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FEATURES

MAILER, DOCTOROW, ROTH

A Cross-Generational Reading of the American Berserk

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What does a white, upper-middle-class American man say to an audience in Poland about captivity and, more specifically to the problems of our current time, resistance to it? One needs only to read Czesław Miłosz's *The Captive Mind*, the text whose soul inspired and pervaded the conference at which this paper was initially given, to know what a monumental gap divides the United States of America from Poland on this subject, both in terms of history and the attitudes that history ingrains. It is admittedly and abundantly true that the United States has produced more than its share of captive lives: the millions who groaned under more than two centuries of slavery; the Japanese citizens restricted to internment camps in the early 1940s; the Native Peoples still shunted off and invisible on reservations; and the present-day American prison population that is, shamefully, the largest in the world. All these were and are deliberate and legally maintained systems of captivity, and their stories, told and untold, cast a shadow over the self-described land of the free to which, as a boy, I daily pledged allegiance. But the United States has never been compelled to regard itself as a captive *nation*. It has never experienced the existential threats to its being of the kind that Miłosz minutely details in *The Captive Mind.* The Captive Minds conference marked my fifth visit to Poland.[1] On each of these visits, I have felt

1. An earlier version of this text was delivered as a keynote address at the International Conference of the Institute of English Cultures and Literatures of the University of Silesia in Katowice held under the title of "Captive Minds.

a deepening bond with this country and an evolving realization that no nation on earth has fought so hard and borne so much in its pursuit of independence for itself and freedom for its people. When I consider how and at what cost the Polish people have defended their homeland; when I reflect upon the history of the Warsaw Uprising and of the Solidarity movement and of the sacrifices both great and small that this nation has bravely undergone, I feel an admiration, a sympathy, and a love that mount to overflowing.

We live in a moment in which freedoms, both East and West, are under attack in ways that could not have been imagined a generation ago. As the future of representative democracy hangs in an uncertain state, I feel that what brought us together in Szczyrk was more than a conference. We were united, I would argue, by a declaration of faith and an assertion of purpose. By our presence, we who assembled there affirmed our wish to abolish the very concept of the captive mind. We declared our commitment to the simple but essential right of people across the globe to think and to speak and to teach as their research and knowledge guide them and as their conscience dictates. In those proceedings, we rededicated ourselves to transacting the serious business of freedom.

As we are all aware, freedom is far from tidy. The free expression of opinion, even in its more polite forms, can be contentious, and it can be uncomfortable. When societies try to correct themselves from within, they often do so in spasms that are intensely painful to watch. This fact begins to explain why protest, which our intellect may tell us is essential to a vibrant and healthy society, can strike some of its most cultured members as deeply unsavory. Of all American paradoxes, none is greater than this: the typical American cherishes free speech but is also gravely offended by public protest, which he regards as at best lacking in taste and at worst an outright crime. A nation founded on dissent; America is exquisitely uncomfortable with ill-mannered disagreement. I find myself today a citizen of a country whose president has asserted on the subject of protesters, "I don't

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know why they don't take care of a situation like that. I think it's embarrassing for the country to allow protesters" (Sonmez). This same president has more recently denounced peaceful protesters as anarchists and, in the streets of Washington and Portland, has sent troops to assault them in clashes reminiscent of warfare. Embarrassment, it seems, can have many causes. More than freedom itself, an American is likely to value moral insularity and absolution: he wants to live his life free from ethical challenge. He seeks suburban anesthesia, a life of commercial abundance untroubled by the pain inflicted elsewhere to maintain it, whether through military aggression or the global exploitation of labor. The American hopes to be reminded that he is good and blameless—and quickly condemns his critics as envious or mad or driven by dark agendas. As by an unwritten law, he denounces protest as an offense against his *amour propre.*

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This condemnation, *ipso facto,* makes a figurative criminal of the protester, who, when her efforts are scorned, finds herself not trying to persuade, but acting in a variety of modes that are notably unlikely to persuade. The first two forms of protest are essentially apologetic. They are either excessively polite, in which case they are largely ignored; or they are immersed in a kind of farcical irony, as if to say, "Yes, I am protesting, but you won't take me too seriously, will you?"—in which case the protest either collapses under its own frivolity or drives the conservative bystander deeper into his reflexive dread of the unfamiliar. Or, finally, the protester may resort to a spirit of resentment and self-vindication. She sees any act by her countryman that does not challenge the social system as intolerable evidence of complicity and collaboration. The spirit of compromise vanishes, and the protester risks falling into the attitude of outright and total rebellion that Philip Roth has described as "the American berserk" (Roth 86).

This, then, is an address about protest: its motives, its excesses, its internal contradictions. It takes as its main texts three American novels, each of them either forged amid or shaped by the social cataclysm engendered by the Vietnam War. Considering *The Armies of the Night*, I observe Norman Mailer's reaction the tendency of left-wing American protest either to excessive politeness or puerile frivolity. Turning to E. L Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*, I assess

the text's contention that the position of the citizen vis-à-vis the state is always and already one of antagonism and undeclared warfare. Concluding with Roth's *American Pastoral,* I return to the well-intentioned complacency of the affluent American who never dreams that he, too, may be subject to the karmic calamities of history.

