LECTURE 2

Multi-Culti and Its Discontents

THE OBSESSIVE SUBJECT of our sterile confrontation between the two PCs—the politically and the patriotically correct—is clumsily called "multiculturalism." This has become a buzzword with almost as many meanings as there are mouths to utter it.

Much mud has been stirred up by the linkage of multiculturalism with political correctness. This has turned what ought to be a generous recognition of cultural diversity into a worthless symbolic program, clogged with lumpen-radical jargon. Its offshoot is the rhetoric of cultural separatism.

But separatism is not, as some conservatives insist, the inevitable result of multiculturalism. The two are in fact opposites.

Multiculturalism asserts that people with different roots can co-exist, that they can learn to read the image-banks of

others, that they can and should look across the frontiers of race, language, gender and age without prejudice or illusion, and learn to think against the background of a hybridized society. It proposes—modestly enough—that some of the most interesting things in history and culture happen at the interface between cultures. It wants to study border situations, not only because they are fascinating in themselves, but because understanding them may bring with it a little hope for the world.

Separatism denies the value, even the possibility, of such a dialogue. It rejects exchange. It is multiculturalism gone sour, fermented by despair and resentment, and (in America, if not in Bosnia-Herzegovina or the Middle East) it seems doomed to fail. To use the cultural consequences of American diversity as a tool for breaking the American polity only breaks the tool itself.

Its six syllables are awkward, this word "multiculturalism," but if it had existed thirty years ago when I was getting ready to leave Australia I would have embraced it at once. The expatriate surrenders some part of his native culture—you can't take it all with you—in exchange for what he will pick up on his travels. To learn other languages, to deal with other customs and creeds from direct experience of them and with a degree of humility: these are self-evidently good, as cultural provincialism is not.

One of the more disagreeable moments of my education was having to stand up and speak extempore in Latin for four minutes, before other schoolboys and our Jesuit teacher, on Horace's famous tag, *Coelum non animam mutant qui trans mare currunt*—"those who cross the sea change the sky above them, but not their souls." I resented this, not only because

my Latin was poor, but because the *idea* struck me as wrong—the utterance of a self-satisfied Roman, impervious to the rest of the world. Hegemonic Horace.

But most Australians were on his side. The motto of Sydney University expressed contentment with the colonial bind: *Sidere mens eadem mutato,* another version of Horace's imperial thought—"The same mind under changed skies."

Our education would prepare us to be little Englishmen and Englishwomen, though with nasal accents. We would not be accepted as such by the English themselves: we were not up to that. No poem written by an Australian was going to make its way into the anthologies of English verse—our national fate was to read those anthologies, never to contribute to them. It seemed natural to us that our head of state, with constitutional power to depose any democratically elected Australian prime minister, should be a young English-woman who lived 14,000 miles away. What native-born Australian could possibly be as worth looking up to as this Queen? Our Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, last of the true Australian imperialists, said we were "the Queen's men," "British to the boot-heels." When asked what his dream of felicity would be on leaving politics, he unhesitatingly replied, "A book-lined cottage in Kent."

In those days we had a small, 95 percent white, Anglo-Irish society, in whose public schools you could learn Latin but not Italian, ancient but not modern Greek. What we learned of the world in school came through the great tradition (and I use the word without irony) of English letters and English history. We were taught little Australian history. Of the world's great religions other than Christianity—Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam—we were as perfectly ignorant

as a row of cats looking at a TV set; or would have been, if Australia had had television in 1955, which, luckily, it did not. I didn't meet a Jew until I got to University, and you can imagine the line the Jesuits took on the Spanish Inquisition and the policies of Ferdinand and Isabella. I didn't even know what an *Episcopalian* was. Not until my late teens did I have a conversation with an Australian Aborigine, and it was short. There were no Aboriginal students, let alone teachers, at Sydney University. The original colonists of Australia—whose ancestors had walked and paddled there, across the string of islands that lay between "our" continent and Asia, around 30,000 B.C.—were completely unknown to us city whites, and their history and culture fell into a box marked "anthropology," meaning the study of exotics with whom one had nothing in common, and whose culture had nothing of value to contribute to ours. Thinking so was our subliminal way of warding-off the suspicion that ours had contributed nothing but misery and death to theirs.

My father, who was born in 1895, was like every other Australian of his generation when he spoke of Asia. He saw it as a threat—not surprisingly, since Australia had been at war with Japan from 1941 to 1945, and lost many young men in the Pacific islands, in New Guinea, on the Burma Road and in hellish concentration camps like Changi. Only by a hair's breadth and the force of American arms did we escape being forcibly co-opted into what Tojo called the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere.

Such national experiences, mixed with a long tradition of Sinophobia—for the racially exclusive White Australia Policy was a left-wing law, originally designed to keep cheap coolie labor out of Australia—did not predispose even intelligent

Australians, like my father, towards an appreciation of Zen calligraphy or the finer points of tea. He kept a captured Japanese flag in a cupboard (not on the wall) and sometimes I would take out this rusty square of cotton with the brilliant red circle and the frayed rip in it, which I assumed to be a bullet-hole, and reflect that but for the grace of God it might now be flying over Royal Sydney Golf Club. (The Japanese, at the time, did not play golf.)

Who talks of "Asia" or "Asians" now—even as we utter our vague generalizations about "European" culture? There are only Chinese, Japanese, Indonesians, Cambodians, and within even these national categories lie complexities of identity and heritage that are lost on the distant foreigner. But my father thought even more abstractly than this. He rarely mentioned Asia to me. He called it the Far East, meaning the Near North, and would not have considered going there. Far East of where? East of Eden: that is, east of England, a country in which, by his death, he had spent less than three of his fifty-six years, in between tours of duty flying a Sopwith Camel in France for his King and Empire in World War I. Today, if you asked a twelve-year-old Australian boy what he thought about "the East," he might hesitate: what does the oldie mean? New Zealand is in the east; maybe he means that, or Peru, which is even farther East.

So you might say that my upbringing was monocultural, in fact classically colonial, in the sense that it concentrated on the history, literature and values of Western Europe and, in particular, of England, and not much else. It had very little relationship to the themes of education in Australia today, which place a heavy stress on local history, the culture of minorities, and a compensatory non-Anglocentric approach

to all social questions. "Multiculturalism" has been a bureaucratic standard there for the best part of twenty years now, and its effects have been almost entirely good. It reflects a reality we have in common with the even more diverse, but culturally reluctant, USA—which, put in its simplest terms, is that the person on the bus next to you in Sydney is just as likely to be the descendant of a relatively recent arrival, a small trader from Skopelos, a mechanic from Palermo, a cook from Saigon, a lawyer from Hong Kong or a cobbler from some *stetl* in Lithuania as the great-great grandchild of an Englishman or Irishman, transported or free. The length of one's roots, as distinct from their tenacity, is no longer a big deal in my country, whatever passing pangs of regret this may induce in the minority of Australians whose families have been there for most of its (white) history. By the 1970s Australia had ceased to be a "basically British" country anyway, and there was no feasible way of persuading the daughter of a Croatian migrant of the mystic bond she was supposed to feel with Prince Charles or his mother—or of the enduring usefulness, to her education, of the history of the Plantagenets. It is probable that young Australians, away down there in what so many Americans still persist in imagining as a sort of Texas conducted by other means at the bottom of the globe, have a far better picture of the rest of the world—Near North included—than their American equivalents have or are likely to get. They have been given it by education and, of late, by television: the Australian government sponsors not just a few programs but an entire network channel, SBS, broadcasting seven days a week, which presents news, documentaries, film and commentary from all over the world, in twenty languages from Arabic to Tagalog (with English subtitles). One can

imagine the howls of outrage about "cultural fragmentation" that would issue from the mandarins of American conservatism if Washington were to even think of spending taxpayers' money on such a scheme in the United States. Yet if SBS's programming has any effect on the Australian polity, it is probably to cement it through mutual tolerance and curiosity rather than to fragment it into zones of cultural self-interest. 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.

II

So was my education in the early 50s deceptive? I am reluctant to think so—but I would be, wouldn't I?

Recently I came across a book by one of my fellow students at Sydney University, who in the 1950s was still a relatively raw émigré, a "New Australian": a Hungarian Jew named Andrew Riemer, who arrived from Budapest with his parents in 1946, suffered the humiliations of Australian exile (which included being shunted into a class for intellectually retarded children because his English was bad), and now teaches English literature at Sydney University. *Inside, Outside* (1992) is a tender and perceptive memoir of what it was like to grow up between the Anglo-Oz and the migrant cultures of our raw, awkward, imaginatively impoverished country, and at one point the author puts his finger on one of the

reasons why the early Anglocentric education we all received was not, after all, without its value. Riemer was a city boy, and in the early 50s the hard beauty and peculiar delicacy of the Australian bush did not enter into Australian suburban experience; the transformations of sensibility caused by the Australian environmental movement, which are commonplace there now, had hardly even begun. "Nothing in our environment suggested that nature could be a source of wonder or consolation, let alone transcendence." His teachers and mentors failed him by not even suggesting that Australian nature could be culturally inspiring: "for them it was merely desert, the awful emptiness of an empty world." The gap this left was filled by English poetry, especially nature-poetry:

> True, the experience was vicarious, perhaps gimcrack . . . but Tennyson's words represented for us an essential experience which we could not approach in any other manner. His poetry, and that of Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley . . . provided an escape from and a consolation for the ugliness and meanness of the world in which we were forced to live. Neither the physical world we inhabited, nor any of the poetry produced by it, could provide such escape and consolation . . . . The literature of England conducted us into the world of the romantic imagination which served one of the essential needs of adolescence. It also catered generously for others: a heroic or noble past in which we could participate, and ethical structures to provide models for fantasies, if not for actual life.[1]

"These," Riemer adds with some understatement, "are contentious issues to raise in the current climate of cultural nationalism." Yet they certainly strike a chord in me, although (as an expatriate) I feel Riemer goes too far when he adds, speaking of the present, that "Nothing in the contemporary educational and cultural climate [of Australia] caters for those powerful longings—romantic, idealistic, seeking for beauty which the individual finds hard to recognize or to define—that our membership of the British world provided for us through books, through a version of history, and through models of behaviour which these structures recommended to us." This is no longer true in young Australians' experience of their own landscape, which tends to be enthusiastic and informed—though not without its ironies. (CONSERVE AUSTRALIAN NATURE, ran a graffito in Sydney recently, and beneath it another hand had added PICKLE A POSSUM.) And no doubt the "version of history and models of behavior" that Australians of my age and Riemer's found in British imperial iconography can be supplanted from Australian sources—the problem being to embrace those sources, which means leaping clear of the double-bind of colonial history, a task which engages many Australian writers besides myself. A necessary prelude to this will be the cutting of the last political cords that tie Australian government to the British Crown and the establishment of an Australian Republic. The point is, however, that one should indulge in neither the Cultural Cringe (the belief that nothing in Australian culture is worthwhile until it has been certified overseas) nor its defensively brash successor, the Cultural Strut, in which one marches up and down to the tune of *Waltzing Matilda* pretending that nothing made outside Australia is "relevant" to Australians. The right attitude is neither cringe nor strut, but a natural and relaxed uprightness of carriage. Perhaps this also applies to the many advocates of cultural group-

separatism (black, Latino, Indian, feminist, gay, what you will) whose din fills the spaces of America with an often shaky rhetoric of "pride" and "entitlement."

