The Sacking of Wemmick's Castle

(Economic Modeling of Adult Immaturity)

> And in order to have real knowledge of [my countrymen's] opinions, I thought I must attend to what they practiced rather than what they preached; not only because, in the corruption of our manners, few will say what they really believe, but also because ... the mental act of believing a thing is different from the act of knowing that one believes it; and the one act often occurs without the other.
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> -- Descartes, "Discourse on Method" 1

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I. R & R: Immaturity, Rash and Rational

Each of us brings his or her favorite examples to the table when the subject of contemporary adult immaturity is raised. From the multitude of news items that, by turns, offend and amaze, I offer the following two as especially illustrative of our postmodern, postindustrial, indisputably American age.

The first, which captured the attention of nightly newscasts all across the nation, related the story of a white, middle-class, Mid-West couple who, on the spur of the moment, decided they needed a vacation and flew south to warmer climes, leaving their preteenage children behind without any adult supervision. When the kids needed help, authorities were notified and the parents arrested. This example was especially troubling to the national conscience, I think, because it seemed to exhibit a purely hedonistic motivation for offensive behavior, absent any apparent pathological or political substrate (drug addiction, welfare rules). It was even more troubling, perhaps, in that all the various ways of categorizing the offending couple refuted our easiest, self-exculpatory presumptions about anti-social behavior: that the desertion of America's children is primarily a problem of single parent families, or of men, or of a mostly black underclass, or of a corrupt liberal cultural elite who have taken up residence on the two coasts.

The second example is stranger but no less relevant. A number of years back, a Californian was involved in an unusual legal suit.2 The man, a scientist of some sort, was dying and he wanted the court to permit doctors to fulfill his final wish which was, grotesque as it seems, to have his head cut off before his disease actually killed him.3 His intention was not some bizarre form of euthanasia (Dr. Kevorkian meets "Chain Saw Massacre") but its opposite really: that is, he didn't want to die in peace so much as live forever. The plan was to have himself instantly frozen "alive," in hopes of being revived when the advances of science might cure his disease. And because he believed his true self to reside in his brain (recall his profession), and because the private companies that offer cryonic deep-freeze charge far less for preserving a head than a whole human body,4 he was requesting decapitation so that he could afford a procedure which he had come to believe might eventually save him.

The great naturalist Louis Agassiz is said to have commanded a graduate student to study a single dead fish for weeks a time to make him intimate with the form (and deformation) of animal anatomy.5 What I would suggest is that this man's judicial request might serve as an equally instructive specimen. I would suggest that if we think, and think hard, about a justice system

that would entertain such a suit; about an economy that would spawn such a company; about the philosophy that predicated the man's reasoning; about the ethical and communal implications of investing one's resources in such a way, we might achieve an intimate comprehension of our culture's anatomy, its current form and deformation.

Let it be noted first that this man's decision-making was rooted in the basic premises of the prevailing practical philosophy of our day -- which is, I would assert, a form of rational materialism largely stripped of Judeo-Christian values. Although his request seems extreme to the point of absurdity, he was not being rash; his reasoning, to the contrary, was highly methodical, rational, and (some might even say) brave. After studying the medical evidence, he had accepted the terrible truth of a terminal diagnosis, researched his options, and made a kind of cost-benefit analysis. Unlike so many today, he wasn't asking for a government hand-out, only for the right to exercise a unique opportunity offered to him by the combined creativity of science and the marketplace. One could argue, in short, that the man was a good capitalist consumer, acting out of precisely the kind of enlightened self-interest which is supposed to produce both economic prosperity and social progress, and that he was a model democratic citizen, using peaceful means -- the law -- to pursue his constitutional right to direct his own destiny.

Is it fair to call such a request immature? If maturity can be defined as those character traits necessary for the sustenance of a harmonious society, and if the sustaining of such a society depends on adults who have adapted to the realities of the human condition (including the reality of death) -- then, yes, I believe it is fair. Although opposite in apparent temper, this "rational" request for decapitation is no less self-centered in its own way than the rash desertion of the vacationing couple, and, as a model for adult decision-making, no less destructive to society.

But is it fair, then, to use two such extreme examples as somehow representative of the nation's immaturity? Society, after all, officially condemned the couple and also refused the dying scientist's request. Yet although these individuals did cross the border of acceptable behavior, their ways of thinking are, alas, not that far removed from the newly emerging cultural norms. Middle class children are left on their own every day in 1990's America, often by parents who are off satisfying their "own needs" as defined ever more expansively (and expensively) by our consumer economy; and the denial of death is an urgent and still burgeoning industry here.6 Millions of medical dollars are spent mechanically prolonging the lives of the mortally comatose and thousands of puffy words expended avoiding the pronouncement of the one word sentence we all must share: i.e., death.7 Our movies may have body counts in abundance, but our own relation to the inescapable fact of our mortality is best captured by the perhaps apocryphal octogenarian lady who, when informed that she was dying, responded plaintively: "Why me?"

It is crucial to note, too, that such delusions are by no means limited to the uneducated or to a willfully superstitious laity. Supposedly serious scientists, associated with prestigious institutions like MIT and Carnegie Mellon, continue make claims that we shall eventually invent our way into an

actual immortality. (True to the ruling philosophy of the day, these claims are of two schools: the rationalists who believe that we will eventually "download" our individual minds into computers and, enacting a Cartesian escape from our merely mortal flesh, live forever as continuously evolving "software";8 and the more traditional materialists who still focus on perfecting the flesh itself through drug protocols and genetic engineering.)

I open with this complementary pair of incidents, then, because I believe they illustrate my larger point that the behavior which disturbs us now is very broadbased, that it is performed by men and women of the middle class, by "us," exercising our freedom of choice, as directed implicitly and explicitly by the values of our postindustrial economy. Although we still cling to the rhetoric of religious and civic responsibility, these incidents illustrate (to borrow Descartes' distinction) our belief in "practice" as it is actually becoming under the direction of those values.

