

“Seek the Light of Love”:  
Philip Lamantia’s “A Simple Answer to the Enemy”:  
Then and Now

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「愛の光を求めて」:  
フィリップ・ラマンティアの「ア・シンプル・アンサー・ツ・ザ・  
エネミー」: かつて, そして今

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Abstract

During the 1940s the poet Philip Lamantia transitioned away from Surrealism to “naturalistic” poetry rooted in spirituality and the mysticism that exists in extraordinary experiences. Some of the subject matter became more sensuous and sociopolitical, and an underlying theme is contempt for government and the evil perpetrated in its name. One of his most overtly political poems, “A Simple Answer to the Enemy” remains applicable today. It makes a case for dissent by laying bare the corrupt agenda of a political order that dehumanizes the public and erodes liberties. Lamantia endorses a revolutionary mindset that rejects mechanistic thinking, aggression, and greed, and encourages us to embrace a philosophy of love and the spirit of compassion.

要 旨

1940年代に詩人フィリップ・ラマンティアはその作風を、シュールレアリスムから霊性と並外れた経験に存在する神秘主義に根ざした「自然主義的な」詩へと移行させた。作品主題のいくつかはより感覚的で社会政治的なものになった。根本的なテーマは政治体制やその名のもとに行われる悪に対する軽蔑の念である。彼の最も明白な政治的詩作の一つ「ア・シンプル・アンサー・ツ・ザ・エネミー」は、今日でも通用する。それは公共を非人間化し、自由を侵害する政治秩序の腐敗した政治議題を明らかにすることによる異議申し立てである。ラマンティアは、機械的思考、攻撃性、貪欲を拒絶し、私たちに愛と思いやりの精神の受容を促す革命的な考え方を支持する。

## I. Transitioning to “Naturalistic” Verse

By the time of the renowned reading at the Six Gallery in the autumn of 1955, Philip Lamantia had already been immersed in Surrealism, political anarchism, devout Catholicism, and indigenous cultures, and each can be linked to a period or phase in his poetic development. About ten years earlier the poet transitioned away from surrealist verse to what he described as “naturalistic” poetry rooted in spirituality and the mysticism that exists in “extraordinary experience” (Meltzer 137-138). His work remained highly experimental, but became arguably more accessible as the subject matter became more sensuous and sociopolitical. Underlying much of this verse is Lamantia’s contempt for government and the evil perpetrated in its name. At some point or several points during the late forties and early fifties the poet destroyed much or most of his unpublished work, and although some poems survive, it is unknown how many were lost. It is believed that almost everything from the late forties no longer exists (Caples xlv). Therefore, a piece from a few years earlier, “A Simple Answer to the Enemy,” the final poem in *Erotic Poems* (1946), provides unique insight into Lamantia’s mind during the time he was immersed in the San Francisco scene (*CP* 45-46). The surrealist metaphors and juxtaposition of images of his previous work have been replaced by clear, plain-spoken revolutionary rhetoric. It remains one of his most overtly political poems, and still has applicable lessons for the contemporary reader. Through a close reading of “A Simple Answer to the Enemy” this paper will explore Lamantia’s vehement opposition to the state and examine how the poem remains relevant today. Making a case for dissent, the poet lays bare the corrupt agenda of a political order that dehumanizes the public and erodes liberties, and encourages the reader to reject divisive mendacity and, instead, embrace a spirit of compassion.

## II. “Revolutionary Individualism”

After spending most of 1944 in New York immersed in a circle of exiled European Surrealists, Lamantia’s poetry underwent a dramatic change upon returning to his native San Francisco: what he called more “naturalistic” verse. The shift was inspired by Kenneth Rexroth, the poet and anti-establishment intellectual often credited as the central figure of the San Francisco Renaissance, whom he met just

before embarking to New York. Once resettled in the Bay area, Lamantia was drawn to the San Francisco luminary due to his exhaustive knowledge of poetry, the classics, religion, and political theory, claiming that his “real education came from and through the great Rexroth” (Meltzer 136). After the war, and perhaps as a result of its aftereffects on American society, Rexroth began hosting two influential discussion groups – the Wednesday-night San Francisco Libertarian Circle, which focused on anti-establishment philosophy, and a more literary Friday-evening at-home salon – that served as brew kettles for the burgeoning Bay area scene. These discussion circles, as well as the relationships with the progressive thinkers who participated in them, would have a profound influence on the young poet’s social, political, and poetic direction.

