

PREFACE

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT WORKS OF THE MIND OF VARIOUS sorts, and the people who wrote or spoke them. The common subject of the essays is the relationship between power and conscience. A politician like Lincoln or a political writer like Burke, as much as the author of a novel or a poem, is engaged in acts of imagination for good or ill. At the same time, he is answerable to the canons of accuracy that prevail in the world of judgment between person and person. These writers and several others whom I deal with recognize that the will of the powerful can induce a blindness to the nature of their actions which is one of the mysteries of human life. All of the essays in this book are concerned with that mystery, too.

Much of my subject matter was dictated by the end of the Cold War. I have been troubled by the thought that America, in these years, was bypassing an opportunity to resume a connection with our most generous ideals: respect for the dignity of the person, and a commitment to improve the justice of a society that looks to its own welfare and liberty. The United States has at times sought to be exemplary. We have unfortunately become evangelical; and part of the reason is the wish to stand unopposed at the center of the world. This ambition is conventional,

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not particularly democratic, and in no way imaginative. It is driven by energetic fantasies.

I write to defend the human faculty which several of the writers I most admire—Wordsworth, Ruskin, Gandhi, Virginia Woolf, and Martin Luther King, among others—have made us think of as *moral imagination*. This is the power that compels us to grant the highest possible reality and the largest conceivable claim to a thought, action, or person that is not our own, and not close to us in any obvious way. The force of the idea of moral imagination is to deny that we can ever know ourselves sufficiently to settle on a named identity that prescribes our conduct or affiliations. Moral imagination therefore seems to me inseparable from the freedom that is possible in society.

Cultural identity, on the other hand—the subject of the second essay here—presumes and works to reinforce a social fixity that obstructs imagination. Accordingly, I would rank it among the fictions that Francis Bacon described as “idols.” He divided them in his *New Organon* into four kinds: *Idols of the Tribe*, *Idols of the Cave*, *Idols of the Market Place*, and *Idols of the Theater*. Idols of the tribe are the offspring of the human love of order: the conceit that “man is the measure of all things” and confidence that the world is more orderly than it actually is. Idols of the cave, market place, and theater are the products of distortions of mind that spring from personal disposition or preoccupation; from vacuous belief induced by the vulgar and fanciful misuse of words to convey a counterfeit sense; and from systems of religion and metaphysical philosophy, abetted by false science. It will be seen that in Bacon’s view, the idols of the tribe command all the rest; and I concentrate on the idols of the tribe in their contemporary forms. In our time, when the measure of man

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is subdivided into ethnic, racial, or national man, idols of the race, nation, and ethnic group enjoy a special authority. Everyone, it is said, needs to belong to a tribe of some sort. I give reasons to doubt the truth of this as a premise of sociology, or as an insight into psychology.

“The Meaning of Patriotism in 1789” offers a pertinent comment on a related theme: the recent acceptance of the inevitability of nationalist loyalties. At the moment that marked the launching of the highest hope for individual rights and democracy, an argument for sympathy without regard to nation or person, and an argument for loyalty to a significant group, were debated by Richard Price and Edmund Burke at a memorable depth on both sides. Price and Burke asked whether loyalty to one nation could matter as it once had, now that democratic rights appeared on the verge of obtaining general assent. A merely national loyalty—which Burke defended more subtly than is often realized, and which Price ranked below the impartial love of liberty—was not, in 1789, lightly supposed to deserve the assent of free minds.

The next three essays concern some particulars of American morale that emerged forcibly in the 1850s. Lincoln and Whitman are the heroes of this part: I write about them at length because I believe that the debates of the 1850s in America, like those of the 1790s in Britain, by force of historical circumstance and the accidents of genius produced discoveries of lasting value concerning the relations of men and women in society. The accurate imaginings of Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Dickinson, Whitman, and many others still run ahead of our own conventions of thought; but many Americans feel a peculiar closeness to Lincoln and Whitman. I think this order of affection is justified, and, beginning with “Lincoln and

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Whitman as Representative Americans,” the essays joined in this section offer a provisional attempt to say why.

“Lincoln’s Constitutional Necessity” looks at his political thought in the context of an ideal of individual freedom and a principled belief in equality—ideals to which Lincoln held firmly and which he did much to interpret definitively for his time and our own. The essay also tries to account for the potency of a leader at a moment of choice, and for Lincoln’s apparent belief in historical necessity as an impersonal force. “Shakespeare, Lincoln, and Ambition” puts to the test of practical criticism my belief that the versions of imagination employed in politics and in literature are not separable. It shows Lincoln exemplifying in words and action, whether consciously or not, a self-knowledge and a wariness that were a resource available to him from Shakespeare’s tragedies.

