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Volume II, Number 2

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ARTICLES

The Resurgence of Political Art in Mexico?

Alan W. Barnett

MEXICAN political art is stirring again. Whether it will be able to achieve the quality it had when Diego Rivera, Jose Orozco, and David Siqueiros were painting remains to be seen. And if the revival of political art continues, it may take altogether new forms. For fifteen years, the government has tried to suppress the tradition of political art, and the artists have been turning to commercial galleries and private commissions. But now an art of struggle, never altogether silenced, has begun to return.

The reappearance of an art of social protest and reconstruction is due to the courage of a few artists and the support of many students and common people. Suddenly in 1975 the government seemed to turn around and offered to assist this art, but with a view to using it as a weapon in a major national crisis. This tactic has heightened the precariousness of political art: the risk of being co-opted has been added to the danger of being crushed. But there is for the moment new space in which to move again, and what is shaping-up is a complex struggle between democratic and oligarchic forces in which art, that for 50 years has been in the midst of Mexican politics, is again taking an important role.

I had the good fortune to view the current activist art and to talk with some of its creators as well as art critics and historians during a recent four month visit as part of a sabbatical leave from San José State University. What follows is an account of what I saw and heard.

I

The great art of Mexico during this century has been an art of social reconstruction. It called for the fulfillment of the promise of a democratic and egalitarian society made by the Revolution of 1910-21. While Rivera, Orozco, Siqueiros, and their immediate followers had to weather political storms and sometimes had to leave the country, nevertheless they enjoyed government commissions for much of their work. Similar funding has not



Figure 1: Troops attack a demonstration of railway workers in this detail from a mural Siqueiros began in 1958 at the theater of the National Actors' Union in Mexico City.

been available during the past fifteen years for controversial art. Recent administrations have been prepared to reward old revolutionary artists with commissions, prizes, and posts as long as they did not challenge the authorities, but art that charged the Revolution had not been completed was no longer welcome.

The principal cause was the government's attempt to contain rising popular discontent. During the late '50s there was rapid industrialization stimulated by heavy U.S. investment after World War II; sudden affluence for some was accompanied by poverty for others — particularly in the countryside from which millions moved to the cities to seek work and live in shanty towns. This was a time of labor agitation because prices had soared beyond wages. There were also demands by union rank-and-file to elect their own leadership rather than have it selected by government-approved delegates. Democratization of the whole political process was sought by the working and middle classes. Resisting them was an establishment of financiers, industrialists, large land owners, and speculators who maintained control through labor bureaucracies, rural associations, and a single political party that, while changing its name a number of times, had dominated politics since 1929.

The last powerful political statements of an artist before the suppression began were two murals of Siqueiros, both in Mexico City — one at Chapultepec Castle, begun in 1957, the other started the following year at the Jorge Negrete Theater. The painting in the theater lobby done for the National Actors Union depicts not only the recent history of drama but also current demonstrations of workers attacked by armed troops (Figure 1). While specifically condemning government aggression against railway men, the mural also alludes to the wave of strikes from 1958 to 1960 by telegraphers, oil workers, and teachers. These demonstrations are also evoked by the Chapultepec Castle mural, titled *The Revolution Against the Dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz*. Here Siqueiros makes his central episode the miners' strike at Cananea in 1906 where the Texas Rangers with the complicity of Diaz helped his troops suppress Mexican workers. It is likely that Siqueiros intended to compare the current Mexican president with the dictator and to indict continued U.S. involvement in Mexican affairs. The mural clearly calls for the completion of the Revolution begun in the first decade of the century.

According to Senora Siqueiros, the Actors Union, submitting to government pressure, boarded up the theater mural and sued her husband for not complying with the contract.¹ The storm around Siqueiros was intensified during a trip to Havana and Caracas where he characterized the Mexican President as an "emperor" who had committed the worst aggression of any Mexican chief executive against the working class. His remarks created a furor back home where the President is never publicly criticized. Siqueiros was finally arrested in 1960 for having fomented "social dissolution" by helping to organize a demonstration of students on behalf of their teachers. His

imprisonment for four years signalled to other artists that public opposition to the government risked serious reprisals. While some artists were outspoken in calling for his release, art in support of political change came to an end. When Siqueiros was finally freed, however, he and the regime made an uneasy peace, and he was allowed to finish the Chapultepec Castle mural.

For three years before the arrest of Siqueiros, articles in Mexican and Latin American periodicals had been attacking him and the whole movement of Social Realism in Mexico. According to Raquel Tibol, one of Mexico's leading art critics, one result of the avalanche of investment by U.S. firms was the impact of McCarthyism on her country's art. Just as the Cold War suppressed Social Realism in the U.S. and almost destroyed works like Anton Refregier's murals in the Rincon Annex Post Office in San Francisco (because art outspoken for social justice seemed to be "subversive"), so in Mexico militant art calling for the fulfillment of the Revolution no longer enjoyed approval by the cultural establishment. Unofficial political posters have been banned from public walls since then. Antonio Rodriguez, historian of Mexican murals, says that in recent years ideological wall painting has been resisted by the Organization of American States and the Modern Art Museum in Mexico City. Muralist Juan O'Gorman adds that neither U.S. museums nor galleries sought to exhibit political art from Latin America during the late '50s and '60s. Figurative art almost disappeared from Mexican exhibitions and was replaced by imitations of U.S. styles – Abstract Expressionism, Pop and Op – at least five years behind their models.

The elder muralists with established reputations for being outspoken were seriously circumscribed during this period in what they felt they could paint. Even Siqueiros, with the Polyforum completed shortly before his death in 1974, weakened his indictment of the establishment by designing a grandiose cyclorama of the struggle from slavery through revolution to the conquest of the moon and beyond. *The March of Humanity on Earth Toward the Cosmos* is said to be the largest mural in the world. Siqueiros, who frequently sought to do painting that physically involved viewers by perspective effects, here envelops an audience that can number 800 at any one time and helps them join the march by means of a revolving central viewing area and the addition of a light and sound spectacle. The Polyforum, financed by a cement manufacturer, suffers from being part of his "Mexico 2000," a 20-acre complex that includes a 51-story hotel with revolving tower, convention facilities, swimming pools, boutiques, a heliport, and its own customs and immigration service (Figure 2). Underneath the mural the Ballet Folklórico performs its farrago of ancient and modern dances for tourists. In his quest for a final monumental work, Siqueiros has been enveloped by what is worst in bourgeois vulgarity and exploitation.

Other major muralists who had formerly used their work for social criticism also found themselves co-opted or constrained. Pablo O'Higgins had to witness the lock-out of the public from his most political murals. He, Juan O'Gorman, and José Chávez Morado have been denied commissions or limited



Figure 2: The revolutionary message of Siqueiros' Polyforum, which houses the world's largest mural ensemble on its outer and inner walls, contrasts with the 51-story luxury hotel of which it is a part.

to creating non-controversial public art. Only in their small, privately sold works — lithographs and temperas — do O'Higgins and O'Gorman still make strong social statements.

The most promising politically committed artist to appear during the '60s was Francisco Moreno Capdevila. Commissioned to do a mural for the Museum of Mexico City, he completed in 1964 *The Destruction of Tenochtitlan*, the Aztec name of the capital. On the long concave wall that embraces the viewer, the flames of the Spaniards' invasion flare out in the night (Figure 3). Armored horsemen charge down on the viewer. Naked prisoners and refugees carry their wounded and dead forward (Figure 4). The figures and their faces look entirely modern and speak of our time — the growing repression in Mexico and violence abroad, the years that witnessed the Bay of Pigs invasion attempt, the Cuban missile crisis, U.S. intervention in Vietnam, the confrontation of the USSR and China, and the nuclear arms race. However, Capdevila's murals later in the '60s were limited to non-political decorations of hospitals and a children's institute, which reflect a climate unconducive to controversial art.

In 1968 ten years after the strikes and violence with which the government repression of political art began, official terrorism returned in its most brutal form in decades. What began in July as a tiff between two secondary schools escalated through the summer into a series of confrontations between the government, which was not reluctant to use its monopoly of force, and a growing number of people demanding reform. Police over-reaction brought university students into the streets and they were joined by teachers, administrators, technicians, professional people, and workers. The popular movement brought to a head the widespread public resentment against the government, and students became the spokesmen of liberalization.

Elizabeth Catlett, the powerful Black artist formerly from the U.S. who was then a professor at the San Carlos Academy (the most prestigious art school in Mexico), tells how the San Carlos students reacted. Their first effort at political activism was to exhibit their paintings on the downtown streets outside the academy. Since their works were in Abstract Expressionist styles, they had little effect on passers-by. The students got the message, Catlett says. They then asked her for permission to use the graphic arts workshop where she taught. They began doing leaflets and posters in figurative, Social Realist styles. The students would commandeer buses for a few minutes, give brief speeches, pass out their leaflets, and paste posters on the sides of the buses before letting them continue on their way. Suddenly one night the print shop was broken into, the watchman was mugged, the presses were destroyed and the literature was carried off. It was assumed that the perpetrators were a right-wing group acting with police connivance.

The climax came on the evening of October 2. Students had gathered in Tlatelolco, a large housing development, for a meeting — not a demonstration. Families and children had come down from their apartments to watch. As everyone was about to depart, they found themselves surrounded



Figure 3: The cavalry of Cortés attacks the Aztec capital in this detail from Francisco Capdevila's mural that alludes to the violence and depression of the 1960s.



Figure 4: The conquered carry off their wounded like modern victims of war in Capdevila's mural in the Museum of Mexico City.

by police, army, and 300 tanks that began to fire indiscriminately into the crowd. When it was all over, thousands had been arrested, thousands more wounded, and, according to a careful investigation by the English newspaper *The Guardian*, at least 325 were killed.² After Tlatelolco, overt protest of any kind became more difficult. But it did continue, especially with the forming of guerrilla bands by intellectuals and agrarian leaders.

While political art flourished briefly during the summer and fall of '68, it had, however, been unpopular among artists, art students, and the public during most of the '60s. The students regarded political and historical murals as the province of earlier generations; they had their eyes on a gallery career where money could be made because of the new, if limited, affluence stimulated by foreign investment. And Catlett observes that after Tlatelolco a new academicism was introduced at San Carlos that was absorbed with the development of forms from point to line to plane. Abstract — especially Op — art prevailed.

Had political murals ever had a sustained impact on ordinary people? Critic Raquel Tibol believes they had a "tremendous effect" on campesinos, workers, and professionals during the '20s and '30s. They created not only a visual culture but also a new consciousness of what it was to be a Mexican, she says. Other writers and artists also are persuaded that the early mural movement created an awareness of national identity and made the Indian the symbol of all Mexicans in their quest for freedom from domination by the privileged at home and investors from abroad. Murals also gave workers a sense of their common plight and need for organizing.

But today students at the National Preparatory School say they take no notice of the Orozco murals in the three levels of porticos they walk through every day. One comes to realize that the murals of the Revolution have become part of the political oratory that seemingly few Mexicans believe any more. Too many promises have been made and too few have been kept. But the government still commissions painting that contributes to routine nationalist sentiments. During the '60s (and still today) other forms of wall painting have replaced militant murals. Private corporations are exploiting what has become a national art form and decorate their establishments particularly with glass mosaic murals. Bottling plants, pharmaceutical manufacturers, film processors, hotels, restaurants and bars, movie houses, banks, drug stores, and country clubs commission murals to advertize their wares. Well-to-do families have murals done for their homes. Monumental wall art now serves the prestige of conspicuous consumption. In the early '70s art students were commissioned to do a great number of abstract super-graphics to cover the nakedness of buildings in downtown Mexico City. Today the conventional patriotic and commercial mosaic walls, the illustrated official slogans and super-graphics seem to mark the end of the greatest movement of public art in this century.

II

In spite of government repression and the apparent decline in the interest of artists and art students in political art, there still remain areas in which it has credibility. About 20 miles southeast of Guadalajara on the way to Mexico City, the road passes through a dusty village near Lake Chapala. In the center of the community the fronts of five one-story shops and houses are covered with monumental copies of details from the mural tradition (Figures 5 and 6). There is Orozco, there Chávez Morado, there Zalce. Around the central figure of Rivera's *Man at the Crossroads*, local additions have been made — the epochal inventions of man from the wheel to the rocket and atom bomb. A portrait of Pericles and Rodin's *Thinker* ponder all of this. The general drift seems to be the power of knowledge and education, but there is also a militant fist as big as a door, and Siqueiros' *New Democracy* once again breaks out of her chains. The inscriptions and quality of the work indicate that high school students were the artists. The paintings are dated 1972-73 and are already fading. This village is certainly a backwater, which may explain the unspoiled belief of the young people in the Revolution and their own power to become active agents in history. It is likely that there are other villages in Mexico, perhaps many, with similar murals. It is clear that throughout the nation there are people of all ages with plenty to say about their aspirations, their grievances, and their country. Painting is the natural way for Mexicans to say it, painting not only by the rare genius, but by those of more modest talents as well.

Similar art appears in Tepito, a run-down barrio in Mexico City with a reputation as a den of thieves. Its main street, the Calle de Florida, contains small shops, an old factory with all its windows smashed, and a series of one-story colonial tenements. Young men out of work lean against walls and make conversation; others putter over the engine of a vintage Chevrolet. During January and February last year, practically every facade received some kind of mural. Two young men and a woman, who clearly had considerable art training, began the undertaking by doing a series of nude figures in varied styles. Some recall Cézanne's *Bathers* and Picasso's *Demoiselles D'Avignon*. On one wall the figures are shown repairing and repainting the barrio, while two clothed men continue to drink beer over a barrel. The mural is inscribed, *Arte Acá* — "Art Here" (Figure 7). This seems to be both a call to action and the title the artists have chosen for their project. On a wall down the street a pair of Cubist parents sit with their child, and on the factory two monumental women stand beneath a bleeding moon. The style changes to Renaissance across the street where more nude figures look down from a window lintel, while others hold up a cornice and try to break through the wall or peer into a bricked-up window (Figure 8).

There is obvious humor in these paintings but also a stream of questions which they must raise in the minds of the residents and shopkeepers. The idea of doing stylized nudes on slum walls at first seems incongruous. But why



Figure 5: The mural tradition of the Mexican Revolution still has meaning for this village where high school students covered five walls in recent years with adaptations of the works of Rivera, Orozco, Siqueiros, and Zalce.



Figure 6: Borrowing from an Orozco mural, village students combine an image of multi-faceted learning with an activist fist and symbol of sexual liberation to express their aspirations.



Figure 7: Stylized nudes paint the walls of Tepito, a run-down barrio in Mexico City. *Arte Acá* – “Art Here” – is a call to action by the professional artists who last year painted almost all facades along this street and stimulated local young people to add their own murals.

should such art be reserved for museums? The appeal of the human body is not limited to the upper classes and their institutions. Should art be? Aesthetically, the street artists' work is competent but not distinguished; as an act of social imagination, however, it is extremely important. The murals have inspired local young people to do their own. One 16-year old pointed out the highly stylized monumental figures of mothers and children at their daily tasks that he had painted on the outside of a wash house and revealed serious talent. The proprietor of a nearby furniture store proudly exhibited the mural that the older artists had painted inside, showing a whole community breaking out of the wall into a better life.

The most moving section of these paintings includes a poem inscribed in large letters along one side of a shop door, balancing the illustrative figures on the other side. Identified as the work of Amado Nervo and written in 1915, the poem titled "*Mi Mexico*" reads in translation:

I was born of a sorrowful people,
of a country without unity,
ideal or patriotism;
my optimism
is only an act of will;
an obstinacy in loving
with all my desire
a Mexico that will have to exist
in spite of obstacles
and which now I do not have to see.

The artists who initiated these murals seem to understand them as a means toward fulfilling Nervo's dream — bringing an authentic Mexico into being. They apparently have gone to the barrio believing that by helping residents develop their own culture, they will help them achieve the energy for collective action. *Arte Acá* can do in the barrio what the neighborhood mural movement has in the U.S. for Chicanos, Blacks, and other exploited people — help them discover their own possibilities, give them the means of making public statements about their serious concerns, and encourage them to act together to improve their lives. The painting of nudes on slum walls is a political act.

One kind of community where popular political art has a tradition in Mexico is the campus, for institutions of higher education have long been centers of political discussion and organizing. At the National University, which is officially autonomous but where the police have made forays in recent years, student murals, posters, and calls to action painted in 15-inch letters abound. In contrast to the non-political murals there of well-known artists, a large portrait of Ho Chi Minh is painted above the blackboard at the front of a large lecture hall in the School of Economics. There are also smaller stenciled portraits of Lucio Cabañas, the teacher turned guerrilla leader, who



Figure 8: Figures break out of the walls of their Tepito tenement and affirm the right of residents to their own culture and a better life.

was killed by the army in 1974. At the University of Puebla students have painted a 20 x 50 foot mural affirming their commitment to "the ideological struggle." It is illustrated by Siqueiros-like dogs lunging forward above images signifying different shades of opinion. Students there also sent an exhibit of their political posters to the School of Design and Crafts in Mexico City, and it was followed by a showing of Chicano posters from the U.S. In a mural class at a college in Mexico City I was shown students' 20-foot long paper "murals." While some were abstractions, many were political, protesting, for instance, the massacre at Tlatelolco and U.S. imperialism.

An art student in the San Carlos Academy, David Mora, has done the only mural on the subject of Tlatelolco in an off-campus public building that I saw. It is in the waiting room of an out-of-the-way clinic in Mexico City. Even though Mora was able to secure the wall because the father of a friend was director there, they all took a serious risk. In the painting three rifles point inward from the bottom left, and their flash of gunfire mixes with the exploding blood of civilians. This is contrasted with the full-length portrait of one of the clinic's doctors, who had recently died but is shown caring for his barrio patients. Above them waves a banner ironically inscribed — *Medicina Para El Pueblo*.

The art of the *Taller de Gráfica Popular* — the People's Graphic Workshop — for which the best of Mexico's political print-makers have worked in the past, is sold at political rallies, like those held almost every Sunday in an open air auditorium in Chapultepec Park. One of the TGP's most recent publications, *Chile Subjugated*, consists of 21 prints of mixed quality, some of them quite strong. The portfolio can be broken up so that prints will cost about 40 cents each and therefore be widely accessible. The TGP's current work tends to be occupied with issues in countries other than Mexico. This is true of the rallies as well, as if the only expression that most supporters of social justice dare make is on behalf of Nicaraguan, Cuban, and other Latin American struggles. This and the almost institutionalized protest against U.S. imperialism are the vents the government allows for political frustrations at home.

Without doubt the most popular art to criticize the establishment and to provide political education is *Los Agachados* (the subservient, the flunkies — an ironic title), a comic book that sells 140,000 copies at newsstands every week. Moreover, each copy passes through many hands. It outsells every political magazine in Mexico. Until recently it was the work of "Rius," the pseudonym of Eduardo del Rio, who now supervises the staff that produces it. It first appeared in 1968 and has survived in spite of its outspoken satire. One of its first issues explained and supported the student movement during the confrontations of '68. Other issues have attacked the party system, police corruption, and the prisons. One issue was devoted to telling the story of the Chicanos in the U.S., who one of the characters says are "setting an example for us in Mexico."

Thus, although the ambitions of many young artists today have been captured by the commercial galleries, others are still drawn to politics. My

encounters across the country revealed a widespread stirring of what might be called a "people's art" — an art that expresses the social protest and aspiration of ordinary Mexicans — villagers, the poor of the city barrios, workers, students, and intellectuals. It makes no pretense of being "high" or "fine art," the art of the museums, galleries, and public buildings. It is an art of the streets, an art accessible only on the facades of shops and tenements, on campuses, at newsstands and demonstrations. It is inherently democratic in its methods. Its varied forms reflect a perennial popular culture that may contract under external pressures but never goes to sleep. It is, in fact, more resilient and more immune to government constraints than the art that depends on the establishment for commissions and exhibition space.

Although people's art in Mexico is affected by modern ideologies, it is nourished by a popular love of art and a garrulous absorption of citizens in their collective affairs, both of which have been inherited from centuries of village life. It was to this combination of community life and an extraordinary "gift of making beauty" — originally the achievements of Mexico's Indians and later inherited by the *mestizo* culture — that the revolutionary artists of the '20s paid tribute in their manifestoes. This heritage reinforced their dream of a "socialist art" that would be freed from the commercial competitiveness of "bourgeois individualism." They sought to avoid being alienated intellectuals and wanted to become technical workers attached to the common people. Siqueiros, speaking for them, wrote that "the ideal goal of art" in that time of transition "should be one of beauty for all, of education and of battle."³ Thus there is both a traditional and revolutionary body of thought and experience that is at hand today for reviving a socially conscious art.

In particular, the revolutionary artists of the '20s and '30s participated in missions to working class districts, outlying barrios, and villages to help develop a modern people's culture. O'Higgins and Catlett recall that the artists listened closely to the peasants and workers to develop relevant designs and helped train talented local people. Rivera supervised the murals at the Abelardo Rodriguez Market in Mexico City between 1934 and '37 on which artists like O'Higgins collaborated with non-professionals. Each painted his own area, but his design was approved by the group. The work of *Arte Acá* and students suggests that such undertakings are still alive.

A widespread popular political art of graphics and painting is not only valuable in its own right; it is the soil that discovers and cultivates special talent, as José Posada's print shop stimulated Orozco and Rivera when they were students. In addition, popular visual culture in Mexico has been a major resource of "high" political art: Orozco used the style of his political cartoons in his murals, and all the artists of the Revolution learned from Indian crafts — an art of high refinement, yet produced and used by common people. In contrast to the culture of the privileged, a culture that remains in touch with popular art and issues can broaden ordinary people's understanding of their lives and dignify their collective action. This is what the art

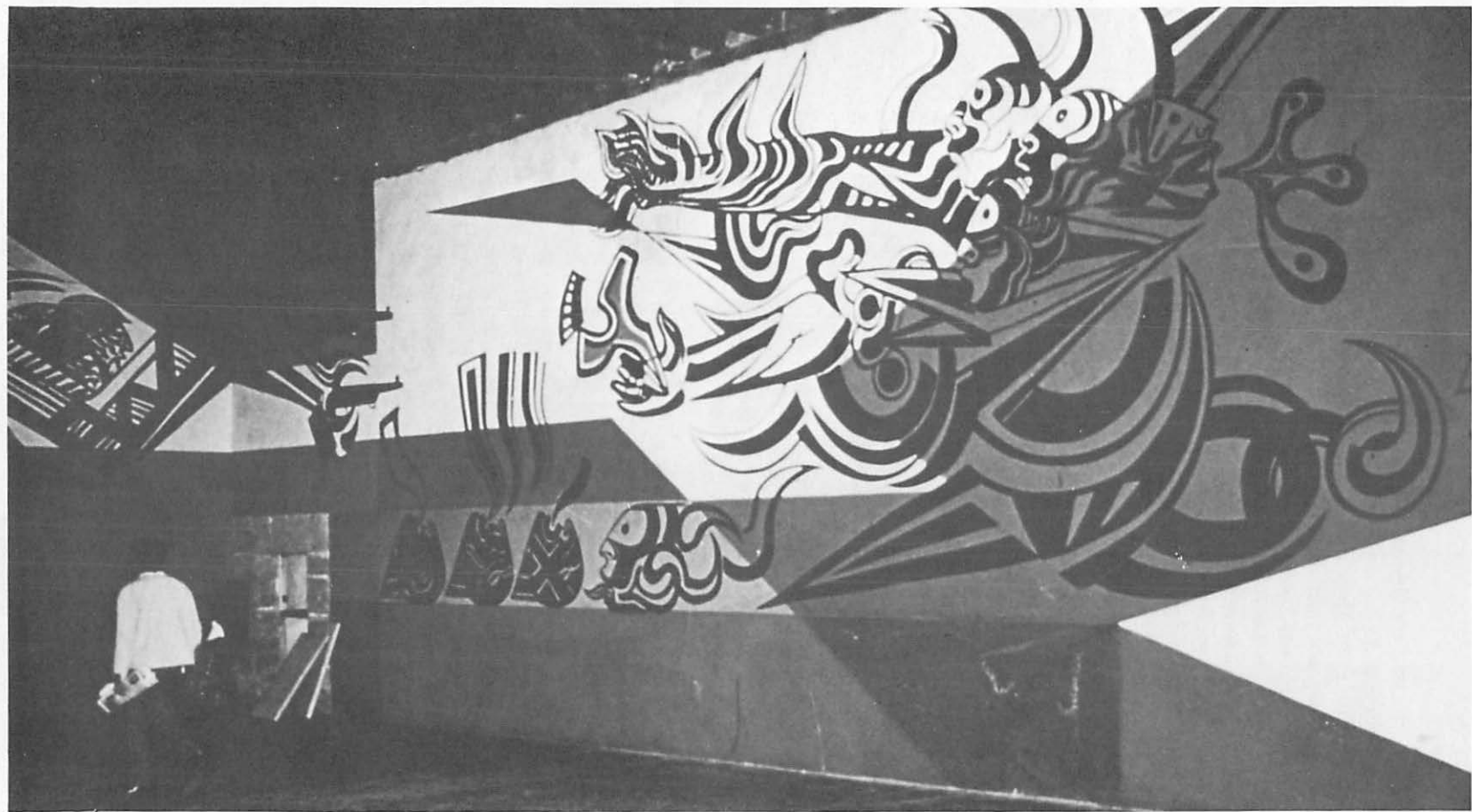


Figure 9: Unarmed civilians defend themselves with their gestures and cries against the attack of government troops in this mural by José Delgadillo at the School of Design and Crafts in Mexico City.

of Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros was all about and why both high and popular forms of socially conscious arts in Mexico break through the barriers of class and constitute an authentic people's art.