These incidents of rash and rational immaturity also relate to Daniel Bell's thesis in the recently reissued The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism -- which is, in essence, a postindustrial updating of Weber's 1904 classic, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. The "contradiction" which Bell and many others have observed is that between the ethos of capitalist production -- which still requires obedience, hard work, and self-sacrifice through delayed gratification -- and the ethos of capitalist consumption with its idealizing of hedonism, rebellion against authority, and impulsive behavior (such as deserting your children for a sudden vacation).9 Simply stated, the two main divisions of capitalist commerce, production and sales, have come to require two opposing schedules of ideal behavior. I have proposed elsewhere that this mixed message actually suggests two discordant identities, a superrational Producing Self (Dr. Jekyll) and an irrational Consuming Self (Mr. Hyde), and that much of the "stress" contemporary Americans continue to report arises from their attempting to follow these essentially incompatible models of behavior.10

What I wish to emphasize here, however, is that both prospective identities, in their over-specializations, are socially destructive, the Producing Self no less than the Consuming Self. Not only can a "good" employee be an awful parent, neighbor, or citizen; that employee is, I would contend, more likely to be an ineffective parent or neighbor if he or she continues to follow the values of the postmodern workplace beyond the bounds of the office or factory. If, for example, delayed gratification were sufficient in itself to good citizenship, then who could be a more exemplary citizen than our scientist, a man willing to "sacrifice" his body now and put his head on ice for untold years before experiencing the "gratification" of his revival?

II. An Overview: the Extinction of Adulthood in Virtual America

In our struggle to recover what it means to be good parents and neighbors, we need to resist, then, both the immoderate model of the Avid Consumer and the mechanical model of the Rational Producer. Yet everywhere we turn these models now intrude: in

the public square, which has been subsumed by the commercial mall;11 in the private home, which has been saturated with commercial solicitation through radio, tv, and (coming soon) pc's; in democratic government, which has become increasingly beholding to commercial interests, whether "left-wing" Hollywood or "right-wing" Wall Street, through the necessities of campaign financing, and increasingly rationalized into an "information product" by election technicians; in k through 12 schools, where advertising has been allowed to intrude into the hallways and even the curriculum 12 in return for badly needed funding; in the university, which is rapidly being transformed into a duchy of the postindustrial economy;13 in the art studio, movie house, and literary bookstore, which continue to contain paintings, movies, and novels espousing a robotic "anti-bourgeois" sentiment, the true essence of which is not rebellious at all but absolutely consonant with, and obedient to, the hedonistic ethos of consumerism;14 even in our religious organizations, which have become increasingly obsessed with publicity and the marketing of product lines. (This is especially true of the most energetic movements in postmodern America, including "right-wing" fundamentalism and "left-wing" New Age cults and sects.)

As recently as the mid-sixties, most of America's women and young children spent a high percentage of their waking hours outside the official producer economy (the consumer economy, of course, had already entered with a vengeance via the Trojan horse of commercial tv). Today's mass entry of women into the work force -- and, consequently, of children into professional child care -- has meant that the entire middle class family is now being modeled not only by the seductions of the Avid Consumer but also by the over-specializations of the Efficient Producer -- by Weber's "iron cage" of highly rationalized, narrowly motivated social structures.15 As a result of these omnipresent if contradictory forms of modeling, our clothing is now stamped with the logos of commerce, our minds are now stocked with the jingles of commerce, our hours are now structured by either the rational regimens of commerce or those of bureaucratic government, and our humane responsibilities -- whether as momentary as expressing a "sentiment" to newly married friend or as monumental as caring for our aging parents -- are increasingly purchased rather than performed.

What happened to adulthood with its full panoply of emotions, responsibilities, competencies -- its capacity for grace under multiple pressures? Adulthood has been becoming extinct because we now live in a place (both physical and social) radically different from the one we occupied even forty years ago. This new habitat, which I have been calling Virtual America, is a place fundamentally hostile to the virtues traditionally associated with maturity. This "new and improved" American place "grows" profit but eviscerates character; it renders our experience rationally "efficient" yet spiritually impoverished. Where has adulthood gone? It has been ramified, outsourced, divided into specialities for expert study and for product creation in the service economy. It has been rationalized and merchandised into non-existence.

How did such a dramatic conversion ever occur? This is obviously a very complex question, one which I can only address here in summary form as a means of framing the examples to come.

Well aware that what follows is more statement of belief than a convincing argument, I would assert the following:

1.) that this conversion is the logical result of the increasing triumph of rational materialism in American life;

2.) that rational materialism is an incredibly powerful engine of thought, especially adept at investigating and manipulating the physical world, but that it is also, and by design, morally blind, metaphysically dumb, and humanly indifferent -- "objective," "agnostic," "dispassionate";

3.) that in any society where rational materialism has rapidly become the unchallenged ruling philosophy, as it did in the form of "scientific socialism" in Russia and Cambodia, it has enacted an almost immediate ethical catastrophe, causing in effect the "rational decapitations" of millions of its own citizens;

4.) that such a catastrophe has been largely avoided in the West because our own instituted version of rational materialism, "scientific capitalism," was preceded by, and (at first) politically allied with, strong traditions of both local governance and religious freedom -- i.e., the original, still spiritually grounded "Protestant ethic";

5.) that, given those origins, our society managed to maintain a humane balance of power, and that this balance was not just within the structures of government ("checks and balances" democracy) but between philosophies of governance in the largest sense -- between, broadly speaking, rational materialism and Judeo-Christianity;

6.) that this balance was severely challenged in the mid-19th century by the Industrial Revolution, with its widespread mechanization of work, specialization of thought, and urbanization of living space -- here begins in earnest the still ongoing institution of Weber's iron cage;

7.) that this balance was further challenged in the early 20th century by the rise of consumerism, with its widespread boosting of new "needs" through instant credit and the constant proselytizing of advertising -- here begins the seductive phase of scientific capitalism (and its cultural contradictions), its paradoxical use of the techniques of the iron cage to create the mirage of what we might call "the gilded carrot," the ever-changing and marketable object of constant desire;

8.) that, delayed by an extended depression and an all-consuming war, the full effects of the second challenge (when added to the first) couldn't be seen until an entire generation, the Boomers, had been raised in relative peace and unprecedented prosperity under its influence;

9.) that the failure of that generation (my own) to mature into responsible adulthood, especially into responsible parenthood, is dramatic proof of both the ideological power and social destructiveness of the current economic order, with its dual and contradictory forms of modeling;

10.) that such a failure is also a sign that the precarious but necessary balance between scientific capitalism and Judeo-Christianity has been lost, that the former has subsumed, co-opted and superseded the latter to our current detriment and future moral peril.

