

wright Edward Albee, who came to the University of Cincinnati as a guest speaker and graciously told his audience that in the Mapplethorpe affair Cincinnati was attempting a “kind of Orwellian thought control.” “Democracy is terribly fragile,” lectured Mr. Albee. “It must always be on the lookout for the book burners.” (What a fool. To watch close-up as Cincinnati thrashed out the issues raised by the Mapplethorpe show was to get a nice little glimpse of how resilient and sturdy and distinctly *unfragile* a thing democracy is.) He also announced, “Art cannot be obscene. Only attitudes toward art can be obscene.” If Mr. Albee went on to address the question of whether something obscene can be art, it wasn’t reported.

My favorite appraisal of the Mapplethorpe exhibit came from a woman who, seeking *something* positive to say about the experience for which she’d just paid five dollars, arrived at this: “At least there was no group sex.” I’ll bet you two tickets to a Reds doubleheader that if the depiction of group sex in art is where that woman draws the line, countless arts militants are already deciding they won’t rest until they have “challenged” and “disturbed” her with depictions of group sex in art. After all, nothing less than our “fragile democracy” is at stake. And when she discovers that she has given them a lot more leeway than they have given her, that *any* line is evidence of, say, “Orwellian thought control,” what will she say then?

“At least there was no group sex.” Idiotic pontifications from Edward Albee. It’s that kind of stuff that makes me long for a Royko-like voice in Cincinnati, one that can dish it out a little. But that’s a silly longing. Even without his recent “rube” jab, Mike Royko and the city of Cincinnati wouldn’t last a month together. He would start making fun of the Reds, and then we’d *really* have an uproar. At that point, the *New York Times* would pick up on the story and report that Royko had once made fun of some beloved Berkeley institution “without incident.” And then . . . well, have you ever seen an entire city break out in mental hives?

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Letter From Rome

by Andrei Navrozov

Nothing Better to Do



I have always wanted to spend some time in Rome, for a whole rosary of personal reasons. As with much else in a person’s private life, to recount these in print is to expose oneself to public ridicule. Yes, Rome is a wonderful city. Yes, the food is good.

But then in England, where I live, the new Labour government came in to finish what the Tories started. And since another famous fact about Rome is that it has already fallen, I figured that over here my chances of being buried under the Eurorubble were encouragingly smaller. So I moved. Days are now passing like centuries outside my window, to the ringing of church bells and the flashing of Japanese cameras.

The paramount joy in all this is a newfound superficiality. On my terrace, in the suggestively Decembrist sunshine, I have been reading a collection of Russian memoirs from the 1830’s. How people knew and valued their cities in those days—Petersburg, Moscow—how well they described every façade, every little bridge they had known since childhood! And of course we have all read such memoirs of London, of Paris, of Vienna, even of New York or San Francisco, written by the natural or adoptive children of those cities with the same tenderness, the same observant devotion.

This, alas, is no longer possible. To know a great city like London or Rome nowadays, to know it by heart and in depth and over the span of a lifetime, is to sustain an emotional injury that would render a sensible man all but mute with indignation and shame. Only a giddy foreigner, a pliant, impressionable, superficial stranger, is ignorant enough not to taste the anti-oxidizing agent in his bottle of bubbly *prosecco*; nor has he met enough cranky old-timers to acquire their inevitable bitterness. He knows nothing of the way things used to be 50, 20, even ten years back. To him, everything is the real thing.

“The knowledge that the world is ending,” wrote a Russian writer in the 1920’s, “is what distinguishes an individual from

a philistine.” In retrospect I am beginning to think that this leave of absence from London, a place which during the last 13 years I had learned to use and to love like the great library it is, was really a convoluted means of getting a few months’ respite from living the life of an individual.

Of all the countries I have ever visited, Italy is the only place where one can live like a philistine without wearing trainers, reading the *International Herald Tribune*, or degenerating into an animal in other ways. One look in the dining room of a middle-of-the-road hotel anywhere in Europe will remind us that, at the moment of pouring anemic, bluish milk over their bowls of high-fiber cereal, middle-class Swedish, French, or Belgian families look exactly alike; that is to say, they look American. They are ready for life in the United States of Europe, where everything will be “better and more fun,” as their predecessors in interest used to sing, not always tunelessly, aboard east-bound cattle trains.

By contrast, in Italy, philistine life is possessed of an aesthetic so richly ritualized that a Roman pharmacy owner on a week’s skiing holiday with his family in Cortina d’Ampezzo will be mistaken for a serious nobleman among serious noblemen. Neither he nor his wife will go skiing, of course; *hauteur*, like *couture*, will not be ruffled by rude Teutonic winds; instead, they will join the carefully timed round of cocktails and promenades that exhibit their exquisite, almost hypochondriac idleness, his languid wit, and her new furs to fine advantage.

Admittedly the weight of tradition is responsible. The Italian bourgeois had begun to promenade when the aristocracy still fenced and boxed. Now that the middle classes of the world have united, under the colors of Benetton, in Americanism—sport, most conspicuously, and all the attendant trappings of the sporting life—the Italian is the odd man out. His vision of the active life may be centered on the English country house of a century ago, but unlike Ralph Lauren he never ran and sweated to get there in one generation. To the contrary, the Italian simply promenaded until every bourgeois around him turned *gentilhomme*, and now he promenades among them like a great aristocratic original. None of which, incidentally, has deterred Benetton from selling the Brooklyn Bridge to Brooklyn, or at least Brooklyn Heights.

