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On Being Beggared:

Child Abuse in America

William Wasserstrom



The child senses that a woman tore him from herself, alive, covered with blood, and sent him rolling outside the world, and he feels himself an outcast Undesirable in his very being, he is not that woman's son but her excrement The abandoning of a child signifies an even more radical condemnation Being nobody's son, he is nothing. As a result of his fault, disorder has wormed its way into the beautiful order of the world, a crack has appeared in the fullness of being.

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genêt, Actor and Martyr*, 1963.

"On Being Beggared" was a paper delivered by William Wasserstrom at the New York City Foundling Hospital in January 1979, under the auspices of the National Alliance for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse and Maltreatment, Inc. Support for the project was received from the New York State Council for the Humanities. The original paper has been somewhat modified for purposes of publication in *Syracuse Scholar*.

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In November 1978, during the first of two public sessions in New York on the matter of child abuse, I remarked how tempting it had been for me to resign from the project and to set aside a problem discomfiting and intractable enough to defeat the sunniest hope of solution. But as time passed I came to believe that the chief reward of this enterprise is the clarity and authority with which we recall to general attention what that remarkable critic of literature Kenneth Burke calls our inhumanly human nature.

Perhaps the most useful benefit of that response to the call of professional service was a reminder of complicities from which none of us is exempt. Indeed, I found myself reliving a period of my own past which remained for thirty years not far below the surface of my mind. For I've never really forgotten my own frustration during the so-called 2:00 A.M. feeding of my first son, never really erased the recollection of fury when he, some weeks old, screamed for me to wake—me, a tormented graduate student barely able to make it from day to day; and then, having sipped an appallingly small drop of milk, a half-ounce or whatever—not nearly enough to keep him going and keep me sleeping till morning—nodded off, an unwakable lump. I didn't beat him: quite. But I wasn't gentle. And though I meant him no

harm, neither did I bear him good will at that period—not on that first night nor on other nights in a procession that seemed endless. I resented his authority over me, resented almost beyond reason his apparent caprice of power and my vulnerability to his need, my weakness in contrast to his strength—his parent abuse—despite our bond, despite my conscience and care.

Within weeks of his birth, therefore, I discovered in myself an unanticipated and unpremeditated force of rage of which I'd had no forewarning. And all during these intervening years I've never quite purged myself of remorse at the harshness of my effort to rouse and feed that hated and beloved son. Similarly, all during these months of temptation to abandon rather than embrace those who do give way to uncontrolled acts of temper, to idiosyncrasies of lust and paroxysms of punishment, I've known that to refuse to speak on this issue would be more an act of self-abdication than of professional bankruptcy.

It is this kind of awareness which Leslie Fiedler stressed in his remarks delivered at the 1978 session on child abuse; an awareness which enabled him to undermine accepted wisdom about the cult of the child. This he did by reenacting Diderot's role in our Rousseauized world. Diderot, in his outrageous book *Rameau's Nephew*, imagines a dialogue between a pair of speakers called He and Myself: He supposedly being the composer Rameau's nephew—a wild man, a con man, a buffoon; and Myself supposedly speaking for Diderot, for sedateness and good sense. In fact, however, both imaginary persons proclaim an idea of the self in which irrational will is at odds and at war with rational mind.

Myself. *Do you love your son?*

He. *Do I love the little savage? I am crazy about him!*

But, He continues, I worry that the child shares with me a "paternal molecule," a "primordial germ" which is incurable. In fact an enlightened, advanced education might well work at "cross purposes with the natural bent of a child who is by nature already greedy, cozening, lazy and a liar; I am afraid he is a pedigreed beast."¹

1. Denis Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, trans. Jacques Barzun (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956), pp. 73-74.

Who is responsible, Fiedler asked in effect, for having denied Diderot's beast his pedigree? Who was it that invented the cult of the innocent child so that in Dickens's novel, in Mark Twain's fiction, and much other nineteenth-century writing, society was supposed to regard as mere prankishness those forms of behavior which are as close to sheer animality as most people come? How is it that the most consequential of passions, recorded in myths and rites and legends and fairy tales—the experience of hostility, of hatred even, felt by parents to the newborn child—has been utterly discredited and denied socially sanctioned instruments of release? What veil of perception therefore closed our eyes to the keenness of sight and insight visible in literature? Why were battered children invisible until 1962, when for so many centuries before the Age of Enlightenment the plight of the broken child has been the most transparent of themes? Countless books have treated carnage as a fit act of personal or political vengeance, of piety, of transcendent obligation.

Exploiting the means of humanistic inquiry and the powers of im-

agination, then, we discover that it's not simply a lapse of education or the collapse of decency or the loneliness of nurture, somehow correctable, which underlie an increase of vitriol in the domestic habits of Americans today. It's a ferocity inherent in our genes. But the question remains: Why is it that child abuse is unquestionably at the center of a vortex toward which all lines of self-inquiry, of historical redefinition, of national self-definition in the United States today most properly tend? Along these lines, on this Americanization of feral energy, therefore, I propose to write; though I fear that what I offer—in segments that don't quite cohere, fragments that won't commingle—is more a melee than an amalgam of ideas.