Now that I have a provided a kind of narrative summary of my argument, I will try to demonstrate -- by means of memoir,

literary analysis, and contemporary example -- some of the specific ways and means of our behavioral change.

III. Great Expectations (1960): Youth, "New and Improved"

The discrepancy between the hope invested in the post-War generation and our actual performance has been so severe that the anticipation itself invites further examination. By the mid-fifties, giddy on the optimism of consumerism and global political domination, America really seemed to believe that its children, like its products, would necessarily be "new and improved" -- that every day, in every way, we were indeed getting better and better. Year after year, in classrooms, assemblies, and convocation halls, we were told in confident tones how special we were: the richest, best educated, most technologically advanced, and implicitly -- because, it was naively supposed, our character must "rise" with the surging tide of our GNP -- the most righteous generation in the history of the planet. Both the oratory of officialdom and the messages of advertising were glad to agree that we were the ones destined to redeem the golden promise of the American dream: heirs not simply to the pursuit of happiness but to its purchase and possession.

The extremity of that hope (and its secret folly) is one of the stronger memories of my own, mostly benign suburban upbringing. I recall especially a posh reception following a classmate's bar mitzvah during which we, his seventh grade friends, were made to enter an enormous dining hall as though a wedding party or a royal procession. Two by two, a boy beside a girl, to the beat of a band's ceremonial music, we were marched up an aisle, parting a sea of damp-eyed adults, and then onto a raised platform where we ate, conversed, and later even danced, elevated above, yet surrounded by the parents of suburbia hundreds in number.

Occasionally one of the men would slip up the steps but then only briefly and to pass to my friend an envelope thick with congratulatory cash, as if only this, his propitiatory offering, gave him license to approach. Otherwise we remained there in exalted isolation, on perpetual display. And what I remember most now, beyond my own discomfort, was how the stares of the adults kept drifting up, from their plates of prime rib, to locate us; how they would touch and then hold the hem of the moment -- this carefully composed, happy tableaux of "youth on the cusp."

My unrelenting desire to disappear was, of course, mostly the result of a social awkwardness befitting my age. But even then I sensed that there was something wrong in this reversal of status; something fundamentally (and frighteningly) false about the veneration we received in expressions that seesawed between proprietary joy and solemn awe -- what hath we wrought!

Now, a parent myself, I better understand the temptations of such love, the ways in which our vanities survive, subversive to the end, through projecting their fantasies onto the lives of our reluctant kids. Now, glancing backward, I see that scene as especially representative of the post-War era: how religious rites of passage were being co-opted then into celebrations of materialist status; how Catholics, Protestants, and Jews alike -- all of whom sat at the elevated table -- were being converted to

Mammon's melting-pot version of the mortgaged Good Life. What I see, when I glance back now, is the idolatry of childhood: the little god and goddess of Self-Esteem being raised on the altar of the secular dream.

About five years later, in the year of my own graduation, Time actually put the yearbook photos of a high school senior class (from California, of course) on its glossy cover, clearly confirming, as only a Time cover could then, the ascension of America's "youth culture." Not long thereafter Time also ran a cover daring to wonder if God were "dead," thus completing the dual prophecy already implicit in that bar mitzvah scene. For the boosting of youth and the debunking of God were (and are) associate phenomena, each arising from the true cover story of the post-War age: the triumph of the consumer economy over traditional spirituality as the arbiter of social values.

The way that we, as a generation, were so "over-sold" only shows how much the temper of commercial salesmanship had already tainted the raising of families by the 1950's. And our failures as a group in middle age speak painfully now to this economy's own failure as the dominant model for daily behavior. Its vaunting of self-interest, its reduction of people to "contacts" or products, its disingenuous blurring of moral improvement with material progress: these were the values that, in the midst of our "rebellions," we were stooping to obey, blind to the results until it was too late.

That our becoming "better off" might actually make a worse human place was the sort of savvy calculation that an economy programmed to Great Expectations could not, and still cannot, make.

IV. Great Expectations (1860): the Family, Saved and Subverted

A. Virtual Castle: Girding the Humble Home

To understand the nature of the economic assault on the contemporary family, we might profitably turn back to the era and nation where industrial capitalism first took hold (19th century England), and to the artistic form that evolved, in part, to study the manners and morals of middle class life: the social novel. Dickens was one of the first and most astute critics of the ways in which the then new regimens of scientific capitalism could imperil the rhythms of domestic life; and nowhere are both the dangers and adaptive responses more entertainingly drawn than in Great Expectations when the orphan Pip, suddenly and mysteriously made rich, is brought to London.

For there, Pip is placed under the care of the new priesthood of the Industrial Age -- "the Law" -- in the form the austere and intimidating, criminal lawyer Jaggers and his clerk, Mr. Wemmick. At first, Wemmick appears to be punctilious and dry, a man so bereft of civil human gestures that he has actually forgotten that people shake hands. When Wemmick brings Pip to his home, however, we learn that he hasn't lost his capacities for amiability and affection so much as been forced to specialize the locale of their expression.16 His particular job, and by implication the larger economy that defines that job, has required a rigid partition of his behavior -- between workplace and homestead, between a strict obedience to the protocols of the Law and a strong conformity to the rituals of the heart.

