AGAINST EVERYTHING

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GUT-LEVEL LEGISLATION, OR, REDISTRIBUTION
(THE MEANING OF LIFE, PART II)

One of the lessons of starting a magazine today is that if you pay any attention to politics you will collect a class of detractors, who demand immediately to know What and Wherefore and Whether and How. Are you to be filed next to *Mother Jones* and *Z* and *American Spectator* in the back row, or with *The Nation* and *The Weekly Standard* and the *American Prospect* up front? Is it possible you have not endorsed a candidate, or adopted a party? Within the party, a position? If not a position, an issue? The notion that politics could be served by thinking about problems and principles, rather than rehearsing strategy, leaves them not so much bemused as furious.

The furious political detractors need "responsibility," which in their hands is a fiction of power. If you question the world from an armchair, it offends them deeply. If you believe you run the world from it, it exalts them—because you have bought into the fiction that justifies their elitism. These commentators who have no access to a legislative agenda and really no more exalted basis for political action than that of their ordinary citizenship (but they do not believe they are ordinary citizens) bleat and growl and put themselves on record for various initiatives of Congress over which they have no influence and upon which they will have no effect. To be on record is to be "politically responsible" in that false sense. No rebuke is made to the process of opinionating itself—

this ritual of fomenting an opinion on everything, and so justifying the excited self-stimulation of a class of unelected arbiters who don't respect the citizens within themselves.

"What do you stand for! What will you do!" Legislatively? Are you kidding? Well, there is something one can do, without succumbing to the pundits: for the day when the Congress rolls up to our doorsteps and asks for our legislative initiatives, maybe it is up to every citizen to know what is in his heart and have his true bills and resolutions ready. Call it "political surrealism"—the practice of asking for what is at present impossible, in order to get at last, by indirection or implausible directness, the principles that would underlie the world we'd want rather than the one we have.

- *Principle*: The purpose of government is to share out money so that there are no poor citizens—therefore no one for whom we must feel guilty because of the arbitrariness of fate. The purpose of life is to free individuals for *individualism*. Individualism is the project of making your own life as appealing as you can, as remarkable as you like, without the encumbrances of an unequal society, which renders your successes undeserved. Government is the outside corrective that leaves us free for life.
- *Legislative Initiative No. 1*: Add a tax bracket of 100 percent to cut off individual income at a fixed ceiling, allowing any individual to bring home a maximum of $100,000 a year from all sources and no more.
- *Legislative Initiative No. 2*: Give every citizen a total of $10,000 a year from the government revenues, paid as a monthly award, in recognition of being an adult in the United States.

The redistribution of wealth can be unnerving whenever it comes up, and most unnerving to those who have least wealth, because they have worked hardest for every dollar and can't afford to lose it.

But redistribution comes in two steps, and when you look at the steps it's not so unnerving. The first step was already accomplished last century. It was the permanent establishment of a graduated income tax,

one of the greatest triumphs of civilization. A consensus was built to grade taxation to equalize the relative pain of taxation for each income earner. A little money is as useful to a person with little money overall as a larger sum is useful to a person with lots of money—and so, for equal citizenship, they carry an equal burden. Tax them proportionately the same, and everyone pays the same stake for government with the same degree of sacrifice.

The second step is our task in this century. It is an active redistribution to help dissolve the two portions of society whose existence is antithetical to democracy and civilization, and which harm the members of each of these classes: the obscenely poor and the absurdly rich. Each group must be helped. That means not only ending poverty, but ending absurd wealth. Obscene poverty doesn't motivate the poor or please the rest of us; it makes the poor desperate, criminal, and unhappy. Absurd wealth doesn't help the rich or motivate the rest of us, it makes the rich (for the most part good, decent, hardworking, and talented people) into selfish guilty parties, responsible for social evil. It is cruel to rig our system to create these extremes, and cast fellow citizens into the two sewers that border the national road. For all of us, both superwealth and superpoverty make achievement trivial and unreal, and finally destroy the American principles of hard work and just deserts. Luckily, eradicating one (individual superwealth) might help eradicate the other (superpoverty).

True property is that which is proper to you: what you mix your hands into (Locke), what is characteristic of you and no one else, and would change state in anyone else's possession. It is your clothes, your domicile, the things you touch and use, the land you personally walk. Property is the proprium, a possession that becomes like a characteristic; it starts as if it could belong to anyone, and comes to be what differentiates you. If it wears the mark of your feet and the smudge of your fingertips, your scent and your private atmosphere, then there is indeed something special and inviolable about property, even where it has come into your hands inequitably, by inheritance or a surfeit of income. The diamond

worn at the throat every evening must share a certain protection, under the law, with the torn cloak that keeps some shivering person warm.

This is distinct, however, from all wealth that is not capable of being used in the ordinary necessities of a life or even the ordinary luxuries. From any wealth that cannot be touched or worn or walked every day by its possessor, which neither comes from nor enables the mixing-in of hands but always and inevitably exists as a kind of notional accumulation of numbers, the protection of the proprium withdraws. When you have more houses than you or loved ones can live in, more cars than you can drive; more income in a year than can be spent on what you or your family can actually use, even uselessly use; then we are not speaking of property anymore, not the proprium, but of the inappropriate and alien—that which one gathers to oneself through the accident of social arrangements, exploiting them willfully or accidentally, and not through the private and the personal.

Thus the rationale for restricting *income.* Inequality will always exist, but in itself it is something different. One has to recognize that while the proprium may be passed down in nonmonetary forms, too—in the peculiarities of your genetics from your parents; in the heirloom, dwelling, tool, or decoration that wears the traces of hands and breath—income always comes as a consequence of arrangements of the community, via the shared space of trade, the discussion and rules, the systems of investment, and all the voluntary associations of society, of which the largest association is government.

A rich person—continuing to draw $100,000 a year in income—stays rich, but puts part of it into his own home and bank account and part into the needs and luxuries he may actually use. This sum will be converted reasonably into the *proper,* the personal, without any absurdity. A superrich person, however, who takes in $1 million, $10 million, or $100 million, will not and can never spend it on any sane vision of the necessities of life, at least not without a parasitic order in which normal goods (a home, a dinner) are overpriced (by the existence of those who will compete to pay for them) and other goods are made to

be abnormal and bloated (like the multiacre mansion). The social system allocates the extra $9,900,000 mistakenly. Reallocated, it would do much more benefit in a guaranteed citizens' income for many individuals in households with total incomes both above and below the median (now about $45,000 per household). But this is without—and this is very important—doing any harm to the formerly superrich person; if anything, it may do him a great benefit.

(And it should also be without any person or office to decide to whom money should be allocated. The goal is an automatic mechanism and universal good, not a form of control. Everyone must be given an equal sum, the $10,000, to help him be free. And that must include the rich top earner of $100,000—to keep him free, too, with the opportunity, through all the years of his adulthood, to *change* his life.)

The threat from those who oppose this line of thought is that, without "incentives," people will stop working. The worst-case scenario is that tens of thousands of people who hold jobs in finance, corporate management, and the professions (not to mention professional sports and acting) will quit their jobs and end their careers because they did not truly want to be bankers, lawyers, CEOs, actors, ballplayers, et cetera. They were only doing it for the money! Actually they wanted to be high-school teachers, social workers, general practitioners, stay-at-home parents, or criminals and layabouts.

Far from this being a tragedy, this would be the greatest single triumph of human emancipation in a century. A small portion of the rich and unhappy would be freed at last from the slavery of jobs that aren't their life's work—and all of us would be freed from an insane system.

If there is anyone working a job who would stop doing that job should his income—and all his richest compatriots' incomes—drop to $100,000 a year, *he should not be doing that job.* He should *never* have been doing that job—for his own life's sake. It's just not a life, to do work you don't want to do when you have other choices, and can think of something better (and have a $10,000 cushion to supplement a different choice of life). If no one would choose to do this job for a

mere $100,000 a year, if all would pursue something else more humanly valuable; if, say, there would no longer be anyone willing to be a trader, a captain of industry, an actor, or an athlete for that kind of money—then the job should not exist.

