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THE GREAT REVERSAL

WHEN I WAS a dozen or so years old, my best friend and I, having matters of great pith and moment to discuss, and wishing to discuss them without restraint in the presence of our elders and of our other enemies, invented a language to fill our need. We called our language *Sdrawkɔab*, and we became so proficient at seeing words in reverse that we were soon able to express our most hilariously devastating opinions of people while they listened, beaming upon us at our apparently innocent prattle.

For a good many years I believed that the chief contribution of *Sdrawkɔab* to my education was that it made me a quick and accurate speller; but I now begin to understand that its real value lay in its subtler encouragement to us to see *things* backwards, too. It was excellent training, the best I can imagine, for The Great Reversal in which now, thirty years later, we find ourselves. My friend and I discovered not only a language, but a workable philosophy as well. We felt wicked, probably, when we contemplated the gap—canyon, rather—between us and the loving, pure-minded children of Stevenson and Milne and the genteel literary tradition generally; we even lacked the basic decency of Huckleberry Finn, who thought pure thoughts almost in spite of himself. I see now, however, that we wasted our guilt, for we were fairly decent representatives of the newer tradition—what might be called The Great Reversal of childhood; I think we compared well enough with such bland and beautiful vipers as Rhoda Penmark in *The Bad Seed*.

I see further that without a thorough grounding in *Sdrawkɔab* I might not have caught on so fast to the operation of The Great Reversal in, for example, the Parable of the Prodigal Son. When I was a dozen or so years old, I was taught that when I found myself to be wrong about something, I ought to admit it. Being, as I have noted, a wicked child (in terms of the tradition), I did not really fall—more than once—for the line about the “fatted calf,” but I accepted it as a part of the story and as indicative of the ideal. Nowadays the story ends more realistically. Young Americans who made an initial mistake by deciding to stay with the Communists

in China made a second mistake, perhaps a worse one, when they changed their minds and asked to come home. Young Americans who admit that they were wrong are called "Turncoats"; they are lucky to be fed cold beans, let alone fatted calf, when they arrive in The Land of the Brave. The one hundredth lamb, that according to the hymn was so valuable—the foolish, improvident, and wayward lamb that the Shepherd loved more than all the ninety and nine dutiful and sheeplike lambs—is, whatever else he may be, obviously un-American. He is the Lamb that turns the other cheek. An American lamb is a *sheep*.

Interestingly enough, The Great Reversal occasionally reverses *itself*, so that sometimes the old ideal theory appears to operate. If the one hundredth Turncoat is, say, Louis Budenz, the fatted calf does indeed get killed: if, that is, a professorship at Fordham can be so inelegantly symbolized. And occasionally the American who changes his mind (or in some instances only his tactics) can so arrange matters that he throws the onus on his victim and emerges as a late-blooming flower of traditional American "fair play." For the past few seasons I have found it instructive to follow the development of the Reversal in the public press. (If my references are a year or two old, it is only to offer the reader the excitement of finding his own immediately contemporaneous analogues, in, for example, the pronouncements of Governor Faubus.) Consider the implications of this story, as reported in *The New York Times*:

Ezra Taft Benson conceded today that it was "gratuitous and unnecessary" for the Agriculture Department to designate Wolf Ladejinsky a security risk when it refused to retain him on its payroll last January

The Secretary admitted that his real reason for suspending Mr. Ladejinsky was a feeling that the Russian-born expert was not equipped to represent American agriculture abroad

"As we look back on it now," Mr. Benson said, "it would probably have been best had it [the security angle] not been injected"

He said that he was sure the department had made mistakes in its security program, "but they were honest and conscientious mistakes."

