

Regenerative man

GUY DAVENPORT

A STEADY CROW FLYING NNE across Boston Bay for twenty miles from Quincy on the south shore to Salem on the north moves along a line that criticism must inevitably draw between John Cheever, who was born in Quincy in 1912, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, who was born in Salem in 1804. Cheever, who died on June 17, shared with Hawthorne a mastery of the short story, a fascination for the slippery tussle between human nature and moral codes, and a fine, forgiving sense that grace can emerge out of the most wayward darkness of the heart.

The resemblances between these two scions of New England puritanism are seductive. They both put Italian paganism and American innocence in an ironic and heartbreaking contrast. They shared symbolic vocabularies of light and dark, old and new, spiritual deprivation and fulfillment, nature and civilization, man and woman. Cheever saw life as a process of impulses whose power to shape our destiny becomes apparent only when we can no longer extricate ourselves from them. The world is beautiful and fun; what we don't know in our joy of it is that what feels so good is addictive and the hangover bitter. All Cheever plots are about good intentions plunging with energy and verve into a trap. The older he got, the more he liked to think that the trap is purgatorial, is, in fact, good for us. Life has no other shape.

Unlike Hawthorne, he had the ability to see how gloriously ridiculous the fly is on its way into the spider's parlor. Cheever was one of the funniest of American writers. In an early story he brings a preternaturally innocent mid-western couple to Manhattan, where

they live up to every sophisticate's ideal of country bumpkins. They are so incredibly gauche that we are told that their clownishness at a party caused the guests to walk in circles beating each other on the back. (This perfect economy of description is maintained in the latest, last novella, *Oh What a Paradise It Seems*, where a *mafioso* is given us deftly: "... one of those small, old Italians who always wear their hats tipped forward over

giving in, giving up, or giving an inch. He is well-to-do, he has been a skillful man all his life in business, in love, in savoir-faire. Cheever slips him neatly into a plot where greed fouls a lake, murders an honest man, intimidates a village; in short, into our world, which can be seen as a disintegrating fabric rotten in every seam.

This is the essential Cheever plot: a pattern of characters embroiled in self-perpetuating disaster, with a Dostoyevskian horror of the suffering of the innocent. There is an instructive contrast to be made between that other master of urban life, John O'Hara, and Cheever. Their stories begin the same way and move into the same kind of misunderstandings and accidents. O'Hara the pessimist drives on into bleakness, scruffy tragedies, dark lessons for us of moral gangrene. Cheever the optimist with a wicked smile and sheer joy at the shamelessness of his incurable brightness insists

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their brows as if they were, even in the rain, enduring the glare of an equinoctial sun. These same old men walk with their knees quite high in the air as if they were forever climbing those hills on the summits of which so much of Italy stands.") It is not until we have finished the story about the rubes and city folk that we realize where Cheever's sympathy was. It was, as always, with the hapless fools.

Fool is the right word. Cheever was—like Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty—interested in human nature at its most vulnerable, because he was convinced that it could not be defeated, that this world is its home, that in our worst ineptitude at living, we are, if only we can see it, somehow thriving and being a success.

In this elegant novella, Cheever's protagonist is an old man whose sensual life is guarded like a match struck in a high wind. He has no intention of

that things right themselves and turn out all right, or as all right as we can expect, given the nature of our folly.

SO THIS LAST WORK, FOR all its charming (and unapologetically bawdy) realism, its unfooled view of nastiness, and its opportunity to be despairing, is a triumphant statement about the human condition and its regenerative resources. The fouled pond is cleansed and its polluters put out of business. The old protagonist keeps discovering surprises in his determination to squeeze all the juice out of life. But Cheever knows that these local victories are precisely that: applicable only to this place, these lives. Squalor worsens elsewhere; that's a problem somewhere else. I doubt if Cheever would have generalized any of his particularities (one would have gotten that wicked smile for an answer if one had

Among GUY DAVENPORT's recent works are *The Geography of Imagination*, *Trois Caprices*, and *The Resurrection in Cookham Churchyard*.

dared ask). He was not interested in framing laws of nature, only in describing with lasting authority special cases of human nature.

In one of the stories there is a rakish dog (it looks like a cavalier at the court of Charles II) who works a rich suburban neighborhood on evenings when cooking is done on backyard grills. He can nip over a hedge and make off with a rare steak before you've noticed a dog anywhere about. He smiles a lot, this dog, and has beautiful manners. He perhaps knows with great accuracy that three martinis induce inattention

in bipeds, and that their minds, these nice people with such toothsome steaks, are on adultery and the stock market and gossip from the country club. Of morality the dog knows nothing, except that it is a highly moral skill to steal with such style and grace.