The supposed collapse of the economy without unlimited income levels is one of the most suspicious aspects of commonplace economic psychology. Ask yourself, for once, if you believe it. Does the inventor just not bother to invent anymore if inventions still benefit larger collectivities—a company, a society—but do not lead to a jump in his or any other inventor's already satisfactory personal income? Do the professions really collapse if doctors and lawyers work for life and justice and $100,000, rather than $1 million? Will the arts and entertainment collapse if the actors, writers, and producers work for glory and $100,000? Do ballplayers go into some other line and stop playing? If you're panicking because you can't imagine a ceiling of $100,000, well, make it $150,000. Our whole system is predicated on the erroneous idea that individuals are likely to hate the work they have chosen, but overwhelmingly love money. Presumably the opposite should be true. Even the really successful trader *must* love his work in some way—he enjoys the competition, temporarily measured in money, and the action and strategy and game of thought and organization, which are his life's calling. And all this glory could be pursued in a society in which he took home only $100,000 from this sport of kings—and he, and all of us, might be better off.

"But how can you ask other people to lower their salaries, without giving your life to charity first? Isn't it hypocrisy to call for change for everyone without turning over your own income?" Morality is not saved by any individual's efforts to do charity, a pocketful here, a handful there. Charity is the vice of unequal systems. (I'm only repeating Wilde's "The Soul of Man Under Socialism.") We shouldn't have to weigh whether our money would do more good in a destitute person's pocket, or our time do more good if we ladled soup to the hungry, or our study do more good if it taught reading to the illiterate. It always, always would.

Because it is hard to give up your money, however, when not everyone else does, and hard to give up your time when not everyone else does—and nearly impossible when you have less time, and less money, than the visibly rich and comfortable—and frankly, because it's not often a good idea to give up your true calling or your life at all, our giving is limited and fitful. It can never make a large-scale difference.

Not only decency, justice, and community but nobility, excellence, and individualism can come about only by redistribution, not charity, in a society organized against drastic monetary inequality in the first place. It would be a good society in the broadest sense, one in which life was worth living, because the good life (as a life of morality, and as a life of justified luxury) could be pursued without contradiction.

The essence of individualism is *morally relevant* inequality. The misuse of inequality occurs when it comes to be based on wealth rather than ability; on birth rather than talent; on positioning rather than genius; on alienable money (which could belong to anyone) rather than action and works (which can be done only by you). These distortions spell the end of a society of individualists. Money inequality creates a single system that corrals every person and places him above or beneath another, in a single file stretching from hell to the moon. These so-called individualists will then be led, by the common standard of the dollar, to common interests, common desires, and little that's *individual* at all.

Some say the more the rich are rich, the better off everyone will be. But really the Dick Cheneys of this world are obese because they're eating everybody else's dinner. Trickle-down economics is an alimentary philosophy: the more the rich eat, the more crusts they stuff in their maws, the more they create for the benefit of all the rest of us underneath them. Even if it worked, one could not forget that what they pass on to us is predigested, already traveling through their stomachs and fattening them first, giving excess nutriment to the undeserving. Their monuments, too, which we do marvel at, are composed of waste. Why gain the world as excrement? Why should we not take it in its morally original form—if money need not pass through the rich to reach us?

- *Legislative Initiative No.3*: It makes most sense to have a president and vice president who will forswear wealth permanently. A man who rules for the *demos* need not come from the *demos*. But he ought to enter it; he ought to become one of the people he is responsible most for helping—that means the rest of us.

Worst-case scenario two, if we prioritize human satisfaction instead of productivity, is de-development. For centuries, it has been at the back of the Western mind that technological development might reach a point at which a democratic community would want to stop, or change direction. So the Erewhonians, in Samuel Butler's utopia, broke their machines.

It's finally become possible to take a better view: not unlimited laissez-faire hubris, and not irrational machine-breaking, either. In a country where some portions of development have gone farther than anybody would like, because of everyone's discrete private actions (as in the liquidation of landscape and the lower atmosphere)—while other portions, as in medical insurance and preventive care, have not gone far enough—then *intentional de-development* might be the best thing that can occur. The eradication of diseases is not something you would like to see end; nor would you want to lose the food supply, transportation, and good order of the law and defense. On the other hand, more cell phones and wireless, an expanded total entertainment environment, more computerization for consumer tracking, greater concentrations of capital and better exploitation of "inefficiencies" in the trading of securities, the final throes of extraction and gas guzzling and—to hell with it. I'd rather live in a more equal world at a slower pace.

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V

ANAESTHETIC IDEOLOGY
(THE MEANING OF LIFE, PART III)

A year ago, I wrote an essay about a modern crisis in experience. I defined experience as the habit of creating isolated moments within raw occurrence in order to save and recount them. Questing after an ill-defined happiness, you are led to substitute a list of special experiences and then to collect them to furnish your storeroom of memories: incidents of sex, drinking, travel, adventure. These experiences are limited in number, unreliable, and addictive. Their ultimate effect can be a life of permanent dissatisfaction and a compulsion to frenetic activity.

Since then, I've felt I paid too little attention to a phenomenon which is the opposite: the desperate wish for anti-experience. The connection between the quest for experience and the wish for anti-experience isn't chronological. You don't wake up the morning after some final orgy of experience and discover that you can't stand any more. It seems to be, instead, arbitrary and eruptive. You reach points in life at which you can no longer live like other people, though you don't want to die. Experience becomes piercing, grating, intrusive. It is no longer out of reach, an occasional throb in the dark. It is no longer a prize, though it is the goal everyone else seeks. It is a scourge. All you wish for is some means to reduce the feeling.

This *anaesthetic* reaction, I begin to think, must be associated with the stimulations of another modern novelty, the total aesthetic environ-

ment. For those people to whom a need to reduce experience occurs, part of their discomfort seems to be strongly associated with aesthetic intrusions from fictional or political drama—from the television, the newscast, the newspaper, the computer headlines, or any of the other unavoidable screens of pixels or paper. "I just had to turn the TV off. I couldn't stand it anymore." This is the plea we accept, more or less, as we mirror the strange look on the sufferer's face with an odd look of our own. We will accept it this far and no farther, because much more of the suffering comes from us—the "normal" others—who obnoxiously recount our daily lives, too, as a series of rare adventures. The anti-experiencers will want to turn the TV off; then they'll want to turn us off. There comes a point at which they will want to turn the sights and sounds of life off—if life becomes a nightmare of aestheticized, dramatized events.

The hallmark of the conversion to anti-experience is a lowered threshold for eventfulness. You perceive each outside drama as your experience, which you could not withstand if it really were yours. It leads to forms of total vulnerability, as if the individual had been peeled or deprived of barriers. I don't know what word can connect the three levels of unavoidable strong experience, broadcast and recounted and personal, except the omnipresence of *drama.*

I also don't know why the nightmare comes for some people and not others, at some times and not others. After considering it, it surprises me that this breach, the fall into painful overexperience, isn't more common. Why of a hundred seekers of experience and dwellers in the total aesthetic environment do only two, or ten, turn? Unless there are features of the aesthetic environment which are themselves also anaesthetic and that manage to regulate the experiential lives of the majority, to keep them from cracking.

Suppose you have reached that point. You no longer feel you are among those whom William James called the "healthy-minded." You can tell because you watch the healthy ones gaping with laughter at violent movies or sitting calmly across from you at the table, over dinner,

recounting from that day's news a sex scandal, an airplane crash, an accidental shooting. You hear from the healthy-minded the battles *they* have fought that day and the experiences they have won. You detect them questing after the things they desire, talking about them with natural spirit, nourished by hope and aggression like their natural milk. They are nature's creatures, in the full grace of modernity. The sad truth is that you still want to live in their world. It just somehow seems this world has changed to exile you.

In that previous essay, I spoke of solutions to a first crisis, the endless quest for experience, in practices that redeem experience by expanding it: aestheticism and perfectionism.* The solutions to this second crisis in experience, the wish for anti-experience—both from tradition and in the present—are the *anaesthetic ideologies.* They diminish experience's reach. They "redeem" experience by weakening or abolishing it. They are, in a sense, aestheticism's and perfectionism's inverse.