When I was twelve years old, I ran the risk of an invitation to the woodshed for being as Emersonian as Mr. Benson in his bland disregard for foolish consistencies; but I have grown up—or at least grown older—and I see through the glass less darkly. I see now, for instance, some of the moral extensions of relativity. I see that an ex-Communist ought to be a tattletale; and I expect soon to understand why one tattletale gets a professorship and the other gets thrown into jail for a couple of decades. I see that although the Constitution is still sacred—in a way—it is just

as well to exercise a reasonable discrimination among the Amendments (as we used to do, in an elementary way, during Prohibition). Some states nowadays even make selections among the decisions of the Supreme Court.

I see—unkindest revelation of all, perhaps, for now Mothers' Day becomes a festival in the same suspicious category with May Day—that a boy's best friend is most emphatically *not* his mother. Far, far indeed, from it! In fact, it's a wise child that avoids the maternal company, as Norman Pierre Gaston and Eugene Landy and Joseph H. Sumners, Jr., and Walter Novak and a few others can testify (and, for the most part, have testified). Mothers are apt to get lonely, like Mrs. Landy, and join the Communist Party just to have somewhere to go. Or, like Ensign Gaston's mother, they join "groups" without knowing that the Attorney General has those groups on his famous list. Mothers subscribe to the wrong newspapers, and, like Mrs. Novak, they forge the names of little boys on cheap insurance policies issued by the I.W.O. The whole situation was seen very clearly by Vice-Admiral Alfred C. Richmond, Coast Guard Commandant, and Secretary of the Treasury George M. Humphrey, who reviewed the case of Gaston after his commission had been withheld. The final statement of the Coast Guard declared—and I assume that each sentence here depends on the one which precedes it, so that the statement may be considered a coherent and related whole:

Mr. Gaston's character and integrity . . . and over-all capabilities are of the highest order. There is every indication that he as an individual would prove to be a loyal and competent commissioned officer of the United States Coast Guard.

It has been found that Mr. Gaston's relationship to his mother has not been close, especially during his scholastic and more mature years.

In fact, the mother-son relationship was less close than in the ordinary case and no improper influence exists. All these findings led to the clear conclusion that the commissioning of Mr. Gaston . . . would be in the best interest of the country.

The editorial writer of *The New York Times* (which has long admired Secretary Humphrey) fell into the spirit of this pronouncement. "It was not," he pontificated, "the mother who was applying for a commission in the Coast Guard." And his conclusion was (like the conclusion of Secretary Benson, and in almost the same words) that "This is a victory for common sense and fair play." I have been impressed by a comment in the final report of the Secretary of the Navy, granting a Naval Reserve ensign's commission to Midshipman Landy and commending him for having been "since high school age . . . unsympathetic and in disagreement with [his mother's] apparent political beliefs." Said the Secretary: "I could not ignore one of the

fundamental principles on which our American way of life has been based and that is the opportunity of each individual to progress and succeed on his own merit."

It is interesting to learn from so prominent an authority that one may discriminate among the "fundamental principles on which our American way of life has been based." It is unfortunate—and probably subversive—that Adrian Unger, a lawyer provided for Mr. Landy by the American Jewish Congress, should say (as quoted in the *Times*) of the Secretary's decision that "It had been the publicity provided by the press, radio and television that brought about the favorable result." Mr. Unger must, of course, have been joking; but he ought to be reminded that an ironist in contemporary America is *ipso facto* a "security risk" just as surely as the man whose mother subscribes to *The Daily Worker* or the man who hangs a Picasso on his wall.

The hard fact remains that Mother herself is a part of The Great Reversal, and the sensible child is a girl like Lillian Sumners, the sister of Joseph, who lost his civilian job as helper to an aviation metalsmith at Quonset Point because his parents had belonged to such organizations as former Vice-President Harry Wallace's Progressive Party. All I know about Lillian Sumners I learned in the following paragraph in the *Times*, in the report of the appearance of Joseph and their mother before Senator Olin Johnston's subcommittee of investigation:

Senator Carlson asked [Mrs. Sumners] about a daughter, Lillian. He had information, he said, that she had been active in four organizations listed as subversive Mrs. Sumners replied that the daughter had lived in Boston for some years and that politics and her activities had not been discussed on her highly infrequent trips home to Providence.

