

common weal. Over the past forty years, we have become “a culture of unfettered greed at the top, which places personal gain above public responsibility. . . . People with great wealth and power have a special responsibility to *refrain* from doing things their wealth and power might enable them to do, but at the same time will undermine the trust that our democratic capitalist system depends on. . . . Cynicism about our economic and political system encourages everyone to act selfishly, even when widespread selfishness imperils the entire system. Without a shared sense of public morality, the individual feels powerless against the greedy behavior of others, and impelled to act selfishly in defense. ‘Why should I be a chump?’ he asks.”⁵⁵

This selfishness can only be justified by a rhetoric of merit, so it is no surprise that our elites now traffic in a moral discourse that assigns the poor and insecure responsibility for their own deprivation. Or else the blame is off-loaded to the implacable laws of the competitive market and the unstoppable forces of globalization. Our company must pay the CEO four hundred million dollars while driving down the wages and abolishing the pension plans of our workers because that’s what the market dictates. Either we get responsibility on steroids (I deserve everything I’ve got and you deserve your ever-increasing economic insecurity) or the total evasion of responsibility (the market made me do it). Any sense of a shared destiny or of possible collective action to shape that destiny is lost. It seems that Louis Brandeis, as quoted by Reich, was right: “We can have democracy in this country or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of the few, but we cannot have both.”⁵⁶

The predictable flip side of a winner-take-all society is anger and scapegoating. The concentration of wealth in a few hands, like the concentration of power in a few hands, inspires fixing the blame for our ills—or a solution of them—in one location. Writing in 1937, facing the rise of fascism on his right and the numerous communists among his friends in America, Burke proclaims that “democracy can be maintained only by *complete sophistication*,” which he contrasts with the Marxist reduction of motive to economic interest and the fascist’s simplistic appeal to place all hope in “the man of destiny . . . the *Führer*” (AH, 168, 166). Comedy is “worldly” in a usage of that term meant to be laudatory. It “avoid[s] the cynical brutality that comes when . . . [we are] outraged by the acts of others or by the needs that

practical exigencies place upon us" (*AH*, 170). Comedy—and democracy—acknowledges and works with the ways humans act to survive and prosper in this world, without imagining some achieved purity of motive or some salvation provided by a great leader, whether human or divine: "The comic frame of acceptance but carries to completion the translative act. It considers human life as a project of 'composition,' where the poet works with the materials of social relationships. Composition, translation, also 'revision,' hence offering the maximum opportunity for the resources of *criticism*. . . . It might provide important cues for the composition of one's life, which demands accommodation to the structure of others' lives" (*AH*, 173–4). On this reading, liberal democracy is a comic political form insofar as it strives to accommodate this cacophony of multiple voices and motives while also giving each person the opportunity to undertake the work of "composition."

Liberalism's critics from the left are echoed by a variety of comedy's critics who bristle at this impulse toward "accommodation." Most damning is comedy's acceptance of prevailing social forms. The first thing Rosalind and Celia do on entering the Forest of Arden is to buy a farm. The prudent couples in Austen and Trollope are not only oriented toward heterosexual marriage, but also to a "competence." These comic couples perhaps marry without parental approval, but never without enough money to maintain a solidly bourgeois household. Even if we accept that comedy rejuvenates the existing forms, that it overcomes the dead hand of the law and of the past by making legal forms and parents amenable to the youthful couple's desires, society is, at best, re-formed, not trans-formed. Sexuality must, in the end, be sanctioned in the public form of marriage—which means that all other sexual acts are criminalized.⁵⁷ Comedy is both "heteronormative" and participates in the societal policing of transgressive sexual desires and acts. I think this argument confuses two distinct issues. The first is the intolerance, and even punishment, of nonsanctioned sexuality. Here liberalism can only, as ever, strive to expand tolerance, while also paying attention to the potential harms certain sexual acts (especially where there are inequities of power) can do. As always, finding the right balance between tolerance and enforced restraint is difficult and must be continually renegotiated. Protests against where the line is currently drawn are to be expected—and welcomed. The

idea, after all, is to better accommodate human desire—and the work of politics will be, in some instances, precisely to hammer out what desires have legitimate claims on the polity's tolerance, even on its help in reaching fulfillment. But living with others does mean that not all desires will be deemed legitimate, so the complaint that liberal societies deny some desires has, in itself, no bite. The argument here must rest on the particulars of which desires are being denied, not on a general charge that not all desires are accepted. To advocate general acceptance of everything enables "radical" criticism by evading all the hard work of actual dialogic exchange with others who have reasons to offer for the restraint of some desires.