“The American Psychosis” renews a question that has perplexed me as it has other commentators on American society and literature. From the humblest to the most original and erudite talents, why have so many American artists been captured by the belief that your soul may “absolve you to yourself” (to borrow Emerson’s words)? Why does the typical hero of American fiction so often seem to fit D.H. Lawrence’s characterization, “hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer”? The answer relates to a Protestant conviction of the inviolability of the self: a belief that is necessary to the strength of a liberal society but fatal when treated as a guide to the conduct of life. “How Publicity Makes People Real” brings out an opposite tendency of American culture, which nonetheless draws on the same compulsion and anxiety. It is not enough for us to be real to ourselves, within ourselves. We want to be completely special, yet we want to be completely normal.

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All of the data of mass culture conspire to persuade us that we hardly exist outside the social world in which we are most visible.

Self-absorption and uninhibited aggrandizement are familiar extremes of character in the United States. They have also marked the character of the nation as a whole. “The Self-Deceptions of Empire” is an appreciation of a theologian and social critic, Reinhold Niebuhr, who saw more searchingly than others at mid-century the combined effects of the belief in America’s uniqueness and a commitment to worldwide expansion. Niebuhr wrote to chasten the assumption that we are good (uniquely good) and that we are therefore situated to punish our enemies, enlighten our friends, and mobilize the diffusive benefits of the global market. Many readers who believe they are following Niebuhr’s wisdom have gotten his emphasis wrong. They think he said, “There’s evil out there in the world, and we must act correspondingly with a practical sense of the limits of our ability to correct it.” On the contrary: he said that we harbor in ourselves both good and evil, just as other people do. I admire him as an iconoclast of the jargon of exceptionalism.

As the first section of the book introduces a contest between habitual loyalties and imagination, the final section points to the persistence of the contest today. My subject here is the intellectual environment in which contemporary varieties of patriotism and the American war on terror have flourished. The idea of the West as one side of a clash of civilizations forms a large part of that environment, and in “What Is the West?” I consider the version of the relevant history recounted by Niall Ferguson. “Holy Terror and Civilized Terror” urges the adoption of a rigorous definition of terrorism. We ought to describe as

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“terrorist” any act of deliberate violence that compasses the deaths of innocent persons in order to achieve a political end. State terror, such as Britain practiced in Kenya, Russia in Chechnya, and the U.S. in Iraq—state terror, as exemplified by our own state among others—differs morally in no way from the terror of the people we are in the habit of calling terrorists. Moral imagination affirms the kinship in evil of these two sorts of violence.

We pretend that our violence is not violence, that our conquest is not conquest, that a client state, because it belongs to us, is on the way to democracy. “Euphemism and Violence” interprets some linguistic symptoms of this bad faith. But new illustrations crop up every day. Think of the phrase “signature strike” to denote the purposeful killing of a possibly innocent person whose identity we do not know, on the ground that his pattern of contacts, movements and so on, his “signature,” makes him look like an enemy. Again, with a boyish privilege D. H. Lawrence would have understood well, prosecutors of the war on terror like to speak of the enemy as “bad guys.” No further definition is thought to be necessary. The fact that we hide our actions from ourselves ought to give us heart, in one sense, for it suggests that shame is still doing its proper work. But the prevalence of euphemism allows the self-deception of the powerful and the deception of the populace to continue. I have included at the end four additional comments on the predicament in which American democracy has found itself in the years since 2001. These are part of a journalistic commitment that I associate with the civic concerns outlined in the essays on moral imagination, cultural identity, and patriotism.

Two essays in this book require an additional prefatory word because their timeliness belongs to an earlier time.

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To begin with “A Dissent on Cultural Identity”: it has been argued that the spirit of national unity from the war on terror broke the charm of “culturalist” doctrine once and for all. Did I then overstate an ephemeral trend? An opposite challenge might be raised concerning the prediction of the effects of social media in “How Publicity Makes People Real.” This has been so spectacularly borne out by the growth of the digital-internet complex that the pessimistic view I offered may now seem an instance of scholastic understatement.

And yet, the preoccupation with identity still pervades the academy, even if more quietly than before. A triumphant faith sounds calmer than a militant faith. I was arguing chiefly against two single-minded theorists, Charles Taylor and Michael Walzer, and the political dangers I pointed to in their thinking still seem to me considerable. I have allies here—more than I found the space to acknowledge at the time. Anthony Appiah, in an early response to Taylor’s proposal of “cultural recognition” as a *right*, observed that no distinct line can separate the well-meant politics of recognition from the politics of compulsion. By every step you take in adding to the prestige of identity cultures, you contribute to make identity a political need with political leverage. From bureaucratization of the need comes official subsidy and supervision, and thereby an additional check on individual thought and action. This is never done without a cost to freedom; and it adds to the uneasy sense that a merely individual identity is not enough.

