

## **FROM CHAPTER 1, “WATCHING AMERICA GO BLIND”**

On Pearl Harbor Day of 2002, the *New York Times* ran a news item by Michael Z. Wise under the headline “U.S. Writers Do Cultural Battle Around the Globe.” Wise reported that “The Bush administration has recruited prominent American writers to contribute to a State Department anthology and give readings around the globe in a campaign started after 9/11 to use culture to further American diplomatic interests.”

The participants include four Pulitzer Prize winners, Michael Chabon, Robert Olen Butler, David Herbert Donald and Richard Ford; the American poet laureate, Billy Collins; two Arab-Americans, Naomi Shihab Nye and Elmaz Abinader; and Robert Pinsky, Charles Johnson, Bharati Mukherjee and Sven Birkerts. They were all asked to write about what it means to be an American writer.

George Clack, the State Department official who edited the volume, explained that because of an archaic law (the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948), the fifteen essays in the anthology were barred from publication *in* the United States, though the news item explained that “the essays can. . .be read on a government Web site intended for foreigners. It went on:

Despite the domestic blackout, the participants are focused on the potential abroad. “There is the perception abroad that Americans feel culturally superior and are intellectually indifferent,” said Mr. Ford, who won the Pulitzer in 1996 for his novel “Independence Day.” “Those stereotypes need to be burst.” He added that he was eager to go to Islamic nations to help “humanize America” and present a more diverse picture of public opinion than is conveyed by the Bush administration.”

And, finally, another State Department official, Stuart Holliday, was quoted as saying: “We’re shining a spotlight on those aspects of our culture that tell the American story. The volume of material is there. The question is how can it be augmented to give a clearer picture of who we are.”



And there we are. Especially since I had myself been involved for some time trying to define and describe the Age of Simplification, I was eager indeed to read a group of essays that had been written in order to address a number of the same questions that I had also been wrestling with. So I downloaded, printed, and stapled the essays, and

then, over the next couple of evenings, I read them through. They were, by and large, just awful. I decided that I should re-read them, more carefully this time, and, just as I might do with any writing that comes under my review, *grade* them.

Here are the grades:

Clack, George: <i>Introduction</i> .....	F (0.0)
Abinader, Elmaz: <i>Just off Main Street</i> .....	D (0.5)
Alvarez, Julia: <i>I, Too, Sing America</i> .....	F (0.0)
Birkerts, Sven: <i>The Compulsory Power of American Dreams</i> .....	D+ (1.4)
Butler, Robert Olen: <i>Postcard from America</i> .....	D (0.5)
Chabon, Michael: .....	D (1.6)
Collins, Billy: <i>What's American about American Poetry?</i> .....	A+ (4.5)
Creeley, Robert: <i>America's American</i> .....	A (4.0)
Donald, David Herbert: <i>On Being an American Historian</i> .....	B+(3.4)
Ford, Richard: <i>How Does Being an American Inform What I Write?</i> .....	D- (0.5)
Hogan, Linda: <i>For Life's Sake</i> .....	D+(1.4)
Jacob, Mark: <i>Both Sides of the Border</i> .....	B (3.0)
Johnson, Charles: <i>An American Milk Bottle</i> .....	D- (0.5)
Mukherjee, Bharati: <i>On Being an American Writer</i> .....	D- (1.6)
Nye, Naomi Shihab: <i>This Crutch That I Love</i> .....	F (0.0)
Pinsky, Robert: <i>A Provincial Sense of Time</i> .....	B- (2.6)

The numerical values, when added together and divided by fifteen, give an average grade of 1.7, or C-. If Billy Collins were awarded an A rather than an imaginary A+ (for being best in the book), the average would fall to 1.6666, remaining C-. If, on the other hand, the top two grades were left out, the average of the remaining thirteen would fall to 1.307692307, technically a D, although soft-heartedness might lead an instructor, in spite of the numbers not allowing it, to round up to 1.4, or D-plus. I myself would not round up, since doing so would detract from emphasizing how desolate the showing is when lacking that small bit of strength at the top. It is, I would say, an almost unbelievably *soft* batch of work.



