

work with, Smith valiantly tries to fashion the proverbial silk purse: he aims at criticism and ends up writing hagiography. Smith takes Ferlinghetti seriously in his self-anointed roles as idealist, prophet, conscience of America, "the open and public realist daring to speak our common truth." In reality, Ferlinghetti has been the literary mouthpiece for every radical cause imaginable; he vilified President Eisenhower, deified Ho Chi Minh and Fidel Castro, and found his political gods in Herbert Marcuse and Eldridge Cleaver. He is hardly, as Smith prefers to see him, the "rare combination of literary catalyst, populist spokesman, and creative craftsman" or "a poet-prophet of the contemporary world . . . the contemporary embodiment of the committed artist."

Ferlinghetti may well consider himself the voice of the people and thus of God, but this may be a case of what General Sherman once described as "Vox populi, vox humbug." He views the United States as thoroughly corrupt, diseased by capitalism, riddled with rotten institutions, an international bully that represses its own people and those of the whole world. The world "rolls on lousy with fascism/ The jails groan with it/ and governments groan with it/ And whenever there's a flag with red in it/ the people holding it up/ groan with it." This kind of poetry reminds us of Cicero's observation that "Men who have no inner resources for a good and happy life find every age burdensome."

Writers who use their names and reputations to proselyte for questionable causes really achieve nothing more than self-advertising. Perceptive readers are always suspicious that such writers are less concerned about the poor, the oppressed, and the unfortunate than about press clippings, expense-account living on the college lecture-and-reading circuit, and adulation by the media, the academics, and sophomore humanities majors. After all, it is very possible these days to make a comfortable living by being a professional conscience. As Roman Gary said not so many years ago,

"There are many ways of becoming a professional beauty . . . and one of them is to write noble books, to take inspired, humanistic positions on all the right causes, keep signing those manifestoes."

Auden went through a period of being the professional beauty and the signer

of manifestos, but he outgrew his artistic adolescence to become a significant poet of his time. Ferlinghetti, however, never put away his toys, and, as Liv Ullman said of George McGovern a decade ago, "the words just keep coming and coming as if he hopes that a little life and truth will sneak through." □

## Self-Indulgence Made Simple

**Peter Clecak: *America's Quest for the Ideal Self: Dissent and Fulfillment in the 60s and 70s*; Oxford University Press; New York.**

by Lee Congdon

This starry-eyed reappraisal of two unhappy decades in our nation's history serves as a sobering reminder that "the revolt of the masses" is far from over. Its author, deaf to any appeal to duty or civility, is an unabashed apologist for "postdeprivational," appetitive, man. Indeed, insofar as I am able to tell, there is almost no conceivable indulgence, no selfish whim, that does not strike Peter Clecak as, "on the whole, salutary." The conviction that human beings ought, for reasons that transcend the self, to practice restraint and even self-denial is as incomprehensible to him as it undoubtedly is to the surfers and "recreational" drug users who, one imagines, flock to his lectures at the University of California, Irvine. Nor will Clecak assign pride of place to any particular desire, for with Plato's "democratic man" he declares "that one appetite is as good as another and all must have their equal rights." This is hedonistic egalitarianism with a vengeance.

Not surprisingly, Clecak is impatient with those contemporary American Cassandras who have warned their countrymen about the perils of unbridled

selfishness and open contempt for every form of authority. In his view, such prophets of doom fail to understand that because all standards are relative, one man's selfishness is another's quest for personal fulfillment. Refusing to make any concession to his opponents, he insists that "there was not enough selfishness and not nearly enough genuine concern with the self in the sixties and seventies."

In view of his cavalier handling of empirical evidence, Clecak need not have informed us that he is "no great admirer of authority," the exercise of which can only limit personal gratification and delay the breaking down of all remaining hierarchies. But there is more to it than that. Not only does he resent political and social authority, he denies the possibility of authoritative, nonarbitrary judgments of any sort. Who, he asks rhetorically, is to say that Doctorow is inferior to Hemingway or Faulkner? Who is in a position to judge whether or not mediocrity and vulgarity are on the rise? And if, perchance, they are, so what? The deliberate cultivation of vulgarity can be a means to democratic ends. "A suspension of manners, an all-around lowering of taste, a corruption of language can serve to include larger numbers of people in widening circles of social acceptability." Thus it is not, as Ortega y Gasset observed, "that the vulgar believes itself super-excellent and not vulgar, but that the vulgar proclaims and imposes the rights of vulgarity, or vulgarity as a right."

