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The Loser in a Lawn Chair

by Thomas Fleming

We are often accused of looking on the dark side of everything. One editorialist even found it amusing that we occasionally compared contemporary America with the Byzantine Empire, as if such a comparison were not an insult to the Christian civilization of Constantinople. Despite our reputation, we like to think of ourselves as hardheaded optimists, and we thought it would be amusing to play Pollyanna for a change. For my own part, what I have to offer resembles, at least in tone, *The Consolation of Philosophy* more than *The Power of Positive Thinking*.

It is not always easy to discern the line of demarcation that divides one era from another, but whatever else it might mean, this century has been the painful weaning process in which European and American man has cut himself off from the civilization that gave him birth. The ancient classics, the faiths rooted in the Scriptures, the artistic and intellectual methods that took shape in the Renaissance—all of these survive now only here and there in little monastic pockets of specialized learning or sectarian commitment. But for the most part the Christian and classical culture so ardently defended in the earlier years of this century by Carducci, Belloc, and Eliot now are reduced to so much

bric-a-brac in museums and fine-print type in a guidebook to Europe.

What is the bright side of cultural dissolution? Simply this. Such things have happened before, and they will happen again. There are lives worth living to be lead now as much as any time before, and those of us who put their faith in the maker of all things must realize that if things must get much worse before they get better, they will, nonetheless, get better. Since so much that good men have labored for is now out of our hands as individuals, we can concentrate on the only things that have ever really mattered.

This is a hard lesson for European man, who has always found it difficult to take life as it comes. It was a Hellenized Phoenician—not a Greek—who founded Stoicism, and it was no accident that such a creed of resignation became popular during an era in which the old world of the Greek polis was breaking down, to be replaced by kingdoms, cosmopolitan empires, and bureaucracy. A typical Alexandrian Greek might have come from Cyrene or Rhodes and could spend his life in the service of Macedonian kings and in the company of strangers. The old political life of the assembly, marketplace, and council was now as much an

irrelevant fiction as our own Electoral College. There is little point in blaming the Stoics for their lack of patriotism or their cosmopolitan indifference to all those myths of blood and soil that had given rise to Hellenic civilization. The important feature of Stoicism was not that it taught people to be locally irresponsible “citizens of the world,” but that it instructed them in the duties and responsibilities of whatever station they found themselves in. “Every hour,” counseled the Emperor Marcus, “consider sturdily as a Roman and as a man that which is in your hands to do, scrupulously, and with unfeigned seriousness, compassion, freedom, and justice.”

It was this philosophy that the Romans, whose upper classes remained civic-minded even under the empire, managed to transform from a creed of passive individualism to an armed doctrine of civil responsibility. The most humane of the Romans—himself no Stoic but “a pig from Epicurus’ sty”—was a freedman’s son with an almost Christian notion of resignation:

*Aequam memento rebus in arduis
Servare mentem. . . .*

In my own version of Horace, I would say: accept the good things without gloating and endure evils if not without complaining, at least without pillorying the universe for letting you down.

This is not a question of equanimity, as my friends and enemies alike will tell you. It is really more resignation than even temper that affords me a certain willingness to accept things as they are and observe events from whatever place I find myself in. What is the alternative? Spend your life brooding over the criminal misconduct of the American Congress or tracing the stream of poisons that gush through the aquifer? We have no control over such things. Politics is the concern of a free people; imperial subjects are lucky—very lucky, indeed—if they can carve out some small niche where their decisions count for something. Rear your children, meet your obligations, and let the empire take care of itself. Be content: although scum generally rises to the top, in the end it is always skimmed off and thrown away.

For as far back as I can remember, I have always known that I was born into the wrong period of history, but it has always been my opinion that most people born into this century are actually displaced persons, who deserve a better fate than modernity. Part of this is the natural condition of men and women, whose hard lot it is to be torn between two worlds: the world of everyday experience in which our bodies are at home, and that other world, that land of heart’s desire from which our spirits are exiled:

Ever-blooming are the joys of heaven’s high
paradise.
Cold age deafs not there our ears nor vapours dim
our eyes.
Glory there the sun outshines, whose beams the
blessed only see.

But, as this world spins further and further out of the orbit of its star, we find ourselves less and less at home. We are resident aliens in our own country, and one place can be as good as another, if all we require is a seat in the window from which we can watch the world go by.

In my own case, they have not been particularly interesting places: a dying city at the end of the Great Lakes, college towns, suburbs, a shrimping village, Rockford. On the few occasions that I was actually able to decide upon a place to live, nothing turned out as I had planned. Either my resolve weakened and I did not move to Nova Scotia, or the destiny that I thought I held was ripped from my hands by the winds of cause and effect that blow from who knows what caves of what malevolent gods. I moved back to Charleston to escape the futility of teaching only to find myself responsible for educating a hundred children from five to eighteen in a village that is as much the antithesis of Charleston as any place in low country South Carolina can be. I went to San Francisco to be part of the new life of the late 60’s and spent most of my days reading Tacitus, James Thompson, and Lionel Johnson on the roof of a retirement hotel that seemed to exist only to abuse Social Security pensioners.

