

Vile Bodies

Pumped-up muscles, empty souls

By Reid Buckley

WOULD IT BE POSSIBLE to invent a more stupefying supper companion than the person obsessed with keeping himself in Phidian perfection of pecs, abs, and buttocks, to the exclusion of mind and spirit?

I am speaking of people so frenzied by the infantile desire to cheat time that they become infatuated with their bodies, worshiping them as ancient Hebrews in the desert fell before the golden calf. Are there more narcissistic human beings?

Tally up the bores one encounters on a regular basis. Basketball fans, baseball fans, Red Sox fans (in that order). Recent enthusiasts (of anything). Recent converts (to anything). Potheads. Stockbrokers and those who have gone broke on stocks. A roomful of young mothers describing childbirth in the gruesome detail of which they seem never to tire. Candidates for any office. Merlot addicts. Fat people who talk about the latest diet, which plainly does not work because they are piggish. Anxious parents who fret about whether their children are getting a proper education in the public schools, when plainly they are not and are destined to grow up mirror images of their ma and pa, devoid of interest, wit, or culture. Earnest sorts who wonder what this world is coming to when it is plainly already here. Supercilious scolds of the Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens ilk who never let pass an opportunity to scoff at the primitive superstitions of believers.

These are trial sufficient, but to the half-mad self-absorption of exercise faddists I prefer even environmental fanatics of the Al Gore variety, though these,

in their obnoxious superiority, vie with the God-is-dead crowd. All share personality traits. The first is evangelistic fervor. Nothing else is of interest, the world go hang. The second is the argumentative insistence of fanatics. They won't shut up. The third is certitude. They are the saved. Their self-righteousness rivals President Obama's.

The fitness craze is simply another escape from the consequences of metaphysical ignorance—an attempt to flee time and space and the inevitability of inexorable, unstoppable, uncamouflaged aging. One pities them: they are doomed to the disintegration of the mortal frame in which they take such pride and invest such complacent hope, doomed to the eventual rotting of their poor flesh—cold to the touch, loathsome to the sight, offensive to all the yet living: disgusting, putrid, worm-ridden, foul.

What a charnel house dialectic. Despite the certainty of their fate, fitness freaks devote hour after hour to strenuous exertion, torturing their bodies, sweat pouring rank from their armpits. Zombies walking, walking to nowhere. They never reach the top of the treadmill, not once.

This is self-inflicted, remember. They willfully pit themselves against the logical imperative—nothing can be forever if God cannot be—enslaving themselves to the absurd. The horizon never changes, the pounding of their feet never ceases, no glorious alpine vista is ever attained, from which rolls out an irenic Swiss valley, dotted with placidly cud-chewing milch cows. Their sole reward seems to be scrutinizing them-

selves in the mirror, admiring the sleekness of their pelts, the washboard ripple of their abs ... but oh! screwing up their brows at the slightest slackness of a tricep, which they determine to flog that very morning in the gym.

How they have reduced the joys, opportunities, dreams, adventures, and poetry of life to the ridiculous yoke of their fitness, which is an existential delusion. They cannot avoid the grave. Stare into it long as they wish, curse the heavens, they cannot cheat the awful avidity of its hunger. They are subject to the astrophysical nothingness of entropy, but during their short hour of strutting and fretting, they devote their entire spirits to that which is most awfully mortal.

Should not decent, cool, intelligent, discriminating society shun these freaks as one would the plague? Or are we, being obedient to the demands of Christian charity, condemned to put up with bores? (In the dreadful simplicity of the postmodern *weltanschauung*, are bores no longer recognized? It's quite possible that people in Hollywood enjoy each other's company, after all.)

I propose that fitness fanatics, whose company in numbing doses engenders sociopathy in their victims, not be stoned in public, not be committed to the stocks (they'd simply continue berating passersby, sigh!), not be obliged to listen to one more economic nostrum from Charles Schumer, nor even be waterboarded in Guantanamo. All too dreadfully crude. They should simply (and humanely) be stripped of the franchise. Civilization must take a stand against primitivism in whatever guise—tight

pecks, flat abs, or sexy buttocks.

