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THIRD IN A SERIES:

**CAN THE LITERARY LIFE
EXIST IN A POST-1984
NATION?**

**WHAT DO
DWIGHT GARNER, REBECCA SOLNIT,
AND A. STEPHEN ENGEL
REVEAL ABOUT THIS IMMEASURABLY
IMPORTANT QUESTION?**

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I have never seen such gladness as there was on that Oxted night. They were very simple people really. All great authors are. If you are not simple, you are not observant. If you are not observant, you can not write. But you must observe simply. The first characteristic of great writing is a certain humility.

—Ford Madox Ford, *Return to Yesterday: Reminiscences of James, Conrad, and Crane* (1932)

Now, a very serious question and one, moreover, that's absolutely essential to the matter of our republic's very survival. Here is that question: Just *how deeply* corrupted, soiled, perverted, criminalized, anti-educated, de-intellectualized, infected, diseased, infantilized, deprived of both conscience and of consciousness, made self-deceptive, delusional, and driven crazy *have* the United States and its people been made since 9/11?

—Eric Larsen, "Can the Literary Life Exist in a post-1984 Nation?"

1

The last chapter in this project ended up, once again, with a look at the *New York Times*—for the very good reason that the gray lady is so major a part of the U.S. news blackout. The *Times*—a “lying machine,” I called it [three years ago](#)—is a paper dedicated to lying on behalf of its overlords and a paper dedicated, also, to the finessing and cosmeticizing of its own lies on those rare occasions when by accident or oversight the prevarications became so obvious that they might backfire—when, that is to say, they run

the risk of being perceived by the average reader for the true and outright falsehoods that they really are.

On that cheery note at the close of my last chapter, I gave out some homework intended, if only for the refreshing pleasure of the contrast, to provide some examples of truth. Whether you *did* that homework, dear reader, only you know, but *I* know that part of it consisted of reading James Petras' "The US War again Iraq: [The Destruction of a Civilization](#)." This is a piece unlike any that would run in the *Times* in that it tells us what the U.S. really did *in* Iraq and what it really did—or has done—to Iraq. Making it all possible by means of massive lies perpetrated on a gullible and conveniently ignorant public, the leaders of our nation set out, successfully, to do nothing less than destroy a civilization. *That* is an enormous, immeasurably vast, act of evil, and yet our country planned it, executed it, and brought it to completion. If Americans knew the truth instead of being lied to intentionally and programmatically by media like the *New York Times*, they would know a great number of things that, given how the "news" is treated now, most of them have not the least clue about. If there real news in the U.S., they would know, for example, that 9/11 was brought about not by foreign terrorists, and not by Osama bin Laden, but by terrorists in our own government or working for our own government, since it was our government that planned, executed, and brought to completion all the events of that day, doing so in order "[to hijack a country from her people and \[to place\] the interests of the rich and the powerful above justice and truth](#)."

Americans, however, don't know that particular truth. If they did, would they stand for it? Americans also don't know that the absolute entirety of the "war on terror" is itself a lie made up of other lies, an immense fraud made possible only by the earlier great lie of 9/11. They don't know that "Islamic terrorism" is something, insofar as it exists at all, created by Americans for America's own purposes, something that has been stirred up and kept in "existence" ever since 9/11 for the very simple purpose of giving the impression that America really does face a dangerous and ruthless foreign enemy when in truth, fact, and actuality, she faces no such thing.

I think we can stop here rather than going on to list yet more lies that America in general now swallows and has swallowed for the past decade or so, largely due to their always encouraged and carefully maintained failure of understanding about them. Not the utterly rapacious and on-going breaches of international law committed in the name of the "war on terror" are well enough known or understood to be taken as the unforgiveable monstrosities that they are, as neither are the ongoing crimes against humanity through the programmatic use of torture and murder, the continuing and extraordinarily horrific crimes against civilians including women and children, the unforgiveable depravities in general that have [come to be routine aspects of United States "military" operations in whatever parts of the globe our "nation" decides to commit its incursions of convenience and greed](#).

In a word, by merit of their being lied to so thoroughly and so unceasingly and so well—Americans don't see and don't understand that it's no longer a "them" who are the Nazis of today, but that it's *us*. Americans don't understand, as people like [Paul Craig Roberts](#)

try to point out over and over, that it's *we* now who are the nation-raping forces, *we* who are the Napoleonic armies, and *we* who are the destroyers not only of nations but, [as James Petras shows](#), entire civilizations.

