The Seraph and the Snake

The Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel dined with me, and I asked them how they dared so roundly to assert that God spake to them; and whether they did not think at the time that they would be misunderstood, & so be the cause of imposition.

Isaiah answer'd: "I saw no God, nor heard any, in a finite organical perception; but my senses discover'd the infinite in every thing, and as I was then persuad'd, & remain confirm'd, that the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God, I cared not for consequences, but wrote."

Then I asked: "Does a firm perswasion that a thing is so, make it so?"

He replied: "All poets believe that it does, & in ages of imagination this firm perswasion removed mountains; but many are not capable of a firm perswasion of any thing."

—William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

It is commonly argued that America has no genuine radical tradition, that its remarkably nonideological politics precludes the kinds of commitment and enthusiasm characteristic of politics in Europe. With its independence secured in a revolution widely held to have been conservative, America has been stubbornly resistant to various kinds of socialism and sweeping and zealous reform.¹

But "radical" is one of those terms that threatens to disintegrate from casual overuse. Depending on one's politics and one's position, radicalism is either something to which one eagerly aspires or a term of severest censure. It is both a term of praise and of approbation. It is used loosely to connote terrorism, anarchy, outspokenness, alienism, simple disagreement, and changes on a large scale. It is both a threat and an opportunity. There exists the assumption that we all know radicalism when we see it, a dubious assumption at best. There is even a certain amount of irony in our glib use
of the term, for it belies the consensus it is supposed to reflect. Some uses betray their factional origins, while other uses are simply trivial. One suspects that the designation has lost its discriminative ability. As Edwin Black once reminded us regarding "revolutionary," a term that claims a close kinship to the term radical, "Some literature produces convulsions in the world; and some merely wears a bonnet rouge to the Rotary meeting."

If we are to talk meaningfully about a radical tradition in America, we must talk in terms of those values that have been capable over the course of our history of engaging Americans in significant ways, of causing genuine convulsions. Radicalism is not to be confused with the bonnet rouge, not to be confused with fringe groups no matter how clamorous; it is not frivolous or ancillary. Radicalism is, quite literally, that which involves the roots of a culture. The six preceding studies, all dealing with figures or movements that have been loosely identified as radical eruptions in American politics, have pointed to two central and antithetical themes in American culture. Whatever radical tradition we might claim should probably be explained as part of a continuing dialectic between them.

From seventeenth-century liberalism, particularly Locke, we have received an idea of freedom. The American Revolution successfully defined the right to the autonomous pursuit and preservation of life, property, and happiness, fettered only to the extent necessary to ensure the equal right of others to do likewise, as a central theme in American politics. The vocabulary recurs in the rhetoric of abolitionism, in Debs's rhetoric against wage slavery, in McCarthy's rhetoric against communist domination, in Welch's insistence on the virtues of individualism, and in the rhetoric of gay liberation. That freedom is an essential aspect of the American identity can hardly be argued. Our idea of freedom is the source of our individualism and our pluralism.

But the idea of freedom promulgated by the American Revolutionaries was not simply the absence of strictures or the granting of license. Freedom was, for the Whigs and for those who followed them, not a privilege but an indicator of moral status, and as such, it entailed certain obligations, certain duties. Moral status must be earned. Thus a second theme in American politics has been the theme of duty, of moral compunction, the source of our tendencies toward conformism and absolutism.

It is the curious amalgam of freedom and responsibility in American political thought that has been responsible for what Louis Hartz has termed its "veritable maze of polar contradictions, winding in and out of each other hopelessly: pragmatism and absolutism, historicism and rationalism,
optimism and pessimism, materialism and idealism, individualism and conformism." Hartz looks at the American tradition within the context of European liberalism, and though he offers occasional concessions to the religious influences in our heritage, he generally maintains that Americans as reformers have not played the role of "secular prophets," have not been intemperate, and have not been prey to religious enthusiasms. The liberal tradition is antithetical to such postures, and within that tradition, they must be viewed as aberrations and contradictions.

But a view of the American tradition that sees only its mundane and businesslike side, that stresses its origins in the Enlightenment, might be accused of stressing Locke to the exclusion of Calvin, thus providing a confusing and inelegant view of its shape. Our preference for Matthew Arnold's Hellenic ideal risks obscuring the Hebraic side of our culture. The transformation of freedom into a moral concept and its pairing with duty is defalcated and tenuous in Locke. The disciplinarian side of the American character is more readily attributed to our Puritan heritage. It was Calvin who, in the name of freedom of worship, authored one of the most regimented and demanding orthodoxies in the Western world, and it was Calvin who, by his emigration to Holland, began a Puritan exile that provided the foundations for the exodus myth created by his spiritual descendants in America.

