Matt Mutino on TORTURE AND AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

Peter Moffit on CHINA’S ENERGY AMBITIONS

R. Daniel Smith on THE VALUE OF LANGUAGE MAVENS

Thomas Manganaro on RICHARD DAWKINS

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and

Alex Beinstein interviews MICHELLE OBAMA
The Midway Review is a nonpartisan magazine of political and cultural analysis and criticism, written and published by students at the University of Chicago. We are a forum for civil debate across the political spectrum and across the humanities and social science disciplines, and for serious reflection on current events, culture, politics, religion, and philosophy.

The Midway Review was founded in Autumn 2005 by Rita Koganzon.

We are accepting Winter Quarter submissions. Please consult http://midwayreview.uchicago.edu/ for submission guidelines.

Letters to the editor may be addressed to midrev-staff@listhost.uchicago.edu.
We ask that letters be limited to 350 words or fewer.

Publication of the Midway Review is made possible by the Student Government Finance Committee, the College of the University of Chicago and the Collegiate Network.

The Midway Review is printed by MidAmerican Printing.
The following interview was conducted by e-mail this past May. Michelle Obama declined to answer two of the questions posed to her: Do you think the lack of [American] response to the genocide occurring in Darfur stems from racism? and When Barack Obama ran for Congress in 2000, his opponent Bobby Rush called him an “elitist.” As his wife and confidante, can you please refute that? —Eds.

How do you think the role of the First Lady has shifted throughout the course of American history? Are there any former First Ladies that you admire, who might serve as role models if you were to become First Lady?

I get the question a lot about what kind of First Lady I would be and the truth is—my primary concern as it has always been—is my family. I’m not really giving a lot of thought at this point to the role I would play in January 2009—I’m much more concerned about the schedule for next week—making sure our daughters are taken care of, that homework is done, that play dates are planned, that my responsibilities at work are taken care of. There are a lot of strong women that I admire—both First Ladies of the White House, and first ladies of other houses—like my mom and my friends. I believe what modern women have in common is their drive for doing it all and having it all—and their constant attention to the many pieces of their lives and performing daily minor miracles to get it all done—I have met many women like that in life and on the campaign trail—and I look forward to continuing to meet them and learn from them along the way to the 2008 election.

Given your background in health care, is that an issue you would like to tackle as First Lady? If so, how would you approach it differently than former First Lady Hillary Clinton?

You know, the health care crisis we’re currently facing can’t wait until the end of this campaign—it’s something our communities must deal with now. Emergency rooms are at capacity, operating at huge volumes, turning people away or making them wait for hours. Because folks are using the ER for their primary medical care, it’s driving up the crowd and driving down the effectiveness of the facility and the care for the people who need it. I believe communities must tackle this problem together with an asset-based, rather than a deficit-based, approach—identifying ways community resources can play a role in remedying this struggle, and educating and guiding patients towards primary care centers that can be more immediately helpful and financially less burdensome.

There has been much discussion about the difficulties women face in balancing work and motherhood. With the cost of living on the rise, most families need two incomes to survive. Where do you stand on this?

Well this is a dilemma women across the country are facing today. Every woman I know, regardless of race, education, income, background, is struggling to keep her head above water. We have tried to convince ourselves that being able to do it all is a badge of honor—if not a necessity—and we have to be careful not to lose ourselves in the process.

More often than not, we are the primary care takers of our children—scheduling babysitters, planning play dates, keeping up with regular doctor’s appointments, supervising homework,
handing out discipline. Usually, we are the ones responsible for ensuring that the household runs smoothly: cooking, cleaning, laundry, shopping, home repairs.

And for those of us who work outside of the home as well, we have the added challenge of coordinating these responsibilities with our jobs. If a child gets sick, we are the ones who are juggling our schedules to be home with them. If a toilet overflows, we are the ones frantically rescheduling that 9 a.m. meeting so that we can meet the plumber. And when all of that is said and done, we have the added social pressure and expectation to be attractive, charming and delightful mates—well groomed, in good spirits, ready to be supportive of our significant others.

I’m tired just thinking about it all. So I think what it comes down to is that women and families are not getting the support that they need to thrive. We have spent the last decade talking a good game about Family Values, but I haven’t seen much evidence that we actually value women or families. We have been ignored and we must take better care of ourselves and our community, and our government needs to give us the support to do so.

MSNBC just fired Don Imus over his “nappy haired ho” comment. Do you think he should have been fired, or were his comments taken out of proportion? Should the African American community hold record companies, producers, and artists as accountable or more accountable than they do for NBC and CBS for the plethora of degrading music which floods the public airways?

We have reached a point in our society that there is an unacceptable use of hate-filled language on our airwaves. But my feeling on the Rutgers women was that these young women were simply doing everything we want our girls to do—they go to college, they work hard, they are athletic and they don’t deserve to be treated as they were...no young woman deserves this regardless of what she has done in her life until then...but unfortunately this stuff happens all the time.

Senator Obama speaks about how faith is very important to him. Was it very important to you growing up and is it something you value now? Is faith something you emphasize with your two daughters?

Barack and I are raising our daughters to not just have strong faith, but strong belief in themselves and strong care and concern for their community and the world around them.

What most excites your daughters about possibly living in the White House, and what most concerns them? What are you most concerned about for your children if they do become members of the First Family?

What most excites them? The prospect of getting a dog. They are 5 and 8 years old, and that was their first question after we told them their dad was going to run for president. In fact, our oldest daughter Malia has already started to research just what kind of dog she’d like.

Of all previous United States Presidents, which one does Barack Obama remind you of the most and why?

What I love about Barack is that he has always been his own man. A strong, grounded man who has a more diverse set of experiences than anyone I know—a mom from Kansas, a dad from Kenya, growing up in Hawaii with his grandparents, international travel at such a young age. A Harvard law degree that he could have used to cash out, but instead he chose to make change—as an organizer who rolled up his sleeves and worked within
communities to turn the world from what it was to the world that it could be. And working with people from our community to Congress every day since. So to me, no one compares to Barack.

Why do you think college students, in particular, are drawn to Barack?

This campaign is not just about electing Barack Obama. It is about building a movement—a movement that all of us are ready for. A lot of people feel disconnected, they're demanding a new direction—and college students are organized and vocal and passionate about their futures. And Barack is organized, and vocal and passionate about them and their futures too.

This election is about engaging people in the democratic process so that when its time for a politician or a group of politicians to take a stance, they’re not doing it on their own, they’ll be doing it with the American people saying this is what we want this is how we want it. These are the priorities, these are the things we care about it. I think this is how democracy was structured and it’s only been working partially until now. You need somebody with the leadership and the vision and the ability and the skill and a person who can dissect complicated issues. But we won’t move in this direction without moving there together. We have to be engaged. Our democracy is based on the will of the people, and this campaign relies on everyone’s participation.

from the “Letters of the World” series:

The famed Ogharihtic sadh, “The Oxcart and the Hammer of Civilization”

This particular pictogram (see fig. a) led to more bloodshed than any other in the ancient and proud history of the Ogharihtic people. Their culture having largely coalesced out of a nearly-universal affinity and respect for the regionally grown sugar-cane (the akhadth), the Ogharihtic men and elders traditionally spent the latter part of the day lazing about in the sugar fields, eating slowly (and as later scholars would perhaps add, even slothfully) from the cane that formed their cultural and economic lifeblood. This afternoon ritual, which was typically exercised ten days per week (following the Ogharihtic twelve-day–week cycle), though it began likely as a simple hedonistic endeavor, evolved through several hundred years to be signified by a sort of religious zeal and seriousness that would appear repeatedly in later successor-cultures’ late afternoon food rituals.

It appears that the sadh initially did not bear any meaning related to sugarcane or the afternoon akhadth ceremony; it seems, quite contrarily, to have referred to a a sort of oxcart whose typically Ogharihtic decagonal wheels were prized among the neighboring kingdoms. But around the turn of the thirteenth or fourteenth Ogharite Dynasty, in the Ancient Kingdom, The-King-Whose-Name-Is-Unspoken (thus evolved through several hundred years to be signified by a sort of religious zeal and seriousness that would appear repeatedly in later successor-cultures’ late afternoon food rituals.

The actual upshot of this shift must have been totally unforeseen by the King-Whose-Name-Is-Unspoken and his court. As soon as the new proto-dictionary was circulated (a matter of several days, owing to the swiftness of royal messengers), marauding militias who called themselves, loosely, the “defenders of the [crop?]” initiated an enormous Kingdom-wide search for anyone who’d ever written the former-

How was a mere lexical shift to instill such politically advantageous zeal? Fascinatingly, by a simple and deft change definition that would remain ensconced in the Ogharite language for more than a millenium after its adoption. While the former meaning of the word had been, as aforementioned, a sort of oxcart, the new definition, as found in the now-famous Randolf Codex (1846) read as follows: “The sign whose [shape/name?] is seen by the grasshoppers as they [swarm?] and consume Ogharite akhadth.”

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Following the bloodshed, the word became deeply taboo, and no written reproduction of it appears to have been done for least seven centuries. It is thought that the pronunciation of the pictogram seems to have been preserved only through the final words of successive generations of Ogharites, who permitted themselves to utter the syllable only when they knew death to be imminent.
The popular blogger/writer Andrew Sullivan recently engaged Bret Stephens of the Wall Street Journal in a debate regarding torture—specifically, the merits of legalizing certain limited torture methods in order to obtain actionable intelligence concerning an imminent terrorist act on the United States. Stephens argued that certain methods some consider “torture” could in fact be necessary to halt a “nuclear 9/11” and thus should be permitted. He went on, “when the moral trade-off comes down to Khalid Sheikh Mohammad waterboarded in order to extract actionable intelligence or some mother’s child murdered, it’s not a tough call.” Sullivan’s first arguments against this were primarily pragmatic. He claimed that the oft-cited hypothetical of a “ticking time bomb” threatening New York that could only be defused through coercive interrogation has never materialized. He also argued that even if such a situation did arise, the intelligence derived from torture is empirically suspect and would probably create more hindrance than benefit in halting an attack on the homeland. Add to these arguments the fact that both Mossad intelligence agents (who know a thing or two about terrorism) and American World War II intelligence officers both claim that coercive interrogation is counter-productive make me highly skeptical of arguments to the contrary. What interests me is his claim that torture is, essentially, a blight on the American system of justice that needs to be eliminated at all costs.

Sullivan’s initial pragmatic arguments are beyond the ken of this essay, although the fact that both Mossad intelligence agents (who know a thing or two about terrorism) and American World War II intelligence officers both claim that coercive interrogation is counter-productive make me highly skeptical of arguments to the contrary. What interests me is his claim that torture is, essentially, a blight on the American system of justice that needs to be eliminated at all costs.

My question to those who propound this view is, simply, what is the (relative) big deal about torture? I understand that this sounds incendiary, so allow me to qualify. I do not mean to imply that torture is not wrong; it very well might be. But even if it is, it seems like our government, with consent of our citizenry, commits a number of acts that are arguably a great deal worse than torture, without eliciting much of a response at all. Take the example of World War II. Sullivan and many others argue that while facing a far more imminent security threat than the contemporary United States, Churchill’s England never tortured anyone. This is certainly true—but it is also true that most of the others things we did in World War II were crueler to unleash on our enemies than a torture chamber. We may not have tortured anyone in Dresden, but that did not stop us

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from incinerating the entire city with firebombs. The citizens of Hiroshima were also not tortured, but they had to deal with what I imagine was the unpleasant experience of a nuclear detonation.