2

Another piece of homework that I gave was to read Ray McGovern's article, "[Blackwater's Unwritten Death Contract](#)," an absolutely chilling and revelatory piece about assassination programs under Bush and Cheney, along with a pdf of [the memo itself, dated Feb. 7, 2002, and signed by Bush](#), saying that rules of the Geneva Conventions don't apply to prisoners taken in the "war on terror." *Anything*, the memo makes clear, can be done to non-people like them. Can things conceivably get any uglier than this? "I have the feeling," writes McGovern, that "we are in for many more chapters recording how the lawlessness and savagery of post-9/11 Washington played out during the last seven years of the Bush/Cheney administration."

If the news blackout weren't so seamless, sustained, and complete, these examples of vile, despicable, poisonous, destructive criminality would *have* to have been exposed to sunlight and destroyed long since—*wouldn't* they? Or think of it another way. If the blackout weren't so seamless, sustained, and complete—made all the more so by the complicity also of "liberal" and "progressive" media, too, like Pacifica Radio, NPR, *The Nation*, and *The Progressive*—if we actually had openness and some meaningful degree of access to the truth, just think of what kinds of things we might have been able to do by now that would have been positive, fruitful, and *good*. It's perfectly reasonable to think that by now we'd long since have impeached Bush, Cheney, Rice, Pelosi, Reid, and perhaps a gross or two of the other Cabinet and Congress members responsible for the towering lies and for the secrecy that alone make the atrocity of the "war on terror" possible in the first place, and ditto for our nation's savage and criminal torture-policy. Further, we might actually have had real elections in 2004, 2006, and 2008. Or maybe we'd even have re-established a *two-party system of national government*.

But not so. No dice. Not *one* of these things, not one of many *other* toweringly desirable or achingly important things, has happened. Nor will they happen—only the crimes will continue—until the news blackout is either lifted (fat chance) or out-flanked, something unlikely but not impossible (and also our only hope). For now, however, in a state of ignorance as profound as most Americans occupy in their waking and sleeping lives, the very *possibility* of their taking action to reclaim either their culture or their country is all but non-existent. The crimes continue, without resistance. As I myself once wrote, in the United States "things remain generally quiet, since the blind don't rebel."¹

Speaking of the blackout on truth-and-things-intellectual, a third piece of homework I gave was to "read Frank Rich's column from the *New York Times* of Sunday, August 23,

¹ *A Nation Gone Blind: America in an Age of Simplification and Deceit* (2006).

2009, "[The Guns of August](#)," and look for the lies, the varieties of lies, and the *kinds* of lies that form the very fabric of that piece through and through.²

There isn't always time for class discussion of outside work, and that may be the case here. If we took time to analyze Rich's groaning packet of smells in the detail it deserves, I'm not sure we'd have room enough left to get on with our *own* piece, *this* one—and we'd end up postponing it yet again. So I have an idea. Let's let Frank Rich dangle in the wind for awhile, the way he likes to leave his own victims, like the "[conspiracy nuts \[who\] have created a cottage industry of books and DVD's by arguing that hijacked jets did not cause 9/11 and that the 9/11 commission was a cover-up](#)," as he put it so graciously and with his usual love of truth a bit over three years ago.³

As Rich dangles, let us, unlike him, move forward.

From all we've seen so far, one thing at least can be declared with something near one-hundred-percent accuracy. It's this: That we do indeed, right here and now, live in what I tend to call "a post-1984 nation," a nation where [lies are truth](#),⁴ or in what Paul Craig Roberts recently called "[a failed state](#)."⁵ Now, the question I'm asking in this series of pieces, as I first mentioned [back in February](#), is this one: "Can the literary life still exist in a post-1984 nation?"

When I first posed that question, here's the way my proposal ended:

Let me put it this way: If it's a question that we in fact cannot honestly answer *in the affirmative*, then there's no question either but that we're doomed, both culturally and politically. What I plan is to do every conceivable thing in my power to show that it's a question that *can* be answered in the affirmative. And then what I plan to do is everything in my power to act accordingly.

Stay tuned.

If it's true that a negative answer will lead to our being "doomed, both culturally and politically," I say let's abandon ignorance and begin the search immediately. And what better place to begin than with the *New York Times*?

3

In the *Times* back on Friday, August 21, Dwight Garner reviewed a new Rebecca Solnit book entitled *A Paradise Built in Hell*. The review itself was headlined "[Delighted By the Joy Of Bad Things](#)."

² If interest in this assignment leads you to want more analysis of Rich's lies, you might see my "[The Pernicious Hypocrisy of Frank Rich of the New York Times](#)."

³ In "[The Longer the War, the Larger the Lies](#)," Sunday, September 17th, 2006.

⁴ Also see "[Another War in the Works](#)" for the Orwellian nature of our state now.

⁵ "[An unmistakable sign of third world despotism is a police force that sees the pubic as the enemy](#)."