But I am advised by friends that depriving narcissists of the franchise is extreme, undemocratic, impractical politically, and anyhow does not solve the problem. Disfranchisement will not keep such folk from sounding off. Social opprobrium no longer computes. When last was a person evicted from a high-priced restaurant because he shaves his cheeks and chin in the slovenly fashion of Iran's Ahmadinejad or consumes his food wolfishly? When last was a person tossed from a morning news show because he is a perfect fool? If this were Heaven, anyone lacking a sense of humor would be struck dumb. Anyone lacking originality of mind would have his tongue cut out. But we are not living in paradise. We are groaning here on earth, and we are trapped in the 21st century, an age from which civility has been banished on all levels of social intercourse, high and low. Civilized people are deprived of defense. Stripping obnoxious fellow citizens of the vote does not remove them from parlors or bars or restaurants.

So what is to be done with this particularly repellent breed of narcissist? The only recourse available to us, I fear, is developing the ability to recognize them from afar and thus avoid them. There are tribal characteristics of the fitness freak. They are, of course, lean. In middle age, their sinews are stringy, and one can spot them at a distance. Not all slim or even fit people, however, belong to the obsessive caste. Many people exercise in moderation. They work out as a sort of penance for gorging on key lime pie or remarking, uncharitably, on how the notion of discussing poetry with Nancy Pelosi is as attractive as the idea of going out on a toot with Harry Reid.

Female fitness freaks are more immediately distinguishable than their male counterparts. They tend to drop their particples, which, I suppose, on a moral scale is better than dropping their panties. Though female fitness freaks

may be ardent feminists on the surface, deep down they are traitors to their sex. Remember, they have broken into what had previously been a man's world. They speak roughly, littering their sentences with obscene expletives like the confetti from yesterday's St. Patrick's Day parade, sodden and blackened with city grit. That's how they imagine the boys speak. Their hair is stringy from frequent sweating and wetting. They wear pants cinched tightly at the waist, doing nothing for their bottoms, and, when not shod for running, the sensible shoes formerly associated with English governesses. Whenever these women pass by one gets a whiff not of Chanel No.5 but of kennels or failing marriages. They despise young, pretty, sensual women who lie in bed a-mornings sucking on sweetmeats and thinking of men, whom, to get, these damsels need not become.

Both sexes of fitness freaks speak of themselves as obsessively as horse and dog people speak of their animals. These also are a kind a cultural Kalarhara. Their periodicals feature pictures of themselves at meets or field trials and, of course, pictures of the idols they have laid up for themselves. They have nothing of interest to say to anyone. This is an accomplishment of sorts. How many people can boast that they are utterly barren of intellectual heft? They speak of nothing more compelling than their animals, which are in most cases handsomer, kinder, more loyal, and, yes, more interesting than their masters.

Children play the same role in the glandular self-satisfaction of the bourgeois Southern matron. In one's most distraught dreams, can one imagine more devastatingly dreary company? Wives of New South McMansion dwellers, Tara on three quarters of an acre, with thousands of superfluous square feet to shout the inflated measure of self-worth. When dog and horse people speak obsessively of their animals, they are in fact—like

these women dilating on their children—speaking of themselves. Their charges are mere extensions of their own being, which is why they are of such consuming fascination.

Fitness freaks use their bodies for the same purpose—as a way of making certain that all social interaction is centered on them. Don't imagine for a moment when a horse nut is glowing over the virtues of his mount in a recent fox hunt or when a canine fanatic is extolling the brilliance of his Labrador in completing a triple-blind retrieve in a field trial that he is actually speaking of the animal. The beast is merely a means of socializing the dog or horse person's self-absorption. In the same way, one notices that fitness fanatics objectify their bodies, speaking of them in the third person. Couldn't get the old carcass going this morning, heh-heh.

This is not the rant of a curmudgeon. I am not grown old and bitter in my biases. When I compare species of American narcissists such as dog and horse people, Southern society matrons, fitness fanatics, and other menaces, I am speaking of obsessed human beings. There is little left of the human in their beings. Consider their disinterest in any subject of conversation removed from their obsession. They listen distractedly. The same goes for political junkies. Witness the impatience of Laura Ingraham as she lets a liberal have his say—her attitude plainly conveys that she has heard it all before and that it is infinitely tiresome to her.

