

A Margin of Hope
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Many people in the East Bronx would have starved-and perhaps some did a little- rather than go on "relief". The psychology of the shtetl householder in Eastern Europe, with his desperate improvisations to appear independent, had an odd way of recurring among these garment workers, some of whom still dreamed of managing their own little businesses, even if no more than a candy store with its shuffle of pennies across the counter. Almost everyone dreaded "charity".

Sometimes the family was about all that was left of Jewishness; or, more accurately, all that we had left of Jewishness had come to rest in the family. Jewishness flickered to life on Friday night, with a touch of Sabbath ceremony a few moments before dinner; it came radiantly to life during Passover, when traditional dignities shone through its ritual. Our parents clung to family life as if that was their one certainty: everything else seemed frightening, alien, incomprehensible. Not that they often talked about these things. Speaking openly would have been still more frightening, a shattering of defenses. Only in moments of crisis could that happen-as in those hysterical scenes that broke out when adolescents tried to slip away into lives of their own.

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Yet the best times were at home, in the comfort of our innerness, as on those Sunday evenings when there was enough money to indulge in delicatessen, or once in a while when my mother went off on a visit and my father and I sat quietly in the kitchen dipping bits of apple into glasses of hot tea.

The worldly manner affected by some of my friends would have stirred flames of suspicion in the eyes of my father; the sullen immigrant kindness of my parents would have struck my friends as all too similar to that of their fathers and mothers; and my own self-consciousness which in relation to my parents led me into a maze of superfluous lies and deceptions, made it difficult for me to believe in the possibility of a life grounded in simple good faith.

Immigrant Jewish life left us with a large weight of fear. Fear had seeped into Jewish bones over the centuries, fear had become the intuitive Jewish response to authority, fear seemed the strongest emotion that the very world itself, earth, sky, and sun brought our Jews. To be Jewish meant- not this alone, but this always - to live with fear, on the edge of foreseen catastrophe. "A Jew's joy," says the Yiddish proverb, "is not without fright."

To be poor is something that happens to you; to experience poverty

is to gain an idea of what is happening. When my father's grocery store in the West Bronx went bankrupt in 1930 and he became a "customer peddler" trudging from door to door to offer modest credit to Italian and Irish housewives, we were really poor, crowded into a small apartment with aunts, uncles and grandmother in order to save on rent. The move from the West to the East Bronx came to no more than a few miles, but socially the distance was vast. We were dropping from the lower middle class to the proletariat-the most painful of all social descents. This unsettled my sense of things: I was driven inward, toward book and dream.

We had a burning need for order-yes, even in our middle teens: a sure sign that the society was in deep disorder. We needed order both in our lives and in our view of life, and we thought to gain a semblance of the former by imposing an ideology on the latter. For a while it worked.

Not that anything really did fall into place: socialist thought after the triumph of Hitler was in severe crisis, the movement in America was fragile, and the torments of adolescence kept breaking through the routines of politics. Yet there were pleasure and sustenance to be found in shared work, in that bonding fraternity which is both the most yearned for and most treacherous

of twentieth-century experiences. Political life was often drudgery: attending tiresome meetings where democracy required that nudniks be allowed to drone on; hawking papers in the streets when few noticed and fewer bought; collecting petitions; distributing leaflets. But all this could release emotions of high purpose such as many political movements inspire, but left-wing movements, with their scored visions, seem especially to elicit.

Roosevelt became an adored figure in the unions, so much so that some of his shameful acts-such as conniving in the refusal to admit Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany and maintaining an embargo on arms to loyalist Spain- would be virtually ignored. Soon the reforms associated with his name came to seem, for many radical workers, a workable replacement for the flickering goal of socialism.

There is something unattractive about a right wing Social Democrat who has found his bureaucratic niche and makes safe politics out of anticommunism, correct as that antisocialism may be. He has lost that larger sympathy for the oppressed, that responsiveness to new modes of rebellion that a Socialist ought to have.