Not many months after the Kent State massacre in 1970 I was at a shop owned by a man whose daughter was a student at Syracuse. In the past we'd had easy chat about one thing and another. But this time, talk came round to the antiwar movement, sit-ins, teach-ins, strikes: the lot. Now as we worked our way down that list, conversation got grim. A World War II veteran, he was infuriated by the young—their politics, their manners, their speech, their appetite for drugs, rock, sex, their hair. Rabid as he was about brats who hadn't begun to earn the right to question adult opinion and official policy, he was still more galled by university teachers and administrators who were too gutless to kick the freaks out of school, fire the dissidents, and call the cops. Thinking of ways to defuse his rant, I said: Remember that all those so-called kooks and hippies are our very own children, yours and mine. And inside all those sleazy outfits, behind all that flimflam of revolt, the mummery of street theater, there were a lot of brave young people risking serious hurt, losing quarts of real blood in confrontations they couldn't possibly win. As it turned out, blood was what he wanted.

“Those bums had no right to be there in Ohio, interfering.”

“Maybe yes, maybe no,” I said, “but why call up a raw militia in battle gear?”

“They got what they deserved.”

“Dead? Murdered? It could have been your daughter.”

“If she'd been sticking her nose into things that weren't her business, she'd have deserved to get it too.”

I left thinking that I must have pushed him too hard, else he would not have said words he couldn't possibly have meant. But if Philip Slater is right, I was wrong, and I should probably have pushed much harder. In *The Pursuit of Loneliness*, probably the widest read in a rush of books about private and public violence in the sixties and seventies, Slater says that regardless of “age group, social class or educational level, Americans seem to be most entertained by watching people get killed, bludgeoned, or mutilated.”² Americans, he observes, take a certain joy in oppressing others with whatever tools of oppression they are themselves subdued by. Indeed, they take an almost feral joy in oppressing even their children. The young are nullified, scrapped by guardians who seem to adore the impersonal and democratic vengefulness of machines far more than they love life itself. Slater equates our “life-destroying technology” with force incarnate in the most tyrannical of possible fathers, the fiercest of patriarchs.

2. Philip Slater, *The Pursuit of Loneliness* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), pp. 59–61.

The point of my anecdote is not merely to confirm Slater's thesis or to find a frame for that father's curses. Nor is its point to illustrate what I take to be self-evident, that child abuse isn't just an uncontrolled act of fanatic temper or berserk intent, a depravity of lust. Nor above all is child abuse an anomaly of history. To my mind it represents a blunder of force which is especially grisly because it travesties virtue and in this way clouds a besottedness of sin. Combining self-righteousness and self-indulgence, it displays emblematically all those tiny and large self-deceptions which encourage a parent not to oppose but to ally himself with his oppressors—with husband or wife, with the state and its representatives, with rulers both near and far who automatically advance the interests of the powerful at the expense of the weak. No matter how viciously treated, children "don't hit back, they can't leave," as a reformed abuser explained in the *Boston Globe*, "and they don't stop loving you."³ And because a forfeiture of trust, like a wantonness of power, is in our time a quintessential American vice, the mutilation or pollution or murder of a dependent child touches a nadir of cruelty in a firmly entrenched American vein.

3. 27 August 1978, A1.

For all that this motif is among the oldest themes in American writing (literature written well before the onset of our machine age), the remarkable thing about abuse is its conformity to categories invented in recent years by theoreticians, rather than literary historians, who have developed synoptic systems that correlate language and power, ritual and culture. I am convinced that a morphology of the American will to betrayal must include an inquiry into rites and ceremonies which are somehow inseparable from speech.

Not long ago in the United States, the union of language and power—subjects rarely taken together—was the province of one proprietor alone, Kenneth Burke, a critic rebarbative enough to dispel poachers. Thirty years ago, in one of his most sustained spurts of construction, Burke pieced out a theory based on the linguistics of No. Negation, he maintained in an essay on the origins of language, does not exist in nature: there's no nay, only aye there. The remarkable thing about this discovery, he believed, citing the authority of Spinoza, Hegel, and Bergson, was its utility in diagnosing both the health of language (which culminates in the negative) and the ills of culture. For if, because of speech, human awareness is objectified and the human animal achieves self-consciousness; and if, as Freud himself contended, comity on earth is derived from the principle of prohibition, then surely No identifies what Burke calls the "one great motivational principle that man, in his role as the language-using animal, has added to nature."⁴ Beginning in 1952, when Burke sought to locate "the very essence of language" in negation, he has insisted that semiotics must precede the poetics and the politics of motive.

Whether or not Burke is right about speech, about art, about consciousness and culture, he did spot and span a distinctively national motif within those constellations of thought—Marxian, Freudian, Lacanian—toward which linguistic theory drifts today. At the current moment indeed, its drift is from France, seat of our age of semiology and structuralism, of ideas radiating from the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes and Collège de France. Fame is not, of course, reason enough for genuflection either to Paris or its local branch in New

4. Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), pp. 420, 430, 457, 469, 478, 479.