I begin, however, with a few thoughts inspired by Miłosz's commentaries on the West in *The Captive Mind*: observations that preceded the escalation of American involvement in Vietnam by more than a decade, but which were relevant to that struggle and remain pertinent in the lamentable, perennially appalling age of Trump. In 1951, Miłosz wrote the following lines:

> More than the West imagines, the intellectuals of the East look to the West for *something.* Nor do they seek it in Western propaganda. The *something* they look for is a great new writer, a new social philosophy, an artistic movement, a scientific discovery, new principles of painting or music. They rarely find this *something* (Miłosz 37).

One may well add, almost seventy years later, that there is a class of Westerners (though I speak now specifically of Americans) who look for this something within their own ranks and also rarely find it. And the question deeply perplexes them: just how is it that generations of prosperity; absence of formal censorship; and, except for one horrific day, the absence of large-scale foreign attack, have failed to more regularly produce instances of that *something*? Why should the fruits of such good fortune so often take the form of cheeseburgers, superhero films, and instantly forgettable trash fiction? The *something*, I would argue, exists in the United States if one looks hard enough to find it. Yet it seldom if ever captures the imagination and enthusiastic embrace of the public.

The mystery behind this absence of something is partly solved by Miłosz's own ruminations, beginning with his thoughts on the Murti-Bing pill, a metaphoric anodyne imagined in the 1930s by his countryman Stanislaw Witkiewicz. As many of you know, whoever consumes the fanciful pill becomes impervious to metaphysical concerns. These pills become an antidote to spiritual hunger, permitting the user to live amid cultural conditions that are at once empty and chaotic, and to feel no distress or existential dread.

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The medicine operates as the fodder of post-modern lotus-eaters. I would argue that societies of great material abundance, such as the United States has long been and as Poland has set itself upon the path to becoming, naturally transform into prodigious consumers and producers of Murti-Bing pills. Often, the pills are literally pills. Statistics indicate that about one of every nine Americans over the age of twelve uses antidepressant medications. But more ubiquitously, the pills come in the form of a profusion of consumer goods. A besetting plight of modernity is encapsulated in the following question: how do human beings fill up their emptiness? The most fortunate among us use love. Disaffected thinkers use words. But the stuffing of choice for many is things, the more ostentatious the better. The condition satirized by Simon and Garfunkel in 1967 continues apace today:

Well there's no need to complain,
We'll eliminate your pain
We can neutralize your brain
You'll feel just fine
Now
Buy a big bright green pleasure machine! (Simon 29)

Feverish in their pursuit of their pleasure machines, the addicts of Murti-Bing are simultaneously apathetic. As their appetites sharpen, their sensitivities deaden. And the cultural soil within them grows barren. To the minimally thoughtful person, the purely material satisfactions produce no satisfaction at all. For those who blindly accept them, conceiving of nothing better, an insensate, porcine existence awaits.

As a scholar and a careful thinker, one pauses before making sweeping, peremptory statements. However, it is arguable that all American protest is somehow affected by the Murti-Bing of material culture, though the relation between protest and consumerism is not always openly adversarial. It can be both symbiotic and sinister. Commercialism has a way of insinuating itself into American protest, absorbing the pulsations of radicalism into the mainstream and thereby warping their significance. It is this complex relation, both tension and symbiosis, that Norman Mailer deftly explores in *The Armies of the Night.*

Even to discuss the work of Norman Mailer in 2020 poses an ethical problem. Spectacularly gifted as a writer, Mailer was often an appalling human being. In public appearances, where he sometimes turned up drunk, he could be shockingly condescending, irascible, and abusive. He is also a man who stabbed his second wife, nearly killing her, and growled at a man who tried to help her, "Get away from her, let the bitch die" (Wright 202). It is difficult at best to approve of Mailer as a human being. It is impossible to disregard him as a voice of his era and culture. The following remarks pay no homage to the man; they seek to understand him, and through him, his time and the nature of American protest.

Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* aspires to a unique artistic duality. Subtitled "History As a Novel; the Novel As History," it makes claims both as non-fiction and fiction—and blithely declines ever to explain where one leaves off and the other begins. Tacit in Mailer's structure is the inference that the reportage of events is never entirely, objectively true: that even the most conscientious effort to narrate history is colored and shaped by one's opportunity to observe, one's perceptions, and one's prejudices. As insights go, it does not seem especially earth shattering. Even the mildly sophisticated reader understands the concept of the unreliable narrator. What adds gravity to Mailer's melding of fiction and nonfiction is the circumstance in which it occurs. In 1967, Mailer was writing both for and about a more credulous country than the one that exists 53 years later. Not only did Americans trust the evening news, but they also had a stronger confidence that truth was knowable and could, at its core, be agreed upon. In retrospect, it is impossible to read Mailer's history-cum-novel without the same foreboding that one might get from observing the first crack in a gigantic dam. Mailer recognized that he was bearing witness as American trust was starting to crumble, compromised by the incipient paranoia both of the Lyndon Johnson administration and of a rising generation that was vowing never to trust anyone over the age of thirty. The spiral downward has been a long, slow one, but it has now reached a place in America that amounts to a confederacy of spin: the widespread discrediting

of fact and a noxious presumption that all that remains is fraught and angry opinion.