To get an idea of what the anthology is like and what it reveals, we need a plan, so I'll propose arranging the fifteen essays into three groups.

1. *First*, what I'll call the "very worst"—Abinader, Alvarez, Chabon, Hogan, Johnson, Mukherjee, and Nye.
2. *Second*, what I'll call the "very best"—Collins, Creeley, Donald, Jacob, and Pinsky.
3. And *third*, what I'll call the "true worst"—Birkerts, Butler, and Ford.

Definitions of these labels and the rationale for them will emerge as we go along.

The most notable characteristics of the first group. . . are. . .

**FROM CHAPTER 2,  
“THE DEATH OF LITERARY THINKING  
IN AMERICA: HOW IT HAPPENED AND WHAT IT MEANS”**

[In the Age of Simplification, the] corporate state, with its policing and proselytizing arm, the mass media, wants, in all citizens, to create and maintain passivity, lack of individual thought, and as low a consciousness as possible of the nature, meaning, and full potential of the individual self. And if this is so, how can it be, how can it conceivably have happened, that the bringing into being and the nurturing of those very same deleterious qualities and characteristics—rather than their desperately-needed and deeply undervalued opposites—could have become the routine business even of the intellectual, academic, and artistic classes in the nation?

Complexity and confidence of individual perception and thought alone can equip or enable anyone to begin to resist the smothering and destructive conformities, diminishment, deceptions, and simplifications of thought and of self that serve the interests of the corporate state in its exploitation of the population and of the republic itself. But where, in the face of this unutterably alarming truth, is to be found the needed leadership that can represent, identify, speak for, and encourage this kind of independent thought and strategy needed for resistance? Certainly, such leadership *should* be expected to come from intellectuals, artists, writers, academicians, and literary publishers. And yet, even from these crucially important elements of the population, as we’ve seen already in academic humanities, comes nothing of the kind, but only, instead, still more simplification, still more self-referential “categories” of thought in place of real thought, still more labels and agendas and codes, all with the numbing and diversionary effect of filling, as it were, the mind’s eye up with darkness, blinding it to the realities of the life that exists not only everywhere around it, but also inside the unseen, unexplored, and steadily diminishing self.

The evidence is everywhere, inside classrooms and out, much of the time in the very *language* of Simplification. The website of *The North American Review*, for example, is typical in what it suggests not about “literature”—too simple, direct, clear—but about what, speaking in simplification-ese, it calls “the literary experience.” The website’s “Note to Prospective Contributors” goes as follows:

The *North American Review* is the oldest literary magazine in America (founded in 1815) and one of the most respected. We are interested in high-quality poetry, fiction, and nonfiction on any subject, but we are especially interested in work

that addresses contemporary North American concerns and issues, particularly with the environment, gender, race, ethnicity, and class.<sup>1</sup>

And there it is, the automated, code-word litany of narrowing, proscribing, pre-digested categories of permissible *seeing*, as if these few agenda items were all that's left of life, the rest having fallen off somewhere into darkness. Consider the history of American intellectual and literary life, two and a half centuries holding a vast aesthetic and social chronicle of burgeoning, impassioned achievement, of probing, often haunted, sometimes obsessed, at other times revolutionary productivity and exploration in literature, from Anne Bradstreet and Jonathan Edwards to T. S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams, from Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson to William Faulkner and Marilynne Robinson. Until *now*, that is. Until 1947. Until thirty or forty years ago. Now, it seems, that entire glorious chronicle, that entire history of heart- and mind- and soul-driven courage and risk and dedication and accomplishment has suddenly withered away, been simplified, reduced, denuded, and diminished, until *now* the artistic and intellectual life no longer has to do with love, life, death, being, nothingness, progress, fear, passion, childhood, birth, hope, desire, beauty, rage, terror, metaphysics, the role of human beings and nations, history itself, salvation, fate, the cosmos, or madness—to cite only a few examples of the stuff of art. No longer, it seems, is *life* what calls out to the artist's mind and heart, but, instead, what compels the creating self are “subjects,” “concerns,” and “issues.”

