

Buckley suggested changes to the piece she replied to him with a quote from Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest: "I tole you twicet, Goddammit, NO." Whittaker Chambers, for one, did not think Paterson worth the trouble.

Cox, a senior editor of *Liberty* magazine, occasionally mars his otherwise excellent book by proselytizing for his libertarianism in a heavy-handed fashion and taking it for granted that the reader should share his interests. "*The Fountainhead*, as everyone knows, is the story of Howard Roark," he writes at one point, as if casual familiarity with the works of Ayn Rand were a prerequisite of cultural literacy. Perhaps the remark is meant ironically, although similar if less egregious passages elsewhere in *The Woman and the Dynamo* suggest that is not the case.

Cox in any event finds in Paterson an ancestral libertarian far more to his liking than other contemporary individualists: Mencken and Nock are too elitist for his tastes, and he lets the reader know it. Nock fares particularly poorly at Cox's hands, painted as an outright bore. Of *Memoirs of a Superfluous Man*, Cox writes, "its subject, even to a tiresome degree, is Albert Jay Nock." As provocative as such judgments may be, they do serve to cast into sharp relief the real differences between the relatively more populist Paterson and the unabashedly Olympian stances of Nock and Mencken.

His periodic forays into sectarianism do little to undermine Cox's achievement. In illuminating the life of Isabel Paterson, he has rendered a service not only to libertarians but also to conservatives and indeed to all who have an interest in the intellectual history of the American right. *The Woman and the Dynamo* came about in part, in fact, at the urging of Russell Kirk, who saw in *The God of the Machine* a classic worthy of inclusion in the Library of Conservative Thought series that he cultivated for Transaction Publishers. Kirk asked Cox to write an introduction

for a new edition of Paterson's book and pressed him to pursue his study of her at greater length. We can be glad that Cox took his advice, for *The Woman and the Dynamo*, as a serious and insightful treatment of an individualist firmly committed to the best of the American tradition in letters and political philosophy alike, is a work that Dr. Kirk would surely have commended.

A New Camus?

Graham McAleer

Icarus Fallen: The Search for Meaning in an Uncertain World, by Chantal Delsol, *Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2003. 350 pp.*

FOR GENERATIONS, American intellectuals have had reason to assume that their European counterparts—especially in France—were all on the Left, varying in their basic commitments only to the degree that one was a "hard" or "soft" Freudian Marxist. Chantal Delsol's book will begin to correct this impression, offering a glimpse of a quite different and quite robust current of contemporary European thought. What is more, for those who remember having to put up with the conceits of Jacques Derrida's writing, or that of the likes of Umberto Eco or Jean-François Lyotard, Delsol's volume will help heal those memories. *Icarus Fallen* is written in a straightforward style and Delsol's ideas are rendered with absolute clarity. Readers need not fear wading through turgid prose to find an argument; indeed, Delsol's views are often advanced

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with positively luminous images.

A central contention of *Icarus Fallen* is that “contemporary man”—at least contemporary European man—rejects all authorities, whether these be religious or ideological. This is not to say that “we” contemporaries reject all moral order. We want moral models to follow, but these models must appear to us “from atop an invisible pedestal.” That image wonderfully captures the degree to which we seek moral guidance while simultaneously rejecting any social, political, religious, or theoretical order that would make such guidance possible. For if contemporary man fears one thing, it is the authoritarianism of any absolute, of any measure not of one’s own making.

And so, as Delsol subtly puts it, we are not morally “barbaric,” but rather, morally “uncivilized.” We can all agree that certain things are *evil*, there is a “consensus of repugnance”—but we cannot agree that there is some common *good* which should be aimed for and which ought to be an ordering principle in our lives. We do not think any such good would even be desirable, since it would limit our freedom. Thus, truth must be rejected in principle, for truth entails obligation. Today’s basic moral gesture is a facile moral skepticism atop a bedrock of repugnance. This is the dogmatism of our age. With only disvalue acknowledged to transcend the sovereign individual, Delsol concludes, Western man is now a creature of aversion and fear.

Like her compatriot Pierre Manent, Delsol believes that contemporary man is virtually a new species. A constant theme of her book is that the old ways—whether of Greece and Rome, Christian Europe, the Enlightenment, or the totalitarian utopias that were, Enlightenment’s offspring—are all of them hopelessly outdated. The survivor of these historical moments is not to be satisfied by any of them. But the survivor has also learned something from these historical disap-

pointments. Man, it is now palpably obvious, has a basic condition, beyond which he cannot aspire on his own. The re-emergence in Europe of illiteracy, poverty, plague (AIDS), religious militancy (Islam), and war all point to one obvious conclusion: “The rejected universe has come back and is taking shape within the very wake it left behind.” Liberal progressivism, for example, held out the hope and the expectation that politics might be abolished, for in the democratic order, each is both ruler and ruled. But after Kosovo, even contemporary Europeans now see that command and obedience (and so, politics) are inescapable. Having had to acknowledge certain structural elements of the human condition, contemporary man hates what he now knows himself to be. Favoring equality and justice, he must nevertheless admit the centrality of commerce, family, and government, with all their attending inequality and injustice. These things are thought despicable, yet all the historical attempts to live apart from them have proven disastrous. Hence, contemporary man is a fallen Icarus.