Dickens makes clear which of these two locales (and the separate schedules of behavior they allow) is "under siege" by providing a delightfully comic depiction of a man's house is his castle. For Wemmick's house, although the smallest Pip has ever seen, is a miniature redoubt. With painted Gothic windows, a ditch as a moat, a plank for a bridge, a lattice fence for stone walls, and a small gun as armament, Wemmick has self-consciously constructed his own symbolic castle to keep the modern world out.

While the castle's physical protection is merely symbolic, the psychological border it demarks is very real. Inside his castle walls, Wemmick practices the old economies of farming and craftsmanship -- he is a self-reliant, independent "jack of all trades;" outside, he works a middle stratum within one of the new economy's white-collar professions -- he is a highly specialized, wage employee. Inside, Wemmick maintains the old allegiances to country and clan -- he raises a flag every Sunday and, much more importantly, he lovingly cares for his deaf father, affectionately dubbed "the aged parent"; outside, his sole allegiance is to his employer, Jaggers, and Jaggers' often disreputable clients -- his loyalty is literally for hire. The man-at-home in his castle is affectionate, generous, gregarious; the man-at-work in his office is pinched, parsimonious, dutifully discreet.

Dickens' comic depiction of Wemmick's divided life captures, a century earlier, a key ambition behind the suburban adventure of the fifties and sixties: the attempt to build a green-belt moat around the American family to protect it not only from physical danger but from the psychological depredations of the postwar economy -- its simultaneous reduction of motives (to salesmanship and efficiency) and complication of procedures (through the self-generating maze of both technology and bureaucracy.) And when Pip describes how the once gracious Wemmick becomes "dryer and harder" as they head back to work, he might be describing the psychological transformation required of any of ten million American fathers commuting daily then to their white-collar jobs.

B. Virtual Virtue: Subverting the Humble Home

Wemmick's challenge is the perennial one of the democratic citizen living under scientific capitalism: how to partake of its material bounty without succumbing to its spiritual depravations; how to use its machines without, in effect, becoming one. While always problematic, his ironic solution -- to use the economy's means to build, in a sense, a fortress against that economy's beliefs -- was far more feasible in 1860 than in 1960, when the penetrations of the Information Age made any large scale segregation of private from public impossible, and when the economy's own shift to boosting consumption made the family itself a necessary target for ideological instruction. The commuting fathers of postwar America might keep their family circumstances a secret from their bosses, as Wemmick did from Jaggers, but the economy's propaganda was still invading their homes daily through radio and tv, and no moat, wall, or remote locale could block its reach.

Although Dickens died long before the Information Age, one of the subplots in David Copperfield does metaphorically suggest the insidious nature of its coming threat to the family's domain.

Here, too, law is the profession, but Mr. Wickfield's focus is financial not criminal, his small office is in his home, and he practices in suburban Canterbury rather than fast-paced London. In character, too, Wickfield is nearly the opposite of Wemmick's master, soft to Jaggers' hard, more devoted to his wife and daughter than to his job. He is an honest man, but after his wife dies, he increasingly retreats from the details of his practice into solitude and drink -- a retreat that is encouraged and, in fact, secretly stage-managed by his single employee, the clerk, Uriah Heep.

Perpetually present, always volunteering to take over for his distracted boss, Heep flatters and fawns, and behind his unctuous protestations of his own 'umbleness, the resentful underling relentlessly plots: first taking control of Wickfield's practice, then tricking him into complicity in illegal dealings, then bribing his way into a formal partnership. Eventually, he not only runs Wickfield's business as if it were his own, he completes his domination by actually moving both his mother and himself into Wickfield's home. While Wemmick's virtual castle managed to maintain a safe space for the actual practice of "family values," Wickfield's family castle has now been invaded -- its spaces occupied, its practices subverted.

As the central vehicle for consumerist ideology, postwar TV was very much the Uriah Heep of technologies: always hanging about the house and bowing obsequiously, always claiming to be our servant, our ever so 'umble and unworthy servant. Like Heep, commercial TV perpetually flattered its viewers, playing on our weaknesses while subtly subverting our traditional beliefs. Like Heep, it quietly became a household fixture, so mundane and demeaned that we ceased to see this high-tech, servile "employee" for what it actually was: failing to note, as Wickfield failed to note, how dependent we had become on its "companionship" and "services"; failing to suspect, as the domain of its influence rapidly spread, that TV's offerings weren't free after all, that the interests it served were not ours but its own, and that, like Heep's, its aims were insidious: de facto control of our business, our bodies, our children in our homes.

In Dickens' story, the climax of Heep's attempted usurpation of the head, house and heart of the Wickfield family is his plot to marry Agnes, Wickfield's only daughter. It is a plot rich with symbolic overtones, for as the novel's highly idealized heroine, Agnes practices those very same traits of modesty, solicitude, and self-abnegation (true "humbleness") that Heep can only fake. Through his blackmail, then, Heep is aiming to take possession not only of the home's sole, beloved child but of the incarnation of goodness itself, simulated virtue on the verge of conquering actual virtue -- a triumph of fakery only foiled in the end by a comic-heroic intervention.

In our story, though, the tale of the postwar generation as stalked by the avid industries of consumerism through the 'umble appliance of commercial TV, there is no intervention. We, the culture's "new and improved" kids, overfed and overfeted, are gradually co-opted, subtly possessed. Actual virtue is gradually subverted by simulated virtue as, in true Heepian fashion, private resentments and personal ambition assume the guise of public compassion. In our story, unlike Dickens' story, "the helping hand" is subsumed by "self-help" while charity becomes an

industry itself, complete with commission sales forces and perk-laden chief executives. In our story, self-interest on both the left and the right borrows the language of the idealistic ("liberation from oppression" or "creative destruction") as we manage to progress from civil rights to self-esteem; from "keeping the world safe for democracy" to the sanctification of selfishness and the commodification of everything.