In particular, the Wednesday-night crowd rejuvenated and complimented the radical theory and anti-authoritarian mindset that was cultivated during his brief tenure with the Surrealists. Recalling the gatherings, Lamantia noted, “the focal point of the group was every aspect of anarchist thought, researched and discussed with passion and objectivity” (Meltzer 138). While inspiring, however, it was not unfamiliar territory; Lamantia had shared this passion since even before his stint in New York. As a child in a Sicilian family of produce wholesalers growing up during the Depression, Lamantia became aware of poverty, work strikes, and the imperfections of capitalism, which compelled his curiosity about authority and matters of state. He told David Meltzer, “my deeper awareness of politics came later when I was about thirteen, reading in the Communist bookstore on Market Street” (146). Furthermore, in a 1943 letter to the distinguished Surrealist Andre Breton, the sixteen-year-old wrote,

At the present time when the forces of extreme principles are being felt almost by the whole world, a true revolutionary poet cannot help defying every appalling social and political instrument that has been the cause of death and exploitation in the capitalistic societies of the earth. ... Though I have not yet fully realized the implications of the external world, I nevertheless feel suited to express a revolt, and a contempt in my poetry or otherwise, for any system or form that stands for mechanistic thinking and the enslavement of man! ... To rebel! That is the immediate objective of poets! (*Preserving Fire* 6-7)

Much of this sentiment was prompted by the war, which had profound implications and touched the lives of almost everyone in the Western world. The teenager's disgust for authority stemmed not only from the evils being perpetrated in Europe, but was motivated by the actions of the U.S. government as well: including, but not limited to conscription, state-sanctioned killing, and the internment of Japanese-Americans. While his earlier Surrealist verse was a means of confronting injustice – essentially, by employing revolutionary poetics to cope with the insanity of warfare – ultimately, the young poet pursued other forms of cultural and literary radicalism. The San Francisco scene encouraged these alternate forms of defiance.

Social and political radicalism offered the eighteen-year-old a different method of rebellion. While promptly ending the war, America's use of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki further fueled Lamantia's opposition to the state. From a humanitarian point of view, he was horrified by the American press's lack of compassion and sympathy for the hundreds of thousands of Japanese whose cities, lives, and dreams had been destroyed. Naturally, his disdain extended to the state. In a November, 1945 piece published by a British anarchist paper, the poet lamented at length about the inherent immorality of government:

The principles of hate, aggression, torture, and the will-to-war have become so powerful in the mass-psychology of the world, that they have almost annihilated the principles of love and freedom. The atomic bomb is the outward expression of this basic psychological malady. Totalitarianism is its political expression; American democracy reveals the moral irresponsibility that springs from it. (*Preserving Fire* 14)

Lamantia vowed to adhere to the creed of “revolutionary individualism,” a path that he had forged a few years earlier, as his foray into Surrealism, mysticism, and free thinking were explicit means by which to distance himself from the status quo. With Rexroth's assistance, pacifist conviction compelled the poet to apply for Conscientious Objector status, which he was eventually granted, when he turned eighteen. Insisting that the state was a mechanism of evil, “[he] certainly refuse[d] to directly participate in, or be at the mercy of, that part of the State which compromises its greatest evil: the military” (*Preserving Fire* 19). This act of civil disobedience and a mindset of “revolutionary individualism” guide his writing.

Although his poetry does not overtly concentrate on politics, his canon can be read as political. The San Francisco counterculture suited Lamantia’s pacifist mindset, and intellectual and spiritual growth would manifest themselves in his verse for the remainder of his life.

### III. Prosperity over People

Most likely penned in the latter half of 1945 “A Simple Answer to the Enemy” is Lamantia’s rebuttal not only to the brutality of the past decade, but to government oppression over the centuries. The poem is preceded by an epigraph from the Russian revolutionary philosopher and prominent advocate of anarchism, Peter Kropotkin. In his 1897 essay, “The State: Its Historic Role,” the activist concludes that unless “the State” is “destroyed” – leading to rebirth – it will ultimately “crush the individual and local life,” bringing strife, wars, and petty power struggles resulting in a revolving door of “tyrant[s],” eventually leading to death (*CP* 45). Nearly fifty years later Lamantia channels Kropotkin as he reflects on the Second World War:

It is an eventful year.  
We live in a nation flourishing  
On the blood of millions murdered  
And millions more being murdered  
Everywhere else in the world. (ll. 1-5)

Referring to 1945 – when the atomic bombs were dropped and the war came screeching to a halt – the opening stanza considers the over six million victims of the Holocaust as well as the countless civilians and soldiers that died in the world’s deadliest war. Despite the cost in lives, however, the United States is “flourishing.” The end of the war brought prosperity to the country and its citizens, contrasting starkly with most of Europe, its major cities reduced to piles of rubble, and especially Eastern Europe, which succumbed to the tyranny of the Soviet Union. Undoubtedly, Lamantia also has in mind the war profiteering by American plutocrats: namely industrialists and Wall Street financiers. Stylistically, the break between the second and third lines emphasizes the wealth gap between post-war

have and have-nots, while the stanza's final line reflects America's isolation from the rest of the world. The bleak imagery establishes a hostile tone in just five short lines.

Applying the poem to 2018 yields some similarities. Although the year's events were not nearly as profound as those of 1945, due to the proliferation of news programming and the shortening news cycle one gets the impression that more is happening than what actually transpires. The onset of cable news in the eighties introduced the 24-hour news cycle, and with the development of social media, featuring trending topics and facilitating the ability to share information, that cycle has been shortened to a two-hour timeframe (Ingram). Heightened scrutiny across the political spectrum and the never-ending need for more content has resulted in increased nitpicking and more dirty laundry being aired. Moreover, an American administration plagued by frequent drama and helmed by an executive that issues policy via Twitter only exacerbates the nonstop barrage of news. It may feel like there is more news, even if not everything is actually newsworthy.

