismarck could grumble that God takes care of drunks, little children, and the United States of America. Those days are gone, and they hold no favor for a Robert Nisbet otherwise awash in the past.

All this is not to say that these present days are necessarily an improvement. They are not. But this pause between the torpor of a strictly stratified America and the demands of a universally egalitarian America provides Robert Nisbet with a basis for hope, if not necessarily grounds for real optimism. In a sense, Nisbet's surprising conclusion is further evidence of his ability to strike an oxymoronic pose. Is he a hopeful pessimist or a despairing optimist? Or is he simply a secret ally of an American isolationist of other agendas and another persuasion, namely Jesse Jackson? After surveying the wreckage of the American underclass, Jackson can do little more than shout "keep hope alive." And after sifting through the debris left over from too many present days, Robert Nisbet can only resort to a very similar refrain.

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**Daedalus**

It has as much to do with craft
As anything: feeling the earth
Fade into its casual brown,
Into the sea . . .
The sun centers it all.

There he is, Icarus,
Your other self, winged
And taking the air
As if it were sleep,
As natural as dreams.
What rests there
In the calm flight?
You want to know, following . . .

Suddenly you don't see him.
He's caught in the light—
Son, star, sun—
And there's no talking
To him now. How could you,
Fashioning those wings,
Have known about such whiteness,
What it could mean,
The wings free of you?

And then, as if surprised
Or curiously expectant,
He falls
Into the spinning blueness,
A tinier figure
Falling in the still seconds
Of your craftsman's eye.

Kim Bridgford

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*The Cresset*
American Canon

Charles Vandersee

Dear Editor:

Whatever may be the case in Sweden, let's say, or Haiti, here in the United States you cannot take for granted the veracity of the writer— the novelist, poet, essayist—in interpreting the nation and its people. Of course you can't take for granted a lot of other people either, when you start looking for the truth: the statistician, the journalist, the cultural analyst operating inside a think tank, even impressive fusionists like Christopher Lasch, a sort of historian/sociologist, and Michael Novak, a philosopher/theologian. But at least the Lasches, Novaks, and Bellahs deal with observed and recorded realities, while writers are people who make things up.

Still, we do go to our writers, one by one, to find things out: to Fitzgerald for the upper middle class in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s, and their expensive modes of uneasy play. Whitman for the exuberant mysticism and materialism that seemed to see us through the Civil War and beyond. Henry James for pondering how, between Lincoln and Teddy Roosevelt, everything old in Europe seemed at first worthy of great reverence but then finally deep suspicion.

We never know whether what we have found out is true, but we feel they have something to tell us. And by "we" I mean those few Americans who actually read something of canonical American literature besides the one or two semesters they had in college. Still, a major literary work was not written to be studied in college. It usually was composed to tell a story or reveal a character, not to express "truths" about society at large. It's only marginally serviceable as a repository of useful generalizations.

I take a risk, therefore, in offering one way in which we may create from literature the "truth" about America. My notion is that our impulse to find things out from literature is warranted and can be rewarded. Remember that I am speaking here only of "American" literature—literature of the United States—and please take for granted that by "truth" I mean neither the statistically verifiable nor an entity arrived at with linguistic and philosophical rigor. "Truth" does mean certain revelations that a historian of some breadth and authority would comfortably assent to.

This way of putting literature to use in understanding our own culture—of obtaining some wisdom even—rests upon a very few pillars, seven in number:

1. Use works that are "canonical," which is to say works you really ought to read, because they are interesting, complex, and alive—interesting to people with well-formed minds and alive to the past and the future as well as the present.

2. From the canon, choose works in which the writer claims overtly to be saying something about "America" or "Americans"—as in an ambitious title ("The American Scholar" by Emerson, The American of Henry James, In The American Grain by William Carlos Williams, Americana by Don DeLillo), or in an unsuble declaration: "This is an American story, of the late twentieth century, . . ."

3. Accept such titles as serious promises and claims; be hopeful that such declarations indicate a mind seriously at work. But pay close attention, in reading, to the question of fulfillment. That is, a writer can easily insert a bogus claim here and there, nudging the reader to construct more significance than the text warrants. Saying something is distinctively "American" doesn't necessarily make it so.) The reader therefore has to be skeptical of the sententious and watchful for inflation. Finding explicitly "American" moments in texts, look to see how (and if) the rest of the story or the essay really does expand such moments into impressive durations.

4. Draw judiciously on the author's own comments regarding the work in question—letters, interviews, other writings.

5. Presuppose nothing, when reading. Leave aside such notions as the alleged "opposition" of the American writer to all that is "normal" in American society. Reserve for later the suspicion that a literary work is excessively subjective—merely "one man's opinion," and likely a cloistered opinion at that. Resist such critical constructs as "the American Adam," "the machine in the garden," "the imperial self," "the reign of wonder," "the power of blackness," "regeneration through violence" (some of the central themes in the American experience, these proffered by R. W. B. Lewis, Leo Marx, Quentin Anderson, Tony Tanner, Harry Levin, Richard Slotkin).

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November, 1988
6. Keep lists as you go from one work to another—lists of passages, merely, until gradually you learn, from cumulative reading, what your essential categories of understanding will be.

7. Of greatest importance: Make connections among the works. Reread works, bringing your later reading back to them.

What you have here is only slightly systematic and self-evidently non-rigorous. Also, lamentably commonsensical in an era of literary studies that “foregrounds” or “privileges” rather more profound modes of proceeding. An era also that hesitates to speak of “truth-seeking.”

Still, in the list you can notice certain premises which will stand up pretty well, as being neither quaint nor obsolete nor simplistic. Canonicity, for example, spares you the charge of straying into an endlessly contestable “America.” However “true” they might be on certain topics or regions, such noncanonical writers as James Michener, Pearl Buck, and James Whitcomb Riley will not go far in persuading a great many people about “America.”

Intentionality (Fenimore Cooper, let’s say, or Thoreau or Dos Passos or Ralph Ellison claiming explicitly to be saying something about “America”) may get you in trouble with critics who think intention does not exist—that human beings are generally instruments through whom language itself does the speaking, or else instruments expressing ideas that simply happen to be in the air. But the merit of an overt, expressed intention is that you can “unpack” or “deconstruct” that kind of statement, seeking the genesis, securing a richness of possible meaning that you may not find in passages apparently more casual. Somebody who says “Here I stand” may have come a long way, over considerable territory.

Extrinsic materials show you the writer’s own “unpacking” and extending of the text—the writer trying, with varying degrees of candor, to supply a context.

Connecting, which is finally the aim of the whole project, is the means of dealing with that “one man’s opinion” problem. Crévecœur (Letters from an American Farmer) is going to mislead seriously if you conclude on his authority that America is a “melting pot” where nationalities cannot help but dissolve. Cather in O Pioneers! will help correct, by showing on the Nebraska plains a more-or-less tolerant coexistence of Swedes, Norwegians, Russians, Czechs, French, Germans, and Irish, not much dissolved. Henry Roth, in Call It Sleep, will complicate the question of ethnicity by showing you an Austrian Jewish boy on the Lower East Side of New York bewildered by what Hungarian Catholics worship and terrified by the Yankee cultural temple called the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Thus, through canonical literature, one “truth” about America (one of those “categories of understanding”) is the permanent question of immigration, acculturation, and ethnicity. You cannot reduce it to “melting pot” or “unmeltable” national groups or benign coexistence. Different regions and different eras show forth varieties of epimeris and dialect, making an ever mutable society. Neither Crévecœur nor Cather nor Roth has got hold of “the truth,” but the canon has. And the canon will manifest the truth by nuance: Thoreau’s Irish laborers, building the railroad at Walden Pond, will become the policemen, saloonkeepers, and streetcar conductors of Call It Sleep, risen a bit in the world.

You will have guessed by reference to specific books that the seven aforementioned pillars support one of those edifices called a college course. Not in the abstract am I talking to you, but as a practicing pedagogue. Let me tell you then what we’re reading in the course this semester, this little enterprise in seeing America “inter-textually,” as they say.

We start with William Carlos Williams, In The American Grain (1925), one of the few canonical works that does have as its chief motive the overt expression, throughout the book, of personal convictions about the nation and its people—argumentation, if you will, takes precedence over narrative. The New Jersey physician says so in his Autobiography: “I want to give the impression, an inclusive definition, of what these men of whom I am writing [e.g. Columbus, Cortez, Cotton Mather, Daniel Boone, Ben Franklin, Aaron Burr, Lincoln] have come to be for us. That they have made themselves part of us and that that is what we are.”

