The Self and the State

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I

No one has ever seen the self. It has no visible shape, nor does it occupy measurable space. It is an abstraction, like other abstractions equally elusive: the individual, the mind, the society. Yet it has a history of its own which informs and draws upon the larger history of our last two centuries, a time in which the idea of the self became a great energizing force in politics and culture.

Let us say that the self is a construct of mind, a hypothesis of being, socially formed even as it can be quickly turned against the very social formations that have brought it into birth. The locus of self often appears as "inner," experienced as a presence savingly apart from both social milieu and quotidian existence. At its root lies a tacit polemic, in opposition to the ages. In extreme circumstances, it may be felt as "hidden."

There is probably some continuity between the idea of the soul and that of the self. Both propound a center of percipience lodged within, yet not quite of, the body. *Soul* speaks of a person's relation to divinity, a participation in heavenly spark, while *self* speaks of a person's relation to both others and oneself — though *soul* may in part serve this function too. In these ideas of soul and self there is a dualism of self-consciousness that forms, I believe, a historical advance. And there is a similar link between the idea of the self and modern notions of alienation, since both imply a yearning for — with knowledge of a usual separation from— a "full" or a "fulfilled" humanity, unfractured by contingent needs.

Once perceived or imagined, the *self* implies doubleness, multiplicity. For what knows the awareness of self if not the self? — division as premise and price of consciousness. I may be fixed in social rank, but that does not exhaust, it may not even quite define, who I am or what I "mean." By asserting the presence of the self,

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I counterpose to all imposed definitions of place and function a persuasion that I harbor *something else,* utterly mine — a persuasion that I possess a center of individual consciousness that is active and, to some extent, coherent. In my more careless moments, I may even suppose this center to be inviolable, though anyone who has paid attention to modern history knows this is not so. To say that the world cannot invade the precincts of the self is to indulge in bravado, and yet, even while sadly recognizing this, I still see the self as my last bulwark against oppression and falsity. Were this bulwark to be breached, I would indeed be broken.

In the long past of modernity, there have been numerous prefigurings of selfhood. Hamlet spars with this sense of self, both cradling and assaulting it. Saint Augustine's *Confessions* have been called a "manifesto of the inner world," though I doubt that he postulated a self in a modern sense of the term. Jacob Burckhardt writes that by the end of the thirteenth century Italy was beginning to "swarm with individuality: the ban upon personality was dissolved."[1] But the ban upon that personality assuming historical initiative was not dissolved.

In the latter part of the eighteenth century, through the Enlightenment and romanticism, a deep change begins in mankind's sense of its situation. In the Enlightenment educated Europeans experience "an expansive sense of power over nature and themselves."[2] The self attains the dignity of a noun, as if to register an enhancement of authority. Earlier intimations of selfhood give way to the *idea,* or at least sentiment, of the self, slippery as that proves to be and susceptible to criticism as it will become. The idea of the self becomes a force within public life, almost taking on institutional shape and certainly entering the arena of historical contention. For what occurs is not just a new perception of our

[1] Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (London: Phaidon Press, 1944), p. 81.

[2] Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation,* vol. 2 (New York: Knopf, 1969), p. 3.

internal space but its emergence as a major social factor. Once, as in the phrase of Hegel, we celebrate "our existence *on its own account,"* that is, being for being's sake, we have stepped into a new era.[3]

So far as I can tell, the prominence of the self in the writings of that brilliant intuitive psychologist Denis Diderot, notably in *Rameau's Nephew* and *Jacques the Fatalist,* does not lead to any expectation or even desire for a fusion of self and role. The split between the two is accepted as a given. There can be no return to any "state of nature," whether taken to be historical fact or tacit allegory. We may at first suppose that the Moi of *Rameau's Nephew,* that "honest soul" marked by a "wholeness of self," constitutes an image of ordinary, solid mankind, while the Lui, or the "disintegrated consciousness" about whom Diderot keenly remarks that "he has no greater opposite than himself," is a literary construct anticipating modes of character still to come. But the reality is quite the opposite. The very fact that Diderot's books were composed at the historical moment they were suggests that it is "the whole man" who is the imagined creature, a figment of desire, while the nephew, reveling in chaos, approaches a condition of actuality.

Once the notion of the self becomes entrenched in Western culture, there follows an acceptance of multiplicity within being. There may also follow a sort of pride in what each of us regards as unique stampings of personality. The Enlightenment signifies "man's emergence from his self-imposed minority," writes Kant in *What Is the Enlightenment?* That is to say, it signifies the possibility of autonomy and the probability of division. The release of historical energy through the Enlightenment means that the self will now come forth in confident aloneness, declaring its goal to be both a reformation of and an optimal distance from society. This also means that our frequently deplored alienation can be

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[3] Cited in Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), p. 34, emphasis added.

seen as a human conquest, the sign that we have broken out of traditionalist bonds. Psychologically, because the pain of estrangement can be seen as a necessary cost of the boon of selfhood — if we bemoan "deformed" selves we may be supposed to have a glimmer of "true" selves. And morally, because it is all but impossible to postulate a self without some intertwined belief in the good and desirable. For the self is not just an intuited supposition of a state of being; it is also a historically situated norm.

The self turns out to consist of many selves, as Walt Whitman happily noted: partial and fragmented, released through the liberty of experiment and introspection. It is also an interpretation of new modes of sensibility, and of interpretations, as we have often been informed, there need be no end. So I hasten to note just a few of these conflicting selves — songs, chants, and whispers:

• The self may evoke an original state of nature, not yet stained by history, as if all were still at rest in the garden. Rousseau dared to strip man's nature naked, and, naked, there emerged the features of goodness.

• The self does service as a heuristic category enabling criticism of modes of existence taken to be morally crippling.

• The self can be envisaged graphically, with "higher" and "lower" segments, or perhaps as fluctuating up and down between them, so that the two — some hold out for three — come to be seen as both intertwined and separable.

• The self becomes a lens of scrutiny with which to investigate psychological states and is especially helpful for the study of anxiety, a condition that grows in acuteness as awareness of self increases.

• The self can become an agent of aggrandizement, an imperial expansion into a totality encompassing or obliterating the phenomenal world.

• Like all powerful ideas, the self can falsify itself through parody, become a masquerade of faked inspirations, hasty signals of untested intuitions. Jacques Rivière writes keenly about this:

> There is nothing more deceitful than what is spontaneous, nothing more foreign to myself. It is never with myself that I begin; the feelings I adopt naturally are not mine; I do not experience them, I fall into them right off as into a rut . . . ; everybody has already travelled along them. . . .
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>   My second thoughts are the true ones, those that await me in those depths down to which I do not go. Not the first thoughts alone are thinking in me; in the very depths of myself there is a low, continual meditation about which I know nothing and about which I shall know nothing unless I make an effort: this is my soul.[4]

• The self is an ideal possibility, sole resident of utopia — a notion enabling humanity to extend its moral capacities. Schiller writes, "Every individual human being . . . carries within him, potentially and prescriptively, an ideal man, the archetype of a human being."[5]

• The self implies an acceptance of the sufficiency of the human condition, so that divinities, myths, and miracles slip into obsolescence. Deism frees the mind from the puzzle of origins — God is granted primal power and then gently put to sleep — thereby clearing a path for human autonomy.

• As against atomistic theories positing a space "outside" of society, the self may be seen as a social formation, a corollary of advanced civilization. A character in Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady* remarks: "There is no such thing as an isolated man or woman. . . . What do you call one's self? Where does it begin?

[4] Jacques Rivière, *The Ideal Reader* (London: Harvill Press, 1962), p. 26.

[5] Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man,* trans. E. M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 17.

Where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us — and then it flows back again."[6]

• The self entails a provisional unity of being, yet this occurs, if it does at all, during transformation and dissolution. For the self, as a felt presence, is inescapably dynamic, at once coming into and slipping out of being.

• The self (see Proust) creates a created self, manifested in works of art as a kind of double, different from yet linked to the putative empirical self,

• And in our own time, the self becomes a redoubt, the last defense against intolerable circumstances, precious even when lost. In Pasternak's novel Dr. Zhivago writes in one of his poems:

> For life, too, is only an instant,
> Only the dissolving of ourselves
> In the selves of all others
> As if bestowing a gift —

Given this multiplicity of possible selves, is there any value in continuing to speak of "the self"? The question is of a kind that occurs in many contexts, as in the famous discussion of whether romanticism "exists" in view of the innumerable definitions proposed for it. The answer is provided by our experience: despite our awareness of how slippery a term *romanticism* is, we cannot avoid using it. Without such slippery terms, we cannot think.

The versions of the self I have mentioned might be called interpretations in static cross section. What gave them, historically, a tremendous charge of meaning and energy is that the idea of the self came to form a social and moral claim. A claim for space, voice, identity. A claim that man is not the property of kings, lords, or states. A claim for the privilege of opinion, the freedom to refuse definitions imposed from without. A claim advanced by

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[6] Henry James, *Portrait of a Lady,* chap. 19.

all who had been herded into orders and guilds. A claim against
the snobbisms of status. In sum, the claim advanced by a newly
confident historical subject. And a claim upon whom? Upon any-
one and no one, launched into the very air — though at a given
moment perhaps chiefly against despised governments. This revo-
lution in moral consciousness, with its steadily magnified complex
of claims, is by no means completed; it never will be: it is the one
truly permanent revolution.

Let me offer three instances, from very different writers, with
one speaking about time, the second about nature, and the third
about society, yet all linked by the common perceptions that bind
men within a historical moment.