When I was young I found that reading the 18th- and 19th-century English poets did not make Australia invisible. Quite the contrary. It pointed me towards reading those Australian poets whose project was to describe Australian nature, history and social experience in images that made sense to Australians—writers like Kenneth Slessor (in *Five Bells*), Robert Fitzgerald (in *The Wind at Your Door*), Judith Wright or, twenty years down the line, Les Murray. It is a truism, but true nevertheless, that a writer should be open to all literature; that its national or tribal forms and sentiments should not be experienced as mutually exclusive. The idea that the ex-colonial must reject the art of the ex-colonist in the interests of *political* change is absurdly limiting. And its absurdity remains true no matter what form of "colonization" is meant—economic, sexual, racial. You can learn from Picasso without being a phallocrat, from Rubens without becoming a Hapsburg courtier, from Kipling without turning into an imperialist. The particular feeds on the general, and vogue-words like "Anglocentrism" or "Eurocentrism" are wretchedly crude devices for describing the complex, eclectic processes by which the individual imagination and a common culture form one another, reciprocally, with much feedback and many cancellations, through the medium of language. Where I come from, "Euro" is also the Aboriginal name for a large kangaroo. In an important essay published in 1977, and thus predating most of America's present multiculturalist debate, Les Murray described how the influence of Aboriginal culture and its song-cycles entered his work, even as it was "implanting the Aboriginal concept of the sacredness of the land and of one's native region in the minds of many Australians." The main conduit for this was T.G.H. Strehlow's monumental compilation *Songs of Central Australia,* which appeared in 1970. Such a perception of myth deeply grounded in landscape could not help but present itself, even as it built (in the work of a white poet of Scots descent) upon English poetic traditions, as an alternative to the colonial perception of Australia as an empty field of otherness, sterile and dull when compared with the "fullness" of Europe. Already, in the 1970s, there was a political guilt-current in (white) Australian culture hostile to such perfusions, accusing their (white) makers of exploitation, paternalism and so forth. But, as Murray argued,[2]

> It will be a tragedy if the normal processes of artistic borrowing and influence, by which any culture makes part of its contribution to the conversation of mankind, are frozen in the Aboriginal case by what are really the maneuverings of a battle for political power within the white society of our country, or by tactical use of Third World rhetoric . . . Artistic borrowing . . . leaves the lender no poorer, and draws attention to his riches, which can only be depleted by neglect and his loss of confidence in them; these cause them to be lost. Borrowing is an act of respect which may restore his respect for his goods, and help to preserve them. And he is at all times free to draw on them himself.

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 ex-

pected 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.

The critic of Eurocentrism would say that it implanted a permanent bias. Maybe, but you can't see other cultures well until, through knowing your own, you reach a point where inclusiveness means something. Otherwise you're left with mere indecisive mush.

If I now react against the idea of centralized, imperial culture, if I am more interested in difference than supposed mainstreams today—and if I was not, I would hardly have written a longish book about Barcelona and Catalan nationalism—the impulse probably began because Father Wallace made me read Byron on Hellenism when I was fifteen. If I can handle a few Romance languages that I never heard spoken in Australia, it's partly because Father Fraser taught me Catullus and Ovid, not shirking their erotic and skeptical side. If I can sight-read one of the great Baroque churches of Mexico, like

Santo Domingo in Oaxaca, and reflect on what makes it both like and so very unlike others in Spain or Italy, it's ultimately because I learned a common ground of iconography as a boy, in that school chapel full of ugly plaster saints. And though the Jesuits' preoccupation with the classics didn't leave any room for Arabic history, it certainly prepared me to change my mind about Islam when I later discovered how little of the written heritage of Greece and Rome would have survived without Arabic scholarship.

So I would say that my own environment, though highly monocultural, was not monolithic: it gave me the tools to react against it, which I did when by leaving, living elsewhere, and getting interested in the hybrid, the impure, the sense of eclectic mixture that lies at the heart of so much of 20th-century creation. Culture and history are full of borders but they are all to some degree permeable. And America is one of their classic sites: the place filled with diversity, unsettled histories, images impinging on one another and spawning unexpected shapes. Pilgrims land on a rock in 1620, totally unaware that Spaniards had begun to build Santa Fe ten years before; and why should one chain of history be given marked precedence over the other in school textbooks? The history of Spaniards in America is not for Hispanics alone. The history of blacks is not for blacks alone. No minority or group can be written out of American history, because the very nature of its narrative enfolds them all.

This polyphony of voices, this constant eddying of claims to identity, is one of the things that makes America America. It is, I repeat, why the foreigner is grateful to be here. Hence when I hear Pat Buchanan, another nice Irish Catholic boy, ranting about the likely effect of importing "a million Zulus

to North Carolina," and how we must not surrender the single, apostolic, Christian and European essence of American culture to the unspecified multiculturalist hordes . . . well, the gut sinks and the hackles rise.

Nothing could be less like the tiny homogeneous Australia of my childhood than this gigantic, riven, hybridizing, multiracial republic, which each year receives somewhere between a half and two-thirds of the world's emigration, legal or illegal. By the year 2000, less than 60 percent of the people entering the American workforce will be native-born whites. 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 future of American ones, in a globalized economy without a Cold War, will lie with people who can think and act with informed grace across ethnic, cultural, linguistic lines. And the first step in becoming such a person lies in acknowledging that we are not one big world family, or ever likely to be: that the differences between races, nations, cultures and their various histories are at least as profound and durable as their similarities; that these differences are not divagations from a European norm, but structures eminently worth knowing about for their own sake. In the world that is coming, if you can't navigate difference, you've had it.

Thus, if multiculturalism is about learning to see through borders, I'm all in favor of it. Americans have a real problem in imagining the rest of the world. They are not the only ones—most things are foreign to most people—but considering the variety of national origins represented in their vast

society, its incuriosity and proneness to stereotype can still surprise the foreigner, even (in my case) after twenty years' residence in the U.S. For example: If white Americans still have difficulty seeing blacks, what of Arabs? Like everyone else, I watched the Gulf War on television, read about it in the press, and saw how that conflict brought to an ugly climax America's long-implanted habit of hostile ignorance about the Arab world, past and present. Rarely did one get an indication from the media, let alone from politicians, that the realities of Islamic culture (both past and present) were anything other than a history of fanaticism. Instead, a succession of pundits came forth to assure the public that Arabs were basically a bunch of volatile religious maniacs, hostage-takers, sons of thornbush and dune whose whole past disposed them against intercourse with more civilized states. Modern Islamic fundamentalism filled the screen with screaming mouths and waving arms; of the Islamic past—let alone present-day Arab dissent from fundamentalist xenophobia and militarism—one heard much less. It was as though Americans were being fed an amplified, updated version of the views on Islam held by Ferdinand and Isabella in the 15th century. The core message was that Arabs were not just uncivilized, but *uncivilizable*. In its perverse way, this represented a victory for the mullahs and for Saddam Hussein—in American eyes, everything in the Arab world that contradicted their cruelties and eschatological manias was blotted out, so that they were left in full possession of the field.

But to treat Islamic culture and history as a mere prelude to today's fanaticism gets us nowhere. It is like reading a French Gothic cathedral in terms of such modern Christians

as Jimmy Swaggart or Pat Robertson. Historically, Islam the Destroyer is a myth. Without Arab scholars, our mathematics would not exist and only a fraction of the Greek intellectual heritage would have come down to us. Medieval Rome was a scavengers' village compared with medieval Baghdad. Without the Arab invasion of southern Spain or *el-Andalus* in the 8th century, which produced the furthest westward expansion of the Islamic empire run by the Abbasid dynasty from Baghdad, the culture of southern Europe would be unimaginably poorer. Hispano-Arabic Andalusia, between the 12th and 15th centuries, was a brilliant "multicultural" civilization, built over the ruins (and incorporating the half-lost motifs) of ancient Roman colonies, mingling Western with middle-Eastern forms, glorious in its lyric invention and adaptive tolerance. What architecture surpasses that of the Alhambra in Granada, or the Great Mosque of Córdoba? *Mestizaje es grandeza:* mixture is greatness.

The conservative fear of mixture is tinged with paranoid exaggeration. One need only suggest that "history from below"—a phrase invented by the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in the black days of Europe in 1942, to denote a possible history of "those who suffer"—clearly has some moral and educational point to it, and the chorus begins. Lay aside Plato and pick up a copy of Rigoberta Menchu, and suddenly there's William Bennett, with his big black boots on, announcing that it's closing time in the gardens of Western Civ. "It is a given that the enemy of justice and humanity is Western man," sneers Dorothy Rabinowitz, editorial writer for the *Wall Street Journal.*

What is so fragile about Western Civ? And conversely, what is so radical about multiculturalism, which in America

means an improved understanding of the art, literature, history and values of cultures other than the dominant Anglo-Jewish one? Writers and academics are not the only people to recognize that multiculturalism is the wave of the future. But they are probably the only ones (apart from their conservative opponents, for here, too, extremes meet) to have convinced themselves that it poses a threat to capitalism. The capitalists themselves know that it does not. Ted Turner's decision, a few years ago, to ban the word "foreign" from global CNN newscasts was a more significant moment in the multicultural enterprise than all the papers on Self and Other that have ever been read at the Modern Language Association's jamborees. For, as the cultural critic David Rieff has pointed out;[3]

> the more one reads in academic multiculturalist journals and in business publications, the more one contrasts the speeches of CEOs and the speech of noted multiculturalist academics, the more one is struck by the similarities in the ways they view the world. Far from standing in implacable intellectual opposition to one another, both groups see the same racial and gender transformation in the demographic makeup of the country and the workforce; both emphasize the importance of women, and of the need to change the workplace in such a way as to make it more hospitable to women; and both insist that it is no longer possible to speak of the United States as some fixed, autarchic entity, and emphasize world over nation.

Unhappily, you do not have to listen very long to the arguments on the other side before sensing that, in quite a few of its proponents' minds, multiculturalism means something less than genuine curiosity about other cultural forms. The first casualty of this is the idea of Europe itself—for how

can anyone with the slightest acquaintance with the enormous, rich, contradictory range of European literature and thought presume that it forms one solid "Eurocentric" mass, "as if," in Russell Jacoby's words, "Adolf Hitler and Anne Frank represented the same world"? We hear people invoke something they call Latin-American culture (as distinct from the "repressive" culture of the Anglo) without realizing what coarse generalizations the phrase implies. There is no "Latin-American literature" as such, any more than there is a place called "Asia" with a common literature that somehow connects the *Ramayana,* the works of Confucius and the *Pillow-Book of Sei Shonagon*. There are only the cultures of various and distinct Latin-American countries, diverse in themselves, drawing on common pools of imagery—the vast reservoir of Roman Catholicism, for instance—but inflected by their own political and racial histories, different senses of nationhood and identity, and different languages. All are the products of long, intense, unpredictable hybridization between three continents, Africa, Europe and America—the process which, more and more, is seen at the center of "Eurocentric" culture as well. For example, is it possible to speak of a single literary "Portuguese language"? Instead of one "pure" Portuguese tongue, there are several, all the result of colonialization and mixture. There is the stem language of Portugal itself, in which Camoens wrote his epic *Os Lusiades*. But then there is Brazilian Portuguese too, transformed by African and Indian borrowings that break with the colonizers' grammar and usage. There is the Portuguese of Angola; the Portuguese of Mozambique, mingled with Hindi; the Portuguese of Cabo Verde, created as a literary idiom by the poet Jorge Barbosa,

and that of Guinea Bissau. Each one is the base of a distinctive literature and to speak, like so many Spaniards and North Americans, of a generality called "Latin-American writing" is to utter an empty abstraction.