The myth of the American exodus, which reached its culmination in the Revolution, unabashedly drew its parallels from the exodus themes in the Old Testament. It captured all the contradiction of freedom and obligation in a powerful synthesis. The example of Moses and the covenant made clear that escape into freedom involved hardship and sacrifice; freedom and discipline became, not antithetical, but complimentary. Furthermore, an escape that is, in part, a sign of the beneficence of a divine being involves, not only a disciplined response to adversity, but also a certain debt.

It was the role of the Old Testament prophets to remind the peoples of Israel and Judah of that debt, to demand an adherence to those terms upon which their continued freedom depended. American Whigs, likewise, argued that the dual nature of the law both provided guarantees and made demands; they depended on the ability to enlist discipline in the service of freedom. Making freedom a sacred concept, early American radicals were able to demand a certain consensus as to its nature and its requirements.

The discourse of the Old Testament prophets continues to provide American radicals with a model even into the twentieth century because it is a highly visible discourse of radical reform that strikes an amenable
balance between the contradictory elements of freedom and duty. The rhetoric of the radicals examined here provides testimony as to the sometimes quite self-conscious influence of this model, though the line of influence became more oblique as American radicals, over the course of years, molded these materials into an indigenous prophetic tradition. With the ascension of American prophets to canonical status, the influence of the biblical books was sometimes obscured, but as long as the tradition could be sustained, it bore the marks of its source.

Seeking to articulate those essential marks, I began with the idea that the prophet is somehow alienated from his audience, possessed of a message that is somehow exclusive. At the same time, the prophet engages those premises that are central to the culture. The prophet is simultaneously insider and outsider; he compels the audience, but only by use of those premises to which they have assented as a culture. The discourse is, then, both of the audience and extreme to the audience. It might fairly be said that the prophet shares the ideals of his audience rather than the realities of its everyday life. He reminds his audience of that transcendental side of its culture that makes it larger than our individual wants and needs and aspirations and challenges us toward the achievement of that ideal. That effort requires exertion, sacrifice, and a renunciation of indolence, an exercise of virtue. Prophetic discourse seeks to reshape, to re-create the audience in accordance with a strict set of ideals as commanded by God, revealed in natural law, and asserted to in principle but unrealized by the audience.

The attitude of the prophet toward the audience reveals much about the cosmology and epistemology behind his discourse. At the same time that the prophet sets himself apart from his audience, he depends on an understanding that they share the same world with him, thus making them the subjects of his visions. The world as God's creation is considered sacred, substantially immune to alteration by humankind. Properly attended to, it contains directives for living. Alone in the Judeo-Christian cosmos, only humanity has a model of the ideal and the independence of will to deny that ideal. Here is the conflict between freedom and duty at its source: the presence of a free will coterminous with divine dictates. Prophetic discourse seeks to reform the people in accordance with the demands of the ideal.

The belief that the ideal is shared, that there is a common and unquestioned vision of the good, invests prophetic discourse with a fundamental faith in its auditors. From the American Revolution to the time of Debs,
radical reformers were profoundly optimistic, optimistic about the possibility of reform and about people as the vehicles for that reform. People, after all, could know the truth if they would only open their eyes to it, and thus knowing, why would they not act in accordance? Such an optimistic view of human nature holds no cautionary tales on the role of passion; there is no dark side of the psyche straining against its chains. Precisely the opposite is the case: it is because man's feelings are asleep, anesthetized, dormant, because man is apathetic, that evil is allowed to exist. The rhetoric in this tradition exhibits an unabashed emphasis on emotional appeal, on awakening the feelings, on speaking to the heart. Prophetic reformers were confident that if the people could simply be made to feel the truth, reform would follow as a necessary consequence.

The American Revolution is unique among the cases included here as the only example among them of a radical movement widely held to have been successful. Its success might be explained by its ability to achieve, for that brief historical moment, a compelling balance of the elements of freedom and duty. By the time of Wendell Phillips, the doctrine of perfectionism had seriously eroded the basis of consent upon which prophecy depended. The path was cleared for legitimate disagreement or at least irresolvable disagreement between persons making equal claims to perfection. Phillips and his compeers were able to prick the conscience of antebellum Americans precisely to the degree that some consensus on transcendental values remained viable, but though that consensus was sufficiently strong to engage Americans in a significant way, it was not strong enough to compel assent. The studies of those who followed Phillips reveal a continuing erosion of the cultural homogeneity necessary to validate prophecy and an increasing incapacity to argue convincingly from premises of obligation. By such a reading of our cultural history, it should have surprised no one when Bill Clinton's "New Covenant" theme, designed in the tradition of FDR's "New Deal," John Kennedy's "New Frontier," and Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society," to sound the vision of a new administration, was allowed to wither ignominiously on the vine.