It can be argued that these bombings of civilian populations were of great strategic importance during the war, and that to avoid them would have certainly cost a great deal of American lives. But this is besides the point; Sullivan (and he is not alone in this view) claims that the security risks inherent in forgoing torture, no matter how dire, are to be absorbed at the cost of preserving our national dignity. But they should be uneasy with propping up World War II as a noble, torture-free endeavor, while overlooking the fact that we inflicted a fate worse than torture on hundreds of thousands of civilians. One can pose a slightly hyperbolic hypothetical: were it possible, would those who subscribe to the ‘torture exception’ rather have tortured Hirohito to extract an unconditional surrender, or firebombed Tokyo at the cost of thousands of Japanese lives? Given the strength of some libertarians’ rhetoric on torture, it seems that they would have preferred the latter.

One also sees tensions in the American disdain of what some claim are the absolutely intolerable conditions at both Abu Ghraib prison and the detention center at Guantanamo Bay, and the current state of other American prisons. It is accepted that American jails are terrible and cruel places to reside; the practice of “prison rape” is often a joke among teenage boys, and the non-sexual violence perpetrated by prisoners on one another is understood to be vicious and commonplace. Yet, if one were to gauge public outrage at the state of these very prisons, I imagine it would be very low. This is interesting; though Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib seem gruesome, the sexual humiliation depicted in the iconic photos of the latter seem to pale in comparison to stories one regularly hears about sexual abuse of Americans in our own prisons.

Of course, one can draw two distinctions. First, all of American inmates are supposed to have been apprehended with due process and administered a fair trial. The same cannot be said of the detainees at either Guantanamo or Abu Ghraib. Second, the majority of abuses on prisoners are committed upon each other, not by agents of the government (namely the guards). This is distinct from Abu Ghraib, where photos clearly indicate that the American soldiers themselves were abusing the prisoners.

It is difficult to dispute the first argument, but it is not a stretch to claim that the ideal of the American justice system often was not on display when many current prisoners went to trial. That is to say that there are bound to be thousands of prisoners who, either through denial of rights or simple bad luck, are now in prison for something they did not do, and are suffering terribly because of it.

As for the second argument, the direct agents of abuse seem irrelevant. It seems as though prisoners’ abuse of one another could be greatly minimized by the state were those in charge of detention either to enforce stricter security measures in prisons, or simply reorganize them altogether. And besides, regardless of whether the goal of prison reform is realistic, it seems unlikely that the voting public would push for the state to achieve it. The image of prison as a terrible, terrible place is a means for deterring criminal activity; essentially, don’t rob that store, or else you might end up the object of a large man’s sexual affections in a prison shower. Thus citizens seem content that modern jails could constitute cruel and unusual punishment—and although many will gasp at an episode of “Oz” or cry during The Shawshank Redemption, they will rest easier at night knowing that bad people are prevented from doing bad things by their fear of going to prison.

Again, I do not point out this contradiction to legitimize the abuses at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. Rather, I mean to illustrate an interesting quirk of American moral thinking. I also do not mean to imply that everyone who criticizes the use of torture, supports the ‘torture exception.’ Many citizens may oppose torture, war, and prison abuse with equivalent vigor.
But this is not the norm. The news media and its army of bloggers and editorialists has written a great deal more about the abuses of Abu Ghraib than the civilian death total in Iraq, and, likewise, while the torture issue is a mainstay in legal debates, one finds prison reform relegated to the desks of a few liberal advocacy groups.

The 'torture exception' is not necessarily a bad thing. Torture is probably wrong, and at the very best ineffective, and so it makes sense for Americans to strenuously oppose its use by our government. That said, I will isolate two potentially harmful implications of the 'exception's' existence, one from a liberal perspective and the other from a conservative perspective. For liberals, strong controversies over select issues like torture and unlawful detention obfuscate broader moral debates that we should be having about war and the criminal justice system. Extensive discussions about how to best ethically fight a war cause us to forget the troubling fact that no matter how we fight it, a modern war will cause a lot of innocent people to die, and is thus an unconditionally morally perilous undertaking. Likewise, a focus on civil liberties issues germane to the ‘War on Terror’ causes us to forgo a moral investigation of the conditions of ordinary American prisons, where conditions are arguably comparable to terrorist detention centers.

For conservatives, the danger of the ‘torture exception’ is plain old hypocrisy. If we need to bomb our enemies’ civilian populations into submission to protect national security, so be it. But if we do, and we acknowledge we do, then we should stop fretting about torturing select prisoners, because in the grand ethical scheme of things, it doesn’t matter much. Likewise, if we need the fear of terrible prison conditions to deter crime, so be it. But if we’re willing to send low-threat offenders like pot dealers to almost certain physical abuse in prison, we might as well let soldiers in Iraq take some embarrassing pictures of possible insurgents, and we might as well submit terrorist suspects to water boards.

from the “Letters of the World” series:

**The Strician zet, “The complex letter”**

Take a walk down the street and ask the first Strician you come upon; you’re likely to get the same answer, no matter what part of the world you’re in. Ask him, or “tup,” as the Strician second- and third-person honorific is usually formed, “What’s zero divided by zero?” or “How can we, who are imperfect and mortal, comprehend the nature of an everlasting perfect being?” or “Why do bad things happen to good people?” or “Was the rise of the nation-state inevitable?”

Then listen very carefully to the answers you get.

Sure, different Stricians will have different replies—some will refer you casually to religious texts, or say that they don’t think that the question makes all that much sense.

But none of them will ever reply, “I don’t know.” The phrase doesn’t exist in their language.

And moreover, every single word they reply with, forming every clause, phrase, and sentence of their reply, is going to start with the letter zet (fig. b).

Guaranteed.

It’s generally agreed amongst linguists of renown that Strician is one of the most highly evolved languages that’s ever been studied. It’s a complex mesh of nominally-, adjectivally-, pronomially-, verbally-, and convectivally-declined words which must obey a litany of strictures that even natives struggle with. It’s been said that if you’ve not been exposed to Strician by the age of seven months, you’re never going to get even a foothold.

Sick of the dithering and constant references to uncertainty in the responses typical in any language to complex questions, the Stricians intentionally adopted a standard to mark uncertainty without sounding fawning and stupid.

They prepend a zet onto every word of their response to any obviously complex question as both sign of modesty and as a matter of timesaving. Where English speakers would dither for five minutes with a disclaiming preamble, the wise Strician just intones, “Zetphul zetud zetuntartidna.”
Africa is heating up. Propelled into the spotlight of the global political and economic stage, the continent is quickly becoming one of the most hotly contested regions in the world. This is due essentially to Africa’s large pool of harvestable resources, namely its massive oil and mineral reserves. The developed superpowers of the world—that is, the United States, the European Union, and China—have taken notice, and already Africa’s economic and political landscape is being dominated by intensely competitive foreign investment.

Central to this massive increase in foreign interest is the acquisition of energy resources, particularly in light of China’s unprecedented growth rate in recent years. China requires a tremendous amount of foreign imports to sustain that growth. It is in an effort to successfully maintain this expansion that China has dramatically stepped up its efforts to reap the riches of Africa, and has lately become one of the most commercially influential foreign powers on the continent. “The stylized facts reveal an interesting story about changing trade patterns,” writes Ali Zafar in a WBRO article entitled The Growing Relationship Between China and Sub-Saharan Africa: Macroeconomic, Trade, Investment, and Aid Links. “First, there has been a dramatic increase in direct trade between China and Sub-Saharan Africa in the last few years, especially since 2001, resulting in trebling of trade volumes from close to $10 billion in 2002 to more than $40 billion in 2005 and more than $50 billion in 2006.”

The main oil-producing countries of Africa generally appear to be benefiting from this Asian partnership. However, this does not mean that they are safe from lapsing into a predominantly exploitative relationship that can potentially accomplish next to nothing for important concerns such as sustainable civil development. In his book Africa’s Silk Road: China and India’s New Economic Frontier, World Bank Economic Advisor Harry Broadman points out that Sub-Saharan Africa is the only region in the world that has not “exhibited an increasing share of non-oil exports over the last two decades…this disappointing performance means that Africa has not taken full advantage of international trade to leverage growth.” The concern that Broadman raises is one of the most important questions surrounding the African resource race. Steps must be taken to ensure sustainable development in these African countries so as to protect them from being defined, as in the past, purely by the market value of their raw resources.

Before continuing, we should establish the atmosphere in which all of this market competition is taking place. We are well aware of the utter mess that Africa has come to signify since the decolonization process broke down in the latter half of the twentieth century. Africa represents a catastrophe of harrowing proportions on a truly continental scale. It has been plagued by corrupt, despotic, or at the very least remarkably inefficient governments; violent and often genocidal armed conflicts; dead-end foreign aid initiatives; widespread poverty and disease; and rampant human rights violations that have incensed the self-righteous fury of the Western world. However, Africa remains a land rich in valuable, mostly untapped, natural resources—natural resources that attracted the gaze of rising European powers in the nineteenth century, and natural resources that today bring the developed world to Africa’s doorstep.
The United States has itself been heavily involved in the African energy market. However, the degree of U.S. investment—indeed, of Western investment—in these markets is greatly influenced, and in some cases very much limited by political currents. These currents are typically tied to such widespread problems as corrupt governance and human rights violations. Former British foreign secretary Jack Straw summed up the Western agenda in 2006 while on a trip to Nigeria: “What matters to the west is not the fact of China’s engagements in Africa, but that such engagements should support the agenda which…the African Union have set for this continent: support for democratic and accountable governance, for transparent business processes, for economic growth and effective poverty reduction, for human rights and the rule of law.” The tendency on the part of Western powers to enter into political confrontations in cases where these goals are not being met has somewhat restricted their commercial investments in key oil markets. Of course, most would agree that this is hardly a bad thing.

Now, enter China: rising superpower. A net importer of oil as of 1993, China is undergoing an economic and industrial expansion doesn’t seem to be slowing down. Gao Shixian, director of the Energy Economy and Development Strategy Research Center of the Energy Research Institute (ERI), predicted in February 2005 that China’s petroleum imports would reach between 180 and 200 million tons by 2010, bringing the country’s dependency on oil imports to about 50 percent. Already, China stands as the second largest energy consumer in the world after the United States (although it should be noted that the margin between the two is fairly large as of yet). Of course, in terms of its own domestic development, China is hardly out of the woods. Some 200 million citizens are still living on less than a dollar per day. The wealth gap is rapidly increasing, with urban incomes far outstripping those of rural residents. Health care and education are highly problematic in rural communities, with dramatically increasing environmental complications arising from virtually uncontrolled industrialization. We should still keep in mind that, despite all of this industrialization, China’s per capita energy consumption is still only about one eighth that of the U.S. Regarding the nature of this consumption, coal remains the country’s chief source of energy, accounting for some 70 percent of its energy consumption in 2006. Nevertheless, oil is undoubtedly looming on China’s horizon. Its advances into African markets are strongly indicative of Beijing’s awareness of this inevitability.