Well, he was not inclusive, but he gets us back to certain beginnings
John Dos Passos' "Jewish boy," David Schear! , as he chapter "American Scholar" "America," "the American , of and of a woman from Puerto Rico , of being interesting : agonized and of Thoreau 's perverse insistence on otherwise rejecting the tion in the canon . Emerson's Williams more than most writers was genuinely trying to figure out "the Big Money. November I988 out-without material excess , in (actually a New Yorker), whose century starts , following a little (1934) . We pass over World War I again, in the late 1930s, with Invisible Man, that impressive tapestry in which Ellison makes the bold and successful effort not only to display, through nomenclature and allusions, all the white American cultural heritage but to show black oral and musical tradition woven inextricably through it.

We end with the 1985 novel by Russell Banks, called Continental Drift ("This is an American story, of the late twentieth century"), which reorchestrates much of what we've seen from earlier generations. It extends the vexed question of immigration and acculturation—our hero, Robert Dubois is French Canadian in ancestry, involved in smuggling Haitian refugees into Florida, which has replaced the West as the locus of the American Dream, at least for the Caribbean oppressed. There's the perennial American question of whether the common man can be a good man, a man large enough to deal with "America." "Bob wants to be a good man." There are new ramifications of the classic American irony: what you came to America and hoped for ("those gold-paved streets") is often not what you found.

Well, anyway. Some time I'll return to this subject—especially to explain how it is I'm bold enough to canonize a novel of our own decade. But at least you have some indications, if not fully realized argument, about how one gets the "truth" about "America" in American literature. You extract a small canon from the big canon, and then place trust in both aggregation and nuance. You may find Williams wildly erratic (he hates the Puritans), but when you get to the admirably level-headed Cather you realize how true he is on one of his emphatic points: Americans have generally wanted to dominate the earth rather than accept the soil and the seasons on their own terms. Finding Cather working out the same proposition pushes you back to Williams to watch him more closely, seeking nuances, just as Ellison's final insistence on "possibility" as the chief American fact makes you think back and suddenly realize that, yes, that is what all the others were saying too.

The truth is that truths evolve as you read with deliberation and draw the connections. The future of America is right there. Our writers have made it up for you. With American confidence you can study it and know what to expect.

From Dogwood, yours faithfully,

C.V.

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ever-nagging question, what have you done for us lately? Network programmers work in a kind of Colosseum atmosphere, wincing and setting to work again frantically when the ever-fickle mob turns thumbs down.

It is true that programmers have a low opinion of TV audiences, but then TV audiences have a low opinion of them. Like Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor, TV has power only if it can keep providing the delights of the next auto-da-fe. If the flames don't burn as bright and high as audiences desire, they have the ultimate power: the channel changer. Power on TV resides in remaining in sight; if you are out of sight, unwatched, you do not exist. Bishop Berkeley anticipated television when he remarked that if I don't see you, you're not there.

But from another viewpoint, television is very stable. It is, after all, an institution, and institutions are founded on cultural habit. Even with the expansion of viewing choice with cable, there is an astonishing stability to the structure of the television day, and indeed to those shows that constantly appear in rerun. The rerun is the eternal recurrence of television, and it deserves our attention for a moment.

Flip around the channels several times during a typical day. The familiar icons are there, floating in the interstices of the TV schedule, like poltergeists conjured at a seance. True, these programs are cheap, they are "filler," they are not prime time; but they are watched, they are venerable, they are the survivors of the history of television, the huts on the shore that go on forever right by the torrents of media change.

We know them all intimately, often in groups: Lucy and Ricky, Timmy and Lassie, the Kramdens and the Cartwrights, Matt Dillon and friends huddled at the Long Branch, the Andersons, the Cleavers, the Nelsons, and so on. Shows, trends, corporate structures, political influences on TV come and go, but these few remain, Pareto's "residues," seen forever in the platonic world of residuals.

Thus, I contend, they are important. They would not have survived so long unless we found something instructive in them. Reruns have achieved a certain inviolable status, like old photographs we pull out from time to time to savor a memory. Yet more: television now has a history, and a history creates a mythology. Reruns are the stuff of television myth, not only by their past success, and the nostalgia we may feel for the time in which they were popular as prime time, but also because they are the core of the mythology of a mass-mediated world. The canon of popular reruns has achieved mythic status because it describes a sacral universe of ritual resolutions denied the present in a time and place that was at the beginning of the world we know.

We are all too familiar with the studies that demonstrate how little contemporary students know (or care, but that's another matter) about history and geography. They may not know when Columbus discovered America, or where America is on a map. But I suspect they have a firm grasp of television mythology. After all, we are now into the second generation of people familiar with television. The time and place of events or objects educators find important is outside of their experience. But the mythology of TV describes the world at its beginning, the world before which, and outside of which, there is nothing.

Let us walk through the mythographic world familiar to the children of television. At the core of

James Combs is spending this fall on leave from Valparaiso University, where he is Professor of Political Science.
Cleavers and Andersons are clearly antediluvian, even prelapsarian, to Town, the small-town middle-class War II bourgeois ideal. This is the today's teenagers. But they seem acted upon. The Town of the critical rhetoric in the Eighties has been expended celebrating that lost world, but like much myth the Fifties' nuclear family is a "Sunday truth" that is celebrated but not acted upon. The Town of the Eisenhower normalcy is a TV myth of origin from which we have strayed, and neither the example of the Reagan family (including Michael, who thought their black cook was his mother until he was eight years old), nor the biblical injunctions of Pat Robertson (who married his wife in pregnant haste), nor the "women's duty to bear children for the glory, and taxation, of the State" argument of Ben Wattenberg will likely make that myth anything more than the iconography of nostalgia.

The 'Town of such representative families is what we might call "general American," homogenous, sanitary, and relentlessly cheerful. Familial relationships are geometric in their predictability, and the complications of plot no more threatening than a new gardener who does silly things or a decision on Saturday morning as to whether to cut the grass or go golfing. (What did Ozzie Nelson do for a living?)

The kids are sexless, drugless, and mindless, three admired traits that did not stick.

The Town of TV memory is not entirely homogeneous. On some run-down old streets, you can find funky families like the Munsters and the Addams family. And you'll find strange people like suburban witches and genies and Martians, bachelor fathers and middle-class families with colorful but wise maids and butlers. If you venture a bit out in The Country, you'll find the rustic folk of Mayberry, RFD, the charming little hotel of Petticoat Junction, and the rural characters of Green Acres. Solid Anglo-Saxon stock—apple pies, church socials, slow pace; no Snopeses, crushing boredom, small town caste and class, flight to the cities. The pastoral myth survives on classic TV as unheroic and silly, but also with its Aunt Bee certainties and populist code. The people of The Town, many of them originally from The Country, can find inspiration in such a place. They can point to the example of The Beverly Hillbillies, who retain their vast fortune in cynical and grasping Hollywood through their virtues of ignorance and trust, foiling every attempt by bankers and other sharpies to outsmart them.

There is, I am sad to say, a dark underside to the mythography of television. If we leave The Town, we come upon The City. The City is divided into Manichaean factions of good and evil. Good people live in apartments and often are in show business. The Ricardo live in an apartment; Danny Thomas lives in an apartment. Later on, non-show-biz good people would occupy apartments too—Mary Richards, Bob Newhart, the Jeffersons. But the City lacked the simplicity of The Country and the homogeneity of The Town. Sanford and Son live in a slum, other Blacks in projects, and Chico works for The Man. Archie Bunker lives with his universal prejudices in a lower-middle-class neighborhood in Queens (he has since moved to Yonkers).

However, urban work groups—cops, taxi drivers, hospital teams—closest to the mean streets are usually an ethnic coalition. Occasionally there would be a sit-com with an ethnic theme (Bridget and Bernie, the latter-day Abie's Irish Rose), but a glance at the corpus of Eternal TV reveals strikingly few such enduring treatments. Even during the 1970s, with all the talk about the "unmeltable ethnics" and the celebration of what Jimmy Carter called "ethnic purity," one searched in vain for a memorable TV show about ethnic life. (By contrast, Hollywood has over the years become bolder about daring to offend someone in the depiction of ethnics. Think just of Italian-Americans: The Godfather epic, Moonsruck, Raging Bull, Mean Streets, Prizzi's Honor, Rocky, even
And on those TV shows where there were explicit, or even implicit, depictions of ethnicities, there were often tendencies to "dumb them down," make them cute or silly, or appeal to a stereotype. The Italian on Taxi (Danny DeVito, who went on to become a truly accomplished comedian), the Pole on Barney Miller, the Puerto Rican on Sanford and Son are all dense, the butt of jokes, and in some ways representative of some very old prejudices—Italians are short and volatile, Poles are dumb (thus the demeaning Polish jokes), Puerto Ricans talk in fast and unintelligible Spanish when excited (as for that matter did Cuban band leaders such as Ricky Ricardo). The "Sweathogs" of Welcome Back, Kotter are a little more subtly drawn, but still the Italian is darkly handsome, the Jew supersmart, the Hispanic and Black street smart and tough.