The second issue partakes of this taste for anarchistic positions in radical critiques of liberalism, but should be separated out as a distinct complaint. At stake is the need or desire for public forms that either aid in the expression of or serve as the means to recognize what might be seen as "private" desires. The publicness of comedy, its placement of love on the stage, highlights both the exposure to ridicule and the desire for approbation. To scorn forms (like the form of marriage) because they violate the ineffable, private quality of my love is to seek a refuge in the sublime from the difficulties of living with others, in using the language and forms afforded to us by society. Again, comedy is attuned to the need, even the imperative, to continually improve our language and our forms so as to better accommodate desire. Liberalism is committed to giving individuals as much leeway as possible to re-form what is inherited from the culture and the current idols of the polity. But comedy does not indulge in the dream that true liberation lies in the escape from all forms—and, thus, rejects the generalized criticism of the melancholy Jaques (in *As You Like It*). We can—and should—argue endlessly about the forms we have and their adequacy, but the argument for formlessness is as fruitless as other transcendental arguments that abjure the human scene.

What about the form of property—and the institution of the market? Is Marx right that capitalism renders the promise of liberal freedom an illusion, and that only the abolition of capitalism could provide a real freedom underwritten by material security? Liberalism has always forefronted the distribution of power as a safeguard against tyranny. Central to that strategy has been the notion that a modicum

of economic sufficiency, some resources held securely apart from the command of others or of the state, is an important bulwark against oppression. Thus, modern liberalism (or social democracy) has relied heavily on regulation of economic power (in terms of how the economically powerful can treat employees and in terms of combating the market's tendencies to concentrate economic power and to reward various "insider" practices) and on redistributive tax policies and social insurance mechanisms. State regulation, even intervention, in the market has been favored over abolishing the market or attempting centralized management of it. For a leftist like Paul Smith, liberalism's diffidence in this regard renders all its political hopes barren.

The liberal's tone is certainly outraged and militant; but it would be a mistake, I think, to take it as radical opposition. Rather, the discourse of the *bien pensant* liberal acts, and has always acted, as the *loyal* opposition, pressing for the right to dissent and question, but never finally questioning or dissenting from the very system that has produced both it and its master. Indeed, the condition of liberalism could be the dictionary definition of precariousness itself: utterly dependent on the system and its rules, always in a supplicatory and petitioning relation to it, wanting to have its voice heard, but certainly never willing to overthrow it.⁵⁸

I will plead guilty as charged. The key point of contention here is the elision of American democracy with American capitalism. Accept the complete coincidence of the two (and the additional assertion that capitalism drives American foreign policy), and Smith's position follows. But if the "rules" of democracy actually function to provide some cherished rights and to offer the means to challenge capitalism's arrangements, then stepping outside the game is not a preferable alternative to working within it. Liberals prefer to take their chances with constitutionalism and the give and take of democratic politics both because the alternatives are unpalatable and because they believe they have a persuasive account of how society should be arranged. Unless our democracy is a complete fraud, one that does not in fact allow for the less powerful to have a voice in prevailing social arrangements, winning one's way to changing those arrangements through the political means afforded by that democracy is preferable to the alternatives. Which is another way of saying that the protections against tyranny offered by constitutional liberal democracies have a better track record than any competitors and it would take a mighty persuasive argument

to convince me (and many others) that those protections were worth risking in a play for revolutionary transformation.

That liberals have told their story badly in recent years does not prove the failings of the “system,” but the failings of the liberals. The American right has eaten the left’s lunch over the past fifty years by going out and convincing, by hard and sustained rhetorical work, the American people that their version of American life and values is the one to endorse. The right transformed the American political landscape from a general acceptance of New Deal liberalism to the current attacks on Social Security and other entitlements. If Smith thinks “social democracy” of the northern European sort is a craven surrender to ruthless capitalism, he at least owes us some indication of an alternative he would accept as truly “radical.” In other words, how far does his radicalism extend? Does it include a need to scrap our democratic framework? The “loyal opposition” Smith derides accepts that there is no substitute for this hard work of convincing the demos of its version of the world and of how America should act within it, both at home and abroad. The alternative to doing that work of persuasion, of looking like “supplicants,” it would seem, entails claiming that change through democratic means is impossible—and, thus, an enlightened minority is justified in pursuing other means toward change. Since the radical left no longer discusses those means very often (certainly Smith’s book never addresses any means he thinks would actually effect the changes he claims to desire), I feel entitled to the suspicion that righteous complaint, not actual reform or revolution, is dearest to these leftists’ hearts.

