

A Contemporary Lucretius

Thy Neighbor's Wife, by Gay Talese,
New York: Doubleday, 1980. 568 pp.
\$14.95.

THE PUBLICATION OF Gay Talese's book, *Thy Neighbor's Wife*, is an important statement about this nation and its values circa 1980. This, I should hastily add, has nothing at all to do with the value of the book. In character and in content this work is lubricious. Its only redeeming quality is in the author's seemingly endless ingenuity in making sex passionless. In many respects Talese is like a contemporary Lucretius. He mistakes the mechanics of sex for the celebration and the mystery of love in the same way Lucretius mistakes energy for the transcendence and the majesty of God. This book, which supposedly deals with sex in America, reads like directions for an Erector Set. What I find particularly baffling is the author's view that descriptions of massage parlors, Al Goldstein's enterprises, Hugh Hefner, and Sandstone—a commune for casual sex—constitute an examination of sex in America. Where is the discussion of sex as a dimension of fulfilling and binding relationship? Is Talese prescient? Are we evolving to a time when sex is exchanged like handshakes?

Thy Neighbor's Wife is much less a description and more a prescription of what sexual morality should be. Talese is not a dispassionate journalist. He arrives at conclusions based on his own experiences. When the evidence doesn't suit him—as is the case with one sexual pioneer whose activities in Sandstone end in divorce, therapy, loneliness, and despair—Talese drops the matter as an unwelcome exception to the generally blissful generalization of promiscuous sex. One gets the impression that the enemy in the book is inhibition. Whether the inhibition is caused by Anthony Comstock's crusades against sex or by bourgeois morality seems unimportant. The only distinction that counts is whether you are for or against casual sex.

This argument, which appears as ingenuously as Candide facing the verities of life, ignores the totality of human experience. It is as if Gay Talese thinks he has discovered Somerset Maugham's "New-Found-Land" only to find it is Sodom and Gomorrah. By accepting the adolescent belief that doing what you want makes what you want worth doing, Talese preaches a standard of anything goes. At Sandstone, for example, conventional morality is subordinated to feelings of satisfaction. In reading the section of the book that deals with this community, I was reminded of the hero in *Clockwork Orange* who is a prototype for the "new freedom." His cruel acts make him feel good, so why not do them? The Sandstone described by Talese does not legitimate cruelty; but in the act of requiring people to be free, a norm of conformity is imposed on communal adherents. Like the characters out of an Aldous Huxley novel, the Sandstone crowd contains seedy decadents who would prefer to be caught in the act of adultery rather than face a charge of provincialism.

Where is the so-called liberation in this setting? Can one be a dissenter at Sandstone without a psychic price being extracted? Talese tells us that his generation was "uptight" about sex; it was caught in the bourgeois trap of religious and moral standards which cause shame, guilt, anxiety, and neurosis. I won't attempt to explain to the sybarites why there is a societal need for guilt. But what I find baffling is Talese's total insensitivity to the psychological demands of contemporary liberationists. How can one ignore the role that sexual freedom has played in destabilizing family relationships and sinking sexual pioneers into a cesspool of loveless sex and depression?

As Talese recounts the boyhood fascination with sex that grows into perversion in adulthood, I am reminded of Irving Kristol's argument that "whole classes of the population...are entering what can only be called, in the strictly clinical sense, a phase of infantile regression." With Abraham Maslow as its spiritual father,

this generation of liberationists demands actualization which usually takes the form of sexual indulgence. How can I be a better person, it is argued, if I am not permitted self-expression? These ingenues dismiss two hundred years of the American social contract as so much nonsense. Like contemporary Emiles, they exalt savagery and find all evil confined to the introduction of civilized standards of behavior.

This message is hardly new. "Autonomous man" has always been the goal of liberationists in every culture. Civilization, as Freud noted, struggles with the need for social order and the competing desire for pleasure giving experiences. But as most post-adolescents know, life isn't all pleasure. Inhibitions can create a social cohesion that results in stability and the attendant value of repose. At a time when morality is determined in large part by people of the couch, not those of the cloth, it is not surprising that this lesson of history must be relearned.

What I find alarming, however, are those critics who take seriously the message in *Thy Neighbor's Wife*. Surely the well advertised pleasure to be derived from a redefined notion of morality is irresistible in this sensate culture. But in this case the message is more formidable than the medium. The pleasures to be derived from free sex are seemingly not as persuasive as the manifest pain of divorce and of isolation. Yet Talese writes solely to the drum beat of sexual awareness. His human awareness is not discernible. For him the good life is the one free of commitments, open to sexual adventures, and severed from the bond of bourgeois constraints.

There is a curious irony to this argument that has obviously eluded Talese. If man should free himself from the shackles of middle class morality, why associate with those who, by virtue of this union, limit that freedom? The logical concomitant of

this reasoning is that those who are free are also without associations, except, of course, those associations that gratify immediate desires. Since any relationship assumes some degree of commitment, autonomous man must guard against a genuine involvement with others. One result is a divorce rate that soars to the level of newly discovered free spirits who had once promised to love, honor, and obey. Institutions such as Sandstone are then created for free spirits to come together or massage parlors open in direct response to the need for companionship. All the while liberationists contend that nirvana has been found in a hot tub or that the range of human experience has been enhanced through casual sexual encounters. But they protest too much. All one has to do to discover the vacuousness in the claims is casually chat about loneliness with the recently liberated. The vacant stares reveal more than any words of satisfaction.

Nonetheless, the publicity for new lifestyles (whatever happened to a life?) continues unabated. The commercial success of Talese's book will ensure the publication of several clones. We are likely to hear three cheers for sexual freedom from the rooftops of *Cosmopolitan*, *Playboy*, and Al Goldstein's scurrilous publications. But when the noise is subdued and people have a chance to consider the consequences of sexual liberation, they may find that human relationships have lost some of their loveliness. We may find that the mystery of sex has been unraveled and in the process human sensitivity and concern have diminished as well. And, alas, we may come to believe that love is a maudlin preoccupation that represents a bygone era. I suspect that even Talese won't like that time very much.

Reviewed by HERBERT I. LONDON