Anaesthetic ideologies are methods of philosophy and practice that try to stop you from feeling. Or they help you to reduce what you feel. Or they let you keep living, when you can no longer live, by learning partially how to "die." I preserve the word "ideologies" because of the methods' potential duplicity—and also because of our perhaps justified suspicion that such undertakings are, at some level, inhuman.

The gallery of heads in the West, marble smooth, marble eyed, begins near the entrance with Plato and Aristotle. Plato put a megaphone to the mouth of Socrates. Thus we learned of the Forms, the permanence of Justice, and the objectivity of the Good. Aristotle held the dissecting tool to nature and the yardstick to man, systematizing all the forms of

* Aestheticism and perfectionism work by putting experience under the control of the active individual, teaching him to make rare experience *always* and from *anything.* Aestheticism teaches its practitioners to find rarity or beauty in any object or event; perfectionism finds moral reflections upon the observer in the same sources. They turn even banal or ugly things into objects of singular aesthetic interest or into moral examples that would encourage the constant transformation and appreciation of the self, thus exploding the *quest* for experience by putting it always at hand.

matter and the forms of life. We learned man is a political being whose good lies in the fulfillment of his potential. Plato led to Aristotle as the only alternative to himself, and the two of them together gave us Western philosophy as a line of action and actualization.

In the ancient world, though, rival traditions competed with theirs. These philosophies did not lead toward our modernity, defined by the quest for experience. They created traditions of nonstimulation, nonsusceptibility, nonexcitement, nonbecoming, nonambition; also antifeeling, *anaesthesia*. Thus at the *origins* of philosophy, thoughts were devoted to the restriction of experience. These traditions were at least as central to the concerns of the West, once upon a time, as were the lines we have received as active common sense and normalcy. They can help us at least as much today as the "Eastern philosophies" that have been for many moderns the only, marginal way to attain some distance from one-sided Western ambition.

The students who followed the example of Socrates did not all join Plato's Academy. (My account of Socratic successors draws on the writings of A. A. Long, the great scholar of Hellenistic philosophy.) One of the earliest, Diogenes of Sinope, called Diogenes the Cynic, led a beggar's life, upheld the example of Socrates's insulting speech, and taught Socratic freedom from "property, fine appearance, social status," while preaching, unlike Socrates, nonallegiance to any city. Philosophy for him was the use of reason for each individual to talk himself out of the material needs that everyone else claimed, and thus to be free of the fears to which everyone else was subject. This freedom from conventional need and this freedom from fear—even when they meant a refusal of the world—came to be combined with the philosophical hedonism of Aristippus of Cyrene, one of Socrates's direct pupils. Cyrenaic hedonism said that pleasure and pain are prior to all other motivations, and *should* be, too. These views made a different founding to philosophy than the one mediated by Plato.

In moods of peaceful hopefulness, I think that Epicurus, a genius of the next Greek generation, should be our perfect philosopher now, for America. He was a hedonist, as we are today. But he would have freed us from the pain of our search for experience, our mistaking of the

most valuable pleasures for the rarest and hardest to attain. He came to maturity while Aristotle was still alive, and began teaching a very different doctrine: that pleasure is the goal of life, but pleasure defined as the end and absence of pain. "For we are in need of pleasure only when we are in pain because of the absence of pleasure, and when we are not in pain, then we no longer need pleasure." The Epicurean ideal was *ataraxia,* imperturbability and mental detachment. This imperturbability couldn't be accomplished through avoidance—pain would come whether you wanted it or not—but only through the right way of thinking about all unavoidable experience.

Unsought pleasures, whatever they were—a lavish banquet, a night of erotic love—were never bad in themselves. The difficulty with most positive pleasures, however, was that "the things which produce certain pleasures bring troubles many times greater than the pleasures." Luxuries of experience involved you in uncertainties and pains—whether you would ever have them again, or whether you could sustain them. If pain is more to be avoided than positive pleasures are to be sought, it is "the freedom of the soul from disturbance" that is "the goal of a blessed life."

> Everything natural is easy to obtain and whatever is groundless is hard to obtain. . . . Simple flavours provide a pleasure equal to that of an extravagant life-style when all pain from want is removed. . . . So when we say that pleasure is the goal we do not mean the pleasures of the profligate or the pleasures of consumption, as some believe, either from ignorance and disagreement or from deliberate misinterpretation, but rather the lack of pain in the body and disturbance in the soul.

"For we [Epicureans]," the founder wrote, "do everything for the sake of being neither in pain nor in terror." Epicurus, on the outskirts of Athens, began the Garden, where his friends and followers "included household servants and women on equal terms with the men," as the scholar D. S. Hutchinson has noted—arrangements inconceivable to the rest of Athenian society. There they lived in peace and tranquility. They took their pleasure from a little wine mixed with water, and if

you ever wanted Epicurus to enjoy an extravagance, he said, you could send him a little pot of cheese. Friendship mattered. Friends reminded one another that true happiness was freedom from fear, that death was meaningless and pain tolerable. They sought to help one another to resist being touched by any disturbance, to win a gentle victory over strong experience.

In more tempestuous or harsher moods, my thoughts for the hidden sufferers in America go over to the tougher anaesthetic of the late Roman Stoics. The Stoa existed in Epicurus's time as a place of conversation and teaching in Athens, like the Academy, the Garden, and Aristotle's Lyceum; but Stoicism seems to have come into its most emphatic and lasting form many generations afterward. If you want a simple program and definitive dogma, you look to Epictetus. He is a much later figure than his Greek predecessors, and much better documented. The violence of Epictetus's rhetoric can be tonic. Really, we will eradicate experience, not just learn to be happy with barley cakes and watered wine. Then we can withstand anything, the richest luxuries or the heaviest blows.

The Stoic system is not so different from Epicureanism in its methods of controlling needs. It disposes of the feeling for pleasure, however, as a root for the mind's disciplining of experience. Epictetian Stoicism tells you to divide the world into what is up to you and what is not up to you. All that is left for a person to do, then, is to master his desire and aversion—so that he will never have either desire for or aversion to anything not up to him. He must never desire what he cannot control—not honors, not events, not other people's thoughts, behavior, or reactions, not all the good experiences of his body. And he must have no mental aversion to anything that comes to him without his choice, like illness, death, or the bad experiences of his body. He can groan in illness, but he must not care about it. The fates of things are up to nature, not to you.

> In the case of everything that delights the mind, or is useful, or is loved with fond affection, remember to tell yourself what sort of thing it is, beginning with the least of things. If you are fond of a jug, say, "It is a jug that I am fond of"; then, if it is broken, you will not be disturbed. If you kiss your child, or your wife, say to yourself that it is a human being that you are kissing; and then you will not be disturbed if either of them dies.

Life, Epictetus intimates at one point, is like a tourist visit to Olympia; you go because, well, who doesn't go? But it's bound to be incredibly annoying. "Do you not suffer from the heat? Are you not short of space? Do you not have trouble washing? . . . Do you not get your share of shouting and uproar and other irritations?" You will shrug it all off. "What concern to me is anything that happens, when I have greatness of soul?"

The only thing the Stoic should invest *any* emotion in is his own choice, which determines that "greatness of soul." He will feel pride when he remains absolute master of his choice and of his desire and aversion. He feels displeasure when he fails temporarily to be master of himself. Stoic reason makes a man absolute master of his judgments and eradicates everything that is bad while clarifying the only thing that is truly good: the right use of choice.

It is the denial of any meaning to immediate experience, apart from the judgment one places upon it, that is truly anaesthetic—a will to control one's judgments and minimize their effects, to make experiences not matter except for the inner experience of mastering experiences. The Stoic ideal was *apatheia,* release from passion and feeling, but it freed itself from everyone else's cares precisely in order to be able carelessly to do what everyone else did. It became supermilitant, because it continued to live in the world while denying it. "Practice, then," Epictetus teaches, "from the start, to say to every harsh impression, 'You are an impression, and not at all the thing you appear to be.'"