Having carried the egalitarian idea to lunatic lengths, Clecak concedes that he is isolated intellectually, at odds with

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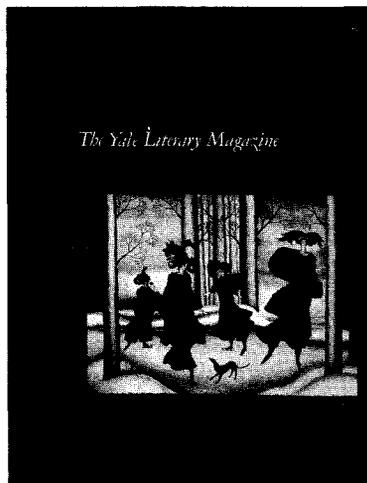
*Dr. Congdon's latest book is The Young Lukács (University of North Carolina Press).*

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When *The Yale Literary Magazine* was founded, Beethoven was completing the *Missa Solemnis*, Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* appeared, and Emerson began his *Journal*. The names of a few authors we have published since then — Rudyard Kipling, Sinclair Lewis, Stephen Vincent Benét, Thornton Wilder, John Dos Passos — show that some of our judgments have been quite timely.

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the Spenglerian, or, as he prefers to call it, the nostalgic, mood that informs so much of recent cultural criticism. Yet he is so recklessly self-assured that he does not hesitate to take on all comers, singling out conservatives and neoconservatives for especial censure. He devotes many pages, for example, to an elucidation and critique of the writings of Philip Rieff and Daniel Bell, not having given prior thought to the fact that his faithful recreation of the latter's sensible arguments in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* and *The Winding Passage* only serves to underscore the fatuity of his own apology for infantilism.

But Clecak is almost as hard on the left as he is on the right. Because radical critics look back wistfully to the 60's, he upbraids them for having refused to abandon utopian demands and expectations and for having withdrawn from the arena of daily struggle. Blinded by bitter disappointment, they do not seem to notice that many of their more temperate demands have won wide societal acceptance. This excessive pessimism is somewhat less characteristic of left-liberal critics, for whom Clecak expresses an affinity, yet they too have succumbed to nostalgia, a longing for a time when their views defined the perimeters of public discourse. Ultimately, as Clecak sees it, their nostalgia derives from the contradiction between their plebeian sympathies and their patrician lives. Committed to political and economic democracy, they remain culturally conservative—even snobbish—and hence alienated from those whose well-being they claim to have at heart. Their disdain for the increasingly vocal cultural preferences of the unsophisticated is particularly evident, according to Clecak, in Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism*.

Against the present Spenglerian grain, Clecak argues that the immediate past should encourage optimism. During the 60's and 70's, the nation witnessed great egalitarian advances, particularly with respect to the twin elements of personal fulfillment—"salvation" and "a piece of

social justice." In a chapter entitled "The Shapes of Salvation," Clecak bestows his benediction on virtually every redemptive nostrum of recent vintage. Although he has some reservations about "The Movement" of the 60's—its political utopianism above all—he applauds its cultural radicalism, the impetus it gave to the democratization of taste and conduct. At the same time, he praises the "Christian revival" because it too offered salvation—in the form of subjective contentment—to millions of Americans. He himself belongs to an unspecified "liberal branch" of the Christian church, but unlike so many of his "elitist" friends on the left, he does not disparage less-sophisticated expressions of religious experience, even those associated with Billy Graham and Jerry Falwell. And for those who do not find salvation in *Mother Jones* or *The Late Great Planet Earth*, there is always the primal scream, holis-

tic running, or vegetarianism. Impressed by the likes of Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, Clecak places himself foursquare behind the "human potential movement," and hence any and every therapeutic idiocy that promises to "free" the self from such depressing thoughts as sin, guilt, and judgment.

Turning his attention to "social justice," Clecak is somewhat less sanguine, in part because political, economic, and social democracy have advanced less rapidly than he would have liked. Still, thanks to dissent, almost every instance of which he defends, the past two decades did produce sufficient progress to secure the foundations for cultural equality. Because they were willing—I should say eager—to "make a scene," blacks, women, homosexuals, the handicapped, and the aged discovered and won new rights and entitlements. Even the fat, the ugly, and the short began to organize, and if

In the forthcoming issue of *Chronicles of Culture*:

## 1984

"1984 is a wonderful . . . book. Every twist and turn in it is a warning, heightened imaginatively, of the horrors of communist society. Orwell's special horror, the intellectual key necessary to make the whole thing work, was doublethink . . . to hold two totally contradictory thoughts in one's head at the same time. To know that they are contradictory, and yet not know. To say things one does not believe, and yet to hypnotize oneself into thinking that one does believe them . . . Where I encounter doublethink regularly is in the West, where large numbers of the intellectual . . . classes . . . routinely give themselves over to monstrosities of doublethink."