III

Mexico's most promising political artist connects these two worlds of popular and high culture in a new way. The murals of José Hernandez Delgadillo do not have the look of the fine arts characteristic of the Mexican tradition of revolutionary painting (Figure 9). They are more like enormously enlarged posters with their flatness, boldness, and legibility. But they also have a breadth of reference, a semi-abstract form, and a monumentality that link them with high art. At the same time they are brazenly agitational, situated in the midst of the daily political struggle, for they address themselves to the debates and organizing efforts of the campuses where most have been painted.

The recurring theme of most of the nineteen murals Delgadillo has done since 1973 is the attack of police and the army on civilians who have little more than their fists and screams as defense. The memory of Tlatelolco is immediately evoked, but other episodes of government brutality and the continuing threat are also brought to mind. In each of these murals the inhumanity of the troops is expressed at the left by their weapons being presented as extensions of their hunched-up bodies, or by rifles pointed by unseen soldiers, in the manner of Goya. Between the troops and civilians, decapitated heads lie on the ground. The center of these compositions are filled by gesticulating unarmed people caught up in flames. In one version a group flees in terror. In another, they have found a single rifle which in their fear and rage they awkwardly point back at the troops. In each mural the common plight and solidarity of the people are conveyed by their pressing together; in actual fact, they are no more than heads, arms, and coils that suggest the outward and inward motion of human bodies.

Everything is reduced to flat silhouette by stark unnuanced yellows, reds, oranges, blues, whites, and blacks. Sometimes large wedges of color suggesting searchlights cut and pull together the surface. One is reminded of a vastly magnified woodcut or silkscreen, a Pre-Columbian codex or low relief sculpture (Figure 10). Delgadillo has adopted the forms of Mayan, Mixtec, and Aztec art: the two dimensionality, the profiles with the bridgeless noses and open mouths (whose yells are made graphic by volutes), the square builds of the figures, the broad, ritualized gestures, the stylized repetitions of details — such as a row of severed heads which suggest ancient rather than modern murder. Arms and faces are strikingly patterned — cross-hatched, seemingly bandaged, and marked with the outline of straining blood vessels, bones, and muscles. In some cases the markings resemble war paint or masks. As in earlier murals of the Revolution, the Indian serves as symbol of all Mexicans, their exploitation and struggles for freedom.



Figure 10: A detail of Delgadillo's mural showing his use of abstract form and Indian design to create the vehemance of his protest art.

Delgadillo's work has the look of being done rapidly and under pressure, which increases its intensity. In fact, he sometimes transfers his design to a wall and completes the painting in a day. The directness and simplicity of his means are also forced on him by his difficulty in raising funds. But he tries to put such limitations to advantage. Although his murals have none of the lush color and texture, none of the carefully built-up glazes and layers of pigment of the mural tradition, they have the old vehemence that sets them off from so much of contemporary work. And they have style.

Delgadillo sees himself as one of the few artists of struggle in Mexico today. "It is very risky to do political art now," he says. "You endanger your livelihood and freedom." Wasn't his celebration of civilians resisting with rifles romantic, and wouldn't it mislead people about the government's monopoly of weapons? "No," he replied, "the guerrillas are contributing to the liberation of Mexico. They cannot do it alone, but they are a necessary part of the rebuilding of society."

The problem of where to paint struggle art so that it can have maximum visibility when most public walls are unavailable has been solved by Delgadillo. His main support comes from the students, who have invited him to do murals at universities, colleges, and secondary schools, which have become almost the exclusive sites of his work. Under present political conditions they offer the best protection for public protest art since they are relatively free of government interference. In most cases, he adds, the administrations do not take art seriously and do not interfere, although occasionally they have made difficulties. In Mexico City his murals can be seen on the facade of the National University's Theater Center, in an auditorium of its School of Economics, and at the School of Design and Crafts. He has done murals at the University of Oaxaca, at the Law School of the University of Zacatecas, at a preparatory school in the same city, and at secondary schools and colleges in Durango, Fresnillo, Jalapa, Veracruz and Monterrey. Sometimes painting a mural is a happening with a guitarist or other musicians on hand. Delgadillo is very serious about reaching the young, for he knows that the future of political change and activist art depends on them. In a manner recalling the cultural missions of the '20s and '30s, the doing of murals in public has become for him a performance he carries about the country to dramatize the importance of political resistance.

In one of Delgadillo's most recent large scale public works, a portable mural in a hall for medical meetings in Cuernavaca, he gives his figures a 3-dimensionality and weight not to be seen in his earlier work. His freeing himself from the flat silhouettes opens up a new set of possibilities for him. His recent exhibition in Mexico City of 58 smaller works is persuasive of his variety and capacity for development. The swift and violent motion of his figures and faces caught in the midst of speech are suddenly arrested like stop-photography so that his people assume simple geometric forms — arcs and squarish shapes that are echoed by the rest of the composition. The whole takes on a classic poise. The frozen lunges and screams assume the

power of symbols. Delgadillo is thus exploring the area between an art of political agitation and an art of enduring meanings, an area that connects the popular and fine arts. His hand in fact can be recognized in illustrations for contraband political newspapers.

Delgadillo agreed to work within the establishment when he accepted a post as director of art to decorate the outside of a high rise housing project for people of mixed incomes in Mexico City. The *Centro Residencia Morelos*, completed in 1970, contains fifteen-story murals, one of them by Delgadillo with others by Capdevila and additional artists. All are abstract; none have any political significance. This was a missed, perhaps denied, opportunity. However, Delgadillo returned to a political subject in a three-story free standing monument he did in the center of one of the housing clusters. The work, which exhibits a powerful talent for sculpture, consists of three separated pieces: a larger than life severed head that lies on the grass with its mouth agape to the sky; an open casket on its side so that the face of the corpse can be seen; and a huge arm stretching upward with its hand making the sign of a pledge. The whole is done in resins over an armature, and the surface is worked to look like rough grey concrete. Each of the many entrances to the apartment buildings is decorated by small murals, some done by Delgadillo in 1969 and some by his students from the Esmeralda Academy. He had a free workshop there for students whom the administration judged were not suited for regular studios, and he gave them the chance to work at the housing project. Their styles are varied, proof of his giving them their head.

Recently the government offered to send Delgadillo's work on an international tour. He rejected the proposal. Such an exhibition of protest art, he says, would lend credence to the authorities' claim that free speech and democracy exist in Mexico.

Like Delgadillo, Leopoldo Flores addresses primarily a popular audience of students and educators in the murals he is currently working on at the *Casa de la Cultura*, a library and resource center in a colonial style palace facing the main plaza of Toluca. He has already completed two stairwells on opposite sides of the central patio, and drawings of what is to come can be seen on the walls of the ground floor and second level. The theme of liberation is illustrated by the struggle of mankind upward, the fall of some (like Icarus) and the trapping of others in a great net; but the effort upward continues. The struggle is dramatized by a variety of visual *tours de force*. Two-story high naked figures fall or draw themselves up through the floors around the patio. One supports himself wearily by throwing his arms over two doorways on the second level while his feet are planted on the court yard below. Another figure falls so that his legs are seen on the upper level and his head almost touches the ground. Flores is able to persuade you that a figure is moving through deep space although painted on the complex surface on the underside of a staircase (Figure 11). He uses the perpendicular surfaces to render the jutting of limbs and the incline of another stairway to dramatize

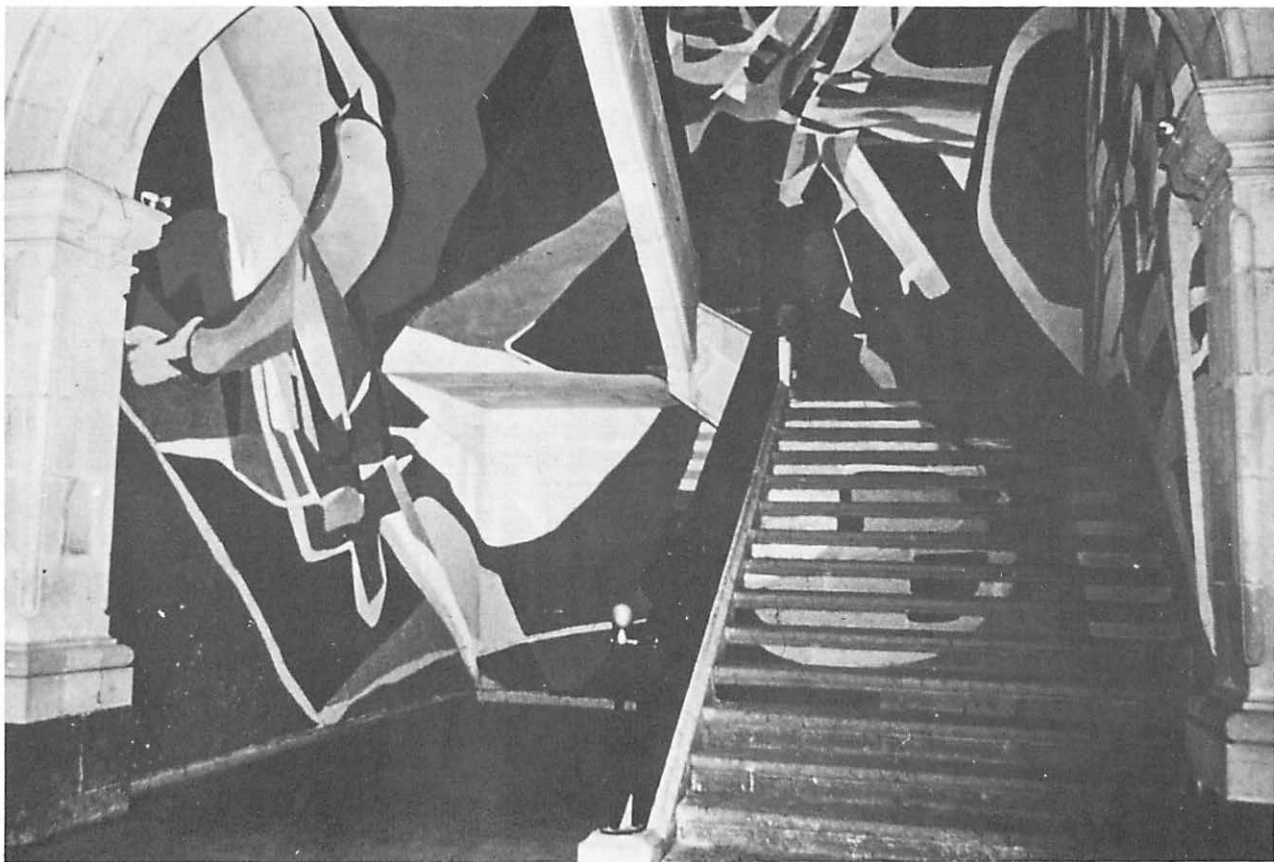


Figure 11: Human figures plunge downward like Icarus in Leopoldo Flores' mural celebrating the struggle of mankind for liberation in the Casa de la Cultura in Toluca.

the climb of his figures upward (Figure 12). Elsewhere his people brace their feet in a corner. He paints staircase risers so that lines appear to sweep up with the figures on the walls and one is caught up with them. He creates an extraordinary tension between the actual surfaces of the old building and the figures that press through them, a visual conflict that expresses the effort of mankind to overcome the weight of old institutions. The images draw the observer into their own space and compel him to decipher human figures from the semi-abstractions. By shocking and involving viewers, Flores apparently hopes to pull them physically and intellectually into his drama of struggle.

Only when the work is completed will the visitor be able to tell whether the artist's ingenuity does in fact dramatize an important and sufficiently precise idea. For at this point Flores has so generalized his theme that it is understandable why the authorities have not interfered. The problem is that any art that does not openly challenge the regime risks giving it prestige. If Flores' theme is genuine liberation, then he must wrestle with the dilemma of how explicit he can be in an establishment institution. We must wait and see.

The centrality of the educational world to current political art is further demonstrated by the etchings that José Capdevila completed in 1970 in response to the mass arrests and shooting of students, teachers, and their supporters during the summer and fall of '68. That a very talented muralist should have to make his protest of Tlatelolco in a form that allows mainly private viewing and ownership reflects the repression continuing two years afterward. Many of those arrested were still in prison. The prints are unusually large for etchings; in fact their effect is monumental and reminds one that Capdevila is a muralist. Each plate embraces an infinitely subdivided world of tiers, cells, and a honeycomb of chain-link fences where beams of light cut up by bars and walls pick out of the dense shadows slumping heads, pairs of eyes, and shoulders of human beings massed together. These scenes update Piranesi to our age of political terror. Strangely enough, the etchings were exhibited at the government-directed National Polytechnical Institute. Perhaps as a warning.

Thus, the major obstacle that all political muralists encountered in the '60s and early '70s was how to find public spaces and funding for resistance art when most walls were controlled by the establishment. Or to put it another way — how outspoken could an artist be? Now suddenly a widespread change seems to have occurred.

IV

Late winter and spring of 1975 witnessed what appears to be a thaw in the establishment's treatment of political art. The Modern Art Museum put on large exhibitions of three foreign artists whose work is concerned with social justice — Oswaldo Guayasamin of Ecuador, Roberto Matta of Chile, and Arnold Belkin, a Canadian who resides in New York and Mexico City.



Figure 12: Flores uses a staircase to dramatize humanity's continued effort upward.

Guayasamin's series of often mural-sized canvases, *The State of Anger*, is one of the 20th century's most haunting indictments of the poverty and suffering that the powerful few impose on the many. After these exhibits of political art, the largest showing ever of Siqueiros opened at the Palace of Fine Arts in 1975. Now dead and with his Polyforum due to become one of the principal tourist attractions in Mexico City, he could safely become an ornament of the establishment which he had spent his life fighting.

Finally, the restoration of political art seemed to be confirmed by the announcement of a huge monument to Latin-American unity to be constructed in Cuernavaca. Guayasamin was appointed to head the project, and artists from all over Latin America were invited to participate. The Mexican government was to appropriate 4 million dollars to cover the costs. Chávez Morado, to whom President Echeverría had awarded the National Art Prize a few months before, wrote him that such a sum of money should be spent on the more urgent needs of the Mexican people. There was no reply. Hardly had the news of the project been published, when a storm broke around it. A reporter discovered that one of the officials pushing it owned land adjacent to the site and was bound to profit handsomely. The news was leaked to Mexican artists, some of whom were disgruntled because commissions were going to foreigners, when the government had neglected its own for so long. They issued a formal protest; Echeverría backed off and proposed instead a cultural center in Chapultepec Park with workshops and exhibition space. The President met with the Mexican artists, many of whom were old Social Realists, and encouraged them to "think big" with regard to the new plans which he invited them to share in preparing. Chávez Morado still contends that the project is too centralized and that the funds should be spread around the country.

Why this sudden turn in government policy toward political artists on the left? Why the offer to send Delgadillo's protest work on international tour? Why the cultural mission to Havana led by Señora Echeverría in January 1975?

These events can be understood in the context of Echeverría's efforts during his presidency to build a base for his own power at a time when Mexicans were more divided and there was wider discontent than there had been for a decade. Since he assumed the presidency in 1970, his and his party's political survival has been at stake. In 1970 the richest 5% of the population received almost 40% of the national income. Half of the agricultural workers were unemployed. Inflation rose to 49% per year and produced hundreds of strikes. The press was dominated by the government, and the new urban working class and many professionals were making increased demands for participation in government and a fair share of the wealth that industrialization had created. At the beginning of his term, Echeverría promised political liberalization and a redistribution of income.

In 1970 the nation's democratic elements were still smarting from the massacre at Tlatelolco which Echeverría was personally responsible for as

Minister of the Interior and director of the security forces that carried out the attack two years earlier. When he became president, he did release some of those who were arrested in 1968 and tried to contain the para-military groups that together with the right-wing of his own party sought to weaken his regime because they feared his "socialist" proposals. He did in fact loosen restraints on the press; but his other promises frequently exceeded either his will or ability to carry them out. As a result, a guerrilla movement of campesinos and left intellectuals undertook a wave of kidnappings and killings of prominent figures, then bombings of U.S.-financed firms. In response to protests of Echeverria's ineffectiveness, he launched a military campaign against the guerrillas and succeeded in killing some of their leaders. He was caught in a crossfire between the left and the right. He tried to deal with the left at home by becoming the spokesman of the Third World in its hostility to U.S. economic and political penetration of developing countries. But then he was reported to have called in major foreign investors in Mexico to allay their fears in private. His strategy has been to try to conciliate all sides by maintaining attractions for business investment and expanding the top-down bureaucratic welfare state.

His new indulgence of political painting can be understood as part of this process of co-optation. Public art has carried the message of previous regimes. Echeverria seems to be trying to win over political artists now to support him and his programs. Although there is an open conflict between the President and the oligarchy, the establishment of which they are both a part is in charge and shows no serious intention of democratizing the political and cultural life of the country. If Echeverria's efforts to conciliate those seeking fundamental change — including activist artists — do not produce the desired results, the indulgence can be quickly withdrawn. Unless the democratic opposition can organize quickly, the repression of political art will return when one of the powerful factions behind the government decides that the challenge to its rule has gone too far.

Is there a resurgence of political art in Mexico? There are tentative anticipations of it. Before the current thaw, there were relatively few new artists of clear promise doing political art that challenged the system — notably Delgadillo, Flores, and Capdevila. At the same time there was a stirring of political art on campuses, in the streets, at rallies, and in working class communities. Moreover, this combination of high and popular forms of socially conscious art pointed to the revival of a people's culture. The space that the government has now created for activist art, as precarious as it is, may attract additional talent. The question is not only whether the artists who are emerging can mature and carry the national tradition forward, but also, and more important, whether political art and activism together can survive to complete the Revolution. For without the political and social struggle, there will be no people's art, and without art the struggle would lose a major humanizing weapon.

Notes

¹ "Dear Friends – A Letter from Angelica Siqueiros" (1960), *Siqueiros Imprisoned – 1960-4* (Chicago: Public Art Workshop, undated), p. 3.

² Octavio Paz, *The Other Mexico: Critique of the Pyramid* (New York: Grove, 1972), pp. 16-17.

³ "Declaration Social, Political and Aesthetic of the Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters, and Sculptors," quoted by Anita Brenner, *Idols Behind Altars* (Boston: Beacon, 1970), pp. 254-55.

Political Reform, California Style

Larry N. Gerston

THE theme of political reform is hardly new to California or the nation, although current post-Watergate efforts to remedy abuses have been the most intense in several decades. Contemporary political reform, in fact, is rooted in ideals and values that are reminiscent of the Progressive period in American politics. More than 70 years ago Progressive reformers blanketed the country with the call for citizen politics and an end to political bossism and corruption. As with the current wave of reformist ideology, Progressive attitudes focused on the people assuming control of their own political lives. Although national in scope, the "Progressive impulse"¹ was particularly strong in California where the reformers, led by Hiram Johnson, created their own political party. Traditional party units, Progressives argued, were subject to manipulation by party bosses and corporate giants. Thus, the Progressives advocated a lengthy series of reforms designed to place control of government in the hands of capable individuals, regardless of party affiliation. Also in the name of direct democracy, the Progressives adopted the initiative, a method for the people to enact legislation after 5% of the voters were secured as sponsors. Throughout the twentieth century, Californians have voted on the merits of hundreds of initiatives.

On June 4, 1974, California voters were asked to pass judgment on a ballot initiative designed to bring major changes in the state's campaign laws. Proposition 9, known as the Political Reform Initiative, was approved by nearly 70% of the voting electorate. The new law, billed by some as the most significant reform legislation since the Progressive period, was created by a coalition of two "public interest" groups and Secretary of State Edmund G. (Jerry) Brown, Jr. The principal objective of the initiative was to make "the system" directly accessible to "the people." In the words of the ballot argument presented by the proponents:

It is time the people of California put an end to corruption in politics. It is time politicians are made directly responsible to the

people — not to purchased demands of special interests. It is time to open wide the doors of the state Capitol, of county boards, and of city halls so that we may all look inside. It is time for political reforms which can only be accomplished by Proposition 9.²

Thus, the call for reform was revived with Proposition 9.

Perhaps the most important individual to emerge from the recent Proposition 9 reform victory is Daniel Lowenstein. Much like Hiram Johnson in his zeal for direct democracy and antipathy for power, Lowenstein became a major architect of the initiative in his capacity as an assistant to Secretary of State Brown. After Brown's gubernatorial victory in November 1974, the new governor appointed Lowenstein to serve as Chairman of the new Fair Political Practices Commission (F.P.P.C.) created by the Proposition 9 legislation.

In light of his experience and the dearth of expertise that traditionally accompanies any new administrative unit, Lowenstein has been a major influence in the early months of the Commission. His reform attitudes and the overall objectives of Proposition 9 provide an interesting contrast with the dominant Progressive attitudes of the early 1900's — and indicate several recurring political values in California politics.

I. PROGRESSIVE CALIFORNIA: HOME OF CORRUPTION AND REFORM

Prior to the Progressive era, corruption was a widespread phenomenon in California politics. Political party leaders, rulers of massive political machines at the state and local levels, dictated office nominees and party policies with little challenge from the masses below. As California Historian Walton Bean summarizes,

State law still regarded the political party as a kind of private enterprise, or private club, and this made it easy for party bosses to control primaries and conventions by a luxuriant assortment of corrupt methods without risking prosecution of election frauds.³

Party bosses had mammoth amounts of political power and made their clout available to anyone able to buy it.

It was because of the strength of party bosses that the party organizations were susceptible to co-optation, or the manipulation of traditional party units by outside power groups. Working closely with the Southern Pacific "political bureau," party bosses and their legislative sycophants were willing agents for the railroad. Every time a lawyer was elected to the legislature for the first time, for instance, he received a letter from the Southern Pacific legal department "stating that the railroad wished to retain an outstanding attorney from his region during a period which happened to coincide with that of the upcoming session in Sacramento."⁴ Regardless of party, each new

attorney received an accompanying retainer fee. The power of the railroad, therefore, extended from Sacramento throughout the state to threaten all aspects of economic life.

Inasmuch as no means within the existing two party system appeared available to relieve the public of this corporate domination, a non-partisan movement began in an attempt to deal with the railroad machine. Much more than an anti-railroad effort alone, Progressivism focused on the changing qualities of American society. The progressive reform creed asserted that government and society alike had fallen victim to the power of large interests. Characteristically, these corporate giants sought private economic and political gains at public expense.

The Progressives soon structured their reformist sentiments in the form of a new political party dedicated to the return of individualism and the elimination of corruption. In California the party was led by Hiram Johnson, whose fame had come from his role as special prosecutor in the trial of San Francisco political boss Abe Ruef. Although Johnson was elected Governor on the Progressive ticket in 1910, the party was short-lived in California. Nevertheless, with temporary control of the executive and legislative branches, the Progressive reformers hammered away at two themes: first, democracy must be open to all; second, politics must be taken out of government. In order to open up the system, the Progressives secured passage of the direct primary law designed to prevent bosses from handpicking their own candidates. In addition, the Progressives passed other direct democracy legislation such as the initiative, referendum, recall and the short ballot. These changes, it was believed, would bring government to the average citizen. In an attempt to remove politics from government, Progressives created weak party organizations by separating the state and local units. Cross-filing was established so that candidates could seek public offices under the banners of more than one party. At the local levels, non-partisanship was instituted so that the influence of political parties, long poisoned by the corporate giants, would be neutralized.