Haven. But there's good enough reason for those of us who have no business diagnosing syndromes or prescribing therapies or executing social policies in the ghastly matter of child abuse; splendid reason for humanistic scholars to anchor reform movements in that degree zero of impulse, language itself.

Language is, after all, the mode of being which stresses the primacy of relationships between people (rather than the supremacy of objects) and measures fields of force between persons, not things. And it is semiologists, those specialist students of language, convinced that "social life and culture in general [are] a series of sign systems which the linguistic model may clarify in revolutionary ways" (as Jonathan Culler maintains)—it is semiologists who could conceivably achieve an advance in social thought comparable to Galileo's in cosmology. In summoning Burke to join Roland Barthes, for example, or Lévi-Strauss or Michel Foucault, we assemble a circle of literary intellectuals whose researches into the innermost nuance of tongue and talk turn up evidence, perhaps proof, that "violence is the father and king of everything."

Within any code men can imagine, René Girard argues in a book called *Violence and the Sacred*, code of law or of language or of religion, provision is always made for ritual murder. Seizing a creature that can be struck down "without fear of reprisal since he lacks a champion," men have killed in order to localize and purge the will to disorder in society. Traditionally this figure, the scapegoat, the *pharmakos*, is selected from a short list of candidates that includes "prisoners of war, slaves, the handicapped and those too young to have undergone initiatory rites, precondition of status within the community at large."⁵ Which is to say that those best suited for sacrifice have usually been utterly powerless people whose very circumstance—as foreigners or enemies or captives or children—is itself a denial of standing within, hence a perturbation of, the life of society. Girard's list of historic victims, incidentally, does not include the candidate that Right-to-Lifers today insist on adding: a foetus.

According to *Violence and the Sacred*, then, the brutalization of children is not at all an aberrant act, however abhorrent, and is instead a pervasive and purposive and portentous event in the history of crimes committed on behalf of law and order. Although Girard does not refer to American tribal customs, his recipe clearly strikes home. Indeed, the exclusion of data drawn from the United States is the more noticeable in that it is the custom of our country to elevate before the law, far beyond the reach of every child, the powers and privileges of natural parents no matter how unfit. Speculating why it is that their rights take precedence over nearly all other civil rights and civic duties, one wonders: Can it be that in America, laws or conventions confer on natural parents a covert but unquestioned authority to dispatch a sacrificial victim, as if in performance of some unacknowledged service to the state? Service of this kind is often, we know, overtly associated with father-daughter incest within families which would otherwise disintegrate. So it is that societies everywhere attempt to withstand collapse, Girard concludes, in a book saturated with evidence taken

5. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), pp. 12, 13, 148, 306.

from anthropological, psychoanalytic, mythical, linguistic, and literary sources the whole world round. If Girard's thesis is true—if, as he says, not only do "all religious rituals spring from the surrogate victim" but all the great institutions of civilization as well (government, science, medicine, law, art, learning itself) "spring from ritual"—then it follows that stability among the nations of earth rests on a need to propitiate a killing passion, a phylogenetic passion, invariably and unavoidably directed against those powerless and dependent who stand nearest at hand.

Tendentious, circular, both farfetched and far-reaching, Girard's book has unquestionably caught a glimpse of one or another principle of ambiguity in the social life of this language animal—of manUN-kind, as the poet Cummings said. Not only does *Violence and the Sacred* review the antiquity of dogma sustaining the political uses of cruelty but also it enables us to locate a likely source of American resistance to reform. For even if Girard fails to prove his case for the sanctity of violence, there's no end of proof that a promiscuous taste for victims, drawn from nearly all categories of scapegoat and entrenched both in families and in government, underlies those characteristic American attitudes which William Ryan describes in *Blaming the Victim* (1971).⁶ Defect in the social order, Ryan says, referring to the Moynihan Report and matter of like kind, is habitually mistaken for stigma of person both in American ghettos and wherever else social policy conforms to the sort of opinion exhibited by Cyril Burt's infamous work on IQ, race, and intelligence.⁷

6. William Ryan, *Blaming the Victim* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), p. 80.

7. See Boyce Rensberger's account, *New York Times*, 9 November 1978, of D.D. Dorfman's essay in *Science*, 29 September 1978, demonstrating the fraudulence of Cyril Burt's methods, argument, and proof.

8. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977), pp. 25, 26, 31.

Ryan's theme, the sociology of blame and its devastations, recurs in a book of entirely different kind and purpose: Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1977).⁸ Technically an account of the birth of prisons, this book—which transposes parts of the body almost literally into parts of speech—is in fact a "history of the body" stretched along a frame that runs from political assassination to parental murder during three centuries of more or less modern times. *Discipline and Punish* therefore subsumes the abuse of children within a very long history of codes devised by nations to justify butchering the flesh of condemned persons. Whatever systems of punishment the world has developed, it is always the human body that is at issue—"the body and its forces, their utility and their docility, their distribution and their submission." The control of convicts or the rule of parents, Foucault says, no matter: In our societies the history of punishments is inescapably a history of bodies selected to project in public the inner self of a nation. It is the human body, bounded by a network of relations which "go right down into the depth of society," a network that links "colonized" workers in an underdeveloped economy to union members "stuck at a machine" in our computerized and overdeveloped West—it is the supervised, trained, contained, corrected, and coerced human body that stylizes the spirit of an era. And it is by studying the constraints and cruelties and tortures visited today on madmen, on working classes, and "on children at home and at school" that we acquire unimpeachable means to comprehend "the history of the present."