Chinese and Western interests in Africa’s energy markets are different in two ways. First, China’s thirst for oil can only increase. Second, China does not limit its economic interests for issues like human rights violations. Liu Guijin, Chinese ambassador to South Africa, articulates China’s policies in Africa as being consistent with its foreign policies worldwide: “We follow five basic guidelines of peaceful coexistence in our relations: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity; mutual non-aggression; non-interference in each other’s internal affairs; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful co-existence—and these also apply to Africa.” Of particular importance is the idea of sovereignty and territorial integrity: China immediately places itself strategically closer to African governments (albeit, unstable ones) for the sake of achieving its ends. This makes China a very formidable presence, especially in light of recent Western sanctions on such countries as Sudan—countries in which China is building up its political connections for the purpose of fulfilling its aggressive economic agenda.

As a consequence of this behavior, many political critics have raised questions concerning possible future conflicts between China and the United States on account of what the West might view as morally suspect policies. Some take these views even further, going so far as to voice the opinion that China, by so heavily prioritizing its rapid growth programs, is on the road to replacing the U.S. as world hegemon (an argument that is fraught with error). I would like only to make it clear that China’s economic interests have actu-
ally brought it somewhat closer to the West, if only because of its reliance on foreign energy imports. China’s concerns, where energy is involved, are stability and security. Directly knocking heads with western powers is not, at least at present, conducive to either of these goals. This has not and does not mean that China is willing to play by Western rules, and it most certainly doesn’t make the African situation more stable. China’s policies in Africa may very well bring it into conflict with Western interests in the region: the very real possibility of such an outcome is a commonly observed one. An article from the Summer 2007 issue of *China Security*, for example, reads that the jockeying for position now on the part of American and Chinese companies has prompted “[their] diplomats to compete for the favor of these states. As a result, it seems reasonable to assume that as oil supplies tighten, Sino-American competition is likely to increase.”

Human rights issues lie close to the heart of this delicate situation, owing mostly to China’s exceedingly frank “aid-for-oil” strategy, with which it is winning quick friends on the continent. Take, for example, Zimbabwe, shunned by Western powers and the IMF on the basis of its poor human rights record and its destructive reform policies. Now, Zimbabwean speaker of parliament Emmerson Mnangagwa calls China an “all-weather friend… Zimbabwe will never walk alone.”

We should ask ourselves, then, what, exactly, is the extent of Chinese involvement in Africa at this time? Just how committed is China? Remember that we are looking at this issue with the idea of growth hovering constantly over our heads, and that this growth is necessarily dependant on foreign energy. By 2050, China will likely depend on foreign oil for some 50 percent of its total energy needs (barring, of course, the nuclear question, which is a separate issue). Given these projected trends it should hardly be surprising that China is for all intents and purposes entrenched in Africa’s energy market. Angolan oil, for example, provided some 50 percent of China’s total oil imports in 2005 (amounting to about 30 percent of Angola’s crude oil export). Angola, the sixth biggest exporter of oil to the United States, is currently China’s largest supplier, having recently replaced Saudi Arabia in that capacity.

The IRIN offers some illuminating points concerning infrastructural development in the capital city of Luanda as a result of these partnerships. Having just recently emerged from a thirty-year period of brutal armed conflict that left it in ruins, Angola has attracted some $20 billion in foreign direct investments since 2003. It made approximately $30 billion from oil exports last year—highly significant for a country whose oil sector accounts for over 40 percent of its GDP—and is now projected to meet Kuwait’s total oil output of roughly 2.6 million barrels by 2011. This apparent growth on the part of the Angolan economy is, perhaps, not as beneficial for the entire country as it might seem—70 percent of the population is still impoverished, with limited access to health care and education, and beset by a considerable child mortality rate. Recent monetary injections from developed investors have basically amounted to a shot in the arm for the country. If properly directed, these funds may provide Angola with the necessary tools to diversify its market and sustain development—the first steps that may ultimately result in alleviating conditions for the underprivileged majority of its population.

Foreign involvement in Sudan provides us with a fairly different perspective on the oil trade in Africa, due to the current political turmoil in the western region of the country. We are well aware of the Sudanese civil war raging in Darfur, and the human rights violations—of genocidal proportions—that sweep the region. According to the State Department’s 2006 *Country Reports on Human Rights Practice*, Darfurian conflicts have caused over 200,000 deaths, displaced approximately 2 million people, and forced an additional 200,000 to flee to neighboring Chad since 2003. The United States has actively rebuked the Sudanese government for its failure to effectively put an end to the conflict, and has recently tightened trade sanctions. Chinese involvement in the area, however, has hardly been as political as that.
For many years postmodernism has been anathema to American conservative thinkers. They claim it is too wordy, too jargon-laden, and ultimately too French. They attack it for undermining traditional scholarship and even Western values. However, some basic strands of postmodern thought exist which conservatives can use to help revitalize their flagging movement. Postmodernism, as Jean-Francois Lyotard once defined it, is “hostility to meta-narratives.” While the ornate Marxist political theory associated with many continental philosophers offers little to today’s conservatives, a conservative brand of postmodernism can and should exist. This new school of thought will be unsympathetic to the modern obsessions with progress, centralization, and human perfectibility. Although true conservatives share with postmodern philosophers a distrust of modern institutions, they suspect the post-modernist obsession with ideology. Conservatism is, as Russell Kirk put it, “the negation of ideology: it is a state of mind, a type of character, a way of looking at the civil social order.” However, Russell Kirk, archconservative though he was, has recently been described as possessing a “postmodern imagination,” an accurate depiction. Although he contributed to the creation of the modern conservative movement, Kirk was uncomfortable with the contradictions of any combination of conservatism with modernism. It is this postmodern moral and political imagination that today’s conservatives must draw on to address their political and intellectual concerns.

Conservatism has the potential to become uniquely relevant in our postmodern age because of its pre-modern heritage. Unlike liberalism, progressivism, or laissez-faire capitalism, conservative ideology is not rooted in the dogmas of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Instead conservatism depends on a much richer and longer tradition stretching back at least to Aristotle’s belief in prudence and caution in politics. While American conservatives often identify themselves as “classical liberals,” claiming the mantle of the Enlightenment to combat the centralizing impulses of liberals, the Enlightenment constitutes only a small part of the conservative heritage. Prudence and variety, virtue and hierarchy, are more a part of the conservative tradition than “Life, Liberty, and Property.” While an amalgam of traditional conservatism and classical liberalism may have helped furnish the intellectual core of the anti-communist coalition that thrived during the Cold War, it has failed to provide answers to the problems we face today. Instead conservatives should attempt to look beyond the Enlightenment, to conservatism’s roots, for solutions to the problems of modernism.

This trend has already found champions among dissident members of the American right. Some of the central areas of agreement between modern neo-liberals and modern conservatives, such as the benefits of unfettered global capitalism at home and the prudence of spreading democracy abroad, are being held up to criticism. Authors such as James Poulos, Rod Dreher, and Peter Lawler have shown that questioning these goals can be accomplished without turning to radicalism or reaction. Criticism of global capitalism within the right is an important place to start because of its widespread support within the elites of the Republican Party. For Rod Dreher to claim that “big business is as dangerous as big government” in his book Crunchy Cons is a bold attempt to slay some of the sacred calves of modern conservative thought.
His argument that corporations in their pursuit of the bottom line create homogenous communities that sever people from their traditional ties of family, religion, and nature can never be considered a force for conservatism. A force for conservatism is powerful and persuasive. Schumpeter’s “creative destruction” may unleash great economic and innovative forces but the social and moral dislocations it causes cannot be underrated by the next generation of conservative leaders.

As Americans become more and more concerned with the destabilizing effects of globalization, Dreher’s message will have more and more appeal. Conservatism, properly understood, should attempt to preserve variety, cultural and economic, in American life. The wholesale embrace of a corporate culture attempting to homogenize America in the name of efficiency and profit is a fundamentally progressive position. While large-scale government regulation does not provide a conservative solution to the cultural problems created by big business neither does the acceptance of these problems as a fait accompli. Instead private and local attempts to preserve America’s “proliferating intricacy of long-established social institutions and modes of life” should be applauded. Postmodern conservatives, like Dreher, have attempted to create truly conservative alternatives to the flattening uniformity brought about by the laissez-faire dogmas of the Reagan generation. More contentious to conservative thought are the issues surrounding the promotion of democracy abroad. The returning popularity among average Americans of so called “paleo-conservative” or “isolationist” views is simply a reminder of the imperial overreach of the current administration. Americans, who long for a return to prudence in its foreign policy, appear to support whichever political party will offer that prudence. It is important for the nascent post-modern conservatives among us to remind unrepentant supporters of this administration that freedom and democracy cannot always triumph in any cultural environment no matter how much force is supporting those ideals. Moreover, it seems axiomatic to any post-modern conservative that a foreign policy based only on faith without reason cannot endure. It was only the modernist faith in an “end of history” that allowed the hubris of our policy makers to create the foreign disasters we currently face.

Finding new ideas for conservatism in the twenty-first century is not a pedantic, ivory tower pursuit; it has political consequences. Karl Rove’s alliance between evangelical Christians and business leaders of the Club for Growth variety has shattered his party and damaged his nation. The arrogance and disregard of the so-called conservatives in the current administration for humility, prudence, and other truly conservative values has created room for true debate about the benefits of the modernist ideal. In practice, politicians cannot couch their arguments in the same terms as conservative critics of modernity without appearing radical. However, the aberrant appeal of “anti-establishment” candidates such as Ron Paul or Barack Obama show how exhausted most Americans are with the modern consensus that has reigned supreme in Washington during the Bush and Clinton administrations.

Conservatism, despite its tarnished reputation, can still be a salutary force in American democracy. Conservatism should remind us in an ever-changing world of the continuity of permanent things. However, to renew their political movement, conservatives must admit the crimes, and there have been real crimes, that they have been committed in the name of conservatism. Then conservatives must show that they are no longer willing to tolerate the politicians or the intellectuals who justified these crimes. They must begin a debate to define their fundamental values. They must be willing to find guidance not simply in hero-worship of Reagan or Bush but in more lasting conservative truths. To “stand athwart history yelling stop,” as William F. Buckley put it in the first issue of National Review, did not mean replacing the orthodoxies of yesterday with today’s complacency. Instead conservatives must be willing to embrace their pre-modern heritage and their postmodern future to justify fighting the historical inevitabilities of today.
Rarely has any droll occasional fashion had such a long and fertile career as prescriptivism, the persistent group of ideas concerned with applying value judgments to language usage. In spite, however, of a millennium or so of righteous effort, the story of the Prescriptivists, the Grammarians, and the Language Mavens looks to be a sad one, as the prescriptivist tradition has lately come under siege from academic linguistics.

Wondering nothing more complicated than ‘why,’ linguists have undertaken to consider prescriptive maxims from a scholarly perspective, and have discovered that they depend on a variety of misunderstandings of the nature of language change and variation, carry little warrant aside from these misunderstandings, and when faced with serious rebuttals quickly become indefensible. The general public, and certainly a lot of English teachers, still tend to adhere passively or actively to grammatical folkways, but in the academic community the work of the prescriptivists now finds itself, justly or otherwise, altogether disregarded.