Rousseau writes about Jean-Jacques that "Work costs him
nothing as long as he does it when he chooses and not when some-
one else does. . . . The moment when he got rid of his watch, re-
nouncing all thought of being rich in order to live from day to day,
was one of the sweetest days of his life. Heaven be praised, he
cried in a fit of joy, I won't need to know what time it is any
longer."[7] As it happens, the world Rousseau helped usher in is
one where everybody needs to know what time it is, yet the rebel-
lion of self that his refusal of clock time announces is still a recur-
rent cry of the heart: man against his rules.

Wordsworth in the prospectus for his long, unfinished poem
The Recluse declares that he, the poet, commands a subject even
greater than that of Jehovah, so mighty is the idea of man:

> Not Chaos, not
> The darkest pits of lowest Erebus,
> Nor aught of blinder vacancy, scooped out
> By help of dreams — can breed such fear and awe
> As falls upon us often when we look
> Into our Minds, into the Mind of Man.

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[7] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Second Dialogue," *Rousseau, Judge of Jean Jacques,*
ed. Rogers Masters and Christopher Kelly (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New
England, 1990), p. 143.

Here transcendence becomes an aspect of subjectivity, or in the words of Wallace Stevens, writing in a Wordsworthian mode, men shall "chant" in self-celebration, "not as a god, but as a god might be."

Stendhal, exalting the freedom of the person against all structured hypocrisies, has his Julien Sorel make a speech to the jury at the end of *The Red and the Black.* Accused of a personal crime, Julien speaks as if he were a political prisoner: "Gentlemen, I have not the honor to belong to your class." In this astonishing remark, self emerges as historical definition.

That the idea of the self should be mobilized as a mandate for action is part of the development of the liberalism — both political and metaphysical — that comes to the fore in the late eighteenth century. Liberalism not just as social program or political movement but as a new historical temper.

Liberalism in its heroic phase constitutes one of the great revolutionary events of our history. The richness of modern culture would have been impossible without the animating liberal idea. The self as a central convention of modern literature depends upon the presence of liberalism. The dynamic of plot in the novel, based as it is on new assumptions about human mobility, would be quite inconceivable without the shaping premises of liberalism.

All these terms — *self, liberalism, romanticism* — have a way of melding into one great enterprise of renewal, located, in part, in the liberal idea of the Enlightenment. This new moral and imaginative power promises a dismissal of intolerable constraints, speaks for previously unimagined rights, declares standards of candor and sincerity. For the whole of modern culture, liberalism releases energies of assertion, often as energies of opposition. Without some such cluster of values and perceptions, how could the nineteenth-century novelist so much as have conceived a Bildungsroman in which the self attains itself through a progress within and against society, or struggles to escape the locked frames of social role?

Let me now glance at a few central texts, starting with Rousseau's *Confessions.*   Not the whole of Rousseau, not the Rousseau whom Ernst Cassirir presents as the author of a coherent political philosophy, not the Rousseau of that problematic notion "the general will," but the Rousseau who said about himself that he was more changeable than Proteus. If we choose to see Rousseau as moving from speculative thought to personal apologia, we can focus upon him as an exemplary and undisciplined — exemplary, in part, because undisciplined — personality, one of those whose tumult and self-penetrating chaos ushers in the modern age. William Hazlitt, a critic born sixty-five years after Rousseau but of a romantic generation which could still read him as its contemporary, observed: "The only quality which [Rousseau] possessed in an eminent degree . . . . was extreme sensibility, or an acute and even morbid feeling of all that related to his own impressions. . . . He had the most intense consciousness of his own existence."[8] This "intense consciousness" was both a sign of the moral revolution being enacted in his time and what Jean Starobinski calls "a manifesto from the third estate, an affirmation that the events of his inner life . . . have an absolute importance."[9]

Saint Augustine confessed to God; Rousseau, to a packed house, sometimes filled with enemies, sometimes with merely his own shifting selves. Saint Augustine hoped to make confession into a discipline; for Rousseau it would be an affirmation, at once humbling and flaunting. Saint Augustine sought to bend himself to Christ, Rousseau to justify the contortions of self to anyone who might listen. Saint Augustine sought truth, Rousseau sincerity. Seeking truth, Augustine found, at the least, sincerity; seeking sincerity, Rousseau unleashed a memorable persona with a lively touch of scandal. For Augustine, anything like the self would be

[8] William Hazlitt, "On the Character of Rousseau," *The Round Table,* Everyman's Library (New York: Dutton, 1936), p. 88.

[9] Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 185.

a barrier to relation with God; for Rousseau the self is the public
creation of a private face, sometimes a scolding judge before
whom he pleads guilty with every expectation of going free.

Rousseau's *Confessions* opens with the declaration that he has
resolved on "an enterprise which has no precedent." He will offer
"a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray
will be myself." A few sentences later occurs the crucial word
"sincerity," that mode of feeling through which he, Jean-Jacques,
at once "vile" and "noble," will bare his soul to the "Eternal
Being"![10] A not inconsiderable project, and as I read this slippery
character, he is quite aware of how improbable his "enterprise" is.
Which only prods him, with a sort of malicious sincerity, to further
displays of self, a subject of which he never tires.

Yes, he will be sincere, he will reveal the truth about his inner
being, he will strip everything away to reach an essential self that
the world has only glimpsed. It is unique, this self, he declares
with a pride that to a Christian must seem appalling (as it did to
Kierkegaard, who in his *Journal* remarks that Rousseau "lacks . . .
the ideal, the Christian ideal, to humble him . . . and to sustain
his efforts by preventing him from falling into the reverie and
sloth of the poet. Here is an example that shows how hard it is
for a man to die to the world"[11] — something that a writer with
one thing more to write will rarely do).

But the fact is that the more Rousseau reveals his turmoil, his
inner conflicts, his misdeeds through the flaring chaos of his self,
the more persuaded we are likely to be that, yes, he *is* unique; and
still more odd, the more we are persuaded that never before was
there anyone quite like this Jean-Jacques, the more we feel that
this touching monster shares many traits with us; and oddest of
all — the knowledge that there are contradictions here does not

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[10] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions,* trans. J. M. Cohen (London and
New York: Penguin, 1953), p. 17.

[11] Cited, Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau,* p. 384.

trouble us — we may even feel that this tangle of responses approaches a sentiment (if not a statement) of truth.

Everything that can be said about the versions of the self in literature composed during the age of Proust, Kafka, and Beckett — "I wanted," says Hermann Hesse's Demian, "only to try to live in obedience to the promptings which came from my true self. Why was that so very difficult?" — has already been said by Rousseau. So it is not quite true, as historians of consciousness sometimes claim — I'll be making the same mistake in a few moments — that the self in literary representations has "disintegrated" over time. The self in Rousseau *begins* as a state of disintegration, a state it abides with ease, sometimes with a tear of shame or a smirk of remorse.

The writer who declares he will be utterly sincere, indeed, the first truly sincere voice in the history of mankind, ends as a virtuoso of performance. As Starobinski remarks, "The discovery of the self coincides with the discovery of the imagination: the two discoveries are in fact the same."[12] Programmatically to make a claim for sincerity may already entail an element of bad faith, may itself contain an alloy of insincerity (the reasons for this having been grasped by Rousseau himself in his attack on the theater). Sincerity is not likely to make its appearance as an announcement. If it can be had at all, it must (Whitman again) sidle in as a portion of speech; always more halting and less articulate, surely less well rounded, than Rousseau's wonderful prose. But why should his effort to reach an unprecedented sincerity have resulted in a performance in which "natural man" turns out to be a shifty historical actor? Because his enterprise yields the hubris of supposing that a human being, even one as keen as Rousseau, is capable of sufficient self-knowledge. Because it means replacing the fragments of candor with the fullness of program — and a program, be it "noble" or "base," signifies a performance undertaken to some outer measure.

[12] Ibid., p.7.

Still, may not the partly sincere or even insincere performance of sincerity — this contrived public self — be in some way authentic? May this not actually be Rousseau's "true self," that is, the only self available to him, as against the much-invoked "inner self" we have been taught to look for? May not, still further, the "true self" consist in the performance, which is perhaps all we have in life?

Rousseau was quite sincere in his yearning for sincerity, but everything about him, especially the public being he had so artfully constructed, militated against that. As he shrewdly noticed, his downfall began the moment he published his first *Discourse,* since from then on, alas, it was all *up*hill, toward the construction of the most dazzling if frequently repulsive persona of the modern era. His vision of natural man was only a phantasm of civilized man, a compensation for having no escape from civilization and its not-unglorious discontents.

By now, Rousseau has found his place in literature. His thought seems hopelessly entangled by time and commentaries, but his figure looms brilliantly, our ancestor in division, who made his self into a myth of literary consciousness, quite as Byron would, and after him, Lermontov. There is no "real" Rousseau to be ferreted out in research; the Rousseau of the writings is the salvage of time. If I may parody Wallace Stevens: the self is momentary in the mind, but in performance it is immortal.

Brushing aside their enormous differences in style and temper, Hazlitt linked Rousseau and Wordsworth. He saw that the linkage was historical: whatever binds radically different personalities within a defining epoch, perhaps as an overflow of consciousness variously mirrored. The self, for both Rousseau and Wordsworth, figures as creed, goal, burden, necessity, sometimes as token of revolution. Wordsworth, wrote Hazlitt, "may be said to create his own materials: his thoughts are his real subjects."[13] Even when

[13] William Hazlitt, "On Mr. Wordsworth's *Excursion," The Round Table,* Everyman's Library (New York: Dutton, 1936), p. 112.

placed against great historical events or a natural setting glowing with sublimity, his thoughts center upon the molding of self, that growth which enables him to claim identity ("Possessions have I that are solely mine,/Something within which yet is shared by none").