That the collective self of the American nation has been manifest in

its children is, I suppose, indisputable. Beginning with Rousseau and ending with Spock, we have “speculated intensively on how to rear our children,” says Robert Coles, “as if their outcome was our fate and their perfect outcome both possible and the clue to our immortality.”⁹ Captivated by Freud, Erikson adds, by a doctrine consistent with the Christian archetype of the Babe, with the Nativity—“the child is in the midst”—Americans have hoped to harmonize modern psychology with that perennial theology which sees hope newly born in every child, hope in spite of despair. The birth of a child begins the world anew, Thoreau said in *Walden*, as if it were an imprimatur of the American creed.

Despite this weight of doctrine, American writing has assumed other burdens. Setting aside Rousseau, setting aside even Thoreau, we find that our night thoughts as a people are recorded in a literature of the misbegotten: stories about outcasts—black and white, bastards, orphans. The betrayed child, a being whose genealogy is in doubt or whose lineage is cloudy, whose connection to parents or guardians is based not on bonds but on bondage, is not yet fully acknowledged by students of lore and letters in America. From the post-Puritan era to the present day, the betrayed child has embodied an antinomy of belief and behavior inherent in this disorganized and unstable society. Beginning at about midpoint in the nineteenth century, peak time of Victorian rectitude and regularity, American writers exploited the resources of melodrama in order to register a sense of immitigable stress in society at large. This is not to say that the institution of the family one hundred years or so ago was suddenly shattered. It is to say, however, that an intermingled joy and despair, a rapture and rupture of faith in the American experiment, is manifest in stories which depict collapsing houses, fractured families, afflicted children, and which concentrate in the life of a betrayed child a terror of failure to legitimize the American Idea.

All during the colonial period, as the historian Milton Kamen remarks in a very good book on this subject, *People of Paradox* (1972), an unabated quest for legitimacy animated society as a whole.¹⁰ The American nation was especially fervent in the conduct of this quest, motivated by an ardor for self-justification alongside a peculiarly hectic sense of reprobation in all spheres of personal conduct and political behavior. The nation originated in a state of ambivalence about the conquest of Indians and the ownership of slaves, the promise and practice of received religion, and the temptations of commerce and industry in a pastoral land. “Insofar as legitimacy is a psychological phenomenon,” says Kamen, “it depends upon the assumption that a particular set of institutions is appropriate for a certain society and that they function in a manner accepted or understood by society.” American society, however, was based on a federal constitution whose text had no sanction in divine law, whose appeal to natural law could not be buttressed by undeniable proofs, whose innovations of civil law defined inherited wisdom. In the colonies the problem of social legitimacy, Kamen concludes, “came down to the most literal levels such as marriage and the family.” Especially in the years just preceding the Revolution was

9. Robert Coles, “Children and Racial Discrimination,” *American Scholar* 33 (Winter 1964-65): 87-88.

10. Milton Kamen, *People of Paradox* (New York: Knopf, 1972), pp. 88-90.

this a truly vexing matter. An eighteenth-century people, accustomed to but uncomfortable about an exceedingly high number of clandestine and common-law marriages, was both amused and abashed by the epigram which said that the two most visible effects of the religious revival were literary and erotic, a burst of books and bastards.

Long beset by theological and political, economic and domestic, questions of legitimacy in all its works and ways, the American people for more than three hundred years have broadcast their vexation in a large library of stories about bastards, outcasts, freaks, and demons. Of all generations, ours is unquestionably the most vexed. And though our bicentennial year produced a bumper crop of bastards (nearly one-third of births in New York City were illegitimate), more to the point is a high degree of correlation between illegitimacy and abuse: "Children born out of wedlock are more than 2.5 times more likely to be abused than children born in wedlock."¹¹

11. Report prepared by the Center for Disease Control and the Georgia Human Resources Department in Atlanta, *New York Times*, 28 January 1979, p. 24. On illegitimacy in 1976, see Peter Kihss, *New York Times*, 29 September 1977, p. 39.