On the face of present-day discussions, cultural identity may have taken an underground course, but it remains in fact as influential as ever. Beyond the boundaries of the multicultural debates in North America, the ideology of

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identity has been deployed in the creation and definition of new states in the Balkans, in the former Soviet republics, and in the Middle East. Liberal believers in cultural identity, trained in part by the writings I discuss, have drafted constitutions for those countries. Thus the orthodoxy of the 1990s has made a lasting impact on the practice of American foreign policy, as well as on the rules and sanctions of American society. Nor have the effects been altogether happy. Assurance by American legal experts that a democratic constitution for Iraq should be based on tribal identities (Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish) did not check but excited the violent disorder of 2004–2006. That was an admonitory instance of translating cultural recognition into political practice.

In the eighteen years since I wrote, the theorists of cultural identity have not altered their views so much as they have widened the grounds on which they seek to carry conviction. In the recent and ambitious writings of Walzer on comparative politics, for example, one detects a convergence between the treatment of revolutionary nationalism and of religious piety. Walzer is struck by the extent to which movements of national liberation have been driven by religious enthusiasm. This was the subject of his first book, *The Revolution of the Saints*, an analysis of the Puritan revolution in which political radicalism and religious zeal were shown to go hand in hand; yet the revised view comes close to saying that radical politics can never transcend the religious motive from which it springs. Walzer plainly regrets this finding; he would prefer a secular radicalism; but he presses hard the inference that nonreligious politics in a new nation are a lost cause. Modern militants bring with them, into the revolutions they lead and into the states they forge, more of the old beliefs than they realize.

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Or what comes to the same thing: they have to deal with people who are attached to the old beliefs. Revolutionary radicalism in politics is thus shown to be secular only on the surface of events, and only for a generation, at most.

More expansively, Taylor has argued in his recent work that secularization itself was not secular. Whig history and the habits of reductive social science may have deceived us into omitting religion from the common understanding of modernity; but professed faith and the “lived religion” of pious communities in modernity were always much closer to the heart of the Enlightenment project than we were led to suppose. Along these lines, in *A Secular Age* Taylor develops a historical background for his argument on cultural identity and recognition; and it is clear that the political and historical projects go together. In a lecture given in the early 1990s, at Yale Law School, he announced that the peoples of the former Soviet Union had come out of a “deep freeze”; the revived ethnic enthusiasm was the result of a thaw that returned the tribes to their deepest instincts. The implication was that the natural state of man *is* one of ethnic identification—mere politics being as unfriendly as ice to the human touch. The context left no doubt that the freeze had not been the result of the oppressive artifice of totalitarian politics alone. A similar derangement would be imposed by any politics that sought to free itself from the thick or robust identity conferred by culture. For culture is the authentic reality. And politics? A superimposed set of hopeful expectations. Close to the heart of any authentic politics must be religious practice, which is part and parcel of the real enlightenment of secular modernity.

Both of these provocative and influential writers assent to the theory that a bond exists that is more humanly compelling than the moral duties of men and women toward

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each other in the light of our shared condition on earth. I do not acknowledge any such deeper obligation, and rather cast my vote with the Huxley of *Ends and Means* and the Orwell of *1984*. I see no point in trying to maintain a distinction between ideology and religion. Ideology is religion that has not built its church, and religion is ideology grown lofty and distinguished. This was the common view of the educated in liberal societies half a century ago. If it remains so today, we who hold the belief have lost our voice. The fiction of cultural identity is now so well entrenched that it has been possible for recent advocates of civil rights to argue that sanctions against “hate speech” are justified, since insult, carried by words alone in the absence of physical menace or a threat to livelihood, tends to impair the self-esteem of individuals. They say it does so by lowering the collective self-image of the group. Yet this argument presumes that the vulnerable persons have always already delegated their identity, their morale, and their empirical consciousness to the named identity of the group. At home and abroad, such an assumption reinforces the virulence of the same fixed identities it says it wants to reform.

Is there a connection between group identity and the destruction of privacy? I think there is. “How Publicity Makes People Real” was written several years before the invention of Facebook, but it offered an almost self-evident projection from tendencies by then impossible to mistake. Broadcast therapy and reality TV had accustomed people to finding themselves most real when most revealed. Two goods were supposed to be accomplished in this way. The confessing person is spared anonymity and what is said to be the loneliness that makes anonymity a curse. Also, he or she is put in immediate and visible

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contact with a circle of helpers. I am writing two months after the revelation that the national security bureaucracy of the United States is far on the way to collecting all possible information about every person in the United States and much of the rest of the world: friends, habits, patterns of consumption, assets and debts, travels, tastes in reading and eating and music, political orientation, random curiosities, financial and medical history. Young people may have lived all of their conscious lives with the assumption that these things were known already, or could be known; but the storage of a comprehensive pool of secret data under secret laws is consistent with neither enlightenment nor democracy.