Such standardized vacuity of concept and expression, such agenda-driven category-think as this, then, is what we have come to. Change of this kind is something that we have *allowed* to happen. Things of this sort show what *has been done*—to us, to literature, to the way we're *able* to look at the world, the very *way* we think. We think in abstractions first, with life itself tagging along being, if it's lucky, whereas what *should* happen is this: art should originate from a germ of life, no matter how small, but so alive that the artist is incapable of *not* beginning with it. Today, in simplification's paint-by-numbers and begin-with-the-agenda manner of literary “thought,” where is *life*? *Passion*? *Originality*? The life-is-issues idea may well have been brought into being by the energies of a moral and ethical commitment and, as with the new professors, a concomitant desire to do good. But that originating morality is weakened, enervated, cheapened, transformed into second-hand, stained, and shopworn goods when it's put piggy-back on the frame of its own natural superior—literary art—and *then* given the blind temerity and self-serving gall to declare *itself* the driving force rather than the true force that's carrying *it*, although at the same time that true force is quickly dying, since the rider on its back is in reality thin-souled and poisonous, narrow-visioned and righteous, giving neither food nor energy to the thing it rides on, the tradition of literature, but simply beating it to death instead. The sheer penury of such “literary” thinking is both obvious and pernicious. Why should race, class, gender, or ethnicity even be summoned or evoked as “things” fit or desirable to inspire or nourish *art*? What do *issues*, anyway, have to do with art in the first place? Could Dostoevsky name the “issue” that brought any one of his novels into existence and sustained it? Art comes not from issues and abstractions like race and gender but it comes from forces and feelings like mystery, rage, sorrow, loss, ecstasy, or it comes from the unbridled, the angry, the selfish, the unleashed, the miserable, the grief-stricken, the hopeful, the doomed, the yearning,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.webdelsol.com/NorthAmReview/NAR/HTMLpages/NARToday.htm>

the desiring, the blissful, the ecstatic—in every case this originating embryo or germ of emotion, existing *in life* and not in abstraction, is then *married* with intellect and thought, creating the art-union of feeling and thinking that in turn results in meaning and significance, a meaning and significance *that can be created and expressed in no other way than through that marriage*. The moment an “issue” or the agenda comes first, the moment it’s declared the originating thing, the writer is reduced to the status of hireling, akin to an ad writer, in service to the issue, not to life *or* to art. Race, class, gender, ethnicity—where, one asks, is *all the rest of life*? What about those who have no interest whatsoever in the agenda or its attendant issues—could *they* submit their art to *The North American Review*? Where is Walt Whitman: could *he* submit to it (“Till the gossamer thread you fling, catch somewhere, O my Soul”—where are race, class, gender, and ethnicity *there*?) Could Emily Dickinson? (“With blue, uncertain, stumbling buzz, / Between the light and me”?) Thomas Wolfe? Gertrude Stein? Virginia Woolf?

What, in other words, about *real writers*? What about the *entire rest of the universe*?

But, oh, not so. These aren’t questions of the kind you hear any more in classrooms or writing workshops or cafes or even in interviews with writers, and they aren’t questions of the kind, either, that you hear *implied*, peeking out silently and yet irrepressibly from between and behind the words at readings, not even in the words that *are* read.

The Age of Simplification is real, and the confusion between thought and feeling is real. Where thinking should come first, as in the classroom, feeling does instead. And where feeling should come first, as in the vital germ of life inspiring a piece of writing, abstraction takes the lead instead, akin to a plow-horse stepping on a rosebud. The loss, the vacuity, the error, the *inattentiveness*, the unawareness, the waste, the *damage*. Consider the importance of classrooms: Classrooms are places where the older, wiser, and more experienced have charge of the younger—have charge, that is, of the *eyes* of each individual self, looking out from its place among the rows of seats, these being the future eyes of the nation, the nation whose very fate will depend upon what those eyes of the new generation will *see* and *be able* to see. And what is it that happens in the classrooms of the new professors in the Age of Simplification? These eyes get poked out one by one, made harmless, obedient, blind. As for the literature itself, meanwhile, there will continue to be less and less of the great and more and more of the imitative, mediocre, uncomplex, and derivate, *not* the literature that can bring vision to eyes and power to hearts.