In short, a liberal like me does believe that the return of ruthless capitalism in our day greatly threatens the great strides the modern democracies made prior to 1970 in spreading the benefits of prosperity and peace to many. The imperfections of liberal democracy’s pre-1970 achievements are not to be ignored, but they do not, in my opinion, mean that liberal democracy was on the wrong track, or that it necessarily cannot deliver the effective freedom that it presents as its goal. At stake, fundamentally, is whether one believes that our democratic forms and our democratic heritage afford the resources required to combat the depredations of contemporary capitalism. The liberal believes that we know what mechanisms to employ—including vigorous state regulation and progressive, redistributive tax policies—

to get the kind of results we want. What we lack at the moment is the popular endorsement that would enable using those means. That lack is not some in-built fault of the “system,” irremediable except by destroying the system.⁵⁹ It is the fault of a liberal-left that has not made a persuasive case for its vision of the good society.

Comedy, in other words, is about change, but it is not about revolutionary change. And the same charge can be laid at the door of liberalism, and, for that matter, of pragmatism. With their emphasis on habit and on “the trail of the human serpent” carried in our signs and concepts, James and Dewey respect the values and commitments we carry from the past into the present. They are almost Burkean (Edmund Burke now, not Kenneth) in their sense that “reconstruction” must work with the materials bequeathed us. Starting from scratch is no more in the cards for the pragmatist than is radical doubt. “The longing for a total revolution” (Bernard Yack’s phrase)⁶⁰ has been a persistent dream in modernity—and one that does not have a promising track record. It is hard to dissociate such longing from visions of purity, of nonaccommodation, and of uncompromising recititude. The miracle of liberal democracy, from the first successes in ending the religious wars of seventeenth-century Europe through to the present, has been the ability to maintain relatively peaceful societies in which the rule of law and orderly succession of power from one group to another has triumphed over civil war. Violence is the all-too-ordinary reality in many societies today, as it has been throughout history. The ability of some societies to establish another ordinary reality, the boring placidity of bourgeois life, only seems contemptible when the threat of violence is so remote as to be forgotten. The Bush administration’s violations of the rule of law do suggest that complacency about our liberal democratic order has lulled us into a false sense of its permanence. The eternal vigilance that is the price of liberty has, it seems, deserted us. A highly questionable election in 2000 and an administration that ignored basic civic liberties should have precipitated constitutional crises, but instead these were accepted peaceably by a citizenry perhaps too committed to its own immunity from political conflict. The Achilles’ heel of liberal democracies is revealed when there are abuses of power that are not well addressed within the given procedural forms. The tactics of the civil rights movement from 1955 to 1965 and of the antiwar movement from 1965 to

1971 were an experiment in how to influence the powerful (both in government and in society more generally) when accepted forms of political suasion (the ballot and working with elected representatives) were not getting the job done.

Still, I would argue, the success of such tactics depends on, among other things, the enlisting of large numbers. Nothing is forbidden ahead of time; the abolition of private property and the establishment of a "command economy" are fully acceptable if you win a majority of your fellow citizens over to that view through persuasive public speech. Revolutionary violence (like its cousin, terrorism) often comes from small cadres who, in failing to create a mass following, resort to violence out of despair or impatience or dogmatic certainty. Confident in their vision of how things should be and contemptuous of those who do not share their vision, revolutionaries are careless about causing suffering in the world that is. Hostile to the framework of liberal democracy, caustic about its continual compromises, they are likely to look at legal forms as "shams," as providing cover for the sins of the powerful instead of protection for the many. The bourgeois virtues are easy to despise, but the stability and peace they enable are very difficult to recreate.⁶¹ That's why Dewey, like Gandhi, argues that violent means toward change can only prove counterproductive: "The means to which it [democracy] is devoted are the voluntary activities of individuals in opposition to coercion; they are assent and consent in opposition to violence; they are the force of intelligent organization versus that of organization imposed from outside or above. *The fundamental principle of democracy is that the ends of freedom and individuality for all can be attained only by means in accord with those ends*" ("Democracy Is Radical," *EDI*, 338).

Democratically produced reform does not rule out abolishing some forms or institutions inherited from the past. But it does make such abolition less likely given people's investments in those inheritances. More likely is the reconstruction of those forms and institutions to better accommodate present needs and desires. The drive is toward a more capacious ability to satisfy a wide range of desires located within an appreciation of how stable forms provide the conditions for peace. So, yes, I admit the charge that comedy, like liberal democracy, is suspicious of visions of total transformation. The hard work of persuading a large number of one's fellows is the means

toward transformation that democracy offers—and rhetorical success is almost certainly going to require that I bend to some of my interlocutors' views. The notion that I will be able to dictate to them what they should believe is a fantasy—and a dangerous one. Kenneth Burke offers a sober account of what the “work of peace” can accomplish and of the obstacles it should expect to encounter.