This meant not only not giving credence to impressions, but, in a sense, never aestheticizing them, never enjoying them as more than accidental facts or conjunctures, never investing them with any aura beyond their material constitution and fate, never giving them a place in a drama to be remembered or dwelt upon emotionally. Hence the

hostility of Epictetus to the tragic drama and the epic of strong feelings. What sort of person complains and lets passion and experience get the better of him, saying, "Woe is me"?

> Do you suppose I will mention to you some mean and despicable person? Does not Priam say such things [in the *Iliad*]? Does not Oedipus? . . . For what else is tragedy but a portrayal in tragic verse of the sufferings of men who have devoted their admiration to external things? . . . If one had to be taught by fictions, I, for my part, should wish for such a fiction as would enable me to live henceforth in peace of mind and free from perturbation.

Then, typically, Epictetus washes his hands of the question of drama, to return his followers to their choice: "What you on your part wish for is for you yourselves to consider."

Epicureanism and Stoicism survived, even predominated, for centuries—centuries in which Platonism and Aristotelianism had gone into relative eclipse. (These latter were revived in the first century BC.) The anaesthetic doctrines' memories now sit under a layer of dust. They are neglected by us, and their masters sit among the unrecognizables in the hundred forgotten generations between classical and modern.

In the last essay, I spoke of some specific means of collecting the most important experiences: drugs and alcohol, sex, and travel. I suggested they are unreliable by themselves and contribute to dissatisfaction with existence by creating the need always to be searching for more.

Outside the disciplines of full anaesthetic ideologies—what we can find among Epicureans and Stoics, as life philosophies—I begin to wonder if our banal searches for experience today don't often contain a shot of anaesthetic; something that allows these activities to serve the moderation of experience as well as its collection. What's more, modern solutions to the intolerability of experience have a way of flipping back and forth between reactions to the too-painful experience of late-modern economy and adjustments to it as extensions of its reach.

With drugs and alcohol, the anaesthetic effect may seem just too obvious. Drowning your sorrows in drink is recognized to be the first and cheapest means of escaping experience. Whiskey continues to be a fine painkiller even if it is no longer used medicinally. You start drinking to look for fun, for experience. You end in another place. Alcohol is a means to collect experiences, and then, too, alcohol is abusive as well as abused, the cause of troubles with experience as well as a reaction to trouble with experience. If drinking fails us, which ideal is it failing—the life of fun, on a high, or the life of anaesthetization, shut off and protected?

Sometimes I find myself thinking about those high-school and collegiate and postcollegiate figures the "stoners." What were their futures? They might have had their only natural social existence, without penalties, while still in school. But it seemed a plausible existence, like that of a creature who had found the right ecological niche. This penaltyless stoner was someone who would rise in the morning and take a hit from the bong, smoke through the day, take all experience (classes, social interactions) with a hazy anaesthesia that made it not quite experience, yet not quite anything so positive as "fun"—then finish off a bowl before going to sleep, to start the next day in the same way. It seemed a life of anti-experience, different from physical addiction. No doubt there is something myopic in a nostalgia for what the stoner proved was possible, if only for a few short years. No one thinks it ends well. But there was something about his manner, wreathed in smoke, that made him seem not like an adventurer but a symbol of a bizarre but real reaction to something we can't name.

For the small group of people who insist on the legalization of marijuana, who can even become marijuana "activists," the logic of their movement has become ever more oriented to the wedge issue of medically recognizable anaesthetization, the anaesthesia of cancer patients and the terminally ill. That is because it is the only way to make marijuana legible to our world, a world of experience and not anti-experience: by the recognized evil of interior *bodily* pain rather than the wish for a life less acute, or the acknowledgment of a healthy physiology that could prefer, somehow, haze in experience to our supposed clarity.

Sex and the search for sex hold out the acquisition of experience, much praised and discussed in our culture, against the unspoken moderation of experience by sex as a reassuring and intimate repetition. We speak of an alternative only in marriage: *conjugality,* the repetition of sexual experience as an act of love, but also as a kind of interpersonal comforting. Conjugality repeats, it does not much change, and it never needs to change unless its participants decide on change, since it is not ever done with anyone else. It is not precisely anaesthetic, but anti-experience. The larger culture of experience, of course, suggests that sex, in some sense, should *always* be done with someone else, in a new way. Your spouse or helpmate must become continually somebody new, somebody unknown, to share new experiences with. Our culture has become pornographic at all levels of its narrative structure: it always seeks a further experience beyond the last one, with more reach and extremity, even where the human mind seems limited to repetition, and human habit seems to prefer it. It is probably the case even in the carnival of dating, switching of partners, anonymous intimacy, that in the act of seeking and acquiring the sheer bodily presence of another person, whoever he or she may be, there is self-reassurance and even near self-anaesthesis: what matters in the moment will be not only the recountable events but silent, forgettable, forgotten-in-the-moment acts of mutual oblivion.

There are, of course, better-organized ways of seeking some relief from experience—non-naive ways, modern ideologies. The "voluntary simplicity" movement of the last decade was a self-conscious plan for the reduction of possessions in order to unclot experience, to find out which experiences, of so many options, were really needful. Simplicity would limit the acquisitive instinct in favor of the retention of a small number of indispensable items. You would learn first to get rid of a closet of clothes, for the most useful; get rid of many friends, for fewer; stop attending to much foreign news, for news closer to home; eventually, in the "advanced" techniques, have one car instead of two, then no car at all, a smaller house, an easier job, and a diminished but possibly more manageable or more vivid experience. The ideology was not always precisely anaesthetic; sometimes it was purifying of experience.

But wherever it did not acknowledge its own real *opposition* to experience of the dramatic kind, and could be co-opted by aesthetics of more vivid, purified, and improved experience, simplicity had the capacity to flip. It could become a matter not just of fewer clothes but of more perfect, ideal clothes, even *new* clothes. It furnished the basis for its own lifestyle magazine, *Real Simple,* a glossy for those who wanted to organize and vary, to switch between simplicities, or to stylize their environments in "simpler" hues of eggshell and porcelain and light pastel, rather than to reduce objects or even learn to accept the old, ugly, and easy, which exist already and therefore might be less spiritually intrusive.

I think the organized spiritual system of the greatest anaesthetic use to the largest number of people in America today must be Buddhism. And yet this still recruits only a tiny minority of seekers. Buddhism is the genuine article, an ancient system, however complicatedly it makes its way to us for modern purposes. Contemporary "nonattachment," as it is sometimes described to me, sounds a good deal like Epicurean imperturbability and, in some formulations, Stoic apathy. The more I hear of "mindfulness," the more I hear traces of aestheticism and perfectionism, though in mindfulness they are removed at last from the limiting requirements of artistry or moral self-scrutiny and are made instead a function of permanent biological habits (breathing, attention, basic sensation) in a kind of hybrid aestheticism-imperturbability. The Buddhist would protest, justifiably, that his practices came first and should be judged on their own. (I am not a Buddhist myself and therefore a bad judge.) What is striking in the Americanization of Buddhism, however, as it appears in books and pamphlets and tapes and talks, is the mixture of different methods and aims. We may just be seeing a diversity of sects and practices, or we may be seeing the perennial Janus-faced quality of American autotherapeutics. Something like mindfulness will be a way to moderate experience for some and to collect and intensify it for others; a way to drop out for some and to get ahead for others; a system at odds with convention for some and an adjustment to conventional life, reducing friction, for others. We knew already that yoga could be imported to this country and, for some, retained as an interlocking series of total systems of practice, knowledge, and devotion—while it

was made a form of gym exercise to slim down and improve muscle tone for others.

Then there is the promise of the New Age. It is surprising how often New Age solutions come to us from aliens: interplanetary beings, men of the fifth dimension, and oceanic tribes preserving ancient wisdom lit by the glassy filtered blues of their bubbled Atlantis. I suppose these fantasy archaisms and interstellar revelations are no different finally from our worship elsewhere of the Orient against the Occident—our idea that truth must come from our morning rather than our eve. No different, probably, from my own desire to rediscover anaesthesis in the heart of the West, among sandal-wearing Epicureans or Stoics, while I willfully reinterpret their complex doctrine. We cannot take advice from ourselves, and so we take it from men and women with very strange ways. The stranger the better, so estranged are we from our fellow citizens, who can see no problem.