For the Progressives the objective was clear: government must be cleansed; it must be taken away from the special interests and returned to the control of the people. Only under these conditions could democracy thrive again. What the Progressives hoped to accomplish, in Hofstadter's summary, was the restoration of

popular government as they imagined it to have existed in an earlier and purer age. This could be done . . . only by revivifying the morale of the citizen, and using his newly aroused zeal to push through a series of (legislative) changes in the mechanics of political life . . . Such measures . . . would deprive machine government of the advantages it had in checkmating popular control, and make government accessible to the superior disinterestedness and honesty of the average citizen. Then, with the power of the bosses broken or crippled, it would be possible to

check the incursions of the interests upon the welfare of the people and realize a cleaner, more efficient government.⁵

As the Hiram Johnson era gave way to the 1920's, it became apparent that Progressivism would not only limit the clout of political parties but destroy its own objectives as well. In implementing a cure that became more harmful than the disease, progressive legislation struck a paradoxical chord of "partisan" non-partisanship.⁶ By minimizing the effectiveness of the political party as an agent of competing interests and values, Progressive era legislation encouraged partisanship behind non-partisan masks. No longer involved with parties other than in the most token of ways, candidates worked even more closely with corporate groups, the media, and other privileged interests. In Dean Cresap's words,

At a stroke, parties were almost totally decentralized . . . The candidates and officeholders, now in control of the state organization, were freed from rank-and-file ties, and in their concern for election came to rely less on party support and more upon that of the special interests.⁷

In the name of democracy, the Progressives crippled the California party system, ultimately allowing special interests to thrive unchecked. In the name of clean government, the reformers succeeded in making politics less visible, hardly the disappearance that the Progressives earnestly sought. Despite their failure to reform the state, however, the Progressives stamped their values on the political system. Many of these ideas still permeate California politics today.

II. CONTEMPORARY CALIFORNIA: THE PRESENT BUILT ON THE PAST

By 1922 the Progressive party died the traditional death of all third parties in the United States, and its remaining members filtered back into the mainstream of California Republicanism. Yet, if the party withered away, Progressive ideas did not. Non-partisanship and reform continued as important political values in California politics. Because of the fear of power and party manipulation, virtually all successful candidates for Governor in the state were elected through non-partisan appeals. Earl Warren represents the most noteworthy example of a string of political candidates who successfully pursued office on the strength of partisan avoidance. Warren, though nominally a Republican, ran on the theme of "personal accountability." Rather than rely on political parties, Warren formed his own campaign organization. His success was overwhelming; Warren was the only individual to capture the governorship three times — in 1942, 1946, and 1950. Warren's non-partisan appeal was so great that he actually won the 1946 governorship by capturing the nominations of both parties in the primaries. Moreover, he set the example for political success in California politics.

Future governors Goodwin Knight, Edmund (Pat) Brown, Sr., and Ronald Reagan all conducted campaigns revolving around causes rather than parties. In the cases of Brown and Reagan, both had been members of the other party (Democrat Brown was a Republican in the 1930's; Republican Reagan a Democrat until the early 1960's) in the early days of their political careers. In states with stronger partisanship, such revelations would have had deleterious consequences for a candidate for office. Yet, in California, progressive values have placed party affiliation a distant second when compared with the "character" of the individual candidate. Thus, Reagan demonstrated his skill in manipulating the issues of power and morality in his battle with Pat Brown when he stated, "They've been in power so long, these professional politicians, that we're beginning to see a degeneration of moral standards."⁸ The answer, Reagan went on to say, was for the citizen-politician to assume the reins of government.

Personal campaign organizations were not the only developments in non-partisan-oriented California in the mid-twentieth century. With the debilitation of parties, pressure groups had little difficulty in accomplishing their objectives. Ironically, this development was exactly the kind of misfortune the Progressives had hoped to avoid. Yet, since political parties were forbidden to function as effective watchdogs over legislators and political candidates, interest groups and lobbyists developed direct relationships with governmental leaders. Private interests were anxious to provide campaign finances, information on crucial issues and general assistance to legislators who, it was hoped, would see the needs of these groups in a favorable light.

During the 1930's and 1940's, one lobbyist in particular, Arthur Samish, was considered to be the most powerful person in the state. Through monetary contributions from a long list of clients ranging from beer companies to banks, Samish was literally able to buy the legislature. Even Governor Warren recognized the power wielded by the lobbyist: "On matters that affect his clients," Warren once stated, "Artie unquestionably has more power than the governor."⁹

Although Samish was eventually convicted of Federal Income Tax evasion, other lobbyists have continued where he left off. Studies conducted both by the legislature and the media throughout the 1950's and 1960's continued to show that private interests had tremendous clout in state government. In 1972 the *California Journal* concluded:

California's regulations and laws on the subject of conflict of interest are sketchy and weak. The enforcement of existing laws is rare . . . There are many very questionable activities which are not statutorily prohibited to public officials . . . An attorney who is also an executive official may — and often does — appear before a state agency as a private advocate and is not disqualified or prohibited from participating in official actions. State legislative and executive officials are not

required to divest themselves of conflicting interests . . . California statutes do not even generally prohibit receipt of gifts, services, loans or favors or other additional compensation from non-state sources for executive officials and employees.¹⁰

In 1974, the proponents of "good government," stymied by the failures created out of the Progressive era, once again attempted to correct the problems of corruption and excessive influence. No longer content to wait for responses from the executive and legislative branches, the reformers sought legislative action through the initiative process. Although the initiative has a long record of electoral failure in state politics,¹¹ three factors indicated that a comprehensive reform package might be favorably judged by the people. First, in 1972 environmentalists passed a tough initiative regulating activities on California's coast. The proposal had been unsuccessfully opposed by big business and organized labor, chief opponents to the Political Reform Initiative of 1974. Second, the tragedy of Watergate had alienated large numbers of the public to such an extent that many mobilized to correct what they perceived as defects in California politics. Third, the combination of two public interest groups — Common Cause and the Peoples' Lobby — and the dynamism of Secretary of State Jerry Brown provided an alliance for reform unparalleled since the Progressive era. The momentum was there, yet the haunting questions remained: Would Proposition 9, the new reform initiative, pass and, if so, would the inequities of California politics be corrected at last?

III. PASSAGE OF PROPOSITION 9

Although the cry for political reform mounted during the early 1970's, the final push for Proposition 9 came from the legislature's failure to pass meaningful reform legislation and from the exploitation of that inactivity by gubernatorial candidate Jerry Brown. To be sure, the legislature's efforts were not completely lacking. It is fairly clear that echoes from the Watergate affair were heard even in Sacramento, where the most cautious members now suggested minor reforms to meet any growing concerns of the voters. For many the passage of the 1972 Coastline initiative was a sobering indication that the voters would now act in the absence of legislative and executive activity.

In 1973, with the threat of an initiative on political reform, the legislature set out to deal with the question of unfair campaign practices. Assembly Bill 703 (Waxman) required all candidates to report periodically the names of contributors who donated \$100 or more as well as all campaign expenses for the same amount. The bill also prohibited cash contributions of \$500 or more. Senate Bill 716 (Moscone) required state public officials to disclose financial interests in the area of their responsibilities if the value exceeded \$1,000. These two new laws were the first efforts in several years to deal with campaign disclosure and conflict-of-interest matters. Yet, far from expressing

content with the new laws, the reformers lamented the comprehensive legislation that failed to clear Sacramento.

Principal disappointment focused on the death of Assembly Bill 1218 (Meade), a bill that not only required lobbyists to register themselves, their employees, and the groups they represented, but further required the lobbyists to stipulate the recipients of their money. A.B. 1218 also provided for enforcement of these provisions, something that previous laws had failed to do. While the bill cleared the Assembly, it was killed in the Senate by members of the "old guard" sympathetic to the lobbyists.¹² More than anything else, the defeat of this bill convinced the reformers that meaningful legislation would not come from the legislature. Robert Smith, coordinator of the Proposition 9 initiative for Common Cause, viewed the defeat of A.B. 1218 as a catalyst for the initiative effort: "It would have saved us a great deal of work if the legislature had enacted all these measures, but we must now commit our energy to the passage of these reforms by initiative."¹³

Proposition 9 coincided with the values and ambitions of Jerry Brown who, as Secretary of State, had urged passage of new campaign disclosure laws. In the June 1974 gubernatorial primary, Brown separated himself from the field by repeatedly stressing the need for political reform. In the words of Hyink *et al*, the basis for Brown's success was

due in no small measure to his ability to translate voter disillusionment with "politics as usual" into personal support. . . . (Brown) not only recalled the heroic legacy of California progressivism but also established himself early as a fighter against the sins of political corruption symbolized by Watergate.¹⁴

With his reputation for reform and "good government," Brown successfully capitalized on the absence of legislative action. He clearly stamped his approval on Proposition 9, and both won comfortable victories in the June 1974 election.

Several employees in the Secretary of State's office, among them Bob Stern (now counsel to the Fair Political Practices Commission) and Lowenstein, became prominently involved with Proposition 9 through their connection with Brown. In many ways, Lowenstein and Stern served as the nucleus for the fragile coalition of reformers. According to Lowenstein, by February 1973

a number of people thought it would be appropriate to go to the initiative procedure. . . . Bob and I . . . asked representatives from People's Lobby and Common Cause to get together with us (to) pool our heads and draft the best bill we could, and put together the best coalition we could build, and go with it. . . . A drafting committee was set up, which included Bob and myself; Bob Girard, a law professor

from Stanford who represented Common Cause; and various people from People's Lobby. . . . We put in a lot of work over several months . . . and we finally came out with a draft.¹⁵

From the beginning, then, Lowenstein played a pivotal role in the proposed legislation.

The provisions of the political reform initiative were numerous and complex. Yet, ultimately, the proposition centered on the progressive themes of excessive power, corruption and reform. Summarized in the *California Journal*, the major provisions of the 22,000 word initiative were as follows:¹⁶

1. *Campaign Receipts and Expenditures* — candidates for elective office at all levels of government must periodically report all contributors of \$50 or more.

2. *Campaign Spending Limits* — the expenses of all candidates for statewide offices are limited to 3¢ per voting age citizen in each election (gubernatorial candidates have 7¢ primary, 9¢ general election limits). Ballot-measure campaigns are limited by similar formulas. Incumbents are limited to 10% less than their challengers.

3. *Conflict-of-interest* — all public officials must disclose financial holdings that conflict with their responsibilities; they are also prevented from making public decisions in areas of conflict.

4. *Incumbency* — incumbency shall not determine the order of candidates' names on the ballot. As soon as an elected officer declares candidacy, all mass mailings at public expense must stop.

5. *Lobbyist Regulations* — lobbyists must register with the Secretary of State and may not make contributions that exceed \$10 monthly.

6. *Auditing* — the Franchise Tax Board will audit and investigate reports filed by lobbyists.

7. *Fair Political Practices Commission* — a 5 member appointive board, with no more than 3 members from the same political party, will enforce provisions of the proposition. The Governor will appoint 2 members, while the attorney-general, secretary of state, and controller will each appoint one member. The Commission may subpoena records and witnesses, issue cease and desist orders, and levy fines up to \$2,000.

Despite the predictable opposition of organized labor, corporate interests, and a host of gubernatorial candidates, Proposition 9 carried with 69.8% of the votes cast. While the voters had signalled for a change, however, it was hard to predict the magnitude of that change and whether the law would correct the long-standing deficiencies in California politics. Proposition 9 meant reform, but reform at what price? The Commission would now have the responsibility of determining the "costs" for the new "benefits" of clean government in California politics.

IV. DANIEL LOWENSTEIN AND THE ADMINISTRATION OF PROPOSITION 9

A few weeks after the new Fair Political Practices Commission settled down to business, Chairman Daniel Lowenstein was asked to comment on the Commission's efforts to date. He responded, "We're in the top half of the first inning and we're playing pretty good ball so far. But there's a lot of game left."¹⁷ Lowenstein's answer was only partially reflective on the success of the new law. To take his analogy one step further, the Commission was now in the first inning of the second game of a "double header." The first game was played when the proposed legislation was drafted and passed, and Lowenstein had emerged from that contest as the game's most valuable (and knowledgeable) player.

As Deputy Secretary of State to Jerry Brown, Lowenstein was a major architect of Proposition 9. After his appointment by Governor-elect Brown to the Commission chairmanship in December 1974, Lowenstein was given the green light to implement his own legislation. Moreover, his position as Chairman was particularly important. As prescribed in the statute, the Chairman would be the only full-time member of the Commission with an annual salary of \$39,000; the other four part-time members would be compensated on a *per diem* basis. In his capacity as Chairman, Lowenstein would be in the best position to exercise leverage and set the tone for the Commission's business. Because of Lowenstein's early connection with the proposition and its subsequent passage into law, a review of his political values may be helpful in understanding the orientation of the F.P.P.C.

The political ideas of Daniel Lowenstein bear striking resemblance to the Progressive mentality. He seems to fear private organization of any kind. Instead, the Commission is required to interact with the Franchise Tax Board (the auditing agency), the Attorney-General (legal interpretations), and the Secretary of State (where lobbyists must register). The distribution of authority provides a natural check-and-balance and prevents the abuse of power. With respect to the F.P.P.C., Lowenstein notes that "the Commission is as insulated as possible from control by the legislative and executive branches, including, significantly, a minimum annual budget guaranteed by the initiative without any action by the legislature."¹⁸

The concept of direct democracy, originally embodied in Progressive inventions like the initiative process, is pivotal to Lowenstein's philosophy: legislators are only human in that they first protect their self-interests. Consequently, they are unlikely to pass laws that will hamper their political lives. In the absence of completely honest law-making, direct legislation by the voters is imperative. Moreover, the voters are responsible in their actions. In Lowenstein's words, "people can usually see through 'motherhood' issues. They vote down most of the bad initiatives and vote up the good ones."¹⁹ Proposition 9, according to Lowenstein's outlook, is one such effort by the people to secure "good" law.

"Bad" and "good" laws reflect the political morality implicit in the Progressive philosophy of Daniel Lowenstein. For example, "good" government exists when the system is open to all individuals even if such a process means the control of the more powerful elements. "Good" laws are those which do not assist the more powerful and organized segments of society. Here we see the basis for the regulatory provisions of Proposition 9. As the new reformers see it, there are distinct differences between "good" and "bad" lobbyists. The former are those who advocate "public interest" legislation (i.e. Common Cause) and who, because of their reliance on small donations from the public, are controlled by no one. The latter are those who seek private gain and usually win because of their superior use of money and lobbying skills.²⁰ These groups, in particular, must be carefully regulated so that their activities do not jeopardize the efforts of "good" groups. This political control in the name of democracy does not perturb the reformers. Thus, when former Commissioner Jerome Waldie commented on the constitutionality of Proposition 9, he concluded that there is no question of its regulatory element representing "an invasion of privacy. . . But I support invasions that are in the public interest."²¹

Lowenstein views careful regulation as necessary for protecting the "good" groups from the "bad." In his words, "any regulation infringes on liberties to a degree, but every right at some point runs into the right of the public interest."²² The Commission is charged with defining this value (i.e., who is a lobbyist, who is not?) Moreover, the Commission is a proper place for such activity because, Lowenstein notes, the records of previous laws show that, despite their intentions, they don't work. Thus, if presented with the alternatives of good law or careful administration, it is "better to take the latter than the former" when dealing in matters of fair political practices.²³

As Lowenstein views it, the most important element of political reform is to open the system so that all may participate. Disclosure laws will show who participates behind the scenes as well as in the open. Lobbying limitations will prevent excessive influence, thus forcing legislators to rely on the merits of an issue instead of the favors they owe for any financial donation. Both of these reforms, along with campaign spending limitations, represent attempts to make politics equally accessible to all. The new law seeks to be fair to the extent that it allows challengers a 10% spending edge over incumbents. With such a structure, political parties have little importance. Strong party organizations are even dangerous in that they can freeze out people and tamper with the monetary provisions established in the proposition. Indeed, excessive party persuasion may jeopardize one's ability to judge a candidate who, otherwise, would be tied to no organized group. To this extent, Lowenstein views parties as organizations with the same potential evils as the powerful interest groups. Both use well-financed machinery to keep the individual from seeing the merits of individual candidacies and issues clearly.²⁴ Both also should be kept far away from the decision-making process.

V. THE PROGRESSIVE GOAL AND POLITICAL REALITY

It would be an oversimplification to state that the objectives of Proposition 9 reflect a mirror image of the Progressive period in California politics. Yet, many of the important similarities are there. Like the Progressives, the Proposition 9 reformers fear excessive power and seek to control it through the regulatory process. Also like the Progressives, the new reformers seek to strengthen democracy by making the political system more responsible to the people. Lowenstein has expressed the new reform creed in terms of performance: "People want performance. They want to see that government is more open, more accessible . . . The goal is to open the system to those who haven't had an in."²⁵ Clearly, increased political access is the precondition for better democracy.

In their zeal to correct political inequities, the new reformers have nevertheless opened themselves to important criticisms. For example, with respect to control of campaign practices, the new law seems to take the political process out of the political arena of open conflict and, instead, place it in the less visible chambers of administrative regulation. Although reformers praise regulation as a method unsusceptible to the politics of persuasion, in point of fact the new Commission has authority to determine political values (what is lobbying?, what are intentional/unintentional violations of the law?) and make laws by administrative fiat. Thus, the center for the resolution of values has been shifted from the legislative arena to the hands of five appointed individuals. This is an ironic transfer of power in light of the fact that those who disdain power now control it. In the name of performance, then, politics is shortchanged for administrative efficiency.

The new responsibility for campaign regulation places a great burden on the Commission. While reform-oriented now, there is no guarantee that the Commission, after years of dialogue with the regulated interests, will not emerge ultimately as a victim of co-optation. History has recorded a long series of such failures.²⁶ The March 1975 issue of the *California Journal* has already alluded to some odd characteristics in the Commission/lobbyist relationship:

The Commission met periodically last month to set up emergency regulations dealing with the lobbying provisions of the far-ranging act. And their work was crowned, on the 18th, by a school for lobbyists — "a school for scandal," as someone quipped — conducted by commission counsel Bob Stern on the finer points of living within the new law.²⁷

For all of its failings, the elective process is one with a mechanism of built-in accountability at regularly scheduled intervals. The regulatory process, however, is one where popular values must be interpreted by an appointed body, in itself a rather indirect method of "direct" democracy.

The passage of Proposition 9 and the creation of the Fair Political Practices Commission have generated doubts in other areas as well. While a major objective of the legislation was to create an agency for the control of the excessively influential interests, the legislation may have the effect of limiting the right to organize and the expression of free speech, questions of fundamental importance to the First Amendment. Such claims were made before the State Supreme Court in December 1975, when a coalition of representatives from big business and organized labor argued that the spending limitation on statewide propositions incorporated in the Political Reform Act²⁸ "chokes off political communications, limits the range of arguments on which the voters may base their decisions (and) precludes the presentation of orderly, effective and rational campaigns."²⁹ Arbitrary spending limits combined with arbitrary regulation of the laws enforcing those limits could more than offset any gains from the attempts to "equalize" politics. As Arthur Lipow notes, Constitutional guarantees suffer greatly when they are limited:

Speech and its effectuation in politics is constitutionally protected, or ought to be. It cannot be arbitrarily regulated or subjected to administrative rules by an agency of the state without trampling on democratic rights. . . . With the creation of a Commission whose power to regulate is based on the discretionary authority of appointed officials to say what constitutes common sense or what are reasonable forms of political activity, the political reformers have led American politics into a new and dangerous age.³⁰

Another point concerns the amount of expertise required for compliance with the various provisions. Although the grumbling representatives of large interests will have assistance from lawyers and accountants to meet reporting deadlines, the smaller groups — those for whom the Proposition was purportedly designed — may find a disproportionate amount of their precious resources allocated to those matters. When a State Senate subcommittee held hearings recently to determine the results of the new reform act, a womens' activist group argued that the registration provisions constituted "a form of harassment" for small-time activists who have limited resources.³¹ One cannot help but wonder if, in the long run, the smaller interests — perhaps many of the "good" groups the reformers seek to protect — will be discouraged from participating in the system.

In their attempt to restore political balance and create an atmosphere of effective citizen participation, the Proposition 9 advocates have altered every political relationship except that of the voter and the elected representative. Given the values behind the current reform philosophy, this inattention is not surprising. Like the early Progressives who feared political parties as tools of nefarious private interests, the new reformers continue to view parties as threats to the public good because of their organizational potential. Such an

outlook may be jaundiced since in structured democratic political systems, competitive parties have successfully functioned as responsive representatives of both organized and unorganized elements of society. Moreover, in those systems where cohesive membership parties serve as the political midwives between the legislators and electorate, relationships connecting the parties, legislators, and powerful groups are open, thus exposing the voter to the various forces at work within the party structure and political system.

In his study of British politics, McKenzie recounts an impressive number of achievements provided by a cohesive party network:

... (M)ass Political parties ... in Britain fulfill an invaluable set of functions. By exposing the electorate to a cross-fire of political argument and debate they stimulate public interest in the essential business of "attending to the arrangements of society. . . ." They are one of the main channels through which interest groups and both organized and unorganized bodies of opinion can bring their news to the attention of parliamentarians. The parliamentary leaders in turn must weigh and evaluate the news that are conveyed through these and other channels.³²

In American politics both the early and the modern political reformers have failed to recognize the linkage between power, politics, and policy-making; the three elements cannot be separated. Yet, the Proposition 9 legislation isolates the legislator — forbidden by earlier reforms from any meaningful association with his political party — from any relationship with political interests as well. Thus, more than ever, legislators are independent brokers who may act without connection to either element when accountability demands linkage to both. While "mavericks" may excite the rebel in all of the us, their political independence can cause great difficulty in voter evaluation of legislative behavior. Mired in a world of political complexity, studies show that voters lean on partisanship and group identification as mechanisms of electoral review.³³ Yet, with interest groups and parties impeded from interaction with candidates, politics can only assume a more mysterious posture.

Finally, rather than open up the system in such a way as to place incumbents on an equitable basis with their challengers, the new legislation provides incumbents with increased protection. While reformers may take heart in monetary ceilings and a provision that allows the challenger a 10% spending advantage over the incumbent in statewide contests, such limitations will be misleading with respect to their anticipated impact. With challengers' funds frozen, incumbents will rely on name recognition and the powers of their offices as mechanisms of retention. Challengers will have no recourse from this "protection."

The result from the combination of regulation, law and morality by administration, and further emasculation of the party system is a method of politics that leaves the "political" removed from the average citizen. The new

legislation has paved the way for underground politics — where decisions on campaign and political matters may be made by those not directly responsible to the public; where legislators, now unable to identify openly with various interests, may resort to private meetings with subtle forms of remuneration for their deeds.

It is too early to pronounce “dead” the reform efforts of Proposition 9. Lowenstein is right in the sense that *this* ball game is in the early stage. Yet, if history is any guide to the present, the reformers will have much to overcome. The naive Progressive changes in the early 20th century sought to bring democracy to a new crest, yet the reforms succeeded only in making power a more precious commodity. Now, in the aftermath of Watergate, we have a new attempt at reform. While the objectives are simple, the simple solutions often fall short of their goals. Power is not controlled by new definitions; it may be controlled by responsible political organizations. Perhaps it is time to reassess political parties as agents for this objective.

Notes

¹ This term is employed by Richard Hofstadter in *The Age of Reform* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), pp. 174-214.

² Quoted in the *California Journal*, V (May 1974), 6.

³ *California: An Interpretive History* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1968) p. 305.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

⁵ Hofstadter, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

⁶ For an interesting discussion of this theme, see Willis Hawley, *Nonpartisan Elections and the Case for Party Politics* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1973).

⁷ Dean R. Cresap, *Party Politics in the Golden State* (Los Angeles: The Haynes Foundation, 1954), p. 16.