In Dickens' world, imagined at the height of the Industrial Age, the family in distress is usually saved; the regimens of industry and the rituals of domesticity manage finally to coexist in their separate domains. In our world, reinvented by the Information Age, their domains are no longer separate; whether in child-, health-, or "aged parent" care, the industrial increasingly runs the rituals of the domestic; and the family in distress increasingly fails.17

V. Faux Rebellion: the Salesmanship of "Liberation"

Because, in Coolidge's phrase, the business of America has been business for so long, because commerce is our establishment, it becomes easy for us to lose sight of the ways in which modern capitalism is necessarily anti-establishment: how it promotes disruption, dissatisfaction, mini-revolutions in tastes, habits and so, inevitably, moral behavior. In fact, the template for such a pattern of perpetual revolt was actually sketched in Descartes' own philsophical method, his strategy of using radical doubt in hopes of achieving absolute certainty, and it is as well the implicit premise of our secular faith in scientific Progress.

But in the American economy proper, the specific recognition that certain qualities of personal rebelliousness, rather than overthrowing capitalism, might actually be exploited to expand its base, dates back to the origins of consumerism itself. Not only did selling the "new" mean, implicitly at least, discounting the "old"; the very nature of some of the earliest consumer products such as the radio and the car radically undermined both parental and communal authority, changing the moral landscape in the 1920's and fueling a new hedonism in American life.18 The initial establishment response to these commercially driven shifts in behavior was a kind of crude denial and displacement of causes -- to immigrants, to radicals, to urban and "un-American" sinners, to demon rum. (The grossest example of this sort of scapegoating was Henry Ford's highly public anti-Semitism.)19 Yet by the sixties, driven by the desire to cultivate the enormous youth market, rebellion was being embraced as an explicit theme in advertising itself. Initially, Madison Avenue idealized the pose of liberation through traditional images of American individualism like the Marlboro Man, but soon it would learn to exploit even specifically political expressions of revolt.

This opportunistic strategy of converting social protest into marketable product was best exemplified in the seventies by the Virginia Slims ad campaign. Launching the first cigarette targeted exclusively for women, these familiar and highly successful ads typically featured two photos, in an ironically staged before-and-after scenario, dramatizing the change from pre- to postliberation American womanhood. In the first, a young woman who is fettered in a frumpy Victorian dress has been caught attempting to sneak a cigarette by an oppressive husband/father figure -- a veritable starched phallus of paternalism complete

with wagging finger, stern stare, and Germanic walrus mustache. In the second, her contemporary and now "liberated" sister poses, sassy, slender, joyous and free, her cigarette transformed into a kind of elegant fashion accessory, her progress proclaimed in the now famous phrase: "you've come a long way, baby!"

With its arch tone, its hip address, its mockery of the past and of prudishness, its trivializing of political change into selfhood's triumph, its blurring of active accomplishment with passive sexiness, and, of course, with its overall masking of solicitation with flattery -- this one campaign exemplified three decades of advertising themes. Like most seductions, it played on the twin emotions of resentment and self-love, but its particular genius lay in locating the language of vanity best fitted to the age: independence, self-liberation.

That by "celebrating" freedom, these ads actually intended to enslave, a deadly addiction the hook concealed by their flattery's bait, is a dark but instructive irony, and one that describes, in extreme, a key strategy of consumerism in the postmodern age: a strategy through which each inducement to "rebellion" is also a secret order to obey.

VI. Rebellion Big Business: Born (Again) Gangstaz

By the nineties faux rebellion had become a marketing shtick so banal that some marketers were driven to casting their products in ever more outrageous terms of darkness, violence, sexual excess. (The most notorious mainstream example of this was a Calvin Klein ad campaign that seemed little more than a collection of pin ups for pedophiles.) Ever in search of new and profitable borders to cross, pop music provided its own extreme examples, as Brett Pulley of the Wall Street Journal discovered.20

Pulley was investigating the career of Boss Laws, a new female rapper whose first album, "Born Gangstaz," featured cover photos of Boss striking "various poses clutching automatic weapons," and whose songs included the now almost standard cop-killer lyrics: "'I loaded the clip and took the nine to the copper's brain.'" Fond of slugging down malt liquor from 40-ounce bottles, cursing out her audience, and boldly pronouncing in public her desire to kill, Boss spoke often of life on the streets: her menacing persona, and the gritty "art" it had produced, having arisen apparently from her experiences as gang member, drug pusher, and prison inmate.

It turns out, though, that in real space and time Boss had never been in jail, nor could her other mean-street stories be verified. It turns out, too, that Boss wasn't born a gangster, after all, but the youngest daughter of two protective parents in a middle class Detroit home. According to Pulley, she had been educated in private Catholic schools. A student of ballet, modern dance, and piano, Laws also had attended church and gone to college, where she had majored in business and had become a fraternity sweetheart.

Majoring in business is probably the most significant biographical detail in that privileged list. As Laws herself said to Pulley in defense of her new persona: "I'm both a gangster and a smart business person. I know what I'm doing." Indeed, she does. And that, as "a smart business person," she chose to entitle her first album "Born Gangstaz" rather than

something more biographically accurate such as "Born Bourgeois" tells us much about the selling of popular art though faux rebellion, the reinvention of self as commercial product, and the inherent amorality of marketing on the postmodern stage.

In the Christian faith within which Ms. Laws was raised, being "born again" meant having one's soul realigned with the experience of the divine and a subsequent obedience to the laws of God. In the consumerist faith that has now taken its place as the primary determinant of public behavior, being "born again" means reshaping one's image according to the fashions of the Market, obedient to its laws of publicity and promotion.