Although the second and third lines explicitly describe the body count during World War II, thankfully combat-related deaths are far fewer today. Yet, ongoing wars in the Middle East continue to wreak havoc in the region. Since fighting escalated in Yemen in 2015, it has been reported that over 85,000 children under the age of five have died from malnutrition and that close to 14 million people may be on the verge of starvation (Karasz). In addition, Russia's annexation of Crimea and interference in the Ukraine, the Saudi Arabian government's probable involvement in the murder of a journalist critical of the monarchy, and the Myanmar government's persecution of and atrocities against the Rohingya people are just a few more examples of the crushing power of the state that Kropotkin warned about. Regarding the notion that the U.S.A. is "flourishing," one is reminded of rampant consumerism and the insatiable demand for ever-cheaper products. Oil immediately springs to mind. The current U.S. president prioritizes strategic interests over lives; for example, his refusal to confront the Saudi monarchy over human rights violations hinges on the desire to export military hardware and keep oil prices at bay. Large retailers and technology firms engage in similar conduct in their relations with overseas markets; many are reluctant to criticize China and other Asian countries in exchange for continued access and low prices. How the president's trade demands and tariffs will impact these issues remains to be seen, but there is



no quick fix since the problems date back at least a generation. Although today's problems do not reach the degree of killings that Lamantia laments, lives continue to be lost at the hand of the state. When viewing current events, the reader can apply the language figuratively to a host of disturbing global problems. The U.S. continues to flourish, oftentimes at the expense of the less fortunate abroad.

#### IV. Descent into Darkness

Inspired by Kropotkin and other revolutionaries who challenged the state – via Rexroth's discussion groups and classes he audited Berkeley – the second stanza finds the protagonist ruminating on the "incorruptible words / Of those who chose defiance / To the highest evil" (ll. 6-8). The reader wonders exactly whom or what the poet deems to be the "the highest evil." Presumably the generic "state" is too ambiguous, as there were plenty of candidates at the time; Hitler, Mussolini, Truman, and the Japanese Imperial army come to mind. The two most prominent possibilities that qualify as the "nightmare lying before us" are events rather than people; Nazi Germany's perpetration of the Holocaust and the deployment of the atomic bombs (l. 10). Both atrocities left the world in a state of shock, prompting calls of "never again," and are textbook examples of how a leviathan state itself epitomizes the well-deserved moniker, "the highest evil." Lines 9-10 betray Lamantia's and the world's horror and disgust about the inconceivably gruesome "nightmare[s]" of recent history.

Compared to these apocalyptic horrors, "nightmare" is hyperbolic when considering the current state of the world. Akin to the thirties and forties, however, there is revived interest in populism, nationalism, and support around the world for extremist leaders endorsing these notions. The situation in the States is an especially conspicuous example. Unprecedented in modern American history, President Trump was elected without prior service in public office nor the military. His domestic and international policy knowledge before the campaign was questionable, his demeanor, discourse, and moral compass more fitting of a teenager than the leader of the free world, and he won the Republican nomination and the presidency by assailing and fueling distrust in government institutions, demeaning minorities and immigrants, and by hurling personal insults at rivals. Just as disturbing are the attacks on anyone that questions or disagrees with his

sovereignty. As a result of his hostility towards traditional allies and congeniality with autocrats, including Vladimir Putin, Kim Jong Un, and Mohammed bin Salman, the executive branch of the American government has arguably descended into darkness. With a strongman at the helm who is willing to sacrifice traditional alliances, ignore criticism, and question the role and necessity of domestic and international institutions, there is concern that checks and balances are being eroded and that more power is being consolidated by fewer decision-makers in the executive branch. In light of these developments, many infer that the relative stability of the post-war era is ending. The notion that even stalwart democracies can succumb to increasingly powerful ideologues fuels speculation that Kropotkin's prophecies are occurring before our eyes.

## V. "Rising Tide of Revolt"

Perhaps as a result of Lamantia's comradery with like-minded libertarians and radicals, the tone briefly becomes more optimistic in the third stanza: "The Revolution has not won, / But it exists everywhere" (ll. 11-12). An article appearing in the British magazine, *Horizon*, provides insight into the poet's perception about this "revolution":

Those who reject society have come to assume that the main validity of anarchism lives in terms of the individual's moral and social opposition: it is a philosophy of life for those who intend to keep themselves as clean as possible and who are ready to meet any drastic invasion of the State with the resistance of the whole personality. (*Preserving Fire* 25)

His contempt for the state rises above politics into the spiritual realm; opposition is a moral imperative. Resisting an invasive government, as well as penning radical poetry – in Lamantia's case – are noble acts of fortitude. The idealism, however, is fleeting as the stanza goes on to warn of the "trigger-like mentalities" that will go to any length to counter dissent with "unequaled force" (ll. 13, 15). Accusing the state of being trigger-happy condemns it not only for being foolhardy and reckless, but also for its over-the-top opposition to differing viewpoints it perceives to be menacing. The term also suggests mental instability and a lack of critical thinking.

