

Conservatives, and the Lost and the Silent Generations

The rising generation may find in conservative thought a way out of modern desolation.

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DURING THE PAST YEAR, several writers discussed the difference between the generation of the 1920's and that of the present age. These essays almost uniformly lament the silence, indifference, and moral cowardice of young people who came to maturity during and after the Second World War. The apathy of the present generation, its conformity and conservatism, are contrasted with the cultural and intellectual flowering of the roaring twenties. The middle and old aged remnants of the famed Lost Generation cry out in anguish over the absence of any young giants to compare with Hemingway, Menckens, and the rest.

Even the articulate members of the present generation are critical. Taken together, the recent spate of articles gives the impression that America is on the road to ruin via tail-fin cars. Suburbia and the quest for security of "the organization man" are symbols of the present listless generation. The writing of the San Francisco group, we are told, is the only sign of life in the midst of a cultural and political wasteland. One has to turn to England to find "angry young men" comparable to the liberal heroes of the Lost Generation.

On the face of it, it might seem that little can be offered in rebuttal of these critics. The Lost Generation did produce a considerable body of creative literature

and political polemics, and the Silent Generation—well, has been silent. One could console the present generation by noting that it is not America alone which has failed to develop a vigorous post-war group of writers. As an English student of American letters, Marcus Cunliffe, says in his *Literature of the United States*: "Literature in present-day America. . . shows few very exciting trends. . . . America is of course not alone in its troubles. Whatever cultural advantages remain to Europe, its political and economic structures have been severely shaken. And in fact its authors—poets, novelists, dramatists—have on the whole shown no more signs than those of America that they have fresh things to say, or memorable ways of saying them. We should therefore beware of attributing the absence of greatness in current American literature to specifically American conditions."

On reflection, of course, it is small consolation to note that America is simply caught up in the general cultural and intellectual malaise of the Western world. The post-World War I generation had great problems to face, and it dealt with them at considerable length. Why hasn't the generation which came out of the Greater War done at least as well? At any rate, why is the Silent Generation silent? Why doesn't it say something, anything? Before examining the contemporary problem, let's go back to take a new look at the Lost Generation and its response to the milieu of the twenties. For it is all very well to note the quantitative fact of a renaissance after World War I, but what of the merit of the work of Hemingways and Menckens? What did the Lost Generation have to say?

The first World War marked the end of an era, and the beginning of a Time of Troubles which has not yet run its course. Before the outbreak of the Great War it had seemed to most, educated and uneducated, that liberalism, nationalism, and science had created an enduring Western system which would produce ever-increasing freedom and prosperity. And a general war among the Great Powers was unimaginable. As the authors of *This Age of Conflict* put it: "From time to time in the course of history human affairs reach an equilibrium, an equilibrium so stable as almost to give its contemporaries the illusion of permanence. The ages come to their sum and apex. Institutions, manners, conventions, the entire sociocultural complex seem fixed and final. . . . Such was 1914. Here too was an unquestioned, an almost unconsciously accepted stability; here was confidence and boundless optimism; here did man think of change only in terms of perpetual progress . . . there were very few who conceived of a state of affairs radically different from the existing. Marx, Nietzsche, and their prophetic brethren may have a little pricked the conscience of the world but hardly moved its deep complacency."

Four years, four seemingly endless years of trench warfare, shattered the optimism of the West. The Victorian era ended with the crash of the cannons on the Western front, and in the East the hitherto unshakable Czarist regime in Russia also came to an end. It was Armageddon to the people of the time.

And what of America? Previously able to develop its resources behind the shield of the Atlantic and Pacific, proud in its isolation from the ideological, class, and national conflicts of old Europe, the United States found itself engaged in the great struggle. It entered reluctantly, but when it did become involved, there was no mistaking the temper of the country: it would fight, and it would make this the war to end wars, the war to save the world for democracy. The Western world had been

halted in its upward movement; America was called upon to insure the triumph of the forces of justice, to restore the opportunity for further progress. But I need not recall in any detail the mood of the American people during the Great War, nor do more than mention the disillusionment, the rejection of Wilson and his dreams, and the return to normalcy which followed. The Big Red Scare, America Convalescent, The Revolution in Manners and Morals, Harding and the Scandals, Coolidge Prosperity, The Ballyhoo Years—the chapter-titles of Frederick Lewis Allen's *Only Yesterday* are sufficient to set the stage for the Revolt of the Highbrows.