Perhaps it was "fated" too that in the distraught thirties the authoritarian simplicities of the Communists would attract more people, not least of all intellectuals, than Socialists ever could. People wanted certainty and that we could not give them. Steadily, with a self-destructiveness arising largely from good faith, American Socialism was letting slip through its fingers the second great opportunity that history had presented it. Steadily, the movement kept shrinking, with some prominent figures sliding into the milieu of New Deal politics and trade union leadership, others dropping away through disgust with factional bickering, and a small but significant number surrendering to one or another Far Left group, notably the Trotskyists.

We did join with the communists students in more serious demonstration this time against ROTC on campus, and these brought police on horseback to the campus. There, I think, we had some right on our side. Hatred of militarism was a feeling shared by many students, including some who didn't think of themselves as radical: it was a hatred that had become an ingrained part of the culture, an echo of the intense revulsion against the butchery and lies of the First World War.

That teacher may have lured me into this trap with sly motives, yet in a way he was right: one of the things that happen in a good school is that young people are encouraged safely to overextend themselves.

There was a shared belief in the value- indeed, the honor- of gaining a high school diploma, even among many who did not stay long enough to get it. This was not utopia, far from it. But the city did have a unity of culture, and that unity has since been broken.

One major symptom, by 1936 or so, was that many of the "practicals" were dropping out of the party. These were good people, usually Jewish trade unionists who still wanted to reconcile their daily work in the garment center with being stirred now and then by a socialist speech. They had little patience with Marxist theorizing; they had worked, sometimes hard, for the party; their bias, half through weariness, was toward day to day tasks.

The sect creates a life apart, casting aside the imperfections of the world as given and hoping, through disciplines of withdrawal, to establish its own little world as a haven for the elect. It is chosen to be the vanguard of History, a vessel of the Idea. Eventually it will triumph over enemies and skeptics, but meanwhile it has to huddle in its own bit of space. It endures a hibernation of waiting. Its members know they must suffer the pain of helplessness, and in time they learn to celebrate this pain as a sign of vindications to come.

The truth is, I was afraid of it. I was afraid of the rumored dissoluteness of these bohemians who moved in and out of one another's apartments- that wasn't how we had been taught to live in the Bronx. To have been raised in a working class family especially a Jewish one, means forever to bear a streak of puritanism which, if not strong enough to keep you from sexual assertion, is strong enough to keep you from very much pleasure.

There is still another reason, perhaps the strongest of all, for the appeal of the movement. Marxism advances a profoundly dramatic view of human experience. Its stress upon inevitable conflicts, apocalyptic climaxes, inevitable doom, and glorious futures gripped our imagination. We were always on the rim of

heroism; the mockery we might suffer today would turn to glory tomorrow. Our loyalty to principle would be rewarded by the grateful masses. The principle of classical drama-peripeteia, or the reversal of fortune- we stood on its head, quite as Marx was supposed to have done to Hegel. The moment of transfiguration would come, if only we held firm to our sense of destiny.

Precisely because we constituted a tiny, persecuted group trying seriously to cope with such major new problems as the nature of Stalinism, the movement had a way of secreting heresies from the very center of its orthodoxy.

The traditional Marxist dichotomy of capitalism/socialism to which Trotsky clung had been shown to be mistaken; nothing in history "decreed" such an either/or. There was now a third possibility which we called "bureaucratic collectivism". This bureaucratic collectivism was a statified economy barring private property, and it was dominated by a new ruling class that used totalitarian methods to modernize the backward Russian society through an unprecedented "planned" exploitation. It was a society more reactionary than capitalism, since it deprived the working class-indeed, the population as a whole-

of elementary rights that in Western society had been won early in the nineteenth century.