Also located in the The City are the criminals, those who control the streets and direct "organized crime." They typically ride in stretch limos, consort with beautiful painted women, and live in pent houses. They are most of the time vaguely ethnic, often dark-haired and dark-completed, wearing mustaches and hiding behind dark glasses.

TV villainy is almost always urban and sophisticated, and indulged in for the crassest of motives. Terrorists, for instance, never act out of political belief, but from some personal hurt or desire for power and wealth. The mythography of The City places this criminal power as virtually ubiquitous, opposed only by courageous, if warring, teams in enclosed work places (St. Elsewhere, Hill Street Blues). On TV, urban life seems pretty frantic and scary, what with all the cops running around shooting and the criminals so powerful, so it is no wonder that harassed urban folks find respites of sharp banter and strong drink (Cheers).

In many ways, the mythography of TV to which we are heir in rerun complements older mythic depictions and traditions. The Country bumpkins of Green Acres are the latest version of the Yankee farmer, the Appalachian mountaineer, and the Southern redneck who were the butt of frontier jokes and were given later life by Ma and Pa Kettle, the Jeeters of Tobacco Road, and Li'l Abner. The Town has occupied a special place in the American heart since the closing of the frontier, as evidenced by the tears still wrung out of audiences who have seen Our Town. The Suburb has been the target of much sociological attack, but not, as we have seen, on Re-TV. And The City has long had the popular reputation as an asphalt jungle that destroyed innocence, morality, and youth.

I am struck by the extent to which the locus classicus of Rerun World is centered in The Town, as amended by the Fifties suburban ideal. Driving around the country, one is struck by suburban developments still burgeoning everywhere, and by how Donna Reed's and Robert Young's world remains something of an ideal—a nostalgic ideal, to be sure, but one that surely lingers in the backs of our minds as we sign the mortgage papers. I have long suspected that the core American bourgeois ideal is not freedom, but security. The house, the nice neighborhood, the kids on bikes, the scrubbed kids going to church, the safety from crime and change—the essential desire is to be secure. The price is not only familial and financial commitment, but also a certain amount of conformity that is subtly enforced (though usually not overtly oppressive). Middle America does not come to the rerun ideal reluctantly, but willingly. One does not lose one's individuality, but rather becomes part of an assimilated class that accepts affluence and conformity as the fulfillment of the American quest for achievement and equality.

Which brings me to what all this has to do with the price of tea in China. In the American popular mind, The Country—either farming, ranching, or the Green Acres move—is just not a viable option for most. Suburbia is as much of the country as most of us want. In American migratory history, the country was the place you left to seek your fortune. But the city to which many went was rugged and impersonal, and thus the suburban compromise was born, between country and city, with the best aspects of, and access to, both.

But obviously such a universally admired lifestyle had its price. One major price was that the mythography favored assimilation, and this meant that ethnic or racial identity was to become unstable and unfavored. Once the ethnic leaves the old neighborhood, goes to work in the corporate world, marries outside of the national group, and moves to suburbia, the process of assimilation into becoming a "general American" has worked its will. Ethnic pride, speaking the native tongue, dressing up in native dress, insisting that the kids marry within the group—all of this comes to be seen as a bit silly. Even though there are religious and other group pressures to maintain ethnic identification, I think they will all be defeated by the assimilative processes we associate with suburban life.

This is something that has been at work for a long time, but rerun TV has surely given it mythic impetus. The suburban ideal inevitably includes the norm of "de-ethnicizing." It is still striking to meet a suburban family with the embarrassing presence of the immigrant grandmother who speaks
no English, where the father has married outside the ethnic group, become an Episcopalian in a suburban church, refused to let the kids learn the native tongue, and Anglicized the family name. (In that regard, one does not see the Andersons or Nelsons celebrating their Swedish heritage, nor the Cleavers tracing their roots to Germany, nor even the Kramdens and Nortons belonging to the Sons of Hibernia.)

Recall perhaps the most ethnic character in the world of rerun: Danny Thomas. Even Danny, for all the self-deprecating jokes about being Lebanese, was patently “general American,” and to prove it, the show would trot out by contrast his very unassimilated uncle—heavy accent, European clothes, strange habits and responses, chauvinistic attitude toward women, emotional impulses. Danny, like so many other such characters in American culture, was saying simply: if you want to be a real American, lose the hyphen. Adopt a name as nondescript as Danny Thomas. And marry a Nordic-looking wife. After a while, being Lebanese is just a joke without any onus, and you can easily get into the country club.

This impulse in American culture is currently salient, it seems to me, because of the most astonishing development of the 1988 election. This is the Pledge of Allegiance issue that George Bush has used brilliantly against Michael Dukakis. Dukakis may have made the fatal mistake of seeming too ethnic, too much of The City, Europe, and the old neighborhood. Perhaps he (and his Jewish wife) appear unassimilated, and thus vaguely unAmerican, to many voters, including those who have abandoned much of ethnicity in the move to suburbia and bourgeois respectability.

Somehow he has not taken the symbolic “pledge” to become a general American, despite the house in Brookline, the snow blower, and the kids in college. In an assimilative culture, ethnic exoticism has become suspect, and thus in a presidential candidate connotes an alienness that is “disloyal,” or at least not part of the general American contract so many in Middle America have made. Dukakis’ defeat, then (this is written well before the election), would signal many things, not the least of which is that open ethnic identification is a major disqualification for power and certainly a barrier to full social acceptance. This is nothing new, but such a development suggests criteria for patriotism that will not be lost on people with funny-sounding names.

So then, Father does Know Best. Now we know what Ozzie Nelson did for a living, and why Donna Reed thought herself such a lucky girl. June and Ward are “natural,” not conventional, since myth transforms the conventional into the natural. All of us general Americans are “naturalized” and the only-ism we believe in is “Americanism” (what other country would make nationalism into an ideology? Or, for that matter, what other country would appropriate two continents for its nationalism, when what we have is strictly a “United States-ism”?).

We can see the original ritual enactment of our enchanted world in rerun, and many of us will seek to make that TV myth come true for us. The only question I have is, as George Bush leads us endlessly in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, I wonder if we are pledging allegiance to a country that doesn’t exist.

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Blessed Secretary

You keep the secret, like a letter tucked under your sash, in the office where you rummage through documents, files, odds and ends. Yet behind the sash you hid the memo, preserved the peace. No one sensed the odd shift in your eyes. You lost sleep; still, no one spied the piece of paper below your breasts. Mum, you secluded the news, let it sleep, until refining word from page.

The word you collected stays mum like your lips pursing the Secret; you cloister embers and page mystery where no one will rummage.

Yvonne B. Robery

November, 1988
Listening to History?

Linda C. Ferguson

The occasion of hearing a work of great historic significance raises anew some basic issues of musical aesthetics.

Is a composition great because of its position in an historic context, either in the life of the maker (as one might claim for the *Eroica* Symphony) or in the life of his culture (as one could argue for *Le sacre du printemps*)? Is a work great because it is understood to convey extra-musical meaning which is important, or which was important at one time? Is a tradition of cultural esteem for a work sufficient to account for its greatness to the modern concert-goer? Is it enough to just be present when Beethoven's C minor Symphony brings Fate knocking (again) at the door? Whose door? Beethoven's door, long ago answered? Or our door, still to be dealt with?

Does the work speak directly to the audience, or is its value that it spoke to many others before us for whom we are presumably stand-ins? Does our perception of the work's meaning rely on our knowledge of the composer's individual circumstances and explicit intentions? Does one marvel more or less at the denouement of *Don Giovanni* if one tries to explain it as Mozart's revenge on his father? Does Beethoven's Ninth speak less or more of brotherhood if we know how unbrotherly Beethoven was most of his life? And if we don't know, are we more or less susceptible to the expressive values of the composition?