Mailer's book strives for honesty—some of its vulgarity seems to emerge from a genuine desire for candor. He is pushing hard against a kind of pervasive falsehood, in sympathy with a generation that, thanks to television, has been raised on an ethically arid, junk-food representation of reality. Camus argued that rebellion is based not on resentment of authority *per se,* but rather a nostalgia for an authority that one may call legitimate. Yet in the Pentagon marchers Mailer saw a more purely negative principle. His analysis merits being quoted at length:

> Their radicalism was in their hate for the authority—the authority was the manifest of evil to this generation. It was the authority who had covered the land with those suburbs where they stifled as children while watching the adventures of the West in the movies, while looking at the guardians of dull genial celebrity on television; they had had their minds jabbed and poked and twitched and probed and finally galvanized into surrealistic modes of response by commercials cutting into dramatic narratives, and parents flipping from network to network—they were forced willy-nilly to build their idea of the space-time continuum (and therefore their nervous system) on the jumps and cracks [...] which every phenomenon form the media seemed to contain within it. The authority had operated on their brains with commercials, and washed their brains with packaged education, packaged politics. [...] The shoddiness was buried in the package (*Armies* 86–87).

From junk-food culture and politics comes junk-food revolution: the purported, nonsensical goal of the March on the Pentagon was, through a series of ludicrous incantations, to levitate the building three hundred feet in the air. Mailer's novel, then, confronts the incomprehensible: a free and wealthy nation glutted on its own consumerism and verging into madness, in a way not grandly tragic but cartoonishly trivial. He writes:

> Either the century was entrenching itself more deeply into the absurd, or the absurd was delivering evidence that it was possessed of some of the nutritive mysteries of a marrow which would yet feed the armies of the absurd (*Armies* 54).

He intimates that his book is written in and about "one of the crazy mansions, or indeed *the* crazy house of history." (*Armies* 54)

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The Armies of the Night has two principal subjects: the author himself (in both his grandiose expansiveness and his self-despising littleness) and his participation in the 1967 March on the Pentagon that resulted in his arrest and brief incarceration. The novel begins with Mailer on stage at a Washington D.C. theater, delivering a profanity-laden harangue to a restive audience. Apart from his evident intoxication—he is drinking straight whiskey from a coffee mug—there appears to be no motive for his loutish behavior. And yet there is one—one that becomes clear only as the book unfolds. Mailer is reacting against what he perceives as an ingrained habit of decorum in American protest—what he later identified in an interview with William F. Buckley as "a cult of propriety" that had descended over American dissent. He was attempting to dislodge the excess of good manners among the American intellectual left wing, a code of behavior that predictably undercuts the seriousness with which protest is both undertaken and regarded.

> I was appalled, you see, by the general air of the occasion. There was a pall that hung over the Left, because they were in terror. [...] You know, people on the left are more law abiding than anybody else. [...] It's exactly because their lives are so middle class and full of propriety that their political ideas become more and more powerful. [...] There's something about a proper life that tends to make one a little more radical in one's opinions. And I've always felt that this has been the disease of the Left. Just as the disease of the Right is greed, bigotry, insensitivity and general stupidity, so the disease of the Left has always been excessive propriety [...] excessive obedience to all the small laws of daily life. [...] They think of overturning society because they do not know how to break a few small rules and laws (*Firing Line*).

In so saying, Mailer simplified and exaggerated to the point of caricature. And yet the truth at the core of his observation merits consideration, perhaps now more than when he first made it. In the March on the Pentagon, Mailer found himself in the company of "a respectable horde of respectable professionals, lawyers, accountants, men in hats wearing eyeglasses" (*Armies* 94) They represent an endless stream of organizations—this fellowship, that movement, such-and-such a society, the fill-in-the-blank guild. He registers mock surprise when, prior to the March, "there were no drinks being served" (*Armies* 98). Mailer himself spends a good deal of time during the protest checking his watch. He has

scheduled a dinner party at his home in New York and is wondering whether he can catch a commuter jet in time to make it.

Among the younger marchers, Mailer observes less cocktail-party decorum, but in its place a decadent, enervating irony, spawned perhaps by the intuition that history is becoming absurd, and that the only apt response to it is more absurdity still. In their outward displays, at least, many of the younger marchers revel in their own freakishness. Mailer writes:

> The hippies were there in great number [...] many dressed like the legions of Sgt. Pepper's Band, some were gotten up like Arab sheiks, or in Park Avenue doormen's greatcoats, others like Rogers and Clark of the West, Wyatt Earp, Kit Carson, Daniel Boone in buckskin [...] and wild Indians with feathers, a hippie gotten up like Batman, another like Claude Rains in *The Invisible Man* [...] One hippie may have been dressed like Charles Chaplin; Buster Keaton and W. C. Fields could have come to the ball; there were Martians and Moon-men and a knight unhorsed who stalked about in the weight of real armor (*Armies* 91–92).