In his autobiographical poem *The Prelude* Wordsworth cultivates a historically novel sense of the self as emergent, internally riven, and therefore constantly open to misstep, yet finally providing a provisional security of being out of which he the poet, here representative of humanity, can look back upon his earlier years, measuring his personal history against the history of his time. If Rousseau's self is a virtuoso performance, Wordsworth's is a sober narrative. The self we discover in *The Prelude* seems more hooded and less volatile than that of Rousseau, but what the two writers share is a persuasion that this self, be it psychic actuality or mere shadow of desire, is not fixed in either unalterable nature or historical circumstance. It is created, nurtured, the mark of our freedom. The self is its own child.

Still, what can it mean, in the Wordsworthian climate, to say that man is his own creation? Partly this is a testimony to the powers of imagination, not always distinguishable from the powers of will. The entirety of Wordsworth's thought can be read as a meditation upon the interrelation, sometimes the bewildering mutual disguising, of imagination and will. To imagine a self beyond immediate reach, *to be able* to imagine such a self, is to prod the will to action; it is to awake from the metaphysical slumbers of the past; it is to assert a new history. Tacitly, then, *The Prelude* seems to signify a rejection of all those who dismiss the idea of the self as a mere fiction of unity. Wordsworth locates any possible unity of the self as an arena of conflict, buffeted by historical flux. It is this which prompts one to think of *The Prelude* as an epic of selfhood in which "the transitory Being," as Wordsworth refers to the contemplative "I," replaces the hero of traditional mythic quests.

Is there, however, in Wordsworth's view of things an "original self," an integral prehistorical being endowed by nature? We must beware of reducing a poem to a proposition; what Wordsworth cares about is the experience more than the idea of the self. Still, he does write as if the infant, not yet soiled by consciousness, awaits that fortunate fall which signals the growth of the self. Because not yet homeless, the infant is not yet burdened with self-awareness:

> No outcast he, bewildered and depressed:
> Along his infant veins are interfused
> The gravitation and the filial bond
> Of nature that connect him with the world.

The self carries the brand of alienation, the consciousness of consciousness, that which we have left after expulsion from the garden or after being torn from the mother's breast. There are intimations in *The Prelude* of the therapeutic notion that, as an endowment of nature, we may recover gifts of childhood in a journey through a series of false and inadequate selves — rather like the trial of a romance hero confronting a sequence of ordeals — and that this will culminate as a healing of self and unity of peace. But this journey is perilous, and it is to the perils that *The Prelude* introduces us. The poem can be seen as a chronicle of false starts and bewitched wanderings: from commonplace vanities to revolutionary intoxications; from the "unnatural self/The heavy weight of many a weary day/Not mine, and such as were not made for me," which is one consequence of the city's false sociality, to those treacheries the self can so cunningly generate ("Humility and modest awe, themselves/Betray me, serving often for a cloak/To a more subtle selfishness"). Nor is there any reason to suppose that in this Bildungsroman Wordsworth indulges a notion of a fixed, unitary self, ready like a premade box for instant use; he

speaks rather of seeing himself at times as "Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself/And of some other Being."

Nor does the precious if fragile unity of being celebrated at the close of *The Prelude* constitute an end, for there is no end, only quest. This implies a quasi-religious, if hardly Christian, vision, finding its strongest imprint in the "spots of time," set-pieces focusing upon lighted moments of memory. These "spots of time" evoke an achieved (not a given) capacity for the peace that might yet surpass understanding, through a loving submission to nature — yet (a Wordsworthian paradox) also through the activity of imagination. In J. V. Cunningham's words, this entails "the problem [of] the relationship of a man and his environment, and the reconciliation of these two in poetry and thus in life."[14]

The journey at rest but not concluded, there may follow the consciousness that brings a man back to himself — something not soon found, not without many confusions and misdirections, even to the journey's end.

There is a lovely passage in *The Prelude* about "the Boy," apprentice in selfhood, who stands by "the glimmering lake" and blows "mimic hootings to the silent owls/That they might answer him." "A lengthened pause/Of silence" follows and the boy would yield himself to the environment, so that "the visible scene would enter unawares into his mind/With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,/Its woods, and that uncertain heaven." Like many other nineteenth-century writers, Wordsworth enacts a spiritualization of nature — and also an accommodation of nature to human ends — as the basis for a healing, which is also a questioning, of the self. And, note well, heaven remains "uncertain."

The interaction of nature and mind postulated by Wordsworth remains a difficulty, perhaps a mystery, for us and for him. It represents a desire, a yearning, in which it may be, as Geoffrey Hartman says, "nature [does] the best it can to act as Heaven's

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[14] J. V. Cunningham, *Tradition and Poetic Structure* (Denver: Swallow, 1960), p. 115.

substitute."[15] Nevertheless, through this uncertain struggle, with the imagination as prompter, the self is formed.

I have read *The Prelude* largely in terms of Wordsworth's own perception of the formation of his self, but there is of course another reading, one that sees his strong valuation of selfhood as a consequence or sign of a displacement of political aspiration, a turning inward after the disappointment of political hopes — which makes the poem an anticipation of posttotalitarian literature in our own century, also charting journeys from public to inner life. At various points Wordsworth himself seem to endorse this reading, as a subtheme to his main one. These two ways of approaching Wordsworth's journey of selfhood can, with a bit of jostling, be reconciled, but what matters, in any case, is that the realization of self be seen as a consequence of costly journeys, whether toward revolutionary Paris or the poet's idyllic birthplace. The Wordsworthian theme, however placed, is that our inner existence can become a mode of heroism too, even if without sword and shield, and that it is we who can make it such.

In no other writer does the idea of the self — the self as host and shaper of consciousness — attain such centrality as in George Eliot; and in no other writer does the self become the object of such severe moral scrutiny. The novels of the later George Eliot treat consciousness — for her, the very stuff of selfhood — as a gift; but then, in accord with her "religion of humanity," that gray solace for the fading of the gods, consciousness becomes a *project* for mankind. It is only consciousness that keeps us from slipping into the abyss of egotism and its nihilistic reduction; yet, as if to recall that at heaven's gate there is a byway to hell, consciousness also comes to be its own intimate betrayer, breeding Wordsworth's "more subtle selfishness."

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[15] Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), pp. 215–16.

Egotism engulfs the self, The freedom that is the reward of consciousness swells into despotic possessiveness. If consciousness is indeed to serve as a solacing companion, it must now turn upon itself, ruthless in judgment. The "abstract individual"of the eighteenth century, gives way in George Eliot's novels to a social individual who exists only by virtue of the presence of others. To this acceptance of solidarity, the only alternative, as George Eliot graphically demonstrates, is the kind of moral monster — also a self, indeed, preeminently a self, as a fearful parody — who dominates her last novel, *Daniel Deronda.*

But is there not something terrifying in George Eliot's invocation of consciousness? Is that all? Nothing else beyond or within? Yes, that is all we have, replies the sibyl with her steely warmth, and precisely because she knows how weak a bulwark the self can be, she makes her fictions into muted calls for sympathy, hoping, as she puts it, to "mitigate the harshness of all fatalities."

Those characters in *Middlemarch* — Dorothea, Lydgate, Casaubon — who serve as centers of consciousness also become, in consequence, its victims. Almost all of them yield to the low clamor of self which, by a turn of mischief, can also mask itself as a favorite of consciousness. Still, her characters wrest afew moments of insight, if only in grasping how sadly limited these can be. Her major characters think and, thinking, suffer.

The stress upon consciousness in her earlier novels had implied, I suppose, at least a partial attribution of positive moral value. How could she not have slipped into the assumption, so tempting to the secular mind, that a history of consciousness must display signs of progress? But in *Daniel Deronda* she faces up to the chasm between consciousness and value, self and ethic. Through the character of Grandcourt, that supercilious aristocrat who embodies a *system* of dehumanized relations and who, as she remarks in passing, is ruthless enough "to govern a difficult colony," she invokes the barbarism that shadows civilization as a double of the cultivated self. Grandcourt cannot be said to lack

consciousness, he has it in abundance, yet he takes a peculiar pleasure in employing it for a "principled" brutality. The structured self here becomes a pleased witness of the very things George Eliot had supposed it would enable us to resist. In creating Grandcourt, this monster in and of civilization, George Eliot the novelist achieved a triumph, but at the expense of George Eliot the moralist, who must now acknowledge that before the spectacle of a Grandcourt, consciousness — hers, ours — may be helpless.

Trapped in dilemmas to which her truth-seeking imagination has driven her, George Eliot turns in her novels to that sustained flow of commentary, at once impassioned and ironic, severe but not systematic, which forms the moral spine of her work. So commanding is the Eliot voice, we can readily suppose that the rendered consciousness of her characters is a tributary of the consciousness of their creator. The voice of George Eliot as narrator envelops her characters in an arc of judgment and compassion. It is a voice that comes, so to say, to serve as the source of the characters' existence, the self that is the mother of all these imagined selves. George Eliot does for her characters, and perhaps for her readers too, what she has become convinced God can no longer do for humanity: she offers shelter.

It is in Whitman's poetry, and especially *Song of Myself,* that the idea of self takes on its most benign expressions and copious modes, a sort of luxurious, relaxed experimentalism accommodating both the private and the transcendent. Democratic man is transfigured into a democratic hero: "plumb in the uprights, well entretied, braced in the beams/Stout as a horse, affectionate, haughty, electrical." Whitman's images are plebeian, those, you might say, of an ecstatic carpenter. At once individual and "enmasse," Whitman's democratic hero, cast in American easiness, sees no problem in adopting numerous masks, venturing a wide variety of roles, and then skidding back to the solitary self.

