First of the Year 2010

Volume III

Benj DeMott, editor

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BENJ DEMOTT, *editor*

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Contents

Part I: The Politics of Incongruity **1**

Fredric Smoler — *Towards a Definition of Torture (and America)* 9
Benj DeMott — *History in the Making* 16
David Waldstreicher — *The Return of Staughton Lynd* 31
Donna Gaines — *"Shipwrecked on the Wrong Side of Tomorrow"* 37
Sam Abrams — *American Renaissance Criminals* 42
Charles O'Brien — *Left Behind: The Rapture* 44
Sarah Beninga — "*There's a New Left in Town"* 50
Judith Gelman Myers — *Battles of Ajami* 53
Fredric Smoler — *Nailing Avatar* 60
Scott Spencer — *From Hunger* 65
Ben Kessler — *The End of Sensitivity* 70
Roxane Beth Johnson — *Lover's Discourse* 73
Al Aronowitz — *The Saddest Song Ever Sung* 74
Chuck D — *This Bit of Earth* 77
Fr. Rick Frechette — *All and Nothing* 79
Diane di Prima — *di Prima x 3* 84
Paul Pines — *Homage to Guy Lombardo* 86
Sam Abrams — *Visiting Hours* 88
Carmelita Estrellita — *10 Song Demo* 89
Philip Levine — *The Unknowable* 98
A.B. Spellman — *On Hearing Sonny ("Newk") Rollins in the Park on a Hot Summer Night* 99
A.B. Spellman — *Dear John Coltrane* 100
Charles O'Brien — *Free at Last* 101
Richard Torres, Robert Liss, and David Liss — *Roundball Roundtable* 104

Amiri Baraka — *WSQ Meets M'Boom: Another "Grand Collaboration"* 111
Dennis Myers — *Snowblind: The Political Biography of the Girl from the North Country* 114
Tom Smucker — *Why Murray the K Turned into Glenn Beck (and Dr. Dre)* 116
Bob Levin — *A Muy Macho Philly* 119

Part II: Michael Jackson: 1958–2009 **125**

Armond White — *21st Century Renaissance* 125
Eric Greene — *The Price* 128
Carmelita Estrellita — *I Want to Be 10 Years Old and Sleep with Michael Jackson* 135
John Bredin — *On the Wisdom of Stopping When It's Enough* 135
Ben Kessler — *The Many Deaths of Michael Jackson* 138

Part III: *First* Draft of History III **143**

Bernard Avishai — *Indispensable Man* 145
Uri Avnery — *The Tone and the Music* 146
Benj DeMott — *Nationtime* 148
Robert Liss — *His Cool World* 152
Uri Avnery — *Oybama* 155
Judy Oppenheimer — *The Politics of Love* 158
Bernard Avshai — *Who's to Blame II* 159
Benj DeMott — *Truth and Time* 165

Part IV: Trips **167**

Scott McClanahan — *Wurlitzer's World* 168
Rudolph Wurlitzer — *Slow Fade* 174
Irving Louis Horowitz — *Between Illusion and Reality in the Dream Factory* 198
Armond White — *Mike Leigh: Theatrical Neo-Realist* 205
Uri Avnery — *Rest Has Come to the Weary* 212
Amiri Baraka — *Jesse Jackson and Black People* 217
Alison Stone — *Justice* 240
Alison Stone — *The Only World You Know* 241
Peter Lamborn Wilson — *Iran … or Persia?* 241

Greg Rhodes — *The Future in the Past* 261
Fr. Rick Frechette — *Mystery & Anonymity* 275
Sam Abrams — *Memorial for Paine Day Banquet* 279
Scott McLemee — *The Radical Imagination of Cornelius Castoriadis* 284
John Akritas — *Autonomy or Barbarism* 287
Tom DeMott — *Bollinger's Whoppers* 293

Contributors' Notes **303**

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Part I

The Politics of Incongruity

Reviewing the previous volume in this series, *Inside Higher Education* columnist Scott McLemee recalled the "WTF?" sensation he had upon looking into early issues of *First of the Month*. Thankfully, he wasn't complaining. He used a phrase of Kenneth Burke's—"perspective by incongruity"—to valorize *First*-induced surprises. I'm betting this new volume's acute angles and flat-out contradictions are worth (to lift McLemee's own phrase this time) "the price of perplexity."

Take the leap (late in this *First*) from a Catholic priest's affirmation of "mystery" to a poet's Paine Day call for "abolition of religion/and other forms of superstition." There's a lot to be learned on both sides of this segue, and even more to be had since voices of true faith and Enlightenment are sounding off side-by-side. *First* isn't in the biz of muffling differences. Yet I don't think it's selling out to let you know the break between priest and poetic upholder of "Scientific Method" turned out to be less than irreparable. And not just because twenty years ago that priest became a doctor in order to better minister to needy Haitians. A few weeks ago the poet emailed me a transcript of an NPR report on one Jean Marie Lustiger who became cardinal of Paris though he was born Jewish.[1] (Lustiger's mother had sent him and his sister into hiding with a Catholic family before she was executed by the Nazis.) After I read the poet's choice-story, I forwarded it on to our Father who responded: "This is magnificent." Here are excerpts from what they agreed on:

> There used to be a joke in Paris. What's the difference between the chief rabbi of France and the cardinal of Paris? The cardinal speaks Yiddish…
>
> In 1999 Jean Marie Lustiger took part in reading of the names on France's day of remembrance of Jews who had been deported and murdered. He came to the name of Gesele Lustiger, paused, teared and said, "my Mama!" The effect in France during a time of revived anti-Semitism was electric…

> Among his most controversial observations, "I was born Jewish and so I remain, even if that is unacceptable for many. For me, the vocation of Israel is bringing light to the goyim. That is my hope and I believe that Christianity is the means for achieving it…"
>
> He confessed to a biographer that he had a spiritual crisis in the 1970s. He studied Hebrew and considered immigrating to Israel… But just at that time the Pope appointed him bishop of Orleans. He found purpose in the plight of immigrant workers…
>
> Lustiger was close to the Pope. They shared a doctrinal conservatism. He also battled bigotry and totalitarianism. For years, his name was among those who were considered to succeed John Paul. Without putting himself forward, the Cardinal joked that few things would bedevil bigots more that a Jewish Pope…
>
> The funeral for Cardinal Lustiger began at Notre Dame Cathedral with the chanting of Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead.
>
> Sometimes there are profound inconsistencies in our world.