I wish to rescue a pair of prescriptivists, whose linguistic shortcomings mask surpassing wisdom and perspicacity, from the rubbish heap. A serious reconsideration of these two men yields a sharper understanding of the motives of the prescriptivist tradition, and allows their timeless criticisms of society, politics, and education to receive the reflection and esteem they deserve.

I have mentioned English teachers, and it is from these venerable pedagogues that the largest section of the population takes its notions of prescriptivism. These manifest as deeply-rooted images of ‘correct’ or ‘proper’ English, made up of a group of maxims, or ‘rules,’ which vary little between persons. Maxims commonly acquired thus include: that a sentence should never end with a preposition; that who is a subject pronoun while whom is an object pronoun; that infinitives should not be split; that ‘Bob and I’ should be used for compound subjects and ‘Bob and me’ for compound objects—surely anyone whose parent or teacher or peer has interrupted him in mid-sentence to correct his grammar can name several more. These maxims have found their way out of classrooms and into everyday parlance; expressions like “I really try to speak correct English whenever I can” or “he seemed really nice, but his grammar was so bad” are exceedingly common.

The provenance of the English teachers’ maxims is often difficult to trace; many have been attested in classrooms for centuries. A recent phenomenon, however, has wrought several changes on the traditional method of inheritance. While amateurs have published commentary on English since the eleventh century or earlier—one “Ælfric the Grammarian” died c. 1020 AD—in the last century a group of writers has codified and distributed, much more widely than Ælfric could have done, ostensibly authoritative criticisms of usage. These writers are the aforementioned Language Mavens and Grammarians, and their authority has no deeper basis than their own declaration of it. These public prescriptivists, who tend to be copy-editors, essayists, columnists, critics, or dictionary usage panelists, cite maxims that differ little from the aforementioned folk rules, but may also include objections to neologisms or protests at the speech habits of a particular demographic group.

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The formula is simple: they present a set of pet peeves, attest them with anecdotes, contrast them with an idealized ‘correct’ English, and infer from all this that the English language must be in a state of decline. Consider the words of prominent grammarian and theater critic John Simon: “In the 1940s, when I became a graduate student, people were not [committing various solecisms]. Why…was language better in those days? And what started it on its downhill course?”

Linguists such as David Crystal, Steven Pinker, Mark Liberman, Geoffrey K. Pullum, and Leslie Milroy have rebutted many individual prescriptive maxims; but the linguist’s general response to prescriptivism is this: There is no basis for the belief that any particular set of forms, or the state of a language at any given moment, could have some intrinsic positive or negative value. English is just as good today as it has always been; and anyway it is meaningless to speak of ‘the English language’ as though it were a prototype or objective standard, to which some speakers might adhere more than others, and for which all should strive. Everyone speaks his own English, and any attempt to judge one variety against another must be ill-founded. The notions of an ideal former state of language or a superior present variety of language are romantic but indefensible fictions.

Some writers have defended ‘correctness’ by condemning aberrant forms of language as vague, unnuanced, slovenly, or illogical—think of double negatives—and by claiming that those who do not speak and write standard English cannot read or think as well as those who do. The error in these claims lies in an underestimation of the human mind’s capacity to adapt language to its own needs, and to make sense of an utterance beyond its literal meaning. A group develops a vocabulary to describe the things that group needs to describe, with just as much nuance as is required for describing those things. The vocabulary expands as the needs of the group expand, and it is nonsense to suggest that the vocabulary defines the needs, rather than the reverse. Certain versions of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which alleges a systematic relationship between language and thought, have proposed that a mind cannot conceive of those notions for which it does not already have words, but tests have not supported these ‘Whorfian theories,’ and they have fallen out of fashion in the past several decades. To those who allege that nonstandard forms are slovenly, one must reply that they are just as systematic as standard forms—Snoop Dogg’s suffix -izzle and infixation -izz- occur in very specific circumstances and are entirely predictable. As for logic, no Anglophone would ever understand “I ain’t got no change” to mean, “I have some change,” unless he were being intentionally dense—incidentally a favorite tactic of grammarians. Standard English is no more logical anyway: the or of “I will buy you a car or a college education” is different from that of “you must be over 21 or accompanied by a parent to enter this establishment.” The latter allows for both and the former does not; this is plainly a logical ambiguity, yet nobody needs to be taught how to recognize the difference.

Clear and unclear thinking, precise and vague distinction, cogency and casuistry are all equally possible in standard and in nonstandard language, just as they are equally possible in English and in French. It is merely a historical fact that standard English is the way it is, and nothing about the standard forms themselves predisposes them to being standard. Had circumstances been otherwise, Mr. Simon might be defending the diphthongs and triphthongs of Jimmy Stewart as “more emotionally expressive” than the impoverished monotone of the masses, or acclaiming
Eliza Doolittle’s honest, regular Cockney at the expense of Henry Higgins’s piddling, pretentious, patrician diction.

Why, then, does anyone try to apply value judgments to linguistic forms? This tendency seems to arise from association: certain forms are associated with certain groups of users, and an observer tends unwittingly to transfer his opinion of those groups onto his opinion of the forms. In particular, prescriptivists seem to prefer forms used by upper-class or otherwise high-status groups—perceived as ‘proper’; academically known as ‘standard’—to those used by lower-class or otherwise marginal groups. Linguists who allege that the grammarians enjoy reveling in their own superiority and asserting the dominance of their own socioeconomic stratum are not altogether mistaken: the aforementioned Simon decries without embarrassment “the notion that in a democratic society language must accommodate itself to the whims, idiosyncrasies, dialects, and sheer ignorance of underprivileged minorities.”

John Simon provides an exemplary instance of all that is wrong with prescriptivism, and the simple-minded arguments of those like him have led linguists to dismiss prescriptive literature. No good academic can resist the prospect of castigating fools. A quibbler might remark that this is merely a new brand of the same old sanctimony, but I will pass the temptation by. I would like, instead, to observe that the educated of a dozen generations swallowed the prescriptivist tradition unchewed, as one of dozens of inherited and unquestioned assumptions. Many of these men perceived, but imperfectly, trends or conditions in society that they were quite justified in wanting to decry. A blurred perception of the linguistic element in these issues, tainted by an upbringing that took the normative judgments of prescriptivism as indisputable fact, led even those who were not so single-minded as Simon to phrase their warnings in pseudo-linguistic terms, which linguists have lately been wont to deflate.

George Orwell, for instance, begins his popular 1946 essay “Politics and the English Language” with the off-hand pronouncement that “the English language is in a bad way,” peppers the essay with Simonesque terms such as “vagueness,” “sheer incompetence,” and “slovenliness,” and finishes with six clear prescriptions for the use of language. The modern linguistic reaction to such fallacy is clear: pay him no further heed.

The idea of a language in decline is of course unsound, but Orwell’s remark that he considers language “an instrument which we shape for our own purposes” reveals that his crime against linguistic sense is merely a problem of vocabulary. To validate his arguments one need only understand what Orwell calls the state of the language as the way in which particular speakers, generally politicians and those with political aims, use it. The only problem with his phraseology is the implication that the language itself is to blame for its misuse.

Orwell’s prescriptivism is but a distraction, and the sort of misuse he describes is not a Simonesque catalog of cavils. It is far less tangible, and far more alarming: it is the language of politicians, who recycle terms and phrases that through overuse have been divorced from their actual content and reduced to emotional effect. By providing a path of little resistance between reading or hearing these words and believing them or acting on them, politicians appeal to the citizenry’s profound intellectual laziness to induce a “reduced state of consciousness,” and thus may inflame, pacify, or otherwise direct, to whatever ends they please, a herd-minded group of unreflective actors.

Orwell’s solution to the problem—for surely it is a problem, far more real and readily observable than any of the chimeras that cause Simon such anguish—is a set of rules for writing. Here again his schooling and a touch of optimism infix in him a misguided attitude. The error in these prescriptions is not their pseudo-linguistic premises: it is that his arguments will never change the behavior of any politician or political writer. What motive have they to give up their unscrupulous...
way with language, when it has fulfilled their purposes so admirably for so long? Politicians will go on politicking, unless Orwell’s essay should convince the whole of the populace first. But of course that is the true solution, if any there be, to the problem—education.

Richard Mitchell, sometime author and publisher of *The Underground Grammarian*, addresses a problem with similar symptoms and, as it turns out, an identical cause. His objectives of castigation—such fun is that pursuit, and so much of human wisdom contained in it—are educationists and bureaucrats, the former for their ideas and the latter for their writing. Bureaucrats write as they do, not out of a desire to lull the electorate into complacent obedience, but merely as a symptom of the attitude endemic to bureaucracy. These unhappy men and women write compulsively in the passive voice, for instance, because it permits them to shift responsibility for their actions away from themselves and onto nothing. They reveal their very nature in their words, and “words never fail…Who speaks reason to his fellow men bestows it upon them. Who mouths inanity disorders thought for all who listen.”

Though one may not say exactly what one ‘means,’ whatever that means, one always says something about oneself and the way one thinks. This is not the Whorfian notion that language constitutes or governs thought, but rather the indispensable and so often forgotten axiom that language reflects thought.

Yet these bureaucrats and the nonsense they write are epiphenomena. To Mitchell, the problem runs deeper. “People all around you are offering inanity, and you are ready to seize it, like any well-behaved American consumer, dutifully swallowing the best advertised pill. You are, in a certain sense, unconscious.” The consequences of unconsciousness are grave, and are not limited to incomprensible government functionaries: to Orwell it bodes political oppression, and to Mitchell it deprives human beings of the very fabric of their humanity. There are few fates worse—perhaps none.

But is Mitchell’s argument not Whorfian? He certainly wanders into tenuous territory on occasion, as for instance when he claims that “to understand the world, we make propositions about it, and those propositions are both formed and limited by the grammar of the language in which we propose.” He asserts as truth that which is linguistically unproven and generally unpopular among linguists. Elsewhere he appeals for “good grammar” and warns of the onset of illiteracy; he even styles himself a Grammarian. It would be hard for one accustomed to dealing with that particular class of commentator not to dismiss him on these grounds.

And yet Mitchell knows that the Simon school of grammarians have got it all wrong. “It is,” he writes, “a schoolteacher’s cheap trick to say that if you don’t get your grammar right people won’t understand you. It’s almost impossible to mangle grammar to the point where you won’t be understood.” He is visibly not of their ilk; he has discovered genuine cause for concern, but he knows no better than to phrase his concern in pseudo-linguistic terms.

Mitchell and Orwell address as clearly as one can hope the issues overlooked by most anti-prescriptivist linguists. They overtake the answers that grammarians have chased for centuries. The problem about grammar is external to language itself—or, like language itself, it is internal to all of mankind. Even if men do not think in language, they certainly cannot speak about anything they do not know how to say, and if they cannot communicate the ideas they form, those ideas are of no value.