What is more, many "radicals" seem to assume that, in looking at other cultures under the rubric of "multiculturalism," one should gaze mainly at their versions of Marxism, "liberation struggle," and so forth. But is this not just another Eurocentric caricature, to be asked to admire in other countries and cultures the ideological forms they have borrowed, recently, from the West? If this enthusiasm for Marxist re-enactments in Africa, Asia and the Middle East is not Eurocentrism, what is? When Maoism was fashionable in the West, it was completely misunderstood by its groupies—not only because they failed to see what a hideous tyranny it was, but because they imagined it was new, which was the greatest illusion of all. The history, civilization and thought of China is so old and continuous that its own version of Stalinist oligarchical collectivism, devised by Mao Tse-tung and imposed less than fifty years ago, is no more than a tiny blip in six millennia of recorded Chinese history. Maoism cannot be understood except as a reappearance, in Marx-face, of the archaic Chinese cult of the immutable god-emperor that reached its apogee under the Qing in the late 18th century. All too often, what poses as "radical multiculturalism" exists in an ignorance of other cultures as profound as that of a West Coast car-salesman newly appointed as the U.S. Ambassador to Somewherestan in the 60s.

III

In fact, it means separatism. It alleges that European institutions and mental structures are inherently oppressive, and that non-Eurocentric ones are not—a dubious idea, to say the least. The sense of disappointment and frustration with formal politics has gone down into culture, stuck there and festered. It has caused many people to view the arts mainly as a field of power, since they have so little power elsewhere. Thus they also become an arena for complaint about rights.

This process has gravely distorted current ideas about the political capacity of the arts, just at the moment when—due to the pervasiveness of mass media—they have reached their nadir of real political effect. The frame of mind this creates is a rich compost for phantom cultural issues, and a poor environment for clear thought about real ones.

One example is the inconclusive debate over "The Canon," that oppressive Big Bertha whose muzzle is trained over the battlements of Western Civ at the black, the gay, and the female. The Canon, we're told, is a list of books by dead Europeans—Shakespeare and Dante and Tolstoy and Dostoievsky and Stendhal and John Donne and T. S. Eliot . . . you know, *them,* the pale patriarchal penis people. I didn't even know there *was* a Canon until long after I got to the States, and by then it was too late. Mortimer Adler was unknown in Australia. At home, we didn't have a shelf of Great Books of the West bound in hand-tooled naugahyde. We just had a lot of shelves filled with a lot of books in no particular order, ranging from *Paradise Lost* to *Andrew Lang's Purple Book of Fairy Stories,* from Shakespeare to our national dog-

gerelist Banjo Patterson, from Xenophon's *Anabasis* to *Kim, The Jungle Book*—the original, so utterly different from the boorish and bowdlerized Disney version which is all that most kids get today—and *The Hunting of the Snark.* Hence the fatal eclectism of my childish reading habits. Nobody told me that one kind of book drove out another.

Those who complain about the Canon think it creates readers who will never read anything else.

If only! What they don't want to admit, at least not publicly, is that most American students don't read much anyway and quite a few, left to their own devices, would not read at all.

Their moronic national babysitter, the television set, took care of that. In 1991, the majority of American households (60 percent, the same as in Spain) did not buy one single book. Before long, Americans will think of the time when people sat at home and read books for their own sake, discursively and sometimes even aloud to one another, as a lost era—the way we now see rural quilting-bees in the 1870s. No American university can *assume* that its first-year students are literate in a more than technical sense. Perhaps they never could. But they certainly can't now. It is hard to exaggerate the narrowness of reference, the indifference to reading, the lightly dimpled cultural shallowness of many young products of American TV culture, even the privileged ones.

At universities which charge $22,000 a year for the continuing education of young Carmen or Peter, fine-arts and humanities teachers are busily making it clear to their charges that elitism is the pox of Western culture, and that it is wrong to develop much of a critical sense lest they catch it. America's peculiar convulsions over the academic literary canon come

less from a passionate interest in writing, than from notions of what is or is not therapeutic.

Now this, as the writer Katha Pollitt recently pointed out,[4] gives much of the debate over the Canon its peculiarly airless and futile quality. The underlying assumption, she argues,

> is that the books on the list are the only ones that are going to be read, and if the list is dropped no books are going to be read. Becoming a textbook is a book's only chance; all sides take that for granted. And so all agree not to mention certain things . . . For example, that if you have read only 25, or 50, or 100 books, you can't understand them, however well chosen they are. And that if you don't have an independent reading life—and very few students do—you won't *like* reading the books on the list and will forget them the moment you finish them.

The quarrel over the Canon reflects the sturdy assumption that works of art are or ought to be therapeutic. Imbibe the *Republic* or *Phaedo* at nineteen, and you will be one kind of person; study *Jane Eyre* or *Mrs. Dalloway* or the poetry of Aphra Behn, and you will be another; read Amiri Baraka or *The Color Purple* or the writings of Wole Soyinka, and you will be a third. This happens, or is supposed to happen, because the author, whether it's Plato or Alice Walker, becomes a "role model" for the reader, whose imitative faculties are roused by the writer's imaginative ones. If you read Evelyn Waugh before Franz Fanon you may become a racist (if white), or (if black) suffer an attack of the bends through sudden decompression of self-esteem. For in the literary zero-sum game of Canon talk, if you read X it means that you don't read Y.

In theory, all good liberals are for the widest access to every "serious" text for everyone. In practice we are not always so sure, because writers do in fact want to move us, to change our viewpoint on some aspect of life, great or small; and what do you do with a writer of indubitable gifts, even of genius, whose views are by any reasonable standards repellent? What about Céline, for instance, whose imaginative power and poisonous anti-Semitism were both impelled by his rage against French bourgeois life, inextricably twined, so that you cannot *have* the pitiless talent without the Jew-hating? Or, as Simone de Beauvoir asked in the title of an essay, *Must We Burn Sade?*—Sade, the republican as absolute anti-democrat, the writer who imagined his fellow human beings as mere victims, passive instruments for the sovereign will of pleasure in a sealed, absolutist universe where "Cruelty is one of the most natural human feelings, one of the sweetest of man's inclinations, one of the most intense he has received from nature"? Literature isn't a nice normalizing course of treatment whose purpose is to guide and cuff us into becoming better citizens of whatever republic we are reading in.

This occasionally seems to escape the intellectuals of both sides in America. When Norman Podhoretz wrote that "As the transmitter of the canon . . . the humanities have traditionally instilled a sense of the value of the democratic traditions we have inherited," one wonders what he meant. For every writer who praised "democratic traditions," another feared and distrusted them—starting with Plato. Shakespeare, for instance, with his contempt for the fickle unprincipled mob, so vividly evoked in *Julius Caesar* and in Coriolanus' speech to the plebeians:

You common cry of curs, whose breath I hate
As reek o' th' rotten fens, whose loves I prize
As the dead carcasses of unburied men
That do corrupt my air: I banish you.

Or Dryden, to whom the fall of kings and the stirrings of egalitarianism in 17th-century England meant hateful regression into "nature's state, where all have right to all." Or Baudelaire: "We have all of us got the republican spirit in our veins, as we have the pox in our bones: we are democratized and syphilized." Or Nietzsche, or Pound, or Lawrence, or Yeats ("All that was sung / All that was said in Ireland is a lie / Bred out of the contagion of the throng")—the list of notable democracy-haters fills quite a lot of any literary canon you care to invent.

It would also include some of those writers whom neo-conservatives like to hold up as models of critical probity: Matthew Arnold, for instance, who believed universities should preserve "the best that has been thought and said," but as an *antidote* to the spreading values of liberal democracy. Or T. S. Eliot—he of the old *Criterion*—who trusted democracy about as much as he liked Jews, and took up Matthew Arnold's project of reinforcing the mystique of monarchy and High Anglicanism against erosion by democratic values. Were not Eliot's elevation of Spenser the court poet, and his hostility to Milton the republican and regicide, *politically* inspired? Both Eliot and Leavis wanted to dislodge Milton from the Canon altogether, a task comparable to pushing a beached whale back in the surf on a falling tide. But it was a very edited Eliot we got from the neo-conservatives: an Eliot with the monarchist flatulence tuned down (the way

the brutal side of 18th-century English life was left discreetly unexplored by the catalogues of drop-dead Stately Home museum shows in the 80s, like *Treasure Houses of Great Britain*). The anti-Semitism of this Eliot tends to be kept in the wings too, perhaps because it is uncomfortably close to modern conservative arguments for the integrity of the Canon: some intruders dilute the real right wholeness of Western culture, for (he wrote in *After Strange Gods*) "What is still more important is unity of religious background; and reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable."

It is the habit of neo-conservatives to claim, when attacking "politicized" readings of literature, that they themselves represent *un*political readings, a view of history, novels, drama and poetry that is not contaminated by ideology. "Disinterested" is the code-word.

Yet the immense republic of literature contains everything—and its opposite. I have read a lot of books in the last forty-five years, since I became a conscious and addicted reader at the age of about nine. But when I try to imagine the number of books I have not read, and perhaps should have, and now probably never will, I feel giddy and ashamed.

The first trouble with a rigid, exclusionary canon of Great Writing is that it can never be complete: it is always in some sense a prosthetic device, a pedagogical aid whose limitations become clearer when it is moved outside the peculiar course-requirements of the university.

The second is that, like a museum full of beautiful paintings run by curators too timid to expand the collection, it will ossify.

The third is that its defensive stance attracts hostility,

turning its own contents into objects of resentment and thus making them harder to approach.

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.[5]

Crews is surely right; and the idea that one can construct a hierarchy of Timeless Values, and maintain it against the vicissitudes of the present (favorite metaphors, navigational: polestar, lighthouse, anchor in the tide, etcetera) is wrong. But how could this be construed as an argument for junking the classics? To see why immutability doesn't work, we have to immerse ourselves in the past as well as the limiting present, thereby (with luck and hard work) grasping at least as many of the "canonical" works, and internalizing them as deeply, as we could if we *believed* in the need for a strict canon. If we do this, we see—among other things—that the history of literature is one of continuous inclusion and subversion, that literary taste has rarely stood still for long, and

that there is no reason to expect it to do so now. Especially not now, given the profoundly unsettled state of American culture, the crises of cultural identity that come with the dissolution of the binary world held in place for forty years by the left and right jaws of the Cold War's iron clamp. The key words must be "both/and," not "either/or."