**FROM CHAPTER 3,  
“CONSUMERISM, VICTIMOLOGY, AND THE DISAPPEARANCE  
OF THE MEANINGFUL SELF”**

One of the most alarming aspects of daily life in America, particularly since the election of 2000, and even more so since 9/11, is that it has become impossible to discuss

politics in anything approaching an even faintly meaningful way. There are a number of reasons for this blindness, or paralysis—the metaphors aren't easy to choose between—and not only are all of them almost equally, and immeasurably, important, but they're intertwined in exceedingly complex ways.

A place to start may be with the notion of the “unreal.” According to the OED, this word itself dates from at least 1605,<sup>2</sup> and, as all know, it has taken on varieties of meanings, including “incredible,” “fantastic,” “amazing,” and even the recently hyper-popularized “awesome.” Just three or four decades ago, the word gained another and even more interesting meaning: namely, “true,” so that, for example, when the Kent State killings took place in 1970, highly shocked people would say “*unreal*.” What they meant, of course, was that the killings were *true*, that they were *all but* unbelievable, yet that they had actually happened.

Now, though, there's been another turn of the screw, and either that short-lived meaning of “unreal” as “true” has changed back again to the previous meaning of “not true,” *or*—which I fear and suspect—people have simply begun refusing to believe the evidence of their senses. Faced with intolerable ideas, or with intolerable acts, people in very large numbers have begun simply denying them, declaring them “unreal” and thus with a word striking them out of existence.

Americans, in other words, are turning their backs on empiricism as a means of perceiving the truth and of acting on it reasonably. Whether they're *willfully* shutting their eyes to things they don't *want* to see, or whether they *really don't see* things that *are there* to be seen, I'm not entirely sure, and the question may not really be a matter of either/or. Perhaps there is a psychological mingling, instead, of *true* blindness on the one hand and *willful* blindness on the other. But the pattern itself of *not seeing* is inescapable, evident to anyone who looks.

Although there are exceptions, which I'll get to in a minute, the observable pattern is simply this: Great numbers of people *will not talk* about great political matters that are unprecedented or of the most towering and important consequence. For example, they *won't talk* about the possibility of interpreting the Supreme Court's intervention in the 2000 election as the equivalent of a coup or the installation of a junta. And they *won't talk* about the possibility that the Bush administration knew that 9/11 or something like it was coming but did nothing to prevent it since it would be useful to their own political interests. That is, people *will not even entertain the possibility* of such ideas.

But why on earth not? I'm not asking for agreement on any such questions, but I *am* asking—no, I'm imploring—that it be permissible to *consider* them. To make it something *not* considerable seems to me the equivalent of willful blindness and very dangerous. I have an acquaintance who is an internationally recognized and highly honored senior professor at a major—no, an illustrious—university. Admittedly, he is conservative politically and considers himself so, but it seems to me that conservatism is one thing and denial another. In an exchange, I asked him whether or not law is built on precedent. Yes, he said, in extremely large part. I asked him if the court's intervention in the 2000 election was a first-time thing and unique or whether it had a precedent. A first-time thing, he said. So I asked: Doesn't the Court's action then stand as a precedent in this area of law, making it more rather than less likely that the Court might again enter

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<sup>2</sup> “Hence, horrible shadow! / Unreal mockery, hence!” *Macbeth*, III, iv, 106-7.

into a similar electoral matter and that a parallel or corollary finding might be handed down again? No, he said: It doesn't and it won't.

Even my acquaintance's deep conservatism can't explain this simple stubbornness: after all, he's done something akin to saying "a dog is a cat," or "a dog is not a dog." He would never admit that he'd done so, but hasn't he, in effect, said, "A precedent is not a precedent"?

On the face of it, an absurdity. But I think I understand it, at least to some extent, just as I think I understand the refusal of my colleagues, friends, and other acquaintances even to *entertain* the notion that the Court's action could conceivably be understandable as a coup. And the reason is that the very thought is unbearable. It is unspeakable. In a word, it's *unreal*.

Indeed it is. And yet that's the *very last* reason *not* to speak of it.