—from the Comment  
by Richard Grenier

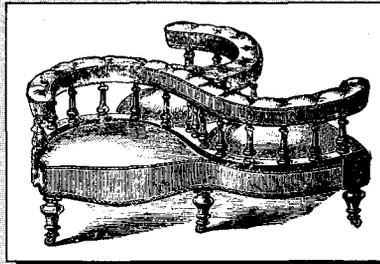
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## LIBERAL CULTURE

### Heresy

There's major schismatic rumbling on the behavioral left. New York's *Village Voice*—the unholy scroll of the pansexual movement, the rock from which the faith of unbounded hetero-and-homo fornication was proclaimed *urbi et orbi* decades ago, the demi-intellectual volcano that buried Cartesian *Cogito Ergo Sum* (I think therefore I am) under the hot lava of multiple mass orgasms (flowing from the assembly lines of Manhattan single bars) and in its stead established the New Principle *Copulo Ergo Sum* (I copulate therefore I am)—has finally admitted a "hard truth":



the romance of sexual liberation . . . [that] sexual action could be limitless and without bad consequences [was] faulty all along . . . Doctors knew it . . . but the rest of us didn't focus.

Reformation?

Clecak is right, we have not heard the last of Ugliers Unlimited and the National Association to Aid Fat Persons, to say nothing of unions of short people who no longer suffer prejudicial "heightism" in silence.

There is, however, trouble in paradise. In 1980, the people, whose every wish Clecak endorses, elected Ronald Reagan as their President. In his "Epilogue," therefore, our author decided to set aside his live-and-let-live attitude in order to deliver an impassioned attack on the President and his advisers, all of whom, we are informed, are "uncaring, cold-hearted men" bent on serving the rich, oppressing the poor, and, damn it all, impeding the quest for personal fulfillment. Even under these trying circumstances, however, Clecak has not lost heart. Barring a nuclear war, which would spoil everything, he is convinced that many of the most important gains of the 60's and 70's "will be preserved and extended . . . in the eighties and nineties."

Although I have not been able to resist the temptation to have some fun with this book, I believe that it should be

taken seriously. Clecak is undoubtedly right to point to the historical unity of the 60's and 70's, for many of the political, economic, and social demands made during the former decade were in fact met during the latter, as often as not by virtue of a Supreme Court decision. And if today there are few radicals in the streets, there are many in positions of power and influence; one of them, Senator Hart, would like to be our next President. Most important perhaps, issues that were once the property of extremists, are now taken up with enthusiasm by substantial numbers of respectable Americans, particularly those who hold college degrees. Consider, for example, the widespread support in middle- and upper-middle-class circles for pacifism, the proliferation of "rights," homosexual "liberation," and grammatical relativism.

Culturally, of course, the consequences of our increasing immaturity as a people have been disastrous. Perhaps Hilton Kramer has put the case as well as anyone. He wrote in the first number of *The New Criterion*:

We are still living in the aftermath of

the insidious assault on mind that was one of the most repulsive features of the radical movement of the Sixties. The cultural consequences of this leftward turn in our political life have been far graver than is commonly supposed. In everything from the writing of textbooks to the reviewing of trade books, from the introduction of kitsch into the museums to the decline of literacy in the schools to the corruption of scholarly research, the effect on the life of culture has been ongoing and catastrophic.

The publication of Clecak's book is surely a case in point. This celebration of barbarism, indiscipline, and hedonism bears the imprimatur of Oxford University Press, once a proud name in publishing.

I wish finally to consider a potentially more dangerous consequence of cultural egalitarianism—the decline of mass taste. Those who were born before 1945 will, as I do, remember radio shows such as *Amos and Andy*, *Jack Benny*, *Suspense*, *The Life of Riley*, and *Fibber Magee and Molly*. These shows were not, of course, the stuff of high culture, but they were, in their own way, worthwhile—witty, well written, and entertaining. Certainly they were never debasing. One has only to compare such shows as these with current television programs such as *Three's Company* and *Dynasty* to get some sense of just how far we have sunk. Or think of the popular music of the 30's and 40's, the work of Cole Porter, George Gershwin, Johnny Mercer, and Rodgers and Hart. Few of our young people would even recognize these names and most will die believing that John Lennon was a great songwriter. As far as the movies are concerned, the less said the better. Most of the great directors and actors are gone now and we are left with films that contrive to be as morally repugnant as they are aesthetically void.