In such conflict [between people with different views], one's natural mode of action will be that of education, propaganda, or suasion. And any instigations to select one's means from the realm of violence must come solely from the violence of those who attack him for his peaceful work as propounder of new meanings—a state of affairs which he will strive to avoid as much as possible by cultivating the arts of translation and inducement. He will accept it that the pieties of others are no less real or deep through being different from his own, and he will seek to recommend his position by considering such orders of recalcitrance and revising his statements accordingly.⁶²

Comic accommodation is the work of peace insofar as it takes turning the opponent into an enemy off of the table. You do not get to eliminate your opponent, drive him off the public stage, in a democracy. You only get the opportunity to persuade him to adopt your views—just as he gets the chance to do likewise. And this rhetorical contest (Burke has a distinctly agonistic conception of comedy and of politics) takes place within a framework that provides for the peaceful coexistence of different fundamental commitments (“pieties” in Burke's terms).

We reach here what I take to be a core assertion of secular comedy. Pluralism is understood as the irreducible multiplicity of different human conceptions of the good; the irreducible multiplicity of various selves occupying this world at the same time and engaged in pursuing different goods; and the irreducible multiplicity of goods, not all of which are compatible with one another, that any one individual might pursue. There are existential evils that humans can try to mitigate, but which they can never fully avoid or cure. But there are also humanly caused evils—and one recurrent question appears to be whether those evils are the result of pluralism or the result of our efforts to cure pluralism. Comedy strives to accept pluralism, to learn how to affirm human life in all its chaotic diversity. Comedy insists that cures for pluralism are far worse than the disease. We are not going to be saved from the messiness of living with others. But we

can act within our social relations, as political animals, to minimize the evil we do to one another. The work of peace is the work of continually adjusting ourselves to the presence of others and to our need to cooperate with them to sustain life. The work of comedy is to foster first the “charitable attitude” that can help us to avoid the temptation of blaming others for our ills and then, possibly, to move us toward a more positive love that delights in the fact of others who are not like me.

Crucially, in order to forestall the tragic victimage that also accompanies the anti-liberal intolerance of plurality, Burke repurposes the notion of “socializing losses.”⁶³ (This strategy activates Nussbaum’s notion that social solidarity is the alternative way—contrasted to angry striking out at others, the self, or the world—to respond to human dependency and vulnerability.) By generalizing guilt, by making us all responsible for the abiding fact of conflict and disagreement, by accepting that all of us retain differences that are not fully compatible with the prevailing order, the socialization of losses eschews the fantasy that one great purgative killing could save us from the slings and arrows of our daily interactions, from the inefficiencies of democracy. Where tragedy trains our focus on “the individual hero” who attains a kind of “divinity” through serving as the sacrificial victim, comedy “replace[s]” the hero with “a collective body” (*AH*, 268). Such a strategy spreads the suffering around even as it tells us that there is no permanent, once-for-all end to suffering, no one thing we can do to make the world pain-free. It protects us from the delusions of redemption, from the fantasy that the rubs of pluralism or the aches of the body can be eliminated. And it provides us with a social, this-worldly, non-extreme response to the ongoing presence of evil in human affairs.

Although Burke could not identify an author of the phrase, “the socialization of losses,” the term originates in the economic sphere. The politics of such socialization in recent years have been dramatic. Even a Republican administration embraced socializing losses when it came to the financial collapse of fall 2008, but Republicans generally have been hostile to devices for such socialization adopted in most liberal democracies during the twentieth century. That a society should spread the pain of natural disasters by providing emergency relief out of the public coffers is now almost universally accepted, although FEMA’s deficiencies in the wake of Hurricane Katrina suggest such

relief was hardly a priority for the Bush administration. But even Social Security, and certainly national health insurance, are suspect for the American right at this point in time. That the ills of old age and of poor health might be mitigated by social insurance schemes that spread the economic cost among the whole collective is anathema to a right wing that seems determined to locate pain squarely on victims deemed responsible for their condition. Contempt for the weak, for losers, is the other side of a righteous sense of entitlement to what I garnered by my own efforts and that the demonized government is trying to take away from me. Any sense that we are all in this together, or that our collective is shamed by its neglect of the most needy, is banished. Only “girly men” (in the memorable words of Arnold Schwarzenegger) entertain such thoughts, such sentiments.

Examples of the “socialization of losses” in literary comedies are fairly rare. The Duke in *As You Like It* responds to Orlando’s attempt to gain food by threat of violence by telling him that, in the Forest of Arden, “your gentleness shall force / More than your force move us to gentleness” (act 2, scene 7, 101–2). In the movies, the most famous socialization of losses takes place at the end of *It’s a Wonderful Life*, a scene that is both wonderfully gratifying to watch and almost always subsequently disavowed as sentimental. I have come to believe that “sentimental” is the name given to an emotion one fears, for whatever reasons, to acknowledge. Why do we feel (on reflection) the need to disavow the vision of goodness and of social cooperation that, at first blush, moves us so deeply at the end of Capra’s movie? The Holocaust shows us something deep about human potentials; to disavow its lesson is an act of massive bad faith. But to acknowledge the human capacity, often exhibited, for generosity, love, fellow feeling, and cooperation is somehow to make oneself prey to sentimental fantasies. A slightly different (and less iconic) scene at the end of Peter Weir’s 1986 film *Witness*, brings the nonviolent Amish community together in front of armed killers—and the community’s willingness to face death together defeats the power of the gun.⁶⁴ We can recognize here a variant of the political strategy pioneered by Gandhi and adapted to American circumstances by the civil rights movement. “Socialization,” collective action, can achieve things impossible to the individual agent. It is not just that the left needs to mobilize this power of the collective; it also needs to develop the various ways that

