

"Cornfields: Late Summer," having thirteen lines, "The Bowl of Cereal," on the page facing it, containing fifteen. And lines not intended to rhyme seem to, as does the poem "Ocean":

*Your wizardry would be alarming,
But for the peace you bring,
When your washing waves slide in
And breathe your name over and again....*

The English language, unlike the mellifluous tongue of Homer, finds its genius in stark simplicity. Shakespeare, of all the English poets, perhaps most perfectly understood this. Whole quatrains in his sonnets rarely contain words of even two syllables:

*That time of year thou mayst in me
behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few do
hang
Upon those boughs which shake against
the cold,
Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet
birds sang.*

And Winston Churchill, in his World War II speeches, saved what Shakespeare termed "this blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England," with words like "blood, toil, tears and sweat."

To write poetry in English one must dress oneself in humility, as Shakespeare put it:

*And then I stole all courtesy from heaven,
And drest myself in such humility
That I did pluck allegiance from men's
hearts.*

And, fortunately, that quality is inherent in the graciousness of Christhilf's verse. Similarly, the cult of personality which so often destroys poets who know themselves to be "the unacknowledged legislators of the world" is not a snare in which Christhilf or his book is caught. Focused on truth and beauty, he remains discreet as well as discrete from his work. Concepts of Hellenism reside in poems moderate in all things, stressing nothing

in excess. There is an irenic quality to the book, reminding one of the quiet bowers of poetry, "full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing," even when poems focus on such transportational nightmares as "The Beltway." There is a steady quality also to the book, making one feel that the author will go on to write many more, ascending

The Ladder

*Grasp the next rung with the hand's palm,
Lift your leg till the foot snags a higher
place,
Swing up with the breath of rising on your
face,
And feel the muscles stiffen your thigh
As another view welcomes your eye.*

Re-Barbarizing the Western Mind

Wayne Allen

The Undoing of Thought, by Alain Finkielkraut, London: The Claridge Press, 1988. 132 pp. \$ 6.95.

In *The Treason of the Intellectuals* (1928) Julien Benda identifies the metaphysical significance of modernity: "Our age is indeed the age of the *intellectual organization of political hatreds*" (author's italics). In the seeming effort to validate his 1928 observation, moderns have concocted spurious but politically obtrusive doctrines of moral decay: deconstructionism, structuralism, semiotics, and species of feminism grounded in a new animism. The corrosive effects of these pseudo-self-insights are having the effect of confirming Benda's very next sentence: "It will be one of its chief claims to notice in the moral history of humanity."

Benda has seized on the chief characteristic of modernity, the rejection of nature and the turn toward the will as the primary ordering principle of politics. In

mocking Hegel's "cunning of Reason," modern intellectuals have sought to overturn one's natural fate, and the designations attached to it, and replace it with substitutes of the mind, mental constructions that flatter the egoistic ambitions of the collectivity that proffers them. Thus deconstructionists can concur with Humpty Dumpty in his exchange with Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*: "How can you make words mean so many things?" asks Alice. Retorts Humpty Dumpty, "Which is to be master, that's all."

We now have another battle in the war between the Ancients and the Moderns. One's natural fate does not have to be an axiom of politics. This is a clear rejection of the classical view in which nature is consulted on the perfectibility of all things when completed. While man is generated from nature and an inseparable part of it, he can be understood teleologically; not as an adversary of nature, but as the highest form of it. One sees here the amazing relevance of Benda's "*clercs*," those who have abandoned the life of the mind in favor of acquiring political power. It is, says Benda, their "desire to abase the values of knowledge before the values of action" that betrays their trust to civilization. This betrayal is all the more ironical because of the current effort to apply the will in behalf of nature's lowest common denominator, race; hence nature's debasement.

Since the Enlightenment, rationalism has served as the reckoning of the will in its confrontation with nature. Much of rationalist thought has recognized that while it cannot defeat nature, it can at least circumscribe its ill-effects on public life. Because rationalism's own grounding is nature it has had to turn to law to do what nature failed to do, de-differentiate natural types. More baldly, the mind has tried through artificial means to ameliorate natural discrimination.