Who could tell where the waters would take us? Once the split was completed in 1940, our minority group, numbering perhaps a thousand, formed its own organization. With the grandiosity that marks beginnings, we called ourselves the Workers Party, no doubt because we had so few workers among us. At the very start James Burnham dropped away. He had been revising his ideas far more drastically than he had troubled to let us know, and in a few years would be developing his theory of the managerial revolution, which posited the coming to power in modern society of a new stratum of managers overwhelming both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat—a theory that met with devastating criticism from George Orwell and Dwight Macdonald. The defection of Burnham since we were not overly blessed with intellectual talent. But there was no turning back, so we pumped our legs as if marching ahead. We started a weekly paper, Labor Action, and maintained the theoretical magazine, the New International. Within a few years, chastened by our inability to emerge from sect isolation, we dropped the pretense of being a party and renamed ourselves the Independent Socialist League. Within the radical milieu we were simply the Shachtmanites.

Still, my guilt hung on like a dull ache, and not because I thought I was doing wrong, but because I thought I was doing right. The worst kind of guilt is that which comes out of persuasions of necessity.

In 1932 John Dos Passos said: "Becoming a Socialist right now would have just the same effect as drinking a bottle of near-beer." Sherwood Anderson asked himself what the difference was between Socialists and Communists, and answered: I guess the Communists mean it." In its very transparency this sentence helps explain why so many writers in our century have yielded themselves to authoritarian values: The Communists mean it.

A few years after Troy's death I met his widow, the poet Leonie Adams, and when I told her of my repeated failure to write him about my feelings, she let out a moan. In the early fifties he had been a troubled man, uncertain of himself and his work, and the admiration of a young stranger, she said, might have given him pleasure. She wheeled on me, "Why did you worry so much about your motives? Suppose they weren't pure? Don't you see that what matters is what we do?" Her words shamed me as few stronger rebukes ever have, I turned away in silence, to carry

with me through the years a dislike of that vanity which drapes itself as scruple.

The Jewish immigrant milieu had branded on its children marks of separatism while inciting fantasies of universalism. It taught them to conquer the gentile world in order finally to yield to it. By the twenties the values dominating Jewish immigrant life were larkely secular and universalist, with strong overlays of European culture. Startegic maneuvers of the vanguard had first been mapped out on gray immigrant streets.

A sprig of genteel anti-Semitism wasl also entwined with the ivy of our more notable departments of English. When I tell my students that only forty years ago so distinguished a literary man as Lionel Trilling had trouble finding a job in the Academy because he was Jewish and therefore judged by his peers to be deaf to the "Anglo-Saxon spirit" of English literature, those students stare at me in disbelief. Their disbeleif was made possible by an earlier generations discomforts.

My own responses were as impassioned as they were confused. At the forefront limped wily, clubfooted Ambivalence, God of Modernism, and behind straggled such lesser spirits as Eager Ambition and Self-Protective Withdrawal. More important, however, was a deep trustingness that I felt, a persuasion that the New York intellectual world really did function as a free market of ideas and talents, closer to the norms of laissez faire than any capitalist society I had ever heard of. In our little world competition was fierce, with little mercy shown to losers, and the clamor of self was incessant. Yet no entrenched monopoly was tolerated nor traditional caste privileges honored simply because they were traditional. Anyone with talent or a fresh idea could elbow into the market and set up a stall. The competitors might even help a little. There was equal opportunity to soar or tumble. There was also envy and nastiness: when Philip Rahv or Delmore Schwartz finished tearing apart a friend, little remained but a stack of bones. Still, gifts mattered, ideas mattered. Of manners there was perhaps little, of passion an abundance.

How long can this standoff continue, with history grinding its wheels in the ruts of insoluble crisis, and culture ceaselessly inventing new modes of experiment? Must not a breakdown occur sooner or later, a wearying of nerves, a pull toward entropy?

