

James Bowman

Whit Stillman: Poet of the Broken Branches

It is a mistake, I think, to look at Whit Stillman as an apologist for what one of his characters in *Metropolitan* wanted to call the Urban Haute Bourgeoisie, or UHB. Apart from anything else, it is far from clear whether any such thing actually exists in nature in the form proposed by the term's inventor, Charlie Black. To Charlie, it seems to mean the same thing as WASPs, "preppies," or "People Like Us," but with the vague expectation that the quasi-academic, quasi-sociological sound of "Urban Haute Bourgeoisie" will prevent it from accruing the connotations of racialism or snobbery which attach to the older terms. Yet there are plenty of people from any sociologically identifiable equivalent of the urban haute bourgeoisie, even those who have lived all their lives on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, who nevertheless would see the characters in *Metropolitan* as being quite as alien as they appear to most Americans.

This non-existence of Charlie and his friends as an identifiable social sub-class in the real world is surely the point about them in the movie. It may be that there are in New York (or were, as late as the 1980s) young people of 20 or so who still go to

"deb" parties in white tie and tails, seem to have no interest in rock 'n' roll or much popular culture subsequent to the 1950s and whose social chit-chat is sprinkled with references to Thorstein Veblen, Lionel Trilling and Jane Austen. But the rarity of such creatures and the ideal quality of their world is something that Stillman's characters themselves seem to assume. In Charlie's case, that assumption is what lies behind his prophecies of impending preppy doom. In *Metropolitan*, what binds these characters together is not social class, or money, or even their shared prep school backgrounds so much as the fact that they are all young people who have taken up, in one way or another, an implicitly adversarial relationship to the youth culture whose values predominate among their coevals.

True, the contrast between the culture of these *rara aves* and that of their more recognizable contemporaries is mostly implicit. The big dogs of the 1980s pop scene are the barkless canines of Stillman's film whose absence helps to define in outline what a notional alternative to their cultural tyr-

James Bowman is the American editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*, media critic for the *New Criterion*, and film critic for the *American Spectator*.

anny might look like. For Stillman's real purpose in inventing such outlandish characters as Charlie and Tom Townsend and Nick Smith and Audrey Rouget is not to defend some notional class of juveniles who are still prepared to argue the merits of the detachable- as opposed to the soft-collared shirt so much as it is to call such a class into existence.

Whether or not, that is, these people actually exist, they are so rare that it is as if they didn't. Stillman is perhaps trying to disguise his and their isolation from the depressing realities of late 20th century America by putting the phantom class of the UHB on a par with other categories called into existence by sociological nominalists. But his subsequent films, *Barcelona* and *The Last Days of Disco* make it clear that their real function is to give us a hard but not unhopeful look at the prospects for innocence in our time. By this I mean not just, or perhaps not even sexual innocence. His characters all live in the ever-widening wake of the sexual revolution and are not politically or spiritually self-confident enough to set themselves up as ideologically-motivated opponents of that revolution in the way that subsequently young people have done in *True Love Waits* and the pro-virginity movement. But regret for lost innocence of a more general kind is such a recurring theme for Stillman that his literary forebears would seem to be Alain-Fournier and J.D. Salinger.

In part this is the merely sentimental innocence enjoyed by those from well-to-do families who have enjoyed sheltered childhoods. But the note of nostalgia—sometimes for a world that they themselves have never known—is seldom struck by his young characters without also making the serious point that they are bewildered by what it means to be an adult in a culture dominated by the values of children. Their

nostalgia for childhood is also a paradoxical longing to be shown the way out of childhood by parents who want to be children themselves. Tom and Nick in *Metropolitan* discover a box of toys put out in the street for the trash collector. "The childhood of our whole generation is represented here, and they're just throwing it out," laments Nick. But the more particular and poignant significance of the box only becomes clear with Tom's realization that the toys are his own and are being thrown out by his divorced and remarried father, who is leaving town without telling him.