Far more sinister than bastardy, however, is a current burst of books and movies about children sired by machines and possessed by devils. Prodigious killers, "emissaries of death and destruction," says James S. Gordon, these children attain their power not just from quirks of new technology but as well from forces native to this continent and by no means foreign to its first immigrants: "witchcraft, ancestral curses, karmic accidents, demonic possession."¹²

12. James S. Gordon, "Demonic Children," *New York Times Book Review*, 11 September 1977, p. 3.

It is therefore not American Gothic but a flair for Satanism that's frightening. And for all our rationalizing, our sociologizing, our Freudianizing of evil, a Puritan substratum provides a kind of American bedrock. Indeed the current rage of pop flicks and quickie books must bespeak a sci-fi recapitulation of what the Puritans and their successors knew as Original Sin. "Thou embryo-angel, or thou infant-fiend"—are you one or the other or both? Thus in perplexity did the Reverend Samuel Davies address his newborn child two centuries ago. Writing his poem "On the Birth of John Rogers Davies, the Author's Third Son," Davies raised the inevitable issue of infant depravity and damnation. It was an unavoidable issue surely, given the strength of the negative side of parental perceptions of infancy which so plagued that third of a nation, the "moderates," in Philip Greven's usage, unable to decide whether children were monsters or seraphs.¹³ It is of course well known that moderates of theology in the eighteenth century inherited their dilemma from those whom Greven calls evangelicals, guardians of a fanatic and obdurate zeal to "abase, to deny, and to annihilate [the] corrupted and sinful self," adult's or child's, out of convictions that will-lessness conformed to the sovereign will of God. What has until now not been appreciated is the degree to which parents in our post-Freudian age revive a kind of cultural memory of post-Puritan ancestral times, times in which parents' sense of love and affection for infant children is contradicted, Greven tells us, by a sense of distrust and fear as well. For, Gordon adds, it is by no means uncommon today, both in and out of clinical practice, to hear parents insist that their infant's instinctual demands are deliberately intended to "suck the life out of them" and to drive them crazy. How easily, he concludes, how naturally, how aptly do we settle on children as "targets for our sadism and convenient receptacles for our fantasies."

13. Philip Greven, *The Protestant Temperament: Patterns of Child-Rearing, Religious Experience, and the Self in Early America* (New York: Knopf, 1978), pp. 12-13, 15, 29, 360, 361. Cf. John Demos, *Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (New York: Oxford, 1970), pp. 100-105, for a cheerier view of Puritan temperament and custom.

Monstrous or not, our fantasies are confirmed in books which from

first to last rehearse a long history of our worst imaginings about our young, from novels called the *The Omen* or *Satan's Love Child* or *Demon Seed* to the collection of poems entitled *Cruelty* by a young writer who has taken the name Ai. "Her body, somehow fat, though I feed her once a day" (Ai says in a poem entitled "Child Beater"), the child's seven-year-old flesh "reminds me of my own, just after she was born." As if determined to splice the Protestant temper of sin to a Freudian tempest of vice, the Beater in Ai's poem reenacts a rite of exorcism and sadism both penitential and pestilential, minatory and maleficent:

*I move off. I let her eat,
while I get my dog's chain leash from the closet.
I whirl it around my head.*¹⁴

Arriving at the final act of this drama, sticking closer to Freud than to Calvin, Ai virtually duplicates the scheme described almost sixty years ago in Freud's "A Child Is Being Beaten." Because in dreams, he said, to beat and to masturbate come together as a feature of the nursery, beating is therefore "punishment for the forbidden sexual relation" and "also the regressive substitute for it." Regressive to extreme degree, the very "essence of masochism" is generated in the battered child, who—as Freud merely suspected but as all specialists in child abuse know—perpetuates a cycle indistinguishable from the pattern of cruelty insinuated into the end of Ai's poem.

*O, daughter, so far, you've had only a taste of icing,
are you ready now for some cake?*

Perversion, says Kenneth Burke, is a major aspect of No—both "sexual deviation from the biologic norm" and nays of another kind as well, negations typical of a people who habitually "get things upside down, inside out and backwards."¹⁵ To my mind, that's as much invitation as we need to direct attention to the small tribe of immigrants responsible for applying a theology of negation—Puritan theology and religious observance—in creating one of the most perverse systems of child-rearing known to Christendom. Terrified of the very children over whom as parents they possessed power derived from God and authority confirmed by the state—absolute literalists of dogma, they devoted themselves to immoderate degree to carrying out God's will by breaking the will of the child. In this way alone could so "filthy" a being as a child attain a right relation—devoted submission to parents and Deity. And though dogma was later in some measure discredited by Rousseau, an ancestral curse remains affixed to our history as a people, fixed by a perverse band of settlers who first got things turned round on this continent. Whether or not negation is our sole legacy as a people is not at all the point. What is unalterably to the point is that fact that a tribal No antedates and overrides later utterances of Yes; which is to say that the remarkable thing about the victimization of children in the United States is not its eccentricity but its orthodoxy, its ordinariness, its fixity in the sexual, spiritual, secular, imaginative, and fantasy lives of people on this continent from the early seventeenth to the late twentieth centuries.