The abrupt tone shift from the stanza’s first two lines is especially noticeable; the overtly belligerent language in lines 12-15 – “trigger,” “attack,” “bear down,” and “force” – reflect the overwhelming power of the state and the fearless audacity to fully deploy force when it feels threatened. In such cases, those pulling the levers of power become at risk of sacrificing sound judgement, and even their humanity.

Read in the context of contemporary society, the reader can draw parallels. The revolutionary movements across the Middle East beginning in late 2010, branded the Arab Spring, come to mind. The results have been slow to be realized and inconclusive. The regime in Tunisia collapsed and reforms were announced in Algeria, Jordan, and Oman, but after that hope faded. The nefarious Islamic State, which aims to extend its brand of fundamental Islam across the Middle East, unleashed brutality across the region, which persists today. Uprisings in Libya and Egypt resulted in chaos and a return to the status quo, while Syria and Yemen devolved into wars that look to have no end in sight. As it has throughout history the region remains a simmering kettle of discontent, perpetually threatening to boil over, that is overseen by leaders with autocratic tendencies quick to stem any hint of dissent.

The situation in the States is nowhere near as dire, though the country remains bitterly divided, as evidenced by the elections of the past 30 years; government control alternates between Democrats and Republicans elected by slim majorities. While strong opposition to the Trump administration exists, its proponents remain faithful and undeterred. Whether or not Special Counsel Robert Mueller’s investigation of possible collusion and obstruction of justice involving Russia and the 2016 presidential campaign can be called a “rising tide of revolt” remains debatable. Certainly, the president and many conservatives view it as a threat and would like to see it crushed. And although the Democratic Party’s showing in the 2018 midterm elections restores some degree of restraint on the executive branch, by no means can it be called a revolution. The president’s tendency to lash out when backed into a corner is well known; “trigger-like” can easily be applied figuratively to his spiteful name-calling and combative tweets, and literally to the fingers that fire them off. However, the president’s aggression is not only metaphoric. He has condoned violence during rallies and refused, until prodded by aides, to condemn white supremacists. Moreover, he suggested, and subsequently walked back, firing upon migrants who throw rocks at agents along the Mexican border: an unfortunate

example of “unequaled force.” On the local level, the power of law enforcement has increased exponentially in recent years; even in small communities military-grade weaponry is standard and police have permission to use overwhelming force that often becomes brutal. America became a police state long ago, and as its strength and power continues to grow, one wonders how oppressive it will become – how much it will, in Kropotkin’s words, “become the master of all the domains of human activity” – before “the rising tide of revolt” erupts. Although it is difficult to compare contemporary political and social strife to that in the mid-forties, states around the world are striving to increase their power and quash anything that challenges their ambitions. Surely, Lamantia would find many of these actions not only disturbing, but immoral and worthy of opposition.

## VI. Sleepwalking amid the Chaos

The fourth stanza, the poem’s longest, criticizes not only the state, but the people as well. The poet lambasts the masses for existing in a state of mindless sleepwalking by succumbing to state control and acquiescing to its heartless policies:

The people walk as if in a movie-dream  
And work in the terrifying order  
Of a chaos their bodies reject,  
But their fear compels them to accept. (ll. 17-20)

In a letter to the Selective Service Headquarters declaring his desire for Conscientious Objector status, Lamantia writes about the “imperfection of man”: “if I were to analyze these principles of imperfection I would name them as such: hate, force, aggression, torture, and finally the culmination point for all four: mass murder, War. These principles are those of destruction, and in times of war they become its instrument” (*Preserving Fire* 16-17). The poet criticizes governments that prey upon people’s worst instincts to gain acceptance and keep them in line, even though doing so goes against humanity’s better nature. The general public also must accept responsibility for its lack of moral fiber and capitulation to the will of the state. By the Second World War, major players were using the media to produce

sophisticated nationalist propaganda films to fire up and unite citizens behind the war cause. The Third Reich implanted dehumanizing thoughts against the Jewish population, stirring the pot of nationalism. Across the Atlantic, lulled by a war fought on foreign soil and brainwashed by the slickly-produced Hollywood newsreels, the American public is painted as automatons manipulated by the state, unaware of or unconcerned about their complicity in the terror. The masses willingly participate in the “chaos” of the war machine because of the jobs provided, a desire to help the troops, and a strong will to win the war. The break after line 18 enhances the ordered chaos paradox. Another motivating factor was fear: fear of losing their current way of life, of losing the war, and losing a loved one. Capitalist pursuit of materialism and normality were powerful methods to allay these fears, or at least counter the body’s natural physical rejection of armed conflict and the atrocities committed in the name of the state. The half-rhyme of “reject” and “accept” and the “walk” and “work” pararhyme emphasize the discord and disconnection between the people’s bodies and their minds. Considering that “A Simple Answer to the Enemy” was published at the end of *Erotic Poems*, there may be a suggestion that even passionate sexuality – a method of exerting control over one’s body – can be a coping mechanism to defy authority. A country is only as strong as its population, however, and one unwilling to stand up to injustices at all costs is doomed to fall under the spell of corrupt leaders.