The failure of obligation is critical, for it is the presence of obligations that allows us to exist as a culture. Unalloyed freedom is anarchy. Obligation is presented by the prophet as an order, and it in turn provides order to a confused world. It is the flight from chaos that provides the fundamental conservatism in American radicalism. The common themes in the rhetorics of the Revolution, Phillips, and Debs represent efforts to preserve some nucleus that orders society, some invariant point of reference. Faced with
crises of culture, rhetors in each of these studies in part I sought to restore a vision of structure and clarity to the world. They shaped an American identity from the materials of their Calvinism, their English heritage, their classical Western educations, and their Judeo-Christian ethic. They explored the ramifications of that identity, applied it in their respective situations, innovated where necessary—but always with a respect for the essential and the definitive—and in the process, revivified for succeeding generations a cultural tradition.

Nor is the American prophetic tradition as it developed from the American Revolution, through Phillips, to Debs, and even to some extent to Welch a mere critical hypostatization. Looking to the rhetoric of those who made it, it is evident that it was, quite literally, handed down from one generation of radicals to the next: Wendell Phillips was a student of the American Revolution; Debs was a student of Phillips; and Welch appears to have been a student of nineteenth-century America and of Emerson in particular. Our understanding of these discourses is poorer to the extent that we ignore this lineal influence. Failing to recognize its sources, we misread its intentions and mislocate its aspirations. Radicalism understood as a tradition does not threaten culture, but reaffirms and challenges it.

Conservatism in this sense is not a simple reactionary impulse. The American prophetic tradition is not a retreat into an idealized world in the past. American radicals from Paine and Otis to Phillips to Debs sought to preserve some agreement on goals; they attempted to maintain the sanguine vision which the past had created of the ideal future. The great tradition of American prophets has been unfailingly progressive. Faith, I have argued, has been their great common bond. It has been the "will to believe," as William James once termed it, that has sustained the prophetic impulse. With a "firm persuasion" in the divine sanction of their mission, American prophets have held an almost limitless confidence in the future. It is that confidence that failed in the period following the Second World War.

According to Henry May, the "hegemony" of "Progressive Patriotic Protestantism . . . ended exactly in 1919."5 Certainly there was evidence of its decay in Debs's time, but it is my argument that the genesis of the decline occurred much earlier and that its full implications were not felt until after the Second World War. Our vivid memories of the Sixties notwithstanding, it is important to remember that of the four decades since the end of the Second World War, three of them have seen movements of the right more prominent than movements of the left in America. As important representatives of this trend, the movements inspired by Joe
McCarthy and Robert Welch are characterized by a lack of faith. They were reactionary not because they wished to move backward in time—in McCarthy's case this is simply inapplicable, and in the case of Welch it is merely a symptom. They were reactionary because they existed only as reactions to threat; they were not positive; they had no direction to offer, no plan, no goals, no god—at least no supremely potent god capable of assuring his will in history. They had only devils to battle. They appealed to a dissolute world, a world without a common faith, unable or unwilling to acknowledge the command of any supreme being so diminished that it could occupy the small spaces of mystery that rationality and technology had left to it. For a people capable of destroying its own world, indeed its own existentially defined universe, there is no sacred space, nothing beyond ourselves.

Left exposed and vulnerable, McCarthy's response was to refuse the shelter of sanctuary; he preferred a bellicose game of hide-and-seek. There is a distorted vestige of American manliness and virtue in his discourse, all bare knuckles and brashness. Welch, on the other hand, responded to chaos with nostalgia. He did not carry the tradition forward; he was overwhelmed by it. There is no innovation in Welch's rhetoric. He recited his poems in praise of a bygone era suggesting that the greatest vision to which we could aspire was one that existed only as a perversion of memory. In a world completely subordinated to our control, the only thing we cannot touch is the past, and even that is an illusion, for those like Welch profane the past by making of it an idyllic fiction. The lack of a common history is one of the symptoms of the break in the tradition of the prophetic voice in America.