⁸ Quoted in Bill Boyarsky, *The Rise of Ronald Reagan* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1968), p. 178.

⁹ Lester Velie, “The Secret Boss of California,” *Collier's Magazine*, August 13, 1949, p. 13.

¹⁰ “Conflict of Interest Issue Eludes Easy Answers,” *California Journal*, III (March 1972), 83-84.

¹¹ John Owens, Edmond Costantini, and Louis Weschler, *California Politics and Parties* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1970), p. 277.

¹² For a discussion on the defeat of A.B. 1218, see Bruce Keppel, “Open-government initiative,” *California Journal*, IV (November 1973).

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 376.

¹⁴ Bernard L. Hyink, Seyom Brown, and Ernest W. Thacker, *Politics and Government in California* (New York: Crowell, 1975), p. 86.

¹⁵ Remarks by Daniel Lowenstein, Sacramento, California, February 25, 1975.

¹⁶ “The California Journal's Ballot Propositions Analysis,” *California Journal*, V (May 1974), 8.

¹⁷ Quoted in Bruce Keppel, “Making Prop. 9 Work,” *California Journal*, VI (March 1975), 79.

18 Remarks by Daniel Lowenstein, Political Communications Seminar, Washington, D.C., October 8, 1975, p. 5.

19 Remarks by Daniel Lowenstein, Sacramento, California, February 25, 1975.

20 This distinction was presented in an address given by Lowenstein at the Center for Ethics and Social Policy, Berkeley, California, March 7, 1975.

21 Quoted in "Prop. 9 Panel: An Active Infant," *Los Angeles Times*, February 5, 1975, p. 20.

22 Berkeley remarks, *op. cit.*

23 *Ibid.*

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Ibid.*

26 See Grant McConnell, *Private Power and American Democracy* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1967), pp. 336-368.

27 "Making Prop. 9 Work," *California Journal*, VI (March 1975), 79.

28 Under the new formula for statewide propositions, spending is limited to about \$1,200,000. However, in order to encourage balanced presentation of the issues, no side can spend \$500,000 more than the other.

29 Attorney Stephen Reinhardt, quoted in "High Tribunal Asked to Void Vote Reforms," *Los Angeles Times*, December 9, 1975, p. 1.

30 "Political Reform as a Danger to Democracy," *California Journal*, VI (August 1975), 269-270.

31 "Red Tape Snarls Political Reform Act, Inquiry Told," *Los Angeles Times*, October 10, 1975, p. 12.

32 R. T. McKenzie, *British Political Parties* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1963), p. 647.

33 See Theodore J. Lowi, "Party, Policy, and Constitution in America," in William Nisbet Chambers and Walter Dean Burnham (eds.), *The American Party Systems* (New York: Oxford Press, 1967), p. 257.

The Museum as Historian

James Steel Smith

A museum is the collected past. As such, it expresses by what it contains and by how it organizes its contents the historical conceptions held by its makers. We are accustomed to thinking of historical positions as they are expressed in language — in books, articles, lectures — but concepts of history can be just as fully, if not as concisely, revealed by a museum. A thoughtful wandering through a number of museums is an effective way, in fact, to review the major attitudes men have held towards the past.

If, of course, we do not wish to look at the past, we will not collect it, and we will not build and fill museums at all. Their absence, then, may indicate a lack of interest in the past, even a dislike of it.

If we do attend to the past but believe that it has no significant pattern we may collect the past for miscellaneous non-historical reasons. From the past we may seek to retrieve and preserve objects — from buttons to buildings — because few have lasted and so have the value or rarity, or because they are odd, unusual, strange in some way (like shrunken heads from the Amazon, miniature books, Roman hermaphroditic sculpture, or fossilized woods). Other items are collected because they have scientific meaning or illustrate a scientific principle (as would an orderly collection of fish or ferns) or because they meet esthetic criteria (for example, a collection of gold objects originating in a liking for the glint of gilt) or because they are still useful (like old clocks that still keep good time or a rolltop desk that remains an efficient way of hiding messy correspondence). A person may simply turn to the past, as he would to the present moment, for the satisfaction of his taste for the rare, the scientifically interesting, the beautiful, the useful, and if these are his primary wants, his museum will not, except incidentally and uncertainly, reflect a historical pattern.

If, however, we feel, consciously or unconsciously, that the past *does* have a *pattern*, a rational, intelligible meaning, then we will very likely collect, organize, and house the things of the past in a way that will show that meaning. By our selections, groupings, placements, labelings, symbols, etc., we will make the saved past reveal a theory of history, a conception of the order of events.

For instance, if we feel that the pattern of history is a continuous evolution, then in our collecting of objects — pottery, weapons, paintings, costumes, scrolls, stoves, printing presses — we will try to collect as *complete* a record as possible, from the beginning to the present, with all the steps in the development represented, and we will arrange them in some kind of line that will chart the changes. The line would come right up to the present, without any suggestion of curling back from the hitherto indicated direction of development; thus, the steam engine from Stephenson's little model to the massive locomotive achieved by the 1940's, or the primitive typewriter to the very latest model, or expressionistic painting from Daumier and Van Gogh through Munch and the German Expressionists to Pollock and De Kooning and Kline. There would also be a tendency to drop out throwbacks or offshoots that went nowhere in particular; for instance, the "period" furniture (Queen Anne, Empire, etc.) still popular in the past several decades would be omitted from a survey of "modern design," and the bow and arrow, although still used in hunting, would not be near the top of the weapons line. And, of course, our labels and direction-pointers, even our lighting arrangements, would most likely all say, in one way or another, that we thought "things had developed," "evolved" from "that" to "this."

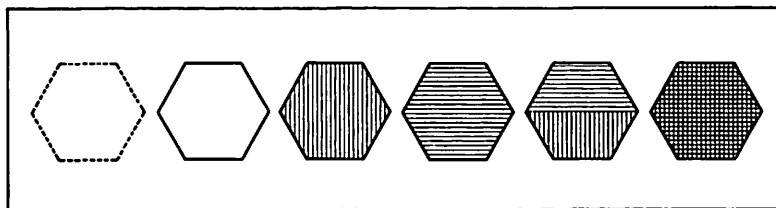
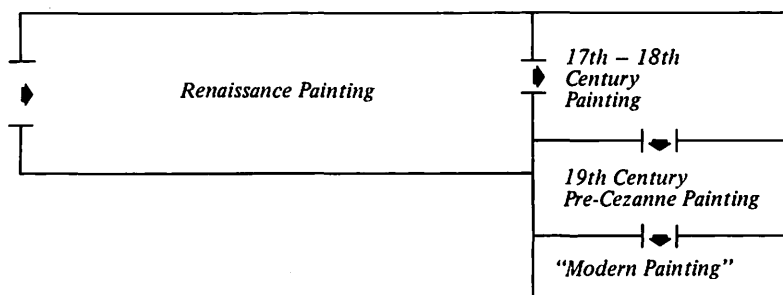


Exhibit suggesting evolution of a form in art: each development represented in museum by a number of objects and in various media.

Even in choosing or building a place to put them in, we would be happy with hallways; they suggest one-way directional movement. Or, at least, we would like a series of rooms, side by side, in which to exhibit the assumed "steps" in the hypothetical development or growth.

Of course, some few of us may harbor a notion of the past as a constant decline from a better state of things, a slipping away from some Golden Age. "Man consoles himself for what he is by what he was," writes Germain Bazin. "A temple where Time seems suspended, the museum procures for today's man those momentary cultural epiphanies in which, since Gide, he has delighted."¹ Bazin sees special manifestations of this "escape from time" in the popularity of "prehistory" and also of "period rooms," which for many evoke the "happy life" from the artifacts of a time remote from today's confusions. This view might reflect itself in our looking for the *earliest* artifacts of a given culture — a preference, perhaps, for archaic Greek sculpture over Periclean and Hellenistic, or for Han dynasty relics over those of Tang and by fuller and maybe more admiring commentary for the earlier.

Our emphasis in collecting would probably lead to the crowding of our museum with the traces of the earlier periods. If, for one reason or another, we persisted in exhibiting the later, we would make clear, by placement, lighting, etc., that the line was a line of *decline* rather than a line of progress.



One way of suggesting "decline"

It is not difficult to tell whether the builders of a Greek collection were archaists or Hellenistic enthusiasts, or whether the founders of a medieval collection felt Late Gothic to be a rise or decline from Early Gothic.

A museum from the minds of men who sense history to be circular, rather than progressing upward or descending, may reflect that concept in a variety of ways — artifacts in a circle from one sort of principle or style through others and back to the original (for instance, the Victorian Morris chair through various other chairs to Eames' modern equivalent, or primitive sculpture through contemporary and back to primitive), much as Thurber in *The Last Flower* started his civilization with a flower being admired and ended that civilization with the same.

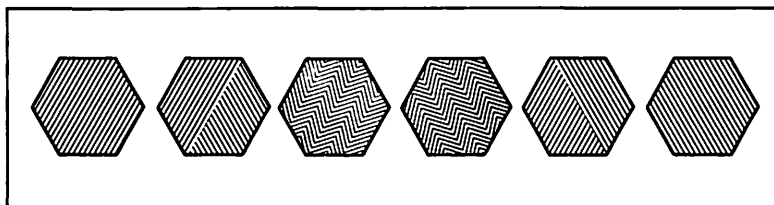
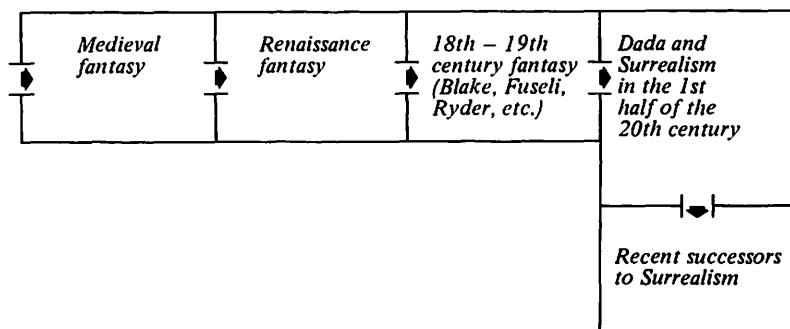


Exhibit suggesting cyclical development: Each development perhaps represented by many objects and various media.

Such exhibits, however, are relatively rare in our culture; their rarity would give support to the inference that our Western culture is fundamentally optimistic, convinced of the reality of progress.

The present as the product of the past or the present as a discreet set of facts simply following the past but not created by it — such different notions of the relation of the present to the historic past make themselves felt in the

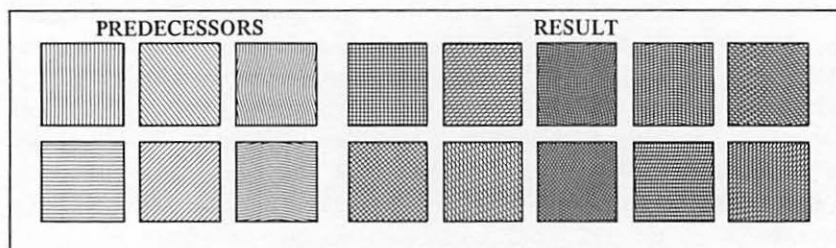
museums we make. If we start with the firm belief that the present is produced by the past, is tied to the past by a chain of cause and effect, we will most likely show as often and effectively as we can, when we present the past, that the exhibited past led to the exhibited present. For instance, one enters the great exhibition of impressionistic art in Paris in the Jeu de Paume through several rooms of *earlier* art that are meant to show some of the forerunners of the movement which is the Museum's primary content. In recent years planners of exhibits of modern design have taken to prefacing their shows with objects (and accompanying remarks) representative of "l'art nouveau." Frequently an exhibit of contemporary technological devices includes "firsts" — the primitive instruments from which the present sophisticated instruments developed. A collection of present-day fine printing may be accompanied by a smaller collection of examples of fine printing that show the particular tradition the exhibitor feels his modern examples are a part of; likewise, a collection of 18th-century fine printing may be accompanied by earlier Renaissance books for the same reason (the "present" of which I am speaking is any time in relation to any previous "past"). The Duncan Phyfe furniture may have with it one or two pieces of Sheraton to indicate what the exhibitor considers its source. Pennsylvania Dutch design may be exhibited with a number of pieces of German peasant craftsmanship. An exhibit showing the life of the New England colonists — their clothing, furniture, tools, books, prized possessions — may have in it similar English objects suggesting the English roots of their New England way of life. Relics of the American Washingtons may have with them relics of the English Washingtons, the history of the family in England prior to their coming to America.



A "fantasy in modern art" exhibit based on evolutionary concept and introduced by forerunners.

In many museums of American history an attempt is made to explain, by objects and charts and wall-essays, why America was settled, why in the first place Europeans left the Old World. Indeed, whenever a museum tries to "background" its collection, it is expressing faith in the continuity of past and present, the belief that the present must be accounted for by the past.

When displaying a certain past we may also feel it appropriate to remind the observers that this past left a legacy in a subsequent time. I have seen a very interesting show of originals and their imitations — Chinese designs and the Chippendale and other 18th-century imitations, Regency furniture and costume and revivals of those fashions. That exhibit was a rather special one, but the same inclination to point forward to effects is evident in almost every large museum and innumerable temporary exhibits. For example, in a recent display of Dickensiana there were a number of cases and walls devoted to later editions of Dickens, books that the exhibitors felt showed Dickens' influence, recent advertising containing Dickensian allusions, records and movies suggested by Dickens. Exhibits of Greek or Roman culture like to remind us, by object, photograph, or word, of the modern descendants of their architecture, art, government (e.g., the ballot), religion, science, etc. Exhibits of early aeronautic developments nearly always include a reminder of how far air travel has gone — photographs of the latest air liner, the helicopter. A recent Cézanne show contained a little cluster of post-Cézanne paintings to show Cézanne's influence, to say that art was not, could not ever be, the same after Cézanne.



"Legacy" Exhibit

There are even many shows which intentionally omit from the exhibit of a period or culture anything but what points forward to some subsequent period — e.g. "Predecessor of . . ." "Forerunners."

The commonness of this pointing backward to origins and forward to results suggests, I think, how widespread in our culture is the sense of historical continuity, the premise that the past determines the future, that in this way the past may be said to be part of the present and the present to have been implicit in the past. And perhaps at the same time it expresses our feeling that results — the *effects* of things and events — are important and worthy of notice. What *came* of it? What did it *lead* to? What *started* it in the first place? How did it get going? And where did it go? The influence diagram is a commonplace of the modern museum. It may be taken as a symbol of our civilization, our feeling about it and ourselves.

The museum feelings which I have so far noted all concern themselves with the *historic significance* of the age of the exhibited things — where they fit into a progression or a circling, what they look back to or forward to. But one may treasure objects from the past *just* for their pastness, their age, their

lastingness, and this may be the reason for a museum, for the particular things in it, and for the way in which they are organized and shown there. This will create the antiquarian museum, the cabinet of *curios* that are the curious *because of their antiquity*.

When we prize things because they are old, naturally we collect the oldest things we can find – the first fort or log cabin in our city, the furniture of earliest colonial America in preference to that of Victorian America, the carved stones of medieval Europe and ancient Greece and Rome and Egypt. We will emphasize these in our museums by quantity and by placement and elaborateness of display; they will get the lion's share of the annual budget. We may even limit our museum to them, if we can withstand all the other kinds of pressures from within and without ourselves. And if this is our only strong driving force, we will not try to show an object's beauty or historical significance, its relation to other things of its own time or of other times before and after. We will, instead, concentrate on the task of displaying its oldness, or expressing our delicious sense of its antiquity.

Shadows and heavy stone arches in the museum's own structure help express oldness. We would prefer weathered objects which show their age and perhaps be less enthusiastic about older objects which wore better. We would place the older objects in prominent positions; we would not relegate the Egyptian collection to the basement, as used to be done in many museums. We might be tempted to leave the objects encrusted and discolored, uncleaned for fear of discovering bright colors and smooth, new-looking surfaces beneath the secretions of smoke, mold, and tarnish of years and so losing the sense of their antiquity. When museums make the opposite decision for their paintings and go ahead with a thorough restoration program, usually there are unhappy objections from those who have loved the accretions of aging and are perturbed by the bright presentness the painters' contemporaries experienced. Many people were made unhappy by the decision in the 1950's to remove the varnish from the not-so-old impressionist paintings in the Jeu de Paume. This same question arises constantly in the preservation of old buildings: Shall we clean them, brighten them up and perhaps recapture some of their former beauty, or shall we keep them in their present state of aged decrepitude? In the United States we often do the former. Malraux dared to clean Paris's grimed masonry – even the sacred Louvre. Some parts of the ruins at Knossos in Crete have been "restored" to look as Sir Arthur Evans presumed they looked in ancient times. The Irish, however, have pretty much settled for keeping their ancient monastic ruins ruinous.

The prizing of age for its own sake makes dates and dating important. The older subject is selected, if there is a choice, and is given a position of honor and a prominent time tag – "Late 13th Century," "1928," "Early Georgian." And this label is likely to give the exhibit added importance in the eyes of great numbers of the general public who have the awe of the old – the touching wonder that many express in bookstores when they are permitted to handle and perhaps buy a book printed in 1829 – "A hundred years old!" –

even though the book may be not nearly so rare or so important in some other way as many a book printed in the last few years. Other nonverbal ways of time-labeling the old thing may be available in special instances — placing near the object a tree stump whose rings show it was a sapling when this book, chair, armor, building was made, or setting the object in an easily time-identifiable environment — cave dwelling Egyptian temple, monk's cell.

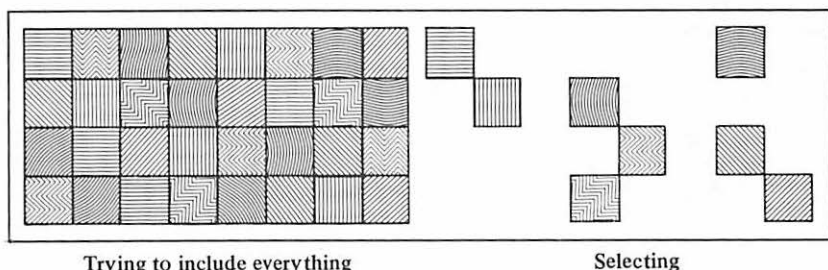
It is always possible, of course, for the museum maker to prize things for characteristics other than their age but to be aware that an object has this value for many people and thus to use its age as a come-on, a teaser. He knows the tug of the past for its own sake — one of the main reasons for millions of Americans visiting Europe every year — and he uses this attraction to pull crowds into places where crowds are not accustomed to go. He may think of it as a "concession" to public taste, or as simply showmanship.

How significant we consider the *historic value* of an object — not just its age, but, rather, all its kinds of historic value — in comparison with its other possible values will be revealed by the particular museums we think up. When the place of the object in history is more important to us than esthetic considerations (its beauty), utilitarian ones (its present usefulness), meta-physical ones (its revelation of truths), monetary ones (its value in the market place), then we will very likely select it for historical reasons rather than for any of the others and will exhibit it in ways that underline its historical meanings. If the painting is mediocre but has some sort of historical value — links with famous political events or people, characteristics of a culture or period, importance as a reportorial account or record — we will want it for our museum and will give it prominence. Thus we will most likely collect many popular prints, cartoons, social commentaries whether or not they have other merits, and our museum, like the Musée Carnavelet in Paris or the art gallery of the Chateau Ramezay in Montreal or the Museum of the City of New York or the Custis-Lee Mansion in Washington or the Victoria Museum in Calcutta or the National Portrait Galleries in London and Edinburgh, will interest people who are looking for a historical record. Although we may feel that the taste of a certain period in furniture was very bad, we will exhibit the furniture of that period as a record of it. If we have mementos of a ruthless despot who died in bed and at the same time feel his success is to be deplored, we will still exhibit the mementos if we consider him of sufficient historical interest. We may believe instruments of torture unedifying, but we will include them in our museum of the 15th century. We will exhibit the errors of the past but not as errors; we will present them simply as a part of that past, a way of explaining and understanding it. Thus, we will be less concerned with moving the visitors directly by beauty or ethics than with conveying historical truth, or at least the material from which to build it.

These various purposes, of course, may clash within us, and so we will lean in one direction and the next time in another direction, trying to keep our consciences calm.

Where the historic purpose has been given its head and the results have not been complicated by strong esthetic, moral, or other purposes, it is possible to detect a variety of notions about history.

Indeed, the very collecting and exhibiting of objects of the past — the museum itself — expresses a faith in the belief that the part reflects the whole, that the physical artifacts created and left behind by a society express that culture, the spirit of the time. If men did not believe this, they would probably not even start to assemble a museum collection on ancient Egypt, Greek civilization, Southwest Indians, medieval Irish, or any other culture; or, if they did, they would make a desperate effort to collect every piece of it, without selectivity. But men do try to find significant pieces of a culture in order to reconstruct that culture; they fill in the blanks with their own imaginations. They also arrange the pieces in *illustrative* groups and put them in a certain order and give them names.



All this implies that one does not need *all* the past to reconstruct and think about the past. Of course, some people feel more this way than others, and this difference is the difference between a highly selective 25-painting exhibit of 19th-century academic art and the large, more inclusive collections in most provincial museums in Europe. It is what makes the museum with only a dozen or so African pieces feel itself justified in arranging a room or area and calling it African art, or, if it has one Viking hoard, displaying that as Viking culture of a certain place and time. And it is, along with esthetic canniness, the basis for the art of gallery arrangement as it has developed in the past half-century, the striking shift from the crammed rooms of the 18th and 19th century storehouse-museum to the highly selective, thought-out spacious exhibit, in which the implications of the individual pieces seem to fill the spaces between them. The modern museum relies on the typicality, the suggestiveness, of the individual piece.

One's selection of the significant in history is made easier if he assumes that each historical period will have its own special characteristics — its *geist* — and so its own particular mode of expression — its own style, its own stamp. Armed with this assumption one will be on the watch for recurrence, for tendencies that make themselves felt in many different ways and things. He will think of a society as permeated or dominated by certain characteristics, and he will look for them in many places — in jewelry, costume,

furniture, books, art, music, politics, religious ritual, economics, military manners, communication, commerce, architecture, etc. He may, of course, believe that in a certain time particular kinds of revelation — art, perhaps, or in another culture politics and economics — will tell more; in a highly mercantile culture he may seek most assiduously in the relics of trade for the indices of the style of that culture. In a seagoing society, like the Vikings', he would most probably look specially hard at their boats and all the things and customs connected with their seagoing. In a hunting people, like the Plains Indians, he would examine the paraphernalia they developed for the chase. But he would not be limited by any assumption that he would find these characteristics in any one form or type of relic; rather, he would first look about to find likelihoods, then explore, then select according to typicality and clarity or revelation. The result in a museum exhibit of a culture or period would generally be a great variety of objects — dishes, clothes, books, cornices, paintings, manuscripts, handwriting specimens, weapons, musical instruments, wagons.

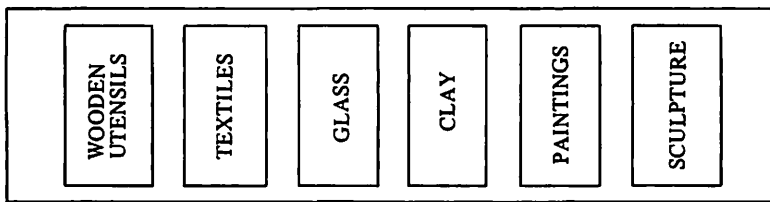


Exhibit suggesting one element in a whole culture.

And by his selection from them and by his arrangement of his selections he would suggest that ebullience of one society (for example, the Cretan élan in their great jars, in their bright, highly decorative murals, in their jewelry, in the pictures of their games and dances). In 17th-century Austria, he might find the baroque in architectural fragments, paintings, furniture, music, fountains, paragraphs from their writing; he might put 5th-century Greek vases, carvings, and architectural pieces together and thereby try to capture the restraint, the feeling for economy, that he sensed in their culture — their style, that is. And by his arrangement of the objects he can express his own sense of their style; for instance, he can place Egyptian carvings in such a way that their frontality becomes clear, almost oppressive, or he can surround the neo-classic elegance of Empire furniture with a suggestive environment of color and line, or, as the National Gallery of Portraiture in London does, he may suggest through wall colors the time of a particular period of portraiture. He may put the tiny, lively Etruscan bronze figures near enough the Etruscans' large, reclining grave figures to make altogether obvious the Etruscan directness, literalness, and relish of ordinary life.

