

CULTURE OF COMPLAINT by Robert Hughes

“Idealism will be replaced by Materialism . . . Diverted from its normal outlet in patriotism and civic or family pride, the need of the masses for some visible Idol to worship will be driven into totally unsociable channels where no education can reach it. Divine honours will be paid to shallow depressions in the earth, domestic pets, ruined windmills, or malignant tumours.”

“Justice will be replaced by Pity as the cardinal human virtue, and all fear of retribution will vanish. Every corner-boy will congratulate himself: ‘I’m such a sinner that God has come down in person to save me.’ Every crook will argue: ‘I like committing crimes. God likes forgiving them. Really the world is admirably arranged.’ The New Aristocracy will consist exclusively of hermits, bums and permanent invalids. The Rough Diamond, the Consumptive Whore, the bandit who is good to his mother, the epileptic girl who has a way with animals will be the heroes and heroines of the New Tragedy, when the general, the statesman, and the philosopher have become the butt of every farce and satire.”

And then, because the arts confront the sensitive citizen with the difference between good artists, mediocre ones and absolute duffers, and since there are always more of the last two than the first, the arts too must be politicized; so we cobble up critical systems to show that although we know what we mean by the quality of the environment, the idea of “quality” in aesthetic experience is little more than a paternalist fiction designed to make life hard for black, female and homosexual artists, who must henceforth be judged on their ethnicity, gender and medical condition rather than the merits of their work. 7

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 I remember feeling some qualms fifteen years ago when Charles Colson, one of the minor Washington villains of the Watergate years, announced at the very gate of the minimum-security prison that he had seen the light of Christ and been born again. Surely Americans won't swallow this? But they did. Even David Duke said he was reborn from Nazism into the brotherhood of Christ—and thousands of people believed him. Next, Robert Maxwell's family will tell his aggrieved bankers and former employees that he was moral at the last, and died from a bungled attempt at self-baptism by total immersion. With so many crooks queuing up to be washed in the blood of the Lamb, it's no wonder that the poor creature is looking a bit pale.

It was foreseen in 1835  
 by Alexis de Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America*:

Men will never establish any equality with which they will be contented . . . When inequality of condition is the common law of society, the most marked inequalities do not strike the eye; when everything is nearly on the same level, the slightest are marked enough to hurt it. Hence the desire for equality always becomes more insatiable in proportion as equality is more complete.

If you simplify your English, you are freed from the worst follies of orthodoxy. You cannot speak any of the necessary dialects, and when you make a stupid remark its stupidity will be obvious, even to yourself. Political language—and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists—is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind. One cannot change all this in a moment, but one can at least change one's own habits . . .

Does the homosexual suppose others love him more or hate him less because he is called a "gay"—that term revived from 18th-century English criminal slang, which implied prostitution and living on one's wits? The net gain is that thugs who used to go faggot-bashing now go gay-bashing. ]

[Just as language grotesquely inflates in attack, so it timidly shrinks in approbation, seeking words that cannot possibly give any offence, however notional. We do not fail, we underachieve. We are not junkies, but substance abusers; not handicapped, but differently abled. And we are mealy-mouthed unto death: a corpse, the *New England Journal of Medicine* urged in 1988, should be referred to as a "nonliving person." By extension, a fat corpse is a differently sized non-living person. ]

[No shifting of words is going to reduce the amount of bigotry in this or any other society. But it does increase what the military mind so lucidly calls collateral damage in a target-rich environment—namely, the wounding of innocent language. Consider the lumpen-feminist assault on all words that have "man" as a prefix or suffix. ]

[In any case, words are not deeds and mere nomenclature does not change much. As Barbara Ehrenreich remarked,

I like being called Ms. I don't want people saying "man" when they mean me, too. I'm willing to make an issue of these things. But I know that even when all women are Ms., we'll still get sixty-five cents for every dollar earned by a man. Minorities by any other name—people of color, or whatever—will still bear a huge burden of poverty, discrimination and racial harassment. Verbal uplift is not the revolution.<sup>4</sup>

Not only is it not the revolution: it has been a godsend to the right. Where would George Will, P. J. O'Rourke, the editors of the *American Spectator* and some of the contributors to the *New Criterion* all be without the inexhaustible flow of PC claptrap from the academic left? Did any nominally radical movement ever supply its foes with such a delicious array of targets for cheap shots? ]

Propaganda-talk, euphemism and evasion are so much a part of American usage today that they cross all party lines and ideological divides. The art of not answering the question, of cloaking unpleasant realities in abstraction or sugar is so perfectly endemic to Washington by now that we expect nothing else—the main practical difference being that presidents, congressmen, generals and CEOs hire others to write the stuff.