The questions multiply when a performance of the work claims its own historic significance. One wonders, is this a "great performance" because of its association with the "great work"? Or because the special event increases the chances that either the musicians or the audience (or both) will rise to the occasion? Or because of the reputation of the performers? Or because, rather, it projects the expressive form of the work in so dynamic a way that the work transcends its claim to "historical importance" and claims instead a vitality that speaks to the audience as themselves, not as imaginers of past times and circumstances. (I choose the last as the most appropriate option, that being the only one where it matters if you listen to the music, and it is toward this conclusion that this essay moves.) Such thoughts occupied me when, on the longest night of the summer just past, Leonard Bernstein conducted Shostakovich in Chicago.

Not since 1951 had Leonard Bernstein appeared on a regular subscription concert with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. His series of appearances in Chicago in June included a concert prepared under his supervision showcasing three young conductors and two performances of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 7 with Bernstein himself conducting. (The concert was taken a few days later to Avery Fisher Hall in New York; the Chicago performances were taped by Deutsche Grammophone for future commercial release.) Bernstein had for a year or so been even more in the public eye than usual, in part because of the appearance of the sensational and unflattering biography by Joan Peyer (*Bernstein: A Biography*, Morrow, 1987) and in part because of his approaching 70th birthday, celebrated widely and musically this past August.

Shostakovich's Symphony No. 7 (called "The Leningrad Symphony") occupies a distinctive place in world history, and its score comes with extensive baggage. Whatever else it is, the Leningrad Symphony is an historical document whose extra-musical associations are alluded to every time it is mentioned and detailed every time it is heard, and with good reason, for it is a thrilling story.

Briefly, Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) was residing in his native Leningrad when, in July, 1941, Hitler's forces laid seige to the city. Shostakovich volunteered for the military on the first day of the invasion but was rejected due to poor eyesight and on grounds that he could serve the national interest better as a composer than as a soldier. Nevertheless he served as a volunteer firefighter during the air strikes, and a photograph showing him in this action was widely circulated and published in American news magazines. Carl Sandburg commemorated the image in "Dimitri Shostakovich":

> Sometimes as a firewarden you run to the streets and help put out the fire set by Nazi Luftwaffe bombs. Then you walk home and write more music.

In September, as the siege wore on (it would eventually last 900 days and kill nearly a million Leningrad citizens), Shostakovich began a symphony he envisioned as...
a tribute to the courage of those enduring and resisting in his city. With three movements of the work finished in late September, Shostakovitch and his family were ordered to leave the city for refuge in Kuibyshev, where a number of other artists were staying. There in December he completed the final movement. The premiere was performed in March, 1942, by the orchestra of the Bolshoi Theatre, the members of which had been evacuated there as well. The Moscow premiere followed shortly and met with a standing ovation despite the air raid alerts that persisted throughout the performance.

In the United States, the symphony was "a hit" before a note of it was heard. The demand for an American performance called for yet another romantic intrigue: the score was copied onto microfilm and smuggled from Moscow to Teheran by plane, then by auto to Cairo, by plane to Casablanca, then to Brazil and finally to the United States. American conductors scrambled to be the first to program it, despite having neither heard it nor seen the score. Toscanini won out, performing it with the NBC Symphony in a radio broadcast heard by millions in July, 1942. (It was first played by the Chicago Symphony a month later at Ravinia.)

The 1942-43 concert season saw the work programmed sixty-two times in the United States. Clearly it established itself on the basis of its circumstances. This does not suggest the work lacked intrinsic musical value, or that this musical value was ignored, but it is hard to imagine a listener, American or Soviet, in that first season of its hearing responding to its musical content apart from its political agenda.

The memory of the hardship, sorrow, and courage at Leningrad is not immediate for many listeners today and is supplanted in the minds of others by more recent instances of hardship and valor. Music for "propaganda" purposes is now culturally suspect, and Americans and Soviets no longer share a political or artistic vision.

What does this mean, then, for the values and meanings of the Leningrad Symphony? That it remains in standard repertoire testifies to musical as well as topical interest. But is this work distinctive in its relating of life experience to music?

Bernstein himself has made a useful distinction between programmatic works with "narrative-literary meanings" and those with "atmospheric-pictoral meanings."

It has been noted that this is the first major work about warfare actually written during the struggle. It is not a biographical work growing from the artist's sorted-out impressions after the event. Although Susanne Langer's distinction between symptom (indicative of "how one feels") and symbol (articulating "what one knows of feeling") still holds, the "lag time" between experience and transformation of the experience into artistic form was, in this case, unusually compressed. Even more remarkable is the ultimate victory suggested in the finale, composed at a time when literal victory was by no means certain. Thus the work is no simple reflection on life experience in an historical context.

I do not know of anyone who seriously believes anymore that music, apart from textual works and specifically contrived performances, can convey or represent political ideology. Although a Platonic tendency has characterized Marxist thought about music and although music can certainly be used in service of political and social causes, it does not seem appropriate to argue that the Leningrad Symphony's meaning is essentially political. One might well argue that its style is "nationalistic" in the nineteenth-century sense, but even as I listened to the "giant steps" of the openings of movements 1 and 3, I noted that the "Wide Spaces of Our Land" could as well refer to our land. (The opening of the third movement, in particular, sounds like Aaron Copland "describing" the American west.)

Whether or not the Leningrad Symphony has a "program," a literary or pictoral set of images intended by the artist to be associated with the music, remains a point of controversy since the composer both embraced and rejected such suggestion. This issue is related to, but not the same as, the matter of the work's historical value. The original titles for the movements, "War," "Remembrance," "The Wide Spaces of Our Land," and "Victory," were replaced by the time of the first performance by brief descriptive phrases retaining the program for movements 1 and 4 but focusing more on the qualities of the second and third movements (lyricism and drama) than on concrete imagery. In so choosing, the composer made the first move to disengage the work from complete dependence on its historical context.

Bernstein himself has made a useful distinction between programmatic works with "narrative-literary meanings" and those with "atmospheric-pictoral meanings."

Further, he recognizes "affective-reactive meanings" ascribed to music (a complex category of meaning, since it implies a successful communicative transaction be-
tween composer and listener) along with “purely musical meanings,” which interest him (and most other musicians) most but which are considerable trouble to explain.

Although I do not know of any verbal account of Bernstein’s interpretation of the work, I believe that his exploration of meaning in the Leningrad Symphony would refer to the program only in passing. His writings include a delightful dialogue (“What do you mean, Meaning?”) between himself (“L.B.”) and another character, “Lyric Poet.” In it he recognized two fundamentally different approaches to musical semantics, and although he allows the Lyric Poet to have the final word, he pokes his fun at those who must have names for their “sonorous forms in motion.” In that dialogue he assigns to the Lyric Poet the clearest statement of his own belief: “...words have their original function in representation, and are transparent; and notes have their original function in abstraction, and are opaque.”

I do not know what was in L.B.’s mind as he interpreted the work in performance, but I do know that I paid close attention for the full hour and a half, and that when it was over I knew the work’s value had been revealed as essentially musical. When the famous march tune intruded in the first movement, first innocently in the distance, then menacingly in the foreground, then maddeningly through more than ten minutes of incessant repetitions, it never occurred to me to imagine Nazi troops goose-stepping. I was not alive when Leningrad was besieged. My historical knowledge is indirect and academic. I am free of the “necessary” historical reference which this work has carried.

I was struck, in retrospect, at how little “program” and knowledge of history are necessary to comprehend the composer’s expression of despair as Bernstein drew it out: mechanistic forces wreaking havoc with the natural organic process of the first movement sonata form; bittersweet remembrance of contentment interrupted by a distorted, wicked trio in the second; and the triumph of the human spirit, reflecting not “what one knows of triumph,” but how one hopes it will feel even as the marks of struggle still show.

These qualities, the vital import of the work, began in specific circumstances, but those circumstances are now insufficient to explain the music’s vitality. The work can no longer be tied exclusively to them. This is not to argue that a musical work “means what the listener wants it to mean,” but that its capacity for meaning is best specified in terms of qualities and shapes of experience rather than in the particulars of the experience themselves.

A Newsweek quip recently noted that “Leonard Bernstein is almost as famous for what he says as what he plays.” While that statement may describe a fact, the fact is inconsequential, for what Bernstein says and what he plays are the same thing. In this he seems worthy to be described by his own definition of compositional excellence (from another dialogue, “Why Beethoven?”) “...the power to make you feel at the finish: something is right in the world. This is something that follows its own law consistently: something we can trust, that will never let us down.”