The cognitive ability of any one man is surely tremendous, but his biological endowment is a mere framework without substance. He cannot start from nothing; he must inherit the accumulated wisdom of the ages, always through the medium of language, in order to develop any understanding of himself or his world. These abilities depend not on memorizing a group of superficial rules of ‘grammar,’ but on understanding the way in which
the parts of his language interact, perceiving fine distinctions, and learning to synthesize words and phrases clearly and cogently. Consciousness, and immunity to the devices of those who would lead others into unconsciousness, do not come naturally to a child in the course of his development. The capacity for consciousness is always present, but it must be drawn out, or it will lie dormant forever.

So perhaps it is not quite accurate to phrase this state of affairs as a problem, if, as is probable, that term implies that the problem arose at a particular point in time, and that reversion to some former state would be desirable. The problem, ignorance, is the natural condition of mankind, and it is the continual obligation of the adults in society to impart consciousness unto their children: in a word, to educate them. If there is a problem, it is that society believes its children are being educated when they are not.

Good writing and bad writing clearly exist. No amount of linguistic reasoning can controvert this fact, which anyway is not a matter of academic linguistics but one of literature. The problem of prescriptivist pedagogy is that it is woefully inadequate for its supposed purposes. H.L. Mencken noticed in 1926 that the grammarians’ “central aim, of course, is to reduce the whole thing to a series of simple rules,” while “the essence of sound style is that it cannot be reduced to rules—that it is a living and breathing thing, with something of the demoniacal in it.” One must be careful, having convinced oneself of the value in rubbish- centuries of grammar-related pedagogy, not to leave empty the space it occupied, and to consider carefully what ought to take its place. This must involve some inquiry into the purpose of language instruction, for which I propose two results: literacy and style. Each begins with a technical ability—to read and to write, respectively—but these are means, not ends; any true progress demands some measure of Reason.

To read is to compute; to understand is to come of age, to awaken into full consciousness. To write is to regurgitate; to write artfully and effectively, to articulate understanding and transfer it to another person, is to participate in the advance of civilization. These goals are grand, but there is still one grander. George Orwell and Richard Mitchell perceive it; to all appearances, John Simon and those who rebut him do not. The purpose of education is this and only this: to deliver control of the self unto the self. What does not accomplish that aim cannot be called education.

from the “Letters of the World” series:

The Late Phratric gzm, “A type of goat”

In an environment in which there simply are not many living organisms, the hardy Phratristes have eeked out a difficult, but (in their minds, at least) rewarding existence. Historically, the Phratristes were goat-herders, owing obviously to the rocky and generally inhospitable terrain of their ancestral home. This cottage industry has been replaced in the twenty-first century with one that came to them largely through an incredible typographic error: the notorious central bureaucracy of the Phrastrian Counties submitted a fact-sheet to a minor United Nations informational ministry listing the region’s main production as “gut-husbandry.”

Immediately following what was by all accounts an unfortunate mix-up, the Phratristies, always a people of their word, were forced to take their ancestral goat-herding underground and attempt to first ascertain, and then exercise, “gut-herding,” so that they would not be seen in the eyes of the United Nations as having gone back on their word, or, worse yet, prevaricated.

After a crash research program that involved using the internet to determine what “gut-husbandry” could possibly be, the determined Phratristries set up a website, <gut-husbandry.gov.ph>, which claimed the Phrastrian Counties to be the only place in the world where one could legally wed another’s (or one’s own) viscera.

More germanely, “gzm” is a Phrastrian neologism for “a friendly goat which is not marriageable.”
We can’t ignore Richard Dawkins; that’s for sure. These days, he has been making noise in the village square, insisting that religious people are deluded. This prompts our bombastic retorts: “What does he know about God?”, “Who does he think he is?”, and sometimes, “Finally, a hero!” But Dawkins has stirred up noise before, and not always by bringing up the fiery topic of God. He has upset geneticists with his unorthodox ways of describing gene transmission, evolutionary biologists with his simplistic picture of inheritance and adaptation, and cultural anthropologists with the limitations of his cultural evolution model. All the while, Dawkins’s words remain calm, logical, and very approachable. When CNN’s Paula Zahn accused him of adopting a “threatening” atheist position, he responded:

Why would anybody be intimidated by mere words? Neither I nor any other atheist I know ever threatens violence, we don’t threaten to fly planes into skyscrapers, we never threaten suicide bombs; we’re very gentle people. All we do is use words to talk about things like the cosmos, the origin of the universe, evolution, the origin of life. What’s there to be frightened of in just an opinion?

This kind of innocuousness and clarity makes Dawkins such a difficult opponent.

It should be clear that the cause for Dawkins’ fame and notoriety is not just his subject matter. It may be exciting to be an atheist, but to put together as formidable a book as *The God Delusion*, and for it to garner such attention, requires something more. Likewise, his arguments that previously startled the scientific community are not in themselves sufficient cause for the drastic responses he elicited. More important to understand the Dawkins phenomenon is his style of demonstration. His arguments are not merely arguments; they fit into a worldview that is enticingly clear and sensible. The package is presented so lucidly and logically, and so imaginatively, that Dawkins comes across as a philosopher with the accessibility of a journalist and the creativity of a novelist. His opponents, then, are not just confronted with arguments; they are confronted with the appeal of his worldview. It is not that Dawkins is an atheist, nor the content of his arguments by themselves, that make him so difficult to ignore. It is the formidable way he presents his arguments and the undeniable appeal of his polished perspective that make him difficult to ignore.

I take this to be a general fact about Dawkins and the sensationalism associated with him, and to best understand it, I will look back to the attention he aroused with his first book, *The Selfish Gene*, in 1976.

It is important to demonstrate just how great and powerful this book is in order to demonstrate what is necessary to outdo its appeal. *The Selfish Gene* immediately propelled Dawkins into stardom. It was a book the likes of which almost never appear in science: it read as popular science while providing a serious contribution to the field of evolutionary biology. Science writer Matt Ridley writes, “[it] revived the central role of the book as a scientific art form.” Besides galvanizing the biological community and giving birth to Neo-Darwinism, the book inspired a new generation of biologists and single-handedly altered some philosophers’ careers, like Daniel Dennett of Tufts University. It also coined the term “meme,” which refers to the cultural equivalent of the gene (i.e.,
ideas, catch-phrases, tunes), and which catapulted new attempts at cultural evolution. In a book celebrating its thirtieth anniversary called *Richard Dawkins: How A Scientist Changed The Way We Think*, natural historian Andrew Read describes his initial reaction to *Gene*:

Over the next few years, I learnt that many people worldwide were involved in working out the logical consequences of *The Selfish Gene*...I learnt that most of the criticisms it attracted were intellectually boring or, worse, stupid...this was the only show in town, and it was a productive and exciting one.

In brief, *The Selfish Gene* attempts to use adaptations like altruism to show how adaptations in general should all be explained by thinking of selection as occurring on the level of the gene. Previously, selection was understood as occurring at the level of individuals or populations. In this way Dawkins explains how the gene must be understood as a causal force. Genes are unique from individuals or populations, because they are replicators—that is, they replicate themselves. Individuals and populations propagate parts of their genotypes. Genes, however, have an “interest” to propagate themselves. Dawkins uses metaphors, saying they “want” to be propagated, and they compete “selfishly” to do so—hence the title of his book. He shows how to explain adaptation in this light. As he writes, “both individual selfishness and individual altruism are explained by the fundamental law I am calling gene selfishness.” Here is a powerful and famous passage from the book that illustrates Dawkins’ way of talking about genes:

The replicators that survived were the ones that built survival machines for themselves to live in. The first survival machines probably consisted of nothing more than a protective coat. But making a living got steadily harder as new rivals arose with better and more effective survival machines. Survival machines got bigger and more elaborate, and the process was cumulative and progressive...Now they swarm in huge colonies, safe inside gigantic lumbering robots, sealed off from the outside world, communicating with it by tortuous indirect routes, manipulating it by remote control. They are in you and in me; they created us, body and mind; and their preservation is the ultimate rationale for our existence...Now they go by the name of genes, and we are their survival machines.

To anyone who reads it, *The Selfish Gene* is clearly not just a way to strengthen the argument for the gene as a unit of selection—an argument made previously with George Williams’ *Adaptation and Natural Selection* (1966). It so powerfully describes the world as one revolving around and for replicators that it has the power to act as an exciting manifesto for a new era of Darwinism. Here, like with *The God Delusion*, counterarguments must be fierce counterarguments. To dispute *The Selfish Gene* is not to take on a mere scientific argument; it is to take on a worldview.

The man for the job—the most outspoken opponent to Dawkins after *The Selfish Gene* was published—was none other than the most popular theorist of evolutionary biology of the time, the late Stephen Jay Gould. Gould called Dawkins and his followers “Neo-Darwinists.” As Gould writes, Dawkins is

[C]onvinced that everything out there is adaptive and a function of genes struggling. That’s just plain wrong, for a whole variety of complex reasons. There’s gene-level selection, but there’s also organism-level and species-level...

Gould argues that evolution can happen in many more interesting ways than simply through germ-line mutation and adaptation. He shows how chance environmental changes shape evolution and how new frameworks might serve as better impulses to evolutionary change than others.
Connected to this are worries about “adaptationist thinking,” a tendency which assumes that all evolved things are perfectly “adapted for” their present purposes. Gould stresses, rather, how pre-existing structures become adapted in new environments. Also attached to this idea of Gould’s is the idea that evolutionary processes can occur sporadically for various reasons, as opposed to algorithmically and gradually as Dawkins proposes. All in all, Gould attacks this view of evolution that occurs exclusively by and for genes, which act through vehicles.

Gould has things going for him. He considers processes that are not genetic, and has a broader picture of what might happen in biological evolution. Dawkins has some serious empirical evidence against him, too: it may simply be false that inheritance can only be found through the germ-line. But does this level Dawkins?

When Gould published his attack on “Darwinian Fundamentalism” in a 1997 article in The New York Review of Books, he was alone, trying to fight off philosopher Daniel Dennett, evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker, and more. He was preaching to an audience that had already “gone Dawkins”—an audience that had already defended adaptationism in print, helping to establish the field of evolutionary psychology; an audience which had already sunk its teeth into the “meme”; and an audience for whom the importance of the replicator was clear. What Gould had to offer was less interesting; it was thorough, yes, but it was also messy. One could not wrap one’s head around it. Dawkins, on the other hand, had it all. With his “gene’s-eye” view, one felt satisfied.

Interestingly, there really is no need for one of these thinkers to conquer. Gould and Dawkins are talking about two ways of looking at the same process, with empirical disagreements that always have been controversial and so are worth putting to the side (such as rate of evolution, or whether behavior is “adapted for”). In the opening to his second book, The Extended Phenotype, Dawkins prefaces what his gene’s-eye view is meant to con-

tribute. He brings up a Necker Cube:

It consists of a line drawing which the brain interprets as a three-dimensional cube. But there are two possible orientations of the perceived cube, and both are equally compatible with the two-dimensional image on the paper…The point is that neither of the two perceptions of the cube is the correct or ‘true’ one. Both are equally correct. Similarly the vision of life that I advocate…is not provably more correct than the orthodox view. It is a different view and I suspect that, at least in some respects, it provides a deeper understanding.