“Reasonable” voters begin to suspect that the talk about moral values may be a cover-up for the lack of practical social policy. But it is political folly for the “reasonable” to assume that the election of Clinton and Gore in any way neutralizes the large gains made by evangelical groups at the local political level in 1992.

Thus, in Dione’s words,

The moralism of the left blinded it to the legitimate sources of middle-class anger. The revolt of the middle class against a growing tax burden was not an expression of selfishness, but a reaction to the difficulties of maintaining a middle-class standard of living. Anger at the rising crime rates was not a covert form of racism but an expression of genuine fear . . . Impatience with welfare programs was sometimes the result of racial prejudice, but it was just as often a demand that certain basic rules about the value of work be made to apply to all. Those who spoke of “traditional family values” were not necessarily bigots . . .

↳ The new business heroes, the corporate raiders and junk-bond merchants—Michael Milken, Ivan Boesky, Kohlberg Kravis—exploded the traditional business relationship between investor, employee and customer; the only interests that mattered, in the new atmosphere of leveraged buyout and tear-down, were those of investors and their agents. This wasn't conservatism. It was more like Jacobinism—a wildly abstracted form of fiscal revolution-by-deed, in which every company, whatever its grounding in former practice and principle, was led before the guillotine of credit. As Michael Thomas put it: 9 ↷

{ In such conditions time itself breaks up into discrete parts. An enterprise that may have sunk its roots in commerce and community over a century can be disassembled by a takeover artist in a matter of weeks. Continuum means nothing. Relationships mean nothing. The modern financier lives and dies by the transaction. Each day is wholly new, the wheel subject to endless reinvention. There is no need for coherence because there is no advantage to coherence. Action is all . . . Critical judgment is neutered by celebrity, censure collapses in the face of success. 7

↳ Why do so many of the citizens of the world's oldest democracy not vote when they can, at a time when the struggle for democracy in Europe and throughout the rest of the world has reached its most crucial and inspiring level since 1848? Partly, it's an administrative problem—the disappearance of the old party-machine and ward system, whose last vestige was Chicago under Mayor Daley. Whatever its abuses, it got people street by street, household by household, to the ballot-boxes. Its patronage system did help tie American people, especially blue-collar and lower middle-class ones, to the belief that they as citizens had some role to play in the running of their country from the bottom up, ward by ward. It reinforced the sense of participatory democracy. ↷

There is much ground to be won. By the late 70s the American citizen was becoming a passive spectator at political events handed down in snippets between commercials. American network television is mostly junk designed to produce reality-shortage, and the average American is said to watch seven or eight hours of the stuff a day. No wonder that the act of pulling the lever every four years seemed to mean less, and that fewer people went to the booth to do it. In the first free election after Franco died, nearly 80 percent of Spain's electorate voted. If 80 percent of American voters voted, as they regularly did in the rough old days of stump politics between 1840 and 1910, that would be a populist revolution; it would mean that Americans really appreciated democracy, instead of just sitting around and making patriotic noises whilst urging democracy on other nations who, not uncommonly, value it by voting more than Americans themselves do. }

But it was patriotic noise one got from Washington in the 80s. And who can honestly claim not to be fed up with it? The public face of politics dissolved into theater: a banal drama of pumped-up optimism, fireworks and ballets of Elvis look-alikes at the Statue of Liberty, little cosmetic wars in Grenada and Panama to simulate the sweets of victory after the bitter taste of Vietnam. In the 80s, as never before in America, we saw statecraft fuse with image-management. Too many things in this supposedly open republic got done out of sight of the citizens. Or they were presented in terms that mocked public intelligence by their brevity and cartoon-like simplicity. This was known as "Letting Reagan be Reagan," and it accorded perfectly with the dictates of TV. So the very words that described one's grasp of events mutated: one casualty among dozens was "perception," which used to suggest the act of seeing things truthfully, but in the 80s came to mean "notion" and finally "illusion" or "dumb mistake." }