Apart from tradition, which has saved

the Italians from the embarrassment of ending up like everyone else, another powerful characteristic that humanizes their middle class is a kind of seriousness, a seriousness which at times resembles cheerfulness and at times cheerful resignation. I have already alluded to the image of life which the Americanist set all over the world holds up as a banner of progress, and I allude to it again in this connection. The familiar strangeness of seeing, on the No. 22 bus in central London, a young woman wearing a track suit or a Walkman is explained by the conjecture that she does not enjoy being on the No. 22, indeed that riding it is only a transitory phase of her existence, and that she would gladly swap this for a run in the park or an evening at the local discotheque. Looking around, one may note that just about everyone else on the bus, including the driver and the conductor, shares her anxiety and her sense of displacement.

What is it with people? From the exodus of the Jews from Egypt to a Sotheby's drinks party, everybody wants to be somewhere, if not something, else. You are talking to an old stupid woman with a glass of champagne in her trembling hand, you think you are being polite as a boy scout, you suppose the woman is grateful for the attention, but no! You catch her eyeing the door through which a famous used-car salesman is entering, and before you can murmur something suitable ("Madam, is it not time, now that you are in the frosty autumn of your life, to be thinking of higher things?") she is off like a shot. And for the stupid old woman of the parable, read "everyman," read baker and banker, newspaper editor and lover, bootblack and writer.

A scene of this kind, which is routine in New York, Rockford, or Paris, is almost unobservable in Rome and hilariously inconceivable in a provincial town of Italy. Of course I would not say under oath that there are no waitresses here who are actually critically acclaimed actresses, and no taxi drivers who have had series pilots produced. But what one observes emanating from each individual soul is extreme, almost sacramental seriousness with respect to its predicament at this or that given moment in time. Until it became the mark of the bourgeois, this solemn self-satisfaction used to belong to no particular social group and marked equally the upper and the lower classes throughout Europe. A German grain merchant (see Thomas Mann), a Rus-

sian nobleman (see Tolstoy), and an English orphan (see Dickens) all saw their position in the world as reasonably convincing, reasonably convenient, and reasonably permanent. The main exceptions were poets, men with bad gambling debts, and Hans Christian Andersen's little mermaid—all tragic and romantic and worthy, yes, but not 99.9 percent of the population, either.

What I am trying to say is that the seriousness of the Italian way of life, its solemn ritualism and its cheerful acceptance, now accounts for the incredible fact that only in Italy will one see a mother nursing her child or a beggar begging alms or a butcher slicing meat "as if they had nothing better to do." They don't, and in the world as it is today, this is a miracle well worth watching.

Andrei Navrozov is Chronicles' European correspondent. This article first appeared in the May 1998 issue.

Letter From the Lower Right

by John Shelton Reed

Still Fighting the Civil War



The influx of Northern migrants to these parts continues to produce misunderstanding. Some time ago, the good people of Hillsborough, North Carolina, gave up their right to shoot marauding vermin in their own backyards to an official municipal squirrel-shooter. Citizens whose nut trees were being sacked, gardens despoiled, or houses chewed up (it happens) could call police officer William King, who would come over with his .22 and take care of the problem.

Now, according to the *Chapel Hill Observer*, a pushy newcomer has objected to this arrangement. "This is just pagan, to be out there shooting squirrels," says Karen McKinnon. Last November, she took her case to the town council, which responded by hedging the practice about with bureaucratic restrictions. Owners of all adjoining property must now be notified before a squirrel is shot, and the person requesting the shooting

must be given a leaflet describing non-lethal methods of squirrel-removal. Am I the only one who finds it weird that it's harder to kill a squirrel than to get an abortion?

McKinnon believes that the long-term solution may lie in importing owls to control the squirrel population, but it's not clear why that's preferable. I think if I were a squirrel I'd prefer a .22 slug in the eye to being torn limb from limb by an owl. In fact, I'd prefer it even though I'm not a squirrel. Moreover, I don't understand why an owl is seen as a natural predator and Officer King is not. But then, like most natives, I don't share Ms. McKinnon's Disneyesque view of rodents. Hillsborough resident Cecil Sanford, brother of our lesser-known U.S. senator, quoted a farmer friend on the subject of squirrels: "They ain't nothing but a rat with a bushy tail."

My solution would be to kill two birds with one stone (as the pagan expression has it): I'd arm welfare recipients and encourage them to forage. They could eat what they shoot, or sell it. Squirrel-based Brunswick stew is \$7.00 a bowl at one fancy Chapel Hill restaurant.

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That story illustrates a problem I have, living where I do. I don't want to leave the South, and don't plan to, but I'm afraid it's leaving me. Let me explain.

There's a letter from Robert Frost in which he tells a friend of his plans to move back to New England and get "Yankier and Yankier." That's just about what he did, too, and most of us are glad of it. America's a better place because he did that.

Twenty-odd years ago, living in New York City, my wife and I came to a similar resolve about the South. Unlike poor, tormented Tom Wolfe (the Elder), we knew we could go home again. We did it a *couple* of times a year, and we wanted to do it for good. New York's a great city, but—well, I just had a letter from one of my former students who says she's had enough, too: "It's definitely not a good place for decent, polite Southerners, not even high-strung ones like myself."

But living in the North had changed my idea of where "home" was. I'd come to realize that I could find balm for my Yankee-jangled sensibilities not just in my particular East Tennessee hometown, but 'most anywhere in the South. Driving home, my chronic heartburn always let up somewhere around Hagerstown, Maryland, on old U.S. 11—about