A new generation grew up to find "all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken," Scott Fitzgerald wrote in *This Side of Paradise*. Hemingway stepped forward with his sensate lives of the disillusioned, Sinclair Lewis rocked the country with *Main Street*, and Henry L. Mencken mocked the idols of the business and Puritan civilization with his furious diatribes. Eugene O'Neill turned the American theatre from melodrama to realistic and symbolic consideration of the problems of real individuals. It was an age of literature and social commentary such as the nation had never witnessed before.

According to Allen, the general themes of the Lost Generation were as follows: "They believed in a greater degree of sexual freedom than had been permitted by the strict American code . . . they defied the enforcement of propriety by legislation . . . they were mostly, though not all, religious skeptics . . . they were united in a scorn of the great bourgeois majority which they held responsible for prohibition, censorship, fundamentalism, and other repressions . . . they took a particular pleasure in overturning the idols of the majority . . . they feared the effects upon themselves and upon American culture of mass production and the machine, and saw themselves as fighting at the last ditch for the right to be themselves in a civilization which was being leveled into

monotony . . . they believed also, these intellectuals, in scientific truth and the scientific method. . . .”

All in all, the Lost Generation engaged in a thorough attack on the ideals, conventions, and institutions of America in the 1920's, whether they went into “exile” abroad or stayed home and suffered. An extensive, at times artistically competent, and always dynamic body of literature was produced. There is nothing to match it in the present post-war era. But the amazing thing about those who condemn the Silent Generation by contrast is that they ignore the basic flaw in the work of the twenties which they praise. As Allen put it as long ago as 1931, the great renaissance was the work of disillusioned men who knew that they were disillusioned, and whose credo—freedom—was meaningless to them, for they had no values in terms of which to exercise liberty.

Have the critics from the Lost Generation writing today so smugly of what *they* produced in contrast to the much despised Silent Generation forgotten, in Allen's words, that “they could revolt against stupidity and mediocrity, they could derive a meager pleasure from regarding themselves with pity as members of a lost generation, but they could not find peace”? To put the matter most simply, while one can admire the outpouring of energy by the Lost Generation, it is impossible to applaud the *substance* of the writing of the great figures of the twenties. As Lovell Thompson writes, “It was indeed a great age of liberation. When the waters receded we had freedom from just about everything but freedom; but it was not, upon its noisy and chaotic surface, a constructive age. . . . Those who argue that the new generation lacks the spirit of the old are giving frivolous and vestigial advice indeed, and when we hear it we must listen reverently. It is the dying sigh of the Lost Generation—lost at last.” The great debunkers, the prophets without a code who blitzed America in the twenties, violated a cardinal tenet of intellectual honesty:

having nothing positive to put forward, the Lost Generation should have been Silent.

It will be objected that the analysis overlooks several important factors: the bewilderment of America and of the West generally at the destruction of the old way of life, the crass materialism and narrow outlook against which the Lost Generation revolted, and the fact that artists like other humans are not rational automatons—whether they had a constructive philosophy or not, the writers of the twenties *had* to express themselves, to put forward—their lostness. All these points are valid, but they do not invalidate the judgment that on its philosophic merit the work of the Lost Generation must be found wanting.

The trouble of course lay in the nature of the liberal's mentality. As Thompson writes, “The old-fashioned liberal was—perhaps you can still say he is—a mythical intellectual of intense good will with an *absolutely open mind*” [italics mine]. Having “open minds,” it is little wonder that the old-fashioned liberals filled them by accepting “unflinchingly, the great and troublous ideas of our time,” Marxism, Freudianism, Fascism, and the notion that the scientific method is the only way to establish truth. If one will not accept the contention that all these ideas were demonstrably false in their undiluted forms in the twenties, then it seems impossible to deny that experience and intellectual criticism have rendered these “great and troublous ideas” patently absurd in the fifties.