What the contemporary right has in common with the prophetic tradition is the impulse to order. The rigid, formal characteristics of prophetic discourse create sense out of confusion. They offer clarity and provide direction. Although they emphasize the negative side of this equation, that those on the right should be so obsessed with plots suggests the same impulse. But there is a considerable difference between an order that derives from compassion, is optimistic, and provides direction for the future and one that derives from fear, is faithless, and retreats into the mythical past. The former may be criticized for its utopian excesses, but the latter is the provenance of fascism. The former emphasizes freedom, the latter discipline. The former emphasizes opportunity, the latter impending foreclosure.

Modern movements of the left are no less spiritually impoverished than
those of the right. Many of the radical explosions of the 1960s have been characterized as idealistic, but the stress on the newness of the “New Left” suggests a rupture with the old ideals, and it is telling to note how many of the ideals of the Sixties were imported: religions of the East and Middle East, continental philosophies, and various forms of Marxism were seized upon as sources of transcendental value, changes signaled in discourse by a shift from the rhetorical form of the “Declaration” to that of the “Manifesto.” These visions failed to capture the imagination of most Americans, not because of any inherent defect, but because radicalism is cultural, and these ideals were not of our culture. In fact, that radicals should have turned to them is suggestive of how moribund our own ideals had become. Except perhaps for recollections of the Declaration of Independence, Thoreau on civil disobedience, or other signature documents recited either as liturgy or as evidence of hypocrisy, there was little evidence of historical awareness in the rhetoric of the Sixties, and no evidence that the spiritual sources that fueled the radicalism of the past were considered either viable or relevant.

As an extreme manifestation of these tendencies, such social movements as gay liberation have abandoned transcendental ideals altogether. Gay liberation has, in fact, been decisively excluded from claims on the divine. Some segments of the movement may profess belief in some higher order, and certainly individuals might, but as a social movement, gay liberation is characterized by an overwhelming emphasis on the individual, the freedom side of the freedom/discipline equation. A commanding transcendental presence is antithetical to a policy of “live and let live.”

Gay liberation efforts have largely been characterized by Arnold’s ideal of “sweetness and light,” a campaign for civil rights. As congenial as that may be, it also contains clear defects and limitations. By adhering to the rules of “reasonable discourse,” gay liberation leaders reinforce the underlying ideas regarding the nature of reasons and truth; they provide tacit assent to the claim that their cause may not be right, and they deny the integrity of reasons that might compel concordance with their cause. “Reasons” are both enthymematic and compelling of reform only as long as there exists the assumption of widespread agreement on what should be. In a pluralistic world, reasons can be only that to which the audience is willing to assent, something to be negotiated. In short, gay liberationists have no faith in their own righteousness.

Faith is a nonempirical idea. As such, its compass is not restricted to the narrow world of the observable and the quantifiable; its only limits are those
of the human imagination. Freed from the chains of the quotidian and the pedestrian, faith reflects itself in the grandeur and spaciousness of our mythologies. As Northrop Frye describes it, we live in two worlds. For the objective world, the world we are actually in, we develop “a logical language of fact, reason, description, and verification.” For the “potentially created world,” the ideal civilization we are trying to build or maintain, we develop “a mythical language of hope, desire, belief, anxiety, polemic, fantasy, and construction.” It might be said that we can judge a culture by the quality of the stories it tells about itself, by its mythical language. The stories of the Greek golden age still capture the imagination, and the achievement of the Old Testament has been its ability to anchor a cultural identity for three millennia. Such stories solicit our continuing admiration because they remind us of what humanity can achieve when it strains to reach beyond itself into the sacred, all the while recognizing its own finitude.

About such stories, Matthew Arnold, in his essay “The Proof from Prophecy,” wrote,

That men should, by help of their imagination, take short cuts to what they ardently desire, whether the triumph of Israel or the triumph of Christianity, should tell themselves fairy-tales about it, should make these fairy-tales the basis for what is far more sure and solid than the fairy-tales, the desire itself—all this has in it, we repeat, nothing which is not natural, nothing blameable. Nay, the region of our hopes and presentiments extends, as we have also said, far beyond the region of what we can know with certainty. What we reach but by hope and presentiment may yet be true; and he would be a narrow reasoner who denied, for instance, all validity to the idea of immortality, because this idea rests on presentiment mainly, and does not admit of certain demonstration. In religion, above all, extra-belief is in itself no matter, assuredly, for blame. The object of religion is conduct; and if a man helps himself in his conduct by taking an object of hope and presentiment as if it were an object of certainty, he may even be said to gain thereby an advantage.