The stanza’s latter half returns to denouncing the state: “The bureaucrats and idle rich / Continue their reign of permanent war / On the sweat and blood of the poor” (ll. 21-23). Although stateside the war effort lessened the lingering effects of the Great Depression via lower unemployment and higher wages, poverty increased and families were forced to move in search of work. These families faced housing shortages, as well as a lack of schools and medical services. Child labor increased and taxes skyrocketed, disproportionately affecting less well-off segments of society. This contrasts significantly with those on top, who profited mightily. In addition to the anti-war rhetoric, the revolutionary poet also calls attention to class-warfare within his own country. Both are vile. Clearly, Lamantia’s experience of growing up in the Sicilian community during the Great Depression informs these lines, as he was acutely aware of social and economic inequality. Stylistically, over the course of the stanza deceptively-relaxing /r/ consonance as well as half-rhymes (“order,” “war,” “poor”) reinforce the slumbering state in which the public lives and stress the

disharmony of hoping for normality during wartime. Unable or unwilling to challenge the state, the masses bend to its control, even though they know deep down that something is not quite right.

We see parallels in contemporary society. The state has perfected its ability to manipulate the media for political purposes: to silence critics, sow unrest, spread disinformation, and influence elections. The Hollywood dream has morphed into an unending barrage of short videos – often cherry-picked, edited, and / or taken out of context – which often convey a particular slant in order to distort the digital landscape. In the U.S., administration spin doctors orchestrate a Reality TV dream, something at which Donald Trump is particularly adept. One ramification of living in the media mirage has been a decrease in the reliability not only of journalism and the press, but in the trust of established institutions in general. Other corollaries are indifference and disillusionment. Participation in the political process is mediocre at best; voter turnout in established democracies over the past 40 years has been falling (“Voter Turnout”). In the United States, however, it has remained in the 50-60 percent range in presidential elections during the same time period (“Voter turnout in the United States”). One wonders why nearly half of voting-age citizens cannot be bothered to participate in elections. There are a host of reasons: apathy, lack of education, feeling disconnected from the political process, and the notion that politicians are cut from the same cloth; prioritizing themselves and their wealthy donors over the interests of constituents. All of these convey Lamantia’s notion that a general malaise has anaesthetized a sleepwalking population; a sickness that does not bode well for democracy. The word “chaos” is especially applicable in contemporary America as President Trump oversees the most chaotic presidential administration in recent memory, characterized by nepotism, mixed messages, infighting, and an unusually high turnover of top aides. He sold the country on his deal-making and management acumen, but it is clear that incompetence, confusion, and disorder are the dominant features of his administration. An anesthetized state could explain why so many tolerate the president, even as “their bodies reject” his behavior. What other reason can there be for the backing of the religious right, despite words and actions completely antithetical to the teachings of Christ, such as, but not limited to, sexism, racist and anti-immigration policies, and encouraging violence? Perhaps our principles have become lost in the fog of confusion. Lamantia offers another plausible reason: fear.

Fearmongering in politics is nothing new; long ago Machiavelli opined that it is better to be feared than loved. His authoritarian pragmatism has influenced and inspired autocrats and politicians for centuries; across parties and persuasions morality and ethics are often jettisoned in favor of preying upon the public’s uncertainties and anxieties. The editors of the avant-garde magazine *The Ark* – Lamantia was one – noted as much in the editorial of the publication’s first and only edition, “because fear and greed have become the primary ethical movers, States and state-controlled societies continue to exist” (*Preserving Fire* 28). Gripped by fear, real or imagined, one’s ability to rationalize is impaired, making an individual much more susceptible to manipulation, especially if protection and safety are offered. On the American stage, all three presidents since 9/11 have made terrorism and security important pillars of election campaigns and policy rationale, and fear-mongering has been employed to combat terrorism, immigrants, and those with differing views. Sadly, there is no indication that scaremongering will be abandoned any time soon. Returning to the poem, the stanza’s final two lines note that states continue to target the economically disadvantaged, as lower levels of education, an ability to suspend disbelief, and the hope that one day they too will reap the benefits of being well-off compels them to acquiesce to those above, even if it is in their own disinterest. President Lyndon B. Johnson enacted the War on Poverty nearly twenty years after the poem was written. Although it has been reduced, poverty has not been eliminated, even in a country as wealthy as America. Administrations on both sides of the aisle have downsized or eliminated programs that help the needy. In recent years tax cuts in the States have overwhelmingly skewed towards corporations and the wealthy, universal healthcare has been derided as “socialist,” and funding for anti-poverty programs has been slashed. Lamantia views this kind of callousness as yet another shortcoming of the state. It takes care of itself at the peril of everything else.