the desire to be part of something larger than ourselves can be articulated and exemplified in the public square. The joys of participation in effective social (or political) action are underappreciated and underexperienced today. Dewey's description of democracy, among other things, reminds us that politics is, not exclusively, but not trivially, about collective action—and that participation in collective action can be a powerful source of individual satisfaction, pleasure, and meaning.

A similar moral intuition about justice underlies the argument that the fruits of economic prosperity should also be shared across the whole society. There are many ways to describe the growing economic inequality in the United States.⁶⁵ Here's just a few: from 1990 to 2005, corporate profits were up 106 percent and corporate CEO pay up 298 percent, but corporate worker pay rose only 4.3 percent. Since 1979, the top 1 percent of American wage earners has seen their share of the national income more than double; the bottom 90 percent has had their share of the national income decrease. Do we really believe that all the economic growth since 1979 has been the result of the efforts of only 10 percent of America's workers? These differences in income over the past thirty-plus years have been registered in a redistribution of the nation's wealth upward. The top 1 percent now holds 225 times more wealth than the average household, up from 125 times in 1962 and 131 times in 1983. The top 10 percent of Americans now own over 60 percent of the nation's total wealth, the highest total since 1929, while the bottom half (that is, one out of every two Americans) owns less than 3 percent of the total wealth of the country. We are in the process of destroying the middle class that was created between 1930 and 1970. What made the rise of the middle class possible? A mixture of progressive taxation, social insurance programs (and the economic transfers they entail),⁶⁶ and, crucially, a national culture that acted on the feeling that we were all in this together, that my prosperity relied on the efforts of many others, and that my prosperity was shameful if my neighbor was in need.

Liberal democracy has a story to tell, a story about how the polis can mitigate suffering and loss through a collective response to those ills, about how all members of a society can contribute to and enjoy a collective prosperity. It is a story with strong emotional appeal, one that taps into preexisting sympathies and the strong desire to participate in a collectivity of which one can be proud. Like many others,

I fault the Obama administration for lacking either the vision or the courage (I don't know where the fault lies) to tell that story when working for health care reform. Yes, the ingenuity of our social insurance schemes is a marvel of modern governance, but the more direct story about how we should be a nation that cares for its sick, its poor, and its elderly (every single one of them) needs to be the central focus. The left did a terrible job of "selling" the health care bill. It got mired in the details instead of telling the big story. Dramatic cases of people lacking care, of having lost their insurance after getting sick or because of being laid-off, are all around us. The suffering of those people should have been highlighted—and the ways the legislation would alleviate that suffering made clear. Much more was at stake here than bending the long-term cost curve or the difference between a "public option" and an individual mandate to buy insurance from private providers. Yes, the complexities mattered, but the first priority was to get the voters' "buy-in" to a vision of the country we want to be. The administration failed to translate the vocabulary of "hope" and "change" from the campaign into the hope that a change in our health care system would provide for millions of our fellow citizens.

Battered from both the left and the right, liberals in America seem to believe that they lack a compelling story to tell, that the harsh rules of international economic competition and geo-political strife dictate an entirely different story, one that highlights insecurity and the consequent inability to trust anyone else. There is no doubt that American liberalism has been in serious decline over the past forty years—and that this decline is tracked almost exactly by the growing economic inequality in our country. The master narrative of who we are as Americans and who we aspire to be has been captured by the right, although the liberal vision still resonates for a sizeable minority. To the liberalism of fear that emphasizes protection against abuses of power and alleviation of unnecessary suffering, the left needs to add its more capacious vision of a flourishing life for all in association with others. Liberal democracy needs to become what people desire, not something viewed as an impediment to individual fulfillment. Against the right's vision of an individualistic freedom underwritten by a fear that sees all but my most intimate others as threats and by the desire to accumulate wealth for me and mine, the left must articulate and embody its vision of caring and sharing relationships with all our

fellow humans. And that work begins with repudiating the ways our tough-minded right has made the more tenderhearted vision of the left unspeakable in the public sphere, tainted as hopelessly sentimental or utopian. Our ordinary experience in caring for others and in finding our most satisfactory and meaningful moments in those loving interactions needs to be mobilized. Admittedly, translating from these generally face-to-face encounters to larger social scenes is difficult, but faint hearts never won fair polities.