That is, however, enough to know, for here is what used to be known as a "red-blooded" but must now be carefully called a "true-hearted" American girl, vintage of 1956-57.

I used to feel ashamed when I remembered how often I had disobeyed the admonitions of my parents, even sometimes refusing to listen to my mother (who was, after all, a foreigner, born and raised in Quebec, a good hundred miles or more from home); but I can see now that I was absolutely on the right track. I can see now that children really *are* wiser than their parents, as Wordsworth contended; I am disturbed now to reflect that I hearkened and heeded as often as I did. If I had only realized that a record of disobedience in youth is the clearest evidence to bring before the subcommittee to demonstrate one's true Americanism! It is perfectly clear that the wise—and, I am practically ready to guarantee, the *truly* patriotic—Sumners is Lillian, who seldom goes home nowadays, and when she does, keeps

quiet, at least in front of Mother, about "politics and her activities." No "improper influence" for her. And we can now read *King Lear* in a new dimension, since Goneril and Regan have become the heroines.

I get the idea also, pretty clearly, that—although one must take the elementary precaution of consulting the Attorney General's list before joining—it is generally safer nowadays to run in packs, whether of sheep or wolves or even fatted calves. Mr. Adam Yarmolinsky in his "Case Studies in Personnel Security" tells the rather fascinating story of an expert geographer employed by the Department of the Army, who had to be "cleared" on five separate occasions. At his final hearing (so far, one should perhaps add), he was asked the darkly leading question: "Do you by nature get a sort of secret, personal satisfaction out of acting as an individualist?" It was probably not alone his affirmative answer to this question that kept him suspended for nine and a half months, but indubitably it helped. And the real meaning of The Great Reversal becomes apparent.

A little more than a century ago Emerson called upon his countrymen to "hurl in the face of custom and trade and office, the fact which is the upshot of all history, that there is a great responsible Thinker and Actor working wherever a man works; that a true man . . . is the center of things."

No "fact" has fallen more sublimely into disrepute than this one, nor have we ignored more completely any of the admonitions of Emerson. We are clever enough to see that true men (including Emerson, but no Cabinet member or Senator that I can think of since 1789) are dangerously and inevitably subversive, as they always have been. We prefer to follow the grim hints of the Cabinet and the subcommittees: to reduce all men to the comfortable anonymity of statistics, to mere outward and visible signs of an apparently inward and intelligent life, to the status of the ninety and nine sheep.

In our time the outward and visible sign is alone necessary; we set full store by the notarized oath of loyalty. When I nowadays in the fulfillment of my professional duties as a college teacher find occasion to notify the Recorder that one of my students has fallen below the standard that I have set as "passing" in a given class, that student is apt to come to me and say in tones heavy with reproach, "But I have been *present* every single day." Recall, by the way, the horror that animated our civilized and sophisticated world when first the Russian delegates walked out of the Security Council of the United Nations. We breathed with an easier sense of hope when they returned; no matter how obstructionist their subsequent tactics have been, still we are foolishly relieved because they are "present." That, we say, is the hope of the world. And the more who are present, the better. The city where I

now dwell is fifteen times better than the town of my birth, because it has fifteen times as many residents. The University of California, with forty thousand or more students—or, more precisely, “candidates for degrees,” as one of my old teachers used to call us—makes my undergraduate college, with its seven hundred, look embarrassingly paltry. All these impressive groups of statistics are nervously busy, mostly on “group projects” (which reduce, or hide, the responsibility for error); busyness is the outward and visible sign, after all, of Thinking and Acting, and the group insures a safe decorum. We must pack our patriotism safely in a Community Chest.