VII. Postmodern Parenting: the Producer Model

"Born Gangstaz" provides a useful and sobering transition out of stereotype. The careerist maneuvers of Boss Laws remind us that although we have come to expect the proselytizing of immaturity, vulgarity, and violence from the entertainment industry, it is still, in fact, an industry, with a structural and intentional identity common to contemporary life. Like any industry in postmodern America, then, the primary beneficiaries of pop music's offensive values are both the investing rich and a highly diversified professional class: lawyers, publicists, accountants, graphic artists, marketing and computer consultants, all rationally and efficiently assisting in the creation of a product, the core values of which are (in the case of Boss Laws) irrational and anarchic.

This professional assistance, it is important to remember, is usually provided without any self-conscious political or social intent. We cannot presume, for example, that the large cast of co-conspirators listed above consists primarily of misguided liberals, much less self-proclaimed "anarchists" -- a group that seems to reside almost exclusively now in academic tenure dens and the tony galleries of art investors. Many a conservative's stock portfolio has been fattened, and soccer mom's all-terrain vehicle financed, through supporting clients like Calvin Klein. And would anyone really be surprised if the tobacco company that was flattering feminism through its Virginia Slims campaign was simultaneously contributing to the re-election coffers of Jesse Helms? The ethos of commerce -- with its scientific methods pressed to monetary ends, with its strict rationalism placed in the service of a narrow materialism -- has neither the language nor the appetite for such scrupulous discriminations. Rather, its democracy of profit wants to decree that all money is "good" money, while its standard of service wants to insist that the customer is always "right."

When practiced in moderation, these commercial ideals of toleration and solicitude are indeed necessary for a civil, democratic marketplace. But when the market expands to enclose the whole of society so that even the most intimate of activities becomes economically defined, when the bottom line becomes the predominant shaper of allowable behavior, then toleration gives way to decadent license, civil solicitude to venal solicitation, as everything becomes "good" and anything "right." So enclosed, we can rationalize the most offensive of behaviors. Access to the morgue photos of a murdered child, JonBenet, becomes an "entrepreneurial opportunity," their purchase and publication

justified under the banners of "freedom of expression" and the public's "right to know."

We ask ourselves in bewilderment now how moral relativism has come to define our social sphere; the answer is both so pervasive and near that it is hard for us to see: such a relativism is the standard operating procedure of scientific capitalism, the working premise of commercial life. To say so is merely to restate the premises of capitalism's cultural contradictions, and show again how the Producing Self has become complicit with, and dependent on, the depredations of the Consuming Self.

As a last example of the insidious effects of these economically shaped identities, I want to return to parenting and balance the "rash" with the "rational." Let's imagine a slightly upscale, much more admirably motivated version of the family mentioned on the first page: a white, married, Mid-West couple, college educated, with two preteenage children, Adam and Amy. Yes, both parents work full-time; but the mother stayed home a full year after each child's birth, they relentlessly search for the best possible childcare and are willing to pay more than the going rate. In fact, committed to both gender equality and responsible parenthood, this couple had planned to alternate working half-time until Amy reached junior high. But when the father's company was downsized, he had take on more work rather than less, and although the mother was still willing to sacrifice the career advantage of full-time employment, they found that, without the extra income, they couldn't afford a home in the community with the best public schools. So she extended her hours -- as did the father, for his commute was lengthened an hour each day after the move.

Such sacrifices are, in fact, characteristic of this couple. They have no desire to take impulsive vacations free of their children's company. To the contrary, their fondest fantasy, discussed over take-out dinners or whispered above the soundtrack of the children's Friday night video, is to have a more relaxed and natural family life. But everything they read, including the President's speeches, and their own employment experiences warn them that their children must be highly trained to survive the changes that this new economy is likely to require. So they take out a loan to buy a home computer, which they upgrade, then upgrade again. When Adam has trouble learning to read, they send him to a nationally franchised Sylvan Learning Center for after-school training, and then to a private tutor who specializes in dyslexia. When Amy shows ability in math, it only seems fair that they offer her tutoring as well, so they send her to the local Kumon Math Center (also nationally franchised), and pay for skating lessons as well.

All of this, of course, means more expense and less time spent together, but they try to adjust by using cell phones and e-mail to stay in touch. Furthermore, Adam and Amy are guaranteed "quality time" on the weekend (there's a sign-up sheet over the microwave): four full hours when each gets to choose favorite activities and special foods, when each has the right to be "spoiled" by the intensity of their parents' total attention. The couple also attends every conference, game, and performance they can. There, too, the intensity of their attention doesn't flag; there, as their children's passionate advocates, they work

"the system" -- lobby teachers, network neighbors, argue with refs -- whatever it takes to wrest the best for Amy and Adam. Once, in fact, the mother refused to leave a principal's office until he agreed to transfer Amy out of a class where her gift for math was going unappreciated. She shocked herself then with the language she was willing to use on her daughter's behalf...

I could go on, but the portrait is complete enough and, perhaps, painfully familiar. What I find so insidious here is the extent to which the totality of domestic life is being shaped by economic models, motives, fears, and values: how much the grimly anxious pace of the postmodern workplace has come to command the postmodern household. And, of course, for clarity's sake, I have removed all the potentially corrupting effects of contemporary consumerism, the hedonistic half of the mixed message the economy presents. Statistically speaking, this is a uniquely ascetic postmodern couple. Here, we have no divorce, infidelity, rampant careerism; no alcoholism, drug addiction, compulsive shopping or gambling -- none of the many forms of self-centered dysfunction that darken our day and rend family life. Here, we have nothing so rash, just a perversely rational desertion of one's own children "on their behalf."

This household has been purged of sexist inequalities, but it has also been stripped of wonder, curiosity, improvisational fun. Mother and father have merged into one cooperative, unisexual provider; the good parent has been reduced to the Good Producer whose job as parent is to supply society with a new generation of good producers: employees who are already accustomed to highly rationalized social environments and whose skills are upgraded to the ever-evolving specs of the time. This new parent doesn't teach by example; he/she hires tutors, coaches, experts "in the field." This new parent's role is less to cherish and chasten than to outfit and facilitate; less to shape meaning than to make money, furnishing each child with the materialist gear and rationalist techniques the economy requires.