So extended a regime of publicity can only serve to undermine and degrade personal autonomy: my conscious ability to govern my actions. Considered as an aesthetic experience, the virtual boards and walls and rooms and screens and links may yield a new way of making your life a work of art. The destruction of privacy gives a window into a theoretically unlimited number of lives and the pleasure of a mediated experience that can be enhanced and intensified to the limit of waking existence. But the knowledge that comes from a web of personal communications overseen by the state assures the transparency of a one-way mirror. You may look with pleasure at the new accessories, applications, constituents of yourself, but the state takes in your look. One recalls the warning of Bacon that the minds of men and women are a haunted mirror, “an enchanted glass, full of superstition and imposture, if it be not delivered and reduced.” There may be an inward connection, after all, between the discipline of moral imagination and the patience required to draw back from our appetite for images.

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Bacon spoke for half of the critical calling of imagination when he noticed the susceptibility of the mind to waking dreams and wishful thinking: a temptation the more seductive when the illusions are pleasing to collective self-love. Whitman spoke for the other half when he said that a recovery was always possible through acts of inspired judgment: acts, he would have us realize, in which an unswerving self-trust may accompany an ingrained self-suspicion.

Somehow I have been stunned. Stand back!
Give me a little time beyond my cuffed head and
slumbers and dreams and gaping,
I discover myself on a verge of the usual mistake.

One would like to live in a country that could say this to itself.

“Shakespeare, Lincoln, and Ambition,” which appears for the first time in this book, was part of a Spring 2012 commemorative series organized at Yale University by David Kastan. Several of the other essays began as public lectures, and I am especially grateful to Richard Levin and Anthony Kronman of Yale for the chance to contribute “Lincoln and Whitman as Representative Americans” to the 2001 DeVane Lectures on Democratic Vistas; to Ralph Lerner and Nathan Tarcov at the University of Chicago for proposing the seminars in Fall 2001 at the Committee on Social Thought which became “The American Psychosis”; and to Akeel Bilgrami for the invitation in 2007 to give the Edward Said Memorial Lecture at Columbia University on “Moral Imagination.” Discussions with the abovementioned friends and colleagues brought sharper detail and qualification to my arguments. I have revised most of the essays lightly to correct errors and infelicities and keep

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redundancy to a minimum. Two exceptions are “A Dissent on Cultural Identity” and “Holy Terror and Civilized Terror,” both of which have been checked in these smaller ways and also cut to rid them of local emphases that seem dated. Conversations with Dudley Andrew, George Kateb, Edward Mendelson, Steven Smith, and Georgann Witte deepened my understanding of many of the topics; and discerning comments by an anonymous reader for Princeton University Press convinced me to revise and expand the preface. I am grateful to Jackson Lears at *Raritan*, Robert Silvers at the *New York Review of Books*, Michael Walzer at *Dissent*, and Mary-Kay Wilmers at the *London Review of Books* for steady interest and encouragement. Alison MacKeen, at Princeton University Press, thought of the title and helped to shape the contents, and the book has greatly benefited from her advice.

Essays have previously appeared in the following journals, in some cases under a different title: “Moral Imagination,” *Raritan*, vol. 27 no. 4 (2008); “A Dissent on Cultural Identity,” *Dissent*, Winter 1995 (with replies by Michael Walzer and Charles Taylor); “The Meaning of Patriotism in 1789,” *Dissent*, Summer 2011; “Lincoln and Whitman as Representative Americans,” *Yale Review*, Spring 2002, reprinted in *Democratic Vistas: Reflections on the Life of American Democracy*, ed. Jedediah Purdy (Yale University Press, 2004); “Lincoln’s Constitutional Necessity,” *Raritan*, vol. 20 no. 3 (2001); “The American Psychosis,” *Raritan*, vol. 21 no. 4 (2002); “How Publicity Makes People Real,” *Social Research*, vol. 68 no. 1 (2001); “The Self-Deceptions of Empire,” *London Review of Books*, October 23, 2008; “What Is the West?” *New York Review of Books*, December 8, 2011; “Holy Terror and Civilized Terror,” *New Republic*, January 23, 2006; “Cheney’s Law,” *Huffington Post*, October 20,

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