Bernstein has been much criticized musically as well as personally. Michael Walsh of Time sees in his “exaggerated gestures and lugubrious tempos” a parody of his earlier more brilliant and incisive self. The same charge can be levelled against all of his published prose work. In graduate school I gave away my copies of his books. They seemed disorderly, unschol-
arly, unprofessional, full of hyperbole and firing for effect.

I now see they are not books at all, but collections of lesson plans. Their lack of "professionalism" is rather their attempt to reach those who are not experts. Their lack of scholarship is rather the attempt to share what any good teacher provides: insights rather than encyclopedic information. A self-appointed popularizer of the works and issues of the fine art concert tradition, he does not resort to a superficial packaging of his wares. His aim is not to make more people buy music but to make more people understand it, and understanding music is an untidy business.

In a presentation at my first important interview for an academic position, I applied Bernstein's linguistic and rhetorical theory of musical process to a passage from a Schumann piece. I got the job, and immediately bought new copies of all his books. (Leonard Bernstein in absentia has been teaching my classes for years.) His active role in the larger conversation about the nature, functions, and meanings of music in human life is at least as important to contemporary American audiences as his compositions, and if he has employed hyperbole as a conductor, he is only doing what we teachers do when we are desperate to be understood.

John von Rhein of the Chicago Tribune wrote of the Shostakovich concert that it "sent the audience home on . . . a tidal wave of euphoria, and for so many of the right reasons." Surely he did not mean that everyone had contemplated a single historical event. History lessons, even stirring ones, could hardly be expected to produce such a result. The vital import of that work spoke to us far more musically, and hence, directly, with Bernstein as the composer's advocate.

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Richard Maxwell

Explosion in The Zone

Richard Maxwell

Not many people liked Empire of the Sun. Maybe we were all too busy rushing out to catch Bernardo Bertolucci's admirable but evasive Last Emperor. Maybe Emperor and Empire simply shared too much—spectacle scenes shot within (see it now!) the mysterious East; war pageants of devastating futility and horror viewed by children who had been separated from their parents; aspirations to epic scope and epic length. Two such movies in one season—three, if we add John Boorman's smaller scale Hope and Glory—may have been too many. When doppelgängers meet, one of them must die. Emperor rode to glory or at least to the Academy Awards; Empire was left behind, prostrated.

If we want some sense of Empire's distinctive accomplishment, we must recognize the narrative tradition that lies behind it (and that distinguishes it, largely, from works like The Last Emperor—despite the similarities mentioned above). Along with his screenwriter, the British playwright Tom Stoppard, Steven Spielberg worked from J. G. Ballard's novel-memoir, also titled Empire of the Sun. Ballard is a British science-fiction writer who has produced some striking novels about anomie in urban settings; Empire develops a related theme autobiographically and historically.

According to its author, the book "describes my experiences in Shanghai, China, during the Second World War, and in Langhua C.A.C. (Civilian Assembly Centre), where I was interned from 1942 to 1945." The subject is in one way familiar. There have been many other semi-fictional narratives about disoriented victim-observers wandering through World War II, a number of them rather effective. Empire goes a step further, however; it connects this attractive (if easily exploitable) subject with the lore of the Zone.

The Zone was discovered long before anyone thought to call it that. One of its earliest appearances is in Sir Walter Scott's Talisman, where a passel of Crusaders encamped on Syria's sands attempt to comprehend the diplomatic-military maze where they find themselves. Scott imagines a world of overlapping cultures, traditions, and languages, a world not quite at war but not at peace either. Crucial political settlements are held in abeyance; for the moment, anything is possible. Under these charged circumstances it becomes difficult to tell the difference between Christian and Moslem, Englishmen and Scotsmen, sanity and madness.

The historical novel—so often concerned with the fate of discrete nation-states—thus takes a rather different tack than in Scott's earlier work. It becomes an international genre: marked by the dissolution of familiar boundaries (both cultural and geographical); in the absence of these boundaries obsessed with
the wildest utopian or dystopian speculations; haunted, despite an apparent lack of constraints, by immediate, contingent, often quite deadly circumstances.

There are other accounts of the Zone in the nineteenth century; however, not until after World War II does it really flourish as a subject. We can encounter versions of the Zone in a number of important works from the last forty years or so, all of them—more or less—historical novels, all of them following something like the model of The Talisman. John Cowper Powys' Porius (1951) has never achieved the wide readership it deserves, but in retrospect looks like a defining instance for postwar literature. Günter Grass' Danzig Trilogy (about a "Free City" straddling several ambiguous borders), Gabriel García Marquez's Hundred Years of Solitude, Edward Whittmore's Quin's Shanghai Circus as well as his later Jerusalem Quartet, Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow, and perhaps portions of Michel Tournier's The Ogre explore various aspects of this topic. (So do the gargantuan can­vases produced by the painter An­selm Kiefer, current darling of American art critics.)

It is Pynchon who names the Zone, Pynchon who associates it most fully with arrangements made in the wake of the war. Narrowly speaking, Pynchon's Zone consists of the occupied zones in Germany. However, as one street-smart character puts it, "there are no zones...no zones but the Zone." The narrator of Gravity's Rainbow comments further, "Here in the Zone categories have been blurred badly. The status of the name you miss, love, and search for now has grown ambiguous and remote, but this is even more than the bureaucracy of mass absence—some still live, some have died, but many, many have forgotten which they are. Their likenesses will not serve. Down here are only wrappings left in the light, the dark; images of the Uncertainty..."

Pynchon equivocates about whether it is a temporary condition or the beginning of a dispensation in which we still find ourselves. In either case, the Zone offers unique opportunities of knowledge. Because the workaday framework of national sovereignty is suspended here, because old fictions have been obliterated or neutralized without new arrangements immediately hardening in place, forces that would normally remain hidden are exposed; we can talk about realities that would otherwise remain unspeakable.

So long as he is protected by British dominance, Ballard's young protagonist Jim need not confront the Zone-like qualities of the city & its environs.

Ballard shares with other chroniclers of the Zone the desire to present a moment when politics and society as normally understood have collapsed. Empire begins, "Wars came early to Shanghai, overtaking each other like the tides that raced up the Yangtze and returned to this gaudy city all the coffins cast adrift from the funeral piers of the Chinese Bund." The Bund—to quote a 1935 guidebook—is "the muddy tow-path of fifty years ago which has magically become one of the most striking and beautiful civic entrances in the world."

of a Chinese beggar; Jim looks back through a polished window and sees that the corpse's arm has been severed.\textsuperscript{2}

Once he has lost his privileged status—and, almost simultaneously, been separated from his parents—his apprehension of Shanghai changes, along with the pecking-order within the city. Jim does not exactly gain a social conscience. On the other hand, he learns to make certain discriminations; he sees more than he used to, partly because certain facts have become more obvious (e.g., the Chinese need no longer mask with deference their hatred of the British), partly because he is educated by pain and separation.

The great images of Empire, like that opening picture of returning corpses, create a condition of information overload. Jim becomes both hyperactive and disoriented. Mentally as well as geographically, he enters the Zone. Because he is forced to help build an airport runway, just outside the prison camp where he spends most of the war, he identifies with the Japanese pilots who land there. Because he adapts so well to prison life, he comes to hope that the war will never end: Dr. Ransome, one of his apprehension of Shanghai changes.

Ballard dwells on such paradoxes. He uses them as a way into Jim's most compelling confusion. Especially after he has left the camp, herded by the Japanese towards an unstated goal, Jim cannot determine whether he is dead or alive. Ballard briefly mentions the boy's confrontation in the camp hospital with "a Belgian woman who had seemed to come back from the dead." Jim suspects that his own frenetic attempts to stay alive "meant no more" than her seeming resurrection. Though he escapes the Japanese march before it can kill him, his visions of mortality persist. American planes drop rations from the sky. Jim eats Spam. "He associated the chopped ham with those fattened corpses [of prisoners, swollen by death]. Each was enveloped in the same mucus. . . . Food fed death, the eager and waiting death of their own bodies."

I have not thus far mentioned the book's ultimate death-vision. Ballard prepares this moment through a chain of allusions to movies. Yang, chauffeur to Jim's family, works in the Shanghai film industry. He proves an infinitely adaptable character, just as malleable as the play of light and sound. Wandering through Shanghai, Jim sees an advertisement for Gone With the Wind, an historical epic quite different than Ballard's own. Later Jim is imprisoned in an open-air cinema which has become a detention camp: the real purpose of the camp is to nudge as many prisoners as possible into dying quickly and thus putting less strain on food supplies. Those who survive are not released from cinematic torments. A slowly starving prisoner, Mrs. Vincent, "stared at the whitewashed walls above her son's bunk, as if watching an invisible film. . . . Jim worried that Mrs. Vincent spent too much of her time watching these films."

