

porcine discontinuity of most American discourse." Yet he also shows a measured sympathy for Karl Shapiro's attack on the moderns, despite his rejection of Shapiro's idea that poetry (and poets) should be antirational. And in a fine tribute to Conrad Aiken he joins the attack on the sterile and loveless verse of the latter-day modernists, while commending those who are seeking a newer and more vital language (e.g., Denise Lever-

toy and Robert Creeley).

Hayden Carruth apparently likes every kind of poetry except that which is demonstrably bad, and he spends much of his time in this volume separating the graceful and durable from the facile and mundane in 20th-century poetry. For that, as well as for the beauty and precision of his prose, *Working Papers* is noteworthy. □

Food for Memory

Richard Brautigan: *So the Wind Won't Blow It All Away*; Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence; New York.

Richard Sennett: *The Frog Who Dared to Croak*; Farrar, Straus & Giroux; New York.

by Will Morrissey

The first-person narrative form in 20th-century fiction often asserts individualism while undercutting it. Although it is quickly clear who this "I" wants the reader to believe he is, few fail, in the end, to see who he really is. What isn't always apparent is what the author thinks, or believes, about his narrator's seeming and being. By refusing to judge explicitly, many modern novelists and poets depend on their readers' ability to find a constellation of meaning beyond the narrative's landscape—beyond the individual portrayed. Even in this irreligious time we have some idea of Dante's meaning, but what will readers make of James Joyce six centuries after his death? Joyce himself identified an immediate need for literary archaeologists to interpret his books.

The current literary situation mirrors the familiar political tension between liberty—an assertion of individuality—and authority—the embodiment of

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meaning. In modern times especially, individuals resent authority but find themselves diminished when it is destroyed. They often get the worst of both: individualism for Stalin, tyranny for the Russians; or, alternatively, anarchy for the many and subservience for the few. Brautigan explores liberty in America. Sennett explores tyranny in Hungary and the Soviet Union. Both use first-person narrators, and both pose the problems individualism causes.

Brautigan's middle-aged narrator remembers the summer of 1947, when he was 12 years old and "the most interesting thing happening in his life" was watching a husband and wife who fished in a pond while sitting in their living-room furniture, carefully trucked out and unloaded each evening at seven. Imitating their deliberateness, he intersperses his description of one afternoon spent waiting for them with memories of his childhood, culminating in the day his "childhood ended"—when he accidentally shot and killed a friend.

The reviewer for the *New York Times* could find no purpose for this procedure, but the narrator explains it simply enough: "I am still searching for some meaning in the story and perhaps even a partial answer to my own life, which as I grow closer and closer to death, the answer gets farther and farther away." Hence the attempt to reverse aging by the means of memory, to recapture childhood, the time when truth seems

closer—not only for Wordsworth's famous reason but because an adult can see "unknown vectors" the child did not see. Brautigan does this well. He remembers the boredom of childhood. His cuteness, which has irritated more than one reader of his other novels, here contributes to a story that does not omit childhood's childishness. Children ponder lying and truth-telling, fantasy and reality, with an intensity most will lose in adulthood; Brautigan knows something of how these intertwine. So, for example, he has his narrator remember the "very ancient and fragile" lock on an old woman's garage door:

The lock was only a symbol of privacy and protection, but that meant something in those days. If that lock were around today, a thief would just walk up to it and blow it off with his breath.

The narrator remembers these things "so the wind"—today's prevailing viciousness, a sort of realism—"won't blow it all away." His memories recapture not only childhood but the more humane minds of that time and place—the American Northwest a couple of years after World War II, "before television crippled the imagination of America and turned people indoors and away from living out their own fantasies with dignity." This isn't quite as sentimental as it sounds; lonely children who spend their days watching, not participating, often find their way to the eccentric adults (mostly old people—old age is a form of eccentricity) who have time for them. The narrator draws these portraits with a bright child's mixture of sarcasm, curiosity, and fondness.