Much of the writing in this volume addresses "profound inconsistencies in our world." A trio of pieces in the "Trips" section (where Paine-loving poet and mystery-minded priest bump into each other) are exemplary on this score. Uri Avnery confesses his "cognitive dissonance" when confronting the legacy of Zionism's pioneers: "How can one overcome the contradiction … between their many magnificent achievements in building a new nation, and the dark side of their actions and the consequences?" Amiri Baraka goes deep into double consciousness of the African-American nation in his narrative of the 1988 Democratic National Convention in Atlanta. Peter Lamborn Wilson writes lovingly about his '70s tourism in Iran even as he allows "post-colonial" discourse taught him to suspect "the entire hippie project of Romantic travel." ("I'm unable to repent or to write off my experiences as irrelevant crypto-reactionary delusions.") These writers realize they must live with contradiction because (as per Avnery) "it is the truth of our lives."

Such truth should produce a sense of wonder but heavy human contradictions often end ugly. Just look at America's political discourse. This volume of *First* covers the country's current debates and culture wars. There are pieces about Glenn Beck, Sarah Palin, and the "*First* Draft of History" section looks back on Obama's first year. It includes signs of disillusionment, but your editor cops to still being in the party of hope. It's a kick watching Obama's words and days inspire Americans to find positivity in incongruity. (I never liked will.i.am's lame praise-song but can't resist that gently triumphant post-HCR mashup of "Yes We Can(s)" with Boehner's nails-on-a-blackboard "HELL NO YOU CAN'T" rant.) *First*'s Afro-tinged variousness fits Obama's political aesthetic, though

there are members of our fam who are disdainful of his persona and politics. I think they're mad wrong, but who can blame them for not believing the hype. That unearned Nobel was no help to my side. And back on the block I'm reminded Euros don't deserve all the blame. At a Lenox Avenue screening of a (less than essential) '50s documentary on race and jazz, a white visitor to Harlem justified the film's dead lectures and tendentious prophecies by noting Obama had been born the year the film was made. In his mind, this was a … Big Fucking Deal. Obama may be on the side of angels, but there are plenty of blowhards in his corner too.

They're likely to keep irritating *First*'s anti-Obamaists. Still, we all know a balm—a secret (*pace* Bill Simmons—see p. 104) that should keep *First*'s team together. It's in the music in our heads.

This *First* gives love to Billie Holiday and (post-*Emancipation*) Mariah Carey, Bach and Coltrane, World Saxophone Quartet and M'Boom, Sonny Rollins and … Guy Lombardo. (What'd Buddy Bolden say in re incongruity?) There's a section devoted to Michael Jackson. Don't skip that even if you weren't knocked flat by Jackson's death. Take a hint from one elder *First*er. He allowed he'd "totally missed" Jackson, yet when he tried our MJ pieces (online at *First*'s website), he was moved by their emotional and intellectual "depths": "The Eric Greene piece was especially powerful."

Charles O'Brien's tribute to Al Green's producer, Willie Mitchell, is another keeper. Its title comes from "Free at Last," a track on the album *Living for You* that confirms O'Brien is right on the singularity of Mitchell/Green productions. This done-with-love song slips any political connotation in its title and lyric. "Free at Last" seems removed from black freedom struggles Aretha Franklin once sound-tracked in her '60s soul records. (Remember "Think" where Ree ooh-weeed out of nowhere, "Freedom!"?) Yet O'Brien touches on a Dreamy racial aspect of Mitchell-Green collaborations when he invokes the role of session musician Charlie Chalmers who played horn for Aretha and sang backup on classic Al Green records as a member of Rhodes Chalmers Rhodes. I recall being wow-ed years ago when O'Brien let on those back-up singers were white. A reaction that proves my head was stuck Up South, far from Mitchell, Green, Chalmers, and all those Memphis cats on Hi Records' creative margins.

O'Brien himself has often lived well out on the edge. But it's not easy for an outsider without capital (and without a lease) to stay healthy in the USA. Last summer O'Brien had to limp to an emergency room and

ended up having a leg amputated below the knee. In the hospital after mulling over his operation, he declared: "Time for a Change" (quoting Mick Jagger in *Performance*). That sounds almost scripted so let's slide from toney/arty pop reference to a more prosaic one. (After all O'Brien is nothing if not high/low.) While he was waiting in a rehab center for the U.S. health system to give him a leg up, O'Brien got stuck on a YouTube video of a live performance of "Abracadabra" by Steve Miller Band. Maybe it was the slightly surreal fiddle solo. Or perhaps he was grabbed by the goof quotient in the inane chorus (which Miller's back-up singer belted like it was no joke): "Abra-cadabra … I'm gonna-reach-out-and-grab-ya."

When *First*'s Carmelita Estrellita heard O'Brien was wishing away his bad luck, she wrote the following serio-comic tribute to him.

Footloose

the mystical o'brien
I'm not even sure how to spell his name
surrounds me like a siren
one more phantom not quite feeling his pain
(but wishing to just the same)

the new york public library's losing its mind
the books all speechless the windows blind
a million ideas now no one can find
walked out on one foot with charley o'bryan

the mystical o'brian
I don't know how to spell his name
but you can't blame me for trying
as he muscles his one-footed way
along the courageous path of the lion
(on a lease they won't let him resign)

the new york public library's not doing so fine
I'm dancing across rooftops with Charlie o'bryan
to a million operas now no one can find
from Jacques Cousteau to when poets were blind

the magical o'brien
only the gifted can come from behind
(what do you think made those poets go blind)
only the best of us get to be o'bryans
The rest of us'll just have to go on trying
(I'm making this up but if I'm lying, I'm dying)

O'Brien's unique standards (and wit) inform his review here of Michael Berube's *The Left at War*—a book purporting to comprehend debates on the left over the Iraq War (and the War on Terror). O'Brien zeroes in on the acknowledgements. That might seem unfair but it's actually a just way of highlighting the profs-first cluelessness of Berube's college try. The wackness of *The Left at War*'s academicism didn't come home to me until I got into the chapter on British cultural theorist Stuart Hall. Thirty-five years ago, Hall's Birmingham Center approach to working-class youth cultures amounted to an act of radical imagination so for a few pages I practiced non-resistance to theory. But then it became plain Berube was going to yammer on about his fellow academic's Thatcher-era essays and pass right by British polemicists who were much more engaged than Hall in the debate over the Iraq War. To cite just one instance, Berube fails to mention columnist David Aaronovitch (formerly of the *Observer*, now at the London *Times*) though Aaronovitch's liberal interventionism made him one of the most read—and reviled—journalists in the UK. (Aaronovitch is still pissing Brits off—calling on the "anti-war brigade" to look at Iraq's "miracle" election and admit "that there is definitely an important new democracy in the Middle East and that its existence is one of the most hopeful changes in recent times.")

The absence of Aaronovitch is only one of the holes in *The Left at War*'s Swiss-cheesy intellectual history. Berube misses all evidence of pro-interventionism among European '68ers. Nor does he seem aware the most urgent (and subtle) case for the invasion of Iraq was made by Kurdish politician Barham Saleh in his 2003 speech to the Socialist International. That speech was reprinted along with a wide range of pieces "for and against" the Iraq War in *First of the Year: 2008*. Passages in Berube's book indicate he's vaguely aware of a few of these articles. Which makes the narrowness of his take on "the left at war" seem more egregious.