Despite the sympathy which we may rightly feel for the Lost Generation in its predicament following the Great War, it remains necessary to say that the literary output of the liberals was, however energetic and sincere, destructive, and that it sowed the seeds of trouble in the decades which followed—including the proletarian literature and political treason of the Thirties. The Lost Generation has apparently forgotten “the frustrated hopes that followed the war, the aching disillusionment of the hard-boiled era, its oily scandals,

its spiritual paralysis, the harshness of its gaiety; they would talk about the good old days. . . ." (Allen, *Only Yesterday*).

But the last statement requires modification, for it seems that the great figures of the Lost Generation have not forgotten. It is only the secondary writers who complain of the Silent and praise the work of the Lost Generation. For as Robert Spiller says in *The Cycle of American Literature*, "Faulkner's turn to religious allegory was not an isolated event. Hemingway's Old Man was in many ways a fisher of men, Robert Frost's Masques of Reason and Mercy used the stories of Job and Jonah, O'Neill's Iceman was but Death demanding his reckoning, and T. S. Eliot's late verse tragicomedies were all thinly disguised religious debates. After 1945 leading writers of the older generation were preparing to face something larger than their own individual deaths, there was the unmistakable tone of Judgment Day for an era in their common symbolism and skeptical otherworldliness." Can it be said that, after all, you can go home again? And that the giants of the Lost Generation have atoned for much of their earlier work and groped their way back to the gates of the classical Western tradition?

But what of the Silent Generation? If we may criticize the Lost Generation for its lostness, it remains to discuss the alleged sins of the present generation of suburbanites. Why has there been no creative response to the second postwar era on the part of the younger generation? After all, there has been a comparable Red Scare, bigger perhaps than that of the twenties, juvenile (and adult) delinquency is rampant, we have had five-percenter, mink coat, deep freeze, and other larger scandals, the Republic suffers from (in Walter Lippmann's words) "prosperity acting as a narcotic, with Philistinism and McCarthyism rampant," and Madison Avenue and the Hidden Persuaders make the ballyhoo artists of the twenties look like hicks by comparison. Where is the revolt of the Highbrows, or even of the Middlebrows?

It is actually very easy to account for the difference between the Lost Generation and the Silent Generation. Whereas the Lost Generation came to maturity prior to or at the beginning of the Decline of the West, the present generation was reared during the Great Depression, and had maturity thrust upon it by the Second World War. There were no Great Expectations in the hearts and minds of the boys who went off to fight World War II, there were no illusions of grandeur, nor did the girls who stayed home really hope for anything more than the return of their sweethearts, husbands and brothers. The Lost Generation had successfully undermined the traditions and old certainties of America, and events did whatever else may have been required to eradicate normal aspirations and hopes.

It is really little wonder that the Silent Generation has found America basically good, for it participated in the military destruction of patently evil Fascist systems, and was soon made aware of the equally evil and even greater menace of Soviet and international Communism. Most returned from the war with the determination to find a place for themselves in society, to raise a family, to enjoy the private life they had dreamed about in the service—the one thing which sustained them and made the whole effort really worthwhile. As Podhoretz has said, "The trick for the post-war generation was not to carp at life like a petulant adolescent, but rather to begin regarding life with respect for its complexity and its drama, and to get down to the business of adult living as quickly as possible. And get down to business the young generation did. A great many married early; most made decisive commitments to modest careers; they cultivated an interest in food, clothes, furniture, manners—these being elements of the 'richness' of life that the generation of the '30's had deprived itself of."

While there are some professional liberals among the present generation (and these are the non-Silent ones), to most of

those who returned from the war with some awareness of cultural and intellectual things "contemporary liberalism was [seen] as a conglomeration of attitudes suitable only to the naive, the inexperienced, the callow, the rash—in short, the immature. . . . one was living in a world of severely limited possibilities, balanced precariously on the edge of an apocalypse. In such a world there was very little one could know, very little one could do." The only "expatriates" among the present generation are in the Foreign Service—serving the Government, not criticizing it, waiting anxiously for every home leave, and wishing they could find a job in America and settle down.