All in all, it is not difficult to understand why the Spenglerian metaphor of decline continues to haunt civilized Americans. One need not accept the inevitability of degeneration that Spengler

proposed in order to be alive to the dangers he described. There are, to be sure, some signs of hope, but I do not believe that I am alone in thinking that our time may be running out. No civilization that gives itself up to the limitless hedonism that Clecak extols can long endure. It was Ortega y Gasset who pointed out that the benefits of civilization do not fall

from the sky; they are secured by means of sacrifice and effort. I would only add that the maintenance of civilized life is impossible without a citizenry that recognizes the importance of discipline, discrimination, and a sense of community. That being the case, books such as this one, which pander to the worst in us, can only hasten our ruin. □

## One Way Out

Walker Percy: *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book*; Farrar, Straus & Giroux; New York.

by Joseph Schwartz

So too it may be useful to write a novel about the end of the world. Perhaps it is only through the conjuring up of catastrophe, the destruction of all Exxon signs, and the sprouting of vines in the church pews, that the novelist can make vicarious use of catastrophe in order that he and his readers may come to themselves.

—*The Message in the Bottle*

Although *Lost in the Cosmos* is not a novel in the sense that Walker Percy's earlier *Love in the Ruins* is, both conjure up catastrophe. (*Lost in the Cosmos* is, however, a fiction, both in terms of its invented persona and its structure.) In all his work Percy has been concerned with eschatology. More than any major writer of his time, he has been haunted by an intuition of the end of things as we know them. That sensibility has led him to conjure up visions of catastrophe in the hope of teaching a lesson. Instead of this concern leading to suicide, the option with which some of his characters have been greatly preoccupied, it has made Percy a novelist-prophet, "one of the few remaining witnesses to the doctrines of original sin, the imminence of catastrophe in paradise."

The novelist writes about the coming

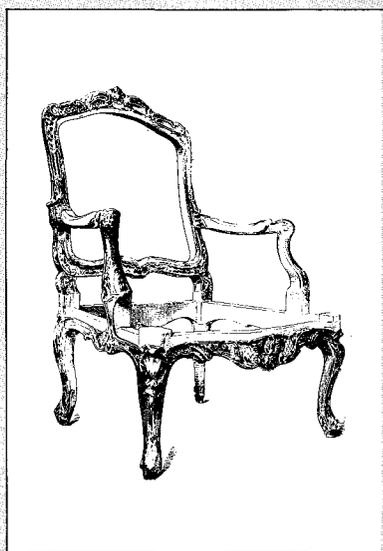
Dr. Schwartz is editor of *Renascence*.

end in order to warn about present ills and so avert the end. Not being called by God to be a prophet, he nevertheless pretends to a certain prescience. . . . The novelist is less like a prophet than he is like the canary that coal miners used to take down into the shaft to test the air. When the canary gets unhappy, utters plaintive cries, and collapses, it may be time for the miners to surface and think things over.

*Lost in the Cosmos* is the "last" self-help book: run, do not walk, to the nearest exit. The last war will soon begin, readers are warned. War, for Percy, is a fit symbol of both the inner and outer chaos caused and experienced by the self-destructive creature that triadic man has become. Having willfully disinherited himself, he is a ghost haunting the cosmos. Percy's book is about "The Strange Case of the Self"—the self in its relationship with itself, with others (the cosmos), and, ultimately, with God. The most exciting formal aspect of this work is its unique structure. Two comparisons may be of help. The first is with Jacques Maritain's *The Peasant of the Garrone*, a series of reflections on the nature of the present time from a philosophical perspective much like Percy's.

I [Maritain] said once to Jean Cocteau: We must have a tough mind and a tender heart, adding with a certain melancholy that the world is full of

## LIBERAL CULTURE



### Veracities

Well, if one thinks about it, it seems that New York has invented a whole new industry of thrills and pastimes for "enlightened" liberal audiences. Not long ago, a "crowd of 2000," according to *The Militant*, the organ of the rabid left, went into ecstasy at Hunter College, where Caribbean communists, headed by former Jamaican Prime Minister Michael Manley, produced a reggae festival of political sadomasochism. One of the speakers promulgated:

Revolution is the last means through which a people can achieve freedom, democracy, and self-determination.

And the audience wallowed in the bliss of being most brutally lied to. □