Song of Myself carves out a transit between self and all that is nonself, between the Walt hugging secrets to his bosom, a furtive, somewhat deracinated bohemian at the margin of social life, and the assured self that enters into, merges with, and shares an easy moment with all other selves. But Whitman's notion of the self is sharply different from that of Rousseau, in that he has little taste for revelation or display, and different also from that of Wordsworth, in that he cares more for simultaneous enactments, shifty changes of role, than for a coherent, formative history. In Whitman the self serves as a normative supposition projecting the democratic hero who is of and with "the roughs and beards and space and ruggedness and nonchalance." Prototype of a "new order" — we have still to see it — in which "every man shall be his own priest" and carry himself "with the air . . . of [a person] who never knew how it felt to stand in the presence of superiors," this envisaged self yokes Protestant individuality with New World friendliness and is treated by Whitman with humor, even mockery — as if to acknowledge the impudence of native visions!

Whitman is quite realistic about the place of the self in an urban world. The most fruitful of his persona has been described, though not with Whitman in mind, by Georg Simmel, the German sociologist, in his brilliant essay "The Stranger." If "wandering," writes Simmel, "is the liberation from every given point in space and thus the conceptual opposite to fixation at such a point, the sociological form of 'the stranger' presents the unity. . . of these two characteristics. . . .The stranger is being discussed here not, . . . as the wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow. He is, so to speak, the *potential* wanderer: although he has not moved on, he has not quite lost the freedom of coming and going."[16]

He who comes today and stays tomorrow, the *potential* wanderer "whose position in the group is fixed" yet "who imports

[16] *The Sociology of Georg Simmel,* ed. Kurt Wolff (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1950), p. 402.

qualities into it" — is this not a sketch of the author of *Song of Myself*?[17]

The self of the poem is fluid, defined by unwillingness to rest in definition, committed, with both an ingenuous faith and comic skepticism, to the belief in *possibility* which so delights and be-devils Americans. At times the self of the poem comes to resemble a protean demigod absorbing all creatures who yet avoids grandi-osity by the grace, rather infrequent among demigods, of having a sense of humor. After one of his rhapsodic catalogues, Whit-man writes:

> And these one and all tend inward toward me,
>   and I tend outward to them,
> And such as it is to be of these more or less I am.

That "more or less" is priceless as an intimation of what I would call Whitman's distancing fraternity.

At times the self of the poems sinks to an almost mineral tran-quility, a quasi-mystical dissolution of consciousness. The famous "oceanic" impulse that disturbs some readers because it seems to blur distinctions in quality of being, is here acceptable because we see that the self of the poem also acts out of a deep anxiety and loneliness. Reduce the cosmic straining of *Song of Myself* from philosophical grandiosity to a common human tremor, and Whit-man's possession of all possible selves, like his corresponding with-drawal from them, becomes familiar.

"I have no mockings or arguments, I witness and wait." "Agonies are one of my changes of garments." Such lines are spoken by a stranger in the midst, planted in the very milieu from which he moves apart. In a splendid phrase Whitman speaks of the "knit of identity," that is, the self composed of a multitude of experiences, feelings, and intuitions, all braided into a loose but clear unity. The self becomes an agent of potentiality, and Whit-

[17]Ibid.

man, most amiable of pragmatists, tries on a range of new ones, yet keeps returning to his own center:

> I have pried through the strata and analyzed to a hair
> And counselled with doctors and calculated close
>   and found no sweeter fat than sticks to my own bones.

The rejection of the self as mere mental consciousness finds its keenest novelistic voice in D. H. Lawrence. He invites us to respond to his characters as Ursula, in *The Rainbow,* responds to the life about her: "She could not understand, but she seemed to feel far-off things." These "far-off things" are not only of immensities and absolutes, the "infinite world, eternal, unchanging"; they are also close within, deep down, untapped, Lawrence said he wanted to drop "the old stable ego," or what we call the coherent self, and move toward "a stratum [of being] deeper than I think anyone has ever gone in the novel."[18]

In *The Rainbow* he strives to represent states of being which his characters feel to be overpowering yet find hard to describe. "There is another seat of consciousness than the brain and nervous system," wrote Lawrence in a letter to Bertrand Russell, "there is the blood-consciousness, with the sexual connection holding the same relation as the eye, in seeing, to the mental consciousness. . . . This is one half of life, belonging to the darkness."[19]

Through metaphor and analogy, since he cannot find a denotative vocabulary for this "deeper stratum," Lawrence explores "the other seat of consciousness." Might this "other seat" be what we usually call the unconscious? Admittedly, the distinction between "blood-consciousness" and "the unconscious" is vague; if we could speak with clarity about such matters, there would be no need to speak at all. But I venture that there is a distinction of sorts between the two, because Lawrence spoke of a variant of conscious-

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[18] *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence* (New York: Viking, 1932), p. 198.

[19] *The Collected Letters of D. H. Lawrence,* ed. Harry Moore (New York: Viking, 1962), p. 178.

ness and because this "deeper stratum," unlike the unconscious, can now and again be reached by his characters on their own.

Through long, loping alternations of submission to and resistance against this "state of being," some of the Brangwens (the family in *The Rainbow*) know this "state" or at least can feel themselves in its grip. Acutely or drowsily, they sense that in some nether layer of consciousness there swirls a supply of energy, and that this energy is not to be controlled entirely by will or intelligence — on the contrary, these characters feel that fulfillment can come only through yielding to these deep-seated rhythms, rhythms in which they move toward union with another person and then withdraw into solitariness. Lawrence's characters live out the thrust and pull of the forces churning within themselves and sometimes throw up sterile barriers of resistance; but except for Ursula, who represents the third and youngest generation of Brangwens, they do not propose or think it possible to name these forces.

Naming things, identifying the deeper surges of instinctual life, becomes a possibility only for Ursula's generation, though by the previous or second generation, that of Will Brangwen, there is a groping after meanings that elude words. This wish to describe the inner actions of psychic life coincides with and may even be a consequence of a yearning to move "upward" spiritually, a yearning that can be felt even when Lawrence's characters are still in the drowse of sensual experience.

Naming things is something about which Lawrence feels sharp inner conflict. He sees the urge to name things as a striving after "higher" values, but also as a sign of the sickness afflicting an overrationalized consciousness. He admires those who live in "another seat of consciousness than the brain and the nervous system," and he even makes them into exemplars of his fiction; yet he is himself, like those characters, such as Ursula, who are closest to him, a creature of "the brain and nervous system." The writer who would abandon or at least minimize that "system" cannot help resorting to it. Lawrence writes most familiarly about

characters who have entered what he calls "the finer, more vivid circle of life," the circle of mental consciousness. For only the latter are capable of so much as imagining "another seat of consciousness" — those already lodged there don't know or need to know it.

The "deeper" stratum Lawrence seeks to evoke consists of intervals in long swings of psychic-emotional energy, into "the darkness" and then back to the outer air. There are mergings with others, sometimes ecstatic, as if to break into the marrow of being, and sometimes sullen, as if in fear of losing identity; and then comes a bruised solitary apartness, the stuff out of which a self is formed.

Yet a reading of *The Rainbow* leaves one with a question: We can readily say that the solitariness of Lawrence's characters, their periods of withdrawal, are the stuff out of which a self is formed: that, after all, is a familiar notion to readers of the nineteenth-century novel. But may not the phase of merging into "the darkness" also be — not a blotting-out of self — but another way of renewing the self? May not Lawrence's enterprise be one of prompting a series of tentative, connected selves, available when needed and retracted when not? And may these not be present within a deeper stratum, call it "blood-consciousness" or the unconscious?

The Lawrence who would probe beneath mental consciousness is also the Lawrence who aspires to its "higher" levels. So the self is not obliterated. It may for a time be "lost," it may be transformed or immersed within some collective flow; but it returns, a witness to its subterranean adventures.

I would have liked, if there were time, to look at the vicissitudes to which the idea of the self has been subjected in twentieth-century literature, through both monstrous expansion and radical shrinkage of characters, as well as through the manifestations — imperial, disintegrative, muffled — of the authorial presence. An

extreme instance would be that of Samuel Beckett, in whose work occurs a dispossession or emptying-out of characters as selves, so that in a play like *Endgame* a world of feeling remembered and mourned for comes into juxtapostion with an emptied present, the "zero-level" condition in which Beckett's characters torment themselves. But in Beckett's work the self also emerges an an overpowering presence: his own voice, with its lucid speech and biting wit — "You must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on."

I approach the end without having finished or, perhaps, being able to finish. In recent literary and, to some extent, political theory, the self has suffered demotion, even dispossession. I have tried to understand this school of thought, but with shaky results. There is the problem of verbal opacity, which I find a formidable barrier. So I can only venture a few possible reasons for the demotion of the idea of the self.

- It is said that the idea of the self is phallocentric, a sign of traditional male domination. This claim is partly true, but since it is made through or as a historical approach, it is not in principle so different from the one I have been using here: namely, to see the self as a concept with its own history forming a narrative within history at large. If there is value to such an approach, then there is no reason why the idea of the self need remain phallocentric, no reason why it cannot be revised and extended to serve as a basis for rectifying inequities of gender.