There is a festive aspect to these displays. However, Mailer sees past the raucous pageant and sees a pathetic haplessness—a fatal mismatch between well-intentioned, somewhat stoned idealism and massive, indifferent power:

> Still, there were nightmares beneath the gaiety of these middle-class runaways, these Crusaders, going out to attack the hard core of Technology Land with less training than armies were once offered by a medieval assembly ground. The nightmare was in the echo of those trips which had fractured their sense of past and present. [...] [N]ature was a veil whose tissue had been ripped by static, screams of jet motors, the highway grid of the suburbs, smog, defoliation, pollution of streams, over-fertilization of the earth, anti-fertilization of women, and the radiation of two decades of near-blind atom busting (*Armies* 92–93).

It wasn't a fair fight, and Mailer knew it. Instead of high-minded innocents, the Pentagon protesters were characterized in the national media as ugly, vulgar provocateurs. Every rock thrown was emphasized; every broken window, though there were few of them, was counted and thrown back against the protesters as an indictment of their methods and, by extension, their cause. Instead of prompting outcry against President Johnson, the March stirred sympathy for him. It also stirred the bland TV watchers

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of the heartland either to greater fear of long-haired, drug-crazed radicals, or merely to reach for another beer and change channels.

For Mailer, then, to rise up in protest was not so much an assertion of power but an experience of impotency. The protesters in *The Armies of the Night* are haunted and handicapped by the knowledge that their only power lies in the possibility of persuasion, and that they inhabit a nation that finds nothing more persuasive than the application of well-financed, superficially legitimized force. Mailer's vision of the March on the Pentagon is the stuff of a political catastrophe: a recognition that America has sold her promise and that the efforts to buy it back are either excessively urbane or pointlessly puerile. His novel ends with a jeremiad, decrying the crisis that has set

> the military heroes [...] on one side, and the unarmed saints on the other! Let the bugle blow! The death of America rides in on the smog. America—the land where a new kind of man was born from the idea that God was present in every man not only as compassion but as power, and so the country belonged to the people; for the will of the people—if the locks of their life could be given the art to turn—was then the will of God (*Armies* 288).

But Mailer at last looks down with profound unease upon the corruption of that will, and he worries that the great national spasm he is observing is not a death throe at all, but rather the start of a fearsome labor that may give birth—I use his words —"to [...] the most fearsome totalitarianism the world has ever known" (288).

Mailer's prophecies were, in his time, overstated. The next two decades brought Nixon and Watergate and the have-a-nice-day cruelties of the Reagan administration, but no totalitarianism. Indeed, even now, as unsightly as the leprosy that has descended over America has become, the actual demise of its republican democracy, though far more probable than it was only a few years ago, feels currently unlikely. (The previous sentence was written in 2018. The author is, in 2020, less confident of his country's future). Yet Mailer's reflections on American protest remain pertinent and haunting. The day after the gross, repellent spectacle that was Donald Trump's inauguration, I attended the Women's March in Washington, D.C.—to date the largest

protest in the history of my country. It was an astonishingly crowded, genial, warm-hearted gathering. It seemed to make all the participants whom I saw and spoke with feel extremely good. Yet it seemed to be almost exclusively about good feelings. The marchers were fresh-faced and affluent. One had trouble imagining that any of the political issues that had brought them together really felt to them like life-or-death concerns. The unbearable lightness and politeness of the Left that Mailer decried was stronger and more neutralizing than ever.

The March on the Pentagon also figures, though more hauntingly, in Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*. *The Book of Daniel* is a brooding novel, taking as its subject the tormented life and reflections of Daniel Isaacson, the child of a Jewish-American couple executed for espionage. His parents are, of course, modeled on Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who, in 1953, were subjected to the death penalty for their collusions with Russia. Old as the tragic form itself is the clash between fidelity to one's family and allegiance to the nation. It is the conflict that ruins Agamemnon and shatters Oedipus. What distinguishes Doctorow's treatment of the clash is that, in the work of Aeschylus and Sophocles, the prerogatives of the state are presumed to be legitimate. Indeed, service to one's society asserts the superior claim on the subject's loyalty. For Isaacson, however, the implied social compact of loyalty is impossible to honor, for the state demanding his fealty is the government that has electrocuted his mother and father.