But no mental construction can oblit-

erate biological types, they can only be trivialized or diminished by minimizing their public, hence artificial, significance. It would then seem an article of rationalist dogma that any law or policy that privileges one natural type over another breeds natural antagonisms and potential fights between natural types. Affirmative action, for instance, reincorporates body symbolizations into law and policy, consequently exposing those ugly feelings Western Civilization has tried to subdue under the veil of law. Yet the history of Western jurisprudence is the history of incremental de-classification of categories of persons for legal protection, hence political incorporation. But as law constricts around body types it loses its integrative capacity and is pulled apart by the centrifugal forces of blood feuds.

Alain Finkielkraut, much in the tradition of Eric Voegelin and Hannah Arendt, is one of the few in this century to understand how the narrowing of law around blood type signals the end of the state and the rise of the nation to political prominence, but in a new name. He informs us scornfully, but epigrammatically, that "[T]here are increasing numbers of people who, when they hear the word 'thought,' they reach for their culture." The object of his scorn is the current smarmy "I'm ok, you're ok," subjectivist, moral/cultural relativism now part of the academic post-modernist love-fest. It is the abstract, emotionally disarming, "humanitarianism" that emerged from the Second World War. It prompted Robert Frost's characterization as the "more righteous-than-thou, regimented, collectivist love that is sweeping mankind." But in an obvious attempt to rescue classical liberalism and the universalism it sought to convey, Finkielkraut traces the corruption of rationalism not to the *philosophes*, but to their more contemporary progeny, especially Johann Herder.

Finkelkraut's effort to rescue the Enlightenment turns on the rejection of the *ratio* of the Enlightenment that has spawned the materialist penumbra of so many modern pseudo-philosophical insights. Its current manifestation rests on a "parochially conceived nationalism." He turns, instead, toward a reason (*nous* as the Greeks conceived it) that aims at a "spirituality of humanism." It is the humanism of Plato that subordinates all men in their quest for the divine order. But it is the old nationalism that has assumed the mantle of "culture" which has issued in the paroxysms of racial sentiment found recently in Hitler, then in post-colonial Africa, finally to reach American shores in the form of multiculturalism.

It was Herder who rejected reason's quest for the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, and degraded everything to a contingent of history and circumstances. Besides robbing man of his freedom to make history and shape circumstances, Herder reduced humanity to ethnic egoisms: "Everything which was divine was human, and everything human, even the *logos*, belonged to history." Taking Hegel one step further, Herder marched variegated "reasons" through history; every group, every geno-type, one by one, to their natural conclusion in "cultures." Indeed, it was history, not reason, that rode into Jena on horseback and carried with it Herder and the multicultural credo: "Let us follow our own way....Let men say what they like, good or bad, about our nation, our literature, our language. They are ours. They are us. That's all that counts."

At the ontological level, Finkelkraut understands with Voegelin and Arendt that the end of the state and the rise of the nation signaled the end of the Old Regime and gave all power to ethnicity. But worse, it paved the way for the modern, temporal, egoist rejection of ancestry, class, faith, and transcendent norms,

provided by truth and goodness. The nation became an inverted solipsism, "associates...represented by the same legislature." Finkelkraut is aware of the true meaning of this inversion; the transposition of man into god. Thus it was not the "revolutionaries," not the *philosophes*, who were drunk under a "Promethean delirium," who denied the uniqueness of ancestral development in history and sought to reshape it around an "imaginary entity: man." Instead, it is the "*clercs*," the intelligentsia, whose imagination can be reified in the collective soul of the people; through their will they can "transfer to man the powers which the ancient alliance of throne and altar had reserved for God."

The way Finkelkraut conceives it, "human culture" is the nemesis of the globalist sentimentality that emerged out of the Second World War. The icon of this sentimentality turns out to be the contemporary villain, UNESCO. There is a cultural revivalism in UNESCO, where progressivist illusions are transformed into an internationalist political agenda. Swords are beaten into plowshares, and the last shall be first, or at least equal.

The ghosts of Diderot, Condorcet, and Voltaire were there to guide the delegates toward the new, abstract, intellectually contrived Man. The very Man Nietzsche rightly despised, and the United Nations was there to show us why. In a frenzy of egalitarianism, UNESCO sought to re-humanize race by affixing it to a cultural particularity. In order to be truly human, humanism had to respect persons, but only in the concrete form of their existence. Applied to reality this theorizing led to the democratization of culture under the banner of equal historical opportunity.

The charm of this equalization of culture is that it validates the assumptions of each one of them and thereby diminishes the humanity proclaimed by the Enlightenment. But in an ironic denial of