The right devoted great attention and considerable resources to shaping and then disseminating its story.⁶⁷ Conservatives have understood the rhetorical core of politics in a democracy. It is also true that conservatives from Nixon on have fought dirty, that they have politicized (i.e., ramped up conflict in) areas of American civic life that were previously apolitical, that they have used the resources of money and power in profoundly anti-democratic ways, and that they have ignored (at best) and demonized (at worst) vast numbers of their fellow citizens in creating their image of a unified America. Liberals have a tougher task insofar as they are trying to craft a vision of communal care for a diverse population and are trying to combat the concentration of wealth and power that threatens our democracy. But explanations for liberal failure cannot serve as an excuse for inaction. Only if liberals counter the conservative narrative on the terrain of a “large vision” can the comic vision of a caring, sharing society prevail.

32. Ibid.

33. Sean McCann, *A Pinnacle of Feeling: American Literature and Presidential Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). See also my review of McCann's book, "Our Presidents, Ourselves," *American Literary History* 22, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 232–42.

34. Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, 362.

35. Paul Krugman, "The Pain Caucus," <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/31/31krugman.html>. Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2003), offers a brisk summary of the liberal suspicion of sacrifice (as a prelude to a misguided, in my view, attempt to salvage the term for leftist politics): "The idea of sacrifice seems particularly insidious, combining as it does a whiff of barbarism with a streak of self-abnegation. Sacrifice means relinquishing one's own desires in the service of the master's. It has unpleasant overtones of self-repression and self-laceration, of bogus appeals to tighten one's belt in the general interest. It is what women do for men, infantrymen do for generals, or what the working class are expected to do for the benefit of all" (274–75).

36. F. H. Bradley, quoted from Cranston, *What Are Human Rights?* 5.

37. Kahn, *Sacred Violence*, 134.

38. See Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 153–60.

39. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso Books, 2004), and Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), have been the two most influential recent writers to address the ways that states justify killing. My thinking on this whole topic has been deeply influenced by Dustin Ells Howes's wonderful book, *Toward a Credible Pacifism: Violence and the Possibilities of Politics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009).

5. Liberal Democracy as Secular Comedy

1. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, section IX.

2. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 208–9.

3. John Bruns, *Loopholes: Reading Comically* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2009), xx.

4. Kieran Ryan, "Shakespearean Comedy and Romance: The Utopian Imagination," in *Shakespeare's Romances: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Alison Thorne (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 17, 31.

5. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 186.

6. Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 17–18.

7. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 206.

8. Robert Frost's deflationary response to this view of tragedy is worth recording here: "It is immodest of a man to think of himself as going down

Frye's ultimate source for this claim in Aristotle's *Poetics*, where comedy is described as the imitation (*mimesis*) of characters beneath us.

23. G. Bruns, *Tragic Thoughts at the End of Philosophy*, 122, 123–24, 112.

24. Richard Wilbur, "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World," in *New and Collected Poems* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), 233–34.

25. Stanley Cavell, "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 351. A concern with the "ordinary" runs throughout Cavell's work, but a reader interested in pursuing these issues in Cavell might well start with the essays "Knowing and Acknowledging," and "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*," both in *Must We Mean What We Say?*

26. The first hundred pages of Burke's *Attitudes toward History* pursue the question of whether "to accept the universe" or "to protest against it" (3), a question Burke takes directly from William James. Of course, Nietzsche also takes up this issue of (to use his terms) "affirmation" or "nihilism."

27. Robert Frost, "Birches," in *Collected Poems* (Cutchogue, N.Y.: Buccaneer Books, 1986), 152–53.

28. Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (1994; repr., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 217.

29. See *AH*, 166–75, for Burke's extended discussion of the "ambivalence" of comedy, its "charitable attitude towards people" mixed with a "shrewd" understanding of their motives. Comedy is "neither wholly euphemistic, nor wholly debunking" (166).

30. C. L. Barber celebrates Rosalind in *As You Like It* as an exemplar of double vision: "Romantic participation in love and humorous detachment from its follies . . . meet and are reconciled in Rosalind's personality. Because she remains always aware of love's illusions while she herself is swept along by its deepest currents, she possesses as an attribute of character the power of combining wholehearted feeling and undistorted judgment" (*Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*, 233).

31. Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 182.

32. Kahn, *Sacred Violence*, 109–10.

33. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 309–10.

34. Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 257.