That fateful history of guilt is documented in a classic American literature of hearth and home. Centering attention there, writers and artists in general dramatize our incapacity to provide a haven in a heartless world. Christopher Lasch's recent book to the contrary, our

14. Ai, "Child Beater," *Cruelty* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), pp. 38–39.

15. Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*, pp. 341–343 passim.

writers have long interpreted heartlessness within families both as a deviation from the norm and as a reliable measure of the depth and danger of our fault as a civilization. As failed executors of God's will, on occasion convulsed by self-hatred, we pursue an eighteenth-century quest for social legitimacy which pivots round the wilfulness of a race of revolutionaries that dared to invent, more or less from scratch, a federal Constitution—flawed document in its own right, as even its most venerated proponent, James Madison, confessed. Simultaneously these revolutionaries entrusted the operation of the Constitution to an untried people utterly unqualified to conduct so deviant, perhaps discreditable, a form of government. Madison, who presided over our origins as a people, who struggled to capture the spirit of this new American place, to convey high drama in homely example, remarked in *The Federalist Papers* that no sensible man would refuse to quit a “shattered and tottering habitation” (i.e., the “lifeless” mass of colonies organized under the Articles of Confederation) merely because the new house “had not a porch to it or because some of the rooms might be a little longer or smaller, or the ceiling a little higher or lower than his fancy would have planned.” Echoing Madison a generation later in *Home as Found* (1838), Fenimore Cooper maintained that “the materials, the climate, and the uses of America” do not make for symmetries and harmonies and proportions in the Palladian style. From the Federal period to the present moment, then, as if in display of our inconsistency of mind and our irregularity of shape as a nation, we have found ourselves deprived of a tradition of architecture which achieves a proper fit of habit and habitat and habitation in the New World.

Beginning with *The Federalist Papers*, therefore, Madison's house has haunted us—that house with which he hoped to contain the idea of experiment, to domesticate risk and accommodate danger and thereby disarm distrust of the idea of America. Indeed, long before society reached the era of turbulence in the politics of government—the era evoked by Madison's metaphor—perturbation of the most intimate and pervasive kind had been for generations a preeminent fact of life in those “struggling outposts, isolated at the very edge of the Atlantic world.” And it is only now, according to Thad W. Tate (director of the Institute of Early American History and Culture at the College of William and Mary), that historians are beginning to associate instability in colonial affairs with the trope of a “tottering habitation.” Life in the colonies was marked by a rudeness and tenuousness endemic to an “immigrant society, marked by fragile family life, a shortage of women, and a high death rate.”¹⁶ Not merely did adults then deem it inappropriate to dwell on tomorrow, other than to prepare wills providing for “children who had little expectation of seeing either parent survive until they were grown,” but also, in New England and elsewhere, people did not generally build for the long term. In Maryland and Virginia, Tate says, houses remained “primitive and temporary” more or less until the mid-eighteenth century: “No more than four rooms—two up and two down—built not on a permanent foundation but on wooden posts driven at intervals into the ground so that the structure usually rotted away in twenty or

16. Thad W. Tate, “From Survival to Prosperity: The Artistic Greening of Eighteenth Century America,” *Key Reporter* 44 (Autumn 1978): 2.

thirty years." This was typical construction, "even for people who could afford better." A phenomenon, as Tate observes, that "goes beyond economic hardship," its meaning may well lurk within the final paragraph of *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* in Henry Adams's meditations on the use of a flying buttress for the erection of Gothic cathedrals. Less a solution to structural problems than a symbol of medieval sensibility, "the leap downwards of the flying buttress" divulges a "visible effort to throw off a visible strain" of faith. Exalting the loftiness of cathedrals in which human aspiration is "flung to the sky," Adams traced simultaneously "that self-distrust and anguish of doubt" which in its downward arc the flying buttress "buries in the earth as its last secret."¹⁷

It is this figure to which writers have returned whenever they have sought emblems connecting our self-distrust and anguish of doubt as a people with our pattern of life as a civilization. Throughout the nineteenth century, as successive generations strained to reconcile faith in Providence with the creed of Progress, literature recorded their effort in books which portray a main segment of the American people as orphans and outcasts—as if homelessness itself could convey anguish implicit in our failure to validate this fearful experiment in self-rule. In contrast to the English novel, which usually "revolves about great houses and conjures with the perquisites of a settled order" (as a British critic wrote twenty-five years ago), American fiction offers few equivalents. Our log cabins and prairie homesteads do not represent places of fixed or final abode but serve rather as "milestones of exploration," moveable feast or famine along the landscape of adventure.¹⁸ Even our skyscrapers, always going up and coming down, the English see as a sheer virtuosity in the inventions of science—see less clearly, indeed, than Tocqueville, who observed that "men who live on a small scale in narrow dwellings frequently aspire to gigantic splendor in the erection" of a fantastical and imaginary metropolis. Between these two extremes, he said, "there is a blank." It's therefore an *unsettled* order our buildings represent, both the shanties made of scrapped timber and scrounged stone and the towers of Carrara marble designed by McKim, Mead, and White. And it's this unsettled order that recurs in books which portray a nineteenth- and twentieth-century bungle of home and homeland, books which mythologize the life of a society given to totter and tilt.