His book is good for at least one (unintended) revelation though. Berube revives a dubious claim made by journalist George Packer in his Iraq book, *The Assassins' Gate*. Packer wrote up a conversation in a bar where one of America' best-known "left hawks," Paul Berman, supposedly displayed an appalling naiveté about the likely consequences of war in Iraq. According to Packer, before the U.S. invasion, Berman said (over drinks) Iraq would soon resemble the East Bloc in 1989. Berman disputes Packer's account (though Berube wouldn't know this since he never bothered to check with the defamed man) and, in print, Berman said exactly the opposite, cautioning against beamish projections about

prospects for democracy in Iraq. So what's the revelation? Thanks to Berube's bad reporting on that bar fight, I'm now pretty sure the author of *The* [*Character*] *Assassins' Gate* has maligned two writers he once counted among his closest friends and mentors. (I've written previously about how Packer's *Gate* traduced Kanan Makiya's expressions of honest, anguished idealism.)

Packer's readiness to throw his buds under the bookmobile hasn't enabled him to keep up with what's news in the Middle East. After offering tepid support for the invasion of Iraq, he argued against the Surge and for "breaking up" the country. A plan that never made sense and seems criminally dim now given the strong showing by Ayad Allawi's national coalition of secular Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds in the recent Iraqi elections.

All politics is local in the Middle East too. That's why certified experts tend to get less respect in *First* than folks closer to the action in that region's hot spots. Like Sheikh Jarrah's Israeli and Palestinian protestors represented here by Sarah Beninga. Or the Palestinian and Israeli co-directors of *Ajami* interviewed on p. 53. Their film transcends conventional political wisdom by getting down to facts of feeling in a Jaffa neighborhood "where Muslims and Christians, criminals and cops, Jews and Arabs collide." The co-directors' straight talk speaks volumes about virtues of their movie. But let me add-on one detail that might give those who haven't seen *Ajami* a sense of its moral seriousness. Co-director Scandar Copti comes from a Palestinian Christian family—yet the least sympathetic character in the movie (in which there are no pure heroes or heavies) happens to be a … Palestinian Christian. Copti has been accused (predictably) of being an Israeli collaborator. But *Ajami*'s self-criticism isn't about self-hatred. It's not a *Precious* thing. It's closer to being an Israeli Mike Leigh movie.[2]

Ajami is the best Middle Eastern film I've seen since *Turtles Can Fly*. It's hard to think of a more vital and/or timely movie. But it's not going to compete with *Avatar*, which Fredric Smoler takes down beautifully in his review here, though he responds livingly to the best case for the movie:

> The most interesting argument I have heard for *Avatar* deserving its success was offered by Jeff Lawrence, a student of comparative literature, someone young enough to have grown up playing the video games of the later 1990s, and for whom the first scenes of Sully inhabiting his new body recalled the pleasure of attempting to control another and virtual body. Those scenes are in fact thrilling, and even for someone who was never enchanted by late 1990s video games they recalled the pleasure of other stories about possessing another body, one more powerful than one's own. Sully's

> human body, however, is crippled, and the Na'Vi body he controls—and eventually exchanges for his own—is superhuman. This is a very particular kind of fantasy of a second body, and it possesses a special pathos … although perhaps all fantasies of possessing virtual bodies are energized by some kind of awareness, however subliminal, of the current and increasing limitations of the bodies to which we are so far indissolubly wedded.

Near the end of his *Avatar* piece Smoler evokes a graceful imaginary friend from a 19th-century novel that preps you for what comes next: Scott Spencer's bracing defense of the novel against *Reality Hunger*—an English professor's attack on the bright book of life and pitch for unmediated experience (i.e., the culture of reality shows, sampling, channel-surfing). Smoler and Spencer weren't born yesterday and that's one reason they're not at the mercy of today's junk pop. But their sense of a past isn't Boomer-bound either. I'm reminded of a line in an old Smoler piece where he quoted a friend who mused "if you don't know history, you don't know anything."

Donna Gaines develops the point in her comradely review here of Rory Nugent's *Down at the Docks*—the true fish 'n' crime story of how the proud city of New Bedford, former capital of New England's whaling industry, went down slow in the '90s. Gaines spells out what New Bedford's next gen could get from Nugent's gritty cultural history:

> Truth-telling can be redemptive too. For the seafaring grandchildren born to swallow this pain, and lost children who wander the wastelands wondering "What broke our fathers? Who were they? Were they losers or heroes? How did this day come to pass?" Nugent offers answers. There's no better reason to write cultural history.

There's plenty of cultural history in this volume's opening section. The '50s get a lot of play. An encounter between Beats and Billie Holiday is recalled by (the late) Al Aronowitz. Bob Levin digs into the down low side of '50s' pop life. I try to separate Whittaker Chambers' legacy from McCarthyism (and today's Movement Conservatism).

After I posted my essay at *First*'s website, Chambers' grandson David let me know online he was glad to see his grandfather's work taken seriously by someone other than a right-winger. I took the opportunity to ask him about his grandfather's friendship with James Agee. Their relationship was one of those incongruities that seemed to me to subvert the standard Buckleyite line on Chambers' life and times. David Chambers confirmed Agee was one of his grandfather's best friends. He told me a family story about a time when Agee visited the Chambers' Maryland farm. Hoping to dry out, Agee went to the fields with Whittaker and son (David's father). They were all supposed to be working but Agee was in

his cups and on a conversational roll. He kept talking until one Chambers noticed their visitor was bleeding. Agee had stuck a pitchfork in his own foot, though he was so far gone he hadn't noticed. His hosts had to rush him to the hospital.

Thinking back on this tale now, O'Brien's foot of pride comes to mind (though he's not on the sauce). But that's just personal. David Chambers' story belongs to a larger historical nexus, which I explore in my essay on his grandfather. Here's hoping this history still matters to readers outside his family.

David Waldstreicher makes a strong case here for the relevance of Staughton Lynd's radical interpretations of American history. Waldstreicher realizes Lynd's '60s' sense of possibility has a new resonance in our time. His account of how his hero got read out of the history profession by eminent Ivy liberals and one young Old Leftist, Eugene Genovese, remains news we can use. It rings true to me in part because I was a student of Genovese's in the '70s. I once made the mistake of invoking a (well-regarded) historical text[3] that was *verboten* to Genovese since it told how genteel mythmakers in the North helped create the ethos of Southern planters. Genovese preferred another account of Southern Romanticism's rise that made it all seem down home. Most professors (in my experience) would be easy on an undergrad citing a book not on the required reading list. But Genovese reacted like a once and future Stalinist.