The shade of Samuel Adams must be amazed at such a turn in the American definition of “good citizenship.” One of the most ironical accomplishments of The Great Reversal is the substitution among us of manners for convictions: and this, paradoxically, despite the virtual disappearance of manners among us. We Americans have become in general rather lamentably well-bred and polite in all matters which do not immediately sound their political overtones. We have so frequently been admonished that it is somehow vulgar to be shocked by anything (in the departments of philosophy and morality, at least) that to a completely impartial observer, if nowadays one could be (or dared to be) found—a true and wondrous barbarian, like, let us say, Homer or Shakespeare—we should appear to be a people without standards of virtue or anything else. Our constantly trumpeted national tolerance has degenerated into excessively polite attitudes, which, by the rules of Reversal, have their implications of the purely vicious. At best, such attitudes are those of commonplace sentimentalism. We must, whatever the cost, be “sophisticated.”

The genteel aim of the nineteenth century, to bring into existence a society of ladies and gentlemen, in many ways, astonishingly, succeeded. “The true gentleman,” wrote Cardinal Newman,

. . . carefully avoids whatever may cause a jar or a jolt in the minds of those with whom he is cast;—all clashing of opinion, or collision of feeling . . . his great concern being to make every one at their ease and at home. . . . He is . . . merciful towards the absurd . . . he guards against unseasonable allusions, or topics which may irritate He . . . interprets every thing for the best He . . . [is] too indolent to bear malice He . . . even supports institutions as venerable, beautiful, or useful, to which he does not assent He is a friend of religious toleration, and that, not only because his philosophy has taught him to look on all forms of faith with an impartial eye, but also from the gentleness and effeminacy of feeling, which is the attendant on civilization.

It is hard to believe that the Cardinal was serious; but we must remember that few Cardinals—and certainly no British ones—have ever been guilty of irony. We are

compelled to accept this ideal gentleman as a serious concept, and as serious also the apparent ideal of civilization which could produce such a monstrous paragon. The intention, to be sure, was noble and good—even beautiful. What happened to spoil it was The Great Reversal: the Cardinal's true gentleman inadvertently saw the word *value* as *taste*, and he was too polite to inquire if there was a difference. The victims of the ideal have learned, to their chagrin, that nobility, goodness, and beauty—not to mention fair play and patriotism—lose their moral dimensions when they become matters of “taste”; or they acquire new moral dimensions, which change their nature so that *goodness*, for example, becomes *respectability* or *conformity*.

The Cardinal rightly called his ideal effeminate. It is really worse than that, how much worse we realize only insofar as we have escaped it: insofar as we are willing and brave and barbarian enough to embrace rather than to avoid jolts and clashes of opinion, to be quite *unmerciful* towards absurdity, to reject useless institutions and to be *intolerant* of them because they are merely old. To be intolerant of age is easy enough for Americans, of course, as the recently created ensigns have so patriotically though unfilially shown. No true American dares nowadays to grow old. On the other hand, we sometimes insist that some ancient idea or other piece of furniture is good simply because it *is* old. One such idea, indeed, is that to be a gentleman is necessarily *good*.

Perhaps what saves us from sinking out of sight in the morass of civilized manners is the wonderful way we have of almost unconsciously changing the force of words by a little modification, exactly as though we were all Cabinet members. The word *gentleman* has overtones of gentility which we must approve; but *old gentleman* introduces a new overtone of either humorous or pitying condescension. And *little gentleman* is generally synonymous with either *brat* or *sissy*. To introduce the word *sissy* is, of course, to return to the Cardinal's unabashed depiction of the civilized ideal as effeminate. One of my former students wrote to me the other day, in a kind of Theodore Rooseveltian mood, from the distinguished and elegant graduate school which he is attending (and from which I received two degrees): “We are so constantly told by our professors that we are here to become scholars and gentlemen that I find the temptation almost irresistible to become a barbarian and a rake.”

What the innocently unwary might be tempted to think of as a merely loose and ignorant use of words is nothing more than what my friend and I understood instinctively when we were twelve years old. I hope it is not irreverent to note that Cardinal Newman's “true gentleman” is on another level the “perfect gentle-

man" held up as ideal before Penrod Schofield and Willie Baxter. We in this group—except maybe the Cardinal—can understand how easy it became to refer publicly to a certain Senator as "the *gentleman* from Wisconsin." This represents the ultimate achievement of the ideal. We have scaled with this effort the Everest of language.

