

Seduced and Abandoned

I was reared in a cultural microcosm that undervalued experience. More than that, it treated experience as a kind of monstrous blemish upon the face of thought, a defect that was deemed the more unfortunate for being the more noteworthy, unexpected, or rare. It was as though the threadbare commonness of climbing the Himalayas, or roaming the world as a hired assassin, or sleeping with seven women at once was more glaring than that of shopping for bread and milk. Experiences alleged to be more substantive or adventurous, went the implicit argument, were more illusory and, hence, distracting, polluting, and generally unsuited to the mind. And the abiding aim was cultivation of the mind.

Russian culture, ever echoing what, in English culture, had been William Blake's command to see Heaven in a grain of sand, chimed in with this. Our writers did travel far and wide; they did fight in wars; they had bizarre love affairs and lost fortunes at cards; but, just as Russia never produced a school of formal philosophy, she never produced the intellectual type of Hemingway, T.E. Lawrence, or Somerset Maugham—wise to the world, allegedly, and proud of it. Our writers "wanted to travel," in Andrei Platonov's phrase, "into the depths of man." *Not to Arabia.*

In retrospect, I cannot but appreciate the inverted cynicism of that approach to reality. I cannot but admire my parents and their circle of Moscow friends for having isolated me so effectively, throughout the whole of my youth, from action, and solely by means of an education in the pleasures of contemplation. The *vita contemplativa* was the sum total of their own lives, and, all along, I had been able to feel that their solicitude was not hypocrisy but the increasingly scarce product of a unique and absorbing, though quite possibly moribund, cultural tradition.

And so it went on in my own life and travels—this obstinate, indiscriminate, and anachronistic denial of experience at all costs. So long as the joys of the *vita contemplativa* are unceasing, I kept on thinking, I consent to regard the physical world around me as a medieval clois-

ter. Well, not quite, perhaps, but then again, anyone who reads Augustine's *Confessions* or listens to Orff's *Carmina Burana* knows that monasteries were not merely repositories for the Sid Sawyer personalities of their day. Still, during my first ten years in the United States, I never once visited Europe, and, during my subsequent 15 years in Britain, I never once ventured beyond the European continent. That's a quarter-century of stubborn self-confinement to an intellectual ideal.

The Russian emigré grandmother of an erstwhile friend of mine, a Hohenlohe by birth, refused to come out of her house in Rio de Janeiro to look at *Sputnik*, which everybody said could be seen in the midnight sky: "It's a Soviet provocation," said the princess. At the American university I attended, I was drawn to the study of Gnostic writers, and even to the Coptic language in which they raged against the world, for the simple reason that I had glimpsed an intriguing Russianness in the totality of their denial. They went further, of course, because, to them, not only all experience of the material world, but its very source, matter itself, was of the Devil.

Having grown up under totalitarianism, I could see their wisdom; for, if everything around you is the work of a malevolent demiurge, can you really gamble on a single atom as the source of joy for your immortal soul? On the other hand, I was no longer living under totalitarianism, or so it seemed; and, if matter was free and governed by its own laws, including those of physics, then perhaps the girl next to me was truly my beloved, the sunset I was admiring in her company was real, and the taste of the veal chop with wild mushrooms at the inn on the Vermont border was not, in the end, a Soviet provocation.

Thus I smoked but didn't inhale. Matter, our source of experience, might not be evil, but relying overmuch on the value of experience was contraindicated to the man who wanted to save his soul and be truly free. All action is provocation. Certainly, I reasoned, there must exist an ethical fissure between good and bad actions, but it is since time immemorial

shrouded in moral mist and, more important, dwarfed to nothingness by the much wider chasm that separates action from contemplation.

It was into this chasm that I fell one night ten years ago in London, when I walked through the doors of a seedy gambling club and looked into the mesmerizing whorl of the spinning wheel. It was—and, in the context, I cannot possibly think of a word more laden with meaning—an *experience*. It was as though all the pent-up thirsts of a puritanical past stirred to life within a parched soul, and I felt like the old spinster who, never having tasted liquor before, liked it so much that she drank a whole bottle of brandy and died of alcohol poisoning later that evening.

The revelation was, as revelations so often are, a blinding paradox. A life of contemplation teaches one many things; yet it is only when one is drawn, perhaps unwittingly, unwillingly, or by pure chance, into action, that one realizes that what these things add up to is an understanding of the world one has spent a lifetime contemplating, *not* of oneself. And, quite probably, a life of action is likely to spin out the selfsame paradox in reverse; so that an experienced, decisive, resourceful man of the world will be deeply conscious of his own weaknesses and strengths, of his own cowardice and bravery, but will then travel to Spain to fight on the wrong side, write a panegyric to Stalin, or lose his money on Wall Street.

Next month, I'll tell you exactly what happened to me that night.