- The idea of the self, providing lonely moderns with "metaphysical consolation," is a notion, we are told, that a postsymbolic view of language — language self-subsistent, perhaps autonomous — can now dispense with. There is a philosophical tradition, reaching back to parts of Friedrich Nietzsche, which rejects the idea of the self. But the evidence compiled by Stanley Corngold in his learned book about German literature, *The Fate of the Self,* seems decisively to show that in some version the idea of the self has been central to the work of many major literary figures

these past two centuries, and more problematically, that even
Nietzsche, while at some points disdaining the idea of the self,
inclines at other points to recoup a version of it. The self, it would
appear, can be banished only by a banishing self. At least for pur-
poses of literary discourse — I cannot enter the philosophical dis-
cussion — this historical evidence takes on significant weight.

• A fairly innocent reason for demoting the idea of the self is
provided by Richard Poirier. Writing in a quasi-Emersonian vein,
he argues that the very idea of the self, fixed because defined,
blocks further vistas of possibility, closing off a "circle" in that
endless sequence of "circles" which forms the schema of Emer-
sonianisni. One such possibility — but now Poirier seems to write
in a Foucaultian vein — is "the abolition of the human," and the
question whether this "is a good or bad idea," he adds, "is not to
be decided by a show of hands."[20] Indeed not! Exactly what "the
abolition of the human" might mean Poirier does not make crystal
clear, nor do I suppose he can, although the nonchalance with
which he puts forward the notion strikes me as breathtaking. But
is it really true that to hold to an idea of the self is to foreclose on
the endlessness of the Emersonian "circles"? Cannot our idea of
the self expand with the expansion of those "circles" of possibility,
perhaps now and then to reach an "oceanic sense" of a trans-
individual or collective self, and may it not also contract with the
contraction of the "circles" into a grim acknowledgment of
nothingness?

• Perhaps the most powerful assault on the idea of the self is
one that identifies it, tacitly or explicitly, with the historical dis-
abilities of humanist liberalism. I cite two telling passages from
Michel Foucault:

> By humanism I mean the totality of discourse through which
> Western man is told: "Even though you don't exercise power,

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[20] Richard Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature* (New York: Random House,
1987), p. 182.

you can still be a ruler. Better yet, the more you deny yourself the exercise of power, the more you submit to those in power, then the more this increases your sovereignty.". . . In short, humanism is everything in Western civilization that *restricts the desire for power* (emphasis in original) .[21]

And

man is a recent invention within [European culture since the sixteenth century.] . . . As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end.[22]

Foucault's first passage bears a distressing resemblance to the notion that "bourgeois democracy" is a mere facade for class domination. As for the second . . . well, we can only wait and see what may replace man. So far, most candidates have not been very attractive. But what interests me most is not so much the question Why is this being said? as the question Why have these statements somehow become apparently plausible at this historical moment.

Have we reached a breaking point? Is it possible to argue the question of the self, especially with its more intransigent opponents? Do we not have here two sharply contrasting narratives of modern experience which can only be placed side by side in the hope of later enlightenment?

So let me declare my bias. The idea of the self has been a liberating and revolutionary step, perhaps the most liberating and revolutionary, toward the goal of a communal self-humanization. I will cite, for support or comfort, two utterly different writers. Karl Marx: "The critique of religion ends with the doctrine that *man* is the highest being for man, hence with the categorical imperative to overthrow all conditions in which man is a degraded,

[21] Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 221.

[22] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), pp. 386–87.

enslaved, neglected, contemptible being."[23] And in two lines of verse, Hölderlin:

> Der Mensch will sich selber fühlen . . .
> Sich aber nicht zu fühlen, ist der Tod.

> [Man wants to have a sense of self . . .
> Not to have a sense of self is death.]

II

Can the mind confront a harder task than to imagine — truly, deeply to imagine — circumstances radically at variance with those of the immediate moment? Such an effort must be especially hard for intellectuals, who tend to impose theories drawn from the present upon a helpless past. I have in mind here the decade of the 1950s, close enough in time but separated from us by an intellectual and emotional chasm. My intent is neither to defend nor assault the thinkers of that decade, but rather to evoke its distinctive provenance and tone.

The destruction of nazism at the end of the Second World War brought feelings of elation. Barbarism had been uprooted. People talked about "a new Europe," rising up from the ashes of the old. In America, intellectuals were captivated by those brilliant young Frenchmen, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Merleau-Ponty, with their notions of an existential freedom that might open into social liberation. It began to seem that we were entering a time of lively thought and imagination, unshackled by ideological systems.

But this expectation did not last long. The darkening of the political horizon in Eastern Europe, with Czechoslovakia taken over by Stalin's troops in 1948, as if to repeat what Hitler had

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[23] Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction," in Eugene Kamenka, ed., *The Portable Karl Marx* (New York: Viking, 1983), p. 119.

done a decade earlier, brought on a mood of profound depression. *It was,* one felt, *starting all over again:* the totalitarian blight would remain with us for the rest of our lives. Less irrational perhaps than that of Hitlerism, the politics of Stalinism evidently had a greater social appeal, a deeper root in traditional European insurgency, and would therefore prove harder to oppose. Intellectually, Stalinism evoked keener discomforts than did nazism, since here the enemy seemed to have come out of "our own" milieu, that of the Left. Stalinism used words and symbols representing our hopes. And meanwhile, its rise within Europe coincided with the emerging reports of the magnitude — *the unimaginableness* — of the Holocaust.

Almost everyone I knew fell into a muted gloom, a half-spoken persuasion that apocalypse would turn out to be without end. The meaning of the Holocaust, if it had a meaning, we could not fathom, nor could we absorb its emotional impact; not only did it rend all theories of progress, it brought into disrepute the very idea of humanity. As for Stalinism, in its fusion of revolutionary appeals with a code of murderous cynicism, it seemed a coarse parody of long-cherished persuasions. Yet it enjoyed an immense following in Europe, as well as a new set of allies in the third world — glamorized dictators, shabby dictatorships. In the struggle for world domination, Stalinism seemed to hold the initiative. Even conservatives like James Burnham and Whittaker Chambers conceded this. And at home, we were trying to cope with the squalor of McCarthyism. The mind reeled.

Historians of a later moment, usually revisionist in outlook, would write that the fear of Communist expansion in Europe had been greatly exaggerated during the 1950s, largely because liberals and the anti-stalinist Left had been swept away by cold war hysteria. According to these historians, the possibility of a Stalinist seizure of power in France and Italy was very slight, if only because Moscow realized that any such attempt would probably lead to a war it was not prepared to wage. Well, this was easy enough

to say a few decades later, once Stalinism in France had been crowded into a corner and the Italian Communist party had transformed itself into a quasi-social democratic movement. No; I think the fear of Communist power in the 1950s was justified, with serious liberals and radicals sharing this fear because they saw that wherever Stalinism took over, freedom died. So let me here, as one premise of what follows, briefly affirm the basic validity of liberal-leftist anticommunism, while adding that of course this could and often did decline into error, crudity, and oversimplification — something all but unavoidable in moments of severe historical tension. In any case, this was the setting, by no means ideal, for what would prove to be a major intellectual enterprise of the 1950s: the discussion of theories of totalitarianism.

Let me begin unsystematically, with two citations from Nazi sources and two from critics of Stalinism. Speaking of Nazi policies for shipping recurrent segments of "inferior peoples," or *Untermenschen,* to concentration and death camps, Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS, said: *"In this process of selection there can never be a standstill."*[24] In the vocabulary of nazism, "selection" also referred to the *Übermenschen,* or the process by which the Nazi leadership, above and sometimes against the formal party structure, renewed itself (a process for which Stalin also showed a decided talent). Nor is this symmetry between elite and damned accidental; it is crucial to the workings of the totalitarian mind, entailing constant upheaval, a "permanent revolution" within both the master class and the enslaved, which can never be brought to rest or completion if only because the goal of "purity" must always prove elusive.

Primo Levi, in his memoir of Auschwitz, tells the story of a Nazi guard who, responding to an inmate, said: "Hier ist kein warum," "here there is no why," nothing need be explained. This casual remark by a shrewd thug provides as good an insight into

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[24] Cited in Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* new ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1966), p. 391, emphasis added.

the camps and the minds of their creators as anything in the entire scholarly literature. It suggests how difficult it is for the rational mind fully to apprehend the totalitarian ethos; arational, anti-utilitarian, disdainful of the idea of limit, persuaded that through will, organization, and terror, all existence can be compressed into a mad coherence.

At the end of his unfinished biography of Stalin, Leon Trotsky writes " 'L'É'tat, c'est moi,' is almost a liberal formula by comparison with the actualities of Stalin's totalitarian regime. Louis XIV identified himself only with the State. The Popes of Rome identified themselves with both the State and the Church — but only during the epoch of temporal power. The totalitarian state goes far beyond Caesero-Papism, for it has encompassed the entire economy of the country as well. Stalin can justly say, unlike the Sun King, 'La Société, c'est moi!' "[25]

Written in 1938, before the full impact of the total state could be registered, this passage points to the historically unprecedented extent of its reach: the wish and, for a time at least, the ability to control the whole of existence.

Some fourteen years later Czeslaw Milosz wrote in *The Captive Mind:* "Intellectual terror is a principle that Leninism-Stalinism can never forsake, even if it should achieve victory on a world scale. The enemy, in a potential form, will *always* be there; the only friend will be the man who accepts the doctrine 100 per cent. If he accepts only 99 per cent, he will necessarily have to be considered a foe, for from that remaining 1 percent a new church can arise."[26]

The absolute coherence of doctrine — this "Orwellian" notion, in various forms — would become a central element in theories of totalitarianism advanced in the 1950s.

[25] Leon Trotsky, *Stalin: A Biography,* trans. Charles Malamuth (New York: Harper, 1941), p. 421.