For most of the Silent Generation, what they have is good enough, and their only real fear stems from the Bombs. Nuclear war may wipe out everything—they're not worried about the Republicans, but about the Russians taking it away. There remains, however, after all that has been said, a legitimate complaint about the behavior and the Silence of the present generation—and about America in the fifties. Although the postwar generation has been emphatically right about the goodness of America as opposed to socialist and totalitarian systems, has rediscovered such traditional values as the family and religion (of a sort), there is no denying the malaise in both the great and lively arts, the conformity and complacency, the distrust of ideas and of the eggheads.

While there has been constructive effort in private life, there has been resignation in the sphere of public duty and apathy toward cultural and intellectual pursuits. One must agree with Max Lerner that a "moral interregnum" exists in America, in which old codes have collapsed and new ones have not yet arrived to take their place. "America has become in many ways a sensual and sexual society, but with a curious blend of blatancy and deviousness. . . . America has come to stress sex as much as any civilization since Rome" (*America as a Civilization*). While the

work of the Lost Generation in the area of politics has been discarded, the effects of the roaring twenties linger on in the private and cultural spheres. The "religious revival" can not withstand serious scrutiny; it is hard to deny that the flight to religion for peace of mind or soul, for the acquisition of The Power of Positive Thinking, is really only a gesture, a half-hearted visit to "drive-in churches," in Peter Viereck's striking phrase (*The Unadjusted Man*).

While there is much that is wholesome in the thought and actions of the Silent Generation, and it is absurd to say—as does Podhoretz—that they "know nothing, stand for nothing, believe in nothing," it is nevertheless true that they have tolerated and even supported a good deal of political nonsense in the postwar decade, that they have spurned pursuits larger than canasta and barbecue parties, and that they are Silent. It is hard to be as sanguine as Eric Goldman regarding the American acceptance of the middle way: a mixed economy at home and commitment to responsibilities abroad (*The Crucial Decade*).

There is, in fact, a dangerous intellectual and cultural vacuum—what basic principles, what tradition, will sustain this moderation in the face of inevitable hazards to come? If it is true that "creeping conservatism" rather than "creeping socialism" is the grand trend of our times, and there is every reason to believe that the trend will continue for some years to come, it is also true that "the men brought to power by the conservative revival will never discharge the mission that history has thrust upon them until they learn a great deal more than they now appear to know about the nature, logic, and principles of conservatism" (Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America*). The political sobriety of the younger generation and of America as a whole is the result of an instinctive reaction to experience rather than of a conscious examination of the contemporary scene in terms of basic principles, and America has shown itself subject to fits of political inebriation dur-

ing the past decade because of the absence of an operative conservative tradition. Moreover, literary life is dominated by "open-minded" liberals who give us *The Young Lions*, *The Naked and the Dead*, *From Here to Eternity*, and it is not reassuring to know that J. D. Salinger's adolescent exercises are the most appealing to the college generation.

If the Silent Generation is to find an intellectual basis for its conservatism, it is to be hoped that the work of the New Conservatives will be more widely disseminated and discussed. For in the writings of these men can be found the rediscovery of the Christian-humanist tradition and its application to the problems of the present. As Rossiter summarizes them, "the constant themes in these writings are: the universal moral order supported and sanctioned by organized religion; the imperfect nature of man; the conservative mission of education; the inseparability of liberty and property; the excellence of aristocracy, or at least of the aristocratic spirit; the limited reach of reason and consequent importance of traditions and institutions; the necessity of diffusing power; the equilibrium of rights and responsibilities; the primacy of the community; the beauties of stability and order; the final dignity and inviolability of the human personality." The New Conservatives, whether "Southern agrarian, Catholic or [sic!] intellectual, are together distinguished from other conservatives by their obstinate refusal to delight in the 'progress' of industrialism or to make peace with the 'shallow optimism', 'selfish individualism', and 'hedonistic materialism' of the scheme of values this progress has sustained."