And Isaacson is shaken not merely by the knowledge that the government has destroyed his family. In Greek drama, the state is typically presumed to be a fragile structure, so much so that a single act of disloyalty to one's obligations can bring the civic down to the dust. Daniel Isaacson's understanding of the state is far different; he knows that opposing the American military--industrial complex of the late 1960s is like assailing the sun with a peashooter. Now a graduate student at Columbia University, Isaacson travels to the March on the Pentagon and narrates many of the same events witnessed by Mailer: the turning in of draft cards; the interminable speeches; the gaudy, costumed freak show of the March itself. Even Mailer himself makes a cameo appearance in Doctorow's fiction: Daniel notices him sitting outside the Justice

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Department, his forearm on his knee, listening to the speakers. But Daniel's experience and narration of the March differ deeply from Mailer's. Both narrators convey a sense of detachment from events. But whereas Mailer's detachment is principally ironic and intellectual, Daniel's sense of distance is founded on emotion, and it is immense. Especially when compared with Mailer's exuberant style, Isaacson's descriptions of the March feel curiously flat and lacking in interpretive vigor. Of all the thousands of protesters who have come to the Pentagon, none has greater reason than Daniel Isaacson to wage an impassioned personal war with the establishment. Yet the rally against the war leaves him largely numb and apathetic. He explains:

> I come under the awful conviction of everyone else's right to be here. I feel out of it. It seems to me that practically everyone here, even [my wife] Phyllis listening past the point of normal attention to the endlessness of the droning speeches, has taken possession of the event in a way that is beyond me. I feel as if I have sneaked in, haven't paid, or simply don't know something that everyone else knows. That it is still possible to do this, perhaps. Or that it is enough (Doctorow 254).

And of course, it is not enough. Daniel spends the day of the March, as he states, looking for satisfaction. Needless to say, he does not find it. In the journey to the Pentagon, others seem to feel momentary release or exhilaration or a passing sense of their own valor. Daniel, however, feels his very attendance has "robbed the day of its genius" (Doctorow 255). As he drops his draft card into the pouch and announces his name into the microphone, he feels an artificiality in the heart of his gestures. He tells himself, "What a put-on. But I have come here to do whatever is being done" (Doctorow 252). It occurs to him that there is no escape from oppressive orders and orthodoxies and that, no matter what marches and sit-ins might accomplish in the short term, the most they can ever hope to do is to institute a new pattern of conformity, finally no more satisfying than the one it has replaced. Ruefully and with jaded ennui, he proclaims:

> No matter what is laid down, there will be people to put their lives on it. Soldiers will instantly appear, fall into rank, and be ready to die for it. And scientists who are happy to direct their research toward it. And keen-witted academics who in all rationality develop the truth

of it. And poets who find their voice in proclaiming the personal feeling of it. And in every house in the land the muscles of the face will arrange in smug knowledge of it. And people will go on and make their living from it. And the religious will pray for a just end to it, in terms satisfactory to it (Doctorow 255).

In this moment of dark revelation, the particular character of the system in power seems to Daniel to be irrelevant. The sole thing that matters about any given force is that it is a force. Anything large enough to command will exercise command. Whether the ship sails under colors of peace or war, the same barnacles will seal themselves to its hull.

In Isaacson's narration, the ship is sailing toward sinister shores. Like Mailer before him, Doctorow recounts the incident after night has fallen on the Pentagon march, which Mailer dubs the Battle of the Wedge. After most of the older marchers—and, more significantly, most of the reporters—had gone home, military police outside the Pentagon formed a wedge and, with clubs and rifle butts, drove into the remaining crowd of marchers, methodically beating them and hauling them bleeding into waiting wagons. Witnesses said that the troops were especially focused on attacking young women. In a tour-de-force description, Doctorow tears the veil from the sick ballet of oppression, placing particular emphasis on the exquisite preparation of the weapons and the proper golf-swing precision of the quasi-sexual assault:

And suddenly [Daniel] is there, locked arm in arm with the real people of now, sitting in close passive rank with linked arms as the boots approach, highly polished, and the clubs, highly polished, and the brass highly polished wading through our linkage, this many-helmeted beast of our own nation, coming through our flesh with boot and club and gun butt, through our sick stubbornness, through our blood it comes. My country. And it swats and kicks. And kicks and clubs—you raise the club high and bring it down, you follow through, you keep your head down, you remember to snap the wrist, complete the swing, raise high bring down, think of a groove in the air, groove into the groove, keep your eye on the ball, eye on balls, eye on cunts, eye on point of skull, up and down, put your whole body into it, bring everything you've got into your swing, up from your toes, up down, turn around, up high down hard, hard as you can, harder harder: FOLLOW THROUGH! (Doctorow 256)

The task for Daniel Isaacson is to find a mode of living that is not, in one way or another, blasphemous. How is he to remain

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an American, without blaspheming against the memory of his parents? How can he continue to live an American life in a way that does not place him in a perpetually antagonistic relationship to his country? And how can he make peace with a country that, in his eyes, is itself the ultimate blasphemer? As to the second question, whether he can live an American life that does not thrust him into conflict with his government, he concludes that an answer does not exist. Not greatly surprising as it applies to him, this conclusion becomes remarkable when Daniel argues that it is true, not only for him, but for all Americans. And not only for Americans. Pushing out against the very frontiers of political radicalism, Daniel urges that a citizen under any political regime whatever is *ipso facto* that system's enemy. It is the government, he reminds us, that puts the rifle in the hands of the citizen-soldier, that "puts him up on the front, and tells him his mission is to survive." He continues, "All societies are armed societies. All citizens are soldiers. All Governments stand ready to commit their citizens to death in the interest of their government" (Doctorow 73) Every man, he argues, "is the enemy of his own country" (Doctorow 72–73).