[26] Czeslaw Milosz, *The Captive Mind,* trans. Jane Zielonko (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), p. 214.

Now, it would be an exaggeration to say that these four cita-
tions are enough for a reconstruction of the theory (theories) of
totalitarianism, but if the customary visitor from Mars had only
these passages, he could, I believe, come up with a pretty fair
approximation. For they stress a central feature in the thought of
the 1950s: that totalitarianism was a new and unprecedented phe-
nomenon, both as political movement and repressive regime, not
to be assimilated to previous tyrannies, as certain no-nonsense tra-
ditionalist historians preferred to do, George Orwell's Goldstein
in *1984,* a fictional stand-in for Trotsky, remarks that "By com-
parison with that existing today, all the tyrannies of the past were
half-hearted and inefficient." Traditional tyrannies required pas-
sive subjects, while the total state demands active participants, for-
ever mobilized in behalf of sacrifice, meetings, parades, and ritual.
Traditional tyrannies lacked the means, perhaps the imagination,
for exerting complete control over human life; the total state,
gripped by a mixture of renovating fervor and sadistic fury, pro-
posed to break down the barriers between public and private,
transforming the masses into warriors of endless mobilization,
within and without.

Let me now venture a sketch of the central theory. Totali-
tarian movements arise in a soil of decomposition, such as the
decomposition of bourgeois society in the early decades of this cen-
tury, partly as a consequence of an unprecedented pace of social
change leading to spiritual disaffection, widespread anomie, and
extreme social confusion. The "ideological heresy of the totali-
tarian party," wrote the German social democratic theorist Richard
Lowenthal, "can only become historically effective when it merges
with the material and psychological despair of the masses, owing
to the failure of a social order to solve, in accordance with its own
fundamental values, the concrete and urgent problems imposed on
it by the uncontrolled process of change."[27] Thereupon, the totali-

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[27] Richard Lowenthal, "Our Peculiar Hell," in I. Howe, ed., *Voices of Dissent*
(Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), p. 355.

tarian movements break through the cracks of society to rally the masses, those who have lost a consciousness of group interest or class identity and those who have never known it. As Hannah Arendt, the most original theorist of totalitarianism, wrote, "The term niasses applies only where we deal with people who either because of sheer numbers, or indifference, or a combination of both cannot be integrated into an organization based on common interest."[28] The followers are welded by the totalitarian movement into an "iron solidarity" marked by both selflessness and the self-dismantling of fanaticism. And at their head, wrote the historian of nazism Konrad Heiden, "from the wreckage of dead classes arises the new class of intellectuals . . . the most ruthless, those with the least to lose, hence the strongest: the armed bohemians."[29]

Totalitarian goals are articulated not as the usual demands of social insurgency — better economic conditions, greater political rights — but as encompassing suprahistorical visions, engrossing fictions of emancipation, which give a kind of perverse validity to Himmler's remark — itself a parody of Bolshevik doctrine — that his SS men were not interested in "everyday problems" but only "in ideological questions of importance for decades and centuries" (the purification of the race, etc.)[30] Precisely the inability of the existing order to satisfy mundane, specifiable needs prompts masses of people to enter a fraternity of combat pledged to unremittent struggle and — since the goal is total — to total methods (falsehood, murder, terror, as a *system*). Before reaching paradise, we have been traditionally taught, we must experience apocalypse; before brotherhood, destruction. The psychic-moral components of this flight from the mundane are brilliantly described by Hannah Arendt:

> [The modern masses] do not believe in anything visible, in the reality of their own experience; they do not trust their eyes and

[28] Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism,* p. 3 11.
[29] Ibid., 306.
[30] Ibid., p. 316.

ears but only their imaginations, which may be caught up by
anything that is at once universal and consistent in itself. . . .

The masses' escape from reality is a verdict against the
world in which they are forced to live and in which they cannot
exist, since coincidence has become its supreme master and
human beings need the constant transformation of chaotic and
accidental conditions into a man-made pattern of relative
consistency.[31]

So the role of the follower is fixed: to merge with the move-
ment, to yield heart and soul to the leader embodying the mystique
of history, to abandon personal experience in behalf of phantasma-
gorical exercises, and to accept the legitimacy of all methods in
order to achieve — once and for all — a final transformation. The
yearning expressed after the First World War by T. E. Lawrence
and other writers who wished to "lose their selves" was now taken
over by millions of persons who had no awareness that they had
a self.

Once in power, the totalitarian state embarks — its claim to
final solutions requires that it embark — on a series of upheavals,
assaulting both its own hierarchical structures and other social
institutions. There can be no peace. The call goes out for perma-
nent alert, recurrent battle. All this, Stalin grasped intuitively,
without articulating it to the extent that some of the Nazis did.
The endless purges, the demolition of the Bolshevik cadre, the
extreme shifts of line requiring complete shifts of personnel, the
uprooting of whole populations, the liquidations of entire social
classes: this was Stalin's version of total mobilization, called "the
intensification of the class struggle."

Hitler's upheavals took, first of all, the form of terror against
segments of the Nazi party and then against the German popula-
tion, purging the former of any potential dissidents and reduc-
ing the latter to an all-but-undifferentiated mass (or so, at least,
the theory of totalitarianism affirmed). In the camps, the Nazis

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[31] Ibid., pp. 351, 352.

created a picture of their ultimate rule: total domination of the individual, total destruction of human spontaneity. The process of "selection," both above and below, could not stand still.

The Nazis had *an idea* — it would be a grave error to ignore this. To dehumanize systematically both prisoners and guards in the camps meant to create a realm of subjugation no longer responsive to common social norms; and what the camps anticipated in "essence," society would become in substance. The Nazi idea would lead to and draw upon sadism, but at least among the leaders and theoreticians, it was to be distinguished from mere sadism. It was an *abstract* rage, the most terrible of all. This Nazi idea formed a low parody of that messianism which declared that once mankind demonstrated its warrant of faith, deliverance would come through a savior bringing "the good days" — a notion debased by totalitarian movements into the physical elimination of "contaminating" races and classes. And when the Nazis established their realm of subjection in the camps, they brought to a point of completion the impulse to nihilism that is so powerful in modern culture. It was a nihilism at once selfless and self-obliterating.[32]

The keenest analysts of the 1950s focused on whatever seemed novel in the totalitarian upsurge: terror as integral and enduring; ideology as the mental double of terror; the erasure of boundaries between state and society, so that "secondary institutions" would be deprived of autonomy; the atomization of social life, with all classes beaten down to a passive, featureless mass; "permanent revolution from above," as the state mobilized itself against internal and external enemies; and the consolidation of a ruling

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[32] An apprehension of the psychology behind the nihilism of the Nazis can be found in Sartre's description of the generic anti-Semite. As someone who "has chosen hatred," the anti-Semite "is a criminal in a good cause. It is not his fault, surely, if his mission is to extirpate Evil by doing Evil. . . . He knows that he is wicked, but since he does Evil for the sake of Good . . . he looks upon himself as a sanctified evildoer" (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew,* trans. George J. Becker [New York: Schocken Books, 1948], pp. 18, 49, 50).

elite, exalted in the leader, claiming not just a monopoly of power
or a variety of goods but the ownership, so to say, of state and
society.

Two books were central to this discussion: Hannah Arendt's
Origins of Totalitarianism and George Orwell's *1984*, the first a
historical study and the second an imaginative foreboding. Arendt
had a gift for isolating what I'd call a terror of essence. Her
vision was that of a mad relentlessness, a dash toward apocalypse,
accepting no enduring peace but driving on toward climaxes of
struggle. The central premise — the great hubris — of the total
state, embodied in the mania of Hitler and the will of Stalin, was
"the assumption that everything is possible," which "leads through
consistent elimination of all factual restraints to the absurd and
terrible consequence that every crime the rulers can conceive of
must be punished, regardless of whether or not it has been
committed."[33]

What, then, is the ultimate end of totalitarianism, if indeed it
has one? A union of world domination and apocalypse, with the
aim of *straightening everything out*, breaking reality to the de-
mands of a conception rather than fitting conceptions to the "un-
evenness" of reality. This, said Arendt, entails not merely the
transformation of society but "of human nature itself." Before so
fearful a prospect, the mind balks, since "in each of us there lurks
. . . a liberal, wheedling us with the voice of common sense," tak-
ing the phenomenon of terror to be a mere aberration and the
stress placed on it by writers like Arendt and Orwell as a yielding
to hysteria.

The critics who so attacked Arendt and Orwell were not en-
tirely inaccurate; I'd merely say, they were wrong. To penetrate
to the devil's soul, you need a touch of the devil yourself; to grasp
the inner meaning of totalitarianism — again, with the proviso,
if there is one you must yield, yourself, a little imaginatively,

[33]Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism,* pp. 427, 440,

even, as some critics remarked rather nastily about Orwell, with
a streak of morbidity. In thinking about the world of *1984* mor-
bidity is hardly the worst of possible errors. For what Arendt and
Orwell were trying to do was to imagine something at once un-
imaginable and not at all unlikely; to enter the wanton spaces of
the totalitarian mind; to see for a moment what drove a Himmler
in reality, an O'Brien in fiction. And for this, they were convinced
that it was not very helpful to see totalitarianism as essentially the
extension of monopoly capitalism or Leninist dictatorship or even
man's inherent sinfulness. All these were no doubt present as con-
tributing factors, but what made totalitarianism so powerful and
frightening was precisely its break with old traditions, good and
bad; precisely its embodiment of a radical new ethos of blood,
terror, nihilism. Perhaps, as a burden of advantage, there was a
disposition to accept a little uncritically the notion of a totalitarian
"essence," a sort of ideal Platonic form of which the regimes
headed by Hitler and Stalin were flawed realizations. That no
actual society conformed, or could conform, to Arendt's model is
not of course a fatal criticism of her work.