Genovese's nemesis Lynd is, by contrast, a natural democrat. Lynd recalls in his recent memoir how he did his best scholarly work while he was teaching at a black college in the early '60s. His impulse to go to the people has always distanced him from know-it-all leftists. I'm recalling just now how he offended a New York crowd at a '90s Socialist Scholars' Conference by suggesting they might consider getting out of Manhattan if they truly wanted to find out what American workers want. (Lynd who lived in Akron wasn't above rubbing it in—"You can get bagels in Ohio.") Nattering New Yorkers in the audience muttered about Lynd's "nativism." That's certainly not the problem with his 2004 book *Lucasville: The Untold Story of a Prison Uprising*—a largely admirable effort to stop the State from railroading five men whom Lynd convincingly argues were unjustly sentenced to death for the killing of a guard during a prison riot. (Evidence Lynd marshals suggests the killing was actually ordered by the prosecution's chief informant.) Lynd wrote *Lucasville* to try to save lives of the Lucasville Five, but he had a "second concern" as well: "to describe the most extraordinary experience of

interracial solidarity I have encountered since leaving the South in 1964." Lynd implied an alliance of necessity between former members of Aryan Brotherhood (one of whom retained faith in Valhalla) and Sunni Black Muslims amounted to a model for American leftists—a contemporary equivalent of the sort of useable pasts for radicals he'd recovered in his historical work. Lynd's feeling for the Lucasville Five testifies to his (nothing is alien) humanism. But his sympathy for Mr. Valhalla et al. hints he'd veered away from his '60s ideal of growing radicalism rooted in American traditions.

Fredric Smoler's piece here on another travesty of justice in America underscores what's wrong with Lynd's late turn. Smoler's line on "enhanced" interrogation practices is marked by his clarity that shameful things were done on W.'s watch. He gives no quarter to torture-mongers in or outside the Bush Administration and he's aware neo-con fantasies of a forever absolved America had a dark side. But he also knows anti-Americanism is not a good option. Especially in a post-9/11 era (and in the Age of Obama).

Smoler is one of *First*'s double-truthers. He sees around American antimonies without losing his capacity for anger. This volume starts with his thoughts on the state of the nation's morality in the wake of waterboarding.

Notes

1. The reporter was Scott Simon.
2. See Armond White's analysis of Leigh's cinema on p. 205.
3. William Taylor's *Cavalier and Yankee*.

Towards a Definition of Torture (and America)

Fredric Smoler

> *"An innocent's life is at stake. The bad guy you have captured possesses information that could save this life. He refuses to divulge. In such a case, the choice is easy."*
> —*Charles Krauthammer,* The Washington Post

When my friends were going to law school in the early 1970s, I heard and on one occasion read about a striking piece of professorial bullying: the professor would ask a 1L whether he or she thought torture unacceptable under all circumstances, and the student would predictably as-

sure the professor that he or she certainly did. Then, in what was often reported as an exuberant, even gleeful tone, the professor would unfold the hypothetical: the nuclear weapon concealed somewhere downtown, the timer ticking away, the terrorist who alone knows the location of the concealed device in police custody, and notoriously sensitive to very low voltages—what were we then obliged to do? What advice would the student offer?

It was the hypothetical nowadays known as the ticking bomb, the one that appears in pretty much every episode of *24* (where torture is as infallible as it is ubiquitous), and it exercises a remarkable recurring fascination on apologists for torture. Forty years ago, the students never seemed to have had a good answer, and the professor effortlessly scored whatever point had been at issue—perhaps that the law often involves balancing tests, and that absolutist ethics are not for grownups. The anecdotes, which had a pretty clear Cold War as well as post-colonial context—torture had been used in Algeria, and had recently returned to the Greece of the Colonels, after having made a striking appearance in post-Goulart Brazil, also other places in Latin America, and in South Vietnam. The ticking bomb hypothetical anticipated two trends visible in much recent polemical writing about torture: some of the interlocutors were having much too good a time, and the ticking bomb was a substitute for thought as often as it was a spur to thought.

I remember finding the stories of the swiftly crumbling absolutism of the 1Ls irritating, and wondered why the students didn't offer equally aggressive counter-hypotheticals: what if the terrorist is peculiarly sensitive to the protracted rape, torture and murder of baby girls, but only when done not by anonymous CIA contractors, but by tenured professors of law? What if the serial slow and agonizing murder of a mere fifty female toddlers would do it, to save the teeming population of Spokane? What would the professor then advise? What if the terrorist is sentimental about Paris and Lyon, and upon the nuclear destruction of one of them will give up the location of the bombs concealed in more populous Shanghai and Canton? This was, of course, a species of *l'esprit de l'escalier*; I hadn't had to face the apparently irresistible bullying sophistries of law professors, and could never be sure how I'd have behaved on the spot. Also, in framing the counter-hypothetical I was having a bit too much fun myself, not least because the problem the hypothetical tried to address was not quite so easily banished. As it happens, the counter-hypothetical, which I had thought a *reductio ad absurdum* to be deployed against vulgar utilitarianism, was unwittingly apposite: it combined techniques

then employed, or soon to be employed, by actual regimes. Pinochet's interrogators flogged toddlers in front of the young mothers they were interrogating, and Saddam's interrogators showed films of women raped by regime interrogators to husbands, siblings, and parents.

The continuing fascination with the ticking bomb scenario remains remarkable, because it is not clear that a ticking bomb scenario on such a scale—and to achieve the rhetorical effect, scale matters—has ever occurred on American soil, nor a ticking nuclear nor massively lethal WMD of a more exotic kind, radiological, chemical or biological, on anyone's soil. Yet the apologists still wheel out that ticking bomb, every time; they seem less interested in finding an improbable nuclear bomb than in first setting a precedent, then extending it very far indeed. The elements of the original hypothetical were carefully chosen: low voltage, and a weapon capable of killing hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions. It is probably a moral and rhetorical mistake to say that you will never countenance anything that can be called torture under any circumstances, because that move keeps the ticking bomb crowd very confidently in the game, and risks eroding the will of some reasonable people to outlaw the torture that has actually happened, where exponentially fewer lives have been at stake. Note that the ticking bomb scenario is no longer the same one deployed in the palmy days of law professors who had seen *The Paper Chase* one time to many: last week Charles Krauthammer thought torture the only moral choice when a) any bomb is ticking, not just a WMD and b) "the extraction of information from a high-value enemy in possession of high-value information likely to save lives." That last one is a large and ominously imprecise category: can we therefore torture a commander of Iraqi irregulars to locate the likely but not inevitable snipers' posts in Falluja? That implied calculus is a version of where the German Army wound up in its last couple of world wars, and where the Israelis and the Americans are at least accused of being now. Minimizing your own military casualties is always a laudable goal, but the slope is very notoriously slippery.