Dogs were created hunters and carnivores. In Cheever's novel *Bullet Park* a teen-aged boy with a luxurious house to live in, well-to-do parents, every opportunity for success, curls up in his bed and refuses to respond to any entreaty. He has rejected everything, for no reason anyone can discover. I think

in all of Cheever's brilliant writing we are meant to see that boy who has given up in sharpest contrast to the elate, thieving dog. Some slip from grace that Hawthorne brooded on all his life keeps most of us from the lively successes of the dog, and some slip from what we have won back of that lost grace curls some of us up in defeat. Between these two states Cheever's characters move, foolish, anguished, most lost when they imagine they have arrived, happiest when they are wise enough to know that to be alive and free for a few hours is all there is. ■

In Print

IF YOU ARE AS COMPULSIVE A reader of newspapers as I am, you are probably aware that most syndicated political columnists get away with murder. What they offer two or three times a week in the place of the reporting and hard analysis that are supposed to be their job varies, of course. In the case of "the most pre-tentious journalist in captivity," it is a series of obiter dicta sprinkled with Bartlett-type quotations, some of which are *not* from British Tory prime ministers. Others agonize for the required 800 words or so on why they just-can't-cope with the latest development on the political scene, while a few attempt to substitute a would-be "lively" style for the absent substance.

One columnist who gives you your money's worth and more, however, is *INQUIRY*'s own Stephen Chapman (who has recently joined us as a contributing editor). His well researched and carefully argued newspaper columns are the kind of work another writer would stretch over three pieces, or else outrageously pad and try to sell to the *Atlantic*. The trouble has been that up to now no one could read Steve's columns who didn't buy the *Chicago Tribune*, where he has been appearing on Thursdays and Sundays (and occasionally as an unsigned editorial writer) for the past year. Now, however, Chapman is being syndicated by the Tribune Company Syndicate, and ten papers have started buying the column. Those of our readers who are interested in raising the

level of political debate, might consider suggesting Chapman to their local newspapers.

Volume 2, Number 1 of the *Cato Journal* has appeared and is devoted to the question of pollution and its remedies, reprinting almost all of the papers on that subject presented at a Cato Institute symposium held in Palo Alto last year. Among the authors are *INQUIRY* former editor Ronald Hamowy and contributors Murray Rothbard and Gerald Sauer. This 300+ page issue is well worth its \$5.00 price.

Some recent works by *INQUIRY* authors: Charles Tomlinson has just published *The Oxford Book of Verse in English Translation* (\$37.50), a new anthology that collects the finest poetic translations in our language from Gavin Douglas's sixteenth-century Scottish version of the *Aeneid* to contemporary work (including translations by other *INQUIRY* contributors like Guy Davenport and Donald Davie). . . . David Barton, whose poems have appeared in *INQUIRY*, has just brought out his first volume of verse, *Surviving the Cold*, in the prestigious new *Quarterly Review of Literature* series (\$10.00). Evidently Barton's admirers extend beyond the staff of our magazine, because this volume has won him a fellowship at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown.

In its issue of June 19, the *Economist* featured a lengthy and highly informative survey of Japanese technology by its science and technology editor, Richard Casement. The article pro-

vides, besides a fascinating dissection of the Japanese economic miracle and a multitude of juicy details, a welcome antidote to the common view that farsighted government action has been essential to Japanese success. Says Casement: "In America and Britain over half of all R and D is paid for by the governments. In Japan, the figure is much smaller. This is sensible of the Japanese. . . . Projects backed by governments tend to be big schemes with small commercial prospects: ones that industry should be sensible enough to stay clear of." In fact, the most helpful action of the Japanese government has been to "encourage a financial and economic climate that favors investment." As for farsighted government: After the Second World War, a small new company called Sony wanted to purchase a license for the transistor from Bell Labs, which had found it couldn't make money from it; "bun-gling bureaucrats in Tokyo put up great resistance to letting Sony have the \$25,000 in foreign exchange needed to buy the transistor license." Casement traces Japanese success not to the protectionist policies and government-coordinated export strategies so often cited, but to much more potent economic factors: high savings and investment rates, thorough market research, superb quality control, choosy domestic consumers, excellent workers, and aggressive management. As he puts it, "The market is king in Japan and companies respond rapidly to its changing fashions." —R.R.

The butcher of Königsberg?

DAVID GORDON

LEONARD PEIKOFF'S ENTRY into the "why-Hitler?" sweepstakes comes to us with the imprimatur of the late Ayn Rand, who in her introduction hails the book as "brilliantly reasoned." Her followers regarded Miss Rand as a major philosopher, but I do not think even her most ardent devotees would claim her to have been an authority on the history of ideas. Had she been, it is difficult to see how she could have lavished praise on this misguided work. I cannot recall any other book that matches this one in its distortion of the history of philosophy.

