

Little Aristocracies of Our Own

How beastly the bourgeois is,
Especially the male of the species

D.H. Lawrence's lines are still quoted, though most often by writers who know nothing else of his poetry. It is taken for granted that Lawrence was right to condemn the "middle-class values" of the whited sepulchers who pretend to virtues and tastes they do not possess. The male bourgeois may be good to look at, but

Let him meet a new emotion, let him be faced with
another man's need,
let him come home to a bit of moral difficulty, let life
face him with a new demand on his understanding
and then watch him go soggy, like a wet meringue.
Watch him turn into a mess, either a fool or a bully.

It is perhaps not unfair to Lawrence to wonder if, by "new emotion," he meant something like the desire to seduce another man's wife, or if, by "a new demand on his understanding," he intended to convey something like a revolution in which people like Lawrence (who had sympathy for "another man's need") displaced the well-dressed games-playing sons of bankers and brewers.

Lawrence seems to have had a horror of ordinary good looks and decent conventional grooming:

Nicely groomed, like a mushroom
standing there so sleek and erect and eyeable—
and like a fungus, living on the remains of bygone
life
sucking his life out of the dead leaves of greater life
than his own.

The fungus living on a greater life than its own (if I may compress his imagery) is the ordinary man who has been taught to admire Vergil and Handel but cannot, perhaps, just bring himself to throw his wealth and women at the feet of Stravinsky and Lawrence.

Whatever else he was, Lawrence was no Marxist, but something more like an aristocracy of one. Any revolution he took part in would be for his entirely personal gratification. As he advised in "A Sane Revolution,"

If you make a revolution, make it for fun ...

Don't do it because you hate people

do it just to spit in
their eye. ...

Don't do it for
equality,
do it because we've
got too much
equality
and it would be fun to upset the apple-cart
and see which way the apples would go a-rolling.

Don't do it for the working classes.
Do it so that we can all of us be little aristocracies of
our own ...

Nonetheless, I find it hard not to see in his critique of the bourgeoisie the great platitude of modern proletarianism. The bourgeoisie, however superficially attractive, is uncreative and conventional, while really interesting people make the world up as they go along, as if there were a new creation every sunrise. The male is particularly despicable because—well, to tell the truth, it is because he has his pick of the bourgeois females, who, whatever their mental and moral limitations, are still infinitely desirable to someone proud to be a coal miner's son.

The aristocracy was a different case. By Lawrence's day, the House of Lords was a museum for English eccentrics who had long since surrendered power to wealthy members of the higher bourgeoisie. Besides, decadent aristocrats fornicate like cats and have as little thought for next week as a day laborer. You cannot pick up a London newspaper without reading about the death of a noble duke or earl, whose arrests for drug possession, shoplifting, and child molestation are described in politely vague allusions to a "troubled life." It is a matter of time preference, as Edward Banfield argued in *The Unheavenly City*. While dukes, like day laborers, tend to think only of today's pleasures and miseries, members of the middling class, as they proceed up the socioeconomic ladder, think in increasingly long terms—a monthly paycheck, an annual salary, the grandchildren's tuition.

Hatred of the beastly bourgeois was not restricted to proletarian revolutionaries. T.S. Eliot, a respectable bourgeois himself despite his little rebellions, more than once expressed impatience with the dull and pointless world of the pleasant English suburbs.

Here were decent godless people:



Their only monument the asphalt road
And a thousand lost golf balls.

This contempt for the suburban middle classes was only one of the things that so irritated C.S. Lewis about Eliot. Like most Americans, Eliot wanted the English to be more English than they are, and his exasperation with the hollowness of middle-class nicety reminds me a bit of Irish-American tourists who come away from a trip to Ireland disappointed with an almost entirely bourgeois society in which no Victor McLaglen is racing John Wayne down the beach to win the widow's favor, as Maureen O'Hara, forever young and beautiful, looks on.

Let us concede Lawrence's basic point: The male American bourgeois is hard to like and impossible to love. He lacks courage, fire, imagination. Despite the ten-thousand novels written to show the businessman's heroism in going to work every day to make more money and staying married to a nagging and pretentious wife who thinks herself too good for him, we prefer to read about Mafia hit men who cheat on their wives, betray their allies, and murder their friends. At the end of Booth Tarkington's wonderful novel *The Turmoil*, we are supposed to be happy when the poetic dreamer Bibbs Sheridan decides to follow in Old Sheridan's footsteps and become a captain of industry, but we know that he has lost something.