Brautigan has never offered any but the simplest ideas, and his sentiments—the mixture of satire and sympathy Christianity becomes when secularized—recall Dickens (as do his congruent fascinations for eccentrics and children). His style is from Hemingway. The tone belongs to Brautigan, and it is what makes him a most elusive writer. He is

LIBERAL CULTURE

The Bottom Line

Financiers and their like have always been popularly perceived as a cold-blooded, thick-skinned group: think of Shylock. According to a recent news report, a 29-year-old stockbroker, a mother of two, decided, thanks to a suggestion from her husband, to quash this stereotype—and achieve a hefty return-on-investment at the same time. The entrepreneur, Marina Verola of Fort Lauderdale, Florida, appeared in the March 1983 issue of *Playboy* in outfits not recommended in *Dress for Success*. She gained more than \$12,000. During a New York press conference Mrs. Verola reportedly said, "I'm in the public eye now . . . but I prefer to bank on my brains, not my looks." She



added, "We must maintain the conservative image of Wall Street." One suspects that the brains upon which Mrs. Verola banks are not found where they're usually located. □

straightforward enough. The narrator remembers his childhood recreation of shooting apples in an abandoned orchard. He bought the bullet that killed his friend because he preferred the "dramatic" sound of "a .22 bullet turning an apple into instant rotten apple sauce" to the satisfaction of eating a hamburger in the restaurant next to the gun shop; he had only enough money for one or the other. He identifies bullets with "aggressions," hamburgers with the pleasant eccentricity of the married couple ("Take it nice and easy is my motto," the husband says while cooking one). Brautigan surely thinks of this homey dichotomy as a choice Americans always have before them, and he leaves no doubt that he prefers hamburgers.

After the shooting, his narrator developed a sad/comic obsession with hamburgers ("I was a weird kid," he concedes; "weird" derives from a word that meant fate, "unknown vectors"):

Looking back on it now, I guess I used the hamburger as a form of mental therapy to keep from going mad because what happened in that orchard

was not the kind of thing that causes a child to have *a positive outlook on life*. It was the kind of thing that *challenged your mettle* and I used the hamburger as my *first line of defense*. (Emphasis added.)

This satirical counterpointing of guilt with scoutmaster understatement-by-cliche must leave many readers strewn like apples shot by a weird kid. The problem of tone reveals the problem of meaning. The whole account sidesteps the fact that the accident could have been prevented had the boy known not to fire a gun if his friend could be standing in the bullet's trajectory. The narrator never considers this, his imagination obscuring common sense even after 32 years. What of Brautigan?

One can't know. Whatever Brautigan may think of his narrator, the tone provides contrary signals, or signals one can interpret variously with equal justification. Like his narrator, Brautigan enjoys individuality, liberty, but not the responsibility they force upon us. That goes for imagination as well as for action. He detests the mass imagination of today, pre-

ferring the time when "people made their own imagination, like home-cooking." The result was more palatable, perhaps, because however dotty or injurious it was still on a human scale. But to what extent can an individual really make his own imagination? Brautigan will not or cannot delineate the limits, or the complementary extent to which one must take his bearings from things beyond himself. Responsibility, which must be *to* something, or someone, arises there; Brautigan eludes it.

Brautigan presents the world of pre-adolescence, omitting sexuality, that complication of love and friendship. Sennett, in his imaginary memoir of a Hungarian philosophy teacher named Tibor Grau, devotes only a few pages to childhood, many more to youth and adulthood. Sexuality and politics matter here. The notion that sexuality has to do with liberty could be the reigning illusion of today. Despite illustrated instruction manuals and copious experiences, many still contrive to overlook the fact that sexual activity involves physical linkage—however various—and not unrestricted movement. As an act of liberation, "sex" must disappoint. Reportedly, it often does.

Tibor Grau does not share this illusion. Resented by his public-school classmates for his superior wealth and intelligence, he wanted "to have them, to conquer them"; his sexuality was based not on the illusion of sexual liberation but on the illusion that one's enemies are worth "having," an egalitarian presumption that lies beneath much of what passes for power-hungry elitism. After moving from teenage schoolboys to young, displaced peasants who frequented Budapest's Municipal Park, Grau's "first steps" toward Marxism came, he explains, "when I began to feel such love for some of the older boys that I wanted to stop paying them, imagining that they would freely return my feelings." They didn't, of course, and Grau learned early "how sordid life is," and "how sad and impossible it is to live."