Consider some of our other achievements in Reversal. Look at what we have done to the word *charity*. We Americans call ourselves, and by our current definition we are, a charitable people. Yet a not so noble doubt occasionally suggests itself: that charity means to us little more than indiscriminate giving—and then explaining the worth and the impulse of charity in the numerical statistics which can be reported by Madam Chairman at the annual meeting. Ten thousand washcloths knitted for the starving Koreans; these, dear ladies, have won for us ten thousand stars in our crowns! The impulse to give seems often to be dictated by the gentlemanly desire to see our group glorious because it has given more than the rival group. We are 100% givers; the statistical record of our office is clean! No matter what the object of the charity, or the need implied. Charity, too, is a matter of "taste," a "group project," an indication of being "present." Besides, it helps to reduce our income taxes. Surely it is ungentlemanly to remember the churlish objection of Emerson: "I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong."

In an impersonal dimension, charity has become useful as a kind of political barter—as all things seem to lead us back to politics these days. Another United States Senator not long ago said in an address at Princeton University, with regard to our foreign policy: "We [must] try to understand what the people on the ground want and prepare to 'sell' the tradition of freedom." Note the arresting phraseology: "to 'sell' the *tradition* of freedom." I am reminded also of the recent utterance of a prominent "minister-at-large" for the Board of National Missions of the Presbyterian Church, announcing his agreement to participate in a commercially sponsored television program: "Television can sell soap, soup, and cigarettes—it is our belief that it can also sell salvation." (What is happening to Presbyterians these days, by the way? I read in the paper of another, who advertises himself as the Reverend Charles B.—and in parentheses, *Chuck*—Templeton. *Reverend*, indeed! Does what nowadays passes for "Christian brotherhood"—the "ardour of undisciplined benevolence," as Coleridge called it—drive us necessarily to the deadest dead level of mediocrity? Is that what we really mean by democracy? Must the patriot literally "like Ike"?)

Consider again those loaded words used nowadays in increasingly startling combinations, especially at subcommittee meetings: Americanism, loyalty, tolerance. By *Americanism* and such a phrase as "the American way of life" I gather that we mean either so much or so little as to mean nothing in particular save possibly "opposition to that which is, or is presumed to be, Russian." Perhaps *American* means also *lady* or *gentleman*, since clearly no Russian can be either. To say so is not, oddly, to express an intolerant (or an un-Christian) point of view. Why not? Well, Americans have been historically tolerant; it is obvious, therefore, that the American point of view must be by definition tolerant (and Christian). Intolerance is by the same definition un-American, therefore obviously Communist—therefore just as obviously evil. (Read backwards, that makes even better sense.)

I can get thrown into jail, I suppose, or at least be summoned before the subcommittee for calling to public recollection that a kind of loyalty and tolerance which a precise lexicographer might call treason and bigotry are also fundamentally American. The signers of the Declaration of Independence were all, strictly speaking, traitors. We praise them for asserting the rights of common men, preferring to forget—if indeed we ever knew—that even "tolerant" Benjamin Franklin called common men "the drunken electors." We grow sentimental about our Puritan forefathers, who came over here to—was it Massachusetts?—to establish a democracy, forgetting (if, again, we ever heard) the words of their governor, John Winthrop, who said of democracy that it is "the meanest and worst of all forms of Government" and dismissed the subject with the scornful note that "we have no warrant in scripture for it."

We listen with vacant reverence to the American Legion orator on the Fourth of July as he assures us that our tradition is one of "tolerance"—coinciding with the tradition of the gentleman as Cardinal Newman described it—forgetting that the real keynote of the Colonies was sounded thus by the Simple Cobbler of Agawam:

He that is willing to tolerate any Religion . . . besides his own . . . either doubts of his own . . . or is not sincere in it He that is willing to tolerate any unsound opinion, that his own may also be tolerated . . . will for a need hang God's Bible at the Devil's girdle.