It is worth working out why most of us are unwilling to countenance certain things in war, or in counterinsurgency campaigns. If we are not part of the ticking bomb crowd we nowadays tend to say, very quickly, that torture does not and cannot work, because the tortured will say not the truth but rather whatever brings a relief from pain; we insist that "enhanced interrogation" saved no lives, or very few, or none that we can prove were so saved. But that argument implies that if it can be shown that torture, or "enhanced interrogation", does sometimes work,

our objection will significantly weaken, and the relevant history shows that torture's effectiveness can sometimes be demonstrated. Many cells of the French resistance asked members to try to hold out for twenty-four hours, the theory being that a day's notice would let others go to ground, and that asking for more than twenty-hour hours was to ask the improbable. French torturers themselves managed to roll to up a number of FLN cells in Algiers—where there really were ticking bombs—through effective use of torture, so a good argument against torture has to work even if torture itself sometimes also works.

The ticking bomb hypothetical seeks to overcome a now centuries-old inhibition and intuition, because as acts of state violence go, torture almost uniquely disgusts us, but it is worth thinking about why torture so horrifies most of us, even if we suspect that it does often work. The answer may not be immediately obvious, because people who can pretty confidently justify the Hiroshima bomb and the Hamburg firestorm, in each of which tens of thousands of innocent civilians died, are at least strongly tempted to draw the line at torture, where in theory only one very possibly guilty man suffers. Looking into the darkest corners of one's heart, probable guilt does seem to matter—how many object every bit as strenuously to the first hundred waterboardings of the man who planned 9/11, with the blood of thousands of innocents on his hands, as he does to the torture of wholly innocent people swept up in the fall of the Taliban? Still, guilt does not decide the case, for few are willing to make protracted torture the legal punishment for mass murder. But why does torture disgust more of us than area bombing does? At a very tentative guess, this is our Enlightenment legacy much reinforced by the Second World War and its aftermath: we had proudly abolished torture in most of the West, the Nazis brought it back, indeed sometimes gloried in it, and torture became a synecdoche for the whole of the Nazi anti-Enlightenment project, as well as for the grossest perversion of the Enlightenment project, when the Lubyanka became a synecdoche for Stalinism. We further associate torture with what we took to be the most vicious Cold War satrapies—North Korea, Argentina—and with the Mukhabarat states of the Middle East, and with Iran, both the Savak and its Islamist successors. If you grew up hearing about the Gestapo and spent your politically formative years reading the reports from Amnesty International, torture seemed the greatest evil, peculiarly shameful when supported or ignored by one's own government. Torture was the bright line. In a related way, the glories of the WWII partisan war made it hard to object too strenuously to post-WWII terrorists who pretended to be

the French Resistance, and who also pretended that their enemies were the Gestapo—for after all, in that greatest of moral dramas, some of the best had fought without uniforms, and their enemies, the worst of men, had tortured them.

But if detesting every conceivable instance of torture more than the firebombing of Hamburg is not necessarily logical, the loathing of torture is, for most of us, extremely vivid. Many people who had supported the Iraq War wavered when the photos of Abu Ghraib came out; had we gone on to lose that war, rather than see its outcome again in doubt, my guess is that Abu Ghraib would have explained much of that result. It is important to distinguish what a decision to refrain from "enhanced interrogation" will probably achieve from what it will almost certainly not achieve: when we are told that the use of torture exposes American troops to torture in turn, someone is being economical with the truth. It is fatuous to think that Americans were tortured by Japanese or North Koreans (or North Vietnamese) or Lebanese only because Americans had acted similarly, and first. Our restraint will nonetheless achieve something precious: it will let more of us feel that we stand for an order more obviously and indisputably worth defending, which is no trivial gain.

It is also worth deciding what, exactly, we should vow never to do, or at least never to boast of being willing to do. For example, it was never reasonable to debate whether waterboarding was torture, and a very little familiarity with our more recent history would have shown as much. Although we had ourselves used a version of the technique in the Philippines early in the 20th century, by 1947 the United States had convicted and imprisoned a Japanese officer, Yukio Asano, for abuses of an American civilian that included a version of waterboarding, and we included charges of what would now be called waterboarding in other cases against Japanese accused of torture. The United Kingdom executed Japanese who carried out versions of waterboarding during World War II, and Norway tried Germans for similar activities. The State Department has condemned variants of the practice when it has been carried out by foreign governments, and we condemned its use against American POWs by the North Koreans and North Vietnamese. The people in the Bush Administration who claimed that waterboarding was not torture seem to have been either grossly dishonest or peculiarly incompetent.

On the other hand, abiding by the letter of many current interpretations of our legal obligations about torture may be harder to reconcile with historical practice which we did not then and may not now condemn. The United Nations Convention Against Torture's definition of torture

includes inflicting any severe mental suffering for the purpose of obtaining information, which gives the lie to those repeated assurances that with their backs to the wall in 1940, Great Britain nonetheless shunned torture. In 1940 Great Britain staged mock executions of Abwehr and SD agents to encourage other captured agents to give up information, which they did, and to significant effect. Many UN Treaty interpreters, especially those from recently non-belligerent states, consider such a practice torture. Nominal specialists may well interpret the United Nations Convention Against Torture in ways we find at best peculiarly and destructively limiting, and we will probably have to choose between allowing people who have little imagination of and perhaps less sympathy for our predicament to dictate our tactics, or pursuing a now-very-easily-mocked unilateralism. We might do best to attend most closely to the experience of people who have long been in a situation more closely resembling the one in which we may long be mired. So the Israelis bear watching, and in the last few year the Israeli high court, which exists in a society that does face ticking bombs, has moved against interrogation by means of what the Israelis called "moderate physical pressure," including stress positions, one of the techniques American interrogators used through 2005. The Israeli legal decision still allows interrogators the theoretical defense of necessity, but the burden of proof is on the interrogator.

That said, did the Bush Administration uniquely degrade us by the fashion in which it made war? Before agreeing too quickly, it may be worth looking hard at what we thought acceptable in the 1940s, when we agreed on how high the stakes were. That earlier generation attacked civilian populations on a pretty grand scale, and our current willingness to kill civilians is significantly less than that shown by our immediate ancestors. We certainly seem to treat most Americans of Middle Eastern origin better than we once treated almost all Americans of Japanese origin (or than we treated some Americans of German origin in 1917 and 1918), and we accord infinitely more liberties to citizens who in the 20th century might well have been considered enemy fifth columnists. When we caught enemy combatants out of uniform in our previous wars, we often simply executed them.