For some people with an acute sense of historical development such manipulation may seem to be an attempt to do the impossible — to take an object made for and in another time and place and set it down in a

20th-century museum context with a selection of other objects from that age and so try to recapture the reality of its earlier existence. For them it is a pretense, a hoax. The 14th-century painting of a saint's martyrdom was painted by a man with 14th-century ideas of God and man and a 14th-century conception and knowledge of painting; it was done for a certain place in a certain church in a medieval community, and part of its meaning came from the total religious, social, and artistic experience of the people who saw it in that time. We are not those people; we have not lived their life — and a work of art is given its meaning by the people who experience it. Nor is the work even physically the same; its colors and surface textures have inevitably undergone some change, and most likely men and insects have altered it in many ways. And here it is in a *museum collection*, a fate for which it was never intended.

According to this line of thought, the museum in trying to be historical inevitably violates history. "The dual existence of the work of art as a document of the past and as an object in the present," writes James S. Ackerman, "brings to mind the duality of experience we encounter in a museum. Here we find ourselves face-to-face with actual objects of many past eras, but we see them coexisting, all at the same moment. Without specialized information that is not provided by the objects themselves, there is no way that we can see them as products of a greater or lesser antiquity; even the expert in charge of an exhibit may be unable, for lack of historical or archaeological data, to arrange his objects in a proper chronological order. . . . Not only has the artistic achievement of all mankind been distilled into a sequence of galleries, but each of the single works has been drawn out of the environment for which it was conceived and has been placed in another, historically neutral and spatially meaningless."²

Still one who wishes to use art to recapture the historical context of a work of art in a museum collection need neither give up in purist disappointment nor cynically accept it as a hoax, a fraud. We can frankly acknowledge that all museum history — like all written history — inevitably involves selection, omission, arrangement — and so, to some degree, distortion, yet at the same time we can recreate a rough outline, some approximation, of an age and achieve a sensitive guess as to the meaning of the object in its original place and time. This we do in a variety of ways. Sometimes it is possible to exhibit a reasonably complete group of objects — altar, tryptch, pulpit, glass, sacred vessels, tapestries — from the same place, or from different places but from the same general circumstances, and offer them as merely representative of a general style. We can group together specimens of a general type of object — crucifixes or chalices or Romanesque capitals; we may place them in approximately their original physical relation to one another; we may go farther and suggest an "atmosphere" guess — not trying to reconstruct an original setting but, rather, suggesting proportion, color, texture, line and mass by creating a frankly new environment. Or we may simply gather enough varied examples of a kind of object and place them in a plain neutral

setting and rely on two kinds of historical “fill-in” information – what the viewer already knows about the historical context and what we can tell him verbally, by means of wall-essays, labels, guide books, catalogues, and talks. The probable original colors of the object, its original physical place – in city square, cathedral facade, candlelit chapel, high niche – its daily use, any accretion of myth and event, its commonness or uncommonness – such information may help one build historical meaning from and around objects from the human past. If one believes that history *has* patterns and that man can, at least partially, recapture the past, then the fragments gathered from that past into the artifice of a museum *can* be presented and interpreted historically.

History is direction in time. In the museum these temporal patterns can be made manifest in visual patterns, if one believes the time patterns exist. Without such faith, of course, the museum will not come to contain them. But the modern world, both East and West, is filled with a sense of history. Although men today may differ deeply in their conceptions of history, modern societies, unlike most societies before the modern era, possess a strong sense of the historical past. This feeling expresses itself in many ways. One of these is the salvaging of the past (any past – remote or barely past, even just yesterday or last year); this bringing together of historically significant objects into a viewing place is one of the main reasons for the sudden and tremendous growth of museums since the Renaissance, particularly during the past two hundred years. And, just as the modern world reveals its conceptions of the beautiful and the good in its museums, it expresses what it thinks history is by the way it organizes and displays its collections of the past.

Notes

¹Germain Bazin, *The Museum Age*, (New York: Universe Books, 1967), pp. 6-7.

²James Ackerman and Thys Carpenter, *Art and Archaeology*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), pp. 131-32.

POETRY

Center for the Arts: La Jolla, California

Josephine Miles

How did you come
How did I come here
Now it is ours, how did it come to be
In so many presences?
Some I know swept from the sea, wind and sea,
Took up the right wave in their fins and seal suits,
Rode up over the town to this shore
Shining and sleek
To be caught by a tide
As of music, or color, or shape in the heart of the sea.
Was it you?

Was it you who came out of the sea-floor as lab into lab
Weightless, each breath
Bubbling to surface, swaying in currents to kelp plants,
Came in your cars
Freewayed in valleys millions of miles from the shore
To converge where the highways converge saying *welcome to here*,
And to where?
To tape and percussion, raga computers,
Rare texts and components of clay,
With the sea down away past the freeways and out of the town
To the blockbusting towers of learning and quiet
Shades of administering redwood,
Azure dome over all like a bellflower
And star above star.

© Josephine Miles 1975

Did you come
Out of borderlands dear to the south
Speaking a language Riveran, Nerudan, and saying
Aquí esta un hombre; my first lesson?
And come as Quixote, the man of romance
In its new century, tilting
At windmill giants of concrete,
Slim lance at the ready? Woe unto them
That join house to house, that lay field to field
Till there be no place that they may be alone
In the midst of the earth.

Did you come
With a handful of questions
Leaping like jewels
To shock answers, to start
Sparks of inquiry into the evening air?
I came as a kid
Boxed in a mahogany pullman
From that Midwest all recognize
As part of home,
And when El Paso
Stopped us for Indian baskets, the slow move
Of vendors in the sun,
I knew this was another home
Which the salt sea answered in its time
And Vizcaino mapped his ports upon.
You came
As architect of the Theban hundred gates
As concertmaster of the Philharmonic
As mayor of Del Mar
As reader of magnetic messages in DNA
As archivist for the time's poetry, or PTA,
As land-grant scholar
Holding his grey moon rocks.

What is this that we come to
Its walls and corridors
Gaping in space, its north lights
Seeking the north, its substance
Concrete brushed by the grain of its boards
Its boards reaching extension in all of their lengths
In architectural solidity?
It is
A break in the galaxies of our imagination. It needs our lives
To make it live.

A building, a dark hole in space,
Compact of matter,
Draws into it buzzing disinterests,
Ideologies.
Incomplete being
Enters into the dense room, emerges
Another, further.
Compact of matter, this is the place that we enter,
It paints pictures here and plays drums.
It turns us around and we emerge
Out of old space into the universe.
This building
Between buildings as between galaxies,
Between fields as between flights of fancy,
Will reshape our ears and turn us,
Our work of art
Beating in the breast like a heart.

What are we here for? To celebrate
Change, in the density of change,
To err,
To fail and attempt as terribly as possible, to try
Stunts of such magnitude they will lead
To disasters of such magnitude they will lead
To learnings of such magnitude they will lend
Back in enterprise to substance and grace.

What learning allows for is the making of error
Without fatality.
The wandering off, the aberration,
Distortion and deviation
By which to find again the steady center
And moving center.
What art allows for is the provisional
Enactments of such learning
In their forms
Of color and line, of mass and energy, of sound
And sense,
Which bulk disaster large, create evil
To look it in its eye. Surfers,
To look from your boards to prisoners and save
One ride,
To forge
Villainies of the wars, to indispose
Villainies of petty establishment

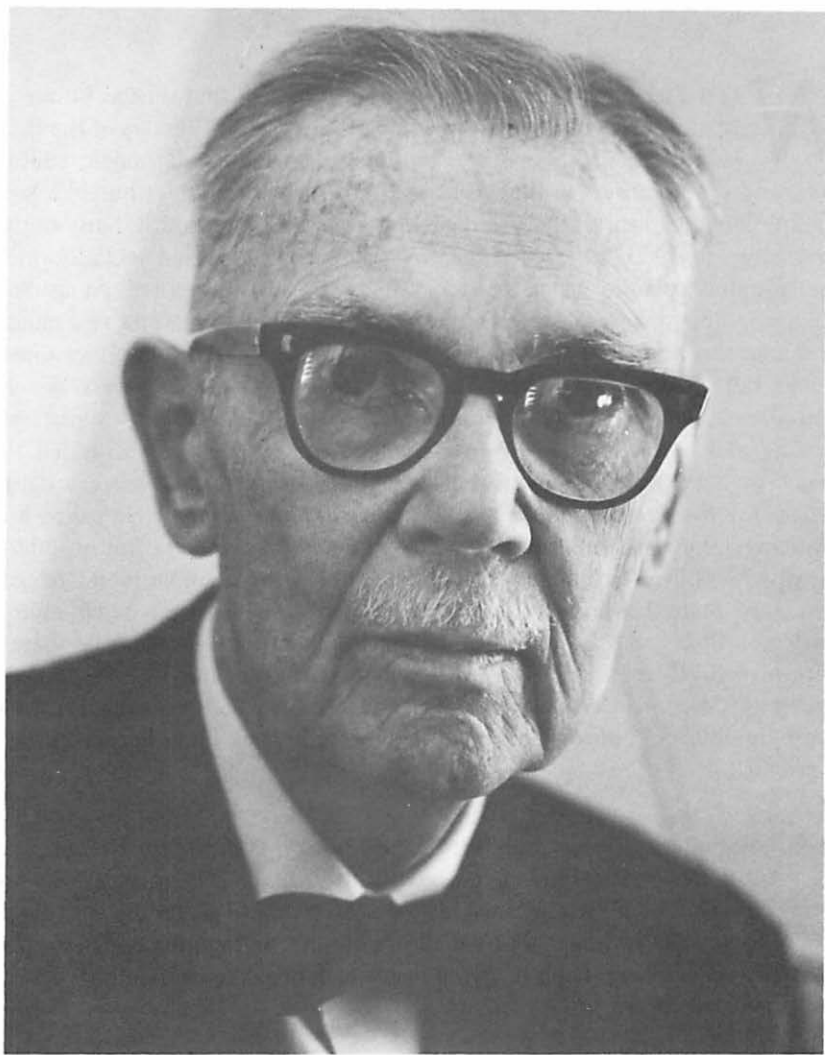
To make them lead their lives in sound and sense
Toward no good end, that we may see them so.
To make mistakes
All of our own mistakes
Out of the huddle of possibilities
Into a color and form which will upbraid them
Beyond their being.

Give us to err
Grandly as possible in this complete
Complex of structure, risk a soul
Nobly in north light, in cello tone,
In action of drastic abandonment,
That we return to what we have abandoned
And make it whole.
Domesticate the brushed
Cement and wood marquee,
Fracture the corridors
Soften the lights of observation and renew
Structural kindness into its gentler shapes.

Out of the sea
The kelp tangles, out of the south
The cities crowd, out of the sky
The galaxies emerge in isolation
One from another, and the faces here
Look one to another in surprise
At what has been made.
Look at the actual
Cliffs and canyons of this place,
People and programs, mass and energy
Of fact,
Look at the possible
Irradiating all these possibilities.

Praise then
The arts of law and science as of life
The arts of sound and substance as of faith
Which claim us here
To take, as a building as a fiction takes us,
Into another frame of space
Where we can ponder, celebrate, and reshape
Not only what we are, where we are from,
But what in the risk and moment of our day
We may become.

INTERVIEW



Bruce Bliven

Seven Million Words Later:

An Interview with Bruce Bliven

Gordon Greb

WITH *The New Republic* for thirty years — half that time as Editor — Bruce Bliven came to know some of the greatest thinkers of the first half of the 20th Century: authors, playwrights, statesmen, educators, and prime movers in the world of affairs such as Gandhi, Churchill, and Stalin. When a heart attack forced him to quit New York's hurly-burly journalism in 1953, he heeded his physician's advice, moved to California, and adopted a plan for living that today finds him far from retired. At age 86, following doctor's orders, he gets up early, writes two hours, walks two miles, and naps two hours — a daily routine which has enabled him to produce three books since leaving New York. The latest is *A Mirror for Greatness*, which had a book club sale of 40,000 on publication in 1975. Besides his years of writing and editing for *The New Republic*, Mr. Bliven has contributed to many of America's leading magazines and for twenty years wrote a daily article for the British publication, *The Manchester Guardian*. He called his autobiography, published in 1970, *Five Million Words Later*. But on interviewing Mr. Bliven early last year (April 27, 1975), Professor Gordon Greb of San Jose State University found that he had really written much more. Professor Greb talked with Mr. Bliven in the Stanford apartment he shares with his wife Rose, the San Jose High School student he met in 1909 while a student at Stanford University. Mr. Bliven credits his wife for making some of those millions of words possible ("My wife, heaven bless her, does my typing").

Q. Mr. Bliven, you've just published a new book [*A Mirror for Greatness*].

You will be 86 years old in a few months. Isn't that a little unusual?

A. Well, it may be a little unusual. The way to grow old gracefully is to keep on doing exactly what you have all of your life, and writing books for me is a kind of nervous habit in an old man which ought to be indulged.

Q. Why did you write your book?

A. I wrote it primarily because it seemed to me the people of this country were a little down-hearted and dispirited, and I thought I would try to cheer them up. And I thought I could cheer them a little by recalling six great people from the past who had lived through times of great adversity and difficulty. They had survived and so had the nation. I thought this might be something on the cheerful side.

Q. What is your view of the future? These are terrible times we are said to be living in: depression, recession, inflation. The world seems to be in a turmoil. Are you an optimist or pessimist about the future?

A. Well, the things that are worrying us right now, the depression, inflation and so on, I think will pass. I think these are manageable things of the next few years. But if you look ahead some decades into the future, then you do have really serious problems confronting us. You have the worldwide overpopulation. You have the worldwide damage to our environment. The air is polluted. Even the oceans are now polluted. The land is polluted. So that a lot of people are saying: Does mankind have a future? Well, even if there were a terrible atomic holocaust, some people would survive. I don't think there is the danger of all of the people in the world being killed. But it is true that we are faced by the most desperate dilemma that the world has ever known. We have to turn the habits of mankind around in some of our most deeply rooted things. The black nations of Africa are defying us in regard to birth control, which they say is just a white man's trick to keep them subservient. Somehow we have to educate the whole world to change many of its habits. It will be the most terrible job that has ever been undertaken, and it has to be done by the media, by the newspapers, the magazines, television, books. If these media do their work properly, I think we can turn people around but it's going to be a very close race. I am an optimist and I think the media will live up to it, that they will persuade the world to turn around and that mankind will survive.

Q. Since you were an editor for so many years — altogether 65 years in journalism — you certainly ought to have an opinion on whether journalism is getting better or worse. Which way would you say it's going?

A. Oh, I think there is no question it is getting better. Newspapers are far better than they were in my day. If you include in journalism things like news magazines — they didn't exist when I started out working for Fremont Older for 15 dollars a week — the news magazines have been of great value. The organs of opinion, which really developed after I started my career, are also useful things. And of course, when you come to television, it is the most overwhelming new medium of communication that the world has ever seen. It has tremendous potentiality.

Q. What do you think about television? Is it taking the place of the printing press? And is this bad?

A. It would be bad if it were true, but it is not true. People keep saying that everybody is going to look at television and stop reading. But on the contrary, newspapers are at an all-time high in circulation. Magazines are at an all-time high. There have never been as many books published as there are today. Somebody must be reading these newspapers and magazines and books. Television, it seems to me, is going in two directions. The good side of television is getting better and better with things like documentaries, which I think are wonderful. On the bad side, we have, of course, what everybody talks about — the violence, which is certainly regrettable. I regret it because the stories which rely on violence are omitting the real passions of the human heart. And television doesn't do this sort of thing. It solves things with a blow or revolver shots, which I regret.

Q. What about the fact that the majority of the people — according to some polls — say that they get their news primarily from television?

A. . . I think television ought to be just an index to the news. You should listen to these programs, a half hour in length and then you will know what it is you want to read with care in the daily newspapers. Now, of course, if you don't read the daily newspaper, it is better to have television news than nothing at all. When I was a boy, most people had nothing at all. Even the amount of news you get on television is better than that. And, of course, television news itself is getting better, the programs are getting longer. They are talking about an hour-long national news service now. We have in San Francisco two hours of news.

Q. Considering that television has all of these positive and negative elements, would you say it is a blessing or a curse?

A. I think it is potentially a great blessing. Today it is something of a blessing. It is certainly not a curse. I regret what it does to children. I am alarmed by what the psychologists now say to us, that children who see violence at the age of eight or nine, sometimes at eighteen or nineteen suddenly come out with violence which has apparently been lying quiet in their minds all this time. But these are things we can and will solve. A country like this is not going to lie down and give up on this fight.

Q. Mr. Bliven, I am told that in your day parents saw to it that children did not read dime novels because they feared their bad influence. Is this true? And should parents today exercise more control over what their children read and see?

A. I think it is a good idea to suggest to the child that he read good things and put good things before him so that he can read them. When I was a child, of course, if you were told not to read a dime novel, you went and read it. And this is still true to some extent. But parents can do a great deal to suggest to the children that they read good things and that they look at the good programs on television also. You can suggest to a child but do

not make a flat prohibition. A flat prohibition is just an incitement to go and do what you are supposed not to.

Q. As a former editor of *The New Republic*, with only 50 to 60,000 subscribers, what do you think about small circulation, subsidized magazines? Do they have any real influence?

A. ...If you are read by the leaders in the community, you can have a tremendous influence. In the case of *The New Republic*, when I was the editor, we were read by the editors of the daily papers all over the country. When we would launch an idea in our pages, I would see it coming back in the editorials from dozens of newspapers in big towns and little towns everywhere. So you can spread ideas remarkably well that way. It is also true, of course, that we were not subject to the pressures of advertisers. In our case, we were not subject to the pressure of a conservative owner, which makes a problem for a lot of newspaper writers. We were very lucky, luckier than most people are, and believe me we cherished that privilege and tried not to abuse it.

Q. You were a friend of Walter Lippmann. You worked with him. Can we clarify something? During World War I, he worked with the State Department. Some people believe it was Walter Lippmann, rather than Woodrow Wilson, who came up with the Fourteen Points.¹

A. Well, Walter always denied this. People were always asking him this. He always denied it. I think myself that he laid the groundwork for at least nine or ten of the Fourteen Points. Walter had a wonderful way of writing beautiful memoranda to anybody he worked with and he wrote them very early before anybody else got around to it. I am pretty sure his thinking powerfully influenced those Fourteen Points of Woodrow Wilson. Yes.

Q. You were also in a key position during the controversial political campaign following World War II of Henry Wallace and his Progressive Party's bid for the presidency versus Harry Truman and Thomas Dewey. There are those who say that Henry Wallace was, in fact, a Communist. What do you think?

A. He was not a Communist. He was a naive liberal. The Communists surrounded him, flattered him, sold him a great bill of goods that he was a wonderful man. The reason they did it was purely a matter of self-interest. They thought that the Communist Party was about to be outlawed in this country. They thought they must have a respectable, above ground duplicate of themselves, which they could use for their own purposes. They picked Henry Wallace for this. When the Korean War began and Wallace denounced the North Koreans for coming down into the South, the Communists abandoned him and abused him bitterly, proving that they had just used him.



Bruce Bliven with his wife, Rose

Q. New York was an exciting city in your day, particularly because of the important and influential people there. Many of them were attracted to your magazine because of its famous dining table. Who were these people, and why did they come to dine with you at *The New Republic*?

A. . . In the early days of *The New Republic* it had quite a smart social aura about it. We had our own chef and butler. We had beautiful furnishings. A big dining room table. The editors ate lunch together every day there and we would have invited guests. To be an invited guest there, you had to be a person of intellectual importance, a significant political figure. Nobody got in just because he was a friend or something of that sort. And over the years we had a wonderful series of people who came to lunch or dinner at *The New Republic* — H.G. Wells, Rebecca West, John Maynard Keynes . . .

Q. Amy Lowell?

A. Yes, Amy Lowell. I ought to begin by saying that Amy Lowell, of course, was famous for smoking cigars in a day when women dared not smoke anything in public and certainly not cigars. We had a big dinner. Amy Lowell was there. And after dinner, Etienne, the butler, passed around a big, beautiful monogrammed cigar box to all the men around the table but not to Amy Lowell. And Herbert Croly, the editor of *The New Republic* in those days, was presiding. And Amy said to him in her deep booming voice, "Herbert, your man has failed to give me a cigar!" And I thought Etienne was going to drop to the floor. He had never heard of this idea, you know. But Herbert said, "Give Miss Lowell a cigar, Etienne." And Etienne did. Then he retired to the pantry to pull himself together.

Q. Many great names are associated with *The New Republic*. You were the editor of such people as George Bernard Shaw, Virginia Woolf, Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Edmund Wilson, John Dewey, Bertrand Russell, the list goes on. Is there anyone on this list you would like to reminisce about?

A. Well, I could tell you a little bit about George Bernard Shaw. He was a great show off. Although he did not come to lunch at the magazine, I did meet him on both sides of the Atlantic. I saw him and had a talk with him in England. I remember one interesting little thing. A play of his was running in New York at that time. My wife and I met him and we mentioned the fact that we had seen his play in New York just a few weeks before. Immediately he pounced on us and wanted us to describe exactly what the costumes were, exactly what the setting was, what the furniture was like, how fast the actors talked, and so on. My wife, who luckily has total recall, which I don't, was able to answer his questions. But he went on and on. He was enormously interested in this. Aside from that he was a mischievous man who liked to make shocking, terrific statements. The only thing you can say about it is that his shocking, terrific statements often turned out to be true.

Q. As an editor you saw the work of many, many great writers of the 20s, 30s, 40s, and 50s. Which ones would you single out as being particularly easy to edit?

A. Hemingway never needed any changes at all. I did not edit very much of his work. F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote beautiful prose. Nobody would dare to change a word of Edmund Wilson's, and you did not need to have it changed. Malcolm Cowley wrote beautiful finished work, and incidentally his first draft got printed frequently without his having changed a single word, which is certainly not the case with me. The English writers like Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey, H.G. Wells, Rebecca West, all sent me polished manuscripts, but I don't know what had gone into the making of that polished manuscript. What I saw was the final draft.

Q. Did you ever find that any major writer disagreed with your editing?

A. The good ones don't complain. The people who are, broadly speaking, the people who complain about editing are the people who have written very little and do not think that they will write anything else. They can barely have a word of it changed. But a professional writer is a man who knows that if this sentence isn't all right, he is going to write some more tomorrow. My great example of this is John Dewey, whom I edited. He wrote a great deal for *The New Republic* and one time we had him under contract to write an article every two or three weeks . . . John Dewey would sit down and compose on the typewriter, interline and work all over his manuscript, and his English style, his word choice, was often pretty bad. I had to almost rewrite him. Never did I have one word of criticism or complaint from John Dewey.

Q. As a man in his 80s, who has just now published another new book, how do you do it?

A. Well, I am handicapped compared with a lot of other people. I had quite a bad heart attack a few years ago and the doctor only lets me work two hours a day . . . My autobiography, which I published a few years back, was called *Five Million Words Later* because I reckoned that I had published that many words, which would be the equivalent to about 50 average-sized books. Actually it was about six or seven million words but I did not want to sound too boastful about it. I did that by dictating. I used to dictate editorials for *The New Republic* at pretty high speeds because we did the whole editorial section, starting Monday morning, and the copy had to go to the printer at 12 o'clock noon. So we were under a lot of pressure. Now the doctor won't let me dictate any more. It is too much of a strain for me. So we found a little portable typewriter, the lightest one on the market, and I sit with the little typewriter on my lap and I write by hand for two hours a day, quadruple-spacing. The only advice I can give anybody thinking of going into writing is the advice everybody else gives — Don't wait for inspiration. Write every day. If one day you write badly,

rewrite it the next day. Keep on with it.

Q. All right, now how did you go about selecting those six Americans for your new book, *A Mirror for Greatness*? There were hundreds of possibilities. How did you narrow it down to six?