What began with the Kennedys reached its climax with the Reagans—the fixation on the Presidential person as a substitute king, no longer the *primus inter pares*, first among equals, so radically envisaged by the founders of the republic. But where was the citizen? Outside, as audiences are at spectacles. }

The idea that many moral and intellectual positions could coexist within the frame of democracy repelled these American monists, who desired only one orthodoxy, one revealed truth. To them, in the 1920s as in the 1990s, disagreement was illegitimate and the "market of ideas" invalid. The extreme of this was summed up in the apocryphal remark attributed to a Baptist preacher, that a man needed only one book on his shelf: for if an idea was in the Bible you needn't look any further for it, and if it wasn't it would be wrong anyway. The monist ("one-truth") line runs exactly counter to Thomas Jefferson's wise prescription: "If there be any among us who would wish to dissolve this Union or change its republican form, let them stand undisturbed as monuments of the safety in which error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it." ↗

↳ When the person laying siege to the abortion clinic declares himself to be "Pro-Life," we may be sure that he's not worrying about the life of the scared pregnant teenager; what is at stake is not so much the survival of the fetus, as the issue of how much male control over the bodies of women this society will grant. For without the right to choose abortion over pregnancy, the idea of equal opportunity for women fails: the involuntary mechanism of ovary and womb will always hamper their pursuit of degrees, appointments, jobs and free time. The growing conservative obsession with legislating against "choice," of trying to hustle a grave moral decision which is inherently personal into the domain of public law, can only prove, in the end, a disaster for conservative interests. It will do to them what strict Roman Catholic doctrine on contraception has already done to the Catholic Church. ↗

But then one finds the distinguished philosopher Sidney Hook, in *Heresy, Yes. Conspiracy, No* (1953), advocating a bar against Communists teaching in American colleges, and claiming that a thousand Reds were already teaching, just in New York schools:

Even if each teacher, on a conservative estimate, taught only a hundred students in the course of a year, this would mean that every year one hundred thousand students in New York City alone would be subject to educationally pernicious indoctrination. Of these . . . hundreds would have been influenced by their teachers to join Communist youth organizations from which the Communist movement draws its most fanatical followers. ↴

↳ The truly intractable difficulty of American higher education today is not its ideological content, but the state of preparedness of its students. This problem lies far back, in the high schools, where "disadvantaged" students—mainly black—receive a basic education that is shockingly inferior to white ones. Bad education inflicted years before college level has assured, as a survey of the National Assessment of Educational Progress found in the late 80s, that among 21-to-25-year-olds, only 60 percent of whites, 40 percent of Hispanics and 25 percent of blacks could "locate information in a news article or an almanac"; only 44 percent of whites, 20 percent of Hispanics and 8 percent of blacks could correctly figure the change due to them after paying a restaurant bill; and only 25 percent of whites, 7 percent of Hispanics and 3 percent of blacks could grasp the content of a printed bus schedule. No university can solve that tragic situation and only the most radical improvement of secondary schooling can combat it. It is not the students' fault. During the 1980s, black American students on their way to college, though falling below the white average on the SAT, actually raised their national average of combined verbal and math SAT scores by 49 points—by a bitter irony, just at the time that the Reagan administration was cutting the amount of federal college scholarship money available to the poor. ↴



⌈ All true; but the trouble with applying this to the humanities is that the appreciation of art and literature has no scientific basis whatever; one is dealing in the unquantifiable coin of feeling, intuition and (from time to time) moral judgment, and there is no objective "truth" to which criticism can lay "scientific" claim. The critic Louis Menand points out that the binding institution of American academic lit-crit, the Modern Language Association (MLA), was founded in 1883 by philologists, "scholars whose work *was* scientific and could therefore be evaluated 'objectively'." Not until 1950 would the MLA add the word "criticism" to its charter; and it only did so because criticism presented itself as increasingly grounded in theory, and hence as a contribution to *knowledge*, not just to the sum of opinion. Obsession with theory, combined with lack of writing talent, creates the awful prose of academic lit-crit. Nobody wants to return to the old ways of harrumphing, "humanistic" belles-lettrism that held sway before the "New Critics" took over forty years ago, but the present state of university writing about the arts today is somewhere between a sleeping-pill and a scandal. ⌋