How about killing prisoners who surrendered in uniform? We did it more often during the Second World War than we do it now. We did it against enemies who had shown themselves likely to perfidiously feign surrender—the Japanese—and we did it in reprisal against German troops. What about torture? A friend writing a history of the Battle of

the Atlantic recently told me about what he was pretty sure had been the torture of a German U-boat commander taken prisoner in the Battle of the Atlantic. I am not sure how often American troops tortured prisoners during World War II, and I suspect it was fairly rare—but I do know that American interrogators tried to beat confessions out of the men accused of committing the Malmedy Massacre after the war was over, and I have seen similar allegations about similar events. What about other treatment of prisoners that fell short of torture but was not by our modern standards exemplary? As I wrote in *First of the Month* in 2005, I once met a former GI who had helped stop the First SS Panzer Division in the snows of Belgium, and recollected taking a prisoner, a 17-year-old boy. A Dutch interrogator slapped the boy, stuck a pistol in his eye, and barked out a question, and the boy spat in the Dutchman's face. The American infantrymen all froze, and then the Dutchman slapped the boy again, knocking him to the ground, and, thankfully, that was the end of it, but it seemed clear that had the interrogator shot the German boy, few would have been absolutely astonished, perhaps because the First SS Panzer division had very recently committed a significant number of massacres in the Ardennes. But even without that possibly-extenuating history, was that slap, and that death threat, torture? By the terms of the UN Convention, the pistol in the eye probably was, but conflating the action with an Argentine interrogator using a blowtorch, or an Iraqi interrogator using a video camera and a rape couch, or a German using a dentist's drill, may not be the most sensible way to frame some urgent questions.

Those questions include the relationship between what we have just done (the methods euphemized as "enhanced interrogation") and what we rightfully abominate as torture, and how we should now think about ourselves in the light of what we have done. We may want to make some distinctions and abolish others, among the latter the distinction a few Justice Department lawyers invented between an act we prosecuted when it was done to our own, and the legality of that act when we inflicted it on others. An admittedly disquieting distinction we might insist upon is the one those same Justice Department lawyers attempted: between ugly, harsh and degrading treatment, and torture. We need this distinction not only because common sense requires it—after all, enhanced interrogation included slaps and loud noises—but because we ought to maintain a rational estimate of our moral worth in comparison to that of our adversaries; a society that does not think itself worth defending is at a marked disadvantage in a protracted contest with startlingly cruel

and committed enemies. This is all the more important because a crucial distinction eroded between 2002 and 2005. Fairly estimating how much it eroded matters, and saying that there is now no moral difference between ourselves and our enemies remains contemptible, either very stupid or very dishonest, which is to say, on a par with the reasoning of those Justice Department lawyers who claimed that waterboarding wasn't torture.

History in the Making

Benj DeMott

Witness—Whittaker Chambers' account of the Hiss case and its historical setting—is the fount of modern Movement Conservatism. (Ronald Reagan credited it with converting him from New Deal Democrat to conservative Republican.) Ideologues on today's right are still playing changes on the persona—"a solitary man in a gregarious land"—Chambers perfected in his great American autobiography cum anti-communist moral tract. But torture-mongers and Tea Partiers will find it hard to assimilate certain implications in Chambers' thought. Meanwhile, leftists who instinctively avoid Chambers—ally of Nixon and the man who shaped Reagan's brain—are missing out on a 20th-century mind whose testimony seems especially pertinent now.

Chambers' voice speaks across the decades in part because he had an ear. A few pages into *Witness* he hears out "the daughter of a German diplomat in Moscow who tries to explain … why her father, who, as an enlightened modern man, had been extremely pro-Communist, had become an implacable anti-Communist:"

> It was hard for her because as an enlightened modern girl, she shared the Communist vision without being a Communist. But she loved her father and the irrationality of his defection embarrassed her. "He was immensely pro-Soviet," she said, "and then—you will laugh at me—but you must not laugh at my father—and then one night—in Moscow—he heard screams. That's all. Simply one night he heard screams."

I came on this passage just as Obama steered the national conversation to the issue of torture and it reminded me of my first encounter with a witness to "enhanced interrogation" techniques at Guantanamo. I had an experience then not entirely unlike that German Diplomat's when I read the following FBI email:

> FROM: Redacted
> TO: Redacted
> RE: GTMO
>
> This is a brief summary of what I observed at GTMO. On a couple of occasions, I entered interview rooms to find a detainee chained hand and foot in a fetal position to the floor, with no chair, food, or water. Most times they had urinated or defecated on themselves and had been left there for 18 [to] 24 hours or more. On one occasion, the air conditioning had been turned down so far and the temperature was so cold in the room, that the barefooted detainee was shaking with cold… On another occasion, the A/C had been turned off, making the temperature in the unventilated room probably well over 100 degrees. The detainee was almost unconscious on the floor with a pile of hair next to him. He had apparently been literally pulling his own hair out throughout the night.

Please don't understand too quickly, as they say in Russian novels. It's likely Whittaker Chambers would've resisted quick and dirty comparisons between the Gulag and Guantanamo (and/or the Black Sites). Yet unlike the Bush Administration's "principals," I think the author of *Witness* would have tried to imagine the agony of that detainee who "pulled his own hair out." (And I doubt he would've slept on the fact dozens died in American custody.)

It's become a commonplace to note the Bush Administrations' conduct of "The War on Terror" was informed by a radical conception of executive power. While Bush's approach to his "war presidency" wasn't all that exceptional—Lincoln suspended habeas corpus, FDR interned Japanese Americans—a passage in *Witness* hints the Bush team's legalisms made them relatives (if not brothers under the skin) of past "revolutionists:"

> Revolutionists have a respect mounting to awe, for the signed document. They have broken, or are trying to break. the continuity of order in society. By that act they repudiate tradition, and the chaos they thereby unloose also threatens them, for they can on longer count on the inertia or authority of tradition to act as a brake or a bond on chaos. Hence the fussy attention which revolutionists pay to mere legalistic forms that puzzles outsiders both in the case of the Nazis and the Communists—their meticulous regard for protocol and official papers. Hence the tiresome detail and massive fictions of their legal and constitutional procedures… For in breaking the continuity of tradition, the revolutionist, for his own sake, must seek a cementing substitute. All he has left to fall back on, the mark of his blighting touch upon life's tissues, are those dead papers, interminable procedures, formidable quiddities—and his incongruous regard for them.

Conservative forces within the federal government, the FBI and the armed services in particular, resisted those "formidable quiddities." But the pettifoggery is still being defended and/or excused by dead-enders on the right. The following casuistic take on the torture memos by Richard Fernandez, who writes at Belmont Club (a popular blog read chiefly by

Movement Conservatives with military backgrounds) is symptomatic on this score.

> America as a society has to draw the line somewhere, beyond which it is not licit to go. The lines the Bush administration drew are described in the memos. Some people think the line is in the wrong place and want to put it somewhere else. But wherever they put it, it's still a line; it still represents a tradeoff between operational necessity and social values. And like any line, you may find that you have drawn it too far one way or the other. What I don't think is helpful is to draw a line that shifts back and forth without a basis in informed consent.

> To recapitulate: I think it is legitimate to voluntarily inhibit oneself with respect to interrogation techniques. But once the challenge comes, once the pain and loss become unendurable, can you hold the line?