Certainly, all these systems, however practiced, are better than depression—perhaps the major arena for involuntary anaesthesis in our time (with its attendant losses of pleasure, will, and caring). What is often enough said by the mildly depressed—though we suspect them of magnifying their own problems into social problems—is that their depression is a logical and reasonable response to an environment of experiences and demands that are too intrusive. From the opposite perspective, and with much more authority, the severely depressed are inclined to say that their death in life cannot be a logical or reasonable response to anything, for their sense of the negation of experience goes beyond what any human being could want or will as self-protection. Depression does not save the self, it tells it to die. This seems so extreme as to be outside the reach of cultural analysis, even though anaesthesis, in its many other organized forms, is often a way of learning to "die" without dying. One wants to say something about depression, still stopping short of the point at which generalization encroaches on the individual malady. If there is a cultural world shared between the rise of "experience," searched for as the only means to furnish happiness, and the steady creep of depression as a frequent, dominant affect for people who expected that their lives might be deserving of full happiness, then maybe there is also some causal connection. Maybe it is a sign that when experience has become intolerable, for whatever specific reasons, the mind and the body will *unideologically* attempt to solve what could only be solved with a practice, a system, and an ideology.

We do not live in an age of the arts. The novel, theatrical play, and piece of symphonic music don't matter very much. Art forms that seemed like the fruit of long lines of development, including opera, ballet, painting, and poetry, are now of interest to very few people.

We do, however, live in an aesthetic age, in an unprecedented era of total "design." The look and feel of things, designed once, is redesigned and redesigned again for our aesthetic satisfaction and interest. Design, which can reach the whole world, has superseded art, whose individual objects were supposed to differ from one another and hold a sphere apart from the everyday.

But the particular aesthetic manifestations that interest me here are *dramatic.* It interests me that there is no end of fictions, and facts made over in the forms of fictions. Because we class them under so many different rubrics, and media, and means of delivery, we don't recognize the sheer proliferation and seamlessness of them. I think at some level of scale or perspective, the police drama in which a criminal is shot, the hospital drama in which the doctors massage a heart back to life, the news video in which jihadists behead a hostage, and the human-interest story of a child who gets his fondest wish (a tourist trip somewhere) become the same sorts of drama. They are representations of strong experience, which, as they multiply, begin to de-differentiate in our uptake of them, despite our names and categories and distinctions.

We often say we watch the filmed dramas of strong experience for the sake of excitement or interest. This is true for any representation *in the singular case.* The large dramas of TV and movies, presumably, reflect back on our own small dramas. I, like the ER surgeons, have urgent tasks; I, like the detectives, try to solve things. If one watched, say, a single one-hour show once a month, the depicted experience might come across as a genuinely *strong* experience. If one watched (or care-

fully read) the news once a month, it might be a remarkably strong and probably an anguishing experience.

But since the spread of television, people have not, by and large, watched dramatic events singly, one a month or week. They've read more than one newspaper and magazine for longer than that. The newspaper itself was always a frame for diverse, incommensurable disasters. We watch and read in multiples. The media of the dissemination of dramas have not been substitutive, either; they have been additive. Not newspaper, then film, then radio, then TV, then the Internet, but all of the above exist today, all the time, in more places, with more common personalities and more crossover of tone, character, content, than before. The claims that fictional dramas exist to "excite," "thrill," or "entertain," like the claims that news exists to "teach," or to "let us know" or "be responsible," have become increasingly incoherent or irrelevant, modeled as they are on viewings of single, focused events. In the era of the total aesthetic environment, the individual case is not as significant as is the effect of scale. While a single drama on television may be thrilling—as it renders the strongest experiences, of life, death, blood, conflict—the aggregate of all dramas on television can hardly be said to be thrilling, since the total effect of television upon a regular viewer is above all *calming*, as any viewer-in-bulk can testify.

This is the paradox. Watching *enough* represented strong experience is associated with states of relaxation and leisure, the extreme loosening and mellowness in which we find a person deliberately "vegetating" in front of the TV—while the walls are painted with criminals' spattered blood, the muscle is pulsating between the doctors' hands, and the hostage is beheaded, and beheaded again, and again, on several competing twenty-four-hour news channels, which no longer promise "up-to-the-minute" but "up-to-the-second" coverage, and show precisely the same events. Over a lifetime, you will also see the same events and scenarios acted out with different faces, sometimes in different genres, some real and some fictional—but "excitement" will very rarely be the reason you turn on the TV.

It used to seem that the news existed as a special case. I think people would agree, at first, if I said that prime time exists for relaxation but the news exists for rigor and truth. Yet what has the news ever been if not also, in some way, calming—or why would one watch the eleven o'clock news before going to bed, as other people take sleeping pills or sip warm milk; why would one watch the six o'clock news, which is even more brutal, more "serious," while eating dinner—when we know in human life that the desire to eat and the ability to sleep are two activities that vanish with genuine disquiet?

With the rise of twenty-four-hour channels, news has become the core and most general case of the total aesthetic environment, because twenty-four-hour news does not play the old game of pretending you can choose to turn it off. Rather, it uses the conceit that there is always something "happening," an experience—though somebody else's—that you must also know about, and the TV is only connecting you transparently to phenomena that should be linked to you anyway. This lie is predicated on notions of virtue, citizenship, responsibility.

I say I watch the news to "know." But I don't really know anything. Certainly I can't do anything. I know that there is a war in Iraq, but I knew that already. I know that there are fires and car accidents in my state and in my country, but that, too, I knew already. With each particular piece of footage, I know nothing more than I did before. I feel something, or I don't feel something. One way I am likely to feel is virtuous and "responsible" for knowing more of these things that I can do nothing about. Surely this feeling is wrong, even contemptible. I am not sure anymore what I feel.

What is it like to watch a human being's beheading? The first showing of the video is bad. The second, fifth, tenth, hundredth are—like one's own experiences—retained, recountable, real, and yet dreamlike. Some describe the repetition as "numbing." "Numbing" is very imprecise. I think the feeling, finally, is of something like envelopment and even satisfaction at having endured the worst without quite caring or being tormented. It is the paradoxically calm satisfaction of having been enveloped in a weak or placid "real" that another person endured as the worst experience imaginable, in his personal frenzy, fear, and desperation, which we view from outside as the simple occurrence of a death.

The old philosophies of aesthetics were based on the experience of a

single drama, going back to Aristotle's pity and fear in the witnessing of just one tragedy. Tragedies were presented in small clusters on a special festival day at a rare time of the year. We do not now encounter dramas on designated days of the year. The old aesthetics increasingly slip away when it is not one, or a few, doctors' dramas we watch once a year, but five thousand episodes of a hundred dramas over the course of a lifetime, amid ten thousand other renderings of dramas of equally strong experience; not one representation of a beheading but the same one run a hundred times, followed by a thousand other atrocities themselves rerun. The scale of drama can become a training in how not to relate the strong emotions of representations back to your own experience, not so that they unnerve or paralyze you, while you still learn to fashion your own experiences in the narrative manner and style of dramatic representations.

Then, too, with the change of scale, more of our strictly personal experiences are likely to be experienced *simultaneously* with outer dramas, whether "fiction" or "news." The screens continue to proliferate. Televisions play silently with closed captions in the restaurants where I go to dinner. (I remember they used to be only in bars.) They play with sound in the waiting rooms for visitors to the hospital; they play in the waiting rooms for emergency patients. One played in the garage where I had a flat tire repaired, where I saw the drama of a Florida man shot by air marshals. A wide-screen played by the men's changing rooms at Macy's. Flat-screens are on the machines at the gym and on the elevators in office buildings. Airport terminals are full of televised news, and it follows you to the screens on the backs of the seats on planes. Screens are promised on the subway, where the public rationale will be that they will only show news (to justify the remaining minutes of paid advertising)—the drama of the necessary news, which so mendaciously justifies all other drama. A few offices may have TVs on the work floor, where they are redundant, since the drama comes through on the work space itself, the screen of the computer. When I read my e-mail on Yahoo, it is accompanied by headlines of distant events, fifty-six killed, a hundred killed; video clips from movies; ads for the dating sites that will find me a new mate and reconstruct my own life as drama.