It is not alone in the spheres of public and private duty that the New Conservatives have much to offer the younger generation and America. As Spiller says, "the voices of the new writers seemed to be calling for values, standards, and security rather than for further upheaval and change. They seemed older and wiser than their elders. . . . they seemed at the mid-

point of the century to be waiting for a leadership that could point direction and guide the literature of the free world into further cycles of fulfillment." Given the necessary degree of imagination and ability on the part of writers, the New Conservatism provides the outlook required for a *constructive* revival of letters.

In his review of Jack Kerouac's *On The Road*, Gilbert Millstein wrote: "The Beat Generation' was born disillusioned; it takes for granted the imminence of war, the barrenness of politics and the hostility of the rest of society. It is not even impressed by (although it never pretends to scorn) material well-being (as distinguished from Materialism). It does not know what refuge it is seeking, but it is seeking." While most of the Silent Generation doubtless feels less deeply than the San Francisco School the intellectual and political issues of our time, it is probably true that underneath the not so calm exteriors of the exurbanites lies something of Kerouac's concern. But the San Francisco group cannot point the way for the present generation, for its members are as lost as the Lost Generation ever was.

Nor will it do to import or learn from the "angry young men" in Britain, for of them it can truly be said that they "know nothing, stand for nothing, believe in nothing." There is no doubt an element of truth in Thompson's requiem for the Lost Generation: "Perhaps the Jazz Age was a great age after all, but if it was we have lost sight of its greatest accomplishment. It was the age that has given us the new generation of today—wiser, quieter, perhaps stronger, and certainly a lot handsomer [?] than the old Lost Generation." Nevertheless, the Silent Generation needs an intellectual basis for its political conservatism. And should it discover the New Conservatism, it is also possible that it will break its silence and inaugurate a positive literary era which will match that of the Lost Generation in energy and surpass it in ethical and aesthetic quality.

Without religious sanction, liberty cannot long be maintained in the civil social order.

Of Human Freedom

RAYMOND ENGLISH

1. *The Meaning of Freedom*

ALTHOUGH IT RECEIVES much adulatory lip-service, freedom has been and is at a discount in the twentieth century. To illustrate this proposition would be less difficult than tedious. I intend, therefore, to take the proposition for granted and to inquire whether the trouble lies not so much in the impracticability of freedom itself, or in the illiberal march of events, as in men's intellectual failure to comprehend this most powerful of all ideals, and, in particular, in a misunderstanding arising out of a long course of the naïvetes of radical liberalism. I shall engage in the unfashionable pursuit of definition, making the unfashionable assumption that moral values are real. This is a procedure deprecated even by some conservative thinkers.

When I see the spirit of liberty in action, I see a strong principle at work; and this, for a while, is all I can possibly know of it. . . . The effect of liberty to individuals is, that they may do what they please: we ought to see what it will please them to do, before we risk congratulations, which may be soon turned into complaints. Prudence would dictate this in the case of separate

insulated private men; but liberty, when men act in bodies, is power. Considerate people, before they declare themselves, will observe the use which is made of power. . . .¹

So Burke wrote, with his characteristic insistence on circumstances rather than generalities in politics. Yet his position might be rephrased as follows: "The mere claim that a man or group of men is free is meaningless; the objective proof of freedom lies in the behavior of the person or persons under consideration, for freedom is a moral value and a free man or a free society is a moral fact, not a matter of opinion, appearance or sentiment."

Important to the present discussion is the historic truth that freedom, when misunderstood, has always proved maleficent and self-destructive. The apologists of liberalism like to assume that liberty was invented by radical liberal thinkers. There is some truth in the claim, if by "liberty" we understand those *one-sided or partial* versions of freedom associated with the Enlightenment and Jacobinism and Utilitarianism. It is, however, important to recall that among those who exalted the ideal of freedom were Socrates, Plato, Cicero, Saint