Few of us are born to be poets, and that few probably did not include Bibbs Sheridan, who, in accepting bourgeois responsibilities, becomes a better man, better than the poet *manqué* he had been and better than his brother and sister who, after one generation of wealth, have been corrupted. To the extent there is a bourgeoisie in America, it is the class that defines our character and our virtues. We are not an imaginative or bold people, but a race of imitators and conformists. For good and ill, we have had to wait for fashions to change in Europe before we were willing to become Marxists or reactionaries, and when we did blaze political artistic trails, they led only to the junk heap destined for Jackson Pollock's paintings and John Cage's scores.

Since the closing of the frontier, we have displayed the spirit of enterprise only in business, and even in business, the men who make the greatest fortunes are those who have learned to manipulate government on their behalf. Armand Hammer and Ross Perot are the names that come immediately to mind, but if you look deeply enough, America's recent great fortunes are founded not so much on crime as on a government contract or legal loophole.

The bourgeoisie is or was a type of middle class, but while middle classes are defined in socioeconomic terms—so much money, membership in this but not that club, graduation from Ohio U but not Yale or Wright State—the bourgeoisie was defined by its virtues. Honesty in business, diligence, self-discipline, and self-reliance are the most obvious qualities, but an upper bourgeoisie also borrowed and preserved many of the traditions and interests of the

aristocracy—classical education, literature and art, and good manners. A bourgeois banker may not have actually enjoyed the concerts to which he was dragged by his wife, but he had a part to play in society—a part that earned him sneering contempt from the classes above and below him. When one of our presidential candidates says she is *from* the middle class and *for* the middle class, she is at least half-right, but apart from the total banality of her mind, there is nothing bourgeois about Hillary Clinton.

Hardly anyone has commented on the strange fact that Mrs. Clinton has wrapped herself in the mantle of the middle class in order to appeal to blue-collar voters, who, by any serious definition, do not belong to the middle class. Her rhetoric does not seem strange, because, in America, we are all middle class, from the shift worker laid off at Chrysler to the executive who shipped his job to China. We do speak of Bill Gates and Warren Buffett as rich or even superrich, but no one could possibly accuse them of being aristocrats. Indeed, no one could accuse either of being bourgeois. They lack the cultivation and sense of decency that one could still observe in many of the Midwest's third-generation industrialists. George Babbitt's wealthier friends listened to Beethoven and César Franck on the phonograph; the Dodsworths rattled around Europe, picking up culture, until they were no longer at home in Zenith City. Mr. Gates could buy the Metropolitan Opera lock, stock, and barrel, but no one could dream of him liking *Così Fan Tutte*. I suspect the only opera in which Mr. Gates takes an interest is the Opera web browser.

To understand what a bourgeoisie is (or has been) and of what use it might be again in American life, we need to know a little etymology and a little history. *Bourgeois* is the French equivalent of the German *Bürger*, a corporate member of a city. In the medieval world, a city was not an accidental collection of people making money off one another. It was a corporation with rights and duties stipulated in a charter granted by the emperor or king. A burgh was surrounded by walls, defended by a militia, and governed by legal and political institutions managed by leading members of the corporation. Not everyone who lived in a city belonged to the corporation—far from it. In Florence, the city-corporation or commune was at first the creature of the wealthier guilds, and, although it later permitted the lesser guilds to participate, Florence was owned by its leading men and operated by the more important guilds.

The older English word for *bourgeois* was *citizen*, a word that still retained its meaning in Shakespeare's day, when flower sellers, petty tavern keepers, and pickpockets did not count as citizens. In 11th- and 12th-century England, Londoners counted as aristocrats, because the citizens fielded a formidable army that had more than once defended its walls against royal forces. This conception of citizens as corporate members in a commonwealth lies behind our republican view of the active and responsible citizen who has a stake in society. Although the significance of citizenship was already in steep decline in the 18th century, English and American Whigs, nonetheless, viewed possession

of property and a capacity for public service as part of the bundle of qualities that made up a citizen.

The nations of Europe and northern North America became, in the 19th century, preeminently bourgeois. The great industrialists, merchants, and bankers were so obviously the ruling class that, during the socialist phase of the revolutionary movement that destroyed Christendom, the bourgeoisie replaced crown, Church, and aristocracy as the principal target. Even today, bourgeois attitudes and “values” can be used as a metaphor for everything that has to be eliminated from modern life on the way to the earthly paradise. The normal family is stigmatized by its enemies and praised by its misguided defenders as “bourgeois,” and the moral principles that undergird the family—chastity and fidelity—are hopelessly bourgeois. While all forms of folk music, no matter how primitive, bogus, or obscene, are worthy of study and praise, a lingering affection for Haydn or Donizetti or even Richard Rodgers is bourgeois. Only the avant-garde is exempt, along with music so early or exotic that no one enjoys it.