Peikoff's principal thesis is a simple one. The prevalent explanations of the rise of Hitler to power in 1933 do not penetrate to the essence of the matter. Some historians have pointed to the failure of the Weimar Republic's successive governments to deal with the Great Depression as a principal factor inducing the desperate masses to succumb to the promises of radical change made by the National Socialists. Others have emphasized the fact that key sectors of German society—the army, the higher echelons of the civil service, and many of the intellectuals—did not accept the republic. Still other historians claim to explain Hitler by an innate depravity on the part of the Germans. (Peikoff rightly gives this last "explanation" short shrift, rejecting it as racist.) While recognizing that many of these accounts contain some truth, Peikoff finds the root of the matter elsewhere. (Oddly enough, in his canvass of the "superficial" factors explaining Hitler's rise, Peikoff does not find it necessary to mention German resentment of the Treaty of Versailles, though it was in fact the most persistent theme in German foreign policy throughout the in-

terwar years. The treaty appears only once, in the course of his summary of the Twenty-Five Points of the Nazi party program.)

What then is the key to the mystery? According to Peikoff, if one seeks a *fundamental* explanation for the rise of Hitler, one must consult the science of fundamentals, that is, philosophy. Ludwig Feuerbach once said, "Man is what he eats." Peikoff has a different view—to him, man is what he believes about metaphysics, the theory of knowledge, and ethics. And it is because most Germans had distorted ideas on these fundamental subjects that they were unable to see the obvious flaws in the nostrums peddled by Hitler. The main reason, in turn, for their mistaken ideas was the malignant influence of Germany's foremost philosopher—Immanuel Kant.

Peikoff does not put all the blame for Nazism on Kant; other philosophers, like Plato and Hegel, must take their share of responsibility. But, however implausible it may at first sight have seemed, I was not exaggerating in stating that Peikoff regards the mild-mannered sage of Königsberg as a proto-Nazi. Peikoff goes so far as to say of life in the Nazi concentration camps: "It was the universe that had been hinted at, elaborated, cherished, fought for, and made respectable by a long line of champions. It was the theory and the dream created by all the anti-Aristotelians of Western history." The reader who has gotten as far as this point in the book will have no doubt as to the identity of the chief anti-Aristotelian.

WHAT IS SO BAD ABOUT Kant? According to Peikoff, Kant downgraded the physical world to which we gain access through our senses as a mere "phenomenal" realm. It was nothing but an appearance as compared with the "noumenal" world, which only faith, not logic, could grasp. In ethics, Kant spurned individual happiness as a matter of no moral worth; instead, per-

sons were to subordinate themselves entirely to a duty that bore no relation to their interests as human beings.

These doctrines, Peikoff holds, paved the way for Hitler. The Nazis rejected reason—Kant taught that reason can teach us nothing of the world beyond mere appearance. Hitler's movement demanded that individuals sacrifice themselves for the common good—again, a theme straight out of Kant's ethics. So pervasive was Kant's influence, Peikoff argues, that no important group in the Weimar Republic dissented from the baleful doctrines of irrationalism, altruism, and collectivism. The decadent expressionist artists of the left shared the same Kantian irrationalist assumptions as their right-wing detractors. No one in Weimar Germany had the intellectual resources to mount an effective resistance to Hitler, hence his triumph in 1933.

In order to resist Hitler, what would have been required (but was nowhere to be found) was a correct understanding of philosophical basics. Specifically, a clear-sighted defender of reason needs to acknowledge the existence of the external world (not a very demanding requirement, one would have thought) and accept an egoist ethics that rejects the duty of individual sacrifice. Someone who accepts these truths has implicitly rejected Kant in favor of the foremost pre-twentieth-century philosopher, Aristotle. In our own day, however, reason has made further advances: Ayn Rand has presented Aristotelian philosophy in a more consistent way than has ever been done before, purging it of the remnants of Platonism entangled in it.

Although, in the absence of Rand's novels, no one before our own time was in a position to see the truth full and entire, the founders of the American Republic came close. In their stress on individual rights and their basically secular outlook, the Founding Fathers were good Aristotelians. But the story of the United States is not altogether a happy one. In the nineteenth century, German philosophy was imported into our hitherto Enlightenment-oriented culture. Its influence has now become so dominant that the rationalism and individualism upon which the United States was founded have been displaced by the altruism and denigration of reason characteristic of—you guessed it—Kant's philosophy. Should this trend continue, an American version of Nazism may well ensue.

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