Daniel's insight, telling him that the individual and the state are in a constant state of war, does nothing to make him a good or enlightened person. He behaves toward his wife in a spirit of humiliating violence. He relates to his infant son in a spirit of dominance and the imposition of fear. Daniel and his family, he confesses, are "not nice people" (Doctorow 7). Daniel's sister Susan is even more irremediably damaged. A tiny child when she witnessed the arrest of her father, when all she could do was to scream helplessly, "Why they do that to Daddy?"—Susan Isaacson attempts suicide as a young adult (Doctorow 116). In the asylum where she is trying to recover from the slashing of her wrist, she has but one line of observations for her brother: "They're still fucking us, Goodbye, Daniel. You get the picture" (Doctorow 9). Having failed once at suicide, she tries again and succeeds. Daniel lists her cause of death as "a failure of analysis" (Doctorow 301).

Doctorow's verbal camera captures big events. But his novel matters because it remembers that all sensation finally takes place on a personal, individual level. Yes, the tragedy of the Rosenbergs is seen as a national one: a failure of justice, a crime against

the Constitution. But the blank misery of Doctorow's story resides in its never forgetting that the real victims of the incident are little people—tiny in their relation to the forces of history that overwhelm them, but deeply significant in the way that all human beings are. Daniel muses regarding his family, "I could never have appreciated how obscure we were. A poor family in the Bronx, too hot in the summer, and too cold in the winter" (Doctorow 93). The thing we abstractly call history feasts upon the fortunes of obscure people, and in an instant, it can make us its plaything. For me, the signature moment of Miłosz's book *The Captive Mind* is the image of a beautiful young Jewish woman, moments away from being gunned down by German troopers, running down a Warsaw street and shrieking the word *No! No! No!* (Miłosz 184) She did not ask for or deserve this moment. She cannot believe that this horror was meant for her. Perhaps at the heart of all protest is this sense that the promise of the universe has somehow failed us—that we had a kind of idea of how things ought to be for us, and that this is not how they are. We look around and at ourselves, and it seems quite obvious that we were meant to be happy and to live forever. But one day, be it early or late, we discover that it isn't so, and the frightened cry of the young woman in the Warsaw street, in less dramatic fashion, becomes our own.

The works of the three authors are united by fire. In *The Armies of the Night*, Mailer avers to a small knot of journalists, "We are burning the body and blood of Christ in Vietnam" (*Armies* 214). Earlier, he has dazed the reader with the nightmare vision of a church-going, but nevertheless soulless grandmother at the great metaphorical American casino, her dyed "orange hair burning bright" as she works a one-armed bandit, feeding an endless stream of half-dollars into a slot machine. The scene unfolds in surreal horror. A disembodied voice intrudes: "Madame, we are burning children in Vietnam." The grandmother retorts, "Boy, you just go get yourself lost. Grandma's about ready for a kiss from the jackpot." The burned child is brought into the gaming hall on her hospital bed. "Madame, regard our act in Vietnam." "I hit! I hit! Hot deedy, I hit! Why, you poor burned child—you just brought me luck. Here, honey, here's a lucky half-dollar in reward. And listen, sugar, tell

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the nurse to change your sheets. Those sheets sure do stink [...] Hee hee, hee hee. I get a supreme pleasure from mixing with gooks in Vegas" (*Armies* 151–52).

In *The Book of Daniel,* Daniel's sister Susan, anguished by the Vietnam War, exclaims, "We're in this horrible imperialist war. We're burning people" (Doctorow 80) (The narration also alludes to the self-immolation of a Buddhist monk in the streets of South Vietnam. And, at the end of the novel, when Doctorow returns us in flashback to the execution of Paul Isaacson, he tells of the smoke rising from the prisoner's head as the death chamber fills with the odor of burning flesh. The scene comes just a page after the attorney general of the United States has told the Chief Executive, "Mr. President, these folks have got to fry" [Doctorow 296]).