It was this model, or nightmare vision, that decisively influ-
enced serious thought in the 1950s. It led us to conclude that
totalitarianism as a system could not be changed from within or
modified through conflicts among segments of its ruling elite —
a conclusion, as we shall soon see, that in time would be happily
damaged. The implicit assumption was that totalitarianism is a
society that has reached a kind of stasis, even if one of sustained
chaos. In effect, if not with explicit recognition, this new kind of
society comes to signify an end to history. Orwell, in this respect,
was shrewder than Arendt, since in *1984* he anticipated a gradual
slackening of the unfuture, a diminution of that ferocious intensity
which had marked the totalitarian state. But while keenly envision-
ing a drop from fanaticism to torpor, Orwell did not suppose this
would affect the continued employment of terror. In the world of
1984 terror takes on a life of its own, almost as if it had become

a mere habit. Orwell failed to consider that the energies making for terror might also run down, so that it would be replaced, as it was for some years in the Soviet Union, by terror-in-reserve.

The question that was ultimately raised by both Arendt and Orwell — the question of human nature: whether it is endlessly malleable, whether the totalitarian program of leveling it to uniformity could be more than a wild fantasy — was canvassed in another remarkable book of the 1950s, Czeslaw Milosz's *The Captive Mind.* His subject, wrote Milosz, was "the vulnerability of the twentieth-century mind to seduction by sociopolitical doctrines and its readiness to accept totalitarian terror for the sake of a hypothetical future."[34] He warned against those in the West — quite as Arendt had warned against the limitations of liberal rationality — who saw the fate of Eastern Europe "in terms of might and coercion. That is wrong. There is an internal longing for harmony and happiness that lies deeper than ordinary fear or the desire to escape misery or physical destruction."

Such assertions found a warm response because they seemed to provide an explanation in depth, beyond mere historical contingencies, for the spread of totalitarian politics, especially Stalinism. Even the few of us on the anti-Stalinist Left inclined to skepticism were impressed by the scope and sweep of Milosz's analysis. He began by evoking a forgotten book that had appeared in Warsaw in 1932: its author, Stanislaw Wietkiewicz, creates "an atmosphere of decay and senselessness [that] extends through the entire country.'' And then, continues Milosz, "a great number of hawkers appear in the cities peddling Murti-Bing pills. . . . A man who used these pills changed completely. He became serene and happy. The problems he had struggled with until then suddenly appeared to be superficial and unimportant. . . . A man who swallowed Murti-Bing pills became impervious to any metaphysical concerns."[35]

[34] Milosz, *Captive Mind,* introductory page.
[35] Ibid., p. 4

What Murti-Bing did in Wietkiewicz's fiction, Diamet (dia-
lectical materialism) was now doing, said Milosz, for true be-
lievers in Eastern Europe, bringing harmony and happiness to the
point where they became "impervious to any metaphysical con-
cerns," Indeed, "Murti-Bing is more tempting to an intellectual
than to a peasant or laborer. For the intellectual, the New Faith
[Communism] is a candle that he circles like a moth. In the end,
he throws himself into the flames for the glory of mankind."

The heart of Milosz's book consists of sketches of famous
Polish writers who had accepted the Stalinist regime: Alpha, the
hero of whose novel "had merely traded his priest's cassock for the
leather jacket of a Communist"; Beta, whose terrible Holocaust
experiences had turned him into a despairing nihilist appalled by
human physiology and who, after churning out propaganda pieces
for the party, stuck his head into a gas jet; Gamma, "who con-
sidered himself a servant of the devil that ruled History, but . . .
did not love his master."[36]

All of Milosz's sketches were brilliantly evocative, dramatizing
the feckless repudiation of humanist values that forms so large a
portion of twentieth-century intellectual history. Yet precisely be-
cause they were more complex and modulated than the theory
enclosing them, the sketches undermined Milosz's thesis, for in
each case his description made clear that these intellectuals were
not simply drawn, like moths to the flame, by the idea of "totali-
tarian terror for the sake of an hypothetical future." Nor lulled
into "harmony and happiness" through dialectical materialism, a
philosophy most Polish intellectuals could not begin to fathom.
Milosz's own work showed that many of these writers were in fact
already marred or soiled by earlier intellectual-moral compromises,
that some brought to Stalinism previously nurtured delusions of
elitist superiority and that others had experienced breakdowns of
character making them susceptible to totalitarian manipulation.

[36] Ibid., pp. 105, 171.

And then there were the commonplace factors of opportunism, fear, greed, vanity. Human nature was not being transformed; the self was not being recreated, it was being violated.

Still, Milosz's narrative persuades one that among these Polish writers, there was indeed a kind of idealism at work, often hopelessly entangled with cynical and nihilist sentiments. Anti-Stalinists of both Right and Left tended to minimize the possibility that there were serious intellectuals in Eastern Europe who sincerely believed in Stalinism, even during the bitter years of Rakosi, Gottwald, and Gomulka. I think of the rending instance of Leszek Kolakowski, today a major intellectual figure of humane sensibilities, who before 1956 had been a fanatical Stalinist. Later, when I met some young leaders of the Hungarian Democratic Opposition, I listened to their stories of having been brought up in the homes of ardent Stalinists, true believers even during the years of terror.

So perhaps Milosz was not entirely wrong. He was guilty, I think, of an intellectualistic fallacy, that which examines the behavior of intellectuals exclusively or mainly in terms of an autonomous life of ideas — a way of looking at their experience that may lend drama and pathos to an otherwise sordid story. In the main, the reality seems to have been that the experience of intellectuals under Stalinism was not so different from that of other people. Milosz himself remarked that "the one thing that seems to deny the perfection of Murti-Bing [but then, also Diamet] is the apathy that is born in people, and that lives on despite their feverish activity."[37] Yes, but apathy, socially regarded, is always more than just apathy. What may seem the apathy of people held down by oppressive regimes and forced to keep chanting and marching also contains a streak of good sense, of saving skepticism, of rudimentary resistance. Human nature buckled, adapted, weaved, but survived the totalitarian experience largely intact. This apathy was

[37] Ibid., p. 23.

a defense mechanism employed by those who, against the coni-
mands of history, were "victims of the delusion," as Milosz nicely
puts it, "that each individual exists as a self.[38] Try today in
Prague or Budapest to deny this!

I want to end by discussing the criticisms of the totalitarian
theorists of the 1950s, but first a brief digression to a still-earlier
discussion of the same problems as it flourished in the milieu of
the anti-stalinist Left. About nazism it had little of theoretical
interest to say; in Stalinism it found a kind of distorting mirror,
raising problems of identity.

Turning away from Trotsky's Marxist orthodoxy, which la-
beled the Stalin regime a "degenerated workers' state" because
it continued to rest on noncapitalist property forms, several figures
in the anti-stalinist Left developed an incipient theory of totali-
tarianism within or near the categories of an unorthodox Marxism.
One of the first was Rudolf Hilferding, the Austrian Social Demo-
cratic economist, who in 1940 argued against those who called the
Stalinist regime "socialist" and those who labeled it "state capi-
talist." Wrote Hilferding:

> A capitalist economy is governed by the laws of the market . . .
> and the autonomy of these laws constitutes the decisive symptom
> of the capitalist system. . . . A state economy, however, elimi-
> nates precisely the autonomy of economic laws. . . . It is no longer
> price but rather a state planning commission that now deter-
> mines what is produced and how. . . . Both the "Stimulating fire
> of competition" and the passionate striving for profit, which
> provides the basic incentives of capitalist production, die out.
>
> It is the essence of a totalitarian state that it subjects the
> economy to its aims. . . . Present-day state power, having
> achieved independence, is unfolding according to its own laws,
> subjecting social forms and compelling them to serve its end.[39]

[38] Ibid.

[39] Rudolf Hilferding, "State Capitalism or Totalitarian State Economy," in
I. Howe, ed., *Essential Works of Socialism,* 3d ed. (New Haven: Yale University
Press, 1986), pp. 322, 325, 326.

This analysis was followed by writings from the dissident Left and ex-Trotskyist groups, notably those of Max Shachtman, who developed a theory called "bureaucratic collectivism" asserting that Stalinist Russia was a new form of exploitative society in which the bureaucracy had stiffened into a ruling class. Total control of the state in a country with a nationalized economy meant total domination of society. Some years later, a somewhat crude version of this theory was advanced by Milovan Djilas in his work on the New Class.

Compared with prevalent liberal and Marxist views of Communist society, the theory of bureaucratic collectivism, which anticipates in part the theory of totalitarianism, had one great value: it stressed historical novelty, graphically outlining the contours of the party-state dictatorship. Its weaknesses were that it provided a static "take" rather than a "picture in motion," making little or no provision for historical dynamic and that it did little to analyze the inner workings of the Stalinist economy.