Fernandez compacted this judgment-proof response a few days further down the line: "Maybe Bush drew the line in the wrong place; maybe he drew it in the right place." But his original walk back from America's recent history on the dark side locks on a key-word that opens up the mindset behind his little refusal to choose. I take his repeated use of the term "line" as a sign he's tacking like an apparatchik. And that's striking in part because he identifies with the author of one of the Great Refusals of party-line thinking. Before Fernandez moved Belmont Club to Pajamas Media's group blog, it featured a tagline—"History and History in the Making"—that echoed a phrase in *Witness*. "History in the making" is Whittaker Chambers' definition of politics. (And just now I'm realizing when I came on that German diplomat in *Witness* a few weeks ago, I'd read his story before. If I'm not mistaken, Fernandez once excerpted it in a Club post.)

Fernandez writes as a techie about weapons systems and computer programming, but his prose is a neo-Chambersian mélange of memoir, Christian pieties, foreign policy "expertise," Spenglerian pessimism and nods to 19th-century lit. Aping Chambers "who loved using the pedigree of great names to boost his points" (as one recent commentator noted), Fernandez has made his Belmont Club a site where the Canon meets the cannoneers. The connection between Chambers and Fernandez is chiefly a matter of tone. But there's an experiential link as well because both Fernandez and Chambers were underground men for a time. Fernandez is now an Australian citizen but he is a Filipino who was once involved in covert resistance to Marcos. Chambers, of course, was famously a member of a Soviet spy ring in the U.S. during the '30s. It's hard, though, to reconcile Fernandez's fundamentally romantic stance toward the safe houses in his past with Chambers' contempt for his own conspiratorial

past. Whereas Fernandez revels in his cruel memories of youthful twilight struggle, Chambers aimed to rip up his back pages. And his contrarian side—call it his oppositional self—persisted along with his yearning for orthodoxy even after his break with communism. Chambers was born anomic. Fernandez is a conformist who plays an independent thinker like so many of his right-wing compadres at Pajamas Media. For Chambers, "courage was the indispensable virtue." Fernandez celebrates the courage of "rough men" too—that's why his site is so popular with ex-military men—but he's not a brave thinker. (Belmont Club has readers and respondents who are much more intellectually curious than their host.) Stuck to the rump of the GOP, Fenandez never takes on stars in the Fox News/Limbaugh orbit or the right-wing blogosphere. Muy macho he may be, but whenever actual arguments jump off on the right, Fernandez is M.I.A. He's an evader not a fighter: "Maybe Bush drew the line in the wrong place; maybe he drew it in the right place." When it comes to "history in the making," Richard Fernandez is no Whitaker Chambers.

Fantasts on the right assume history is being made by anti-Obama demonstrators "going Galt"—i.e., acting like the protagonist of Ayn Rand's novel *Atlas Shrugged*. References to Rand and her hero, John Galt, punctuated many Tea Parties and it all would've appalled Whittaker Chambers who published a memorable take-down of *Atlas Shrugged* in William F. Buckley's *National Review* back in 1957. His piece, "Big Sister Is Watching You," scandalized Rand's acolytes on the right and he left off writing for Buckley's magazine soon afterwards. Only true believers in Rand will find it possible to shrug off Chambers' critique. Let this passage from it spur you to read the whole thing (which is available online here http://www.nationalreview.com/flashback/flashback200501050715.asp).

> Out of a lifetime of reading, I can recall no other book in which a tone of overriding arrogance was so implacably sustained. Its shrillness is without reprieve. Its dogmatism is without appeal. In addition, the mind which finds this tone natural to it shares other characteristics of its type. 1) It consistently mistakes raw force for strength, and the rawer the force, the more reverent the posture of the mind before it. 2) It supposes itself to be the bringer of a final revelation. Therefore, resistance to the Message cannot be tolerated because disagreement can never be merely honest, prudent, or just humanly fallible. Dissent from revelation so final (because, the author would say, so reasonable) can only be willfully wicked. There are ways of dealing with such wickedness, and, in fact, right reason itself enjoins them. From almost any page of *Atlas Shrugged*, a voice can be heard, from painful necessity, commanding: "To a gas chamber—go!" The same inflexibly self-righteous stance results, too (in the total absence of any saving humor), in odd extravagances of inflection and gesture… At first, we try to tell ourselves that these are just lapses,

> that this mind has, somehow, mislaid the discriminating knack that most of us pray will warn us in time of the difference between what is effective and firm, and what is wildly grotesque and excessive. Soon we suspect something worse. We suspect that this mind finds, precisely in extravagance, some exalting merit; feels a surging release of power and passion precisely in smashing up the house. A tornado might feel this way, or Carrie Nation.

It's possible to overestimate Chambers' distance from white tornadoes whipped up by faux-populists on the right. That he wasn't "going Galt" in the 1957 didn't mean he was taking a hard left. Michael Kimmage's new book, *The Conservative Turn: Lionel Trilling, Whittaker Chambers, and the Lessons of Anti-Communism* underscores Chambers saw himself as a man of the right from the moment he broke with the CP (just as Trilling jealously guarded his sense of himself as a liberal). Chambers once jokingly accused his conservative intellectual allies of over-thinking their politics and vowed to vote the straight Republican ticket in every election. Still, his late conservatism seemed pretty liberal-minded then (and now). He had no interest in rolling back the New Deal and noted "there will be no peace for the islands of relative plenty until the continents of proliferating poverty have been lifted to something like the general material level of the islands." His Ike-like clarity about bureaucracy and crony capitalism set him apart from anti-Communists who assumed the military industrial complex was the bomb. He insisted Khrushchev "was not a monster in the sense that Stalin was a monster" and challenged basic assumptions of *National Review*'s hawks: "The West keeps piling up weapon systems, which lead of course to two bad alternatives: 1) to retreat wherever there is any danger of using the weapons; 2) the temptation to use them, which is catastrophic…" Chambers' final comment in *National Review* seems even more … radical given his surround. It was a defense of Paul Robeson: "The spectacle of an artist like Paul Robeson, denied a passport by his own government makes us traduced of other nations." Chambers' biographer, Sam Tanenhaus, elaborates: "Was he sounding like a liberal? So be it: 'I have scarcely any interest in invective tags.'" Chambers' aim was to "grope for reality" and in a final little fuck-you to narrow-minded Buckleyites he signed out of *National Review* by quoting "my great contemporary Trotsky:" "Anyone looking for a quiet life has picked the wrong century to be born in."