An equally indelible fire occurs in the pages of Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*, in which Merry, the ironically named daughter of Seymour "the Swede" Levov, is set on the road to radicalism by a vision of horror brought to her living room by the evening news. We still recognize the real-life event that *American Pastoral* recalls. A Buddhist monk in his sixties, his head shaved and his limbs adorned in a simple saffron robe, sat with quiet dignity on a street in Saigon, as another monk doused him with flammable fuel. Moments later, the monk struck a match, burning himself to death, and burning his image into the history of the world. The monk neither screamed nor writhed as the flames consumed him. The incongruity between his otherworldly calm and the horror of the flames remains astonishing to this day. Inwardly at peace, the monk sends a shock wave that reverberates endlessly in the heart and mind of eleven-year-old Merry. Too frightened even to cry, she can only throw herself into her father's lap and repeat, in the stutter that has plagued and blighted her childhood, "These gentle p-p-people [...] these gentle p-p-people." When the agitation in her heart at last enables a more coherent thought, Merry asks in anguish, "Do you have to m-m-melt yourself down in fire to bring p-p-people to their s-senses? Does anybody care? Does anybody have a conscience? Doesn't anybody in this w-world have a conscience left?" (Roth 154)

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Her parents, being good, understanding, liberal parents, tell Merry she has a well-developed conscience and "It's admirable for someone your age to have such a conscience" (Roth 155). But what they do not tell her is that the conscience of an upper--class person is a strange attribute, one that is typically treated more as a superficial adornment than as a set of uncompromised beliefs and best exercised in tasteful moderation, not in actually disruptive activity. It is, Mr. and Mrs. Levov believe, fitting and proper to feel vague sorrow over global injustice. For a pubescent girl to have and express such feelings in abundance is positively charming, even if her own parents tacitly presume that, in time, she will mostly outgrow them. However, to treat such feelings as a spur to action, in any way inimical to the comfort of one's affluent lifestyle is another matter. One would not precisely call it unthinkable. More precisely, it is not thought of.

But Merry does think of it. She feels the imperative of acting upon her thoughts, and her dogmatic sincerity brings about the fall of the House of Levov. She starts leaving home on weekends and fraternizing with fringe radicals in New York City. The cataclysm comes in 1968, when, in an effort to, as her father puts it, "bring the war home" to American suburbia, she detonates a bomb at her local post office, destroying the general store where the office is housed and killing a singularly luckless man, Dr. Fred Conlon.

We are given to understand that, in the use of the moral tools at their disposal, Swede Levov and his wife can only be regarded as innocent. Roth's narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, calls them a family "full of tolerance and kindly, well-intentioned liberal goodwill" (Roth 88) He describes the Swede as living a life of "carefully calibrated goodness," a man whose earnestness, hard work, and adherence to law and popular norms have showered him with prosperity (Roth 86). The Swede appears to personify the insufficiency identified by Miłosz: "The man of the East cannot take Americans seriously because they have never undergone the experiences that teach men how relative their judgments and thinking habits are. Their resultant lack of imagination is appalling" (Miłosz 29). He is, equally, the type of man who stands accused by Daniel Isaacson's friend Sternlicht in *the book of* Daniel:

You cannot make connections between what you do and why they hate you in Chile. [...] You think you are a good guy. You're not prejudiced. You believe in making money honestly. [...] YOU THINK THERE'S PROGRESS. YOU THINK YOUR CHILDREN HAVE IT BETTER. YOU THINK YOU ARE DOING IT FOR YOUR CHILDREN! (Doctorow 138)

As the Swede gazes with pride over his beautiful wife, his elegant farmhouse, and his small but solid business empire, Zuckerman can only admire his accomplishment: "He was really living it out, his version of paradise. This is how successful people live. They're good citizens. They feel lucky. They feel grateful. God is smiling down on them" (Roth 86) Roth concludes his novel with two unanswerable questions, "And what is wrong with their life? What on earth is less reprehensible than the life of the Levovs?" (Roth 423)

Except that the questions are not completely unanswerable. The Swede himself, though he cannot clearly perceive any fault in the way he has lived his life or raised his daughter, still feels as if the novel's catastrophe is "founded on some failure of his own responsibility." Indeed, we discover that the Swede is a preternaturally responsible man, "keeping under control not just himself but whatever else [has] threaten[ed] to be uncontrollable, giving his all to keep his world together" (Roth 88).

It would be ignoring a significant fact to fail to mention that the three American writers under consideration in this address were Jewish. It is indeed a matter of some interest to note the degree to which Jewish authors have, since the Second World War, shaped and expressed the conscience of American writing. Yet on the subject of Jewishness, Swede Levov presents a curious case. He becomes his community's hero in large part because he seems physically so outside that same community. From the outset of the novel, the Swede is ostensibly non-Jewish; he is introduced first through his blond hair and blue eyes—what Roth calls his "steep-jawed insentient Viking mask" (Roth 3). But it is not enough for the Swede that his physiognomy fits effortlessly into the American ideal, one that has always had Teutonic underpinnings. The Swede's backstory is one of persistent ethnic dis-identification: he strives silently and persistently to purge himself of his Jewishness and simultaneously to immerse

himself in an antiseptic wash of whiteness. He marries a Catholic girl, the former Miss New Jersey, no less; he moves to a WASP suburb and politely declines to notice all the ways in which the locals subtly exclude him. He wants, quite simply, to be a flag-waving all-American kid made good. As he protests to his wife:

> I go into those synagogues and it's all foreign to me. It always has been. [...] [My father's] factory was a place I wanted to be from the time I was a boy. The ball field was a place I wanted to be from the time I started kindergarten. [...] Why shouldn't I be where I want to be? Why shouldn't I be with *who* I want to be? Isn't that what this country's all about? [...] That's what being an American is—isn't it? (Roth 315)

Put simply, the Swede wants a life and an America divorced from history, where Jewishness doesn't matter, where America's imperialist policies don't matter. He wants, in a somewhat empty-headed way, to live and be free to pursue happiness: Jefferson's political creed, magically stripped of its politics. And he does not for an instant regard these wants as ignorant or selfish.