A. Well, I took these six people for several reasons. One is that they were people I liked.

Q. Who are your six people and why did you pick each?

A. Some of them are very obvious to everybody. I began with Benjamin Franklin, who was the first self-made man as well as a genius in so many different ways. Then I did John Adams, who personified the Puritan ethic, the work complex, which so many of us have nowadays. I have Thomas Jefferson, whose versatility was so remarkable that he seems to people in Europe even now sort of the quintessential Yankee . . . Then there is Ralph Waldo Emerson, who broke the bonds of parochialism for American scholarship with Europe and persuaded Americans to stand on their own feet. I have Henry David Thoreau, who really invented the counter-culture and was the first ecologist, the first man to treat nature as a friend and not an enemy. And my sixth person is one some people have never heard of — Soujourner Truth, the wonderful black woman who before the Civil War did more than almost anybody else except Harriet Beecher Stowe to arouse the North to the horrors of slavery. She was herself a slave for the first 30 years of her life. She never learned to read or write.

Q. It must have been difficult to take all of the great people we have had in America and select six. What are the conditions that you believe make for great individuals?

A. This is a subject I go into a little bit in my book toward the end. I tried to use these six as a sort of basis for studying the things that make for greatness. This is a reckless thing to do. You need really hundreds of people to make a scientific survey. But it seems to me, thinking it over, not only in terms of the lives of these people but many others, that you need the following for greatness: First, of course, good health. Second, a fairly high degree of intelligence, though not necessarily the highest degree of intelligence. Third, you must be brought up under conditions of discipline. I don't mean harsh or cruel discipline but enough discipline so that your mind is formed and you are pushed to achieve something both as a child and as an adult. Fourth, as an adult you must be confronted by a problem, especially if you are in political life which was the kind of involvement most of my men had. You must have severe problems that are capable of solution. If there isn't any solution, then people just get hopeless. If you are an artist, you must be surrounded in one way or another by people capable of criticising your best efforts and making you achieve beyond what you, yourself, thought you, yourself, could achieve.

And finally there is the question: How large a community can greatness exist in? Some people think that some communities get so large, so amorphous, that it is impossible for a really great individual to stand out. Athens, at the time of its very greatest, when it was the most wonderful city in the world, had only 50,000 free citizens. Some people think that was about as large as you could get in those days. Of course, we have today things like television which reduce the size of the community. And in time of war or great national stress also, the community is reduced in size. So it is a complicated question.

Q. Mr. Bliven, you said you dictated a lot of your work. Was this to a stenographer or to a dictaphone machine?

A. I could always dictate letters to a dictaphone, without any trouble. But when it came to writing manuscripts, I needed a human presence there . . . I had my secretary sit at a little noiseless typewriter so that it would be quiet, and we quadruple-spaced on the typewriter.. I dictated directly to the typewriter, which is the best possible way to write manuscripts because then you can look over the girl's shoulder, see what you have just said, change it as you go. . . . May I tell you about writing for *The Manchester Guardian*? For 20 years I wrote a daily article for *The Manchester Guardian* on top of editing *The New Republic*.² It was pretty strenuous because my deadline was 3 o'clock every afternoon. So I learned to dictate in "cablese" and I dictated to a secretary sitting at the typewriter, quadruple-spacing . . . anyone listening would hardly understand what I was saying unless he happened to know all about "cablese." The advantage of dictating for journalism was that I could get all around my subject very rapidly, get the main substance down, and then I could afterwards edit and handle it at my leisure. It also gave me the great advantage that I had both hands free to handle my notes — look at what I had written down in advance.

Q. This required, too, that you had to have an organization in your mind before you started talking, didn't it?

A. Yes, I would think over pretty carefully what I was going to say, of course, and get it pretty well outlined in my mind. Then I would just go ahead. I used to write editorials for *The New Republic* under great pressure. I could do a thousand words an hour. That would be a thousand-word editorial. May I tell you something funny? Some of these editorials have been reprinted now in anthologies to be used in college and high school classes in English. The editor always makes a little comment: "Note how Mr. Bliven first set forth his thesis and then the antithesis and so on." Well, I did not know I was doing all this. I was just writing at top speed. But it is probable that I did unconsciously organize the material in a certain way. I mean, present a problem, present alternative solutions, give my own solution, then wind it up with the size of the difficulty or whatever.

Q. How did you happen to develop this technique?

A. I started dictating, I believe, when I was teaching at the University of Southern California. At the time I was also a correspondent for the *Christian Science Monitor*. I don't happen to be a Christian Scientist, but I had to do a lot of material for this newspaper and I was so hard pressed for time that I found that I could dictate more rapidly than I could write by hand or type. Like all reporters I began early in life to pound a typewriter. I worked my way through Stanford writing on the typewriter for the San Francisco *Bulletin*, covering the Stanford campus.

Q. When you sit at a typewriter, what goes through your mind? Is it the same as the dictation process?

A. I find that I write a good deal in my head before I ever sit down. I will sometimes work a week on something, especially the beginning, the first few paragraphs of an article. I may do it in my head a week in advance. Then, after that, I go on and think it out sentence by sentence as I write on the typewriter.

Q. What kind of notes do you use?

A. Well, I make notes usually on a big yellow pad. If I am writing a book of history — I have now written three books of history — I have to organize the notes with great care to get everything in its proper sequence. The only real solution is to put one fact on one page and give the date at which this thing occurred historically. Then put them together. If you are taking notes from four or five history books, date each fact, then shuffle the pages together so that you have the same incident as recorded by five or six people but on five or six sheets of paper. Then you put them altogether. After that, heaven help you, you have to write.

Q. On your long walks, which you now make because of the advice of your physician, two miles a day, are you also thinking about what you are going to write as you walk?

A. I quite often am. The whole Stanford campus laughs at me because they see me stop all the time and make notes on a little pad of notepaper in my pocket. Yes, I do quite often think about what I am going to write tomorrow. There is always the question: What are you going to do tomorrow?

Q. Do you think excellent writing can be taught?

A. Essentially, writing courses are good to give you a chance to try your wings. Let me put it this way: a person who is good enough to become a writer probably does not need a great deal of help in actual writing, but it is of great value to him to get the criticism of his peers, to get the criticism of the leader of the class, who presumably knows more about writing than he does. And after that it is just practice. I had a dear old friend, Mary

Heaton Vorse, who gave the formula for writing which has been attributed to a lot of other people but Mary Heaton Vorse said it: "Apply the seat of the pants to the seat of the chair and work."

Q. Do you think the writer today is given all the credit he deserves. For example, in motion pictures, the writer seldom gets the top billing accorded the actresses, the actors, the director, the producer and so forth.

A. You have to break it down a little bit for the various media. In motion pictures and television, the writer is all important. Nobody seems to recognize this fact. If it were not for the writer, these characters would not exist. He sits at a typewriter and dreams them up. And then the actors and the director and so on try to flesh out what he has created. No, I don't think the writer is given nearly the credit he is entitled to. I have a simile I thought of the other day. A writer is like a hen who has laid an egg. They will take the egg and do all kinds of fancy things with it but ignore the fact that it was the hen that laid it. In the magazines and newspapers now, I think writers are getting more attention than they deserve. Some writers are getting a sort of limelight, which does not go too well. I think writing ought to be a solitary thing. I think you ought to go sit and agonize instead of appearing in public on television or radio, or whatever.

Q. Do you think perhaps some writers are self-publicists? Hemingway, for example, had a certain flair for adventure. And this seemed to be very, very productive of news and consequently, perhaps, of readers.

A. Well, of course, Hemingway — and F. Scott Fitzgerald would be another example of this — were eccentric characters. They were such vivid personalities that they became news themselves. What I was thinking of was the authors now who are forced to make the long trek all over the country publicizing their books on endless radio and television interviews. They are glad to do it, but I don't know if it sells as many books as the publishers sometimes think it should. But I also feel, why isn't he back home writing his next book?

Q. What is your next book going to be about?

A. My next book! Ah, it is a great mistake to ask a writer about this because he is likely to tell you. I am writing a book about the three decades after the Civil War. I begin with Lincoln's funeral train wending westward across the prairie, and I end with William Jennings Bryan flailing his arms and shouting the "Cross of Gold" speech. And my working title is *The Spent Giant Recovers*. My thesis is that the Civil War ruined this country almost — morally, spiritually, economically — and these three decades are the decades in which the country pulled itself together. And I am going to tell it, as I always tell history, through the lives of some of the men of that era, Mark Twain, William Jennings Bryan, Tom Edison, the first J.P. Morgan, President Andrew Johnson. I am having a lot of fun with this book.

G. It sounds wonderful. Thank you very much, Mr. Bliven.

Notes

¹ The Fourteen Points were the terms for peace outlined by President Wilson on January 8, 1918, which were accepted by Germany later that year as the basis for ending hostilities. Because of strong opposition from England, France, and Italy, most of the moderate Fourteen Points were replaced by harsher terms in the final Versailles treaty. Wilson was forced to make concessions on nearly all the others in order to save his Fourteenth Point – to establish a League of Nations. The Fourteen Points raised issues which are debated to this day; for example, whether secret diplomacy should be abolished; or whether an international body can keep world peace.

² When Bliven retired in 1947 as American correspondent for the *Guardian*, the assignment went to Alistair Cooke.

ARTICLES



Photo 1: Foreground: John Steinbeck (standing); John D. Short, Sr. (sitting). Background: Mrs. Henry M. Williams (standing); unidentified (sitting). In this photo Steinbeck appears to have just thrown a ball or to have gone through some such gesture. Background right, nearly completed adobe summer home of Short.

John Steinbeck: a 1930's Photo-Recollection

John D. Short, Jr.

IN 1934, when I was fifteen years old and a freshman at Monterey High School in Monterey, California, I met John Steinbeck for the first time in my parents' Carmel home. Coincidentally, my classes at the high school included a first year Spanish course taught by Miss Susan M. Gregory, who, I was to learn, provided Steinbeck — was in fact at this very time providing him — with the major story sources for *Tortilla Flat*.¹ Miss Gregory, a distinguished and talented person, had been my father's Latin teacher in 1908 and they remained friends until her death in 1939. At this time — 1934 — my father was forty years old, Miss Gregory was fifty, and Steinbeck thirty-two.

The retrieval of times past — the groping back some forty years into one's multitudinous recollections of people and events — is merely the unrefined process of memory. One may well remember isolated people and events with a stunning clarity, but the recall of *context*, of time and place, that is the rub. To sort out specific events, to assign particular people and exact dates is a task requiring the premeditative mind of a Boswell.

I have long suspected that my mother, Marie Hathaway Short, was unconsciously but strongly endowed with the premeditative inclination to capture the present. For some fifty years she expressed this impulse through the now common addiction to the camera. How well I remember the elegant Eastman Kodak that she used all through the years of my childhood and youth. It was one of those great, old bellows cameras that produced fine, clear post-card size contact prints. I can still feel the weight of that impressive machine and smell the very special smell of the black, coarse grained leather in which the camera was bound. It stands in my memory as a vital, remarkable and ever-ready piece of equipment in my mother's life. If the light permitted (and often in impatience when it did not), there were few events, places or people in her life upon whom my mother failed to focus her fine old Kodak. Her restless inclination to capture the time present produced thousands of photo prints that today offer an endless source for recollections

of time past. Over the years these prints were carefully bound and preserved in albums, a record of half a century: 1910 to 1960. The photos of Steinbeck and friends that illustrate this piece are from this collection.

Between 1934 and 1940, usually under casual social circumstances conducted by my parents or their friends, I often met and talked with Steinbeck and his wife Carol. I have many clear recollections of parties that the Steinbecks attended in my parents' home, and I recall vividly the Steinbecks at outdoor luncheon affairs between 1935 and 1937 at my family's Big Sur summer home.

My personal recollections of the now famous American author fall into a pattern. I remember him well. He was a big man and always dressed informally with an open shirt, dungarees and heavy shoes or boots. I can still see his face clearly: light hair, clear blue eyes, full face and large nose. He was handsome in a coarse way. Also, he was a powerful man, or seemed so to me when I used to see him in Carmel and Monterey, and he had a manner, an aura, that always seemed a bit arrogant, though perhaps "assured" is more accurate.

I remember he once gave me a lecture on dogs. Of course I don't remember the exact words, but the feeling and tone of the incident have remained with me all these long years. Steinbeck and Carol came to my parents' home one afternoon for drinks — this would have been 1934 or 1935 — and Steinbeck had his dog with him. It was a young hunting dog, as I remember, a big animal, perhaps a setter or a pointer, and it wouldn't sit still. It wanted to play and Steinbeck wanted it to obey, to sit at his feet. I have no doubt that my own youthful overtures had an unsettling influence on the dog. And Steinbeck, I recall, admonished his dog endlessly and directed to me a very serious talk about his efforts to train this dog, the virtues of the breed, and dogs in general. The tone of all this was very serious. I remember the incident with especial clarity because serious talk about dogs has always made me uneasy.

So, whenever I think of Steinbeck I remember this incident with his dog and have come to associate him with dogs in a special sort of way. Very recently I was amused to read the following passages from two Steinbeck letters dated 1952 and 1963: "I don't need dogs as I once needed them but I like them as much as ever. Once they were absolute necessities to me — emotionally." And: "All of the dogs I have had have been natural dogs. I could learn from them as much or more than I could teach them."² These observations tend to confirm my own youthful feelings of long ago about the man and his dog.

Of course I have other fragments of memories of Steinbeck, the clearest of which connect him with particular places or people: I remember seeing him with Ed Ricketts at the latter's laboratory in Monterey on a couple of occasions, and he seemed very much a part of the place as he worked with Ricketts on some project. I remember him at the home of my old friend Francis Lloyd at a small party that went on late into the night with gallons of

red wine. I remember with excitement Steinbeck's purchase of *The Goon*, a sailboat built by my friend (later my brother-in-law), Neil Weston, whose labors we boys had watched with envy and awe. And I remember the Steinbecks in association with Toby Street, the Tal Lovejoys, the Bruce Arrises, and Beth Ingels. All these associations are connected with social gatherings, beach parties, musical events, gallery openings, or dramatic productions during the 1930's.

The population of Monterey-Carmel in those days was relatively small, and there was the feeling of knowing people — nearly everyone — wherever one went on the Peninsula. This feeling I suppose was augmented for me by my family's long association with the Monterey Peninsula. My grandparents and parents had lived in the village of Carmel since the first decade of the century and had built homes and had close friends and connections there. My paternal grandmother built one of the early homes in Carmel in 1906; my maternal grandfather built one of the early summer homes in Pebble Beach in 1908. So my feelings for the Peninsula derive from a background of long and close association.

My parents were socially gregarious and active people with a lively interest in the arts. Their friends, more often than not, were interested in or directly involved in the arts. Some were also law clients of my father's, though most were friends of long standing whose children were my own close friends. In a small and informal way my mother maintained something of a *salon* — the term was never used — in her Carmel home where her enduring interest in the arts frequently took the form of entertaining artists: writers, painters, musicians, dancers and actors.

Perhaps my youthful recollections of Steinbeck are blurred by this background. Many of my parents' friends were literary people who were not only older than Steinbeck, but at the time of far greater achievement and distinction. Steinbeck was for me merely another writer, a younger one, who was an occasional visitor in my parents' home. Further, I was of that fortunate generation to which TV was unknown, and so was spared the influence of the vulgar contemporary "talk shows that promote and glamorize authors as creature-commodities larger than life. In an atmosphere in which close family friends included such established personalities as Robinson Jeffers, Lincoln Steffens, Martin Flavin, Van Wyck Brooks, Langston Hughes, and Edward Weston, the almost-unknown author John Steinbeck was not especially awesome.

Pastures of Heaven, published in 1932, provoked by virtue of its folkloric qualities considerable excitement and speculation on the Monterey Peninsula. During the years immediately following publication there was a feeling of "great expectations" for the young Steinbeck. But I can also clearly recall during these years the rumor that Steinbeck in writing this work of loosely connected stories had made liberal use of anecdotes written by Beth Ingels, a newspaper reporter and friend, who had grown up in the Corral de Tierra, the setting for *Pastures of Heaven*. My own and other recent findings would

suggest that this may be more than a rumor.³

The publication in May 1935 of *Tortilla Flat* marked the beginning of Steinbeck's popular and literary success. For the first time the young author's work produced significant rewards, and for his many friends on the Monterey Peninsula there was a sense of fulfillment of the great expectations. The *San Francisco Chronicle* on June 2, 1935, ran a biographical sketch by Ella Winter (Mrs. Lincoln Steffens), which observed in the closing paragraph, "He doesn't like publicity and he doesn't like photographs and he doesn't like personal fuss, not as a pose, but because they do you damage."

Today this observation seems rather ironic; and, though it is of course always easier to judge an author and his work when the passage of time has placed his literary corpus in a larger perspective, there seems to be little question that the public response to *Tortilla Flat* was Steinbeck's first encounter with what was to be a life-long struggle with the "bitch-goddess success."⁴

The struggle in fact soon manifested itself in the petulant foreword that Steinbeck wrote for the Modern Library edition of *Tortilla Flat*:

Had I known that these stories and these people would be considered quaint, I think I never should have written them. . . .

All of this gets around to the point that this is not an introduction, but a conclusion. I wrote these stories because they were true stories and because I liked them. But [gas bellied]⁵ literary slummers have taken these people up with the vulgarity of duchesses who are amused and sorry for a peasantry. These stories are out, and I cannot recall them. But I shall never again subject to the vulgar touch of the *decent* these good people of laughter and kindness, of honest lusts and direct eyes, of courtesy beyond politeness. If I have done them harm by telling a few of their stories, I am sorry. It will not happen again.⁶

It is a curious statement that has received considerable critical attention, none of which has given sufficient attention to the clear bibliographical evidence that leads to the sources for the novel. Steinbeck apparently had second thoughts about this foreword and withdrew it from all editions after the Modern Library edition.

Shortly after the publication of *Tortilla Flat*, Steinbeck and his wife Carol attended a large outdoor luncheon at my family's summer home at Big Sur. The occasion was a birthday party for my father, John D. Short, Sr., so I remember the date clearly: July 31, 1935. The occasion also celebrated the completion of an extensive family project that occupied our energies during the early 1930's. This involved the clearing of an elegant ridge on a larger piece of coastal land that my father had acquired in 1920. The ridge, spotted with fine oaks, affords a splendid view of the coast to the north and south, and the beaches and Pacific Ocean a thousand feet below. Having cleared the ridge, we made our own adobe bricks and constructed a snug and solid adobe



Photo 2: L to R: Maj. Charles Morgan (cigarette); Henry Dickinson; unidentified woman; John D. Short, Jr. (bare back); John Steinbeck; Wilfred Davis (rump).



Photo 3: L to R: Mrs. R.A. Kocher; Mrs. Martin Flavin; John D. Short, Sr.; Henry Meade Williams; Maj. Charles Morgan; Martin Flavin; John D. Short, Jr. (bare back); John Steinbeck; Wilfred Davis.



Photo 4: John Steinbeck (standing); Mrs. John O'Shea.



Photo 5: L to R: John D. Short, Sr.; Henry Meade Williams; Maj. Charles Morgan; Henry Dickinson; John D. Short, Jr.; John Steinbeck; Wilfred Davis.

cottage with a redwood shake roof. Though a lawyer by profession, my father found great joy in working with his hands. He had a theory that no one could fully appreciate a chair until he had built one.

So here on July 31, 1935, Steinbeck and Carol, my parents, and their many mutual friends gathered for an outdoor feast, wine, toasts, talk and festivities that included the tug-of-war shown in the photo illustrations with this piece. Steinbeck in a tug-of-war at this particular period in his life has always seemed to me a somewhat sad portent of the struggle ahead with fame, fortune and integrity. Indeed, the general tone of his recently published letters tends to support this feeling of struggle, a tug-of-war. I am told that these photos of Steinbeck are rare: at the time he seldom wore a tie and white shirt and was very camera shy.⁷

Other guests at this affair, some of whom appear in the photos, included Mr. and Mrs. John O'Shea, Mr. and Mrs. Martin Flavin, Henry Dickinson, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Meade Williams, Dr. and Mrs. R.A. Kocher, Lloyd Tevis, Albert Rhys Williams, Ella Winter (Mrs. Lincoln Steffens), Mr. and Mrs. Fritz Wurzmans, Mr. and Mrs. Francis Lloyd, Wilfred Davis, Major Charles Morgan, and various members of the John D. Short family.

Now, some forty years after this event, when so many of these bright and lively people are ghosts of a past era, I am reminded, as I look at these photos, of a favorite quotation of my father's — from the essay "On Falling in Love" by Robert Louis Stevenson (an author much admired by Steinbeck):

When the generation is gone, when the play is over,
when the thirty years' panorama has been withdrawn
in tatters from the stage of the world, we may ask
what has become of these great, weighty, and undying
loves, and the sweethearts who despised mortal conditions
in a fine credulity; and they can only show us a few
songs in a bygone taste, a few actions worth remembering,
and a few children who have retained some happy stamp
from the disposition of their parents.⁸

Notes

¹ Steinbeck dedicated the Modern Library edition of *Tortilla Flat*, 1937, "To Susan Gregory of Monterey."

² *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*, ed. by Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten (New York: Viking Press, 1975), pp. 462 and 775.

³ Beth Ingels, who died in Carmel in November 1975, was a good friend for some thirty years. Shortly before her death I made several attempts to discuss with her the sources she allegedly supplied for *Pastures of Heaven*. On all occasions she refused to discuss the matter on the basis that "this all happened so long ago; I'm too tired and never want to talk about the subject again; as far as I'm concerned it's closed." (From personal conversations). During these same conversations conducted during 1974 and 1975 Miss Ingels willingly supplied other valuable information on subjects pertaining to Steinbeck and sources for *Tortilla Flat*. It is my own belief that there is considerable substance in the long standing rumor that Beth Ingels supplied story sources for *Pastures of Heaven*. Recent discussions of this subject with various members of the Steinbeck circle, including Carol Brown (Steinbeck's first wife), and Webster Street, tend to confirm this belief.

Cf. Richard Astro, *John Steinbeck and Edward R. Ricketts: The Shaping of a Novelist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1973), p. 96: "It has generally been assumed that Steinbeck learned about the Corral de Tierra from stories his mother told of when she, like Molly Morgan in the book, taught school in rural communities. But Jack Calvin [a marine biologist and friend of Ricketts], affirms that it was not Steinbeck's mother, but a longtime resident of Corral de Tierra, Beth Ingels, who inspired *The Pastures of Heaven*. Calvin even suggests that Steinbeck 'stole' Miss Ingels' stories, and recalls 'at my house in Carmel, she spent a long evening telling me in bitter detail about John's treachery'."

⁴ William James, Letter to H.G. Wells, Sept. 11, 1906: "The moral flabbiness born of the exclusive worship of the bitch-goddess SUCCESS."

⁵ MS variant reading deleted from final printed version. Steinbeck MS – Introduction to *Tortilla Flat*, Berg Collection, No. 64B7687, New York Public Library.

⁶ Foreword to the Modern Library edition of *Tortilla Flat*.

⁷ Personal letter from Carlton Sheffield, Sept. 5, 1974: "I'd recognize John anywhere, though it is surprising to see him so formally clad." In a 1932 letter to publisher Robert O. Ballou, Steinbeck confessed, "I hate cameras. They are so much more sure than I am about everything." See *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*, p. 63.

⁸ "Virginibus Puerisque," *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, Vailima Edition (New York, 1921), II, 52.

Mark Twain as Moral Philosopher

Philip E. Davis

THOSE who think of Mark Twain primarily as the author of *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* or have only early memories of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* or *Huckleberry Finn* will perhaps be surprised to find him being taken seriously as a philosopher. Others who have read some of his later works such as *The Mysterious Stranger* or his lesser known essays and speeches such as *My First Lie and How I Got Out of It* will not be so surprised.

But who qualifies as a philosopher anyway? William James once observed that it is not enough to have a certain outlook or attitude, or even to hold beliefs that are true.

What distinguishes a philosopher's truth is that it is reasoned. Argument, not supposition, must have put it in his possession. Common men find themselves inheriting their beliefs, they know not how. They jump into them with both feet, and stand there. Philosophers must do more; they must first get reason's license for them.¹

Despite the differences regarding the grounds of their beliefs, it is nonetheless the interests common to mankind about which philosophers historically have always preferred to reason, e.g., matters of life and death, knowledge and belief, truth and falsity, good and bad, right and wrong, to mention only a few. Other kinds of investigators deal with these problems too, but either in a more *practical* way, as a coroner investigates a death or a physician a life, or in a more *piecemeal* manner, as a sociologist investigates social truths, a physicist physical truths, or a mathematician mathematical truths. Philosophers tend to deal with such matters from at once a more theoretical and a more general (or *wholesale*) point of view, e.g., with *truth*

simply, rather than this or that kind of truth. This difference in approach does not necessarily mean that the philosophical point of view is more important than other points of view or other ways of dealing with problems, but it does mean that it is logically a more *fundamental* point of view.