35. Terry Eagleton's embrace of a tragic world-view (which he then attempts to reconcile with his leftist politics) in *Sweet Violence* hinges on his acceptance that Thanatos, the death-drive, is embedded in all humans, and thus, some kind of sacrificial rite is needed to express it. Or, in other moods in the same book, Eagleton suggests that the creation of a new society must involve the destruction, necessarily violent, of the old. In either case, Eagleton accepts the inevitability of human-inflicted violence on other humans—and thus concludes that tragedy is unavoidable.

36. Northrop Frye, "The Argument of Comedy," in *Comedy: Developments in Criticism*, ed. D. J. Palmer (London: Macmillan, 1984), 78.

220 Notes to Chapter 5

37. Iris Murdoch, *Bruno's Dream* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1969), 221.

38. *Ibid.*, 279–80.

39. *Ibid.*, 287.

40. *Ibid.*, 293.

41. J. Bruns, *Loopholes*, 38–39.

42. *Ibid.*, 8.

43. Interestingly, it is the philosophers Rorty, Nussbaum, and Cavell who have most influentially insisted on the power of stories in our day, although the literary critics have now been picking up this theme. Alan Malachowki, *Richard Rorty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), esp. chap. 2, is good on Rorty's repeated assertions that metaphors, images, and stories are more efficacious rhetorically than arguments. See also Rorty's "Response to Putnam" in Brandom, *Rorty and His Critics*, 88–90. Nussbaum weaves considerations of the power of narrative throughout *Love's Knowledge*, but the last five pages (308–11) of the essay on Beckett contain a particularly persuasive connection of narrative to emotion, a connection that helps account for the power of stories.

44. Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 189.

45. In this respect, Murdoch's *The Time of the Angels* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1966) can be taken as a pendant to *Bruno's Dream*. Meeting the woman he loved in his youth after many years, Marcus Fisher "looked forward to seeing her again. With her the ordinary world seemed to resume its power, the world where human beings made simple claims on one another and where things are small and odd and touching and funny" (248–49). But that ordinary world is unattainable in the novel, which is dominated by Marcus's brother Carel, whose reaction to living in a godless world destroys everyone around him.

46. See Robert M. Polhemus, *Comic Faith: The Great Tradition from Austen to Joyce* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). For Polhemus, "the makers of comic fiction . . . compose secular visions to convince people imaginatively of the possibilities of attaching themselves to large processes of regeneration. Potentially the greatest effects available in comic art would seem to be attainable by combining the intensity of the comic moment—the mood of laughter and release—with the promise of some form of enduring life in which we have a part, and that is what the best modern comic fiction achieves. It asserts . . . the power of mind and body over the universe of death. To the sudden flow of mirth, it adds comic structure" (18–19).

47. I had the opportunity last year (2009) to hear Nussbaum deliver a lecture on Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, entitled "Equality and Love at the End of *The Marriage of Figaro*: Forging Democratic Emotions," that presented a vision of comedy fairly close to the vision I am offering here. This paper has yet to be published as far as I know. I also had the opportunity last year to ask Stanley Cavell in a public forum about the connection between his views on comedy and a liberal democratic politics. Cavell denied any connection; he

thinks of his philosophical work, he said, as apolitical and did not want to speculate on any possible ways to translate his views into political terms. But see also the essays collected in *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy*, ed. Andrew Norris (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006) and Cavell's response to those essays for an extended consideration of the relation between his work and politics. Rorty characterizes Dewey as advocating a "replacement of the morality of obligation by a morality of love" in "Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism," in Shook and Margolis, *A Companion to Pragmatism*, 265–66.

48. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 164.

49. Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 215.

50. Stanley Cavell, "The Incessance and Absence of the Political," in *The Claim to Community*, 282–83.

51. Bakhtin, *Problems in Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, 177.

52. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 345.

53. My all too brief comments on forgiveness here are primarily indebted to Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), and Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Repair* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). See also Judith M. Green's interesting discussion of these issues in *Pragmatism and Social Hope* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), chap. 1.

54. Alison M. Jagger, "Feminist Ethics," in *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*, ed. Hugh LaFollette (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2000), 348–74, offers a good overview of the contribution of recent feminist philosophers to ethical thinking. *Setting the Moral Compass: Essays by Woman Philosophers*, ed. Chesire Calhoun (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), is a particularly excellent collection of contemporary feminist philosophy, and the essay by Virginia Held, "Taking Care: Care as Practice and Value," 59–71, a particularly good introduction to the "ethics of care."

55. Robert B. Reich, *Reason: Why Liberals Will Win the Battle for America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 78, 99–101. The phrase from Lasch comes from the title of his 1996 book *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W. W. Norton).