## VII. Monstrous Children

The fifth stanza explicitly concerns the Third Reich and its “monstrous child” leader: Adolf Hitler (l. 24). Lamantia opines that German hegemony, the Holocaust, and the war to counter the inhumanity and aggression are all symptoms of an “accumulated barbarism” that has been building for “centuries” (ll. 26-27). A shrewd

leader, Hitler was able to harness fear, nationalism, and a perception of strength to win over a docile public that was still reeling from defeat in World War I. Applying this stanza to contemporary society is extremely difficult because notwithstanding a number of autocrats, no one even approaches comparison to Hitler, especially in Europe. It might be helpful to change the locale to the Middle East, where there are plenty of despots. Despite armed conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and the brutality waged by the Islamic State and other non-state actors, none have erupted into a war that has enveloped the entire region the way Nazi Germany's supremacy did. Finally, commentary on the stanza without mention about the word "child" remains incomplete (l. 24). While some may label the current American president "monstrous," he falls far short of the German brute. Yet, he certainly is childish; the name-calling, bullying, and ill-informed, often nonfactual tweets and rallying-cries are not those of a thoughtful, mature individual nor are they appropriate for one who holds the highest elected office in the country. Lamantia would be offended by his boorish behavior and insensitive mistreatment of others.

### VIII. "Seek the Light of Love"

The climactic sixth stanza readdresses politicians and those who willingly obey them:

The politicians spill their lies  
Over our heads; the lies of murderers,  
Rouges and fools whose hearts have ceased  
To seek the light of love.  
The measure of their strength  
Is the docility of those they rule. (ll. 28-33)

Although over-simplistic, it would be difficult to deny that most politicians, once they reach a certain level, lie for myriad reasons, both acceptable and reprehensible. Especially for autocrats, lying is key to maintaining dominance. Usage of "spill" conveys that fabrications of the state are overwhelming, and the gradual lengthening of the first three lines visually symbolizes the overflow of untruths, compounding the maliciousness of foolish leaders. The break between lines 28 and



29 even conjures the image of falsehoods from above raining down on the minions below. Because mendacity during wartime is par for the course, the vast majority of states involved in the Second World War, on both sides, distorted the truth. Lamantia also suggests the Big Lie, a term penned by Adolf Hitler in his 1925 *Mein Kampf*, which posits that a key to controlling a populace lies in spinning a fabrication so outrageous that it disrupts the entire social order. Naturally, the most effective lies are those that target extant prejudices. The Third Reich ignominiously employed this propaganda technique by blaming German defeat in World War I on European Jews and insisting that it could be avenged by eradicating the Jewish population. Of course, other countries misled their citizens as well. Lamantia despises the notion that deploying nuclear weapons was necessary to end the war. In his “Conscientious Objector Statement” he calls the atomic bomb “the most monstrous weapon of all time,” and vehemently opposes its use, noting, “to use force to abolish an evil is sheer hypocrisy; what is left is a lesser-evil born out of the first” (*Preserving Fire* 18, 19). Using evil itself to combat evil is a fallacy.

In what are arguably the most sagacious lines in the poem, Lamantia then pinpoints the root problem of autocratic states and their leaders: forsaking love. Considering that “A Simple Answer to the Enemy” is included in a volume entitled *Erotic Poems*, passion was certainly on the poet’s mind, although the love he channels here transcends physical affection into the spiritual realm. Indeed, for Lamantia, all forms of love are manifestations of the Divine and its rejection is wicked. The sources of evil, he notes in the 1945 letter to the Selective Service board, are selfishness, a lack of compassion and empathy, and turning one’s back on the Almighty:

It has become increasingly clear in the contemporary world that one of the greatest of evils stems from the inability for man to “love his neighbor as he loves himself.” But I also affirm that men have ceased to regard their object of love – in the final, universal sense – they have lost their spiritual life. The object of love, when man turns within himself, is God.

(*Preserving Fire* 18)

Stylistically, the enjambment of lines 30 and 31 reflects this observation. First, the line break implies metaphorically that the hearts of the loveless have stopped; they

are dead, not physically, but spiritually. Second, since “to seek the light of love” occupies its own line, it reads like a commandment or a mission statement instructing the reader how to prevent spiritual death. In addition, the stanza’s shorter fourth line visually halts the spillage of lies over the previous three. While forsaking love causes spiritual death, its pursuit can help thwart mendacity. The stanza’s final two lines continue to undercut autocrats, asserting that a major reason for their “strength” is the general public’s weakness. A lot of people simply want to be told what they wish to hear. Once again, Lamantia denounces feeble sleepwalkers that suspend disbelief, ignore politicians’ lies, and allow themselves to be manipulated. To combat the malaise of subservience he advocates for a revolutionary sensibility tempered by love: “The revolutionary of our times – and I do not mean just politically, for that is not enough – to have any sort of valid position must attach himself to a philosophy of love” (*Preserving Fire* 14). Individuals must rebel against the mendacity and injustices of the state because it is right and moral. This kind of conviction transcends time.