One further comment — almost a warning — about those who philosophize. Although consistency is of course a virtue in one who seeks to be rational, one can be rational without being entirely consistent. According to one commentator, “Kant flatly contradicts himself in almost every chapter.”² Even those who disagree with so extreme an estimate³ would, I am sure, concede that nothing is easier than to find inconsistencies in the writings of great philosophers. More than mere consistency is required.⁴ Insight, perception, invention, novelty, originality, truth — these too are marks of a philosopher. Thus when we are told that Twain “is usually to be found on both sides of any question he argues,”⁵ we should not be turned off too readily from believing that he is nonetheless a philosopher.

I realize that I have left ample room for quarrel regarding what characterizes philosophy, but I do believe that most of the thinkers who have traditionally been labeled philosophers meet these two minimal criteria: a person who seeks the “license of reason” for his beliefs, and whose point of view regarding matters of common human interest is both theoretical and general. And I wish now simply to ask: Does Twain in any notable way measure up to these criteria?

I shall argue that he not only does, but that with regard to the first criterion he exhibits not one but three different types of philosophical reasoning, namely, conceptual analysis, philosophical criticism or critique, and what I shall call speculative problem solving. Although Twain’s philosophical interests are far ranging and touch many areas of universal human concern (the second criterion), I shall, for the purpose of this discussion and because of space limitations, restrict myself to his views regarding morality.

Despite this somewhat narrow focus, it will be necessary to draw upon writing scattered throughout Twain’s lifetime. There is nothing questionable about this procedure, at least in philosophy. Once spawned, a philosophical idea acquires a kind of life and logic of its own, and when firmly believed, usually finds repeated expression. To understand its full implications, it is not only desirable, but necessary to consider as many diverse expressions as possible. The longest dialogue Plato ever wrote was *The Laws*. Yet it would be a mistake to try to extract his views regarding law from it alone. As Huntington Cairns has pointed out,⁶ Plato mentions the subject of law in practically every dialogue he ever wrote throughout his lifetime. Twain similarly wrote one long sustained philosophical treatise entitled *What Is Man?* But it would be a grave mistake to try to extract his moral philosophy from this one volume alone, not only because he said other things at other times about the same subjects, but also because some of the recurrent moral themes, which we are about to examine, are expressed elsewhere in a more interesting way.

I. A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS OF LYING

If someone were asked to discuss the art of dancing, we might expect him, first of all, to clarify just what dancing is, as contrasted with other kinds and forms of bodily movement. It seems reasonable to discuss lying in a comparable way by contrasting lying with other kinds and forms of speech. The task in the case of lying, however, appears to be initially more difficult, for while everyone would agree that dancing involves bodily movement, not everyone would agree that lying always involves speaking. Mark Twain maintains that we can lie just as easily by our actions as by our words.

In his story, *Was It Heaven? or Hell?* two maiden aunts are accused by the family doctor of being liars. The aunts, who have been given the care of their seriously ill niece, pride themselves on being Truth Speakers, and protest the accusation. The doctor reminds them that he had given orders not to disturb the patient. They do and are apprehended. "What would you have done if you had known I was coming?" he asks them. With some reluctance, but truthfully, the aunts admit that they would have tried to slip out unobserved. Their intention, the doctor insists, would have been to lead him to infer that the patient's excitement proceeded from some unknown cause. "In a word, to tell me a lie — a silent lie." He admonishes them not to "humbug" themselves with the foolish notion that no lie is a lie except a spoken one. They lie, he says, "from morning till night" with their eyes, their inflections, their deceptively misplaced emphases, and with their misleading gestures.

Twain provides still another example of an unspoken lie in his address, *On the Decay of the Art of Lying*. This time the lie is accomplished by means of an omission. A woman is asked to complete a questionnaire regarding the performance of a nurse who was employed to care for her child. The mother deliberately leaves certain parts of the form blank for fear of discrediting an otherwise satisfactory nurse. She thereby leads the hospital authorities to regard the nurse as thoroughly competent, when in fact she is not. According to Twain, a deliberate omission under these circumstances is as much a lie as a spoken (or written) falsehood would have been.

Twain's reasoning appears to be based on the assumption that the purpose of a lie is to deceive someone, or more specifically, to create in someone a false belief. Since both actions and words can have that effect, he concludes that both may be termed lies. The reasoning is fallacious unless qualified, for there are many kinds of deception, or ways of creating false belief, which we would hesitate to call lies. For example, we would not call a magician a liar even if he succeeded in deceiving us, nor would we call the behavior of an actor a lie merely because we happened to confuse him with the role he was playing. There are, of course, several differences between these cases and a genuine lie. In the case of the magician or the actor the deception is in a sense "public," or at least undertaken with full notice that it will be attempted, whereas the deception in the case of the lie is "private" and secretive. Also, the kind of deception which the magician and the actor practice is not viewed

by them as an end in itself, but merely as a means to a quite different end, namely, entertainment. The liar, on the other hand, regards deception as the *primary* goal, although, of course a lie may *also* be a means to some other ulterior purpose. Twain admits that lies are sometimes used to help persons, to injure them, to convey pleasure, to gain profit, to make fools of others, to soothe our own consciences, to provide recreation, to achieve certain necessities, to attain generous goals (or mean ones), to protect against injury and to heal wounds. Still, if the actor or the magician manages merely to deceive or confuse his audience, and not to entertain them, he would undoubtedly consider his entire act a failure. But if a liar succeeded *only* in deceiving someone by what he says or does, then he might be disappointed that he did not achieve some one or another of these ulterior goals, but his standing as a liar would not be diminished. Granted these qualifications, Twain's two examples do seem to qualify as lies even though non-verbal. The deception in both cases is undertaken with no forewarning and not merely as a means to some ulterior end.

Twain is well aware that a lie is not merely the telling of a falsehood. A false statement may be only a statement which we have mistakenly made or taken to be true. But a mere mistake is not a lie, nor, for that matter, is an unintentional exaggeration. Twain was often in the position of having to correct false statements about himself which were not exactly lies. On one occasion it was rumored that he was seriously ill and on the verge of dying. He responded: "I wouldn't do such a thing at my time of life." On another occasion he announced: "The report of my death has been greatly exaggerated."

Even intentional exaggerations of the truth are sometimes not lies. The "tall tale," an art form of which Twain himself is a master, fits this category, and although it has, more than any other literary form, perhaps the greatest similarity to lying, the tall tale is not a lie. Toward the end of his story about Bemis and the buffalo who allegedly climbs a tree (*Roughing It*, Ch. 7), Twain says, "If this man was not a liar, he only missed it by the skin of his teeth." But that is precisely the point. The teller of the tall tale is *not* a liar.

Is it possible to lie by telling the truth? Twain addresses this question in a number of his writings. In *My First Lie and How I Got Out of It*, Twain discussed what he calls a "modified lie." He defines it as a truth coupled with a "misleading reservation of an explanatory fact," and illustrates it with a personal recollection. He once got out of an embarrassing situation in Austria by telling the police that he belonged to the same family as the Prince of Wales. According to Twain,

That made everything pleasant, and they let me go; and apologized, too, and were ever so kind and obliging and polite, and couldn't do too much for me, and explained how the mistake came to be made, and promised to hang the officer that did it, and hoped I would let bygones be bygones and not say anything about it; and I said they could depend on me.

Of course, what Twain meant, but conveniently failed to explain to the police, was that both he and the Prince were members of the “human family”!

In his comments about the incident, Twain is somewhat uncertain whether his statement to the police was only a *modified lie* (or *half-truth*), as he originally described it; whether it was really a combination of *two lies*, that is, the statement as told to and understood by the police plus “the misleading reservation of an explanatory fact”; or finally whether it was *no lie at all*, for when asked how he felt after making the statement, he said, “As long as I had not told any lie, I knew there was no occasion to sit up nights and worry about it.” Twain’s English friend to whom he told the incident, after musing about it for awhile, was firmly of the opinion that it was a double lie. Yet, according to the usual dictionary definition of lying as “the uttering of falsehoods with the intent to deceive,” it was not a lie at all. No deliberately false statement was made, despite the obvious intent to create a false belief.

Twain provides still another counter-instance to the claim that lies can be told only by means of falsehoods in his story of “Markiss, King of Liars” (*Roughing It*, Ch. 36). It concerns a person whose reputation as a liar was so well established that no one would believe him. Markiss is found one morning hanging from a beam in his bedroom which had been locked from the inside. A note pinned to his clothing and in his own handwriting declares his death a suicide and begs that no innocent person be charged with murdering him. The coroner’s jury returns the remarkable verdict, based solely on Markiss’ thirty-year reputation as a liar, that either Markiss is *not dead* (they recommend delaying the funeral as long as possible), or if dead, must have come to his death “by the hands of some person or persons unknown”! Assuming that Markiss did commit suicide, it is obvious that the only way he had of telling his last lie, and having a reasonable chance of deceiving anyone, would be by telling the truth.

Everyone, I am sure, would agree that a lie might actually deceive no one and yet remain a lie. We would simply call it an unsuccessful lie. Twain raises a related but more difficult question when he inquires whether it is possible to lie to a person if you know that he knows that you intend to lie to him. The question is *not* whether your lie would be successful if he knew your intent and you knew that he knew it, but whether in those circumstances, you could be said to lie at all.

Twain illustrates the problem in *Life on the Mississippi* (Ch. 24). After an absence of many years Twain returned to the Mississippi River to gather materials for a book, and settled on a plan to travel incognito. His attempt to hide his identity from the steamboat pilot is matched by the pilot’s attempt to deceive him about the river (it was a favorite trick of riverboat pilots to attempt to fool curious but ignorant passengers). Neither attempt is successful, for the pilot recognizes Twain from the start, and Twain, himself an old river pilot, is not about to be taken in by the pilot’s extravagant tales. Despite Twain’s description of the pilot’s speech as a “tranquil spool of lies,” it is

pertinent to ask whether in that situation it is meaningful to call his statements lies. Their falsity is not in doubt, nor is the fact that they fail to deceive Twain, but as we have previously observed, neither falsity nor actual deception is relevant to their being lies. What is in doubt is the pilot's intention: Did he really believe that he could fool Twain? Was it possible even to intend to deceive him? Aside from posing the issue, and incidentally providing us with some delightful humor, Twain does not really pursue the analysis as he might have, except to suggest that the answer is no. For the pilot finally gives up his pretense and turns the "job of lying" over to Twain, since, as he confesses, "You're handier at it than I am."

One issue with which he deals more fully is whether we can lie to ourselves. In *My First Lie* the question comes up in connection with a distinction he makes between various kinds of lies:

Some may think me not strict enough in my morals, but that position is hardly tenable. There are many kinds of lying which I do not approve. I do not like an injurious lie, except when it injures somebody else; and I do not like the lie of bravado, nor the lie of virtuous ecstasy.

Leaving aside injurious lies for the time being, let us examine the other mentioned kinds. According to Twain, William Cullen Bryant was guilty of the lie of virtuous ecstasy when he said, "Truth crushed to earth will rise again," and Carlyle was guilty of the lie of bravado when he said, "This gospel is eternal — that a lie shall not live." George Washington's alleged "I cannot tell a lie" is another unforgivable tower of a lie which Twain says is "in Carlyle's style" (and so is presumably a lie of bravado rather than a lie of virtuous ecstasy). The distinction Twain is making may be too subtle for many. His general point, however, is plain enough: Whatever one's motives, it is idle, deceptive, and in fact dangerous to pretend that truth has a survival value greater than that of falsehood. Such a dogma gives a license to the press to print anything it pleases, encourages libels and slanders, perpetuates monumental falsehoods (such as the statue in Boston of a man who allegedly discovered anesthesia but did not), and condones silence on social issues such as slavery and war when it is important that everyone speak out.

John Stuart Mill says essentially the same thing in his essay *On Liberty*:

But indeed, the dictum that truth always triumphs over persecution is one of those pleasant falsehoods which men repeat after one another till they pass into commonplaces, but which all experience refutes. History teems with instances of truth put down by persecution. . . . It is a piece of idle sentimentality that truth, merely as truth, has any inherent power denied to error of prevailing against the dungeon and the stake.⁷

The only perceptible difference between the views of Mill and Twain

seems to be that whereas Mill calls the dictum a “pleasant falsehood,” Twain without hesitation calls it a “lie.” Has Twain overstated the matter? Surely the motives for making such a statement might be various — pleasure, imitation, sentimentality, even bravado. Whether the statement is a lie, however, depends on something else, namely whether those who make the statement *intend to deceive someone when they utter it*. If that is their primary intention, it is a lie whatever their particular motive for saying it.

Twain’s analysis, it seems to me, is the correct one, for it is supported by an argument implied by what both he and Mill say. It goes as follows: according to Twain, “The history of our race and each individual’s experience are sown thick with evidence [Mill, in the above quotation, says “teems with instances”] that truth is not hard to kill and that a lie well told is immortal.” If that is so, only a “pudd’nhead” could be supposed to be unaware of the fact. If, therefore, someone who is not a pudd’nhead, such as Carlyle or Bryant, repeats the dictum that truth always triumphs, there can only be one explanation: either he is temporarily out of his mind (Twain suggests that Carlyle was “not entirely himself when he told that one”), or else he is trying to deceive someone. If he is sane and does not really believe what he is saying, then he may only be “playing to the gallery,” as Twain thought Bryant was doing when he told the lie. If he is sane and apparently believes the dictum, then he is deceiving himself and his lie is a lie of self-deception.

Twain returns time and again to the idea of lying to oneself. In *Was It Heaven? or Hell?* the doctor pleads with the aunts not to “humbug” themselves with the foolish notion that no lie is a lie except a spoken one. In *My First Lie* Twain wonders why we “beguile” ourselves into thinking that abstention from lying is a virtue while at the same time helping the nation to lie and doing so without shame. Ursula in *The Mysterious Stranger* “finds” some money in the road. Actually she has someone else drop it so that she might then come along and “discover” it. Twain’s comment is that “she could tell everyday lies fast enough . . . but this was a new kind of lie, and it had a dangerous look because she hadn’t had any practice in it. After a week’s practice it wouldn’t have given her any trouble.” In other words, anyone with sufficient time and effort can learn to lie as convincingly to himself as to others.

II. A CRITIQUE OF CONSCIENCE

Perhaps enough has been said to indicate Twain’s powers of dealing in both an illuminating and an analytical way with moral concepts. Can he also reason critically? By “critical” here I mean *philosophical* rather than *literary* criticism (although Twain also engaged in the latter), and I shall use the term “critique” to mark the difference. As used in philosophy since the time of Immanuel Kant, “critique” includes conceptual analysis as well as the attempt to find reasons by which to *justify* our beliefs and disbeliefs. It

should not be confused with an attempt merely to prove or disprove, verify or falsify, some particular claim. In philosophy at least, basic assumptions, first principles, and the like do not admit of "proof" or "verification" in the ordinary sense. We sometimes, nevertheless, want to know whether we should adopt them. In such cases the justificatory process of critique becomes relevant.

Twain considers many such "critical" problems. One in particular concerns the appeal to conscience as a basis for justifying certain of our actions or beliefs. There is no way by which we can directly prove that conscience is the ultimate touchstone of morality. Ethical principles are all of that kind. An appeal beyond them to something which would "confirm" them would mean that they were not what they claim to be, namely, *ultimate* principles. Somewhat the same situation exists with respect to certain basic assumptions underlying inductive inference and scientific knowledge generally.

Appeals to conscience typically arise in situations where we are confronted by a choice of actions, at least one of which is thought of as wrongful or injurious. Convinced that all lies are forbidden, the aunts in *Was It Heaven? or Hell?* are tortured by their consciences when they decide nonetheless to lie to their dying patient about her daughter's ill health. Huck Finn similarly struggles with his conscience in his attempt to decide whether to uphold the law and turn in Jim, the runaway slave, or to do the "wrong" thing, i.e. help him escape and so "go to hell." He finally decides on the latter course.

Twain finds many reasons for rejecting such appeals to conscience as an ultimate basis for determining right from wrong. For one thing, conscience, or the Moral Sense as he also calls it, can sometimes mislead us. It nearly made a moral monster out of a well-meaning fourteen year-old boy. Furthermore, conscience cannot always be expected to give us much help when the action contemplated involves injury to oneself. The aunts in Twain's story fear eternal damnation for telling any lies; Huck fears social ostracism for his complicity in Jim's escape. The possibility of injuring oneself while benefiting another is enough to give one pause. Conscience may not always be able to overcome self-interest, and this uncertainty alone makes conscience at best an unreliable guide.

Twain is painfully aware that the main trouble with relying on conscience as a basis for judging our actions is that conscience is too often only a "consensus," a mere reflection of society's laws, customs, practices, values, and institutions. Thus Huck is tormented by guilt feelings for his lies in behalf of Jim and his consequent "theft" of him from his owner, only because the conscience he has acquired from St. Petersburg (i.e. Hannibal) society says that helping a runaway slave violates the property laws, social customs, and moral values of that particular society.

There are times when Twain suggests that we would be better off without a conscience. He dramatizes the point in *The Facts Concerning the Recent Carnival of Crime in Connecticut* by literally tearing his own conscience apart, and consequently, he thinks, giving up morality altogether. But this

does not seem to be Twain's "settled opinion" any more than the view expressed in *My First Lie* that we should "be consistent and either lie all the time or not at all." He is not opposed to having conscientious feelings as such. He is opposed to having "deformed" consciences, but obviously approves of those feelings which led the aunts to protect their patient and Huck to help Jim. His point seems to be that though moral judgments are unavoidable, conscience will not do as an ultimate moral principle because it provides us with neither a sure nor a consistent guide to right conduct.

III. THE DILEMMA OF MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

During his later years, Mark Twain was haunted by the thought that human beings cannot help doing what they do. If some persons are more easily tempted, that is just the way they are; if others can resist temptation, that too is simply due to their "make." It therefore seems to follow that neither the presence nor the absence of temptation is relevant in ascribing praise or blame.⁸

The type of determinism which Twain recounts in *The Mysterious Stranger*⁹ is interesting and distinctive in several respects. Everything that occurs in a human life is conceived as inexorably related to the child's first act. If we could but see the future, we would know everything that would happen to that person and would see its direct relationship to his first act. No one can do anything which will change the course of his life. Twain rejects the idea, however, that God preordains the order of each person's career. For that order the person's circumstances and environment are causally responsible. Twain finds nothing inconsistent, moreover, in the thought that God, or some other supernatural being, such as Satan, can, if he chooses, alter careers otherwise naturally determined. Apparently in Twain's thinking, determinism and divine intervention are not incompatible.

Man himself is a machine, as incapable of varying his functions as any other purely mechanical device. In *What Is Man?* Twain describes him as a "coffee-mill" who neither supplies the coffee nor turns the crank! In *The Turning-Point of My Life* Twain says, "I see no great difference between a man and a watch except that the man is conscious and the watch isn't." Even his thoughts and decisions are "links" in his total career and are wholly determined by past antecedents. It is a curious machine, however, for it is both a "suffering-machine" and a "happiness-machine." Occasionally "a man's make and disposition are such that his misery-machine is able to do nearly all the business." To that kind of a person, Twain observes, life is not an advantage, but a disaster.

Twain tried repeatedly to convince himself of this kind of fatalism, but he could never rid himself of the notion that evil exists, that men commit terrible wrongs, and that someone, even if ultimately God himself, should be held responsible for it. Some of the most impressive passages in *The Mysterious Stranger* are those which evoke reactions of horror and moral

condemnation. Satan (alias Philip Traum) crushes the life out of the little people he has fashioned from clay, and then "wipes the red" off his fingers; the village loafer savagely clubs his dog until one of its eyes hangs out; the mob accuses Frau Brandt of blasphemy and burns her at the stake; a carpenter seizes the dead body of a young girl as ransom for a debt owed to him by the grieving mother. These and other cases of cruelty and wrongdoing are described and dramatized in Twain's short novel; similar ones are found in his other writings. They all cry out for moral judgment, but if Twain's fatalistic doctrine is true, such a demand, as he himself realizes, is pointless and irrational.

Thus like many another moral philosopher, Twain finds the existence of moral demands logically incompatible with the apparently deterministic character of the world. Shall we give up the moral demands, that is to say, deny conscience, the moral sense, the appearance of evil, and fatalistically accept the belief that there are no situations of genuine moral temptation, no moral decisions, no real choices? Should we adopt an attitude of total indifference toward human well-being, as the character Satan does? But why, Twain seems to ask, should we look at things in this way when there is quite another way? The moral demands are as much a part of the world we know as are the suffering and happiness of its creatures. Why give greater weight to our beliefs in the *natural* order than to our beliefs in the *moral* order of things? Perhaps the better resolution of the conflict between them is to deny the former.

Twain's final suggestion is to do just that. Toward the end of *The Mysterious Stranger*¹⁰ he intimates that "our race [has] lived a life of continuous and uninterrupted self-deception. It [has] duped itself from cradle to grave with shams and delusions which it mistook for realities, and this [has] made its entire life a sham." The universe as we perceive it, with all its contents — other persons, the sun and the stars, a God perhaps — along with all its apparent inconsistencies and absurdities, including the co-existence of a benevolent God and an evil world, is an impossibility, except in a self-manufactured dream. Like the statesmen who "invent cheap lies" and "conscience-soothing falsities" to justify wars, we all daily supply ourselves with excuses for wrongdoing. We tell ourselves how overly tempted we were, or how beyond our human control it all was. But such self-deception is unnecessary, for according to Twain, there are no worldly determinants, other than those we invent for ourselves. It is all "a grotesque and foolish dream."

Whatever one may think of Twain's solution, it is at least a *reasoned* solution, comparable in many respects to the attempts of Kant and certain other moral philosophers to solve the same centuries-old problem. Combined with the evidence of Twain's other philosophical abilities, it must surely question Bernard DeVoto's claim that Twain "had little capacity for sustained thought and to get to the heart of a question had to abandon analysis and rely on feeling."¹¹ That Twain relies on feeling there can be no doubt;

but that he goes to the heart of many a philosophical question there can also be no doubt. Far from abandoning analysis for feeling, he proceeded from analysis to critique, and from critique to speculative problem solving. And this, I submit, fully qualifies him as a moral philosopher.

Notes

¹ *A Pluralistic Universe* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1909), p. 13.

² Norman Kemp Smith, *A Commentary to Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Humanities Press, 1962; 2nd ed. first published 1923) p. xx.

³ H. J. Paton, *Kant's Metaphysic of Experience* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.; N.Y.: The Macmillan Co., 1936), vol. 1, p. 37.

⁴ Twain himself appreciates this fact. Cf. his paper entitled "Consistency," reprinted in *The Complete Essays of Mark Twain*, edited by Charles Neider (Garden City: Doubleday, 1963), pp. 576-83.

⁵ Bernard DeVoto, in his Introduction to *The Portable Mark Twain* (New York: Viking, 1946), p. 15.

⁶ *Legal Philosophy from Plato to Hegel* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Univ. Press, 1949), p. 29.

⁷ Library of Liberal Arts edition (Indianapolis-N.Y.: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1956), pp. 34-5.

⁸ In *The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg* Twain advances a not altogether compatible theory of moral education to the effect that the only kind of moral virtue worth having is acquired through the temptation of hard choices. In the very same story, however, and in his essay, *What Is Man?* and in *The Mysterious Stranger*, Twain reiterates the view expressed above.

⁹ The following references to *The Mysterious Stranger* can be found in either the edition first published in 1916 by Twain's literary executor, Albert Bigelow Paine, or in two incomplete manuscripts entitled "The Chronicle of Young Satan" and "No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger," published in *Mark Twain's Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts* (U.C. Press, 1969), edited by William M. Gibson. Paine patched together parts of each to form what he termed a "complete work." In his Introduction, Gibson charges Paine with "editorial fraud." I decline to enter this dispute, since, in any case, no debate exists over the authenticity of the specific passages to which I refer.