Conservatives may not want us to get into this maze, but some lumpen-radical assumptions won't get us through it. One is the remedial fantasy of culture—the notion, mentioned above, that we necessarily become what we read. But what could be more stultifying than to sentence a student to rehearse what his teacher believes is culturally appropriate to his race, gender or class, and ignore the rest? Another is distrust of the dead, as in "dead white European male." I take it for granted that some books are deeper, wider, fuller than others, and more necessary to an understanding of our culture and ourselves. They remain so, long after their authors are dead. Those who parrot phrases like "dead white male" might reflect that, in writing, death is relative: Lord Rochester is as dead as Sappho, though by no means as moribund as Brett Easton Ellis or Andrea Dworkin. Statistically, most authors *are* dead, but some of them continue to speak to us with a vividness and moral urgency which few of the living can rival. And the more we read, the more writers—living and dead—we find who do so, which is why the Canon is not a fortress but a permeable membrane.

Where does this distrust of the dead come from? Perhaps it is an echo from the 1960s, when that squalid hustler Jerry Rubin exhorted the youth of America not to trust anyone over thirty; but more likely, it is an aspect of the disparagement of cultural memory that pervades the United States.

Ezra Pound's exhortation to "MAKE IT NEW" hangs over all American culture, including Canon debates. But it is misunderstood. Pound never meant it as a sign that the present erases the past. The phrase fascinated him because he believed it had been written on the bathtub of the Ch'ing Emperor and that it was an injunction to carry the work of the past, constantly refreshed, into the present: the "it" is tradition itself:

> Tching . . .
> . . . wrote MAKE IT NEW
> on his bathtub
> Day by day make it new
> cut underbrush,
> pile the logs
> keep it growing.

Reading is *expansive,* not exclusive. If Caribbean, African, Arab and Indian writers get more attention today, if the Booker prize is won by Ben Okri from Nigeria or Peter Carey from Sydney, if readers approach the work of women and blacks without prejudice and without the sense of tiptoeing up on a special case, our shared culture grows and rejoices. We learn how other kinds of cultural consciousness can occupy the speaking center of literary forms. But how could this conceivably be a reason for not reading *Eugene Onegin* or Pope's *Epistle to Lord Burlington?*

IV

The sense of quality, of style, of measure is not an imposition bearing on literature from the domain of class, race or gender. It lives independently of group stereotypes. Every writer carries in his or her mind an invisible tribunal of dead writers, whose appointment is an imaginative act and not merely a browbeaten response to some notion of authority. This tribunal sits in judgment on our own work. We intuit our standards from it. From its unenforceable verdict, there is no appeal. None of our tricks—not our fetishization of the personal, not our attempts to shift the aesthetic into the political, not our exhausted fictions of avant-gardism—will make it go away. Not if we are frank with ourselves. If the tribunal weren't there, every first draft would be a final manuscript. You can't fool Mother Culture.

The *Odyssey* can't mean exactly the same things to us that it meant to a reader in first-century Alexandria, or to one in 17th-century France. But it continues to *mean,* to irradiate the mind of the willing and receptive reader with the vast light of imaginative possibility. You can't get around this with the notion that students should only be taught what is, in the cant phrase, "relevant to their experience": writing *creates* experience. We have all read about, and some have met, indignant students and teachers wanting to know why we should bother with Homer, since he is a dead white male and could have nothing to say to a live black female.

When I hear such things I think of Derek Walcott's *Omeros.* Walcott, winner of the 1992 Nobel for literature, is black and divides his time between Harvard and the Carib-

bean island of Saint Lucia. *Omeros* is that uncommon event, a long reflective and narrative poem, dense with exquisite observation, thronged with characters and cast in the epic form. It defies all the conventions of minimalist writing. It takes the Homeric frame of Ulysses' voyage and conflates it with the central event of black history in the New World, the shipment of slaves across the Atlantic, to which the poet owes his ultimate identity. And the question, what relevance can Homer have to me? is answered quite early on when the narrator is talking to a Greek girl, pining for her own Aegean islands, as he is for the Caribbean. She has on a shelf a head of Homer.

"O-meros," she laughed. "That's what we call him in Greek, . . ."

I felt the foam head watching as I stroked an arm, as
cold as its marble, then the shoulders in winter light
in the studio attic. I said, "Omeros,"

and *O* was the conch-shell's invocation, *mer* was
both mother and sea in our Antillean patois,
os, a grey bone, and the white surf as it crashes

and spreads its sibilant collar on a lace shore.
Omeros was the crunch of dry leaves, and the washes
that echoed from a cave-mouth when the tide has ebbed.

The name stayed in my mouth . . .

So should it, and many other names, stay in ours, whatever our ethnic origin or country of birth. They will not be dispelled by facile chitchat about Dead White Males versus politically OK living writers. On this point, I can't do better than quote Edward Saïd, whose books *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism* are such key works of recent transcultural thought. "These clamorous dismissals and swooping assertions," Saïd writes,

> are in fact caricatural reductions of what the great revisionary gestures of feminism, subaltern or black studies, and anti-imperialist resistance originally intended. For such gestures it was never a matter of replacing one set of authorities and dogmas with another, nor of substituting one center for another. It was always a matter of opening and participating in a central strand of intellectual and cultural effort and of showing what had always been, though indiscernibly, a part of it, like the work of women, or of blacks . . . but which had been either denied or derogated.[6]

That is why, as a writer, I reject not only the poststructuralist argument that all writing is indeterminate, but also the renewed attempt to judge writing in terms of its presumed social virtue. Through it, one enters a strange, nostalgic, Marxist never-never land, where all the most retrograde phantoms of Literature as Instrument of Social Utility are trotted forth. Thus one finds the new *Columbia History of the American Novel* declaring Harriet Beecher Stowe a better novelist than Melville because she was a woman and "socially constructive," because *Uncle Tom's Cabin* helped rouse Americans against slavery . . . whereas the captain of the *Pequod* was a symbol of laissez-faire capitalist individualism with a bad attitude to whales.

With the same argument you can claim that an artist like William Gropper, who drew those stirring cartoons of fat capitalists in top hats for the *New Masses* sixty years ago, may have something over an artist like Edward Hopper, who

didn't care a plugged nickel for community and was always painting those figures in lonely rooms in such a way that you can't be absolutely sure whether he was criticizing alienation or affirming the virtues of solitude.

These backward habits of judging writers in terms of their presumed ability to improve social consciousness may be tough luck for snobbish Proust and depressive Leopardi, for Henry James the closet case and Montaigne the son of bourgeois privilege. But they are even tougher for the students, who come away with the impression that the correct response to a text is to run a crude political propriety-meter over it and then let fly with a wad of stereotyped moralizing. "Boy, Professor Peach really did a job of unmasking the hierarchical assumptions in Dante last week, all those circles and stuff, you shoulda been there."

Politics ought not be all-pervasive. Indeed, one of the first conditions of freedom is to discover the line beyond which politics may not go, and literature is one of the means by which the young (and the old) find this out. Some works of art have an overt political content; many carry subliminal political messages, embedded in their framework. But it is remarkably naive to suppose that these messages exhaust the content of the art as art, or ultimately determine its value. Why, then, the fashion for judging art in political terms? Probably, people teach it because it is easy to teach. It revives the illusion that works of art carry social meaning the way trucks carry coal. It divides the sprawling republic of literature neatly into goodies and baddies, and relieves the student of the burden of imaginative empathy, the difficulties of aesthetic discrimination. It enables these scholars, with their tin ears, schematized minds and tapioca prose, to henpeck dead

writers for their lack of conformity to the current fashions in "oppression studies"—and to fool themselves and their equally nostalgic colleagues into thinking that they are all on the barricades.

Yet when the Iranian mullahs pronounced their *fatwa* against a live writer, Salman Rushdie, for "blasphemy" against Islam, fixing a price on his head for writing words they didn't like, academe hardly broke its silence. American academics failed to collectively protest this obscenity for two reasons. First, they feared their own campuses might become the targets of Islamic terrorists. Second, the more politically correct among them felt it was wrong to criticize a Muslim country, no matter what it did. At home in America, such folk knew it was the height of sexist impropriety to refer to a young female as a "girl" instead of a "woman." Abroad in Teheran, however, it was more or less OK for a cabal of regressive theocratic bigots to insist on the chador, to cut off thieves' hands and put out the eyes of offenders on TV, and to murder novelists as State policy. Oppression is what we do in the West. What they do in the Middle East is "their culture." Though of course we don't go along with everything the mobs—correction, the masses—of Iran say or do, we have to recognize that this culture is indeed theirs, not ours, and that the objective circumstances of anti-Arab racism in these Eurocentric United States would make a protest from the lit department seem like a caving-in to the values of the Republicans, who have used the often regrettable excesses of Islamic fundamentalism, which must be seen within a global context of Western aggression against Third World peoples, as a pretext for . . . but one gets the drift.

V

It's in the area of history that PC has scored its largest successes.

The reading of history is never static. Revise we historians must. There is no such thing as the last word. And who could doubt that there is still much to revise in the story of the European conquest of North and South America that we inherited? Its scheme was imperial: the epic advance of Civilization against Barbarism: the conquistador brings the Cross and the sword, the red man shrinks back before the cavalry and the railroad. Manifest Destiny. The white American myth of the 19th century. The notion that all historians propagated this triumphalist myth uncritically is quite false: you have only to read Parkman or Prescott to realize that. But after the myth sank from the histories deep into popular culture, it became a potent justification for the plunder, murder and enslavement of peoples, and the wreckage of nature.

So now, in reaction to it, comes the manufacture of its opposite myth. European man, once the hero of the conquest of the Americas, now becomes its demon; and the victims, who cannot be brought back to life, are canonized. On either side of the divide between Euro and native, historians stand ready with tar-brush and gold leaf, and instead of the wicked old stereotypes we have a whole new outfit of equally misleading ones. Our predecessors made a hero, almost a saint, of Christopher Columbus. He has monuments from Barcelona to the Antilles (which he discovered, though it is not known which island he actually landed on) and all over North

America, the mainland he never glimpsed. To Europeans and North Americans in 1892, he was Manifest Destiny in tights, surrounded by deposits of pious folklore, such as Washington Irving's story about Columbus and the egg or the fiction that Queen Isabella pawned her jewels, which had actually been hocked long before to pay for cannon, in order to finance his voyages. Whereas a PC book like Kirkpatrick Sale's *The Conquest of Paradise* makes him more like Hitler in a caravel, grasping and filled with apocalyptic fancies, landing like a virus among the innocent people of the New World.

This new stereotype, a rebirth of Rousseauist notions about the Noble Savage, brings a new outfit of double standards into play. Thus the Taino of Puerto Rico become innocent creatures living in a state of classless nature, like hippies in Vermont when Kirkpatrick Sale and I were young, whereas in fact they liked to be carried around in litters by their slaves. If only the people of the Americas, from Patagonia to the Great Lakes, had not been conquered by the Europeans, would they not still be in bliss? Are we not so much worse than they?

Well, yes, up to a point. The arrival of the Spaniards in the Americas was an unutterable catastrophe for the peoples of South America and the Caribbean, as the imperial push of Anglos through North America was for its native tribes. If one accepts the figures presented by David Stannard in his recent book, *American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World,* the slaughter occasioned by the Spanish *conquista* in Peru and Chile may have run as high as 95 percent of the population, perhaps ten million souls; and the total human population loss of the Western hemisphere may

have reached one hundred million in the first two centuries after European arrival. If so, that would be the worst genocide in human history, far surpassing Hitler's.