It is fitting to close our meditation on Richard Dawkins with these words. Of course, when talking about God, saying “both perceptions are equally correct” might not hold. But we should try flipping the Necker Cube Dawkins’s way whether or not it is compatible with the previous view. Most likely, Dawkins’s way will offer us some conceptual insight, some exhilaration, and a clear worldview. Of course, if some other reliable intuitions tell you that, for example, variation in evolution has more diverse origins than just the germ-line, or that God in fact does exist, than you can revert back to your original cube. But it is probably worth remembering what was appealing about that other worldview, and worth considering that there might be things we can learn from it.

For those not experienced with Dawkins’ writing, I recommend most enthusiastically The Selfish Gene and The Blind Watchmaker. For the more adept biologist, The Extended Phenotype and The Ancestor’s Tale do well. Most accessible is his compilation of essays, The Devil’s Chaplain.
JOSEPH BRODSKY AND A POET’S RESPONSIBILITY
Elliot Hasdan

“A writer’s biography is in his twists of language.”
—Joseph Brodsky, Less Than One

There is an interesting mythic quality surrounding the Soviet dissident movement. The samizdat system of underground publishing has come to represent the covert publication and distribution of subversive texts. Most audiences, the Russian one included, consider it heroic political opposition—samizdat, literally a shorthand for “self published” as a means to destabilize authority.

Such an idealized characterization makes a compelling narrative, but is often distracting. Suppressed literature does have a unique history, but not every freethinking Soviet writer can be reduced to a dissident. Joseph Brodsky (1940–1996) is one such writer.

Brodsky is a Russian poet who, after his exile from the Soviet Union in 1972, became a prominent English writer. He served as Poet Laureate of the United States and taught at Mount Holyoke College, Columbia University, and Queens College, among others. He is best known for his English poetry collections A Part of Speech (1981) and To Urania (1992). As Veil reports, Brodsky claimed the Nobel Prize in 1987 as a “Russian Poet, an English essayist, and, of course, an American citizen.” Yet as a product of literature in exile, his political history is often taken to precede his writing.

Brodsky’s first collection of English essays, Less Than One, makes this clear. He despaired of politics. While his essays are not without ambiguity, only intermittently does he refer to his exile. He even criticizes Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who exposed the cruelty of the Gulag, for complicating what was already clear—“the notion of man being radically bad” (299). Brodsky’s focus was instead on language. As “the English idiom” twists along with him in his essays, he takes a decisive stance on the role of the poet, and this stance is not entirely removed from the political.

On the surface, Less Than One is about how a poem works, and it seems unlikely that such a text would produce an accurate picture of his ethics. Brodsky engages in long discussions of prosody and language by unpacking the poems he loves most. The poets include the Russian generation poetry, presupposing a political bent on his part. Cissie Dore recounts how, when a Soviet judge asked him, “Who enrolled you among the ranks of poets?” he famously replied, “No one. Who enrolled me in the ranks of humankind?” His poetry, however, had not been overtly political. He translated poetry and wrote on the metaphysics of language.

He was criticized for his work, which authorities believed to be a cynical, decadent type of poetry that threatened Leningrad culture. A newspaper labeled him a self-proclaimed genius living at the expense of Soviet society. Brodsky quickly became an icon of opposition. It is perhaps an example of what he called, in To Urania, “the noise of history jamming or subjugating the song of art.” If Brodsky is to be interpreted as a social critic, it cannot be on the terms of victimhood or dissidence.

After being dubbed a “social parasite” in 1964, he was sentenced to forced labor in northern Russia. His defense at his trial is often read right into his writing.

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that inspired him—Anna Akhmatova, Osip Mandelstam, and Marina Tsvetaeva—as well as prominent Western writers—W.H. Auden, Eugenio Montale, Constantine Cavafy, and Derek Walcott. The bookends to this collection of essays are both memoirs. The title essay “Less Than One” opens the book, recounting the stupefying boredom of Soviet education. The final memoir, “In a Room and a Half,” is a tribute to his parents, who were never permitted to visit him. We have only hints of the political—there is “On Tyranny,” which is still quite literary, and “Flight from Byzantium,” a travelogue. When he does address social responsibility, it is through a discussion of poetic form.

Brodsky’s theory of poetics unfolds itself in “The Child of Civilization,” his essay on Mandelstam and the manipulation of time. He writes that Mandelstam’s “verse in that period expresses the slowing-down, viscous sensation of time’s passage…the words, even their letters—vowels especially—are almost palpable vessels of time” (125). The way Brodsky elevates language often reveals more about his own style than the work of his interlocutors. He tells us that “verse meters in themselves are kinds of spiritual magnitudes for which for which nothing can be substituted…differences in meters are differences in breath and in heartbeats” (141). He is most interested in exploring poetic models and forms, embracing the flow of a poem and its verbal play. “Prosody,” he writes, “is simply a repository of time within language” (52).

It seems impossible to analyze a poem the way Brodsky does, and although a reader can learn from passionate engagement with texts, it is something that seems impossible to reproduce. For instance, he says, “the rigors involved in producing a decent echo are too high. They excessively shackle individuality” (141). His strong claims regarding poetic devices make it seem like he has known them intimately for years. Even if he has, it becomes difficult to challenge him. This is perhaps why he has been mocked by J.M. Coetzee as a “brilliant sophist.” If anything, his analysis brings his own writing into focus.

When he does touch on the political, it comes through language and aesthetics. He writes about the impact of language in developing the culture within which it exists, and the responsibility of the poet to facilitate this. When he is skeptical of politics, he often looks to literature for redemption, sketching out how an ethical public life can be built through a dialogue of great literature—“political evil,” he says, “is always a bad stylist.”

In the essay on Mandelstam, he remarks that “Russian poetry has set an example of moral purity and firmness,” reflected in preserving classical literary forms. Poetry has the responsibility of reconstructing culture and rebuilding human dignity. It is an emphasis on the relationship between people and texts; he rejects the idea that this is historically or culturally bounded.

In his Nobel lecture Brodsky says that literature is “far more ancient and viable thing than any social formation or state.” It certainly explains his campaign to fill the streets of New York with cheap poetry anthologies. He is the one responsible for the epigrams on the New York subway, one of which goes “Sir, you are tough, and I am tough. / But who will write whose epitaph?” True to form, as he told the New York Times in 1994, that “you” is another poet.

While he is concerned with poetic devices, he is nevertheless a poet with an independent mind—always a hostile element in a totalitarian society. Still, Brodsky never transformed his suffering...
into artistic capital. He once remarked, “the only things which poetry and politics have in common are the letters P and O.” It is not a rejection of the political but rather a refusal to grant special significance to his particular experiences. Seamus Heaney writes that instead of victimizing himself upon exile, Brodsky “got down to business right away as a teacher at the University of Michigan.” Even his poetry makes a comfortable transition to America, with poems about San Francisco cafés and a garbage dump in Nantucket.

He is a descendant of the Russian poetic tradition—he was, after all, close with Anna Akhmatova—but his subject matter is distinctively American, often involving meditations on mundane scenes. His biography, like any other poet’s, is in his love of language, which influences his sense of ethics and history, and not the other way around.

Yet this, too, can be politicizing. Brodsky is a Russian poet writing his essays in English during the time of the Soviet Union. His literary bilingualism was after all a forced one. But again, Brodsky will remove any political element, and embrace the aesthetic. He distinguishes himself from Conrad, who strayed from “his mother tongue…out of necessity,” and Nabokov, who did so “for burning ambition” (357). He began writing in English, he says, only to “find myself in closer proximity to the man whom I considered the greatest mind of the twentieth century: Wystan Hugh Auden…it was simply a desire to please a shadow” (357, 358).

Brodsky is sincere when he tells us that Auden motivated his English poetry. However, it is his choice of writing in English about Russian memories that is peculiar. He tells us in the opening memoir, “the little I remember becomes even more diminished by being recollected in English” (4). On his late parents, he writes, “No country has mastered the art of destroying its subjects’ souls as well as Russia, and no man with a pen in his hand is up to mending them…May English then house my dead” (461). For his parents, “English offers a better semblance of afterlife, maybe the only one there is, save for my very self. And as far as the latter is concerned, writing in this language is…therapeutic” (461).

Soviet society, and perhaps even the Russian language, will only trivialize him and his parents. The impulse to write in English comes from more than just Auden; it is a way to protect his parents and ease his own pain. In the final essay, he tries hard to justify English as a way to honor his parents:

I want English verbs of motion to describe their movements. This won’t resurrect them, but English grammar may at least prove to be a better escape route from the chimneys of the state crematorium than the Russian. To write about them in Russian would be only to further their captivity, their reduction to insignificance…If I had written all this in Russian, these words wouldn’t see the light of day under the Russian sky. (460)

Writing about memories in English makes sense, whether it is to create a therapeutic distance or honor his parents in a language associated with individual freedom. Yet his art always acts as a guide for action, as he resolutely claims that “Language is older than state” and “prosody always survives history” (52). It is poetry that makes reality graspable and provides an ethical clarity.

Brodsky was in fact very political, but it is his value of poetics over history that gives him this uncompromising position: “Life experience,” he says, can do nothing but “follow the voice, permanently lagging behind it…after all, it has the speed of sound” (183). Brodsky is in a very unique, radical category when it comes to poetry. He infused Russian with English poetic forms, and asked Soviet culture to examine its tragic self. Because he could take this stance on Russian letters, he created a possibility for conflict. As for fulfilling his responsibility, we would need to actually read a poem to decide that—something Less Than One challenges its readers to discover.

Three months after the Twin Towers collapsed, Don DeLillo published in *Harper’s* an essay cum manifesto entitled “In the Ruins of the Future” that envisioned a world permanently changed and resituated in a narrative composed out of the attackers’ fertile imagination. A terrorists’ narrative, DeLillo argued, “ends in the rubble, and it is left to us to create the counter narrative.” The attack on September 11 was aimed at America and “the high gloss of our modernity…the thrust of our technology…our perceived godlessness…the power of American culture to penetrate every wall, home, life, and mind.” In the aftermath, time became scarce, and the speed of life was accelerated. The author’s job was to begin in the towers “trying to imagine the moment” of the primal terror as people fell from the “towers hand in hand.” A narrative arising out the imagination of destruction is opposed by a writer’s narrative, devoid of politics and history, and infused with a language inextricable from the world that engenders it. This counter-narrative is the writer’s opposition against their imagination’s design on the present-day.

It is easy to be misled by the essay’s uncompromising polemical tone and urgent rhetoric, and therefore be tempted to evaluate the piece solely in terms of the acuteness of the political analysis and the accuracy with which DeLillo describes the geopolitical dynamics culminating in the attacks on September 11. The real values of “Ruins” lies not in the accuracy of its perceptions or the validity of its arguments, but rather in its capacity to introduce a world-view contributing to the literary powers of one of America’s most distinguished writers. In 2006, Don DeLillo incorporated the rhetoric of his essay to aid in the narrative dramatization of his new novel, *Falling Man,* concerning the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. In contrast to the essay’s broad analysis, DeLillo narrowed his focus, concentrating his literary efforts on portraying a troubled marriage forced to confront the strange realities of a post-9/11 world.