William F. Buckley venerated Chambers and they remained close friends even after Chambers' exit from *National Review*. But when Buckley claimed nothing Chambers wrote deviated from the *Review*'s worldview, he was pushing it. In truth there was always daylight between

Buckley and Chambers. Buckley embraced McCarthy and hung tight; Chambers came to disdain McCarthy. At the height of the modern Red Scare in the '50s, Buckley dismissed "the superstitions of academic freedom;" Chambers argued (in a Luce publication!) academic freedom was a "reason to fight the cold war." While Buckley and Chambers became fast friends when Chambers was in "exile" after the Hiss case, his real soul mates were writers with larger minds and talents. Chambers was particularly close to Arthur Koestler (whose advice to learn more about science led Chambers to enroll at a Maryland community college where he studied biology and physics for a few terms before his death in 1962). After reading *Witness*, Andre Malraux wrote Chambers that its author "had not come back from hell empty-handed." It's no wonder Chambers would connect with such figures given their shared disillusionment with communism. Chambers' friendship with James Agee may say more about his singularity. (In *Witness*, Chambers makes a point of invoking "my friend" James Agee and the book's epistolary opening probably owes something to the "letter" in Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.) Chambers and Agee got tight when they worked together in the '40s at *Time* where they were widely regarded as "the two best writers in the shop." Sam Tanenhaus picks up on elements of Chambers' style in Agee's *Time* essays. He also hears Agee's Southbound sound in this passage of Chambers' praise song for Marian Anderson and her people's music, "In Egypt Land."

> [T]he land in which the slaves found themselves was strange beyond the fact that it was foreign. It was a nocturnal land of vast, shadowy pine woods, vast fields of cotton whose endless rows converged sometimes on a solitary cabin, vast swamps reptilian and furtive—a land alive with all the elements of lonely beauty, except compassion. In this deep night of land and man, the singers saw visions; grief, like a tuning fork, gave the tone, and the Sorrow songs were uttered.

Chambers went on to affirm black Americans had "enriched American culture with incomparable religious poetry and music … and it's only truly great religious art, the spiritual." "In Egypt Land" was a cover story and it generated a heavy response from *Time*'s readership. (The story was unsigned but when Southern writer Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings wrote the editors guessing Chambers was the author, they broke *Time*'s protocols in the next issue and gave up his name.)

Chambers' time at *Time* is notable largely due to his short, stormy tenure as editor at the foreign affairs desk where he shaped the magazine's hard-line approach to Stalin, Mao and the Cold War. But "In Egypt Land" focuses attention on a dimension of his politics of culture that complicates

the story told by Kimmage in *The Conservative Turn*. Once race is in the picture, the differences between the conservative anticommunist Chambers and the liberal anticommunist Trilling seem less black and white. Chambers' range on this front makes Trilling sound thin (and a little pale). Compare Chambers' expansive shout-out to African Americans' "incomparable religious poetry and art" with Trilling's mockery (in his novel, *The Middle of the Journey*) of popular fronters' "admiration of folk art and dislike of trained singing." While there's a risk of reading too much into Chambers' and Trilling's writing on race matters, it's interesting to contrast the fictional black servant in Trilling's influential story, "The Other Margaret," with the real black servant memorialized by Chambers in *Witness*. The black woman character in "The Other Margaret" serves as an example of bad behavior by an "Other" that teaches a privileged child the limits of "progressive" sentimentality. But in *Witness*, actual behavior of Chambers' black servant, Edith Murray, becomes the occasion for a very different sort of teachable moment. Pages after recalling how he'd treated Mrs. Murray with dignity in a racist town (at the risk of calling attention to himself and his family at a time when he was engaged in espionage), Chambers cites her testimony as the peak of the second Hiss perjury trial:

> Throughout those two long trials until then, few voices, except my wife's had been raised publicly to say even once that Whit Chamber was not an inveterately evil man. Then at the very end of the second Hiss trial, there was put on the stand, that slight, simple and plain-spoken colored woman, who had sometimes sat at table with my wife and me. For the first, she did what the whole world would not do—she gave me back my human dignity—"Oh, *no*," she said in answer to some derisive question by Hiss's lawyer, "Mr. Cantwell (myself) was a *good* man." It moved me deeply, few things in the Hiss Case moved me more, for Edith Murray is a good woman.

Chambers was often a witness to goodness in everyday people. His instincts here seem to distance him from the more genteel Trilling. Take the moment in *Witness* when Chambers, having run away from home as a seventeen-year-old, "met the proletariat." Broke and hungry, he tries to get a construction job, but is turned down because his hands are too soft. When the crowd of waiting workers sees the "crushing defeat in his eyes," they pull him back into line, mess up his clothes, muddy his hands and slip him past the boss: "In four minutes, they had taught me what others failed to do in a lifetime—They taught me that there is a level of humanity where compassion is a reflex of distress, and, in that sense, they humanized my soul for the rest of my life."

Chambers stuck it out on that job in Baltimore for months. Then he drifted on down to New Orleans where he had no luck finding work since

black folks did the heavy lifting. But he loved the city. Its people taught him more about "what kindness there was in the lower depths." In *Witness* he recalls how he discovered Shakespeare in New Orleans, "lying on my filthy bed, stunned by the opulence of violence and of language" in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Then he tells about going downstairs in his rooming house to see his friend a pimp who "doted on"—and sometime beat on—"One-Eyed Annie" ("as ugly a woman as I have ever seen"). When Chamber visited these lovers, they often "received" him in bed and he could not help observing their "passion was the raw stuff of Antony and Cleopatra."

Chambers' sense of life in the raw helped make him one of the most influential writers of "proletarian literature." Before he went underground in the early '30s, Chambers' story "Can You Hear Their Voices" became an international sensation. While his fiction was designed to sell the message of the Communist Party, his soulful feeling for underdogs transcended dogma. He got it honest according to *Witness*. He recalls an early encounter with an "extremely poor" girl who was called "Stewguts" by his classmates.[1] Their vicious teasing drove her into rages that made her the town anathema. (Chambers' own mother told him never to talk to the girl.) Stewguts had a younger sister who was an even sadder case—"a pasty-faced child who looked a little like a sheep" and was "very stupid." One day at recess, Chambers witnessed Stewguts teaching her little sister the week's spelling words, never showing impatience even as the younger girl got most of them wrong:

> I watched fascinated, listening to the girls' voices, rising and falling, in question and answer, with the greatest softness… Then there was tramp of feet in the hall outside the room. Stewguts slapped down the pointer… Suddenly she took her sister's face in both of her hands and, bending, gently kissed the top of her head. As the hall door opened with a burst of voices, Stewguts silently closed the cloakroom door behind her and fled.

Chambers sensed he had "witnessed something wonderful and terrible," "something more important than anything I had ever seen before…"

> It is not strange that I should not have understood what I saw. What is strange, and humbling, is that I knew I had seen something which I never could forget. What I had seen was the point at which from corruption issues incorruption.

Chambers knew corruption (or incorruption) wasn't class-bound. A killer chapter in *Witness* titled "The Story of a Middleclass Family" describes how his original family broke down slow. His father was bisexual and left the family to live with a man, before retuning years later to his