Because, too, America is often represented in literature as a place at once hostile and hospitable to human need, not a paradise but a paradox of hospitality, writers have concentrated the pressure of great events on disorganized groups of ordinary people, families whose vulnerability to ruin is the real property of their lives: lives set down in shelters built askew, oriented wrong for wind and weather. The structure of stress in an unsettled nation was a subject that required one setting above all, as Harriet Beecher Stowe was perhaps the earliest of our writers to monumentalize, if she was not the first to perceive. From *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to Willa Cather's *The Professor's House*, from Hawthorne's fabled house in Salem ("emblem of aristocratic pomp and democratic institutions," he said) to Henry Roth's tenement roof and cellar in Harlem—the uneven ground of our geography, rural and urban, has supported buildings whose very sticks and stones enclose a testing place and not a tabernacle of what we've been reared to call the

17. Henry Adams, *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1905), p. 377.

18. *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 September 1954, p. 44.

American Dream. "There's a terrible truth in this American fable," said Edward Dahlberg, a fabulist of high interest though minor reputation. "Every discoverer we have had has been a wild home-steader among the seers of the world. Melville, Thoreau, Parkman, Prescott and [William Carlos] Williams are all river and sea and plateau geniuses, ranging a continent for a house and all of them outdoors."¹⁹ Others in contrast follow *Bartleby's*, and echo *Bartleby's*, litany of naught, of night, of No. "I prefer not to," Melville causes his "scrivener" to say, ending his blameless, wasted life in a prisonhouse, the Tombs. There he expires under an Egyptian gloom of masonry as heavy as the "heart of the eternal pyramids," Melville remarks in the end.

19. Edward Dahlberg, *Alms for Oblivion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1964), p. 27.

For two hundred pre- and post-Freudian years, therefore, the contortion of Americans as a people has been recorded in literary texts, both low and lofty, marked by an unease of family, by a frailty of framework buttressing the structure of houses. Simultaneously, our history preserves a long roster of the extruded (like Prue and Topsy in Stowe's novel, the brood slave without issue and the bastard child without lineage), whose expulsion is taken as a disgrace of hearth and home. Because misgovernment and mismanagement of society are portrayed as a misprision of family, we possess a literature whose pantheon of babes and cherubs is far smaller than tradition holds, its share of waifs and wards and foundlings considerably larger than inherited wisdom says. During two centuries indeed, American fiction, in violation of Tolstoi's Law, has presented mainly unhappy families who are unhappy in much the same ways—ways which when magnified disclose a state of affairs indistinguishable from that in another of Melville's stories, *Billy Budd*. This work, left undone in the 1890s but set in the 1790s and published in the 1920s, is a work of prophecy that stands outside generation and transcends literary period. In Melville's novel, past, present, and future coalesce round the paired figures of Starry Vere and Baby Budd, Captain and foretopman on board a man-of-war in time of war. By sentencing an impressed seaman and foundling boy to the gallows, a fatherly captain's ill-intentioned purpose is masked by a disguise of policy which justifies Vere's service as an agent of defilement. Because adhesiveness of culture depends on a cohesiveness of family, as Melville knew, a system that pulls people apart must finally tear itself to pieces. Conflating the state's interest in parietal power with the captain's interest in an uninterrupted arc of career, Melville's story turns a loving, trusting, and powerless child into an eponymous hero whose unfettered vitality of instinct elicits a fear of freedom, of the libertarian spirit; legitimate but ill-intentioned authority responds with summary execution.

What *Billy Budd* portrays and prefigures is the ambivalence of a people perennially torn between a sense of mission, duty to authenticate and preserve the American Idea, and guilt at its betrayal. In what special sense is there this feeling that the American is young? asked that most florid of rhetoricians, Santayana, a few years before Melville's manuscript came into print. "We are all as young at heart as

the most youthful American," his answer came, but in the New World the "seed has fallen on Virgin soil, where it may spring up more bravely and with less" than an Old World terror of ogres, of fairy tale "giants of the wood."²⁰ Today, no longer young and in fact sick at heart, we contemplate our children and our culture, fearful that both are somehow undone by what we've done. For it's a Saturday night fever of concupiscence and cupidity we transmit. And as we arrive toward the close of our period of stewardship, wracked by disillusion about the future of American generations, by distrust of progress as a dogma, by skepticism about the American political and economic process as an ideology, our anguish as parents and citizens cannot but be intensified by instances of the kind uncovered recently in the Southwest: According to the *Dallas Times Herald* (July 1, 1978), two boys and a girl were found naked, unable to speak, and caked with their own excrement in a chicken coop behind their parents' house in Hooks, Texas. If we observe in this event not just an infection of Diderot's primordial germ but also the ruin of Madison's idea, the decay of husbandry and housewifery in America, we may very well suspect that our country has become a festering and not a fostering state.

20. George Santayana, *Character and Opinion in the United States* (London: Constable, 1924), pp. 179–181.

No matter what else comes of conferences and proceedings that concern child abuse, let it be said that the practice embodies not just the inner life of families but too an inner truth in the life of civilization in the United States. Reform is always a debatable matter of public policy, but mitigation of the lot of children is a matter of social arrangements. Unlike many libertarians today, I have no reservations about interceding in behalf of caged kids in Texas or New York or California, children who are turned into shit. Mitigation and intervention are to my mind not questions of historical or literary or philosophical or anthropological discourse but refer to the apt fulfillment of duty by members of a civilized society—duty performed with solicitude both for the accused parent and the abused child.