This sort of reference is recalled when Jim and his fellow prisoners are interned within a "concrete arena . . . built on the orders of Madame Chiang Kaishik, in the hope that China might be host to the 1940 Olympic Games." Here slogans "hung over the darkness like the hoardings above the Chinese cinemas in prewar Shanghai." We are back at the movies. What we see there first is an allegorical tableau. The prisoners lie dying from hunger and exhaustion among a plethora of goods that have been confiscated from Jim's own neighborhood (there are cocktail cabinets, rotting carpets, fifty or so luxury cars; Jim hopes to find a prized Studebaker, which once belonged to a friend of his father's who is now dying beside him).

The morning following this appalling scene, the stadium is filled by light, "as if an immense American bomb had exploded." Lighting, said Jim's gouverness, was God taking pictures of Shanghai's wickedness. The atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki, whose flash he is in fact observing, takes one final picture of that debauch. We are faced with an image whose intensity is blinding; it is an ending, also a harbinger. The true Empire of the Sun (neither British nor Japanese) announces itself. Salvation comes from the skies, but not just any old
salvation: “Jim smiled at the Japanese [guard], wishing that he could tell him that the light was a premonition of his death, the sight of his small soul joining the larger soul of the dying world.”

War, film, theology, apocalyptic prophecy, and what Freud called the death drive are at this moment fused together. One feels that the book has been seeking such an intersection, recognizable from earlier accounts of the Zone. It is easy to suspect that Spielberg too has been seeking it. Recall: Close Encounters of the Third Kind had its semi-divine flying saucers present a nighttime air show—an airshow where the power of movies and the power of visiting gods were curiously, one might say perversely, identified.

_Raiders of the Lost Ark_ went for the same sort of muddled, groping climax. The holy ark burned to a crisp the Nazis who dared meddle with it. (This scene almost certainly borrows from the science-fiction ending of Robert Aldrich's _Kiss Me Deadly_, where the atomic bomb is mythicized into a radioactive Pandora's Box, opened by a _femme fatale_ heroine. Aldrich, of course, never asks us to worship the deadly box; Spielberg does—at least until he abandons it within the same warehouse where Citizen Kane's _Rosebud_ was so memorably incinerated.)

_In E.T._, most notoriously, the title extra-terrestrial became a Christ-figure fallen from the skies. Here Spielberg worked with a gentler hand than usual, but the dubious identification between holiness and a miraculous technology focused on lighting-displays persisted. The special-effects outfit Spielberg shares with George Lucas is called Industrial Light & Magic; this same phrase might well sum up his career.  

_Empire_ could easily be read as a Spielberg-like work, more grist for the same old mill. And so it might have turned out; the movie could have looked like just another spectacular from the light-factory—beautiful, confused, and in love with its own stunning visual impact. Somehow, though, the project developed differently. I don't want to highlight any one reason for Spielberg's success; there are a great number of things that are right about the film _Empire_. Nonetheless, a few are worth singling out. Let me note several Spielberg preoccupations that—in this new context—are handled much more intelligently than usual as we work our way towards a glimpse of Nagasaki. And then we will have some sense of why that blast is different from anything in this director's cinematic past.

One good sign is that Spielberg and Stoppard (unlike Ballard) are sparing with references to film. An early crowd scene is dominated by the giant _gone with the wind_ poster which Ballard mentions; it looms over a panicked Shanghai mob, trying to escape a city more perilous than Margaret Mitchell's burning Atlanta. Apart from this irresistible detail, there is little _about_ movies before the explosion.

Perhaps Spielberg has finally realized that film allusions within a film tend to function differently than film allusions within a book. The former usually cry out for attention; the latter more easily remain subordinate. We will _not_ be tempted to suppose that the power of film and the power of the atomic bomb are somehow equivalent—even though the analogy between them may help us understand both. Instead, we will be encouraged to focus on matters of greater import (for example, on the logic of violence among Chinese, Japanese, British, and Americans during each successive phase of the war: this is a subject that Ballard handles superbly, especially in a chapter titled “The Eurasian,” and Spielberg better than anyone might have supposed. In both novel and film, we are given an intricately-observed social context which prepares us for the violence of the atomic bomb, making it seem a less singular event than it often does).

**A second encouraging note: Spielberg has moderated some of his dewy-eyed love for childhood innocence.**

A second encouraging note: Spielberg has moderated some of his dewy-eyed love for childhood innocence. Childhood as we conventionally understand it is an invention of the nineteenth century. It is a construct to which Spielberg is enormously attracted. (After _E.T._, it seemed that he might go on to make a version of _Peter Pan_, with Michael Jackson in the title role.)

Ballard's novel provides a useful counterweight to this inclination. Ballard is ruthless about conveying Jim's... originality: for example, his pseudo-religious admiration of wartime violence (especially of Japanese exploits in the air) and his scorn for British efforts to keep up some semblance of conventionally civilized behavior. With one or two lapses—there are some odd family-of-man moments preaching that if people were _nice_, everything would be _OK_—Spielberg conveys Jim's...
point of view without insisting on the moral superiority or moral uniqueness of children. And Christian Bale, a young English stage actor, does superb work as Jim.

A third point. Along with George Lucas, Spielberg has long been fond of that irritating figure, the surly young male adventurer with a heart of gold. There's an Indiana Jones type in Empire, but he proves to be profoundly rotten. (Perhaps I should say superficially rotten: there are no depths here to be corrupted.)

The part of Basie is played by John Malkovich, whom I've somehow avoided seeing in any stage or screen production. There are times when Malkovich seems to be doing his Harrison Ford imitation, but he achieves a fascinating blankness which Ford has never matched and probably isn't capable of reaching. I should note that Stoppard has added an incident in which Basie is humiliated by the Japanese commander of the camp, losing all his hard-won prison possessions; he has also added what looks like a half-developed gay subtext (Basie abandons Jim for a beautiful blond boy named Dainty). Neither of these revisions helps or hurts much, though the first one is more to the point. Basie is capable of turning anything (including Jim) into a commodity. It is his sense of The market, not his sexual aspirations, if any, that count.4

Fourth, Spielberg's attitude towards technology has never been more sensibly thought-out than here. He has always had mixed feelings about science: it is both a gateway to the wonders of the cosmos and a sterile dead-end. There was a problem with this ambivalence. Spielberg seemed to suppose that science could be made OK if only we were persuaded (largely by cinematic means) to class it with magic—that is, with visits from the gods. In Empire of the Sun, this confusion is displaced onto Jim; Spielberg is allowed the possibility of distancing himself from plane-worship, bomb-worship, etc.

When the film came out, people quarrelled about whether he had been able to take this golden opportunity. I think he has, and brilliantly. Like most stories where one character dominates, Empire tempts us to mix up author and protagonist. Ballard's third-person but intimate narration and Spielberg's dogged concentration on the frightened, struggling figure of Jim both push us towards conflating the adult J. G. Ballard with the boy about whom he writes.

But only so far. Ballard maps out certain ways in which Jim is able to resolve his confusions. We are thus made aware, in case we're slow, that he has confusions. Spielberg makes Jim's energies seem terrifyingly pointless (there is a repeated notion of going around in circles, developed with great skill from the barest textual hint) and at the same time pitiable. As in Ballard, though by different means, we are distanced from Jim's semi-fascist mythologies.

This question of mythology is central. If I were to sum up the strength of Spielberg's Empire in one phrase, I would say that Spielberg shows a new respect for fact. To make the point more elaborately: where previous Spielberg films tend to refigure history as fantasy, this one subordinates the fantastic to historical truth.

An incident at the film's beginning offers a succinct confirmation. We see the British elite attending a masquerade party. They are all wonderfully dressed: pirates, clowns, what you will, a pageant of ever-so-elegant dreams. As Jim discovers when he goes out on the lawn to fly a big model airplane, a Japanese squadron is encamped just over the next hill. Spielberg stages this shock well. He reminds us here, as throughout his Empire, that Shanghai was and is an actual place, that it was shaped by a singular blend of geographical, economic, and cultural arrangements, and that all of them surfaced—all became briefly undeniable—at that moment when the city had to be experienced as a Zone, even by people like Jim.

I have identified the Zone with an ability to see what normally remains hidden, to know what might remain unknowable.