Modernism was becoming successful. No longer a literature of opposition, it had begun a triumphant metamorphosis signifying its ultimate slow dying. What remained of authentic modernism—say, the plays of Beckett—figured like a wandering Jew of cultural life: exhausted from restlessness, yet unable to find peace in the grave. At some point in the fifties it would become clear that the problem we faced was no longer how to fight for modernism; it was to consider why the fight for it had ended in so unnerving, almost unseemly a triumph—this modernism that must suffer extinction if once it does triumph.

It celebrated the writer as roamer among theories, as dilettante connoisseur, as luftmensh of the mind. It could be wonderful, it could turn rancid. Our partial assimilation—roots loosed in Jewish soil but still not torn out, roots lowered into America soil but still not fixed—gave us a seemingly endless range of possibilities. These were not really endless, of course,

but it was good that for a time they should seem so. Well or poorly, we tried to live by that vision of Ishmaelite pride and independence that Melville had called the way of the loose-fish. It was a vision that could not last very long, since need and caution, realism and loss of nerve, erosion and complication would finally do it in. Decades later I still ask myself, what better than to be a loose-fish?

Blackmur perfected a style chokingly intense. But he was open in mind, disconcertingly humble at times, and in one of his finest pieces, "A Critic's Job of Work" he wrote sentences I still cherish: "The worst evil of fanatic falsification . . . arises when a body of criticism is governed by an idee fixe, a really exaggerated heresy, when a notion of genuine but small scope is taken literally as of universal application."

Blackmur starts a conversation by rehearsing familiar nativist complaints that the New York writers are too intellectual, too ratiocinative, and Schapiro, for once a trifling impatient, breaks in, "Mr. Blackmur, when you use your mind, you don't use it up!" I confess to never having asked Meyer Schapiro about this story, out of fear it might turn out to be apocryphal.

I asked Tillich: "You say religion rests upon a sense of awe before the 'fundament of being'. Does that mean that if, on a starry night perhaps out at sea, I find myself overwhelmed by the beauty of the scene, and become acutely aware of my own transience before the immensity of things, I am having a religious experience?" My intent, of course, was to distinguish between mere cultivated sensibility and religious belief; but Tillich, suave dialectician that he was, seized upon my question and said, yes, even though I called myself a skeptic I had provided admirably - he grinned - a description of a religious experience. He had turned the tables on us, and we sat there uncomfortably - until from the back of the room there came the Wilsonian rumble: "Mr. Tillich, you're taking away our rights!"

What brought about these changes in our cultural life? Partly adaptation, a moderately conservative feeling that capitalist society, at least in the United States, was here to stay, so that there wasn't much point in clinging to yesterday's radical politics. Partly the sly workings of prosperity. But also a certain loosening of society-the remarkable absorptiveness of modern America, its readiness to abandon traditional precepts for a moment of excitement, its growing hungers for publicity and celebrity, its increasing

permissiveness toward social criticism, arising perhaps out of indifference, or self-assurance, or even tolerance. The lines of separation that had defined intellectual life--lines between high and middlebrow, radical and acquiescent, serious and popular--were becoming blurred. Here and there in the fifties you could find the beginnings of petty greed and hucksterism. But no one I knew was near any big money, and the neoconservatism starting to appear was almost entirely ideological and confined to the pages of Commentary.

Cunningham lived with, believing in and suffering from, an inordinate pride. Pride was the defense of a serious man put up against the world-pride and a fifth of bourbon. Pride was a sin, but an enabling sin: it helped one get through one's time.

Isn't there always a shrinkage of imaginative power when an "engaged" writer submits to the political movement? "The hearts grown brutal from the fare," Yeats had written, "More substance in our enmities/Thna in our live." Decades later, those lines can still evoke for me an unexpended sadness.