Some would say, especially if they have been reading Nietzsche, that such temperaments reflect an inability to “say yes to life.” That is probably true enough, but in my case at least I have never been able to say no either. Why is it that on my first day in a strange city, I am sure to be asked directions? In Pisa last summer I was badgered by an officious group of arrogant tourists who demanded to know where the *touray pahndahntay* was. After several minutes of mutually incomprehensible conversation, I guessed—*la tour pendente*? Their Franco-Italian was even worse than my Americo-Italian.

I must have an open countenance—I know it is not an inviting one—and when I am asked a question on the street I always stop. This is not always a good idea in New York, where you are likely to hear a story that sounds like the last words of Dutch Schultz (which Dwight McDonald interpreted as unintended parody of Joyce). I have been mugged twice, as I began to explain that I did not have any spare change, at least not for people who were so importunate in their demands. Worse than being mugged, I have been dragged into things. What sort of things? Everything from a Daishonin Buddhist indoctrination session to a wine party in the alley behind what would then have been called a colored grocery store.

Thinking about these incidents, I am reminded of Kenneth Patchen’s “shy pornographer” whose last name was Budd. Anytime he heard someone call out, “Got a match, bud?” he assumed it was someone who knew him. In his case, innocence brought him fame and fortune as the only pornographer who had never written a dirty word. His publisher inserted a lot of asterisks and exclamation marks—presumptive expletives deleted—into the text of his otherwise entirely wholesome Perry Mason novel. I know the feeling. There are professional conservatives in Washington who work overtime to find subliminal hate messages by reading *Chronicles* backward at a lower speed.

I used to have a friend who was an absolute paragon of passivity. He would spend days dreaming up perfect book titles, without ever getting around to writing even the first sentence. He did once conceive of a whole book project on American assassins and went so far as to look up the newspaper files on McKinley and Garfield. We went to the library and checked out the stories in the encyclopedias and

history books, and I learned something important about American scholarship: hardly anyone does any work. Nearly every account described Garfield's assassin, Charles Guiteau, as a "disappointed office seeker." "I am a Republican stalwart," he exclaimed as he fired upon Garfield, who had been elected as virtually the only honest man in the GOP. How things have changed. Leon Czolgosz, on the other hand, the murderer of William McKinley, is always "an anarchist enflamed by the doctrines of Emma Goldman." It was enough to make you lose heart in a project, more than enough for Pasquale, who rarely finished anything longer than a sonnet, albeit often a good sonnet.

For all the trouble he got into as a result of a growing affection for the bottle, Pasquale retained an innocence about other people that it was hard not to admire, and when he was sober he could talk wonderfully about the things he had seen when he was drunk. Most of us either cannot remember or would rather not. Fitzgerald says somewhere that people who are amused by a drunk the night before always take it out on him the day after, because they resent the honesty he had enjoyed under the influence. Perhaps, as Fitzgerald got older, people were a great deal less amused by his "honesty" than he realized, but he had a point, and perhaps our fear of honesty, of seeing things as they are, explains the new temperance crusade being waged by America's ruling class. Gorbachev knows that drunkenness and shirking are forms of counterrevolution that put *glasnost* and *perestroika* to shame. "Wine," said Alcaeus, "is a peep-hole into the soul." Small wonder that the Congress of the United States would like to levy an outrageous tax on beer, the workingman's wine.

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Pasquale was half Italian, half North Carolinian—not a good combination for a man who expected to make his way in the world. Since the invention of air conditioning, the Italians and American Southerners have shown a great capacity for enterprise, but both peoples are still sufficiently civilized to spend half their time eating and drinking, living. In his wonderful book on James Johnston Pettigrew, Clyde Wilson describes Pettigrew's reaction as he travels from Germany through France down to Italy. As the North Carolinian passes into Italy, he recorded in his diary that it was like coming home.

In much of Italy, as in Charleston, where Pettigrew practiced law, businessmen and lawyers still knock off for several hours in the heat of the day, to eat or drink or lay around in the shade. This habit of doing nothing is a valuable trait that most of us have lost, along with the habit of reflection and the sense of honor. I sometimes think I am better occupied in staring out the window, my mental

screen gone blank or showing at most a test pattern, than in any strenuous mental exercise. I know that it is only after I have been able to afford such a luxury that I am capable of thinking or writing something better than editorial copy. When one of my colleagues caught me at such a moment, he quipped: "What do you think this is, a think tank?"