Can we say Columbus bears the guilt for this? In a general and emblematic way, yes, for he led Europe to America. In terms of personal guilt, no, for he did not plan these gigantic massacres by sword and disease; he had, for instance, no more knowledge of the epidemiology of swine influenza (the probable cause of the destruction of the people of Hispaniola within ten years of his arrival) than the Arawaks themselves did. For all that, he remains the greatest of all Atlantic explorers. His only rival in history was Captain James Cook, as brave a man but a far more rational and humane one, who added most of the Pacific and Antarctic Oceans to the European horizon nearly three centuries later. Cook is my hero; Columbus is white America's ex-hero. Cook seems closer to us because he was an Englishman of the Enlightenment, and we still to some degree speak his moral language. Columbus is very remote, because he came from an eschatological culture, that of 15th-century Spain, whose God-stricken obsessions we do not share. In Cook's time there was a difference, which his own achievements express, between discovery and conquest. In Columbus's time there was none.

What would have happened if the peoples of the western Atlantic had not been conquered by eschatological brutes? The speculation is existentially meaningless, because America *was* overrun by these imperfect and cruel beings who imposed their own cultures, Spanish and then English and French, on the existing ones. If Columbus had not opened the route to the Caribbean, someone else—Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, English—would have done it a few years later, and the results

for the societies and ecology of the Americas would have been much the same. To expect Mayans, or modern American Indians, to celebrate 1992 is unreasonable; as an Australian Aboriginal remarked at the time of our bicentenary in 1988, you might as well ask Jews to celebrate Hitler's centenary, which was due the next year, 1989.

But the historical evidence also shows that the peoples of the Americas had been doing very nicely for centuries and probably for millennia, when it came to murder, torture, materialism, ecocide, enslavement and sexist hegemony. We may worry about the fate of the spotted owl, but the first men to arrive in prehistoric north America did not seem to have any qualms about their extinction of its megafauna, which they accomplished in short order. The civilization of the Maya, the greatest to flourish in Central America before Columbus, reached its peak between 250 and 900 A.D., at which point a puzzling event called the Mayan Hiatus occurred. It collapsed. Nobody from outside had conquered it. However, recent digs and the slow work of deciphering glyphs, particularly at the site of Dos Pilas in Guatemala, indicate that the classic period of the Maya was ruined by a continuous state of war between local rulers that began around 700 A.D. and devoured the whole economy and ecology of the Mayan empire by the 10th century. The Mayans fell by self-induced ecological collapse, caused by a devotion to unwinnable wars which was itself sustained by an obsession with ideology—the ideology of the transcendent god-king, viewed by his limestone-toting helots as the embodiment of the whole universe.

Pre-Columbian Meso-America was not the Shangri-la that anti-Columbians would like it to be. You cannot climb

the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacan near Mexico City and look down the vast symmetrical perspective of the Avenue of the Dead, abandoned in the 8th century for reasons we know nothing about, without sensing that the society that built them was a theocratic ant-state whose rigidity might have made Albert Speer faint. And try staring at the fangs of the Feathered Serpent and talking about the benign pastoral quality of life before whitey arrived. Aztec culture was messianic and invasive and imperialistic; it had been so ever since the Aztecs came down from the north, under the command of a charismatic ruler whose name translates as Hummingbird-on-the-Left, and slaughtered or enslaved the resident people around what is now Mexico City. I suppose the survivors could be glad there was no Hummingbird-on-the-Right. But by now, it is anachronistic to condemn or to justify the destruction of Aztec society by the Spanish *conquista*. It was an evil fate to be enslaved by 16th-century Spanish regidors. But it was no joke to be one of the countless thousands whose hearts were ripped out by the Aztec priests of Tenochtitlan in order that the sun might rise in the morning. The Spanish burned nearly all the written records of Aztec history, except for a few codices. But the Aztecs, when they conquered central Mexico, also destroyed all the records of the previous societies, so that there could be no history before theirs.

The need for absolute goodies and absolute baddies runs deep in us, but it drags history into propaganda and denies the humanity of the dead: their sins, their virtues, their efforts, their failures. To preserve complexity, and not flatten it under the weight of anachronistic moralizing, is part of the historian's task. One could do worse than remember the advice of the Brazilian novelist Jorge Amado, reflecting on the

500th anniversary of Columbus and the conquest of the New World: for some, he wrote, it means

> the epic of discovery, the meeting of two worlds; for others, the infamy of the *conquista* and of genocide . . . One must set up and compare appearances and differences, because only in this way, by understanding what was great and will be an eternal glory, by disclosing what was wretched and will be a perpetual shame, only thus, in reflection and understanding, can we both celebrate the epic and condemn the massacre, neither of which expunges the other. We are the product of both—the mixed peoples of America.[7]

Surprises crackle, like electric arcs, between the interfaces of culture. These interfaces are where history now seeks itself; they will be the historical sites of the future. You cannot remake the past in the name of affirmative action. But you can find narratives that haven't been written, histories of people and groups that have been distorted or ignored, and refresh history by bringing them in. That is why, in the last twenty-five years, so much of the vitality of written history has come from the left. When you read the work of the black Caribbean historian C. L. R. James, you see a part of the world break its traditional silence—a silence not of its own choosing, but *imposed* on it by earlier imperial writers. Part of my own education as a writer, twenty years ago, was reading E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class,* which showed me how history might be constructed from below, assembling and making sense of the officially ignored experiences of workers whose stories, in more doctrinaire hands, might have become lost in generalizations about class rather

than brought to life in all their particularity. The list of books inspired by Thompson's masterpiece would be long, and certainly I know that *The Fatal Shore* was my attempt to apply this lesson to the submerged story of the Australian convicts. What I found useless, by contrast, was the abstract theorizing about prison and power in texts that became sacred in American academe in the early 80s, such as Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. In his ruminations about Jeremy Bentham's theory of the Panopticon, or total-surveillance prison, Foucault contrived to do exactly what he blamed the State for doing in real life: ignore the experience of prisoners themselves, hardly even bother to consult evidence about it, lest it disturb the autocratic, cuckoo-clock self-referentiality of his own theoretical constructs. Foucault's American admirers fail to see what an authoritarian he was, deep in the closet.

History, above all, must be concerned with human life as it has been lived, to the extent that it can be discovered through the filters of the past. You do not have to be a Marxist to appreciate the truth of Eric Hobsbawm's claim that the most widely recognized achievement of radical history "has been to win a place for the history of ordinary people, common men and women." In America, this work necessarily includes the histories of blacks and other minorities, which tend to break down complacent nationalist readings of the American past. One of the outstanding exemplars of such work was the late Herbert Gutman (1928–85), in *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom 1750–1925*. Gutman was one of a now uncommon breed, the historian who wants to take his work before a general public, showing the complex realities of the "underside of history" in terms just as accessible to non-specialist readers as the Great-Men histories of

elites had once been. His American Social History Project was an act of public reclamation of the sort that cuts no ice with New Left historians today; not "theoretical" enough, too "populist." One also thinks of Eugene Genovese's work on slavery, or Eric Foner's on Reconstruction, or Leon Litwack's superb book on the experiences of black Americans after emancipation, *Been in the Storm So Long*. Or, more recently, of Nicholas Lemann's story of the great northward migration of blacks to Illinois, *The Promised Land*. The need for such studies would have been disputed by American historians two generations ago. Today, they seem fundamental. For as Litwack remarked in his presidential address to the Organization of American Historians in 1987: "no group of scholars was more deeply implicated in the miseducation of American youth and did more to shape the thinking of generations of Americans about race and blacks than historians."

Likewise, the history of the frontier can never be the same as it was for our grandparents. Their idea of an America defined by frontier experience grew from an immensely influential paper read by Frederick Jackson Turner to the American Historical Association in 1893: "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." In it, Turner argued that "the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development." This was in direct contradiction to earlier (Puritan-based) historians who wrote as though everything in America, and especially the values and criteria by which events are interpreted and through which we try to answer the crucial question "Whose history?," emanated from New England. But for more than two decades now Turner's scheme, which is essentially that of Manifest Des-

tiny, the American version of English imperial history with the whites advancing into an unowned "wilderness" (*terra nullius* or "no man's land," as 18th-century colonizers of the Pacific used to say) has been criticized, modified and outright rejected by newer Western historians. To view this as simple debunking of the heroic West—an Oedipal assault on the myths of popular culture by writers who don't like the West—is very far from the truth. Rather, the object is twofold: on one hand to find a real historical West under the mythic West, and on the other to study the history of the "mythic West" as a construction of images and stereotypes—how they were created and fostered, how they came to dominate popular culture. Any effort to discover the historical realities of the West, historians now acknowledge, must begin with multiculturalism: that is, above all, by recognizing that the West was not a *terra nullius* into which the whites marched; that it was a highly charged arena in which various cultures, the invading Anglo-American and the already resident Indian and Spanish, impacted on one another, never with simple results. Nor can the drama and complexity of the West be understood without seeing how persistent and resilient the values, beliefs and cultural forms of the "vanquished" still are, despite long efforts by the Anglo "victors" both to suppress them and to deny the suppression itself with the more comfortable notion that they just faded away. Exactly the same process took place in Australia, with its 19th-century belief in "the passing of the Aborigine," so curiously in accord with the *fin-de-siècle*'s favored literary tropes of mist, wraiths and suggestive indistinctness.

It is true that revisions of Western history can embarrass cherished myths. To take only one of many examples: the

West is archetypally the place where Big Government is distrusted, the land of the independent man going it alone. Yet much of it—states like Arizona, for instance—has depended, not marginally or occasionally but always and totally, on Federal money from Washington for its economic existence. The Southwestern states could never have been settled at their present human density without immense expenditure of government funds on water-engineering. They are less the John Wayne than the Welfare Queen of American development.

What we see in the "new" history, and in the once vocal but now fading resistance to it, is a revival of the conflict over race and class ownership of historical writing that troubled American academe in the 1930s and again in the 1950s. In his excellent survey *The Great Multicultural Debate,* the historian Gary B. Nash showed how, after World War I, Jewish scholars had to struggle for a place in the American historical profession, considered a fief of the brahmin Wasp; and how resistance to their intrusion was still strong enough in the early 1960s for Carl Bridenbaugh, the president of the American Historical Association, to complain that "many of the younger practitioners of our craft . . . are products of lower middle-class or foreign origins, and their emotions not infrequently get in the way of historical reconstruction." But in due course it became clear even to the Bridenbaughs that, if America were to understand the meaning of its 19th-century immigrations—the greatest impaction of diverse peoples on a single state in all recorded history, with perhaps thirty-five million people coming to North America in seventy years—those "products of . . . foreign origins," Wasp code for Jews, Italians and other irrational beings, might have some light to cast on it. Due to the pressure of school boards in

cities with large black and Hispanic populations, secondary-school textbooks in the 1960s were somewhat revised, in the direction of seeing America as a multiracial and multicultural society. But monoculturalist history is tenacious, and conservatives love it; through the 70s and 80s, the same kind of pressures that fundamentalists applied to state education boards to put "creation science"—an oxymoron if ever there was one—in the biology textbooks went into making sure that class conflict was kept out of history texts, and race conflict tuned down as much as possible.