Happiness has wound up in an ideology of the need for experiences. Very well. This is our "health" and our quest. But is this happiness-by-experience itself then regulated and moderated by the constant chatter of strong represented experiences, whose effect is not, finally, to stimulate strong experience in their viewers, but to make up some hybrid of temporary relaxation and persistent desire? Does the total aesthetic environment, that is, become anaesthetic as well as aesthetic? We know its advertisements channel desire toward particular products—and don't much mind. That's just advertising. Its dramas also create and channel desire. Suppose those dramas were capable of a paradoxical, anaesthetic attenuation or deferral of all this desire, to the point where desire could be mobilized ceaselessly without pain to the viewer and without personality destruction. This would forestall the conversion to anti-experience—never causing the full and radical crisis that might occur to an unhabituated and unanaesthetized individual, facing all of these dramas and horrors and strong renderings and commercial demands and new needs as single instances, for the first and only time.

I want to think this is partly right; then the system, and its perilousness, make sense. The trouble then would be that for some people the drama-induced anaesthetic might *wear off.* Their form of experiential illness would represent a breakthrough, in other words, of aesthetic events to their original, singular effects—so that they disturb the person who is supposed to be protected, soothed, and regulated, as if he were now encountering each instance *singly,* at full strength.

If individuals in our society are afflicted suddenly with the inability to take represented experiences in a ceaseless flow, but instead undergo each and every event as if it were happening to *them*—as if fiction were real, and the real (the news networks' medical horrors, beheadings, thousands of deaths) *doubly* real, because publicly attested to and simultaneously experienced as somehow one's own—then no wonder they withdraw. If they feel every outside representation, from however far away it comes, as if it belonged to the context of their private lives and individual drama, then no wonder they tremble. And they may in part have been *asked* to feel things that way—by a system of representations that doesn't truly believe, or wish, that anyone *will.*

("If one had to be taught by fictions," said Epictetus, "I, for my part, should wish for such a fiction as would enable me to live henceforth in peace of mind and free from perturbation. What you on your part wish for is for you yourselves to consider.")

I see: Severed heads. The Extra Value Meal. Kohl-gray eyelids. A holiday sale at Kohl's. Red seeping between the fingers of the gloved hand that presses the wound. "Can you save him, Doctor?" The room of the renovated house, done in red. The kids are grateful for their playroom. The bad guy falls down, shot. The detectives get shot. The new Lexus is available for lease. On CNN, with a downed helicopter in the background, a peaceful field of reeds waves in the foreground. One after another the reeds are bent, broken, by boot treads advancing with the camera. The cameraman, as savior, locates the surviving American airman. He shoots him dead. It was a terrorist video. They run it again. Scenes from ads: sales, roads, ordinary calm shopping, daily life. Tarpaulined bodies in the street. The blue of the sky advertises the new car's color. Whatever you could suffer will have been recorded in the suffering of someone else. Red Lobster holds a shrimp festival. Clorox gets out blood. Advil stops pain fast. Some of us are going to need something stronger.

I don't know why anyone cracks, and the reasons, each time, will be different, deep, and personal. The aesthetic presentations, which seem to be everywhere, as dramas, playing out the strongest experiences—which others can receive in a manner relaxed or blasé—become intolerable. If there was indeed something formerly anaesthetic about this ceaseless flow of strong sensations, then it has just worn off, worn off for oneself *alone* as it often seems, and it is terrifying. The baffled sufferer can't understand what has happened to him.

So he tries to recover the anaesthetic. He may try first the double-dealing strategies, those that add experience in some modalities and preserve you from it in others: alcohol, sex, or another kind of plunge. There are the horrible depressions, ambiguous and painful. There is medicine. There are organized practices and systems, from Buddhism through the many traditions of the East, from Epicureanism and Stoicism back to the origins of the West. Each stands ready to be retrofitted for today. There is organized religion. There is staying in your house and never coming out.

There is also the dream of an alternate aesthetic, of a world in which aestheticized experience worked only on things that were *ordinary,* local, small, repetitive, and recalcitrant, on things that really did happen to most of us in the everyday. This would imply a challenge to drama as we know it. Would it be too much to ask for books in which there is no conflict and no disaster but mere daily occurrences, strung together by the calm being who notices them; television shows on which people sit around silently noticing one another, watch sunsets, type, chat, cook meals without teaching the viewer how, and go about their business in the dull but reassuring knowledge that nothing is going to be very different than the day before? Could there be repetition in a state of grace? Could there be "aesthetic" representation, for those for whom the worldly anaesthetic had worn off, while the systematic ideologies seemed too inhuman and restrictive? Could people live a life in the garden, in our world with its many technologies?

What would remain would not be drama, or "experience," but life. Perhaps there is a way back to life, in people's tentative steps in the interstices of this world, if they cannot live on its grid. Circling life from the cluttered outside, one asks its meaning again and again. How to get back to it: by aestheticizing everything, as before, to explode the questing aesthetic? By anaesthetic efforts, as imagined in this essay, to cut down experiences to neutral occurrences incapable of being made over as drama? Meaning starts to seem a perverse thing to ask for, when what we are really asking is what life is when it is not already made over in forms of quest or deferral. Could *this* life be reached—unmediated? Would there be anything there when we found it?

[2006]

THOREAU TRAILER PARK
THE MEANING OF LIFE, PART IV

In Concord, Massachusetts, opposite Walden Pond, during the decades when I was growing up nearby, the maples and oaks that fringed Walden also shaded two lots of concrete, where there rested a congregation of flat-roofed oblong trailer homes, like caskets of ivory. Cinderblock front steps tied the screen doors to the earth. Fabricated to move, these homes had lost their mobility. The state had purchased the land underneath them. Divided from these lots by a state highway not much widened from the old cart road it had paved, the dark woods, the deep pond, the wan beaches, and vast tracts of forest past the railroad tracks constituted Walden Pond State Park, a nature preserve, and also a historical memorial, controlled by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Thus there was the state park, and then there was the trailer park. The two must be at odds forever. For if the low, undistinguished dwellings across the road made a "trailer park" in the American parlance, this name marked them off profoundly from the logs and grasses and falling leaves, paths and overlooks, fenced in so that anonymous citizens could enjoy them (for a modest entrance fee) as long as they left no trace. "Trailer park" bespeaks a corral for retirees and the working class, poor enough not to own houses not on wheels, but not deprived enough to be picturesque or pitiable; not poor enough to lack garish collections of cars which nosed up to vinyl siding, and oversized televisions that

twinkled in daytime through windows of automotive glass, cutting out silhouettes of plastic flowers on the sills, or glinting through the mazes of chintz curtains. "Trailer trash," referring to human beings, is the rare American phrase of contempt that lacks an organized group to resent it. Throughout my childhood, the state park service prosecuted a war of attrition against the trailers: forbidding transfer of their sites to heirs or newcomers, prohibiting return to anyone who planned to use his wheels and then come back, finally disposing of each carcass as its owners died.

Walden Pond is historical, not just natural, because Henry David Thoreau philosophized there for two years in the 1840s. This source of notoriety is unlike that of the other state parks down Battle Road at the other side of Concord, entering Lexington, where patriots touched off the American Revolution, or War of Independence, by shooting at massed British soldiers in 1775. Thoreau, just two generations of "Americans" later, moved into a small house he erected on borrowed land on Walden's shore, grew beans and potatoes for sale, and noticed as the seasons turned who wandered through his neighborhood, both human and animal. He made his contribution to the tradition in philosophy slightly later than Kierkegaard, slightly earlier than Nietzsche, though both are his spiritual siblings. His book of thoughts and observations, *Walden,* and one essay on his idea of the individual and the state, "Civil Disobedience," are enough to make him one of America's most significant philosophers. Thoreau's questions were quite simple: what, truly, living is; how much more of it could be done if one withdrew from customary obligations, especially the command to "make a living," hold a job, own property, swear to debts and credits. He counseled making one's business only spiritual, or interpersonal. The precise site at Walden where his cabin rested has been forgotten, but visitors have deposited a cairn of rocks behind the pond's northeast cover. It mixes stones worthy of a New England farm wall with smooth balls the size of hands. A rebuilding of Thoreau's dwelling, to the dimensions described in *Walden*'s first chapter, in the main parking lot, wears the refined look of machined and store-bought lumber. It is periodically vacuumed clean. Nearby, a bronze statue of the philosopher meets the weather. The gift shop sells quotations from Thoreau's writings, printed on bumper stickers, coffee mugs, T-shirts, and day calendars—"In wildness is the preservation of the world," "Simplify, simplify," "Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes"—alongside complicating goods: pieces of new clothing and walking equipment for navigating the well-trodden paths in Walden woods. It also sells every one of Thoreau's books.