Nothing, in fact, can be more reactionary, more bourgeois, than careful and effective speech, which is why today’s university teachers interweave platitudes and interjections together with academic jargon into something that sounds like Tommy Chong getting high on a sociology Ph.D. D.H. Lawrence, God rest his tortured soul, would be appalled.

The bourgeois, being neither aggressive nor creative, were too occupied with getting and spending to maintain themselves for long against their Marxist enemies, and beginning in the late 19th century (at least), bourgeois children were being coopted by the enemies of their class. I do not know at what point the struggle was lost, but it was sometime between the publication of such books as *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1919) and the spate of such big-selling antibourgeois novels as *Babbitt* (1922). World War I is, perhaps, the most reasonable dividing line between the world that formed Booth Tarkington and the world of Sinclair Lewis.

The revolt against the bourgeoisie was stalled by depression and war, though it reemerged among Beat writers of the 1950’s. But Jack Kerouac and Paul Goodman (unlike Allen Ginsberg) were too intelligent and too honest to be the leaders of anything in a culture that rejected all standards, and the antibourgeois revolution was taken over by illiterate college students in the 1960’s. With a few exceptions, the student protestors tended to be the offspring and grandchildren of working-class immigrants, and, in a social world dominated by country-club liberals and country-club Republicans, they naturally felt themselves outsiders. No matter how successful a Jewish or Irish businessman might be, he still found bourgeois civility an ordeal, and

his unwashed children—kids such as Tom Hayden, Jerry Rubin, Mark Rudd, David Horowitz—led a feeble uprising against all things traditional, orderly, disciplined, moral, clean, and wholesome. Some of them may have changed—or pretended to change—their ideology, but they have never wavered in their hostility to civility.

Silly and feeble as their protests were, the kids won by default, simply by riding a wave that had been churned up many centuries ago by moral and political revolutionaries from Montaigne to Marx. The idea that losers such as Jerry Rubin or Mark Rudd could lead a parade, much less a revolution, is something invented by the editors of *Commentary* and the *Nation* on a slow news—or, rather, slow lies—day.

Sad to say, children of WASP bourgeois families were content to follow the trends and join the revolution. When had the young bourgeois been anything but conventional? It was apparent at the time that the revolution was winning, as soon as kids (the word is used advisedly) from decent families quit bathing or cutting their hair and took to wearing blue jeans, the uniform of the proletarian mass-man. It is ironic (which, in American, refers to any B that can be logically deduced from A) that the rough clothes of men who work with their hands has become *de rigueur* for people who will never do a day’s work. But middle-class Americans who adopt their denim habit are right: For all their money or degrees, they are just as much proletarian mass-men as any dues-paying member of the AFL.

The stupidity of those days (which are also these days) must have been exasperating to any serious revolutionary, and the “protest kids” inspired contempt among radicals as diverse as Pier Paolo Pasolini and Jean-Luc Godard, themselves afflicted with bourgeois values such as regard for courage, intelligence, mental coherence, and clarity of expression. In America, English has been a dead language for several decades. Nothing, in fact, can be more reactionary, more bourgeois, than careful and effective speech, which is why today’s university teachers interweave platitudes and interjections together with academic jargon into something that sounds like Tommy Chong getting high on a sociology Ph.D. D.H. Lawrence, God rest his tortured soul, would be appalled.

The old bourgeoisie is as dead as the old aristocracy: The two classes, at least in America, have merged into a single fossil type. But the principles on which it is based are enduring: a responsible patriotism that stems from a proprietary sense of being part of a society, integrity in business and public life, self-control, a decent regard for other people, a willing acceptance of social conventions, and a healthy respect for the little hypocrisies that permit us to get through the day without insulting, beating, or killing one another. It is not, from the perspective of either Saint Francis or D.H. Lawrence, a very lofty code, but it is the best we have here in America. You say you want a counterrevolution? Put on a tie, get a haircut, throw away your blue jeans, and try, for Heaven’s sake, to learn English. ◊

Sins of Omission

by Roger D. McGrath

Payback for Pearl Harbor

I was recently visiting with an old Marine Corps buddy, Ralph Willis, at his home on California's central coast. At 86, he is one of the fortunate few who are still alive to describe their experiences fighting the Japanese in the Pacific during World War II. Ralph put down some of his memories in *My Life as a Jarhead*, which caused a local newspaper to send a young reporter to interview him. She told Ralph that she was eager to hear about his experiences. Not knowing how much background material the young reporter might need, Ralph asked her if she was well versed in the various Pacific campaigns. Well, no, she answered, but she had seen Clint Eastwood's two movies about Iwo Jima.