As Nash points out, people miss the overarching themes, the secure categories, the grand syntheses, the stories of Great Men. These are the first things to go when generalizations about history are exploded by close attention to gender, ethnic and class difference. Narrative history, *pace* some theorists, number-crunchers and cliometricians, is by no means dead. It still commands an enormous audience, and is perhaps the only kind of history that will ever be truly popular. But the narratives are in change, and even if we wanted to, we cannot will ourselves back to a time when such changes had not yet occurred. I remember watching Kenneth Clark explaining the Renaissance in *Civilization,* twenty years ago. There he stood, in his imperturbable tweeds, against a background of vineyards near Urbino. He had just quoted Yeats's lines on Guidobaldo di Montefeltro, who

> when he made
> That mirror-school of courtesies
> Upon Urbino's windy hill,
> Had sent no runners to and fro
> That he might learn the shepherds' will.

Quite so, said Clark; but "What about the people in the fields, or those shepherds whom Mr. Yeats rightly supposed that Guidobaldo did not consult on matters of taste and good manners? Could they not have had a civilization of their own?" The thought came and went: perhaps now, four hours into the thirteen-hour series, we will hear some acknowledgement that the lower classes had at least done *something* to create the material wealth on which the court of Urbino—and "civilization" in general—rose. But no; their achievement was to have created another work of art, the Tuscan landscape, whose function was to fill onlookers like Clark and us with "the impression of timeless order." It is fairly safe to say that nobody, in the foreseeable future, is likely to discuss the relations between labor and culture in such terms on television, or perhaps anywhere else; and I don't see that as much of a loss.

Broadly speaking, what has happened in the rewriting of histories has its analogue in American literature departments. There, the arrival of the "New Critics" was greeted with horror by the entrenched remainder of the old guard of "humanists"—wouldn't these close, cold-hearted textual readings destroy the ennobling penumbra of the works of Shelley, Dryden, Shakespeare? Then the new guard became the old, and saw in the arrival of French poststructuralism the wholesale "politicization" of literary studies. And yet, every time, the extremities are drawn back and absorbed into the center.

So it is with the range of historical studies. Academic historians once felt threatened, even insulted, by the idea of "history from below." One of the most interesting and vivacious books to come my way recently was *Journal of My Life,*

written by an 18th-century French glazier named Jacques-Louis Ménétra, which had lain buried in manuscript form for two centuries until its publication in 1986. Though I am certainly no specialist in the social history of 18th-century Paris, I felt while reading it as though I was passing over a reef in a glass-bottomed boat, seeing unfamiliar forms with stereoscopic clarity: Ménétra's omnivorous, bawdy, immensely revealing account of his life as "a man of the people" is a proletarian counterpart to Rousseau's *Confessions;* it is also full of self-aggrandizing fantasy and make-believe, but, as Robert Darnton remarked in his Introduction, this too "gives us a chance to see what eighteenth-century dreams were made of." Fifty years ago, very few formal historians in America would have thought it worth much, since its author was not an important figure and did not influence large events. I vividly remember coming across a somewhat similar text in the archives of the Mitchell Library in Sydney, the unread, untranscribed journal of a convict named Laurence Frayne, which turned out to be an incomparable window into the realities of the punishment system on Norfolk Island by one who had suffered them to the full; on its envelope some past archivist's hand had written in pencil "Convict journal—nothing of interest." The initial reaction to the emergence of women's studies, black studies, gay and other minority studies, and their subsequent spread through the once-settled categories of the study of American history, was the same: first, a denial that these groups needed histories of their own, then a succession of adventurous works showing that they did and do, and then a gradual absorption of them to the point where they take their place in the mainstream curriculum. With, all along the way, various Jeremiahs pointing out that the whole trend has gone too far.

By the same token, great changes have taken place in the versions of American history taught to schoolchildren. No serious educator doubts that these were needed, and still are; and it still comes as a shock to read what has been given out as history in the past. Here is a passage from a fifth-grade textbook, dealing with slavery.

> Back of the big house stand rows of small cabins. In these cabins live the families of Negro slaves . . . The small black boys and girls are pleased to have the white children come to play with them . . . In time many people came to think that it was wrong to own slaves. Some of the people who owned slaves became angry at this. They said that the black people were better off as slaves in America than they would have been as wild savages in Africa. Perhaps this was true. Most of the slaves seemed happy and contented.

This disgusting pastorale comes from a textbook called *My Country,* published by the state of California and used in its schools in the 1950s. It is inconceivable that such stuff could get into an American textbook today. The last ten years have brought enormous and hard-won gains in accuracy, proportion and sensitivity in the textbook treatment of American minorities, whether Asian, native, black or Hispanic.

But this is not enough for some extremists, who take the view that only blacks can write the history of slavery, only native Indians that of pre-European America, and so forth. They are proposing, not an informed multiculturalism, but a blinkered and wildly polemical separatism. This separatism,

in the main, is what conservatives attack *as* "multiculturalism." What is more, the purveyors of this separatist history—based, as the New York State Board of Regents coyly put it, on "non-canonical knowledge and techniques" and "non-dominant knowledge sources," meaning for the most part legend, hearsay and fantasy—want to make sure that it is not just taught at universities, where at least it can be effectively debated, but thrust into the secondary school curriculum as well, where it can't.

That is the object of a bizarre document called the Portland African-American Baseline Essays, which has never been published as a book but, in Xerox form, is altering the curricula of school systems all over the country.[8] Written by an undistinguished group of black scholars and academic wannabes, these essays on history, social studies, math, language arts and science are meant to be a charter of Afrocentrist history for young black Americans. They have had little scrutiny in the mainstream press. But they are popular with bureaucrats like Thomas Sobol, the education commissioner in New York State—people who are scared of alienating black voters or can't stand up to pseudo-scholars like Leonard Jefferies. Their implications for American education are large, and mostly bad. We therefore need to know what they say.

VI

You can summarize the Afrocentrist claim quite easily. It says that the history of the cultural relations between Africa and Europe is bunk—a prop for the fiction of white European supremacy. Palaeohistorians generally agree that intelligent human life began in the Rift Valley of Africa. The Afrocentrist goes further: the African was the *cultural* father of us all. European culture derives from Egypt, and Egypt is part of Africa, linked to its heart by the artery of the Nile. Egyptian civilization begins in sub-Saharan Africa, in Ethiopia and the Sudan.

Hence, argued the founding father of Afrocentrist history, the late Senegalese writer Cheikh Anta Diop, whatever is Egyptian is African, part of the lost black achievement; Imhotep, the genius who invented the pyramid as a monumental form in the 3rd millennium B.C., was black, and so were Euclid and Cleopatra in Alexandria twenty dynasties later.[9] Blacks in Egypt invented hieroglyphics, and monumental stone sculpture, and the pillared temple, and the cult of the Pharaonic sun-king. The Afrocentrist does not mean this as a cultural metaphor of a racially mixed society, designed to call attention to the wide spectrum of skin pigment that existed, as we know, in ancient Egypt. He means that the Egyptians were *black,* with dark skin, long limbs and woolly hair: an observation supported by one ambiguous remark by the Greek historian Herodotus, who visited Egypt in the 5th century B.C., and by not much else. And so the habit of European and American historians of treating the ancient Egyptians as other than black is a racist plot to conceal the achievements of black Africa.

Now it is a fact, documented at length by Martin Bernal in his controversial book *Black Athena,* that writers both popular and academic in the 19th and 20th centuries sought to portray the Egyptians as "whiter" than they can possibly have been—James Breasted, doyen of archaeological studies at the

University of Chicago, used to claim in the 1930s that the Egyptians were "dark-skinned members of the Great White Race," and Hollywood agreed. Cleopatra may not have been as black as Bessie Smith, as Afrocentrists claim, but she certainly didn't look like the present Mrs. Larry Fortensky.

It is equally true that 19th- and earlier 20th-century scholars, in trying to detach Egypt from Africa, were wrong, and that their efforts were motivated by bigotry. Geographically, Egypt is part of Africa; and few historians now seem to favor the skin-saving hypothesis that a "dynastic race" came from outside Africa to create Pharaonic Egypt. As Basil Davidson pointed out, the Egyptian racial mix was certainly added to by Near Eastern migrations, but

> to argue from this that the vast majority of the inhabitants of old Egypt, not being "Negro," were therefore not African is as little tenable as to argue the same about the Berbers and the Ethiopians, whom nobody has yet proposed to erase from the list of African peoples. The old racial categories of "white" and "black" can indeed make little sense in this or perhaps any other connection . . . Whatever their pigmentation or physical appearance, the Egyptians of Pharaonic times may safely be assigned to African history.[10]

Wrangling about the ethnicity of Egyptians—as if there were a single ethnic constant along the Nile for four millennia—is pointless, since no ancient Egyptian would have attached the same racial, political or geographical meanings to the word "Africa" that we do, and in any case African society seems to have been drawn at least as much from the Mesopotamian and Asian peoples east of the Nile as from the

African ones west and south of it. The question of whether the ancient Egyptians were black is unimportant to either Egyptian or African history—it only matters to American Afrocentrists.

Black figures do appear in Egyptian art, but they are usually identified as people from the south. For others, the Egyptian artists—whose frescoes provide a wealth of information about the different colors of old Egyptian society—reserved a range of reddish-browns, creamy whites and ochres; they did not see themselves as black, or represent their figures with negroid features. Probably they would have viewed modern American categories of race as meaninglessly crude. They had a theocratic state, but its ethnic composition was closer to a Benetton ad.

As for Herodotus' views on the blackness of Egyptians, these need to be taken with a grain of salt. Herodotus' work is full of curiosities and fables about national characteristics which are not, in fact, true. For instance, he declared in Book 3 of his *History* that the skulls of Egyptians were thicker than those of Persians, and claimed to have verified this by going over the skeletons left on a battlefield where a Persian army had routed an Egyptian one: the Persian skulls "are so thin that the merest touch from a pebble will pierce them, but those of the Egyptians . . . are so tough that it is hardly possible to break them." This, he explained, was because the Persians wore skullcaps, whereas the Egyptians from childhood shaved their heads, "so that the bone of the skull is hardened by the action of the sun—this is why they hardly ever go bald, baldness being rarer in Egypt than anywhere else."

But to the Afrocentrists, black Egypt is not a historical

guess: it is an article of faith, the key to a system of remedial belief. Cheikh Diop thought that

> A look towards the Egypt of antiquity is the best way to conceive and build our cultural future. . . . Egypt is the distant mother of Western cultures and sciences, [and] most of the ideas that we call foreign are often nothing but mixed up . . . images of the creations of our African ancestors, such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, dialectics . . . arithmetic, geometry, mechanical engineering, astronomy, the novel, poetry, the drama, architecture and the arts.[11]

It's not clear what Diop meant, in detail, by the idea that ancient Egypt provides the model of future Africa, since it was a slave state run by absolute Pharaohs and their priests. I am mystified by his reference to Afro-Egyptian "dialectics"; were the ideological ancestors of Hegel and Marx really loose among the colonnades of Thebes? Angrily denouncing the papyrus Canon? Complaining about the lack of gay and female Sphinx-carvers? On this point, alas, the hieroglyphs are mute.