The state park is a wonderful invention; I don't want to make fun. It saved my suburban childhood in many ways. It preserves woodlands, and husbands oaks, pines, and birches; shrubs and weeds; chipmunks and frogs; owls and chickadees. It makes a swimming pond available to anyone regardless of town residence, one hardly bettered west of Boston, which provides relief for so many in the summer heat. But that trailer park, while it lasted, was a beam in everyone's eye. To the park service, to journalists, to preservationists, to visitors, it couldn't be a plausible place to live the simple life, or a place for philosophy; it was an eyesore, an offense. The trailer residents, who are all dead now, bought their groceries in Acton or other poorer towns than Concord, the fancy community in which they were called "the gypsies." Their presence, through my childhood in the 1980s, was an important mystery to me. As each trailer disappeared, it left behind a gray rectangle of cement like an old bed. I crossed the chains and Do Not Trespass signs to the last one standing but I was too short to see in. And as I came to know Thoreau better, through his writings, in my young adulthood in the 1990s, I thought the trailer park might be one of the few things Thoreau would defend, against so much that was done, at Walden Pond, for his name's sake.

It is hard to remember what Thoreau said because it is all so disturbing. It is easier on us to think of a thin man who erected a cabin with his own hands on the shores of a lovely pond. Thoreau deliberately didn't build his cabin from scratch. He hacked a free timber frame from someone else's trees, got friends to help him raise it, and recycled the rest from a laborer's bivouac, buying cheap, for boards and roof, "the shanty of James Collins, an Irishman who worked on the Fitchburg Railroad." This was philosophical, with all its shortcuts and offenses. Thoreau's fire

burned to irradiate a fundamental mutation into "economy." Economy for him followed from his theorem: "The cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run." Knowing "life" in two senses—holding a yardstick to it, putting it on the scales, to measure it and value it, while at the same time experiencing it, submitting to its manifestations—is the chief philosophical, and daily, task. The challenge reminds me of Schiller's metaphor of social reform, in *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man,* as repairing a clock without stopping it or failing to let it tell the time.

In Thoreau's Concord, farming seemed the most estimable pursuit. Economic concentration, as at the big farms in his neighborhood, was revealed to him, once he had begun his fateful measurements of life, as an enslavement from which only death would free its beneficiaries: "When the farmer has got his house, he may not be the richer but the poorer for it, and it be the house that has got him." Instead of the farmer gathering his necessities in the least expensive and destructive way, he abstracts magnitudes he doesn't need. "To get his shoestrings he speculates in herds of cattle." It might be better, Thoreau suggested, that we sleep even in coffin-sized toolboxes, of the kind he saw among the railroad tracks; we could dwell in them at less expense to our lives, anyway, than that exacted by the big coffins, called houses and properties, on which we pay a thirty-year mortgage. "Many a man is harassed to death to pay the rent of a larger and more luxurious box who would not have frozen to death in such a box as this."

All of his words can be hard to bear, but no American is spared. "I began to occupy my house on the 4th of July," Thoreau boasts, and he means to rival the pretenders to the Fourth of July—those founding Americans of 1776, who claimed they fought for independence, freeing the new nation, when really they left it in ignorant bondage. Thoreau makes war on jobs; debts; houses; inheritances; governments; states. Only his economy can give the country a new chance in its bankruptcy. Thoreau passionately adores the pond and the woods, to be sure, and wildness, and nature, but not because they are adornment, or refreshment, or comfort to human lives. They are, for human life, brute lessons. Beautiful nature is beautiful for men and women because it strips our life to essentials, reflects us, dismisses us, and smashes our idols and objets d'art. "Before we can adorn our houses with beautiful objects the walls must be stripped, and our lives must be stripped, and beautiful housekeeping and beautiful living be laid for a foundation; now, a taste for the beautiful is most cultivated out of doors, where there is no house and no housekeeper."

The philosopher occupied a cabin, because he wished to live outside all houses. He left Walden, too—apparently Heaven—once he had gotten what his soul needed at that time. "Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one."

Occupy Wall Street occupied a park in the financial center of the United States, not because it wanted to sleep out of doors, but because its participants wanted to live in a democracy. Was that connection clear, to all who saw it on TV, to everyone who held an opinion of it? Eight weeks it lasted—eight weeks!—and then it was shoved out with sticks and fists by police, its experiment uncompleted. I was there on the Sunday morning it started, and blocked from the park by police on the weeknight it ended. I had known parks, and tents, and little camps—seriousness and play; the American landscape is littered with them. So what was Zuccotti Park, which the inhabitants insisted on calling by an alternate name (which may have been the old, original name), Liberty Square? Was it a Walden, a project in philosophy? Was it another trailer park, cleared by the state, a disreputable idyll of those who lacked greater means?—despised for that reason, as will be all havens of those too weak to impose their wills upon their betters?

Walden Pond, for all its beauties, is a pond only, not a lake or a seashore—a puddle in the grander scheme of things. Thoreau knew that well. Liberty Square, a tiny rectangle of unlovable paving, hardly ever deserved the name of park; one knew how unwanted it was, how undesirable and unknown. What made it seem a park was just the legal guarantee that it must stay open for the public twenty-four hours a day,

though that contract, too, was intermittently abrogated by its "owners." (The park had been promised as a permanent public space, in a deal in the 1960s, in exchange for allowing its owners to build new office space in violation of existing laws. Thus this leftover plot could be "public," yet not owned by the public or managed by the state. This mutual irresponsibility proved essential to Occupy, as the mayor and realtors dithered over who should suffer the bad press of destroying it.) What sort of park Zuccotti was becoming, though, depended on the angle from which you looked at it. To me, in my idealism or naiveté, it seemed a renewal of the basic reference of America, the visible presence of the People, the living unruliness at the core of dead memorials. Six days before the first Occupy gathering, September 17, 2011, officials had opened, a few blocks away, a foolish, meaningless September 11 memorial, on the tenth anniversary, while we could see them continue to build a giant tower of private corporate office space above the hole, the real offering, amidst their crocodile tears, to the mass murder of American citizens. The free speech emerging in Zuccotti Park was the living memorial in the building's shadow.

The occupation's purpose was to address the economy. No one could deny that private Wall Street banks had, in 2008, nearing collapse, made themselves whole with billions from the taxpayers' treasury, and put great sums from the rescue into their own pockets. They took taxpayers' money and foreclosed on taxpayers' homes. They unhoused the middle class while the executives renovated their third and fourth and fifth vacation houses. But principally banks, brought back from the brink of death, cast their weight, and all the power the democracy restored to them, against democracy: spending the citizens' money in election funding and lobbying, to ensuring that good old laws, born in the Great Depression, retired in the 1990s, which had prevented such profitable (and self-destructive) speculation, could not be restored. Banks spent the citizens' money to guarantee they were heard before any citizen. So the Wall Street occupation was meant as a reminder that the country could still demand its democracy, and put banks under the rule of law, and take something from them in recompense for our foolish generosity. Many cynics who pretended sympathy said: "You should

be protesting in Washington, not on Wall Street." But if arsonists burn down houses (and collect the insurance), and the fire department won't rouse itself (or is bribed not to), you should go and stand where the fires originate, and the rags are being soaked and lit—until your neighbors, the whole city, will turn and look.