Stories at this level are more than the products of a single author; they represent a common voice, a cooperative effort to define our highest ideals and aspirations, our most elevated visions. Arnold recognized them as part of a cultural urge to perfection, and Nietzsche admired the Old Testament precisely because he found therein a people. That some single prophet may become the spokesperson for the mass does not negate the communal nature of the story, for without engagement the story remains inert and sterile.
Borrowing from the stories of the Old Testament, the American prophets examined here at least began with visions that were both noble and exalted, stories that dared to gamble on presentiment alone. But just as Old Testament prophecy was unable to sustain itself, the exodus myth fashioned by the leaders of the American Revolution contained within it tensions that allowed it to devolve first to melodrama, then to melodramatic passion play, then to fantasy, until there was nothing left but the formal trappings of poetry, and finally, a renunciation of the transcendent story altogether in favor of the temporal and prosaic utterances of economics. It seems quite appropriate here to speak of a degenerative genre, a failure of imagination. There is an increasing tendency over the course of these studies to substitute literary conventions for a consensus absent at the spiritual level.

Yet it must be said in defense of those who created the stories of the Revolution, of the slave power conspiracy, of the rights of workers, of the communist conspiracy, of the need to recognize the equal rights of all, that they at least had the courage to recognize and acknowledge things larger than themselves, though some were defeated in the process. In doing so, they have added color and character to our heritage. That their closest kin are found in imaginative literature suggests the reach of their thought. But unlike the authors of novels, plays, and poems, our visionaries cannot be dismissed as idle speculators; they do not allow us to isolate their fictions from the realities of our everyday world. They insist on being taken as renderings of the possible.

That efforts to create grand mythologies have an element of foreignness and extravagance for us reflects how far we are estranged from the faith that motivates them. We have adopted the constricted logic of empiricism, a logic that reduces all things to our level, puts all things on our terms. It replaces commitment with method. It is a logic that demands little of us either in belief or in consequence. A strictly empirical worldview does not reshape human beings; through the achievements of science and technology, it accommodates them; it reshapes the environment, and its success in doing so is prima facie evidence of its veracity. We thus assume a position of passivity and seek to absolve ourselves of responsibility for our decisions. Matthew Arnold, though he sought to temper what he viewed as the excessive Hebraism of his day, warned against such a misplaced faith in the external, in "machinery." The "elegant Jeremiah" understood that culture must properly be a "harmonious perfection," a "totality," "fire and strength" as well as "sweetness and light." In "Dover Beach" he lamented the "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" of the "Sea of Faith," "Re-
The Seraph and the Snake

Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, or help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

That Arnold's poem, originally intended as a criticism of political excess, sounds equally appropriate in a time characterized by diffidence to the soundness of his instinct for balance and a lesson in deference and responsibility. Had he been a thoroughgoing Hellenist, his idea of balance might have resembled the golden mean wherein everything is trimmed of excess and reduced to the palatable, but Arnold finally preferred a more dynamic and athletic notion of homeostasis, less an average than an offsetting of opposing elements. Much as he celebrated "sweetness and light," he was unwilling to renounce those expressions of faith characterized by "fire and strength," which he recognized as having their own value in a culture.

In contrast to Arnold's time, we have erred on the side of Hellenism. We are plainly uncomfortable with the unverifiable and the extraordinary. We prefer the blandness of the bureaucrat to the supernal vision of the seer. Our cynicism prevents us from crediting claims on the divine. We view the prophetic tradition as remarkably naive in its faith in ultimate goodness. We prefer to look for the snake lurking behind every purported angel. Our distrust of prophets is really a reflection of a profound distrust of ourselves and our ability to tell true from false. We take no chances; we hide behind a timorous notion of reason, worn like sensible shoes.

This is, finally, the failing of so many current prescriptions for the national malaise. On the one hand, those on the right would retreat to rigid orthodoxies as sources of order. On the other hand, those who count themselves liberals place their faith in the processes of reason without content. Both responses embrace an idea of civility, but neither comprehends the role of continuing radical opposition in maintaining cultural definition, the need to aerate the roots of society by means that involve some violence to the soil. And the question must be raised as to whether we have not lost some of the richness of our traditions by condescending to the faith on which they were based. We have lost twice, because we can neither fully appreciate the motives that impelled some to speak as prophets,
which alienates us from our history, nor can we expect a renascence of prophetic activity in a world that cannot warrant its fundamental assumptions, which alienates us from the possibility of a prophetic future. It is on the recovery of this abandoned faith, this native radicalism, I suggest, that the revival of a compelling social vision and the discourse that would be its vehicle depends.