Diop wanted us to believe nothing can be imported to Africa, nothing is foreign to it, because everything was there already. Basically, and no matter how much his ideas excite some black Americans, Diop was a crank; this kind of naive diffusionism, in which ideas and cultural forms start at point A and then radiate to other cultures, in which all the threads run back to a single cause or center or puppeteer, is not one that finds much favor with historians today, because it ignores the way in which similar ideas and forms are spontaneously born in very widely separated societies. As John

Baines, the Professor of Egyptology at Oxford, remarked when reviewing both Diop's and Bernal's books in the *New York Times,* "Not everyone who doubts the tenets of diffusionism is a Euro-centrist. Indeed, diffusionism was itself the product of a racist and colonialist era, and served an ideology of dominance . . . in order to attack the mistaken view that Africans were not autonomous and inventive, [the authors] imply that other cultures could not have been autonomous and inventive."

But Diop's drift is clear enough. Africa can take anything it wants from Euro-American culture and technology without losing its African essence, because everything that is, was in Africa once. It is merely recapturing its stolen property. One might call this the cargo-cult theory of history; it connects to the myth of the Golden Age, when all things were freely available in abundance. The cargo-cult religion is deeply involved with New Guinea nationalism. Its adherents hold that at one time all the "cargo" (material goods) in the world was owned by the New Guineans. Then came the fall of man: the white colonists came and took it away. But soon a Messiah will arrive and give all the cargo, from tinned sardines to Yamaha outboards, back to the New Guineans whose rightful property it is. This will annul the anguish of colonialism. Christians have a similar myth, that of a prelapsarian Paradise and the coming Millennium. Such myths have a social use. They comfort the persecuted and the marginalized—early Christians, colonized New Guineans, and blacks both in America and in Africa who know that their ancient past has been written out of history.

And it was. On this fact, the Afrocentrists are right, although every reputable scholar of black history has dealt with

it too. The racism of traditional 19th- and early 20th-century historians when dealing with the cultures of Africa has been appalling. Most of them refused to believe that African societies had a history that was worth telling or even looking for. The catalogue of quotations could go on forever, and one will do for all—Arnold Toynbee, in *A Study of History:* "When we classify mankind by color, the only one of the primary races . . . which has not made a single creative contribution to any of our 21 civilizations is the black race."

No black person—indeed, no modern historian of any race—could read such bland dismissals without incredulity and disgust. The question is: How to correct the record? Only by more knowledge. Toynbee was writing more than fifty years ago, but in the last twenty years, immense strides have been made in the historical scholarship both of Africa and of African America. But the upwelling of research, the growth of Black Studies programs in American universities, and all that goes with the long-needed expansion of the field seems fated to be plagued by movements like Afrocentrism, just as there are always cranks nattering about flying saucers on the edges of meso-American archaeology.

The second claim of Afrocentrism, then, is that European culture owes its very existence to Africa. Africa colonized Europe benignly, by imparting its knowledge to it.

This happened through Egyptian influence on Greece, but in the process the pioneering achievements of Africa were lost or disguised. To plough through the literature of Afrocentrism is to enter a world of claims about technological innovation so absurd that they lie beyond satire, like those made for Russian science in Stalin's time. Egyptians, alias Africans, invented the wet-cell battery by observing electric

eels in the Nile. The Afrocentrist "scholar" Ivan van Sertima claims that black Egyptians late in the first millennium B.C. flew around in gliders; this news is based, not on the discovery of an aircraft in an Egyptian tomb, but on a silhouette wooden votive sculpture of the god Horus, a falcon, that a passing English businessman mistook some decades ago for a model airplane. Sertima also teaches that Tanzanians fifteen hundred years ago were smelting steel with semiconductor technology. Like the Afrocentrist historian John Henrik Clarke, he thinks South America was populated by expeditions from Africa whose records have, naturally, been lost; the evidence for this is the thick lips on Olmec sculpture. Likewise, Afrocentrists think the face of the Great Sphinx of Gizeh was actually that of a black, and that Napoleon's soldiers were ordered to mutilate it with cannon-fire to conceal the fact. There is nothing to prove these tales, but nothing to disprove them either—a common condition of things that didn't happen. This kind of bilge is what the members of the New York State Board of Regents mean by "nondominant knowledge sources."

Why do Americans show such gullibility before people with degrees? John Henrik Clarke has a doctorate and is regarded by many blacks as, in Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s words, "the great paterfamilias of the Afrocentric movement." He is also an anti-Semitic crank, given to denouncing what he calls "the Jewish educational mafia"; he penned an Introduction to a racist piece of pseudo-science called *The Iceman Inheritance: Prehistoric Sources of Western Man's Racism, Sexism and Aggression,* whose author, Michael Bradley, argues that Jews are the worst people on earth because they were once the "'purest' and oldest Neanderthal-Caucasoids."

It seems barely credible that American Jews, who were at the forefront of the struggle for civil rights for African-Americans in the 1960s, should now be the targets of anti-Semitic attacks by a new generation of blacks, gulled by teachers like Leonard Jefferies into believing in the historicity of hate-texts like that durable Czarist forgery, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. But thanks to the rise of Afrocentrist pseudo-scholarship, blacks are the only Americans among whom anti-Semitism, slowly waning elsewhere, is actually on the rise.[12]

This new effusion of racism comes garnished with arguments proposing that, since only those in power can be racists, black racism is not racism at all. And on top of it young blacks are offered the delusory promise of Back-to-Africa sentiment. All American migrant groups draw cultural identity, and a measure of spiritual strength, from a sense of their original roots—in Sicily or the Ionian Islands, in Ireland or Cuba, and in Africa. In longing for the womb they also sentimentalize and stereotype their origins; this, as any outsider who has attended a full-blast Irish beano in Boston can testify, is a powerful tribal instinct. But it ought to be recognized that the "Africa," the imagined entity of which Afrocentrists like to speak, is very largely a construction of this kind—a lost maternal paradise.

American blacks, no less than whites, belong to and are shaped by American culture, to which they have so immensely contributed and into which their own imaginations and deeds are inextricably wound: all they have in common with African blacks is their genes and, in the case of African states that were once English colonies, the English language. To imagine that the cultural experience of an American black

resembles that of a citizen of Zimbabwe or Uganda or South Africa, beyond the basic fact that both have suffered the corrosive and demeaning effects of white racism, is fanciful.

In the past there was never, in the strict sense, a pan-African culture: instead, there were many tribes, many languages, many cultures, many contradictory religions and cults, and many kings; and, needless to add, many wars between them. The horrors of post-colonial Africa are largely due to the fact that new black rulers were able to graft modern techniques of oppression onto ancient tribal hatreds; the borders of African nation-states rarely correspond to tribal divisions, so that tribes within a state are often at one another's throats. Fifteen years ago it was already clear that the more benign legacies of British colonialism, such as independent courts and relatively uncorrupted civil services, were among the first things to be dropped by the former British colonies in Africa that turned into nationalist military dictatorships. Who would seriously argue that the Ugandans were worse off, economically or legally, under Lord Lugard in the 1910s than they are now, after Idi Amin and his successors? Zaire, formerly the Belgian Congo, is a bankrupt dystopia whose tyrant, President Mobutu, has about six billion dollars in Switzerland—the national debt of his country. People have been dying of hunger for hundreds of years in Ethiopia, but not until the dictator Mengistu took charge was the mass murder by starvation of millions of people actually used there for political ends. The behavior of French colonial satraps in Guinea was appalling enough, but hardly worse than the corruption and cruelty of Seiko Toure, the black Caligula who took over when the French quit and ran the country from the mid-60s to the early 70s. Moreover, it may

be that those African states which had no significant record of European colonization—Liberia, which was actually founded by American slaves returned to Africa in the 19th century, and Ethiopia—are the ones that turned out worst. The idea that African-Americans have a place waiting for them in some generalized "Africa," in any but a vaguely metaphorical sense, is mere cultural demagogy. Neither black nor white can "go home again," except as tourists; their mutual home, with all its ideals, opportunities, conflicts and evils, is America, and they have no other.

VII

Nowhere are the weakness and propagandistic nature of Afrocentrism more visible than in its version of slave history.

Slavery is one of the oldest and worst of human institutions. Its legacies are with America still, in the suffering and social damage inflicted on its black people, in the racism of its whites. Every kind of rationalization and excuse for this Original Sin of the American republic has in the past suffused the teaching of American history. As Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., among others, has pointed out, American history was long written by and for whites, who usurped the images of Afro-American life and fed them back as distorted stereotypes, consoling to white prejudices and demeaning to black self-knowledge. No general American history written by a white up to the 1960s can be trusted to give a fair, investigatory view of what slavery and its results meant to black Americans—or, by the same token, of what the conquest of the

West meant to American Indians. Modern historians, black and white, have labored to set this right. But there is no evil so great that it cannot be exaggerated; and this has become the project of recent Afrocentrists, who wish to invent a sort of remedial history in which the entire blame for the invention and practice of black slavery is laid at the door of Europeans. This is profoundly unhistorical, but it's getting locked in popular consciousness through the new curricula.

There have been three major slave revolts in human history. The first, led by the Thracian gladiator Spartacus against the Romans, occurred in 73 B.C. The third was in the 1790s when the great black revolutionary Toussaint L'Ouverture and his slave army wrested control of Santo Domingo from the French, only to be defeated by Napoleon in 1802. But the second fell halfway between these two, in the middle of the 9th century A.D., and is less documented than either. We do know that the insurgents were black; that the Muslim 'Abbasid caliphs of Iraq had brought them from East Africa to work, in the thousands, in the salt marshes of the delta of the Tigris. These rebels beat back the Arabs for nearly ten years. Like the escaped maroons in Brazil centuries later, they set up their own strongholds in the marshland. They seemed unconquerable and they were not, in fact, crushed by the Muslims until 883. They were known as the Zanj, and they bequeathed their name to the island of Zanzibar in East Africa—which, by no coincidence, would become and remain the market center for slaves in the Arab world until the last quarter of the 19th century.

The revolt of the Zanj eleven hundred years ago should remind us of the utter falsity of the now fashionable line of argument which tries to suggest that the enslavement of Afri-

can blacks was the invention of European whites. It is true that slavery had been written into the basis of the classical world; Periclean Athens was a slave state, and so was Augustan Rome. Most of their slaves were Caucasian whites, and "In antiquity, bondage had nothing to do with physiognomy or skin color."[13] The word "slave" meant a person of Slavic origin. By the 13th century it spread to other Caucasian peoples subjugated by armies from central Asia: Russians, Georgians, Circassians, Albanians, Armenians, all of whom found ready buyers from Venice to Sicily to Barcelona, and throughout the Muslim world.

But the *African* slave trade as such, the black traffic, was a Muslim invention, developed by Arab traders with the enthusiastic collaboration of black African ones, institutionalized with the most unrelenting brutality centuries before the white man appeared on the African continent, and continuing long after the slave market in North America was finally crushed.