I have identified the Zone with an ability to see what would normally remain hidden, to know what might generally remain unknowable. Perhaps the reader will not need to be persuaded that such an accomplishment is remarkable. Certainly it is scarce within our culture. "Facts are stupid things," mis-spoke a leader whom I will always remember as the, President who went to Bitburg. On the Left—especially the literary Left—facts have lost ground through a different logic: a puritanical hostility towards art and rhetoric has encouraged people to throw out the baby with the bathwater, to suppose that a knowledge of things as they are is unreachable through film, painting, fiction, and so forth. If we study art, therefore, facts must be quite beside the point. Most sadly, those who argue for the power of fact have allowed the trivialization of their own concerns. E.D. Hirsch's little book on "cultural literacy" is being marketed for the cocktail-party list at the back, from which readers are
tempted to mine those crucial, jewel-like bits of data that every American should be able to produce, just in case he is called to appear on College Bowl.

A last note. I think it would be absurd to expect another movie of this sort from Steven Spielberg. One can hope, all the same. Spielberg is a man with real flair for assembling visual-verbal narratives capable of reaching a wide audience. He happens to have stumbled upon a source and a subject which could change him even while he was at work changing them. Or perhaps more accurately: he discovered a context in which his preoccupations pointed beyond themselves, in which they had more than a narcissistic significance.

There are no geniuses in California. There are no geniuses, least of all among the moguls of the film industry. But there are people in whose vicinity useful work gets done. Spielberg could be one of them. May he, then, keep on striving—and may the bankers open their vaults at his behest, especially if he wants to work in the vein of Empire of the Sun.

A note on videos of Empire of the Sun: you probably didn’t see this film when it came to your local theater because it never arrived there. Moreover, a standard video presentation, designed to fit a TV screen, will distort the widescreen compositions. Is there any way to get access to Empire in something like its original form, without renting a sixteen millimeter print? According to The LaserDisc Newsletter, there will be a laserdisc (and evidently a video) version of Empire of the Sun which preserves the original ratios—which gives television viewers the entire picture, instead of cutting it off drastically at both ends. I should add that no such version has appeared in Valparaiso, Indiana. But it may elsewhere.

Revelation

Only a handful of novels I have reviewed for The Cresset over the past several years have struck me as forcefully as Peggy Payne’s first novel, Revelation. I would cite among those that have stirred me with similar strength Michael Malone’s Handling Sin, Robert Towers’ The Summoning, and Cynthia Ozick’s The Cannibal Galaxy. These are all works that contain the author’s unmistakable force of conviction and vision that propels the narratives to move finally outside of themselves, to point to the Word by which the words are measured (yes, even Ozick, the Jewish writer who seems to be one of the few contemporary writers recognized and rewarded by the literary establishment for the moral voice of her fiction).

Revelation is about Swain Hammond, minister of a liberal Protestant church in a university town—intellectual, controlled, somewhat distant, very careful. Married for fourteen years and childless by choice, Swain wants no intrusions, no unreasonable personal demands placed upon him. His actions and words seem to indicate that he loves his wife, but he says at one point that he cannot imagine loving anything he could not take to bed. As the pastor of Westside Presbyterian Church he is, predictably, not an effective personal counselor, but the congregation does not complain. They seem quite content with his intellectual aloofness because it does not challenge them in uncomfortable ways.

Swain is tempted occasionally to vent his feelings—to yell an obscenity at a driver he narrowly misses running into, for example. But he is always aware of his own respectability and of the possibility that the driver may turn out to be a member of his congregation. He spends his lifetime hiding his feelings from himself. That is why what happens one evening in his backyard is such a thrilling, shattering shock. All of a sudden Swain Hammond hears the voice of God speaking to him, saying, “Know that the truth is...” For some reason, God has chosen that time and that place to enter Swain’s brain in a new, real way, and of course Swain does not have any idea how to receive the favor. In fact, what may seem at first hearing to be a favor turns out to be just the opposite.

Only a handful of novels I have reviewed for The Cresset have struck me as forcefully as Peggy Payne’s powerful new novel, Revelation.

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What God says to Swain unsettles him because it doesn’t make sense and because he is not sure what his
response should be. There are no social rules to cover this situation. There are no theological precedents that he is aware of. He cannot intellectualize this experience or file it under some preconceived category, to be considered later. Instead, he finds himself pushed into a different way of living—a way which forces him to reconsider himself and the sources of his selfishness, fears, insecurities, and neuroses—with the mediating influence only of his wife to whom he cannot that it is Jakey and his friend Bryan—children—who finally begin to get through to Swain.

But meanwhile Jakey Miles, the child of members of Westside church, has been seriously injured in an accident on church property. The boy is left blinded, and the boy's father blames Swain, whose response is physical anger at first—and then after a while a growing sense of compassion. It is significant that it is Jakey and his friend Bryan—children—who finally begin to get through to Swain.

What Swain Hammond wants and has never received is a "call"—a sure sign that God has chosen him for the ministry. From early childhood Swain knew that he would someday be a clergyman, but he never experienced what others had talked about—a sense of clear direction from God that this is what God meant for him to do with his life. Swain does receive his call, finally, as God speaks to him again. This time the message is clear, but ironically it is also at this point that he begins to wonder if he should remain in the ministry. He is not alone. His congregation also has begun to wonder about a growing arrogance they sense in their Dr. Hammond, who is now displaying behavior frighteningly close, in their estimation, to charismatic practice.

Without giving it all away, I will say that the book concludes with one of the most satisfyingly "happy" endings I have read. Most contemporary novels do not have them because happy endings do not seem true to us. They often trivialize truth—even and particularly for the Christian who realizes that the scandal of the cross is at the heart of faith—that life on this earth, at least, ends in pain and suffering, even though there is the promise of ultimate salvation.

Revelation confronts the agonies, but also shows grace at work. It is a redemptive piece of literature, and I commend Simon and Schuster for publishing and promoting it at a time when joy, particularly of the religious sort, may play well in Peoria but is not acceptable (if considered at all) in the book review columns of the nation's major publications. Of course, Peggy Payne's superb writing—the kind that makes you remember why you first began reading novels—makes this book an obvious choice for any publisher. Maybe, too, a reading public that has mulled over Updike's sex-theology-computer trinity has been educated enough in philosophic overstatement and now hungered for a bit of narrative theology—an excellent, well-written story—to make it all make more sense. Not that God does all the time. We need, like Swain Hammond, to learn to listen with more than our ears and to read with more than our minds.

Jill Baumgaertner

Guided Grief Imagery

You are sitting with a group of people in a dimly lighted room. Window shades have been drawn to block the outside light, and the doors are closed to keep away interrupting noises. Each person moves his or her chair around to such a position that it is possible to relax. Someone leans his head back against a wall. Voices are hushed, then silenced. A cassette tape begins playing quiet music, which fills the space without drawing attention to itself. As everyone settles into comfortable positions, a soft voice begins to speak:

"Relax in your chair and close your eyes so that you can see what is going on inside of you rather than concentrating on what is happening outside of you... breathing in... breathing out... breathing in... breathing out... Let your inner spirit become still. Let the concerns and the problems of the day float away. You are going into a quiet and peaceful place, gradually downward into the center of yourself. It is a comfortable place. What is going on outside of you does not distract you, for you are caught up by the movements within your inner being."

Your imagination, as it took you
into the scenario above, may have set you down in any number of surroundings, but very likely one of the last places in which you pictured yourself was a church. You may have imagined yourself subject to a group hypnotist. You might have pictured yourself entering some situation of psychological therapy. You may even have felt yourself participating in some sort of seance. But very likely you did not think of what you were doing as having anything whatsoever to do with church.

Yet church is exactly what Dr. Thomas Droege has in mind as he explores, in Guided Grief Imagery, the possibility and potential for “guided imagery” as a tool for ministry and specifically for death and grief-related ministry. Building especially upon the work of Ira Progoff, Professor Droege offers more than a new, effective way of ministering to people who are dealing with loss and grief; he also opens up for us broad new possibilities for ministering in other situations and for ministering to the whole person.

Faithful to the title of his book, Guided Grief Imagery, Professor Droege focuses his attention throughout primarily on human grieving, dividing his book into two major sections to discuss images of death and to introduce guided imagery related to death. The first major section of the book by itself is a worthy resource, a compendium of imagery related to death from the Christian tradition and its Old Testament roots. The second section is a handbook and continued training in the use of guided imagery.