This aspect of the tradition, because it contradicts the tradition (a double reversal!) must be repudiated. Thoreau and the mild Emerson and James Russell Lowell and William Lloyd Garrison and John Brown and, curiously enough, *Theodore* Roosevelt must be repudiated, for they were, as the student of history knows, often essentially un-American—even anti-American. They were surely not tolerant or polite;

they were no gentlemen: they liked nothing better than to make "unseasonable allusions" and to introduce "topics which may irritate." Thoreau wrote an essay that is printed in the school books under the noncommittal title "Civil Disobedience," but his title for it was "On the *Duty* of Civil Disobedience." During the Mexican War, which he thought wicked, Lowell remarked of Old Glory, "Thet air flag's a leetle rotten." Garrison called the Constitution "A Covenant with Death and an agreement with Hell." John Brown may have been a hero, but he was also a smuggler and a murderer. Emerson reminded his countrymen in words that would surely shock the Cabinet, that

The world of any moment is the merest appearance. Some great decorum, some fetish of a government, some ephemeral trade, or war, or man, is cried up by half mankind and cried down by the other half, as if all depended on this particular up or down. The odds are that the whole question is not worth the poorest thought which the scholar has lost in listening to the controversy. Let him not quit his belief that a popgun is a popgun, though the ancient and honorable of the earth affirm it to be the crack of doom.

Theodore Roosevelt—whose blood, to be sure, was red (and whose gentlemanly code, rather different from the Cardinal's, was "Don't flinch, don't foul, hit the line hard!")—declared to Archie Butt: "I am afraid I have not got as much reverence for the Declaration of Independence as I should have because it has made certain untruths immortal."

The man who has a little information about the development of Americanism can swear his loyalty to a number of perfectly good American principles that would have startled the Gentleman from Wisconsin into conniptions of investigation. It was no doubt a commendable caution that led the Mayor of Providence, Rhode Island, not long ago to spurn the offer for his city of a statue of Thomas Paine and a park to put it in, on the ground that—although he has for a century and a half been safely dead, and buried in an unknown grave—Paine "was and remains so controversial a character"!

The trouble with Paine was that he had a way with words; and words, after all, have created most if not all of our controversies since that first foolish creature at the dim dawn of history broke the golden globe of silence and made a farce of Paradise. But our problem is deeper than one of words merely, for the words that men use are in every age and generation only symbolic of the measure of their comprehension of the things that words represent. When understanding is clear, words are clear; they mean what they seem to mean. But when the understanding muddies, diction muddies, too, and so does life in general. "A man's power to connect his

thought with its proper symbol, and so to utter it, depends on the simplicity of his character," said Emerson.

The corruption of man is followed by the corruption of language. When simplicity of character and the sovereignty of ideas is broken up by the prevalence of secondary desires,—the desire of riches, of pleasure, of power, and of praise,—and duplicity and falsehood take [the] place of simplicity and truth . . . words are perverted to stand for things which are not.

Emerson and Thoreau were unsophisticated men—in our meaning of the term, that is. They knew what they meant when they said *American* and *loyal*, just as they knew that the Prodigal Son got fatted calf when he acknowledged his error and came home, that the Shepherd loved his foolish one hundredth lamb best of all, that you do not label a man subversive because you think him incompetent. Everybody knew the truth about John Brown, for example. He was clearly in the great American tradition: not even his enemies questioned his sincerity. He was equally clearly in the great *Christian* tradition. Loyalty to both traditions cost him his life, but it was still *loyalty* and everybody recognized it. Another Great—and tragic—Reversal was in operation, but it was a reversal that men like Brown and Thoreau were not afraid to report for what it was, under no hypocritical label of Great Crusade. They tacitly understood that one could not be at once good *American* and good *Christian*—and triumph, that is, according to the standard of the civilized nineteenth century. Lesser men might split the difference and survive, willing to be hypocrites—and probably willing to be called hypocrites if it came to that; but the great Christian, they well knew, *always* achieves martyrdom, and so, perhaps, at least by original definition, does the great American. Miss Gertrude Stein had an interesting theory that the truly great American inevitably fails in the achievement of his ideal aim; and she used to cite, among others, Lincoln and Grant and Woodrow Wilson to prove it.