⌈ The status of research and publication is high, and that of actual teaching disproportionately low. More and more, students are required to do research hackwork for the teacher's upcoming paper. American universities preserve, as though in amber, the medieval apprenticeship system. In part, this has been forced on them by the expansion of academe itself. When there are so many students that the professors can't teach them all, and funds are limited, the answer is to use "teaching assistants," paid at sweatshop rates; when the professor sees his or her academic duty as lying more in publishing than in teaching, he can call on a pool of "research assistants"—his own students—to do his work for him. Some see this as good training for the dissenting and questioning mind. Others, with at least as much reason, see in it a form of indenture, leading to conformity and opportunism. ⌋

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But did Václav Havel and his fellow playwrights, intellectuals and poets free Czechoslovakia by quoting Derrida or Lyotard on the inscrutability of texts? Assuredly not: they did it by placing their faith in the transforming power of thought—by putting their shoulders to the immense wheel of the word. The world changes more deeply, widely, thrillingly than at any moment since 1917, perhaps since 1848, and the American academic left keeps fretting about how phallogocentricity is inscribed in Dickens's portrayal of Little Nell. >

{ In Australia, no Utopia but a less truculent immigrant society than this one, intelligent multiculturalism works to everyone's social advantage, and the conservative crisis-talk about creating "a cultural tower of Babel" and so forth is seen as obsolete alarmism of a fairly low order. }

{ So despite the present mania for disparaging Eurocentrism, I know I was lucky to get the schooling I did. It was broad, "elitist" in its emphasis on performance, and rigorous—its sheer workload, the number of books we were expected to read and absorb, would strike a modern American pupil as cruel. It left no "time for smelling the roses," in that favored phrase of American liberal educators (which usually translates as watching TV). This did us no harm at all. We either passed, or we failed and repeated the year, and the report cards went to our parents, whose feelings were not spared. We were made to learn things by heart and read them aloud, with the result that some of them stuck. (I have never agreed with the conventional belief that rote learning of texts destroys a pupil's "creativity"; actually, it enriches it by filling the wells of memory.) We bitched about the discipline sometimes, but were on the whole proud to be in the Jesuit cavalry and not the Christian Brothers infantry. Some of us were snobs, and some embryo fanatics, but that's adolescence. In sum, this Eurocentrist, single-religion core curriculum gave us a point from which we could later branch out. }

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 To put the argument for multiculturalism in merely practical terms of self-interest: Though elites are never going to go away, since the need to create them is written in our biological fabric—whether we choose to kid ourselves about this or not—the *composition* of those elites is not necessarily static.]

◁The critic Frederick Crews makes the case that neo-conservatives like Allan Bloom, William Bennett and Roger Kimball are “cultural nostalgics” who

implicitly subscribe to a “transfusion” model of education, whereby the stored-up wisdom of the classics is considered a kind of plasma that will drip beneficially into our veins if we only stay sufficiently passive in its presence. My own notion of learning is entirely different. I want keen debate, not reverence for great books; historical consciousness and self-reflection, not supposedly timeless values; and continual expansion of our national canon to match a necessarily unsettled sense of who “we” are and what we ultimately care about . . . a certain amount of turmoil surrounding the canon should be taken in stride. In my view there can be no such thing as a sacrosanct text, an innately civilizing idea, or an altogether disinterested literary critic.<sup>5</sup> ]

◁American ideas of liberal democracy are only to be nourished at their sources, which lie absolutely within the European tradition; and it is far more important that the young should know about them before they go on to acquire whatever acquaintance they may wish to have with the ancient culture of the Dogon or the political institutions of the Iroquois. First things first. Cultural separatism within this republic is more a fad than a serious proposal; it is not likely to hold, but if it did, it would be an educational disaster for those it claims to help, the young, the poor and the black. It would be a gesture not of “empowerment,” but of emasculation. Self-esteem comes from doing things well, from discovering how to tell a truth from a lie, and from finding out what unites us as well as what separates us. The posturing of the politically correct, and their guilt-ridden tolerance for con men like Leonard Jefferies and the Reverend Al Sharpton, is no more a guide to such matters than the opinions of Simon Legree. ]

Acquisitiveness is an insidious disease; among its effects are hardening of the arteries of love and understanding, perversion of one's sense of values.

--Joshua Heschel