The realization that those two deeply flawed films were the extent of the reporter's knowledge of the war in the Pacific made Ralph shudder. Names such as Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Saipan, and Okinawa meant nothing to her. How different it was a couple of generations ago, when those battles were household names in America. Now, they are not even recognized by college graduates.

Although most college students today know something about the Japanese sneak attack that got us into the war, few can identify the battle that was "payback" for Pearl Harbor. It took place at Truk Atoll, whose beautiful, deep-water lagoon provided Japan with her greatest fleet anchorage in the Pacific. Along with the rest of the Caroline Islands, Truk had been mandated by the Treaty of Versailles to Japan following World War I. In violation of the treaty, Japan soon closed the Carolines to the outside world and began fortifying key islands, especially the six principal islands of Truk Atoll. By the time Japan was finished, Truk had become the "Gibraltar of the Pacific." The heart of Truk's lagoon lay 30 miles inside a great barrier reef; any attacking force would have to come by air.

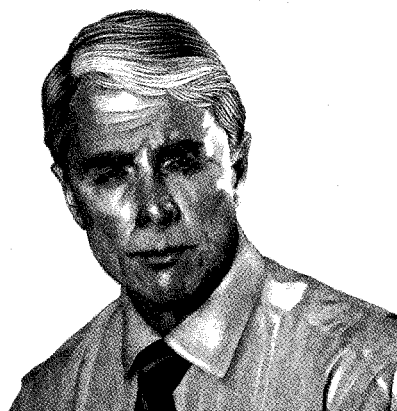
To protect against such an assault, the Japanese had four airstrips operational and some 365 planes at the ready.

Task Force 58, commanded by Adm. Marc Mitscher, included five fleet carriers—*Enterprise*, *Yorktown*, *Essex*, *Intrepid*, and *Bunker Hill*—and four light carriers. There were also enough battleships, cruisers, destroyers, and submarines to push the total of ships involved to more than 60. Aptly code-named Operation Hailstone, the attack on Truk was launched before dawn on February 17, 1944. As the first rays of the rising sun reached Truk, 72 Hellcats, led by Lt. Cmdr. William "Killer" Kane, swept down on the islands. Japanese planes that got off the ground were blown out of the sky by the twos and threes. Kane and his wingman shot down five Zeros in five minutes before turning their attention to strafing planes on the ground.

"Jap airplanes were burning and falling from every quarter," said Lt. Cmdr. Ed Owen, "and many were crashing on takeoff as a result of strafing them on the ground. Ground installations were exploding and burning, and all this in the early golden glow of dawn. At times it might have been staged for the movies."

Watching the raid from the ground was Maj. Gregory "Pappy" Boyington. The leading Marine ace had been shot down and captured six weeks earlier while raiding Rabaul. Since he was a special prize, he was being transported to Honshu for interrogation and torture. At the exact moment that the plane carrying Boyington touched down to refuel, Kane and his Hellcat pilots began their attack. Boyington was hustled off the plane. The first thing he saw was a Hellcat, only a few dozen feet above the ground, screaming over the airfield, and "spraying .50-calibers all through the Nip aircraft standing there in front of us."

Wave after wave of American planes continued to strike Truk throughout



the day. The new Hellcats, which had replaced the older and slower Wildcats, and the American pilots proved more than a match for the vaunted Zeros and the Japanese pilots. Lt.(jg) Alex Vraciu, who had been Butch O'Hare's wingman, shot down four Japanese planes. Lt. Robert Duncan, who had a baby back home in Illinois he had not yet seen, also got four. Lt. Hamilton McWhorter, the first Hellcat ace, Lt.(jg) Tom McCelland, Lt.(jg) Eugene Valencia, and Lt. Armistead Smith got three each. By the end of the day, U.S. Navy pilots had shot 124 enemy planes out of the sky and destroyed that many again on the ground.

During the night, Mitscher sent specially equipped Avengers to pound Truk. At the same time, eight of Mitscher's warships circled the atoll to intercept Japanese ships attempting to escape the carnage in the lagoon. With the next morning came more American fighter and bomber sweeps. By noon, there were few targets left to hit. Sitting on the bottom of the lagoon were 13 Japanese warships and 32 merchant ships. Another two warships were on the ocean floor just outside the entrance to the lagoon. Some 275 Japanese planes had been destroyed. Thousands of Japanese had been killed. The United States suffered the loss of only 40 men and 25 planes.

The raid rendered the Gibraltar of the Pacific impotent, allowing U.S. forces to bypass the once putatively impregnable base on the way to Tokyo. As Hellcat pilot Ed Owen later said, "Up 'til that time the Truk raid was 'the greatest show in town,' and I wouldn't have missed it for anything." ◀