To return to John Brown, everybody knew, knew for *sure*, that even in treason he was a great American, and even in murder a great Christian. Who among us, however, can with honest and unexcited conviction today be sure—sure, I mean, beyond possible cavil or doubt—about Alger Hiss and William Remington? One is almost afraid to mention their names, reflecting that when Mr. Acheson refused in Christian charity (Old Style) to speak ill of Mr. Hiss, he was accused of supporting if not of actually committing treason. If the incident proved nothing else, it proved that one may possibly be *Christian* or *American* or a *gentleman*, in the current usage of these terms, but he most assuredly cannot with impunity be all three at once. Perhaps it is easier to speak of Mr. Remington, who is dead, having had the good

fortune to be murdered. There is nothing like a good, brutal assassination, as history has time and again shown, to restore a man's virtue.

Of course, as sophisticated relativists in matters moral and intellectual, we recognize that the achievement of clear and final meanings in such affairs is, if not impossible, at least—like the affairs themselves—vulgar. We appreciate the gentlemanly reserve of Mr. Chasanow, who, after his restoration to respectability in the Navy Hydrographic Office—with the reward of an “official apology”—preferred not to discuss the matter before the Senate subcommittee because he “had had enough of having his name spread around.” Do you and I *really* wish to know the truth about Hiss and Remington? Suppose, for purposes of argument, that we should find that these were new Dreyfus cases; suppose we discovered that our justice was, in these cases, not justice at all, but a lie. What would we do?

Exactly nothing, I am afraid. You and I think we should be shocked to learn that somehow a simple lie, which surely ought to be identifiable, has been so effective as either—if Hiss and Remington were guilty—to deceive Cabinet members, justices of the Supreme Court, and other learned men, for years; or—if they were not—to destroy, in a few brief strokes of genius, two careers and the several lives dependent of them. Yet it is obvious, whichever way we look at it, that the great and terrible—because so magnificently simple—lie was told, and we are not particularly shocked.

In justification of our moral attitudes, we declare that all things, including truth, are “relative,” as though by saying this we were explaining something. Relative to *what*, pray tell? Our acceptance of the lie as somehow natural and normal explains more clearly than anything else just why our values are confused. This *is* The Great Reversal, at its very heart. When the criterion is beclouded, the moral weather of the community is caught in the ominous doldrums. One no longer distinguishes between good and bad: in a statement of ultimate sophistication, one either declares that no distinction exists between them, or reverses the old order of definition so that what formerly was bad becomes good, and *vice versa*. The “great concern” of the Cardinal's gentleman is “to make every one at . . . ease and at home”—even, presumably (if incredibly), the wicked and subversive; and in this somewhat indiscriminate hospitality he must be “merciful towards the absurd.”

Well, fashions in absurdity change, no doubt fortunately. In New Jersey a few years ago the legislature solemnly robbed adultery of some of its attractiveness by reducing it in dignity from a crime to a misdemeanor. Generally speaking, adultery now—and not only in New Jersey—is a matter of “taste.” (My students, who practice their own wonderful brand of reversal, think it means “growing up.”) Perhaps Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale in the wilderness can be made to

seem tragic, but Ingrid Bergman and Robert Rossellini in Rahway cannot. At them we laugh, not very sympathetically. We do not even begin to understand what is being said about the subject when Henry James attacks it in such nervously hypersensitive characters as Lambert Strether and Madame de Vionnet, balanced precariously on a razor's edge of moral conscience. Nor do we care.