56. Reich, *Reason*, 12.

57. This argument is most forcefully made in the work of Michael Warner. See his *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), and *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002). Cavell addresses this concern that the Hollywood movies he favors are heteronormative by seeing that fact as historically contingent and pointing to more recent comedies that explore the possibilities and strains of "an improvised family, which includes the *philia* of friendship and of marriage within it" ("The Incessance and Absence of the Political," 300). More generally, I would argue that comedy is against forms, of which heterosexual

marriage is one, or ideals, such as the idealized nuclear family, tyrannizing over the messy and more various arrangements people make in their effort to craft sustainable and satisfying lives. The forms and ideals are to be jettisoned, not people's happiness, so I think comedy is generally on the side of eccentric, the new, the creative, not in favor of a rigid adherence to received practices.

58. Paul Smith, *Primitive America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 123. Another example of the radical left's vision of a benighted America beyond the reach of democratic revision can be found in Donald Pease's *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

59. My focus here on the "hard left's" contempt for rhetoric, for making a case in the public sphere, steals a number of arguments from Michael Bérubé's *The Left at War*, arguments that Bérubé adapts from the work of Stuart Hall.

60. Bernard Yack, *The Longing for a Total Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

61. Richard Rorty, in his usual provocative fashion, first tried to rehabilitate the term "bourgeois" in his 1983 essay "Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism," reprinted in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 197–202. And now we have Deidre N. McCloskey's ongoing multivolume defense of the bourgeois virtues. Readers interested in McCloskey's project can begin with *The Bourgeois Virtues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). Let me register here some of my uneasiness with McCloskey's arguments, which in my view both overgeneralize about "capitalism" and tie the bourgeois virtues too tightly to capitalistic economic practices. But McCloskey still offers a very needed corrective to the knee-jerk hostility to the bourgeois virtues (of prudence, of domestic care, of sobriety and moderation, of loyalty, and of nonheroic, nonconfrontational tolerance of others) characteristic of the cultural and political left over the past two hundred years. Not to say that the bourgeois virtues are sufficient for a comic polity; at the very least, generosity, which a priggish bourgeois all too often lacks, needs to be added to the list. The "comic discount" comes hard to the upright middle classes.

62. *Permanence and Change* [1935], 3rd. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 272. M. Elizabeth Weiser, *Burke, War, Words* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008) provides a useful contextualization of Burke's work in relation to questions of war and peace generated by the lead-up to and actual prosecution of World War II. Burke was raised as a Quaker. (Thanks to Bill Balthrop for this last piece of information.)

63. "We cannot say enough in praise of the concept, 'the socialization of losses,' as a pun for liquidating the false rigidity of concepts and for inducing quick convertibility from moralistic to economic categories. The operation of this salvation device in the investment field has its counterpart in the 'curative' doctrine of 'original sin,' whereby a man 'socializes' his personal loss by

holding that *all* men are guilty. . . . Hence the more we look about us, the greater becomes our belief that the 'planned incongruity' in the concept of the 'socialization of losses' gets us pretty close to the heart of things. The formula seems basic for purposes of 'putting things together,' by establishing modes of convertibility between economic, religious, and esthetic vocabularies. But we have not as yet been able to locate the author of the term. So far his contribution to the architecture of thought remains like that of some anonymous mason who contributed an especially accomplished bit of stonework to a medieval cathedral" (*AH*, 312–14). Burke's later repudiated this hopeful deployment of the "socialization of losses" and insisted, fatalistically in my view, on such socialization always transmuting into forms of scapegoating. See his "Appendix: On Human Behavior Considered 'Dramatically,'" added in 1954 to *Permanence and Change*.

64. See my essay, "Looking at the (Alter)natives: Peter Weir's *Witness*," *Chicago Review* 35 (Spring 1986): 35–47, for a fuller discussion of the film.

65. The figures used in this paragraph come from three different sources: a summary article in the *Business Insider* that can be found at <http://www.businessinsider.com/15-charts-about-wealth-and-inequality-in-america-2010-4>; The Economic Policy Institute, whose information can be accessed at their website: <http://www.epi.org>; and the U.S. Government's Bureau of Economic Analysis, whose information is available at the website <http://www.bea.gov>.

66. Against the specious charge that the globalized economy made us do it, there is the example of the many European nations that have not seen an increase in economic inequality since 1979 commensurate with that in the United States. It is true, however, the market forces have pushed fairly dramatically in the direction of inequality. The nations that have mitigated those economic effects have done so through a combination of taxes and transfers. (See the information on this score in the *Business Insider* article cited in the previous note.) In other words, the solution to growing economic inequality is political, not economic. Markets need to be regulated in relation to politically articulated and instituted goals. If we are going to follow policies that destroy the middle class, we should at least choose those policies, for whatever reasons, openly and be willing to abide with their consequences.

67. There are numerous studies now available of the concerted public relations campaign that played a large role in the rise of conservatism over the past forty years. Two good places to start are *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s*, ed. Bruce J. Schulman and Julien E. Zelizer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), and Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009).