Within the Left, the major antagonist of this approach was the historian Isaac Deutscher. With his stress on economic determinism and his belief that the decades of Stalinism constituted a time of "primitive accumulation" (yes, but in behalf of what kind of society?) and with his quasi-Marxist attribution of the Stalinist "deformation" to Russian historical backwardness (here he followed Trotsky, though without the same critical passion), Deutscher lent a certain aura of necessity to Stalinism, partly legitimating the tyrant as one who was performing the cruel but inescapable tasks of history.[40] But Deutscher was mistaken in his assumption that the Soviet Union, because it had a "planned economy" (we might better call it an ill-planned economy), was thereby creating the ground for its own liberalization. It now seems quite the other way round: that it is the crisis of the econ-

[40] Isaac Deutscher, "The Future of Russian Society," *Dissent,* Spring 1954, p. 278.

omy and the failure to provide material well-being that have pro-
voked *glasnost* and *perestroika.*

In fairness, however, we must grant one essential point to
Deutscher. Unlike theorists who became fixated before the horrors
of totalitarianism, he stressed the inescapability of change within
the Soviet system. His reasons for expecting change were largely
mistaken, but the expectation itself was an important corrective.
"It would be a striking mistake," he wrote, "to treat totalitarianism
metaphysically as a state of society's utter immobility, or of his-
tory's absolute freezing, which excludes any political movement
in the form of action from below or reform from above."

Even in the 1950s there was a certain common-sense skepti-
cism with regard to the dominant theories about the total state.
David Riesman, for example, stressed the danger of overestimat-
ing the "capacity of totalitarianism to restructure human per-
sonality," of overestimating Stalinism's "efficiency in achieving
its horrible ends," and of "mistaking blundering compulsions or
even accidents of the 'system' for conspiratorial genius." In an
oblique thrust at Arendt, he warned against succumbing to "the
appeal of an evil mystery." Certain constants of human behavior,
not perhaps the most admirable but valuable as limited defenses
against the omnipotent state — such defenses as apathy, corrup-
tion, opportunism, crime — still operated, wrote Riesman, in both
Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. Corruption might serve "as an
antidote to fanaticism," a human failing against monstrous in-
humanity. It is an error, argued Riesman, "to imagine social sys-
tems as monolithic, and as needing to be relatively efficient to
remain in power."[41] And — this strikes close to my theme —
one lesson from the post-Hitler years is "how hard it is perma-
nently to destroy most people psychologically." What Riesman
was warning against was the tendency to see the total state in

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[41] David Riesman, *Individualism* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1954), pp. 414–23.

totalistic terms, making of it something beyond comprehension and thereby, perhaps, beyond opposition. There was a strand of shrewdness in this critique, but what it seemed to be doing was to refuse *the imaginative leap* required for a full grasp of this new social phenomenon. Which may be why Riesman's observations exerted little influence.

A more fundamental criticism began to unfold after the Hungarian revolution of 1956. Even the most ardent admirers of Arendt had to admit that her theory offered a keener insight into nazism than into Stalinism.[42] While the Stalin dictatorship might roughly conform to the general traits laid down by the theorists of totalitarianism, it contained distinct elements these theories could barely account for. It had its own socioeconomic system; it allowed a larger portion of rationality than did nazism; it drew upon or exploited the Marxist tradition; and it claimed to speak in behalf of humanist values which the Nazis openly despised. Even its dull parroting of sacred texts enabled critical readers to see that the regime was violating Marxist prescriptions and expectations. Perhaps more useful than Arendt's approach to Stalinism was Trotsky's insight in 1938 that Stalinism and nazism were "symmetrical phenomena," that is, similar in surface methods but different in social structure and historical character.

By the 1960s, in any case, it had become clear that if you held strictly to Arendt's theory, the Soviet regime in the post-Stalin years could no longer be called totalitarian. The ideology was still there, even if in deep decay; the dictatorship was still there, even if less brutal; but active terror had been sharply reduced, if not entirely eliminated. Yet some theorists, like Richard Lowenthal,

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[42] In an appendix to the paperback edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* Hannah Arendt recognized the historical significance of the 1956 Hungarian revolution and keenly suggested certain comparisons between its improvised institutions of self-rule and earlier efforts in Europe to set up workers' councils. Her response was exemplary, but I don't believe that her theory of totalitarianism provided a ground, or at least a sufficient ground, for the expectation that there could be major revolts against totalitarian rule.

argued that there were still grounds for describing the Soviet Union as a totalitarian society. Crucial for him was the presence of a one-party dictatorship arrogating to itself complete authority in social and political life. But as experience would soon show, once terror disappeared such a dictatorship could not long maintain total power, since the risks of opposition decreased, as did the risks of any autonomous enterprise by ordinary people.

From the vantage-point of retrospect — which always grants a keen wisdom — the theory of totalitarianism had the great value that it forced attention upon what was historically novel in the Hitler and Stalin regimes. The writers of the 1950s, it may be, were offering less a scientific analysis than a kind of *historical poetry*, a brilliantly evocative image of what had shattered the modern world. From no other writers could you gain so strong a feel of the totalitarian outlook, its radical demonism, its corrosive nihilism, as from Arendt and Orwell. Arendt sought to reach the ultimate spirit, the kernel of motive, in nazism, that which prompted people joyously to kill and be killed. She wanted to penetrate the heart of darkness, even if the cost was that occasionally her work took on a slight tint of darkness too.

With time the flaws in the theorizing of the 1950s grew more glaring. If the monstrousness of totalitarianism posited an end to history, it turned out that history did not end, it just dragged on. Arendt and Orwell had captured the madness of their moment, not as aberration or excrescence but as a driving historical power, and in that, for a time, they were right.

In the intervening decades there has been no shortage of critiques of the theorists of the 1950s. A special virtue of Michael Walzer's essay "Failed Totalitarianism" is that it was written in a spirit of generosity. Walzer made clear that its amendments and corrections would not have been possible without the prior achievements of those he criticized.

Aware that in major respects totalitarianism did reach some of its goals — Hitler destroyed half of European Jewry, Stalin the original Bolshevik leadership as well as millions of innocents — Walzer argued that finally totalitarianism failed. The Nazi and Stalinist movements did not seize control of the world; their regimes did not survive for more than a few decades; the apocalyptic mood they stirred in both followers and opponents has largely faded. What followed the Stalin dictatorship was a mere oligarchy, dead in spirit and unable to preserve even its powers and privileges. Nor was the totalitarian corruption of language a lasting phenomenon. There is no reason to believe, wrote Walzer, that the state can control human conversation, "the rhythms, intonations, juxtapositions of any people who can speak at all."[43] Human beings cannot be permanently transformed by terror, nor their language by fiat. The end of days has not come. And even Walzer's view that the true legacy of totalitarianism is "authoritarian rule" must now, happily, be greatly modified.

For we are witnessing one of the most remarkable transformations in modern history, giving reason to hope that the time of the total state is gone, even if there remains the possibility of a reversion to authoritarian rule. The events in the Soviet Union show that, as in Italy and Germany a few decades ago, all the socio-political forces, good and bad, suppressed by the total state have a way of reappearing once a bit of freedom is allowed.

The spirit of democracy, the tradition of democratic socialism, sentiments of national and ethnic solidarity — all come back, revealing the continuity of human experience and the resilience of the human being. No, it is not the end of days; still, honor to those who had enough imagination a few decades ago to fear it would be.

A crucial difference is here revealed between fascism and communism, or nazism and Stalinism. While the Fascists explicitly

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[43] Michael Walzer, "Failed Totalitarianism," in I. Howe, ed., *1984 Revisited: Totalitarianism in Our Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), p. 117.

rejected humanist values, the Communists claimed to honor them. When the Stalinist and post-Stalinist Communists sent the young and the intellectuals to read the classical Marxist texts, the startling difference between text and reality, Marxist prescription and totalitarian practice, became clear. What the Communist rulers hoped to use as ideological legitimation, eventually helped to do them in.

I will ask the inevitable question about the theorists of the 1950s — Arendt et al. — were they "right" or "wrong" in their analysis of totalitarianism? I hope it doesn't seem evasive if I say they were both right and wrong. They were stronger at evocation than prognosis, keener in searching out historical novelty than in acknowledging historical continuity. At this moment, when the Communist world is at the edge of collapse, it is tempting to stress the mistakes and excesses of the theorists of the 1950s: their categorical absolutism, their "essentialism," their inclination to see an apocalypse that would bring historical motion to an end, their tendency to endow the totalitarian state with an almost mystical "perfection" that it did not really have. Yet, if I will be allowed a paradox, I believe that these analysts were less "wrong" than were some of their critics who were quite "right." There are times when brilliant improvization is more suggestive and useful than rational caution. In any case, how long does a theory have to last? We are still debating the French Revolution; why then should we expect theories of totalitarianism to be anything but vulnerable? Theories that serve even a brief historical moment, serve us well.

I end by returning to the theme of my first lecture: the question of the self, and I propose to turn for just a moment to the work of a writer whose later development I deplore but whose earlier work I admire. When Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn published his powerful novel *The First Circle,* he was still responsive to other voices, other minds; the tacit premise of the book is the plenitude of human culture. Set in a laboratory-prison filled with

scientists and intellectuals, *The First Circle* helps to persuade us
that a large measure of skepticism is warranted regarding the
claims that the total state has transformed or can transform not
only public speech but individual minds. There is a remarkable
range and freedom of thought among Solzhenitsyn's characters,
as if to show a hidden Russia: from Rubin, the lovable fool still
entranced with the system that has locked him up, to Kondrashev,
the painter of transcendental inclinations; from Sologdin, a man
devoted to the disciplining of the will, though full of humor in
doing it, to Nerzhin, clinging to skepticism as a cleansing minimal
value. Sologdin surely speaks for the author when he expresses
faith in "unique personalities" as a fundamental of human exis-
tence. The novel is marked by a rare quality: a keen respect for
the integrity of other minds, a belief in their autonomy, their
rights, their claims to speech. Call this a sentiment of "self," call
it something else, but it is, I believe, the heart of the matter.