Nathaniel West, in his most depressing book, *The Day of the Locust*, has unintentionally captured what I am trying to describe. A burnt-out simple man moves to California and rents a house. He spends most of his time keeping house and sitting out in an old deck chair he finds in the yard:

There was a much better view to be had in any direction other than the one he faced. By moving his chair in a quarter circle he could have seen a large part of the canyon twisting down to the city below. He never thought of making this shift. From where he sat, he saw the closed door of the garage and a patch of its shabby, tarpaper roof. In the foreground was a sooty, brick incinerator and a pile of rusty cans. A little to the right of them were the remains of a cactus garden in which a few ragged, tortured plants still survived.

Not much of a view, to be sure, although one wonders what a Dutch or Flemish painter might have made out of it. Proust's Bergotte (modeled on Anatole France) dies exclaiming over a little patch of yellow wall he had just seen in a Vermeer painting. Although West himself takes the opportunity to display his wonderfully clear prose, his character concentrates on the drama of a lizard catching flies. While rooting for the flies, he never interferes. The novelist obviously meant his character as a savage comment upon a class of Middle Americans he neither liked nor understood, but I would prefer to take the poor fellow as a kind of sage who has learned to be content with his lot.

This sort of Stoical acceptance of life as it comes has nothing in common with the Buddhist tales of the prince who left his family and friends in order to find peace as a ferryman. The only Oriental parallel that comes to mind is the Taoist parable of the ruler who wanted to abdicate his throne in favor of a wise counselor. The wise man refuses the honor, explaining that each man has his station in life. If the cook abandoned the kitchen, he adds, the priests would not quit their duties and take his place. Everyone, so the Taoist texts preach, must learn to make the best of his situation in life, even if we find ourselves burdened—like the Emperor Marcus—with the responsibilities of empire.

One more example to illustrate my Taoism for losers. A college prank, when I was 17, led to a very minor brush with the law. The kindly Charleston police had a good time threatening me with 15 years in jail and—worse—a night in the "blue room" where they put the drunks, homosexuals, and degenerates. This was no idle threat, by the way, since a year or so later some poor fellow passing through found himself in the county jail, because he couldn't pay a traffic ticket. Despite his many notes smuggled out to the guards—who only laughed as they crumpled them up and tossed them away—he was held captive by homosexual prisoners and repeatedly, continuously abused.

I had heard enough tales to be uncomfortable at the thought of a night in jail. One of the policemen at the station turned out to be a decent man who patrolled the beat where many of my friends lived, and he insisted that I be put in a solitary cell. As the door clanged shut, all I could think of was the terrible disgrace, the shame that would be brought on my family, my whole life ruined. You know how adolescents are wont to brood, and I was worse than most, but gradually a sense of peace descended. Since there was nothing, after all, that I could do about anything, there was no point to worrying. My mind went blank and the next thing I remember is being awakened by the voices of friends who had come to bail me out.

In the end, this ruinous experience cost a total of thirty dollars. Our director of student affairs, a fine old man named Willard Silcox, who had no particular fondness for me, kept it out of the papers. So far as I ever could find out, my parents never heard about it, and even if they had, they would undoubtedly have laughed about the incident. Over the years, the whole thing has been polished into an

anecdote that takes at least fifteen minutes to tell. The story is so good that I don't think I can any longer distinguish the true details of "an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative" from the "artistic verisimilitude" it has accumulated. What I do recall quite clearly is the moment of peace that opened up like the broad blue sky after a day of rain.

Peace is not the natural condition of human life, and for most of us these moments are rarer than an uncloudy day. Peace is, however, another name for the land of heart's desire; it is the condition of being at home — not in this alien universe of things and forces — but in that other world of which we have glimpses from time to time in dreams and myths and poems that are like mirages of oases and cities: they are not real in the desert where they appear, where the only reality is sand and blistering heat. But somewhere we may never go there is a real city, a real oasis where weary travelers refresh themselves with pure clear water. In the meantime there is "the peace of God that passeth understanding." 

Sleepwalker

by Dabney Stuart

The questionable old man wanders
the refuse dump, the railroad yards
in his head, deserted, gets out of bed,
traverses the room, goes down the stairs,
his pajama shirttail flapping,
the thin cotton pressing his legs.
Look at that shin — razor sharp:
barefoot to the wind, no more regard.
I meet him coming
out of the front door at midnight.
He points his finger at the moon,
pulls the trigger. I ask him
where he's going. "Off," he says.
The upstairs bedroom sucks at him
through its open window, a vacuum cleaner;
his hair flows toward it. He lifts
his arms, grabs a low branch of the maple,
hauls himself up. Moonbird,
limbnestle. The tree vibrates
from the suction. At its top finally,
he hooks his toes into the ruff,
flaps his arms, flies with the tree
his wake, gone. The bedroom window
shudders, a mouth moaning.
I sit down in the great rootgap
his takeoff has left me, his will,
hoping to die in such arms.