This too is characteristic in Stillman's work. The childhood innocence of which the film is so solicitous is continually under assault from the selfishness and sexual self-indulgence of the previous generation. It is this harder but usually hidden edge to his satire which saves Stillman from a J.M. Barrie-like idealization of childish innocence. His characters' reminiscences about the past always have a purpose in making the present appear more clearly defined in its foolishness, wrong-headedness or backwardness by contrast. Thus Josh in *The Last Days of Disco* is remembered by the other characters, especially Des, as having stood on a table and sung the hymn by John Greenleaf Whittier which begins: "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind, forgive our foolish ways." He had to leave college for a while.

To Des, who left Harvard for more conventional reasons, this was the defining moment of Josh's life, though Josh himself is now inclined to play it down. He was treated for depression and is now "normal." Yet as he gingerly explores the feelings of Alice on the subject of his "breakdown," Josh shows that he has forgotten none of the words to the hymn:

*Breathe through the heats of our desire
Thy coolness and thy balm.*

*Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire,
Speak through the earthquake, wind and fire
O still small voice of calm.*

Whether Alice is genuinely alarmed by the evidence of an unbalanced personality provided by Josh's impromptu recitation of these healing and comforting words or whether she only pretends to be, it is clearly Whit Stillman's excellent joke about a popular culture so heated by "our desire" that a longing for coolness and balm is seen as a sign of madness.

This scene also furnishes a clue as to what it is that prevents his idealization of the past from degenerating into mere nostalgia. For whether it is represented by Glenn Miller in *Barcelona* or the hymns in *Metropolitan* and *Last Days*, or by the disco music of the latter, the idealized past nearly always stands for a much less subjective and more accessible kind of goodness and innocence. In *Barcelona*, for example, the lost ideal is political innocence, in the sense of a belief in the essential benevolence of American power in the world—which was becoming as rare or rarer than sexual innocence by the late 1970s or early 1980s when the film is set. The belief in love, friendship and the American world-imperium all come together in that film as part of a complex which Stillman presents to us as a bulwark against the prevailing cynicism. This he does in the same spirit of gentle self-deflation with which Nick offers his defense of preppy-culture and Josh offers his of disco-culture—that is with assurances that they believe at least *some* of what they say.

In some ways, *Barcelona* is the most ambitious of the three films. It presents us with two American archetypes: Ted Boynton and his cousin Fred, the one an earnest, upright, hard-working Puritan and the other an irreverent, iconoclastic, good-time guy. Both of them have to come to terms with a culture which is at best bewildered by and at worst hostile to all that they

take for granted about the world. Ted's virtue and belief in Dale-Carnegieism is mocked and disparaged while Fred's irreverence comes up against the new pieties of what we now call "political correctness." The hostility that both encounter from the ambient culture of post-Franco Spain is what brings the two together again after an almost inevitable estrangement, uniting all that Stillman sees as being best about America.

There is a marvelous scene early in this film in which Fred tells some of the remarkably pretty but "promiscuous" girls of Barcelona that his cousin "might seem like a typical American, like a big, unsophisticated child, but he's far more complex than that." Not only is he "an admirer of the Marquis de Sade and a follower of Dr. Johnson" whose nickname is *punta de diamante*, but he wears tight leather thongs under his clothes to give himself a masochistic thrill as he dances. As intended, the girls are impressed, but the joke is on them. Fred takes advantage of their own childish credulity about American childishness to show that they are in fact the "unsophisticated" ones, easily seduced by false tales of perverted sexual practices and psychological "complexity" because the straightforwardness and plain-dealing of Ted as he really is is beyond their comprehension.

Later, Fred defends his lies to Ted by saying: "Do you think any even mildly cool trade fair girl would give you the time of day if she knew the pathetic, Bible-dancing goody-goody you really are?" But he also points to the dilemma that confronts them both when he adds that there are books and movies about sado-masochism. "At least people into S and M have a *tradition!*" he calls out—unlike, that is, the victims of the American cultural shipwreck of the 1970s who are forced to invent their own traditions—perhaps something like Ted's weird practice of dancing (alone) to the music of

Glenn Miller while reading the Bible. Likewise, in *The Last Days of Disco*, the young professionals take up the dance craze of the 1970s as heralding (falsely, as it turns out) a return to the courtship rituals of their parents—or even their grandparents.