Evidently, life owes its sordidness, sadness, and impossibility to the rarity of concurring love, liberty, and sexuality. Liberty in particular causes the young to be "confused and afraid, as they should be." "To avoid the terrifying solitude of liberty," they "search to find a realm of life in which they can immediately belong." Grau sought love and friendship among the poor, sharing their "anger and hatred against the world." Even in old age, as he writes this memoir, he imagines "hatred of the world as it is" to be "the noblest emotion an adolescent can feel."

Resentment and love of love mix easily; the combination is poisonous. This is shown when Grau remembers becoming a deputy director of "Cultural Propaganda" in Hungary's short-lived socialist regime of 1919. With the rather heavy irony that totalitarianism provokes, Sennett delineates how this poison causes suspicion, betrayal, and lying, not fraternal struggle for truth against shared enemies. Most insightfully, he has Grau write that he foolishly

resisted what turned out to be a routine inquiry not only because he suspected a conspiracy but also because he wanted to assert his liberty; he did not want to be forced into writing an apologia. Sennett knows that the problem of liberty would remain even if we solved the "problems of scarcity," economic and emotional, which socialists believe they can do. Grau reflects that socialism asks and promises too much because "no one can give another more than permission to exist, and that permission entails all manner of mistakes, stupidities, and waywardness." Evil is the denial of this permission, a denial made by too many frustrated—and fraudulent—socialists. The existence Grau praises, moderately, is not *mere* life; "to live is to love something concrete for itself," he writes—mixing Kant's categorical imperative with Marx's materialism, and hoping to avoid the worst aspects of both.

Sennett has Grau survive some 15 years in Stalinist Russia. He gives him an elderly male lover with whom to spend his last years in Hungary; justifiably em-

barrassed by this bluebird finale, he has Grau write defensively:

I know what you will say: Grau, such a self-absorbed, unpleasant man before, now redeemed. You really understand nothing. I simply have something to do. This life has formed for me those habits of small pleasures each day which the young would call the prison of old age.

The point seems to be that the love of something (or someone) for itself is true liberty. It is surely closer to true liberty than either utopian socialism or Marxist "realism." But Grau overlooks something: throughout, he describes himself as a philosopher. However, a real philosopher, Socrates, insisted that loving wisdom differs from loving another human being. As long as he retains his wits, a philosopher always has "something to do." Grau doesn't know this, so he remains an intellectual, not a philosopher at all.

What of Sennett? He is less elusive than Brautigan; I suspect that he does not know the difference either.

The modern individualist recognizes no authority. Yet he often finds his quest to satisfy mere appetites unsatisfying in the end. With no faith in reason or revelation, he can turn only to memory. Not itself authoritative, memory can recreate some old authority. Remembered authority stands against the rapid changes of democracy or the equally rapid but more brutal changes of totalitarianism. Brautigan's narrator attempts to find authority in childhood, rather like an American Rousseau. Sennett's narrator "weeds his memories . . . to clarify and refine his understanding," yielding a materialist Kantianism. The procedures differ, but both men look to the modern substitute for reason and revelation: sentiment. Unfortunately, sentiment's multifariousness equals or exceeds that of reason, or perhaps even that of revelation. As a substitute for other forms of authority, it is insufficiently authoritative. □

LIBERAL CULTURE

The Computerized Parlor

Meeting people in person is always a messy business, especially for wallflowers and misanthropes. But high technology has leaped into the breach. Indeed, said a primate keeper at a Chicago zoo about her attitude before using her home computer, "I was fonder of Simbad (the zoo's 500-pound gorilla) than of most people I knew." Lemuel Gulliver could have appreciated the woman's state of mind. The woman, who code-named herself "Zebra 3" (after a striped Houyhnhnm?), communicated to others across the country through a computer program called "CB Simulator." Through it she "met" a New Yorker who later said, "I didn't even know Zebra 3 was a woman." A marriage—presumably to be

conducted in English, not BASIC—is planned. While this modern, asexual approach to courting is somehow disturbing, it does have a salutary effect on the nation's health. That is, how many cruisers in singles' bars—every night—say "the thing that is not" about the virus known as herpes? □



Bricks, Mortar & Touchstones

Amitai Etzioni: *An Immodest Agenda: Rebuilding America Before the Twenty-First Century*; McGraw-Hill; New York.