In many respects not much has really changed over the last seventy years. Deception remains commonplace; governments around the world regularly conceal, deny, and obscure the truth. Doing so has a profoundly detrimental effect on the fabric of society because it decreases the social trust upon which the vitality of the democratic process hinges. Today, due to the massive flow of information, rather than the Big Lie we are experiencing an overabundance of little ones, which distract from, confuse, and muddy the truth. The Saudi Arabian government initially denied any involvement in the murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, but it gradually walked back the denials and finally admitted that he was murdered and dismembered on the premises. In the lead up to Britain’s Brexit vote and continuing in the ongoing saga, inaccuracies, exaggerations, and outright fabrications have swirled on both sides of the debate. Stateside, President Donald Trump made 6,420 “lies or misleading statements” in the first 649 days of his presidency: an average of 9.9 a day (Kessler, Rizzo, and Kelly). Even more insulting, he has scolded the media for purveying “fake news,” despite peddling plenty of misinformation himself. His hypocrisy knows no bounds. The administration abets the president’s distorted reality by offering a mixture of stretched truths and “alternative facts,” and one of his lawyers even made the Orwellian declaration, “truth isn’t truth” (*Meet the Press*). Around the world, the lies

in politicians’ cups continue to runneth over.

Equally concerning is the manner in which certain segments of the public accept the fibs. In a time when access to information has never been easier, why is this so? To begin, a lot of politicians tell stories that appeal to their supporters’ experiences and understanding of the world, and when these stories are engaging and the storyteller is charismatic, many people willingly accept them, even with shifting narratives and factual errors. A second factor is that politicians with an authoritarian streak thrive on manufacturing threats, often containing a kernel of truth, that supporters already believe are valid – for example, Hispanic immigrants are taking American jobs and Muslims are terrorists – and then vow to protect the public from said threats. Mix in some nationalism along with highly charged storytelling, and the weak will not only follow, but believe. Fabrications may even bolster a politician’s standing among core backers. Compounding these factors, regime-friendly news outlets – and state-controlled media in autocratic societies – ceaselessly repeat the messages, thereby normalizing the lies. President Trump’s go-to media megaphone parrots his falsehoods and inaccuracies, undermining the truth. All of this has become magnified in the post-truth era, in which anyone with an internet connection can disseminate information regardless of its veracity. Very often by the time the stories are discredited, the damage has been done; if enough people believe a lie, it becomes a fact. All of this ties in with Lamantia’s critique of a public sleepwalking in a “movie dream.” In an ever-changing world, those who feel left behind, have abandoned critical thinking, or both can easily fall under the spell of a demagogue, blindly accepting whatever they are told. Such unquestioning gullibility and a refusal to hold leaders accountable, the poet declares, is a central source of their “strength” (l. 33). Shattered doors of perception enable corrupt strongmen.

## IX. Creative Destruction

The poem ends with an ominous warning:

Whatever happens, one thing is certain:  
The end of a world it has taken  
Hundreds of years to create,  
But mere seconds to destroy. (ll. 34-37)

Clearly, the lines refer to the deployment of nuclear weapons. Having seen the terrifying horror that atomic warfare can inflict, nuclear armament quickly became a priority for countries that could afford to do so. The stanza portends the foreboding shadow that the Cold War was about to cast upon the world, one that has since morphed into fears about rogue-states obtaining and using nuclear technology. The poet realizes that the world has changed forever; he is “certain.” Now that mankind possesses the ability to destroy itself it is only a matter of time before the self-fulfilling prophecy plays out. Lamantia admits as much in the letter to the Selective Service Headquarters, “I consider the so-called ‘peace’ that follows a war to be as evil, if not more evil, than the war itself – for therein are sown the seeds for the next one” (*Preserving Fire* 20). The stanza’s terse but blunt message reflects the instantaneous mass destruction of nuclear weapons. The lulling half rhyme at the ends of the first two lines suggest the complacency into which Americans fall after the war, however, jarring words – “end of the world” and “destroy” – function as deliberate attempts to jolt the reader from her sleepwalking state. It is tempting to believe the poem finishes on a negative note, but there is an alternative, more sanguine reading. One can interpret the diametrically opposed creation / destruction motif in the final two lines as implying the paradox of existence; that from ruin new life is born. Read in this light the poem returns full circle to Kropotkin’s epigraph, implying that rebellion is the only way to break the cycle of state hegemony and remake the world anew.

Filtering the stanza through a contemporary lens yields various interpretations. From an eco-poetic point of view, the strain put on the planet by humanity has reached a tipping point; we continue to sow the seeds of our extinction, and we have started to experience the detrimental effects. Despite overwhelming agreement by the scientific community and many governments around the world, attempts to counter climate change are lackluster at best, and there is little hope of a consequential, near-term unified response. Moreover, despite attempts to curb it, nuclear proliferation persists. From a sociopolitical perspective, viewed in light of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks and countless other terrorist incidents that occur regularly around the world, Lamantia’s words are strikingly prescient. Thinking about the lines presents more questions than answers. Is the post-war global order breaking down? How will the outcome of the Brexit saga affect peaceful relations in the region that was ravaged by the most brutal war in human history? What will

become of the recent worldwide rise of populism? And what will be the lasting impact of Donald Trump on the presidency, American society, and the global role of the United States? Regarding the American presidency, considering how quickly the level of public discourse has fallen – name-calling, personal insults, and petty axes to grind – we have already witnessed a race to the bottom. In the age of social media, can public civility be restored? Those who care about human rights and dignity question how the influence of the United States has changed and if it can ever be the role model that it yearns to be. And finally, what is the role of the revolutionary; to facilitate or prevent destruction? Exactly what Lamantia understood the “end of the world” to mean remains debatable, but one undisputable certainty is constant: change.