¹⁰ Again I decline to debate whether the ending Paine attached to the *Mysterious Stranger* story he published represents the ending Twain himself "really" intended for the piece, whether it represents only a literary invention on his part and no more than that, or whether it represents his final convictions on the matter. That he took seriously the ideas expressed in the appended chapter is indicated not only from the fact that he wrote it, but also by his preoccupation, toward the end of his life, with the problem of distinguishing real life from dream life. See DeVoto's editorial notes to "The Great Dark" in *Letters From the Earth* (Harper & Row, 1938), and *Mark Twain's Which Was the Dream?* edited by John S. Tuckey (U.C. Press, 1967). For my purpose, which is simply to present the philosophical character of Twain's thought and not, at this time, to evaluate it, it is enough that it seemed to Twain a (if not *the*) solution to the problem.

¹¹ *The Portable Mark Twain*, p. 15.

"A Privilege so Awful":

Emily Dickinson as Woman Poet

Suzanne Juhasz

I. "JUDGE TENDERLY OF ME"

When modern American women poets look back to an earlier poet as inspiration or as model, when T.S. Eliot or even William Shakespeare won't do, the name of Emily Dickinson consistently appears. With the exception of Sappho, whose voice comes faint and in fragmentary song over the distance of centuries and cultures, Emily Dickinson is the great and only great woman poet to serve as foremother to a dormant tradition. Yet Dickinson's reputation has been based upon either her sex or her poetry, each to the exclusion of the other, with little recognition that she was *both* woman and poet and that these aspects of herself defined one another.

From 1890 when Mabel Loomis Todd and T.W. Higginson published the first selection of her poetry, *Poems of Emily Dickinson*,¹ until the mid 1930s when New Critics like Allen Tate, R.P. Blackmur, and John Crowe Ransom took it upon themselves to rescue her poetry and to establish its literary value, Dickinson's reputation was largely founded in biographical interest and speculation. The story of the New England spinster who in her entire lifetime rarely left her father's house, who eventually spent most of her days in her bedroom, who dressed only in white, who scribbled odd little poems onto tiny pieces of paper which she sewed together into packets, whose poems describe seemingly torrid love affairs, caught the romantic imagination of many. Interest centered primarily upon her spinsterhood and her love life. In January 1891, *The Commercial Advertiser* commented in an article titled "Grim Slumber Songs":

This article is an abridged and edited version of a chapter from *Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women, A New Tradition*, scheduled to be published by Harper and Row this year.

Extreme hunger often causes strange visions. That this hermitess never satisfied, perhaps never could satisfy, her craving for human companionship, may have first brought her into her strangely visionary state. Upon the theme of human love she becomes absurdly, if not blasphemously, intemperate. . . . Isolated from humanity, she cannot turn the current of her thoughts toward it except in intermittent galvanic shocks.

The frustrated spinster theme (she writes because she is unfulfilled as a woman, and her writing itself suffers from her abnormality) is a common one. "How monotonous I find her flowers, her bees, and bobolinks . . . how empty her love poems — a love more guessed at than known or wanted. Even the visions of death and eternity . . . seem the product of a curious musing, as though here, too, the point was that experience could be forestalled."² The theme continues into the present. A 1961 psychoanalytic study, for example, emphasizes Dickinson's unconscious fear of everything male, caused by the fact that the few males whom she had valued had disappointed her: her father did not reciprocate her love, her brother married and left her, the critic Higginson condescended to her, and even God remained silent, beyond her reach.³ Even when she is being praised (as, for example, by Higginson, writing anonymously in *The Nation* on May 23, 1895), the spinsterly outlook is seen to characterize her work. Higginson describes her "fine, shy, recluse observation of nature and of men" and compares her work to that of Father Tabb (1845-1909), linking "the celibate woman and the celibate priest." At the same time, curiosity about her love life, aroused with the publication of the first series, abounded. "What Emily Dickinson says of love has a peculiar interest, and it can hardly be forbidden that the reader should wonder what experience of her own she might have had to produce so exceptionally personal utterances."⁴ Series of monographs and biographical volumes resulted, promoting the cause of one or another possible lover: Leonard Humphrey, George Gould, Benjamin Franklin Newton, Charles Wadsworth, Samuel Bowles, Josiah Holland, Otis Lord, and a handsome Irish gardener. The authors of these works, in accepting the greatness of her poetry of love and loss, seem to need to spend their energies in searching for its cause: the underlying assumption being, it seems, that the source of Dickinson's creativity must lie in some man's sexuality.

Both approaches are phallocentric: that (a) Emily Dickinson wrote poetry because she did not have a sex life, or (b) the only explanation for such poetry was an active (albeit secret) sex life. Both interpretations lodge the male at the center of a woman's creativity.

In the mid-thirties the influential trio of New Critics (Tate, Blackmur and Ransom) contributed to the evaluation of Dickinson as poet from a critical perspective articulated by Blackmur: "The greatness of Emily Dickinson is not . . . going to be found in anybody's idea of greatness, or of Goethe, or intensity, or mysticism, or historical fatality. It is going to be found in the words she used and in the way she put them together; which we will observe

... as a series of facts about words.”⁵ Yet even when these “objective” critics forsake the business of strict textual analysis, we are back with Emily Dickinson, Spinster. Blackmur concludes his contextual studies of the words “plush” and “purple” with this “fact”:

I think it a fact that the failure and success of Emily Dickinson’s poetry were uniformly accidental largely because of the private and eccentric nature of her relation to the business of poetry. She was neither a professional poet nor an amateur; she was a private poet who wrote indefatigably as other women cook or knit. Her gift for words and the cultural predicament of her time drove her to poetry instead of antimacassars. (pp. 346-7)

I think the fact that Dickinson was a woman poet is at the source of both her life style and her literary style. I see her movement into her house and then her room as paralleling the movement into her mind that her poems document, because both actions were undertaken for the purpose of maintaining her self against pressures from the world to lose it. To explain this notion of keeping or of losing the self, it might be useful to think for a moment, not about what she did, but about what she did not do. That is, what her alternatives were, given the time and place and class into which she was born, as well as her knowledge of her own gift. Her alternative was to behave as a “normal” woman: to marry, to bear children, to manage a house. Where and when would this lifestyle have given her time and space for herself? There could have been neither time nor space in the life to which the lively, popular, and attractive young Emily Dickinson was bred for the necessary “recollecting in tranquility” to which poets before her had laid claim. Her own words on the subject are helpful. In her poem about the usual course of events, “She rose to his requirement,” the woman described drops the “Playthings of her Life” and takes on the “honorable Work of Woman, and of Wife”:

If ought she missed in Her new Day,
Of amplitude, or Awe —
Or first Prospective — Or the Gold
In using, wear away,

It lay unmentioned — as the Sea
Develop Pearl, and Weed,
But only to Himself — be known
The fathoms they abide —⁶

“Amplitude,” “Awe,” “first Prospective” — this is Dickinson’s unique vocabulary which can be translated into more familiar metaphors such as depth, breadth, vision, meaning. These attributes are missing from the married life of the young woman — and silently mourned. Such mourning,

however, occurs deep within herself, only; for even married women soon learn the necessity of keeping themselves to themselves, as much as is possible.

In another poem, "They shut me up in Prose —" (613), she compares her need for the freedom to think to the "stillness" of captivity, and refers to a childhood experience that directly recalls the socialization of and expectations for girls: "As when a little Girl/ They put me in the Closet —/ Because they liked me 'still' —." She concludes with a reference to the power of the mind to win its freedom — if not literally, then always in spirit:

Himself has but to will
And easy as a Star
Abolish his Captivity —
And laugh — No more have I —

The cloistered life may be seclusion, but it need not be captivity.

Finally, in an ironic poem in which she overtly extolls the virtues of passivity, she defines her vision of the poet in a pointedly sex-linked vocabulary of power versus impotence, with the poet and masculine linked:

Nor would I be a Poet —
It's finer — own the Ear —
Enamored — impotent — content —
The Licence to revere,
A privilege so awful
What would the Dower be,
Had I the Art to stun myself
With Bolts of Melody!

(505)

The stanza and its irony are complex, for yet other elements of its vocabulary make it clear that the poet might be a woman (she is, after all, writing the poem). The woman poet would, however, achieve such a state at great cost — "What would the Dower be"? This would be a different kind of marriage. Dickinson ends by postulating a situation in which she is both writer and reader, complete in herself but nonetheless alone. Although these lines are hypothetical, in the subjunctive mood, they refer directly to what was indeed her actual situation and point to the price she paid for power, for such "awful" privilege — frightening but also inspiring of greatest awe — that of being a poet.

The "choice" between "artist" and "woman" is one which is not unique to Emily Dickinson: it is that same choice which our society has asked and continues to ask of every woman ambitious for the fame or power or wealth that the world traditionally accords to men. Most women choose to be "women": they remember, perhaps, the days of their youthful hopes for "Amplitude, or Awe"; they perhaps continue to

dabble, perpetual amateurs. Of the few who have become artists and won the world's recognition, most have chosen as did Dickinson, sacrificing the traditional "feminine" role of wife and, most certainly, of mother. Yet Dickinson enacted the choice in an especially exaggerated mode. Not all women artists, after all, resort to seclusion in their homes and the wearing of white. But Dickinson was, as most are not, a genius, and the enormous quality of her mind was at violent odds with a particularly conservative social milieu. Thus Dickinson devised a life that would enable her to be a woman poet on her own terms: rejecting the life for which society had prepared her, choosing the life of the mind.

2. "I DWELL IN POSSIBILITY"

What does it mean to live in the mind? Richness and risk, Dickinson's poems make this clear. She frequently uses spatial metaphors, especially of chambers and houses, to describe soul, brain, heart; it is clear from what are a large number of poems in her canon that she considers these as occupied space. "The soul selects her own society — / Then — shuts the door —," she writes (303).

I dwell in Possibility —
A fairer House than Prose —
More numerous of Windows —
Superior — for Doors —

(657)

One need not be a Chamber — to be Haunted —
One need not be a House —
The Brain has Corridors — surpassing
Material Place —

(670)

The mental "house" is, if anything, vaster, grander, more impressive than any New England mansion. But these quotations also indicate there are both pros and cons involved in occupying such a space. Solitude leads to the truest insights: "The Soul's superior instants/ Occur to Her — alone —" (306).

Exhilaration — is within —
There can be no Outer Wine
So royally intoxicate
As that Diviner Brand

The Soul achieves — Herself — (383)

Alone, the Soul (or mind) can achieve an intoxicatingly powerful exhilaration of spirit. But such a life contains profound loneliness as well: a special kind of terror, that of the self observing the self: "Ourself behind ourself, concealed — / Should startle most —" (670).

The Loneliness whose worst alarm
Is lest itself should see —
And perish from before itself
For just a scrutiny —

(777)

When the mind turns its visions upon itself, there is no place to hide.

Yet whether that inner space appears a prison or a sanctuary, it is real in its own terms and not as analogue for the external. If metaphors of physical space define its characteristics, so equally do conceptions of the abstract suggest its perimeters.

To own the Art within the Soul
The Soul to entertain
With silence as a Company
And Festival maintain

Is an unfurnished Circumstance
Possession is to One
As an Estate perpetual
Or a reduceless Mine.

(855)

The sure-footed movement in this poem between abstract and concrete is the special dance that characterizes Dickinson's poetic language throughout her work. In these poems about the very place of poetry, its workshop, such relationships are particularly essential to establish. The space of the mind is the setting where abstract and concrete exist in reciprocity, each defining the other. "Silence" as a "Company," "Circumstance" being "unfurnished": concepts achieve physicality here. An "Estate" that can be "perpetual," a "Mine" that is "reduceless": physical objects become abstracted into non-corporeality. The space of Dickinson's poetry is the mind's space, and it is created before our eyes by a poetic language dependent upon figures of speech which grant physical immediacy to abstractions and conceptual dimensions to objects.

3. " 'NATURE' IS WHAT WE SEE"

If Emily Dickinson lived in the mind, how can she be the poet of "flowers, bees, and bobolinks," the famed observer of the New England landscape?

"Nature" is what we see –
 The Hill – the Afternoon –
 Squirrel – Eclipse – the Bumble bee –
 Nay – Nature is Heaven –
 Nature is what we hear –
 The Bobolink – the Sea –
 Thunder – the Cricket –
 Nay – Nature is Harmony –
 Nature is what we know –
 Yet have no art to say –
 So impotent Our Wisdom is
 To her Simplicity.

(668)

Nature is what Dickinson experiences with her physical senses: what she sees, hears, knows. But it is also Heaven, Harmony, Simplicity. Nature is the physical embodiment of the unseen but nonetheless real ideas and emotions that populate the mind as robins populate the trees: "The Outer – from the Inner / Derives its Magnitude –" (451). We need our senses, according to Dickinson, to know what we know in tangible form: our knowledge is dependent upon sensory experience for reification, clarification, and, finally, existence itself, for without the senses there is no life, and death extinguishes the mind as well as the body. Thus the self cannot and must not extinguish the body nor entirely shut herself off from the external world, that stimulus and proof.

4. "ROWING IN EDEN"

To command her own self is, then, the necessary condition for Dickinson to be a poet. Hence her rejection of woman's traditional roles, hence her seclusion on both a physical and an intellectual plane. Yet the greatness of her poetry is characterized as much by its fascination with those forces that can annihilate self as by its self-control. Love and death are the primary of these forces: both "Ecstasy" and "Eternity" dissolve self-consciousness in their own state of timelessness, formlessness, and total abstractness. The self, on the other hand, must be tied to time (form) and the senses (pain) in order to live and to experience life.

Power is only Pain –
 Stranded, thro' Discipline,
 Till Weights – will hang –

(252)

Dickinson's method, in her poetry of love and death, is to approach continually, to describe alluring formlessness with form, which itself safeguards her from losing herself in the process. Her poetry shows that Emily Dickinson experienced love: whether through an encounter in her parlor or in the confines of her imagination is not an especially important issue. She knows what she writes about, and she transfers her experience and her understanding of that experience into language as few poets have done. Yet though their mood is myriad, one theme colors many of these poems: the necessity of sacrifice, or rather abstinence; the acceptance of the pain that is love accompanied by a reluctance to know its joy.

A poem beginning "It might be lonelier / Without the Loneliness —" concludes:

It might be easier
To fail — with Land in Sight —
Than Gain — My Blue Peninsula —
To perish of Delight —

(405)

A longer poem begins:

I cannot live with You —
It would be Life —
And Life is over there —
Behind the Shelf

The Sexton keeps the Key to —

It ends:

So We must meet apart —
You there — I — here —
With just the Door ajar
That Oceans are — and Prayer —
And that White Sustenance —
Despair —

(640)

Although a variety of metaphoric equivalences describe the distance between her present tense of pain and a possible or future union with the beloved in bliss, the most common vocabulary refers to sea and ships. In the first quotation, the suffering poet is at sea. To hope to reach her beloved would be to gain her "Blue Peninsula": but on such a shore she would surely,

she believes, “perish of Delight” — die of love. It might be easier, then, to “fail — with Land in Sight” — to stay in the place “ordained to suffering.” In the concluding stanzas of “I cannot live with You” the sea again appears in a more complex figure, which mingles abstract and concrete with dexterity in order to approach the feeling experienced. The distance between the lovers is as small (“just the Door ajar”) as Oceans are (small in miles, perhaps; deep and wide and limitless in feeling). This distance is equated with Oceans, Prayer, and a “White Sustenance — Despair.” A conceptual distance is first compared to a concrete space, oceans, then to another concept, Prayer, and finally to a concept made concrete: Despair as a white food. Experiencing the distance between them, in its pain and possibility, is yet experiencing the love between them, the poet says. One can live on it.

The existence of — and even need for — a space between the lovers is further clarified in the poem that follows.

You left me — Sire — two legacies —
A Legacy of Love
A Heavenly Father would suffice
Had he the offer of —

You left me Boundaries of Pain —
Capacious as the sea —
Between Eternity and Time —
Your consciousness — and Me —

(644)

The power of the poem is in the final stanza, the one devoted not to love but to its pain. Again the sea is a fitting analogue to the experience of pain — here, specifically, its spaciousness. The final lines define the shores of that sea: on one side, the lover (“your consciousness”), on the other, the poet (“me”); on one side, Eternity, on the other, Time. The parallel structure of the lines links lover and Eternity, poet and Time. He is on the far shore, she on the near; to reach him would be to overcome time and arrive in Eternity. This poem specifically equates two unreachable goals, fulfilled love and achieved death.

The sea imagery usually has sexual implications that help the reader understand more clearly why fulfillment has to be unattainable. In the next poem the lover is the port, and the experience of love is the tumultuous sea.

Wild Nights — Wild Nights!
Were I with thee
Wild Nights should be
Our luxury!

Futile — the Winds —
To a Heart in port—
Done with the Compass —
Done with the Chart!

Rowing in Eden —
Ah, the Sea!
Might I but moor — Tonight —
In Thee!

(249)

This is a poem of passion, where the storm of the physical world becomes an analogue for the sexual throes — which are, however, only imagined in the poem, a subjunctive possibility (“Were I with thee”). Yet a further comparison is made: the sea (of love) in storm is “Eden” itself — a Paradise sea now denied to fallen humanity (in a state of pain, and time), rich with sea-blossoms, sea-fruits. “Rowing in Eden,” with its chaste vocabulary, is one of the most sensual lines in literature.

The self-denied goal may be the further shore, the lover, bliss; but her images at times also connect the sea itself with him, with passion and therefore with loss of self.

The Drop, that wrestles in the Sea —
Forgets her own locality —
As I — toward Thee —

(284)

Drowning-death-passion-death-Heaven-death-Paradise-death: the death of love is the loss of self.

Come slowly — Eden!
Lips unused to Thee —
Bashful — sip thy Jessamines —
As the fainting bee —

Reaching late his flower,
Round her chamber hums —
Counts his nectars —
Enters — and is lost in Balms.

(211)

Here, in one of Dickinson’s most erotic poems, passion as Paradise is the basis

for an extended metaphor in which the sexual act is compared to the encounter of bee with flower. Eden as garden is emphasized here, but the conclusion is the same as in all of the other poems quoted: the bee is "lost in Balms." The overwhelming fragrance (or oil) is akin to the sea; in it one drowns and is "lost." Although the poem begins with a cautious yet hopeful attitude (go slow, I'm not used to this, I've waited a long, long time), its climax is ambiguous: wonderful yet deadly.

It seems apparent from the evidence of her poetry that Emily Dickinson's reasons for not running off with Judge Lord or Charles Wadsworth or the handsome Irish gardener were not solely those of impropriety or maidenly delicacy or even fear; she had as well reasons of self-defense which many modern feminists have advocated. That she did know passion her poems make clear, but the space in which it happened was the space of poetry, carefully circumscribed and controlled by her own power with words.

5. "I COULD NOT SEE TO SEE"

Death is that other dangerous force attracting Dickinson from her seclusion. Not the physical process of dying itself so much as what that represents: the attainment of what is variously called in her poems "Heaven" or "Eternity." Eternity is absolute Abstraction and has the same appeal for her as does fulfilled love: both mean the knowledge of the loss of self. Her fascination with death is the desire of the finite for the infinite, the yearning of consciousness for that moment of total expansion — before, just as unconsciousness sets in: "And then the Windows failed — and then / I could not see to see —" (465). In trying to imagine her own death and loss of consciousness she must stop on the brink with a dash that is a gasp: she is still seeing that she cannot see. In a poem the light will not go out.

Of the fact that in life unconsciousness must ultimately set in, there is little doubt in her mind. She knows that the self must not be allowed to be lost, that, as with love, she cannot and must not know death, even as she stretches her mind to its fullest capacity to find out and still be safe. Thus she experiences it in imagination, because there she will be safe from losing control of herself.

As if the Sea should part
And show a further Sea —
And that — a further — and the Three
But a presumption be —

Of Periods of Seas —
Unvisited of Shores —
Themselves the Verge of Seas to be —
Eternity — is Those —

(695)

The complete poem occurs in the subjunctive mood (that space which is “contrary to fact,” mental space): “as if.” To understand Eternity we need to *imagine* that the sea (the literal sea of ships and sharks) might part and reveal beyond itself a further sea, and beyond that sea, one further yet; and all three themselves be “but a presumption.” A double, triple conceptualization, where the subjunctive or imagined literal sea, which in parting becomes gradually more abstract, is revealed to be itself conjecture: a movement from the sea to Sea to presumption – sailing boldly on the seas of abstraction. The presumption is “of Periods of Seas”: of the idea of seas, the Platonic Idea. And *if* this conjectured concept, such unvisited of shores, were itself but the edge of further unknown, uncomprehended seas, then those seas would be that space we seek to understand because it exists always at the defining edge of our own consciousness, our own lives – Eternity. Dickinson’s simple vocabulary, her clear uncomplicated rhythms express a mental exercise that itself is almost beyond the bounds of comprehension.

6. “TO BE ALIVE – IS POWER”

Emily Dickinson did not, except in imagination, give herself up to love or death. That is, she did not assume the traditional woman’s role of wife and mother which has for its justification and *raison d’être* the power and necessity of love for women; she did not give in to the power of death, which in practical terms means suicide – a traditional method of ending the conflict that women artists experience between the stressful role demands of woman and artist. Her power of mind was great enough to enable her to handle both impulses safely – to use poetry itself as the agent of experience. At times she must have yearned for the “normal” life of the women she knew; it is impossible to escape one’s socialization and the influence of society completely.

A Door just opened on a street –
I – lost – was passing by –
An instant’s Width of Warmth disclosed –
And Wealth – and Company.

The Door was instant shut – And I –
I – lost – was passing by –
Lost double – but by contrast – most –
Informing – misery –

(953)

Yet she seems to have understood and to have dealt with the problem of

being a woman poet in a more triumphant way than most before or since, and I think this is because her poetry — and the mind that could conceive of it and conceive it — was so unusually great. Most of the time, as her poetry indicates, she does not feel a sense of loss, does not feel left out of life. On the contrary, she feels that she is vitally involved in life.

To be alive — is Power —
Existence — in itself —
Without a further function —
Omnipotence — Enough —

To be alive — and Will!
'Tis able as a God —
The Maker — of Ourselves — be what —
Such being Finitude!

(677)

The prime purpose of, and test of, life itself is to create oneself. The person who can do this is all-powerful, omnipotent. (Most women never get to this point. They are forever defined in terms of someone else: somebody's wife, somebody's mother.) When one is properly created, properly oneself, one is — as Dickinson's poems indicate — in a position of power over nature itself.

Perhaps I asked too large —
I take — no less than skies —
For Earths, grow thick as
Berries, in my native town —

My Basket holds — just — Firmaments —
Those — dangle easy — on my arm,
But smaller bundles — Cram.

(352)

By using the housewife's own vocabulary, Dickinson gently mocks the traditional woman's restricted life and self in comparison to her own. Her "native town" is the mind, a profound and expansive version of woman's "inner space." Once again, this poem points to the nature of that expansiveness by its conception of the meaning of space itself. Inner space includes within its perimeters outer space: "Earths, grow thick as / Berries, in my native town." "Berries" is the word from Nature that helps us understand the similarities, and the differences, between round objects, between berries in literal towns and Earths in imaginative towns, or imaginary earths in imaginary towns, or Earths in the town of the imagination. The space of the mind is great enough to contain "just" Firmaments; they dangle easily in her mental basket: while "smaller bundles" — the trivia of the existence of the so-called fulfilled woman — cram.

Even those of us today who take our feminism to mean that we must no longer make the choice between mind and body that society has demanded of us need Emily Dickinson as a source of strength. Sitting in the world of her room, of her mind, she understood the issues — their dangers and their potential victories — and expressed them for us with profound clarity.

Notes

¹ Boston: Roberts Brothers.

² G.W. Stonier, "Innocence Without Experience," *The New Statesman and Nation*, XIV (23 October, 1937), 655.

³ Clark Griffith, "Emily Dickinson's Love Poetry," *Iowa English Yearbook*, 6 (Autumn, 1961), 15-22.

⁴ "The Literary Wayside," *Springfield Republican*, 2 December, 1894.

⁵ "Emily Dickinson: Notes on Prejudice and Fact," *The Southern Review*, III (Autumn, 1937), 325-47.

⁶ Thomas H. Johnson, ed., *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), p. 359, (732). All other citations to Dickinson's poems are to Johnson's edition and his numerical system.

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