Without any doubt, something is seriously wrong in our national politics and has been growing more and more wrong, in a long downward spiral, since sometime around 1947. But for this situation to have come about, something also has to have gone seriously wrong in the population itself—in the national self, if I may call it that, at least for the moment. Between the two—the ruin within and the ruin without—the dread and unspeakable situation has come about that, following the attacks of 9/11 and the passage of the Patriot Act, we are in fact living no longer in a free country but, instead, in a police state. For the comfort of us all, I could rephrase this to say that we are now "technically" living in the "equivalent" of a police state. But the result is euphemistic only, bringing no difference whatsoever in meaning.

This police state, however, isn't what I want to discuss, at least not exactly, or yet. What I do want to discuss is the phenomenon, as I've said, of that topic and other topics closely related to it having become effectively impossible to talk about.

Earlier, I said it was impossible to discuss them "in anything approaching an even faintly meaningful way," and it's time to clarify what I meant. It's clear to everyone that in fact there's plenty of "discussion" going on: campaign speeches being delivered, polls being taken, grass roots organizations being formed, marches on Washington being staged. Fine and good. But the trouble is that, unless the *truly* important matters can also be exposed, addressed, and responded to, none of the rest of this activity matters very much at all—if at all.

It can be said with some truth that everything is important. But, at the same time, distinctions can be made, and, if they're made carefully, they can be enlightening. For example, if we were to distinguish between types of political issues on the basis of their "scope," we might come up with a statement like this: Political issues of *true*, *obvious*, or *immediate* importance are those that have to do with the life and death, survival or destruction, of entire peoples or nations.

A corollary statement then becomes this: Political issues of *less* obvious or immediate importance are those that have to do with the individual or with groups of individuals smaller than the *national*.

This isn't a distinction likely to earn me friends among the new professors or among those—in effect, almost everyone—who are allied with them or think like them. I'm touching on, after all, the fraught issue of *rights*, the value-concept lying at the very

heart of the new professors' thinking. And what I'm saying about rights is that they're of secondary importance. There are two reasons why I'm saying this.

The first reason, which will get a very, very great deal of attention later in this chapter, is that the concept of "rights" as held by the new professors and others like them is, if not entirely then very largely, a bankrupt and falsified concept: Too much of the time it isn't honestly or genuinely a concept that has to do with rights at all.

And the second reason I'm saying that "rights" are of secondary importance is that the political claims to such "rights"—no matter that the thinking behind them may be false or compromised—are what *do* get "discussed," "presented," insisted upon, aired, written about, haggled over, and litigated about at the expense of other and, I would argue, greater political subjects.

Some readers, I'm sure, will conclude at this point that I'm a troglodyte reactionary without feelings, vehemently opposed to any and all programs having to do with human rights and dignities. Of such readers, I ask only that they hold their judgment until they've read the rest of this chapter—and that they give greater weight to what I *do* say than to what I *don't* say.

I'll never say I'm against human rights or any programs that protect human rights when the rights or protections are honest, true, principled, and fair. I *will* say, however, that there's a kind of schizoid double standard in place when talk of rights regularly trumps talk of other and arguably far greater matters. For example, when a college president putatively "disrespects" a black scholar by judging that his scholarship is weak, the matter gets printed, *as news*, in *The New York Times*, while at the same time the absence of *wing holes* in the side of the Pentagon that's said to have been hit by an airliner on 9/11, along with the absence of aircraft parts or wreckage at the crash site, is a thing passed off as the hallucinatory raving of a few "conspiracy-theorists" and kept out of the news, in effect denying people of the right to read—or to think, or to know—about it.



A disconnect—this is the word that comes to mind, in its recently-acquired psychological sense. For the American mind does seem to have been *unplugged* in regard to certain things, unable to see them or, as I've said, even to *entertain the possibility* of them. The word "junta," for example, *can't* be used, *can't* be taken as being even remotely or conceivably applicable to anything that is happening or has happened in the United States. It's unreal. But what if we define "junta" as a power group that takes office by non-electoral, pseudo-electoral, or extra-electoral means and then passes laws depriving its citizens of liberties and freedoms that were previously guaranteed and that, if such now-curtailed liberties and freedoms were in fact exercised, could be obstructive to the interests of that power group?