Even this household's happier moments have been reinvented in the economy's terms. The notion of prescheduled "quality time," for example, converts parenting to corporate standards of executive efficiency. As in the rest of the technological economy, enhanced technique is supposed to reduce the need for management "face time," leading to an implicitly absurd rationalization by which, nevertheless, many of us now run our lives: namely, that the better parents we are, the less time we actually will spend with our children. The parent as passionate advocate -- the one lobbying hard on his child's behalf without broader concerns for truth, justice, or even common courtesy -- is likewise a rote re-enactment of workplace roles, especially as defined by the ever-expanding service domain. Such behavior accurately reflects the highly specialized code of conduct -- the so-called professional ethics -- of the lawyer, the therapist, the consultant, of the licensed accountant whose firm does the books for both a local church and an S&M supply house. Our job at home, like our job in the field, is not to reprimand but to represent. All clients are good clients. Our children have become our customers, and the customer is always right.

VIII. Specialists without Spirit, Sensualists without Heart

When our children become our clients, then even the family has ceased to be a possible sphere for moral instruction. When our domestic rituals are set to the beat and drawn toward the goals of our workaday schedules, then home itself ceases to be a sanctuary. Even at night, we have no respite from the anxieties of the marketplace where the buyer must beware and only the fittest are supposed to survive; even in our living rooms, we find no alternative to the economy's reductive yet contradictory commands to produce and consume, produce and consume. The strict division that Wemmick drew -- the symbolic border that allowed him to be productive at work and humane at home -- has been dissolved. Today's Wemmick has no place to be generous and genial, no time to be metaphysically curious, humanly kind. The old compromise with the wealth-producing engine of scientific capitalism has collapsed. Although small, lightly armored, and comically appointed, Wemmick's house was still an effective castle, but that castle has now been sacked.

Our current distress arises, in part, from an inarticulate sense that we have lost that last bastion of our humanity, what the late Christopher Lasch called our "haven in a heartless world." And the best measure of the dread such a loss can excite is our urgent attempt now to rebuild the moat of separateness: more private schools to teach, more guards to police, a new maze of walled-in communities. Once again, we circle our wagons in suburban cul de sacs, where, ever anxious, we stare out at the world through tinted glass. But physical removal is an insufficient defense when the hearts and minds of the family we would protect, adult and child alike, have been aligned to the values of the very world we are trying to escape.

Those values are intrinsically hostile to the disciplined tenderness that makes a meaningful haven out of a merely physical house. In truth, the economy that now pervades American life does not "want" people who are capable of creating and sustaining the rituals of domesticity. Calibrated by the dualism of its philosophical origins, scientific capitalism wants instead, and paradoxically, pure rationalists and pure materialists; it wants efficient producers and avid consumers. And even if we could harmonize its increasingly contradictory demands for perfect efficiency and unending appetite, the merged model could only supply an impoverished definition of human life. Acting out of such a model, which reduces us to the "mechanical" and the "animal," we cannot mature into competent, caring adults.

Maturity requires the acquisition and application of commonsense intelligence. The economy rewards instead a highly narrow expertise even as it promotes the utopian fantasies of omniscience, omnipotence, and immortality.

Maturity requires emotional endurance. The new economy promotes the habit of complaint; it hypes the new "injustice" or psychic pain which then can be medicated, adjudicated, serviced for a fee.

Maturity requires the selflessness of social commitment; the economy promotes the selfishness of "self-liberation."

Maturity depends on a transfer of tradition between the generations through daily example. The economy eradicates tradition through insisting that the new is always improved, and it segregates the generations -- into day-care, workplace, retirement communities -- for more efficient service and

marketing.

Maturity directs the submission of both physical desires and intellectual schemes to the discipline of higher meaning. The postmodern economy co-opts and consumes all traditional forms of meaningfulness: it relentlessly converts quality into quantity, spirit into commodity, the organism of symbolism into the mechanism of market value, the self-sacrificial hero into the sponsoring star.

Maturity requires, above all, a meaningful acceptance of the human condition. It depends on our acknowledging those facts which remain the same for every culture and generation, uniting the first with the last: that death is real; that our knowledge is limited; that our control (both as individuals and as a community) is always provisional -- that, in the words of Ecclesiastes, "time and chance happen to us all." Not only do common sense, compassion, and self-discipline emerge out of an acceptance of those first and final facts, so does humility. And humility is the necessary temperamental grounding for any system of ethics aspiring to be practical -- aspiring, that is, to shape our beliefs in actual practice. As the temperament which (to use a carpenter's term) constantly trues us to the shape of the real, humility is the source of the most profound sort of pragmatism -- a fact that our earliest American ancestors well knew.

"Every man has just as much and no more truth in him, as he hath humility," wrote a New England Puritan.21

Where, we might ask, in this economy of rank self-promotion and rational utopias, can such a truthful man or woman be found? The relative rarity of such a person illuminates why, for all the explosion of our knowledge, this society of ours seems so shallow, so phony -- not only immature but fundamentally false.

At the very end of the Protestant Ethic, Max Weber briefly emerged from his sober and objective analysis to speculate on the coming character of the West's iron cage of capitalist endeavor. "No one knows," he wrote:

> who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or whether there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals,
>
> or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might truly be said: Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved.22

As -- with what sometimes seems to be "convulsive self-importance" -- we now proclaim America's global dominance, we might wonder at the extent to which we have achieved just such a nullity: a society of rash and rational immaturity; a civilization of specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart. For their eloquence as well as their prophetic accuracy, these words of Weber, written at the very start of our century, are frequently cited -- as well they should be. What isn't often noted, however, is the unintended irony of the sentence directly following that quote: "But this brings us to the world of judgments of value and of faith, with which this purely historical study need not be burdened."