But if monarchical theorists of absolute power were so much more correct about the reality of power than the utopians, it is still not the case that Bossuet and Maistre can be our guides today. Man is rather like a creature with an exoskeleton, a creature surrounded by certain realities that the fallen Icarus now necessarily acknowledges. Yet if contemporary European man is just like pre-modern man respecting the exoskeleton, what is interior to that carapace—the subjective appropriation of the conditions of reality—is completely different: the fallen Icarus is a new species. Lost to original sin and rejecting salvific teachings, everything now hinges on how to live this tragic condition. If only the courage of the Stoics could be a response. But nothing of that sort is possible.

Contemporary man has taken refuge in

negativity, for in that there is at least a protection from the tyranny of the absolutes of clergymen and utopians alike. "By experience, we know that evil lies in the excesses of the good," writes Delsol. This insight helps explain a phenomenon that must have puzzled many of us. Our contemporaries who are indignant at injustices are almost maniacally so (think of those liberal cars with *all* those angry bumper stickers on the back). The reason for this strident indignation is that since a hierarchy of values is no longer admitted, the indignant have no way to establish proportions among injustices. Anger becomes indiscriminate.

It is easy to imagine that Delsol is a brilliant university teacher, for her book is peppered not only with outstanding observations about contemporary society, but also with carefully drawn parallels between ideas that are so old as to be thought laughably benighted and their hyper-modern, sophisticated recapitulations. Thus, women who are carrying handicapped unborn babies are now strongly encouraged to have abortions, whilst there are campaigns to ensure that HIV-positive mothers are helped to bring their children to birth. And if Christian Europe had Satan, the new Europe has him still. The evil of our age remains *diabolos*, "he who separates," for what cannot be tolerated by contemporary man is racism, exclusion, denigration, and hate—that which sets people apart. Thus, to reject homosexual marriage is seen by contemporaries as diabolical, for it excludes some from the social institution by which the rest of us shape our lives. *Icarus Fallen* is simply full of superb insights like these. Clearly, Delsol is a master diagnostician.

The new realism of contemporary consciousness was perhaps first articulated by the later Camus. Like Delsol, Camus reaffirmed the category of tragedy. Although he goes unmentioned, Camus—at least the later Camus—is very much a figure

like Delsol's fallen Icarus. He rejected Christianity and religion as much as he did secular utopianism; his realism forced him to accept what theologically goes by the name of original sin, but in Camus goes by the name of tragedy; and he rejected anything but the most "open" of solutions to our human problems, emphasizing individual conscience as the only salvation from secular and religious tyranny alike. Delsol clearly has some sympathy with the later Camus. Like Camus, her response to our contemporary sensibility is a heightened provisionalism. Hence, her interest in prudence and individual conscience. But there is something that gives pause here. While we can join in her admiration of the sense of liberty that has emerged from Europe's transformations, we might want to hesitate and think carefully about her apparent conviction that individual conscience can judge the moral law. Prudence separated from objective norms is at best moral "situationism," and at worst rank opportunism. But what else could a theory of *individual* conscience be?

Camus thought that human beings all shared what he called "the borderline," a structure of repugnancy that rejected slavery and abuse. This borderline affirmed human dignity and a human commonality. The idea is similar to Marcus Aurelius' three basic laws, and Aurelius had a wonderful sense of the common good. But Camus and Aurelius had little to say about the *contents* of conscience, and Delsol appears to follow them in this. A more complete treatment of conscience than the one offered by Delsol would acknowledge, if not the social origins of conscience, at least the way in which social life reinforces conscience, and the way that moral consensus, law, and institutions affirm conscience. An Aristotelian prudentialism without the modeling offered by social order is a non-starter, I would have thought. And so, while acknowledging the diagnosis—which is

brilliant, no question about that—we might still have legitimate qualms about the prescription offered in *Icarus Fallen*. Can we rest content when told that we must endure the paradox of a human condition we despise and make radically provisional all answers to this paradox, since we are “defined more by a history than by a status, by evolution as much as by static nature”?

Delsol believes the current European illness is best understood as a failure to hope, but I wonder if it is not simply a matter of pusillanimity. After all, what had Churchill to do with prudentialism? It is not too much to say that one man’s convictions about the greatness of Britain, and his ability to bring the authority of British history to the conscious awareness of the British, saved one Icarus from a very nasty fall indeed. Margaret Thatcher relied on the same authority at the time of the Falklands War, and the power of that authority to energize the people was not found wanting. What is more, it does seem that *Icarus Fallen* ignores the variety of opinion in Europe, the pockets of reli-

gious populations, the contrast between urban centers of liberalism and the continuing traditionalism of the countryside, the newfound intellectual spirituality of the Church, and the strides being made locally by conservative (but not radical) forms of Islam. There is undoubtedly a phenomenon of European (and not just European) sensibility accurately captured by the figure of a fallen Icarus, and it may well describe a majority of the population. But recent surveys in England show that a majority of young people believe in God, think that abortion is treated too casually, are convinced that capital punishment needs to be re-introduced. An overwhelming majority expect to marry and have children. Are the realities identified by Delsol as the permanent casing of human life not perhaps more extensive, and less onerous, than she is willing to admit? Can we not realistically hope that human beings—even our contemporaries—will in the end be able to discriminate between tyranny and authority?