All these characters constitute not some identifiable Urban Haute Bourgeoisie defined by income, education, or ethnicity, but Stillman's representatives of the orphans of the sexual and, at least partly, political revolutions of the 1960s. Their cause is not the retention of entrenched power or privilege but the right to hold on



Courtesy of Castle Rock Entertainment

Writer-director Whit Stillman (right) pauses from shooting *The Last Days of Disco* (1998) on the New York Subway.

to customs and beliefs that they persist in believing to be something more than the ideology of a ruling class. For the popular culture has tended to adopt the Marxist-Leninist view of American power as imperialist just as it has the weird, Freudian-feminist view of traditional sexual morality and courtship customs as “repressive.” More recently it has been picking up academic-Marxist views about the old bourgeois high culture of Dr. Johnson and Jane Austen. Scarcely knowing what they were doing, the carriers of the popular culture have cut a swath through the old culture, throwing up broken branches left and right. Stillman is the poet of the broken branches, of the fragmentary remains of the old,

unpoliticized culture which both he and his most articulate characters continue to believe was not what present-day ideologues think it was but what the people who developed it over the centuries thought it was.

In other words, Stillman stands for the right of the past not to be colonized by the present, not to be politicized by what in historical terms is our very parochial tendency to see all things in terms of power distribution. Even when his characters are political, like Tom in *Metropolitan*, their views are likely to be expressed in the most quaint and old-fashioned ways. Tom is a

follower of Charles Fourier (1772-1837), the French utopian socialist and author of *Le Nouveau monde industriel* who was the inspiration for Brook Farm. When Charlie points out that Brook Farm ceased to exist and therefore Fourierism was a failure, Tom quietly replies: “Everyone ceases to exist; that doesn’t mean everyone’s a failure.” Although Tom abandons his Fourierism by the end of the film, his forlorn clinging to a long-outdated creed is treated with typical respect by Stillman. Later it is Tom

himself who has to be put right by Audrey when he tells her that “nearly everything that Jane Austen wrote looks ridiculous from today’s perspective.”

“Has it ever occurred to you,” she replies with her own version of Stillmanian quixotism, “that today from Jane Austen’s perspective would look even worse?”

There is an interesting inversion of this remark in *Barcelona*, when Ted observes to Fred that the sexual revolution lately came to post-Franco Spain has turned the world upside down. “Has it ever occurred to you that the world was upside down before and it got turned right side up?” asks Fred.

“No, I don’t think that’s it,” Ted answers.

In an interview with *Psychology Today*, Whit Stillman spoke of the effect on him of having dropped out of college and gone to Mexico:

It turned out to do the opposite of what it was supposed to do. It didn't make me a mushroom-dropping pothead; seeing another culture and the way the less affluent in that culture coped with life actually made me much more conventional. It made me more respectful of conventional people in the United States.

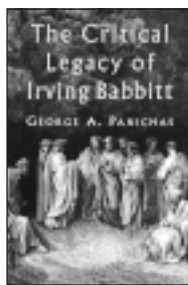
He goes on to give this example:

The people we derided in Cambridge were the Pine Manor [College] girls who wore pink pastels and came in on Saturday nights sort of overdressed. The farm girls in Cuernavaca, Mexico, on Saturday night came in wearing the same colors. No politically correct Harvard person would sneer, because they're working class—and yet their aspirations were so similar to the aspirations of all the people we sneered at back in Cambridge. It makes you think about what it is you should really disrespect.

This is the heart of Whit Stillman's film-

making purpose. His characters are all ideal versions of himself: kids from privileged backgrounds who learn not to feel guilty or ashamed of the fact. But because there are so few such people in reality, or at least so few who are able to give expression to their uncomplicated identities, we have to take them on trust. They are, as it were, hypothetical. But the people Stillman is really writing for are those just below him on the social scale. Not the urban *haute bourgeoisie* but the suburban *petite bourgeoisie*, who ape their betters even when it amuses their betters to sneer at people like themselves. Stillman instead holds up for their admiration a version of what the upper class—that upper class that the middle classes have always emulated—would be if it existed in our world. And because he does this in a spirit neither of snobbish superiority nor of fashionable self-hatred but of good-humored self-deprecation, he makes of the UHB something genuinely admirable.

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