It is not within the scope of Droege’s book to provide an exhaustive directory of death imagery. Nevertheless major themes are well sketched out and illustrated. While death imagery can be found throughout the Old Testament, much of the most useful material has been deposited in the psalms. Droege helpfully suggests basic themes from the psalms related to human fears and God’s comfort, noting specific sources and prompting our own memory to add others. His general themes include Watery Chaos-Safe Passage, Abandonment-Presence, and Terror-Trust.

**This useful treatment is a proper reminder that human need for comfort over against death has taken different shapes under various cultural and historical influences.**

In the New Testament Droege finds materials from the gospels a potent source for fertile imagery, including stories such as the resurrection of Jesus, discourses on themes such as saving life and losing it, parables such as the separation of the sheep and the goats. Other New Testament materials are suggested as well, and again our minds are alerted to search for further scriptural resources.

In this first half of Guided Grief Imagery, Prof. Droege also very helpfully sketches the manner in which the use of Christian images of death has changed over the centuries, noting the four categories of Philippe Aries: tamed death, the death of the self, the death of the other, and forbidden death. This useful treatment is a proper reminder that human need for comfort over against death has taken different shapes under various cultural and historical influences. We are reminded that what comforted human fear in the fourth century may remain true, but not necessarily comforting still, for twentieth-century fear. This chapter again displays the broad variety of Christian images available for the grieving: death as birth, heaven as our home, and comfort for situations of prolonged dying.

A look at images for grief ministry which come from the worship resources of the church, especially from the liturgical heritage of late twentieth-century Lutheranism, concludes this first part of Guided Grief Imagery. This section is quite focused upon the resources of one denominational group, but since that heritage is a shared treasure others will find themselves quite at home, especially in relationship to the Paschal Cycle and Funeral Liturgy. The section on hymnody is based upon Lutheran Book of Worship and is therefore less generalizable for others who use different worship resources. Nevertheless a good number of hymn stanzas are printed out and hymnic imagery is structured into basic categories. Thus the treatment here can prove a useful prompt for the exploration of any specific hymnic heritage.

The second major section of Guided Grief Imagery is devoted to the actual use of guided imagery techniques, and it approaches the subject in two ways. Prof. Droege begins by providing what is actually a small handbook on “How to Use Guided Imagery.” His basic principles are twofold, first that the deeper level of experience provided by guided imagery can be an important element in the spiritual life of Christians and, secondly, that leadership in guided imagery can be done by any sensitive person who approaches the task with care and a small amount of understanding. Thus, Droege’s “handbook” provides both an understanding of the nature of guided imagery and the beginning training that a leader would need in using guided imagery, including steps to follow in effective leadership of guided imag-
ery and suggestions on improving skills in such leadership.

The greater part of the second section of the book continues this training process with actual exercises in guided imagery. Two chapters focus on the use of images from the Psalms and from the New Testament. Subsequent chapters treat imagery for specific situations which anticipate dying, grieving, and loss. Appropriate for use in a wide variety of groups, the exercises provide a healthful expansion of the church's grief ministry, preparing people ahead of time for the inevitable losses and partings that will be part of each person's life. While these chapters are full of exercises which can actually be used with groups, they also are a continued training program, complete with very useful notes for leaders seeking to expand understanding and ability in the guided imagery process.

As already noted, Droege's major focus is on the use of guided imagery in ministry related to death and dying, a focus kept in both parts of the book. This is an area of special interest and experience for Droege, and also an area in which he feels the Christian church has much to say to modern culture. The church has a long history of dealing with death and dying and of responding with ministry to the bereaved. The church is certainly the major agency in modern society able and willing to make such a response. But when it comes to preparing people for grief and loss, while the church has many resources at its disposal it often has succumbed to our contemporary denial of death. It is Droege's hope that his volume will assist the churches in more actively and powerfully pursuing this ministry of preparation to face the loss situations from which we cannot forever avert our eyes.

At the same time, Droege knows that there will be resistance to what he provides. Part of the resistance will simply have to do with the reluctance to face death and dying. Another resistance will have to do with using and experiencing something new, into which category guided imagery will fall for most people. But another whole level of resistance will probably emerge having to do with the very nature of guided imagery, an exercise in right brain function—creative, intuitive, and imaginative. As a culture we have had a heavy bias towards affirmation of only the rational, linear, left brain, with some suspicion of the intuitive, creative, imaginative, right brain functions. And within the church the dream, fantasy, freely symbolic abilities of the mind have not only been suspect, they have even been feared as tainted with evil, though both Old and New Testaments are filled with their manifestations.

There will indeed be some resistance to overcome for the techniques of guided imagery and creative imagining to be embraced by the church.

There will indeed be some resistance to overcome for the techniques of guided imagery and creative imagining to be embraced by the church. For all of this he is to be thanked.

David H. Kehret

November, 1988

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**The Phone Call**

**Dot Nuechterlein**

It was a rare occurrence: husband had gone back to the office and children were working or out with friends, so I was home alone that night when the phone rang.

I spoke—twice—but heard no reply. Then after my third hello there was an odd sound, like a combination sob and moan. "What's the matter?" I remember asking. "Are you hurt? Who is it? Are you okay?"

The sound continued, and I began to feel alarmed. "Please say something," I pleaded; "Do you need help?" Still no answer.

My concern deepened. It's my husband, I thought; he's had a stroke and can't speak; it took all his efforts to dial our number. I said his name, and asked again if he needed help. The sobbing went on.

No, I thought, that isn't logical; if it were my man he would make another noise in response, like dropping the phone or something, something," I sobbed and moan; it took all my effort to dial our number. I said his name, and asked again if he needed help. The sobbing went on.

A more terrifying thought entered my mind. Something dreadful has happened to one of my children, and whoever has called is so upset he or she cannot bring him/herself to speak the horrible words. Now that was not totally unreasonable, since several weeks earlier I had received a middle-of-the-night call from a hospital in Texas, telling me my son had been in an accident. He was not seriously injured, but the few seconds of panic experienced then probably set me up to anticipate the worst now.

"Please," I begged, "please tell me what is the problem. Please!"

Still I heard nothing but that strange muffled weeping sound. Only moments had gone by, but they seemed to be long ones.

Finally I said: "I can't stand this; either you say something or I will have to hang up."

That did it. Suddenly there were words. But what words they were! Foul, gross, perverted, expletive-undeleted words. I've had obscene phone calls before, and I know what you are supposed to do—slam the receiver down hard in the guy's ear. So I did.

And immediately regretted it! I wanted to get him back on the line. All of my "teacherly" instincts surfaced, and I wanted to say, "Hey, buddy, give it up. You have no talent for this stuff. If that was supposed to be heavy breathing, you need a lot more practice to be convincing. You can't fake what you don't know, and I suspect you haven't been confronted with enough real passion, either your own or anyone else's to know what it sounds like. The real McCoy doesn't get confused with crying!"

But it was too late. I was left to shake my head, and, to be honest, to giggle—both at him and at myself, for the foolishness of my reaction. I couldn't help wondering what he thought, to get such a different response from what he probably expected.

Not that I know for sure what that was. Supposedly the obscene caller gets his jollies from putting a woman in a vulnerable position and "hearing" her squirm.

I can't say as how I understand that. I don't fully comprehend rape, child abuse, violence, or other such tragedies, either, but there at least one can guess at some connection with anger or fear or frustration or hatred—there are real people dealing with one another, however terrible their actions. But a phone call is anonymous and impersonal, and I just don't get it.

And then there's the question of how it's done. Does a fellow flit at random through a phone book and pick a number? Does he just punch buttons and take pot luck at some resulting actual connection? Does he ever call someone he knows? My first such experience was back in my probation/parole officer days, and that's what I then thought. But the experts said no, most of these callers don't dial a "friend"—that isn't what they are after.

In this case, I suspect it may have been a kid trying a new game, not really knowing how. Maybe he took so long getting to the point because he was trying to get up the nerve to actually do it. Did I spoil his debut? Was he practicing his technique, and I blew my part? Maybe I should have just laughed in his ear.

Or perhaps a sympathetic response would have helped. Now that I think about it, I remember noticing that when he started talking his voice was quite cold and expressionless, almost like he was reading a script.

Maybe he'll call back sometime, and I can give him some advice. Hmmm, wonder if he reads the classifieds—perhaps I could run an ad. "WANTED: will the person who got a funny reaction to his obscene call last summer please call again."

Which also makes me wonder how serious researchers manage to explore topics like this—how do they find their sample subjects? It's hard to imagine multitudes volunteering to tell all about it.

Maybe next time I'll have the presence of mind to try to engage the caller in conversation. Who knows, it may open up a whole new field to study.