*Falling Man* stands apart from much of DeLillo’s other work because its ambition is not to intricately construct an inner portrait of an influential and infamous figure, as he did with Lee Harvey Oswald in *Libra,* or to imagine how a town would face death as a consequence of a mechanical radiation failure in *White Noise.* When it was released in this spring, *Falling Man* arrived to lofty literary expectations from readers and critics alike anticipating how one of America’s most representative writers would recreate the uncanny horror of that solitary September day in 2001. *Falling Man* sees DeLillo’s vision of life in the twenty-first century as being irrevocably altered by those who chose to attack the United States. *Falling Man* attempts to track these changes through the social fabric of one couple’s life in New York City at that specific point in place and time.

Although the street we’re initially placed into within the novel’s first pages has been transformed into “a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night,” some issues remain persistently important to Keith Neudecker, a survivor of the Twin Towers attacks (29). His marriage is failing, and after a voluntary separation from his wife Lianne, both surround themselves with “certain symmetry” in relation to each other. They remain

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steadfastly committed to an equivalent group to diminish their loneliness and bestow meaning on their lives. Before the towers collapsed, Keith had his poker game and Lianne had “her storyline sessions in East Harlem, also weekly, in the afternoon” with five to seven patients in the early stages of Alzheimer’s disease (29). Lianne maintains her meetings, even after the towers fall, interacting through the patients’ fading memories and their security from trauma as their memories become less reliable.

After Keith returns home, wearing a suit and carrying a briefcase, “with glass in his hair and face, marbled balls of blood and light,” the marital tensions ease as the trauma of survival and the disbelief in the aftermath of the attacks is soothed by renewed physical intimacy between them. Resignation to their separation is replaced with a passionate new intimacy to distract them from the world outside:

“She’d put down a book or magazine and small settled around them. This was sex. They’d walk down a street together and see themselves in a dusty window. A flight of stairs was sex, the way she moved close to the wall with him just behind, to touch or not, brush lightly or press tight, feeling him crowd her from below, his hand moving around her thigh, stopping her, the way he eased and around, the way she gripped his wrist. (7)

Their only child, Justin, lingers in the background, with a pair of binoculars he uses to persistently scan the New York skyline along with his friends, the Siblings, in search of a mysterious man, “Bill Lawton” (Bin Ladin). Despite his parents’ attempts to insulate him from the devastation’s aftermath, the language of the attacks, with their polysyllabic, foreign sounding names, pervade the social atmosphere and reflect DeLillo’s insistence, as he identified it in the Harpers article, on “language [being] inseparable from the world that provokes it.”

Pervading Lianne’s life and attracting the notice of other New Yorkers is the Falling Man, a performance reenacting the iconic photograph wherein an identified man lunges down to Earth after jumping out from the collapsing towers. The performer selects his stage from New York’s numerous locales, carefully contorting himself in front of an expectant audience that knows what to expect but is unable to look away:

Jumps or falls. He keels forward, body rigid, and falls full-length, headfirst, drawing a rustle of awe from the schoolyard with isolated cries of alarm that only partly smothered by passing roar of the train…But the fall was not the worst of it. The jolting end of the fall left him upside-down, secured to the harness, twenty feet above the pavement…but the worst of it was the stillness itself and her nearness to the man…She could have spoken to him but that was another plane of being, beyond reach. (168)

As the body merges into the iconic image familiar to all New Yorkers, the Falling Man, aka David Janiak, persistently retrieves the past and reenacts on full display, merging entertainment with an image of a pitiless death, as a man falling to his death so that he might not be crushed by the tumbling walls.

Disrupting the continuity of the Keith and Lianne’s narrative is the development of Hammad, one of the hijackers behind the plane that would go on to knock down Keith’s tower. In contrast to their urbane lives, Hammad’s identity is submerged among his fellow Muslims who expressed a “feeling of lost history…too long in isolation…being crowded out by other cultures, other futures, the all-enfolding will of capital markets and foreign policies” (80). His self-consciousness and inner identity slowly dissolves into the collective spirit protesting against the intrusion of foreign cultures. Their apartness, as DeLillo describes it in his essay, is “hard and tight…[they] live in a far narrower format” compared to the modern world Lianne
and Keith inhabit, “a wide world, routinely filled with exchange of every sort, an open circuit of work, talk, family and expressible feeling.”

Plot, in *Falling Man* and “In the Ruins of the Future,” is one of DeLillo’s most durable explanations for terrorism because of its ability to construct a feeling of brotherhood among the suicidal terrorists. It was plot that would draw them together and closed the world to the “slenderest line of sight, where everything converges...[to] a claim of fate, that they were born to do this” (174). In a near perfect echo of this passage in *Falling Man*, DeLillo voices the same concern “In the Ruins of the Future”:

This is his edge, his strength. Plots reduce the world. He builds a plot around his anger and our indifference. He lives a certain kind of apartness, hard and tight. This is not the self-watcher, the soft white dangling boy who shoots someone to keep from disappearing into himself. The terrorist shares a secret and a self. At a certain point he and his brothers may begin to feel less motivated by politics and personal hatred than by brotherhood itself.

DeLillo has long maintained that some of his strongest artistic influences emerged from the visual arts and cinema. As a young man, he frequented movies by Goddard, Bergman, Antonioni, all directors who were at work expanding the artistic possibilities of the medium. Critic David Cowart mentions that “more than any other contemporary writer, DeLillo understands the extent to which images from television from film, from magazines, from journalism and photography...determine what passes for reality.” *Falling Man* continues in a tradition of DeLillo novels influenced by the visual medium. Various images, from the description of the glass in Keith’s hair to the portrait Lianne’s mother obtains that contains two shapes resembling the Twin Towers, are essential for the development of the story, but they also must have served as a difficult challenge for DeLillo. To skillfully portray the visual impact of New York City on September 11, 2001, DeLillo had to employ a style capable of replicating the moving images Americans saw on their TV screen while simultaneously being capable of describing something new and unexpected for the reader who feels content with the same images and films repeated repetitiously on the major channels. DeLillo’s sentences, parsed with commas and connected with conjunctions, are capable of conveying the images in one stream without breaking them up into short, declarative sentences at the expense of rhythm and sense of motion: “They ran and fell, some of them, confused and ungainly, with debris coming down around them, and there were people taking shelter under cars.” The epigrammatic rush of this sentence is skillfully chopped up into appositives and sentence fragments, and even complete clauses. The artistic effect is not unlike watching a movie, with quick, jerky cuts to tie visual sense with the scene’s meaning.

But DeLillo spent too much time on imagery and not enough on character. And it feels dull and empty when we’re left alone with Keith, or Lianne’s mother Nina and her husband Martin. Any attempt to bring us closer to these characters is thwarted by DeLillo’s refusal to let us inside their heads as much as he’s let us inside Lianne’s and Hammad’s. The third-person doesn’t disappear enough for the sake of developing some sort of attachment to Lianne, Keith, and Justin as people rather than two-dimensional characters created for the expressed intent of serving DeLillo’s beliefs. If they were only imbued with more life, the startling images would have been needed; their dynamic with one another would have been far more useful for both the reader seeking for something more than style without the depth these characters depended.

*Falling Man* is a fine artistic achievement, but its imperfections are reflected in DeLillo’s dramatizing his vision of the world within characters capable of supporting more life than he allotted. As art and entertainment merge in this century, *Falling Man* will be useful to help us demonstrate the accuracy of DeLillo’s view about the present and the future.
Fifteen years after his death, Allan Bloom still commands a rapt audience. This past April, his thoughts once again filled a University of Chicago lecture hall. Though he was a brilliant essayist, translator, and educator in his own right, he is remembered for his one book that became a New York Times bestseller.

On the twentieth anniversary of the publication of Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind*, we are confronted by a sort of intellectual imperative to re-examine the arguments contained therein. However, I wonder if I—a former St. John’s College student, whose present coursework at the University of Chicago consists principally of the study of the Greek language and of dead white males—should truly have much first hand experience of “the state [of] intellectual pluralism at today’s universities.” Nonetheless, my experiences as an American youth and as a student on various campuses have prepared me to attest to the veracity of much of Bloom’s analysis. However this may be, twenty long years after Bloom’s devastating critique, I feel some confidence in asserting that humane learning does still continue in North America—though not as those sympathetic to Bloom would like it to be.

The *Closing*, 1987
Bloom is not the histrionic and venomous polemicist as he has sometimes been painted. His work is truly a profound diagnosis of our modern ills, in the same way that Rousseau’s was of Enlightenment rationalism and Nietzsche’s of the Left. Bloom’s scathing attack on our culture is in effect a criticism of North American academia and the education which they provide our youth. Each page rings with the insights of a life’s study of men like Plato, Aristotle, Nietzsche, Locke, Tocqueville, and Rousseau. An intellectual heir to Leo Strauss’s *Natural Right and History* and “What is Political Philosophy?” Bloom traces the progression of German social science positivism’s value-free judgments, from vulgar, “pop” relativism to the (perhaps inevitable) bleak nihilism of the Last Man—the darkest abyss known to a self-assured, comfortable, bourgeois society.

To borrow language from the social sciences, Bloom’s work is both descriptive and prescriptive. In it, he proceeds to describe three phenomena: the ambient Western culture, the pathways and the effects of the exchange between the “Ivory Tower” and modern American culture, and the etiology of our present intellectual crisis. In the way of prescription, he gives us an image of the humane learning—which is to say true liberal education—with which he was himself partly graced as a student. What more, his negative descriptions might be understood implicitly to suggest appropriate prescriptions.

Bloom’s profound analysis of our current ills covers an expansive period, dating back to intellectual events sprung in Early Modern Europe. We are today experiencing the birth pangs of an Enlightenment political theory that haphazardly jettisoned its concomitant natural right teaching, replacing it with a value-free science of human things and an optimistic faith in the progress of human knowledge—that is to say, it was replaced by nothing which would prove to be of great substance or consequence. Value-free social science robs us of speech. It does not permit us the words to defend our decisions or choices—even for **Aaron Roberts is a third year in the College, majoring Political Science and Fundamentals.**
those choices of the greatest importance. There are many symptoms of this way of thinking lurking about us. Because we today inhabit a world that has become wary of a thing called “bias,” it has become increasingly difficult to love what is our own simply because it is our own.

The Closing, 2007
As someone born in the 1980s, I write as a second generation student of Bloom—a student of a student of Bloom’s. Though dedicated “to [his] students,” Bloom’s Closing was purchased in droves by the parents of his students, who yearned for insight into the minds of their close-lipped sons and daughters. Twenty years later, my generation has accidentally become the new—although perhaps anticipated—audience of this book. It is true that few of us still revel in the music of Mick Jagger. Yet Bloom’s book speaks to us at least as urgently, if not even more urgently, than it did to his own students. We are in the peculiar position of both living the world that Bloom describes and being simultaneously prepared with the critical tools and insights he presents. Like the generation of the late 1960s, we too are the generation afraid to say to his lover, “I love you.” But we are the first generation to know that we are afraid to say the words, “I love you.” We are the first generation both to fit Bloom’s description and to be equipped with—i.e., to know well—Bloom’s criticism.