## X. An Enemy of the State

As an advocate of “revolutionary individualism,” Lamantia believed it was his responsibility to hold government accountable for its actions. He strove to establish a place for himself amongst the other writers and thinkers over the ages who had dared to raise their voices against the ruling class. He explained the role of the bard in a 1965 letter to the publisher, Robert Hawley, “the poet must be the herald of all *‘that goes beyond its own existence,’* the vital link to the universal order, attested by philosophers & mystics” (*Preserving Fire* 66). Surely, the young poet aimed to do just that twenty years earlier when he penned “A Simple Answer to the Enemy.” The poem is the product of the Second World War’s shocking horrors – the Holocaust, the atomic bombings, the sheer number of civilian and military casualties, and the destruction of Europe – combined with a youthful spirit of revolutionary anarchy and a moral imperative to speak truth to power. At a time when political dissent by artists and the literati was being demonized by the defenders of the status quo, the poet voiced support for Henry Miller, who unapologetically denounced the state’s abuses of power. Championing Miller, Lamantia described the novelist as “an angry, yet humble, individual who refuses to make peace with a society in which inequality and brutality have probably degraded the human personality to a point never before witnessed in history” (*Preserving Fire* 27). The world had changed, and writers, the poet argued, had to change with it.

Instead of employing surrealistic images and associations, the poem departs from

his previous work; Lamantia inserts himself into the anarchist canon by using natural language that is accessible to all. Although the poem's central themes are straightforward, the title is more ambiguous; who is the "enemy" and what is the "simple answer"? Does the poet address the state as the enemy, advising tyrants to take notice that a resistance is developing to rise up and challenge them? Certainly, this case can be made; phrases such as the "rising tide of revolt" that "exists everywhere" herald a fomenting opposition. However, this explanation seems off-base and, ultimately, unsatisfying. More likely, those who dissent are "the enemy." Lamantia explicitly explained in his defense of Miller that "unless a writer toes the line, or keeps quiet, he remains in implacable enemy of an order of things whose God is Mammon and a nation now living off the blood of war and the spiritual, economic, and social disorganization of the rest of the world" (*Preserving Fire* 27). The "answer" is an instructive laundry list of injustices, large and small, spelling out the case for fundamental dissent. There is no attempt to mask the poet's utter contempt and revulsion for established political regimes that exploit their power and erode individual liberties. The poem is a rallying cry to like-minded revolutionaries and libertarians, a figurative call to arms, warning that the state is a threat to all that is decent, moral, and right. It is a wake-up call to those sleepwalking in a world that has been created, and is controlled, by a ruling class that has been corrupted by wealth and power. Lamantia's voice is a moral compass imploring the reader to take note of the outrageous behavior, to listen to her body rather than the fantastic fabrications that she is fed, and to act in accordance with her heart in the spirit of compassion. Twenty years ahead of his time, the poet encourages us "to seek the light of love" as a means to counteract evil and prejudice; a notion that would blossom in the counterculture of the sixties (l. 31). In short, the poem appeals to "the better angels of our nature"; to embrace a way of life that is purer or more enlightened. Interestingly, Lamantia chose to omit the final five words in Kropotkin's treatise: "The choice lies with you!" (Kropotkin). In the aftermath of World War II, maybe he feels that the choice no longer exists; that the argument for opposition has been made painfully obvious and laid bare for the world to see. As a self-proclaimed enemy of the state, the poet has already chosen.

Lamantia's words still ring true more than seventy years later. Over the decades there have been countless instances across the globe of revolt and attempts at self-determination, yet state-controlled societies still exist, pouring vast quantities of

“Seek the Light of Love”: Philip Lamantia’s “A Simple Answer to the Enemy”: Then and Now

human and monetary capital into matters of questionable benefit that often do not filter down to the population, instilling anxiety, dissatisfaction, and unrest. Rather than violent opposition, being an enemy of the state in contemporary society is better served first by shunning what is reprehensible – prejudice, intolerance, brutality – and embracing “the light of Love”: in short, a spiritual transformation. Once that is achieved the opposition can proceed with a political one: appointing leaders who prioritize the needs of citizens, such as comprehensive education, health care, and general welfare, as well as those who have the temperament, rhetoric, and a spirit of cooperation necessary to work with others about how to solve the challenging problems that we face. Unfortunately, encouraging such participation in the political process does nothing for those living outside of representative democracies. One certainty, however, is that a voiceless, soulless, and sleepwalking population only strengthens and emboldens an authoritarian state. Maintaining a collaborative revolutionary mindset that rebels against mechanistic thinking, aggression, and greed, and simultaneously espouses a philosophy of love is the simple answer. The choice is ours.

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