The worlds of Hawthorne and Henry James, where values were (no matter how foolish) clear at least and the meanings of words discernible, are, however regrettably, dead. History is, after all, history; and it continues. We have to head somewhere from here, even if it is only into a cave. We cannot simply submit to the Cabinet and the subcommittees; nor can we, like Lillian Sumners, simply stay away from Providence. The time has passed when we could sit idly on the shore by the dull canal, with the arid plain behind us, merely

Musing upon the king my brother's wreck
And on the king my father's death before him.

We must, in the inelegant but apt phrase, "fish or cut bait." The thunder has spoken. The sound is high in the air, and it is indeed a "murmur of maternal lamentation." The towers have fallen, literally, in

Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Vienna London.

We have looked upon "fear in a handful of dust." The question is, however: just because *it* gibbers, must we gibber, too?

According to Charles Eliot Norton, the infallible mark of the American writer is that at some point in his essay appears the comforting statement, "After all, we need not despair." I suppose we need not—if, that is, we are willing to take a calmer look at our real tradition than we have been doing, and if we are willing to reach a few sensible conclusions about definition. It is increasingly perilous, as the mothers—and, inadvertently, the Senators—tell us, to rest content with the "general idea." If we make the assumption that general ideas—of fair play, of "the American way of life," of Communism, of virtue—will suffice, we are like students I have known who attempted to absorb education by standing in artificially medieval courtyards in the fog, listening to whispers the more aesthetic and cultural because one could not quite hear them. To probe, to weigh and consider and discriminate: these are, naturally, to destroy the easy charm, the gentlemanly pleasure. It is more comforting, at least until a crisis arises, to be merely "present." The trouble is that a crisis is always arising—sometimes, as for Ensign Gaston's mother, just because

we did not check to see who was calling the roll. The times are always trying men's souls, whether Thomas Paine gets his pedestal in the park or not.

We can, if we try—even if we are Cabinet members—invest with meaning our pious, respectable phrases; but not, I think, if we continue to insist that all absurd opinions must be listened to with mercy. Since we obviously do not really believe that it is the right of *all* men to express their opinions, why should we pretend that we do? We might learn to label nonsense as nonsense even when it is uttered by a Cardinal—and not *because* it is uttered by a Cardinal (or by a Pentecostal—or a Russian). We can sometimes make the unseasonable allusion to evil instead of averting our eyes because it would be rude to look, or because we fear the involvement in controversy. We might in time learn to be shocked, at least in the presence of a lie. We can once in a while close our minds—but at the right time. I should call the time right when people begin to talk admiringly of statistics, as though a big mistake is better than a small one; or when a man is called “subversive” without any definition of the term, or any evidence, except maybe that his name is Ladejinsky or Chasanow; or when it is urged that I flunk a senior because of his mother's politics—or her religion. I should question that the time is right when a young man has just come home after a flirtation with false gods. Is it impossible that his motives are honest? Is the Prodigal Son invariably named Ichabod? Does the American boy come home only when he has nowhere else to go? Perhaps this is the time to decide whether disobedience in the young is evidence of patriotism or of delinquency. (Was Dr. Johnson right? Are the terms synonymous?)

We can restore to *charity* its ancient dignity, removing it from the community chest; we can give back to *love* its time-honored meaning. Love is not a “group project,” not even for a family. We can all, parents and children, cease to prate about the “rights of man.” What rights, pray tell, have we, beyond the right to recognize our duties and responsibilities and then to fulfill them as we can?

Maybe we *should*

hurl in the face of custom and trade and office, the fact which is the upshot of all history, that there is a great responsible Thinker and Actor working wherever a man works; that a true man . . . is the center of things.

If it is a “fact,” let us believe it. If we do, justice may not have to be forced upon us by a television program. And maybe some day we shall learn, once for all, that burning the book does *not* burn the idea, that signing the oath does *not* create loyalty, that keeping the statue out of the park accomplishes nothing except to send the pigeons to roost elsewhere.