Still, I underestimated the degree to which Liberty Square had the character of a trailer park, too, not just an experiment in philosophy. Because I am bourgeois. I had an apartment to go to; at night I slept in my own bed. I believed I was at ease with Thoreau in my wish not to make politics take over the rest of my life, remembering the daily individual matters as more important, except when interrupted by injustice. "If I devote myself to other pursuits and contemplations, I must first see, at least, that I do not pursue them sitting upon another man's shoulders." Quite right; and then I went home. In the encampment, however, it became clear that others, much of the core of the occupation, really did want to live together. They wanted to create a democracy not of symbols, but of fact. A bit of the miscellaneous old New York port city or the self-governing Yankee town, a village. A home. People wanted to live democracy together—no matter how bad this looked to those of us, and our less committed fellows, from the home-dwelling petty bourgeoisie. The homeless began to join Occupy. When the vast metropolis of Bloomberg's New York sees them as human trash, littering the parks and squares that business committees primp into window displays, this park alone meant not just a hiding place, but safety, sleep, conversation, amusement, and food, without condescension and conditions.

That a democracy could become a community in actuality, exposing its conflicts and sufferings, with none of the paper stuffing of symbols to cushion it—that a park could furnish people a place to live, under such outside scrutiny—this spelled terrible danger for the protests. As many times as crowds chanted, "This is what democracy looks like" when the police threatened us, I cringed to hear how the words advertised our weakness. Few enough people want to see what democracy looks like, unless it has been cast and burnished in bright symbols. Too much seeing "the Democracy," as the citizenry used to be called, will make it easier for many people to wish that it be gone.

The Democracy does not wear new clothes. Its kindness and manners, transpiring between individuals, will not be visible from boardroom windows high above. From up above, in air-conditioned rooms, one cannot smell that the Democracy is clean, sweet; so it is called smelly, dirty, unwashed. The distant citizenry, cut off from it, treats the Democracy with disgust. And parts of the Democracy will be poor and weak; this, many can't bear to see, especially those closest to the middle or to poverty. It reminds us what we are, where we can fall. So, after eight weeks, without great resistance from other parts of the city, the police were able to hoist their klieg lights, barricade or arrest the press, and beat the Democracy: chase and push the Democracy, arrest it for running into the fists of the police—all in the name, as the mayor's orders came down, of "public health." Garbagemen threw the occupation's five-thousand-book library into the trash to "keep it safe." Those books were ruined, as certainly as if they had been burned. In the empty square, with America's children bruised and bleeding in paddy wagons or on the sidelines, the City of New York brought out the power washers, to make a park glisten, into which no human was allowed. They ended the protests in the name of cleanliness.

I discovered myself, the little bourgeois, pushed by the police, insulted, mocked. So I turned out to be in the trailer park after all. Or, as the thought has gradually grown on me, in one place no one had thought existed with the protesters there, at all: a jail. The liberty of Liberty Square, for those two months, had in fact meant the creation of a jail. On every side, the police lined up facing us—day after day; and I had thought of them as benign. I thought their presence was a gross expenditure and waste of my tax money, certainly; a stimulus to fear, undoubtedly; a sort of marketing gift from the city to the banks, unfairly, as if free assembly, but more specifically *these* opinions, were dangerous. I saw our police line up at the perimeter of Bank of America like employees, fence posts, servants of the bank; but, of course, we pay them. The blue-uniformed guardians stood along the margin with Broadway, facing off with us. They lined Liberty Street, closed it up with police cars and equipment and men. Well, hadn't these silent barriers in the end produced a jail, containing us? Or had the existence

of this tiny pathetic space, the one place in the city for the supposed American virtues, of the Constitution's free assembly, and free speech, the Founders' contest of opinions, brought out the jail from the city around it? Each bank building was a bar of our cell, or a stone block of the wall. Now the hideous "Freedom Tower" erected itself, to bar the window of the open sky.

Jail is the other notable site with which Thoreau, the American philosopher, is associated, after the cabin, and the pond. His town of Concord put him there once, when he refused to pay his poll tax, withholding support from the United States which upheld slavery and jailed the man who wouldn't send an escaped slave back to his owner, which invaded Mexico with its army to kill and terrorize its neighbors for its own territorial ambitions. Thoreau refused to let his neighbors in Concord escape the obligation to justify why they did pay, why they obeyed, even to the tax collector—why they went along with injustice, only saying that it was wrong, when they could act together. From "Civil Disobedience":

> Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison. The proper place to-day, the only place which Massachusetts has provided for her freer and less desponding spirits, is in her prisons, to be put out and locked out of the State by her own act, as they have already put themselves out by their principles. . . . If any think that their influence would be lost there, and their voices no longer afflict the ear of the State, that they would not be as an enemy within its walls, they do not know by how much truth is stronger than error, nor how much more eloquently and effectively he can combat injustice who has experienced a little in his own person. Cast your whole vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence.

The theory behind the practice of occupation, the theory behind all "direct action," in which one goes to a place of injustice or its conduits and symbols and stands there until one is noticed and joined—or carted away unjustly to jail—is, in part, an inheritance from Walden Pond's

eccentric, Thoreau. Other reformers accomplished more in action. But Thoreau communicated a clarity to nonviolent direct action in words that found their way to Gandhi in India and Martin Luther King in Alabama. While government can be maintained by voting, the perversion of government cannot be fixed by voting—nor need it be. If your government gives up on justice, the many men and women with consciences must go to the junctures where the government has leagued with injustice and clog them, with their whole selves, body and soul: to force a decision. Won't your countrymen, government servants included, gradually withdraw support for the wrongdoing? Like so many of the edicts in *Walden,* here, too, in "Civil Disobedience," it is only by irritating people, by interrupting their ease and convenience, that their consciences can be awakened to their capacity for choice.

> The government itself, which is only the mode which the people have chosen to execute their will, is equally liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act through it. . . . A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority then; but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight. If the alternative is to keep all just men in prison, or give up war or slavery, the State will not hesitate which to choose. . . . If the tax-gatherer, or any other public officer, asks me, as one has done, "But what shall I do?" my answer is, "If you really wish to do anything, resign your office." When the subject has refused allegiance, and the officer has resigned his office, then the revolution is accomplished.

A couple of months ago, I went to the courthouse to see the trials of the last defenders who were arrested when the police came and emptied Zuccotti Park. They sat down and locked arms in the little kitchen where the community had prepared free meals for hundreds each day. Taken and arraigned in November, they finally were promised a day to speak their case in the public air of court, in June. The State's prosecutor, in court, announced himself unprepared, and, without a word from the defendants, the judge happily adjourned the trials until autumn. A

year after the 2011 eviction of Zuccotti Park, there is still no opportunity to learn if the arrests were legal, or against the Constitution, or to let the case be made, within the system of the State, against the unjust State.

But the discovery that shocked my bourgeois sensibilities had to do with the young men and women entering the courthouse for their trial. I was amazed to see they had not dressed for court. They did not wear suits, or proper dresses, or ties. But to win, I reflected, you have to behave in the way that people like this, the lawyers, the judges, will recognize. And with that thought, of course, I had gone off Thoreau's path. From life, back to the rules of the dead in mind and soul. One young man, not more than twenty-one years old, wore a T-shirt that read, "I WILL NOT—BE SILENT." A woman defendant in eyeglasses, a graduate student, had pinned a hand-lettered cloth advocating her student-debt campaign to the back of her denim jacket. I thought, thoughtlessly: "That won't look to a judge like remorse." And I was ashamed again. The voice that spoke inside me had the clamor of the wrong. It was the beat of feet on grooves of dirt worn bald by decades of obedience, not the light footfalls of the daimon on a path unique to me. I had to accept that these men and women would not change before the law. Their character was that of protesters, even here. They were refusing, in their being, an unjust order.

"Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes, and not rather a new wearer of clothes." Thoreau's beloved quotation goes on: "If there is not a new man, how can the new clothes be made to fit?" The instant for philosophy is always now, and every day, because some of us need a lifetime for it. We are slow learners.

[2012]