While we may concede that Swede Levov has done everything in his power to earn and to deserve his wealth and ease of life, yet still there are forces at work in his existence, indeed in the life of any materially comfortable person, that make a mockery of the ideas of earning and deserving. What Merry sees with incandescent clarity—and what her father cannot afford to see without permitting his moral system to collapse—is that the prosperity of one part of the world always rests upon the discontent of another. She senses, too, the inequality and exploitation that arise from this configuration of power and privilege and that the guilt that they imply is all but inexpiable. She becomes aware that conscience, as it is experienced and expressed in leafy suburbs, is a highly relative and contingent value. While it extends to keeping one's lawn tidy and returning one's library books on time, it equips one not at all for dealing with self-incinerating monks or air strikes against Cambodia.

The reader's moral compass is likely to tell her or him that Merry's bombing of the post office is appalling and inexcusable. And yet as we follow the steps that lead her to plant her bomb, we can have the queasy feeling that Roth has given her the better arguments. The bombing is preceded by a series of conversations

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between Merry and her father, in which he tries in vain to convince her to stop seeing her radical friends and to become a contented, middle-class sixteen-year-old. They talk about responsibility, and the Swede maintains that the Vietnam War is not his responsibility. Merry counters that her friends do feel responsible when American bombs blow up villages. With deep frustration, she points out that her father cares only about the well-being of his own little world and his own little family. She rejects the moral mathematics by which Vietnamese are being daily destroyed, "all for the sake of the privileged people of New Jersey leading their p-p-peaceful, s-s-secure, acquisitive, meaningless l-l-little bloodsucking lives." With heart-breaking diligence, the Swede tries to reason with and to understand his daughter, only to be countered by Merry's declaration, the declaration that might issue from the lips of any teenager: "I don't want to be understood—I want to be f-f-f-free" (Roth 107).

After planting the bomb that kills Dr. Conlon, Merry doesn't stop. She vanishes into a life of radical renunciation, joining the radical underground and making bombs that kill three more people—people who are guilty only as the Swede is guilty, of passively accepting the benefits of living in a nation that creates benefits by forcing its will upon others. But arguably it is the life of the Swede she most effectively destroys. Disgracing his family name, renouncing all that he considers good and earnest, she becomes

> The angry rebarbative spitting-out daughter with no interest whatever in being the next successful Levov [...] initiating the Swede into the displacement of another America entirely, the daughter and the decade blasting to smithereens his particular form of utopian thinking, the plague infiltrating the Swede's castle and there infecting everyone. The daughter who transports him out of the longed-for American pastoral and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral—into the indigenous American berserk (Roth 86).

Merry's mad reactions shock the conscience. And yet, at the same time, they carry a perverse thrill that is absent from any moment in *The Armies of the Night* or *The Book of Daniel*. It is the thrill of watching someone do *something*, of observing, at last, an assertion of power. If this essay has pointed to any conclusion again

and again, it is that, in a nation obsessed with power, the persuasive efforts of reasonable people count for little. As Reinhold Niebuhr observed in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, "It is impossible [...] ever to rely altogether on reason or conscience in politics. Pressure must be used" (209). Reluctantly, Niebuhr concluded that violence or the threat of violence was practically necessary to the accomplishment of social change. He added, however that, if violence is used, "its terror must have the tempo of a surgeon's skill and healing must follow quickly on its wounds" (Niebuhr 220). Yet one suspects that controlled violence and surgically applied terror are oxymorons. More likely, the violence comes in moments of manic fever, with all the mature judgment of a high school girl who bombs her village's general store.

As I read over these remarks before giving them in Szczyrk, I became aware of how they both express my ideas and push against my innate character. I gaze into the abyss yet remain in a bubble of personal optimism, for I, too, am a version of the Swede. Like Roth's hero, I relish private success and the insularity of a prosperous life. Like him, I feel the attraction of a life lived outside of history, in which hard work, upright behavior, and warmth and compassion toward the people I encounter every day might be thought sufficient to the structure of a good man. But I cannot confine the features of my identity to the attributes of father, writer, and professor. I am also a citizen of the America of Trump, and this in itself is a status that invites self-accusation. I speak now, I believe, for millions of Americans who, in their childhood, saw America as a promise but now regard it as a trap—who have been stunned to realize that, no matter how we may seek to live lives of personal goodness, we are the daily servants of a force that, through the greed of its appetites and the ignorance of its leaders, pushes the world inexorably toward darkness. We do our work. We raise our children. We try to better ourselves and others. But where, at long last, shall be our redemption?

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