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Letter From Alabama

by Michael Hill

Lessons from Montgomery



At 11:30 A.M. (CST) on Thursday, November 13, 2003, Roy Moore, chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court, was removed from office, and the will of the people of the sovereign state of Alabama was thwarted by a unanimous vote of the nine-member panel of the Court of Judicial Ethics. In deciding *Glassroth v. Moore*, the panel charged Moore with violating the canons of judicial ethics by willfully and publicly defying a federal court order to remove his Ten Commandments monument from the rotunda of the Alabama Judicial Building. Alabama Attorney General Bill Pryor, a Bush nominee for a federal judgeship on the 11th Circuit Court, served as chief prosecutor against Moore.

The proceedings of November 13 have their immediate roots in Moore's refusal to obey the federal court order of Judge Myron Thompson issued in August 2003. Thompson ruled that the monument violated the constitutional provision of the separation of Church and state. Thompson gave Moore until 5:00 P.M. on Wednesday, August 20, to remove the monument. Moore refused, noting that the issue in question was not the Ten Commandments themselves but whether the state of Alabama, representing her citizens, could acknowledge God. Who rules Alabama, the people of the state or the federal courts?

The League of the South was one of several organizations to hold a rally in Montgomery on the deadline day in support of Judge Moore. When our rally ended about 4:30 P.M., I joined some 75 other League members, Alabama and Confederate flags in hand, who were making their way from the steps of the State Capitol in Montgomery down Dexter Avenue to the Judicial Building. The mid-August heat and humidity in central Alabama were oppressive. Rumors were flying that Judge Thompson had ordered federal marshals to remove the 5,300-pound monument shortly after the 5:00

P.M. deadline, and we planned to do what we could to prevent such an attempt.

When League of the South members reached the Judicial Building near the deadline for the monument's removal, all of us were dressed quite plainly, most in our standard red shirts and casual slacks or jeans, like men who expected to get their hands dirty with some important work. We did not seek out the media for interviews. We were not there for photo ops. We were there to support Judge Moore and, if necessary, to block anyone from moving the monument.

By contrast, the professional conservative and Christian leaders were dressed to the nines and were energetically grabbing the nearest microphone and preening for the closest camera. One of these men approached us as we ascended the steps and asked us to have "our people" put away their Alabama and Confederate flags and placards because they might "muddy the message." What he meant was that the conservative Christian leaders did not want their fundraising photos marred by any Southern symbols. Nor did they wish to contend with our states' rights argument. In fact, they seemed to prefer quoting Martin Luther King, Jr., to Thomas Jefferson or John C. Calhoun. One "Christian" from faraway Ohio berated us for having a "Klan flag," which actually was the Alabama State Flag (a red St. Andrew's cross on a white field). I suppose he is the fruit of public education.

We refused to comply and were later told by the director of the Christian Defense Coalition, the Rev. Patrick Mahoney (a New Jersey native who has, in the past, allied himself with some suspicious characters on the left), that, because his group had a demonstration permit for the area in front of the Judicial Building, he would have the Montgomery Police Department clear us out if we did not obey his *diktat*. Undeterred, our folks stayed on with flags flying, and the threat against us was never carried out. We left a couple of hours later when one of Judge Moore's legal advisors (a League member) informed us that the feds were not going to try to move the monument that day.

These leaders revealed to us that they had already negotiated with state law-enforcement authorities the terms under

which about two dozen of their "little people" would be arrested and released. I suppose they thought this would impress us, but it did not. It did, however, point out two important things: First, such orchestrated "opposition" was, indeed, a photo op for future fundraising efforts; second, none of the leaders themselves would be arrested. They were "fighting for Jesus on the cheap," as one of my fellow League members put it. These men were not in Montgomery to risk their lives for principle. They were there to grab a microphone and to have others arrested for the well-being and preservation of their professional organizations. Unfortunately, many of these professional folks from outside Alabama (and the South) have wormed their way into Judge Moore's camp. They will not be around very long, however, because they simply do not understand the wide chasm between the American nationalism they champion and the states'-rights issue for which Judge Moore stands.

Alabamians have once again been betrayed by both outsiders and their own elected officials, especially the GOP establishment. Though the press has refused to report it, Karl Rove—and, thus, the Bush White House—has consistently supported those who have opposed Judge Moore, especially Alabama Attorney General Bill Pryor and Moore's 2000 Republican primary opponent for chief justice, Harold See. It is not a stretch to say that much of the campaign against Judge Moore has come directly from the White House. Also, Republican Gov. Bob Riley has consistently refused to stand by Judge Moore during the Ten Commandments controversy. Similarly, Attorney General Pryor and the eight Alabama Supreme Court associate justices abandoned Moore and entered into negotiations with the federal leviathan, Judge Thompson, to keep the state from incurring fines and other punishment for violating a court order.

From August 20 until Moore was removed from office, the elected officials of the sovereign state of Alabama had a rare opportunity to show some pluck and grit. They blew it. Here is what our craven civil magistrates might have said in defense of the people of Alabama: "Tell the federal judge to go to Hell. Alabama is a sovereign state, and federal edicts of this sort