Adopting the body of the debased and defiled child as an archetype of all those earmarked for slaughter, we locate the center of perversity in the American system within the womb of a teenage whore, a battered wife, a sexually used infant. When we add to this company of the damned the charred corpse of an incinerated mate and the inert remains of an abandoned parent—not to mention the trashed countryside in which litter is landscape—we are in fact compiling a list which equates the price of progress with the cost of waste in our postindustrial age. Perhaps a more accurate gauge, however, is the membership lists of Parents Anonymous. For if we agree that the stigmata borne by an abused child radiate a system of signs we begin to know how to interpret (as Foucault has suggested), we must also assume that the Anonymous Parent—panicked by hazards of self-government, bewitched by the spell of self-revulsion, benumbed by the habit of acquiescence to atrocity—does not indulge in a secret act, wanton and witless, but emits signals, pulsations linking us all, users and abusers, anti-interventionists and children's righters, academics and Anonymes, in a network of contradictory impulses that come from depths and distances far and near, time present

and time past.

Looping back once more to Philip Slater's version of the origin of species in the United States, we find him preoccupied with pedigree. Because a "kind of natural selection" not yet fully comprehended governs our history as a civilization, Slater suspects that "America was disproportionately settled by a certain kind of person," one quite opposite in temper from those venturesome and optimistic types on whom Madison counted, those founders and followers in whom traditionally we've taken special pride.²¹ If truly there are ties linking a gain of rapacity in our machine age to a surge of intensity in our assault on offspring, these ties are certified by institutions which reinforce the negative side of our original settlers. However many of the energetic and daring arrived on these shores, Slater says, this largely untenanted land "also gained a lion's share of the rootless, the unscrupulous." Like the cannibalizing father in Joseph Heller's *Something Happened*, like William Jaddis's *JR*, the brat entrepreneur whose genius for business enables him to turn people into products, a pioneer line of Americans long ago mistook piety for love, self-aggrandizement for loyalty.

The illustrations are mine, not Slater's. And I conclude with another, that of Chubby Grigg, whose murder of his own son several years ago not only parodies the reasons why we were in Vietnam but too, in a loathsome instance of the betrayal of authority, provides a real-life climax to this drama of ideas. Chubby Grigg, former pro football player in Buffalo and Chicago and Cleveland, twice president of the Lions Club, former member of the city council of Ore City, Texas, killed his son Mike, aged twenty, as "an act of love." Shooting him while he slept, Grigg said that "the young man was a hopeless dope user who . . . would be better off dead than 'ruled by drugs.'"²² The drugs he was supposedly ruled by are valium and marijuana. But Ore City is a place which by statute hands out twenty-, forty-five-, and seventy-five-year sentences for first offenders in heroin and cocaine. And even though none of Chubby's peers on that jury believed that Grigg was right in what he did, some of them decided that he *felt* he was right. Dismissing a hung jury, the judge sentenced Grigg to a period of five years' probation in punishment for a guilty plea to the reduced charge of manslaughter.

Look inside yourself, Leslie Fiedler says. I agree. Also look inside the *New York Times* of November 18, 1978. "Princeton to Get Sculpture Rejected by Kent State," the *Times* headline went. People in Ohio are very conservative, the article stated, and many "believe that the kids who were shot got what they deserved." A number of Ohioans also felt that it was decidedly inappropriate to "observe the killing of four students and the wounding of nine others with a sculpture that indicates someone committing violence on someone else. We are afraid that people will see only the violence." The erection of the George Segal monument depicting Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac was thus viewed as a capitulation to radicalism in art and politics. But as the sculptor indicates, as Abraham "moves to do violence with his right hand, his compassion and love for his son are expressed in a gesture" made by the fingers of the left hand, which dig into Isaac's hand, though "in an agony of doubt."²³

21. Slater, *Pursuit of Loneliness*.

22. *Dallas Times Herald*, 16 January 1977, A6.

23. Grace Glueck, *New York Times*, 18 November 1978, p. 23.

What sort of people are we anyway? a student of child abuse is forced to ask. What thwart of nature, what derision of love and defamation of duty would lead officials at Kent State University—parents speaking in behalf of parents—to refuse a gift of sculpture which the artist himself describes as intended to villify no one, only to portray the “moral underpinnings of everyone’s belief”? How is it that Segal’s treatment of this sacred subject, this allegory of violence committed by a patriarch on the body of a child, should at Princeton be deemed an apt monument to our culture and our society but in Ohio be perceived as capitulation to radicalism? The answer is, I fear, that Kent State unequivocally confirms Slater’s equation of patriarchy and technology, technology and oppression; Girard’s views on social order; and Burke’s calligraphy of No. As a people we’re wild, not tame; a nation whose being beats time, as the novelist Stanley Elkin remarks, to the “rhythm in chaos.”²⁴ And whenever the pressure is on, when the beat picks up, American society invariably turns its attention to the young: cut loose, adrift, abandoned. In peril.

24. Stanley Elkin, “A la recherche du Whoopee Cushion,” *Esquire* 82 (July 1974): 126–129.