We now have had over ninety years of such intellectual purity -- nearly a century of purely historical, purely financial, purely aesthetic, purely scientific study and practice. All that purity of endeavor and look at the culture we have managed to manufacture. Perhaps now is the time to admit that we do need to be so "burdened." Perhaps now is the time to recover those practices and refashion those places where, as in Wemmick's castle, "the judgments of value and of faith" have a home.

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Notes

1. The acuity of this observation about the distinction between what people think they believe and their actual beliefs (beliefs in action) is undercut by a terrible irony: the dualistic philosophy that Descartes evolves out of this, his methodical search for absolute truth is especially susceptible to such self-delusions. In the words of Karl Jaspers:

"[Descartes'] omnipotent rationality produced nothing but a blindness to Existenz and a means of concealing very different impulses and purposes beneath the cloak of absolute reason. This scientific attitude in philosophy engendered arbitrary irrationality masked as rationality."

Shakespeare captured the same cautionary point in just three words: "reason panders will." (Hamlet.)

2. "Tumor Victim Loses Bid to Freeze Head before Death," Los Angeles Times, September 15, 1990.

3. Cryonics advocates define death by what they call "the information theoretic criterion," which they define as follows: "A person is dead...if their memories, personality, hopes, dreams have been destroyed ... That is, if the structures in the brain that encode memory and personality have been so disrupted that it is no longer possible in principle to restore them to an appropriate functional state..." The particular urgency in this case arose from the fact that the petitioner, Thomas Donaldson, was suffering from a brain tumor, and thus was in danger of having the "structures in the brain that encode memory and personality" disrupted before he was pronounced legally dead. Ironically, Donaldson's tumor ceased growing and he was still alive at the time of this internet posting in 1995, some five years after his petition was denied.

4. For those interested, the relative cost of "neuro" versus "whole-body" cryonic suspension (minimum estimate): $42,000 (neuro) and $140,000 (whole-body). Internet posting, 1995.

5. As reported, most famously, in Ezra Pound's ABC of Reading (New Directions, New York, 1934) pp. 17-18.

6. This overweening triumph of health as the ultimate value of Western materialism is predicted in Josef Conrad's The Secret Agent (1907), one of the most prescient political novels ever written. An acidly accurate psychological portrait of revolutionaries which foreshadows our own era of political terrorism, the novel ends with the two remaining radicals -- one

a narcissist womanizer, the other a nihilist bomber -- arguing about the future. The narcissist, Ossipon, has this to say: "In two hundred years doctors will rule the world. Science reigns already. It reigns in the shade maybe -- but it reigns. And all science must culminate at last in the science of healing -- not the weak, but the strong. Mankind wants to live -- to live." (Double Day Anchor, Garden City, NY) p. 248.

7. See Frederick Wiseman's powerful and disturbing documentary, Near Death. In the three hours of the film -- all recorded at an intensive care unit in a Boston hospital where, in fact, nearly all the patients are dying -- the word "death" is hardly spoken ... not by the patients, their families, the doctors or the nurses. Delay after delay arises from their shared inability to speak the frank truth about the patient's condition. The economic cost of prolonged and painful treatment is substantial, but the real tragedy is the psychological and spiritual loss to the families who never have the closure of a final, meaningful conversation, grounded in the truth of the loved one's imminent death.

8. See Hans Moravec's Mind Children, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA. A professor of robotics at Carnegie Mellon, Moravec is not content to project our eventual triumph over the mortality of the body in what he calls a "postbiological world"; he actually tries to imagine a way that these software "mind children" of ours might survive the death of the universe.

9. The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism, Daniel Bell (Basic Books, 1976 -- reissued 1996). This is thesis of Bell's whole book, but it is most succinctly stated on pages 71-72.

10. "The Cult of the Adolescent," Georgia Review, Fall, 1996.

11. I have written an entire essay on this topic, "Endangered Species," forthcoming Salmagundi, Autumn 1997.

12. The Seattle school district has debated this issue all year. Whittle Communications offers free video equipment in exchange for guaranteeing students will watch an ad-riddled newscast, Channel One. The program is seen by some eight million students. For an excellent summary of commercialization in public schools see "Ad Nauseam," Michael J. Sandel, New Republic, Sept. 1, 1997.

13. Examples are boundless. Oxford now has a program where young genetic scientists can earn their PH.D. through doing research for a private corporation. In my state university system, one of the schools has a program in something called "fast food science."

14. See my essay on the N.E.A. controversy, "Hard Being Good," Georgia Review, Fall 1991.

15. "For when asceticism was carried out of the monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production, which today determine

the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force... In Baxter's view the care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the 'saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment.' But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage." Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, (Scribner's and Sons, New York, 1958), p. 181.

16. See Chapter 25 in Great Expectations for the account of Pip's visit to Wemmick's "castle."

17. Christopher Lasch was particularly eloquent on the usurpation of family responsibilities by professional, governmental, and commercial agencies. See both Haven in a Heartless World, and The Culture of Narcissism, especially "VII. The Socialization of Reproduction and the Collapse of Authority."

18. The classic study of the effects of the automobile on small town America in the 1920's is contained in Middletown: A Study in American Culture, Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd (Harcourt, Brace and World, 1929.) For a brief summary of their work as it relates to Thomas Edison's and Henry Ford's denial of the social consequences of their products, see Gary Will's eloquent analysis in Reagan's America, (Penguin Books, New York, 1987) pp 440-48.

19. Henry Ford and the Jews, Albert Lee, (Stein and Day).

20. Brett Pulley, the Wall Street Journal, Feb. 2, 1994.

21. Increase Mather, "Richard Mather," in the anthology The American Puritans, Perry Miller, editor (Anchor Doubleday, New York, 1956), p. 240.

22. Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (Scribner's and Sons, New York, 1958), p. 182.

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