The ego is the devil here, for they cannot free themselves from themselves. In this self-indulgent society, beyond ourselves, our desires, our wants, the itch in our pants or in our palms, nothing is of concern. Our culture is as obscene as we are obese. Do you know why Steven Weinberg and Leonard Susskind and others despise the notion of a Creator? It is because by definition He is greater than they, from which follows—it is as fell a

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descent in logic as the cast of an expert fly fisherman into an eddy of a fast-flowing trout stream—that they are not so grand as they suppose. Mayflies, gnats, ephemera. The idea of a Lord God gets in the way of their worshipping themselves. Curious: on the metaphysical scales that they renounce, they are precious, priceless, infinitely interesting, and immortal, whereas on the scales of the most advanced string-quantum holographic hypothesis of which they are the apostles, they are nothing. And time-finite.

No wonder our pagan culture places self-gratification as the legitimate first goal. We must have it now, else, in the next nanosecond, we may be gone. We express this dynamic in overeating and overtalking and boorish comportment. We do not taste, we gobble. We do not converse, we sneer and shout down. When one is trapped at a supper table with a fitness freak, one's sole recourse is to ask him to relate his opinion about whether entropy is consumed by or conserved in black holes, or his most profound observations about the essence of the nature of man, or his understanding of Bach's *Passion*, or the secret to being quite as dull as the Swiss, the Dutch, and Scandinavians, who are marvelous at this.

Do not interrupt, as Ann Coulter would. Don't tell them what they should think, as a professional buffoon like Glenn Beck or Bill O'Reilly on his bad behavior might. Remember that their imaginations have been parched and their minds have probably become as brittle as dry tobacco leaves rattling in an abandoned shed. Chances are the fitness freak will fall silent after a sentence or two and turn to victimize another person at the table. Then devote yourself to the chocolate cake. ■

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From the earliest days of its history, there is a deep layer of Messianic consciousness in the mind of America. We never dreamed that we would have as much political power as we possess today; nor for that matter did we anticipate that the most powerful nation on earth would suffer such an ironic refutation of its dreams of mastering history. For our increased power related our will and purpose to a vaster and vaster entanglement with other wills and purposes, which made it impossible for any single will to prevail or any specific human goal of history easily to become the goal of all mankind.

We were always vague about how power is to be related to the allegedly universal values which we hold in trust for mankind. We were, of course, not immune to the temptation of believing that the universal validity of what we held in trust justified our use of power to establish it.

Generally, however, the legitimization of power was not the purpose of our Messianic consciousness. We felt that by example and by unexplained forces in history our dream would become the regnant reality of history.

In both the Calvinist and the Jeffersonian conception of our national destiny the emphasis lay at the beginning upon providence rather than human power. Jefferson proposed for the seal of the United States a picture of the "children of Israel, led by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night." Washington declared in his first inaugural that "the preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are considered, perhaps as deeply, as finally staked on the experiment instructed to the hands of the American people." Most significant was the assurance that we were acting as surrogates, as trustees for mankind.

Such Messianic dreams are not free of the moral pride which creates a hazard to their realization. "God has not been preparing the English-speaking and Teutonic peoples," declared Senator Beveridge of Indiana, "for a thousand years of nothing but vain and idle self-contemplation and self-admiration. He has made us the master organizers of the world to establish system where chaos reigns. ... He has made us adept in government that we may administer government among savage and senile peoples. Were it not for such a force this world would relapse into barbarism and night. And of all our race he has marked the American people as his chosen nation to finally lead in the regeneration of the world." The concept of administering "government among savage and senile peoples" does have power implications. But the legitimization of power is generally subordinate in the American dream to the fact that the concept of a divine favor upon the nation implies a commitment "to lead in the regeneration of mankind." Among us, as well as among communists, an excessive voluntarism which finally brings human history under the control of the human will is in tentative, but not in final, contradiction to a determinism which finds historical destiny favorable at some particular point to man's assumption of mastery over that destiny.

The American experience represents a unique and ironic refutation of the illusion in all such dreams. Illusions about the possibility of managing historical destiny from any particular standpoint in history always involve miscalculation about both the power and the wisdom of the managers and of the weakness and the manageability of the historical "stuff" which is to be managed.

—Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*