In other words, a definition of the Bush administration. If one uses the word "junta," on the other hand, the idea immediately seems crazy and unbelievable, since the word brings with it powerful connotations and associations that have nothing to do with the condition, flavor, or atmosphere of daily life in modern America. "*Junta?*" a person on the street might respond. "No, of course it's not a junta. If it were a junta, things would be weird, strange, extreme, crazy. But everything is normal. Everything is regular and familiar. Everything *looks* the same as always. So it can't be a junta."

And there, indeed, lies a very big problem. Insofar as things *appear* to be the same as always, they're likely to be taken by people as *being* the same as always. This kind of assumption, up to a point, is a matter of perfectly natural common sense. If someone looks and sounds healthy, and claims to feel fine, we're likely to assume that that person *is* healthy, even though there may be a disease within, asymptomatic and hidden. But we've got to look at the question of the determining power of the familiar, and at the question of judging things by their looks, much more deeply than just on the common sense level if we ever hope to understand what Americans see—and what they *don't* see—and why.

That is, we've got to go back to what I called, in the first chapter, the *aesthetic* of the mass media and the fruits that that "aesthetic" has born after its almost sixty-year existence. Governed by its only purpose, of protecting and increasing corporate profit and national economic growth, this aesthetic—that is, the whole of the mass media—has never from its inception had any allegiance to truth, but has, in effect, for almost six decades, consisted essentially of all lies all the time. The big central lie, ever present and subtly interwoven among all the small and middle-sized lies, is the single and fundamental lie *that everything is simpler than it really is*. Products, the effects they'll have, the things they'll achieve for you, life's social elements and personal affairs, all of these and myriad other things are incessantly portrayed and unvaryingly presented as simpler than they really are. Even beyond this, the *look* of things, the sense, the shape, the aura, the *feel* of life are all made to seem simpler than they really are. The result of this unbroken program of falsification and simplification, kept indefatigably at work over a period of six decades, all the while enjoying the ever-increasing attention of an ever-growing audience and taking advantage of an ever-improving technology allowing its own ever more effective, powerful, and thorough delivery—the result of all this is that *people* no longer decide for themselves what's to be taken as real or true, but the media do this choosing and deciding *for* them.

The simplification *itself* is part of what comes to be taken for reality, and, as this quality of simplification throughout daily life and thinking becomes more and more familiar, it comes also to be taken more and more automatically or unthinkingly as *normal*. One outcome of the entire process is that complexity begins to disappear: It fades away, tends to be forgotten, disappears as a *habit* of thought, expectation, or seeing. Simplification thus feeds simplification, the simplified becoming the *normal*. The entire process brings about another outcome as well, which is that *thinking itself diminishes*. This is partly because thinking is, of course, discouraged and unrewarded while impulse and desire—throughout the system of consumerism—are *encouraged* and putatively *rewarded*. But there's an even worse outcome in regard to thinking and thought, and this is that thinking as it was once conceived of essentially begins coming to an end. This is because intangibles begin falling away and falling out of use and becoming less and less familiar, replaced by the far simpler phenomena of tangibles, which themselves come to be relied upon more and more. Finally, "thinking" occurs only *without* the aid of abstractions or intangibles, not *with* the aid of them; it occurs, once this point has been reached, *only by and through and in response to tangibles, things seen, externals, and surfaces*.

Consumers might be said to have come to a point of perfection once they've been brought to this condition, since now they are freed of the ability to see beyond the

surfaces of things, freed of the *habit* of doing so, and freed of the *desire* to do so. Once large enough numbers of the population have been brought to this condition, neither politics nor national elections as they were once known can any longer exist, since ideas can't be a part of an electoral contest, but only looks and appearances. This is why one candidate will invariably look, talk, behave, or act essentially like another. What has happened is that *the familiar itself has become the true and is to be accepted*, while all else is untrue and not to be entertained. This explains why, for example, nothing new must ever appear on television, or nothing unlike things that have appeared before. Only the familiar can be allowed, and, in this sense, there must never be *news*, because real *news* would, by definition, be unfamiliar.

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