by David R. Sands

Despite all the talk about neo-liberalism, it appears that the central intellectual debate in American politics today is taking place within the Republican Party, between two very distinct notions of conservatism. The Reagan triumph of 1980 clarified the debate without settling the fundamental issues. The impulse to "get the government off of our backs," while commendable given the social policies in this country over the past two decades, is just that—an impulse, not a coherent political philosophy. It presupposes that there is a vast network of private charity and local initiative waiting "out there" somewhere to take over what we have grown accustomed to letting the Federal government do for us. The grounds for this presupposition are by no means obvious. In fact, conservatives themselves have been most critical of many of the prominent social trends of postwar America—the decline of the family, the celebration of various forms of hedonism, the impatience for gratification, the disregard for traditional arbiters of taste and authority, in short, modern amoral individualism. One has to wonder whether Social Security should be given into the hands of a populace that made *Pulling Your Own Strings* a best-seller.

One prominent school of conservatives, which follows the tenets of classical 19th-century economic liberalism, sees these qualms as irrelevant. The government, for them, is a mischievous nanny skewing the marketplace with regulations or formulating inane policies that interfere with the traditional family. But for

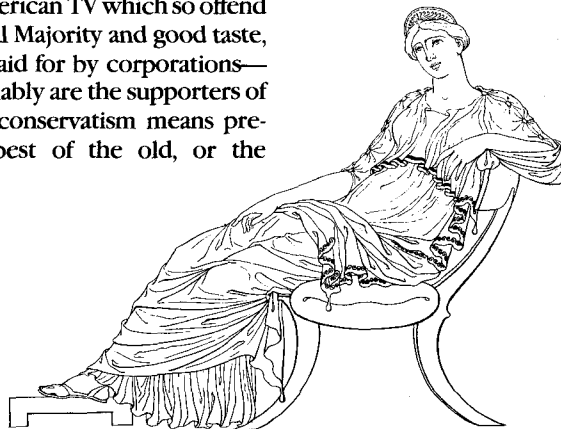
Reaganomics, the New Federalism, or a restoration of familial and civic virtues ever to take hold, a different definition of conservatism must prevail. It must be that of an 18th-century cultural conservatism which places the moral soundness of the community above the leading economic indicators and certainly above most of the traditional liberal criteria for political health, i.e., individual moral autonomy or radical egalitarianism. George Will, one defender of the latter brand of conservatism, writes that "statecraft must be soulcraft; government cannot avoid concerning itself with morals." He decries "the modern 'nightwatchman' theory of government," which "exists only to protect persons and property." These conservatives are willing to give the market the benefit of a large doubt, and they do not underrate the virtues—a work ethic, deferred gratification, individual initiative—that capitalism promotes. However, nor do they see the unfettering of economic activity as the right's primary mission.

Indeed, an argument can be made for the idea that capitalism and capitalists are not necessarily conservative forces at all, that it is only an accident of coalition-building and political style that has placed the National Association of Manufacturers under the Republican banner. The tease and gore broadcast nightly on American TV which so offend both the Moral Majority and good taste, after all, are paid for by corporations—which presumably are the supporters of capitalism. If conservatism means preserving the best of the old, or the

extreme reluctance to embrace the untried, then how can a system of economic organization that brought us the time clock, the factory, the automobile, and the video arcade be conservative?

All of which leads to Amitai Etzioni's important and provocative *An Immodest Agenda: Rebuilding America Before the Twenty-first Century*. It is due more to the confusion of our politics than to any gross inconsistency in Etzioni's thinking that makes this book difficult to label. A social scientist at the George Washington University, Etzioni comes from a most unpromising background, having served stints as a guest scholar at the Brookings Institute and as a senior advisor to Jimmy Carter for one year. He is a Democrat, and he sees his book as a blueprint for a revival of his party's fortunes.

But he pays conservatives the compliment of accepting their definition of the issues, of allowing the right to choose both the battleground and the weapons. There are certain values, he argues, which a healthy America must cultivate and which liberalism has been too embarrassed or distracted to address in recent years. "The Moral Majority has a point; we must concern ourselves more with family, school, neighborhood, nation, and character," Etzioni states.



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