Such regimes are revolutionary (or counterrevolutionary) not only in their methods of taking power, but still more in their methods of keeping it. The charismatic Leader calls for ceaseless vigilance, action, sacrifice. The ultimate end of totalitarianism, if there is one, appears as either world domination or apocalypse--or the two together in a sodden Gotterdammerung. A voracious nihilism lies at its heart. Finally this takes the shape of a hubris aiming to transform not so much society as "human nature itself". Before so ghastly a prospect, admits Arendt, the mind balks, since..."in each one of us there lurks...a liberal, wheedling us with the voice of common sense," who regards the phenomenon of terror as an aberration and the description of it as a yielding to hysteria.

Both Arendt and Orwell performed an immense service by insisting that totalitarianism is not merely an extension of monopoly capitalism or Leninist dictatorship or even man's inherent sinfulness. All three surely contributed to the rise of totalitarianism, but what made it so powerful and frightening was precisely the break with old traditions, good and bad: precisely the embodiment of a radical new ethos of blood, terror, and nihilism. That no actual society behaved entirely in accord with Arendt's model is hardly a cogent criticism.

Orwell failed to consider that the energies making for terror might, together with ideological fervor and psychological mobilization, gradually run down, so that terror would be replaced by terror-in-reserve, which in fact has happened in the Soviet Union.

A phrase from one of Saul Bellow's novels--"evil is as real as sunshine"--lodged itself deeply in my mind.

But what could one do with this? It hardly constituted, as yet, a worked-out idea, it was merely an unshaped perception. One still wanted to oppose the conservatism that was making the doctrine of original sin a pretext for accommodation to the existing society: it wasn't, after all, as if Eve's having bit into that accursed apple had forever doomed humanity to laissez-faire capitalism. To keep in mind Bellow's pregnant sentence was to put a check on the arrogance of an earlier radicalism acknowledging no limit to its claims; was to anticipate that socialist authority, if ever there was one, would also be a power to be restrained and resisted; was even to see some wisdom in the conservative idea that politics should not be allowed to engulf the whole of human existence. Beyond that, for the moment, we could not go.

This may, just possibly, offer some consolation. But even if the totalitarian state cannot complete the "brainwashing" it sets in motion and thereby transform (or collapse) our basic sense of reality, this state may also be able to reduce most of its subjects to a torpor and submissiveness serving it almost as well. If so, the totalitarian state has at least in part succeeded in transforming human nature. Happily, there is some contrary evidence. The Hungarian revolution, the rise of Soviet dissidence, the Prague spring, the wall posters in China, the mass revolt of the Polish workers--all testify that some minds refuse to submit. One reason Solzhenitsyn's novel The First Circle is so affecting is its rich portraiture of a traditional range of minds--locked away, it is true, in a Soviet barrack, yet maintaining a wonderful sweep of discussion. So if we cannot yet say with complete assurance that Milosz was wrong, we may reasonably suspect that he was.

It was an uncomfortable politics, entangling us in difficulties that a "purist" radicalism never had to face. (Purists never have to face anything.) But I think it was a correct politics. That the Communists in France and Italy never came close to taking power is by no means evidence that we overestimated the danger; I would say it is evidence of how necessary it had been to put

barriers in their path. And real barriers -- power, money, politics --not just articles in intellectual journals.

For a humane and rational mind, anticommunism could be only one among several political motives. No general principle can ever be a sufficient guide for confronting specific problems: there is never a substitute for using one's head. And there are circumstances that make it too costly to abide by even one's most cherished principles. Even intellectuals who by the fifties had swung far to the right didn't propose military intervention during the Hungarian revolution, since they too feared it might lead to a world war.

A great bedevilment of our age has been that we can no longer suppose there is but one enemy of progress. I can hardly be the only person who has felt a wry nostalgia, or supposed it would be comforting to feel a wry nostalgia, for those good old days when Socialists and liberals directed their fire solely upon capitalism, Big Business, the trusts and so forth. Everything must have seemed so nicely simple, unshaded by ambiguity, when socialism was first ascendent in Europe and Gene Debs released his cry in America. Then I would not have had to go