Of course we must not overstate the case. Allan Bloom is found on the summer reading list of relatively few university students. All the same, those few that do read Bloom make it their own. For many of his readers, Bloom’s words can even prove to be life-changing—life changing not in the sense of choosing a career path or deciding on a flavor of gelato; life changing in the sense of inspiring us to reexamine critically what it is that we hold to be good or important in our own lives. The examination is an uncomfortable one. We are first led to see the abyss. Soon after, some of us do discover that we are just barely peering over the edge.

Kulturreise
Bloom’s book, I believe, helped me to articulate and understand my upbringing and the beliefs of my youth. It provided me with some of the language and analysis not yet present in my own thoughts. Though I am tempted to say that this very observation sufficiently attests to the truth of this analysis, it might be objected that Bloom’s book simply became for me a distorted lens through which I came to misunderstand my experiences in post-adolescence. To this I would rejoin that although the trans-Atlantic etiology of the cultural crisis Bloom describes may be up for debate, his description of the phenomena is as insightful as it is accurate. I have sufficient insight into the psyche of my post-adolescence to attest to the accuracy of Bloom’s portrayal.

“We are the first generation to know that we are afraid to say the words, ‘I love you.’”

Today, any child can flatter his hollow intellect by declaring everything to be culturally relative. But this is simply the “insight” of the lazy. It is non-philosophical and strictly dogmatic. Unwilling to confront difficult questions, they instead withdraw into their pseudo-intellectual cave. In zealously undermining all traditions of men, modern theory has created a void, which presently yearns to be filled. The truly educated and civilized strive for higher things.

Bloom—following Tocqueville—aptly teaches that the founding principles of our society (freedom and equality) exist in a fundamental tension with one another. Unfettered and unrestrained freedom can be, and frequently is, inegalitarian. Freedom commands that the dictates of equality...
be muted, but equality will not have this.

The confusion over the relationship of the one to the other (freedom to equality) probably manifests itself as a confusion in our own minds regarding what is good. Owing to this confusion, these principles were further radicalized in my own mind.

They came to mean for me permissiveness and license, and the unseating of authority. For reasons still difficult to articulate, I grew, unawares, into an adolescent who believed in no ultimate principles but the principles of self-indulgence and Karamazovian sensualism, the expression of “individuality,” and the pursuit of worldly gain or the satisfaction of my vanity (which seem to be one and the same thing in retrospect).

Have we all become a mass of relativists, of nihilists, of hedonists, of materialists? I speak for myself when I respond, “perhaps.” But underlying it all, it is likely that we are simply in a state of confusion stemming from a more fundamental confusion about the appropriate ends of a human being. But, as Bloom so aptly put it, “all this is a thin veneer over boundless seas of rage, doubt and fear.” Worse yet, American democratic culture appeared to be permissive of this sort of confusion. Is it a coincidence that every adolescent in this land of plenty is haunted by pangs of loneliness, alienation, and dejection? Bloom accurately saw this in our preference for *Catcher in the Rye*—my favorite novel of youth—and Camus. We may be said to have become souls without longing, as Bloom had originally titled his manuscript—emotionally absent, psychically impoverished, and “flat-souled.”

The State of Education

There is no word for “culture” in Greek. The closest word, one might say, would be the word *paideia*, or “education.” As such, a scholar of the classical world, would see the failures of a culture inextricably linked to that culture’s education. Having co-opted the method of the social scientist, Bloom examined the psyches of the “sample” available to him: the best and brightest in American universities. The psyches of the students at America’s elite universities are an image of the state of American culture, insofar as they are the product of a high intellectual tradition filtered down through the schools.

According to Bloom, we face today a profound educational crisis, coextensive with the crisis of our civilization. That crisis consists in the observation that we have formally defeated reason through the use of reason. (See Richard Rorty’s 1982 essay “The Fate of Philosophy,” where he—the indirect disciple of Dewey—effectively pronounces the death knell of philosophy as we know it by referring to philosophy as a “literary genre.”) Whatever we might understand liberal education to be, it is at least clear that it has partly—or in some cases, altogether—withered and died at some of America’s most prestigious universities and colleges.

There no longer exists a coherent image of what it means to be an educated human being. Some of the most elite and celebrated educational institutions have thrown up their hands in a gesture that appears to say that they no longer believe that they know anything more about education than the incoming first year. Brown has abandoned altogether any pretensions at directing any of the educational pursuits of its students. Columbia and the University of Chicago have systematically proceeded to relax their silently decomposing “core” curriculum. In addition, the departments within academia today deny the natural unity of human thought, yet they present their individual, partial perspectives as complete and comprehensive. The “new kind of education,” which Bloom saw, militantly sought to reduce all highs in man to lower motives, thereby stunting the growth of the minds of our nation. Multiculturalism in the humanities—for the mere sake of multiculturalism—has further obscured our purposes in education, having become an end in itself: openness to the ‘Other.’

What is Liberal Education?

As stated above, education plays a reciprocal role
with culture. Strangely, however, Bloom departs from the subsequent inference that Dewey had made, that higher education should become the handmaiden of liberal democracy. In point of fact, Bloom’s book was written in implicit but essential opposition to Dewey. Higher, theoretical thought—and hence, the university—is not naturally in the service of the city. Rather, at its best, it is the healthiest aristocratic element within a democratic society, promoting what is best and highest in man, without concern for the common denominator.

As Socrates is symbolic of the function of the university, the civilized and “humanizing” themes of a true liberal education involve the Socratic-Aristotelian question of the good life for man. Education is said to be truly liberal (i.e., liberating) only if it promotes that single life that exercises that part of man that is peculiar to man, his mind. Humane education should be dedicated to higher things and provide those ideals to which we might aspire.

True liberal education must actively engage us as human beings. Liberal education has as its end “the goal of human completeness,” but we may only fulfill our humanity in the use of reason. Philosophy—or any simply theoretical science—may be indefensible in terms of utility, but it represents something in man that establishes him as a being worthy of dignity. The static quality in all considerations of man is his nature. Humane education must pose those sempiternal questions which belong to man as man.

The very essence of liberal education for Bloom is the cognitive liberation borne of the knowledge of alternatives. True intellectual freedom is awareness of alternatives, a breadth and wealth of perspectives. However imperfect that tradition may be, the “best [minds] of the past” provide us with more reliable standards of thought and life than the ephemeral and present pieties and opinions. Thus philosophy is most needful, insofar as it is the function of philosophy to dismantle popular pieties and received opinions in the ascent from opinion to knowledge; darkness to light. All this requires a return to the philosophical books undergirding our society. However, we must not read Rousseau, Socrates, or writers of their ilk as historical artifacts, but rather as living ideas. In order to treat them seriously, we must understand them as they understood themselves. In so doing, we are obliged to lay aside our faith in the superiority of modern knowledge, which we can do in recognition of the fact that the progress of the modern mind has borne rotten fruit: it has given us value-relativism and nihilism. This is what liberal education can do for us, but always with an awareness that liberal education is not essentially instrumental. (Even the things most needful can be also non-instrumental in the last appraisal.)

The Future of Humane Thought
Humane learning is not yet dead in North America. Today one place with which I am familiar is that tiny enclave called “political philosophy” within many North American departments of political science. There, scholars of the highest caliber still treat the classics with the seriousness of Machiavelli. It is troubling, however, that this group represents a specialization, which definitionally seems to defy the concept of humane learning. Nevertheless, this group, and others like them, have answered the imposing question, why study Greek books? They have taken to heart Bloom’s exhortation:

For the first time in four hundred years, it seems possible and imperative to begin all over again, to try to figure out what Plato was talking about, because it might be the best thing available. (310)

Bloom was not entirely correct about his students (or perhaps—though unlikely—the students are specifically different today). Today, there are still those who come to the university yearning for that je ne sais quoi that will complete them. There are even those who, like myself, came to the university eager to push through to a JD, MBA, or MD but somehow got diverted along the way by the ideas they encountered there. Today, it is not entirely uncommon to find eighteen and twenty
year old lovers of Mozart or Bartók—some of whom are without much formal music training or encouragement from their parents. Some of us do still long for the Continent and for that which it represents. We long for Europe: to visit, to live. Also, contrary to Bloom’s pronouncements, some of us do use Aristotle both as a means to understand ourselves, but also as source for reflection on our own practical or theoretical quagmires.

With all that said, I find myself far less sanguine than Bloom in my expectations from a university education and what sort of changes it might be encouraged to effect in the lives of us, today’s students. The Box of Pandora was opened some time ago. The scientific project has all but extinguished any concept of telos. And so it became impermissible to speak of the end or function of a human being. With it too went all things immaterial, and the soul along with it. Accordingly, it has become increasingly difficult to believe that education can act on anything within us. We cannot point our fingers at it. Undoubtedly, the psyche remains; but since Freud, it has become exclusively the locus of anxieties, depressions, and other such things. Certainly this thing, a psyche, is not seen as the proper object of refinement or improvement, that is, of education. And with it, the aims of education have either changed or become blurred.

Rousseau wrote of a “state of nature” to which man once belonged, although he was ever aware that return was impossible. For us too, it might be altogether impossible to return to an age of wonder. Supposing now that we discovered the true nature of things, we scoff instead at that prior age of innocence.

However this may be, humane learning is, at least, not altogether dead or dying in North America. It continues to inhabit certain halls of the academy, though sometimes tucked away, out of sight. Occasionally, it rears its head to teach those authors about whom Bloom was so passionate. Do students of humane learning reap a benefit? Yes, in a way. However, many of them are professionals, albeit of a certain type. No Socrates stands amongst them.

from the “Letters of the World” series:

The Hygeantose lutl, “A dangerously heterodox form”

The first day of every Hygeantose year begins generally (though not necessarily; c.f. Montrose (1965)) with a retelling of what’s become a very long folk tale. A tale, at least, that is functionally a folk tale for all but the eldest Hygeantose.

The details of the story are not relevant to present purposes, which consist of attempting an exegesis at the etymology and graphology of the character lutl (please see fig. d).

What’s perhaps most striking to the uninitiated casual observer of Hygeantose is the the heterodoxy of the orthographical system; not only is spelling poorly systematized, but the forms of the letters themselves are often also nonstandardized, so that the reader is occasionally confronted not merely with a vocabulary item that’s unfamiliar—a situation common to any foreign-language student—but potentially with letters which are themselves novel. Hygeantose presents, for this and other reasons which present space prohibits the discussion of, something of a steep learning curve. Probably the single best example of this that the author has encountered in the field is the character lutl (carefully, fig. d), an alveolar fricative. The production of the sound is simple enough; most students are able to utter the sound with reasonable fidelity within a few weeks of taking up the language. The graphology, however, is uniquely formidable.

The southern Hygeantose have written the present letter in a manner not unlike the English uppercase X. The northeastern peoples generally produce a sort of Q-looking letter, though there are attestations of something more resembling the numeral 7. And perhaps most distressingly, as is illustrated (if you must, fig. d), is the southeastern variant, whose shape and scope this author can only hint at. To attempt to graph the letter is immensely frustrating. To see it written on a signpost raises the ire of any serious student of language. If remotely possible, avoid lutl.
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Fig. a: U+1038C.
Fig. b: U+10827.
Fig. c: U+2DC9.
Fig. d: U+214C.
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