Historically, this traffic between the Mediterranean and sub-Saharan Africa begins with the very civilization that Afrocentrists are so anxious to claim as black—ancient Egypt. African slavery was well in force long before that: but by the first millennium B.C. Pharaoh Rameses II boasts of providing the temples with more than 100,000 slaves, and indeed it is inconceivable that the monumental culture of Egypt could have been raised outside a slave economy. For the next two thousand years the basic economies of sub-Saharan Africa would be tied into the catching, use and sale of slaves. The sculptures of medieval life show slaves bound and gagged for sacrifice, and the first Portuguese explorers of Africa around 1480 found a large slave trade set up from the Congo

to Benin. There were large slave plantations in the Mali empire in the 13th-14th centuries and every abuse and cruelty visited on slaves in the antebellum South, including the practice of breeding children for sale like cattle, was practised by the black rulers of those towns which the Afrocentrists now hold up as sanitized examples of high civilization, such as Timbuktu and Songhay.

Naturally this is a problem for Afrocentrists, especially in the context of the black Muslim ideas that many of them espouse. Nothing in the writings of the Prophet forbids slavery, which is why it became such an Arab-dominated business. A big lie is needed to neutralize this inconvenient truth. Consequently one of the best-sellers in the American black community at present is an official publication of the group known as The Nation of Islam (whose head is the arch-bigot Louis Farrakhan), entitled *The Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews,* a compilation of pseudo-history which pretends to disclose the "inordinate" role played by Jews in creating "slavery and the black holocaust." Its allegations—such as the fiction that Jewish merchants "frequently dominated" the slave trade to America and the Caribbean—have been painstakingly refuted, point by point, in a response by the historian Harold Brackman, often using the very sources misused and misquoted by Farrakhan's version of history. Yet his reply could not penetrate the black community as *The Secret Relationship* has done, since it is in the nature of paranoid texts to inoculate naive readers against their rebuttal; any reply becomes part of the huge global conspiracy itself.[14]

In the Baseline Essays and elsewhere, one gets a flat denial that Egypt had slaves at all, which would have been news to Moses, and a lot of mumbling about how African slavery,

well, existed, sort of, but was more benign than its American counterpart. But there are no generalizations to be made about this; sometimes the African slaves of Africans seem to have been accepted almost as family or tribal members, though with very diminished rights, and sometimes they were treated as something less than cattle, beaten and raped and starved—again, an archetypal pattern which would be repeated by white slaveowners in the old South. As Roland Oliver, the most distinguished of African scholars and the general editor of the eight-volume Cambridge History of Africa, has shown: All that we know of the slave traffic as it expanded between the 16th and 19th centuries confirms that it could not have existed without the wholehearted cooperation of African tribal states, built on the supply of captives generated by their relentless wars.[15]

The image promulgated by pop-history fictions like *Roots*—white slavers bursting with cutlass and musket into the settled lives of peaceful African villages—is very far from the historical truth. A marketing system had been in place for centuries, and its supply was controlled by Africans.

Nor did it simply vanish with Abolition.

In 1865, the year the Civil War ended in the defeat of the South, Livingstone was in Zanzibar; he estimated that between 80,000 and 100,000 African slaves were brought down in chains from the interior by Arab and African slavers that year, loaded on the dhows and shipped off to Persia and the Arabian Gulf states.

Unlike the English and the Americans, neither the Arabs nor the African kings in the 19th century saw the smallest humanitarian reason to move against slavery. Slave markets, supplying the Arab emirates, were still operating in Djibouti

in the 1950s; and since 1960, the slave trade has flourished in Mauritania and the Sudan. There are still reports of chattel slavery in northern Nigeria, Rwanda and Niger. Jean-Bedel Bokassa, emperor of the Central African Republic, whom a diamond-hungry Giscard d'Estaing ostentatiously embraced as his black brother at the time of his coronation in 1977, kept hundreds of slaves and from time to time arranged a massacre of them for his own amusement. If, as H. Rap Brown once observed, violence is as American as apple pie, then slavery would seem to be as African as yams.

And yet the idea of the solitary guilt of Europe and America continues to haunt discussions of slavery. Some African and even American black leaders, including—rather surprisingly—the Rev. Jesse Jackson, have actually proposed that America and the developed industrial nations of Europe, which profited from slavery, should now contribute a form of blood-money to African states as official reparation for the social and economic damage done to the continent in the past by the slave trade, so as to help these states build up their economic base. Modern Africa, they argue, has as much right to this as Israel had to the immense subventions that have been paid to it by America and other countries as penance for Hitler's murder of European Jews. Curiously, none of them suggest that the Arab emirates or Iraq should kick in their share, which, by all rights, should be a very large one, larger than Europe's or even America's, and just as easily raised from the flow of oil. If Washington must pay cash for the sins of Simon Legree, then it seems only fair that Baghdad should expiate those of the 'Abassid caliphs.

Africa, Islam and Europe all participated in black slavery, enforced it, profited from its miseries. But in the end, only

Europe (including, here, North America) proved itself able to conceive of abolishing it; only the immense moral and intellectual force of the Enlightenment, brought to bear on the hideous oppression that slavery represented, was able—unevenly and with great difficulty—to bring the trade to an end. That we now have so-called historians who are prepared to gloss over this fact strikes me as remarkable. But then, in these latitudes, neither Occam's Razor nor the notion that the burden of proof rests on the person making the assertion has any force.

For here we come up against a cardinal rule of the PC attitude to oppression studies. Whatever a white European male historian or witness has to say must be suspect; the utterances of an oppressed person or group deserve instant credence, even if they're the merest assertion. Now the claims of the victim do have to be heard, because they may cast new light on history. But they have to pass exactly the same tests as anyone else's, or debate fails and truth suffers. The PC cover for this is the idea that all statements about history are expressions of power: history is only written by the winners and truth is political and unknowable, unless some victim knows it in his or her bones.

This sophistry is what enables the authors of the Portland African-American Baseline Essays not only to sow the curriculum with fictions about Egyptian science, but to insert the most ludicrous nonsense about science itself by equating it with magic. Thus we learn that the all-black Egyptians, when they were not flitting about in gliders, could foretell the future with "astropsychological treatises." They could see things that were out of sight, or before they happened. They got the pyramids built by telekinesis—concentrate hard

enough, and you can make a hundred-ton block of limes float in the air. At least this Shirley MacLaine-style arch ogy disposes of the awkward problem of Egyptian slav bor, since we wouldn't want those black Egyptians to slaves themselves. The essay from which we learn all this much else, is written by Hunter Havelin Adams III, describes himself as a "Research Scientist at Argonne tional Laboratories, Chicago." This sounds vaguely im sive but in fact, according to Argonne, Mr. Adams is assistant whose task is to collect air samples, with no qua tions beyond a high-school diploma. Another remedial cise, this time in biography.

VIII

The word "self-esteem" has become one of the obstr shibboleths of education. Why do black children need centrist education? Because, its promoters say, it will self-esteem. They live in a world of media and institu whose images and values are mainly created by whites white tradition is to denigrate blacks. Hence blacks mus models that show them that they are different, and tha matter. Do you want your children to love themselves? change the curriculum. Feed them racist claptrap abou your intelligence is a function of the amount of mela your skin, and how Africans were sun people, free and and cooperative, whereas Europeans were ice people, ing pallidly in caves.

The self-esteem talk comes to us wrapped in senti

which, if uttered by whites, would set off alarm-bells of racism. Black children, one reads in the Portland Baseline Essays, are impelled by their genetic heritage to "process information differently" from white ones—a claim which white supremacists, from their side of the fence, have been making since before the Civil War. The fact is that, to quote Albert Shanker, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, "poor, minority children, whose performance still lags far behind that of white, middle-class kids, deserve the best education we can give them. They're not going to get it if we substitute myths for history or magic for science."

Out of this farrago the Afrocentrists want to create a separatist history and impose it on kids who are still too young to dispute it. There is even talk of curricular change along the Portland lines for three-year-olds. It is not hard to see why these claims for purely remedial history are intensifying today. They are symbolic. They are part of a reaction of despair, frustration and rage against twelve years of rightwing government, the stubbornly anti-reform policies of Reagan and Bush, the Republicans' assimilation of racism with populism. By 1989 about 44 percent of all black children lived below the poverty line, while the hopes for racial equality and greater educational opportunity for impoverished African-Americans that had been raised in the mid-60s were all but extinct.

But that only makes the claims for Afrocentrist pseudo-history understandable. It does not justify it, or lend it credence as knowledge. Nationalism always wants to have myths to prop itself up; and the newer the nationalism, the newer the myth, the more ancient its claims.

That was how Irish cultural nationalists—Yeats and his friends in the 1890s—were able to create a mythic past for Ireland, the Celtic twilight full of heroes and lost kings, Cuchulain and Briann Boru. It is why the tartan, unknown in ancient Scotland, was actually the invention of late 18th- and 19th-century textile manufacturers. It is why the Catalans in the 19th century, bitterly resenting the suppression of their language and the loss of their political autonomy to Madrid after the conquest of Barcelona by the Bourbons in 1714, created an entire system of cultural revival based on a highly selective, and mythologized, version of their own medieval past and its lost institutions. The invention of tradition, as Eric Hobsbawm and others have shown in detail,[16] was one of the cultural industries of 19th-century Europe.

And of the 20th century too. And if you ask what the aim of these efforts to roll history and myth together was, in every case the answer is the same. Self-esteem. The Germans suffered from low self-esteem after the Treaty of Versailles. The Italians had low self-esteem in the 20s, and were understandably tired of being viewed as a nation of organ-grinders and gelato-makers. Irish self-esteem had been debased by seven hundred years of English colonization and religious prejudice, by the disenfranchisement of the Catholics. But the desire for self-esteem does not justify every lie and exaggeration and therapeutic slanting of evidence that can be claimed to alleviate it. The separatism it fosters turns what ought to be a recognition of cultural diversity, of real multiculturalism, generous and tolerant on both sides, into a pernicious symbolic program. Separatism is the opposite of diversity, and it can also make unholy alliances. Nearly thirty years ago Malcolm X's Black Muslims and George Lincoln Rockwell's American Nazi Party staged a joint rally at Madison Square

Garden to dramatize their mutual hope of splitting the United States into segregated zones, one for blacks, the other for whites.

The idea that European culture is oppressive, in and of itself, is a fallacy that can only survive among the fanatical and the ignorant. The moral and intellectual conviction that inspired Toussaint L'Ouverture to focus the grievances of the Haitian slaves and lead them to freedom came from his reading of Rousseau and Mirabeau. When thousands of voteless, propertyless workers the length and breadth of England met in their reading-groups in the 1820s to discuss republican ideas and discover the significance of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar,* they were seeking to unite themselves by taking back the meanings of a dominant culture from custodians who didn't live up to them. For the last two hundred years, the victims of oppression have always been able to find a transforming and strengthening vision within the literature and thought of Europe. It is an act of the shoddiest condescension to suppose that this can no longer be so, and that this immense, complicated, many-celled edifice, this beehive that reductionists mistake for a "monolith," can no longer contain any answers to the needs of the weak, the aspirations of the deprived and the demands of those who seek cultural self-definition.

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 conmen like Leonard Jefferies and the Reverend Al Sharpton, is no more a guide to such matters than the opinions of Simon Legree.