The title and the headline drew my curiosity, as did seeing that Dwight Garner was the reviewer, since he is a writer who'd [very powerfully drawn my interest on earlier occasions](#). Let's follow him again this time as he provides a sense of Solnit as writer and a hint of the nature of this particular book. I will quote generously:

The West Coast essayist and social critic Rebecca Solnit is the kind of rugged, off-road public intellectual America doesn't produce often enough. It's been fascinating to watch her zigzagging career unfold.

In her previous 10 books she has written about disparate topics like Eadweard Muybridge's photography, San Francisco's urban landscapes, the history of walking and the nature of political dissent, always stalking her mental prey from oblique angles.

Ms. Solnit's writing, at its worst, can be dithering and self-serious, [Joan Didion](#) without the concision and laser-guided wit. At her best, however—and the best and worst in Ms. Solnit coexist in the same book and sometimes the same sentence—she has a rare gift: the ability to turn the act of cognition, of arriving at a coherent point of view, into compelling moral drama.

So far, so good. With a matador's skill, Garner ends his introductory passes with the delicate throwing up of a flag that's sure to engage the bull's, or the reader's, attention. No one can miss it: The phrase “compelling moral drama.”

But if your eye is alert, you may consider the flag thrown to be a drab one. “Compelling moral drama?” Look at the phrase and listen to it carefully. It's empty. Is there any drama *other* than “moral”? If there is—*amoral* or *immoral* drama—is *it* also “compelling”? If it's *not* compelling, is it even *drama*?

Picking nits, some might say, accusing me, as so often happened over the decades when I was a “prof,” of splitting hairs and blaming a writer for flaws too minor to matter.

But words matter, and they matter greatly. The future of our civilization is held in the hands of writers like Dwight Garner—and, if I may—like Rebecca Solnit and like me. If we lie, or if we allow our *words* to lie, we are failures and even criminals—if not necessarily in courts of law (though that could certainly happen), then at the very least in courts of morality, a word I choose here with very clear intent.

When I was a young kid and my parents were—for a time—chicken farmers, I learned the rule of thumb that if you saw one rat in the barn, you could safely assume there to be ninety-nine others around the place that you weren't seeing.

Extrapolate that rule to the case of nits-in-writing and you'll find it to pertain in the same ratio as it does to rats. A corollary is that just as all rats are worth being aware of, so are all nits.

And so, onward. More quoting is necessary. For a bit of added interest, see if you can find a nit near the beginning of the paragraph and a case of falsehood-by-vagueness near the middle:

[Solnit's] new book, "A Paradise Built in Hell," is an investigation not of a thought but of an emotion: the fleeting, purposeful joy that fills human beings in the face of disasters like hurricanes, earthquakes and even terrorist attacks. These are clearly not events to be wished for, Ms. Solnit writes, yet they bring out the best in us and provide common purpose. Everyday concerns and societal strictures vanish. A strange kind of liberation fills the air. People rise to the occasion. Social alienation seems to vanish.

Any luck? It's clear enough that the book will be about good things coming from bad things—but did anyone's nit-detector quiver even slightly at the words "an investigation not of a thought but of an emotion"? Interesting dichotomy, no? I mean, if a person sets set out to "investigate" an "emotion," what will the person *use* to do the investigating? Well, thoughts and thinking, of course. I wonder what holds Garner back from simply saying something along the lines that Solnit "is investigating disasters and some of the responses people have to them"?

All right, you may find this one down around levels one or two on the "nit-importance index," but I'll stand by it even if I must stand alone. Some readers may remember the days when copy editing still existed and when copy editors were the real McCoy. There's not a copy editor on earth—or wasn't, once—who wouldn't see the logical merits and greater accuracy of our nit as revised over our nit as written.

Let it lie there. Some readers, too, may remember when exactness, clarity, and accuracy were considered among the highest merits in writing—the days, one could say, of [Strunk & White](#). There the defense rests.

But how about the example of falsehood-through-vagueness (if you'd be more comfortable, we could call it error-through-inaccuracy, though I'd really rather not)? Nobody found it? Perhaps we should have a contest. First person to [email me](#) a good i.d. of it gets a juniper martini at the bar of the Picnic Café.

And now back to work. A few more words from the review give another brush stroke or two as to what the exact nature is of this feeling of potentiality for *good* that Solnit observes in people during or after apocalyptic events:

"What is this feeling that crops up during so many disasters?" Ms. Solnit asks. She describes it as "an emotion graver than happiness but deeply positive," worth studying because it provides "an extraordinary window into social desire and possibility." Our response to disaster gives us nothing less than "a glimpse of who else we ourselves may be and what else our society could become. . ."

The disasters themselves can vary, but even so, Garner explains,

the altruistic human response to them [is] consistent, Ms. Solnit writes. She compares the odd joy of living in their wake to existing in benign anarchies of the kind Thomas Paine described in "The Rights of Man."

All right. If good can rise from bad, or even if a sense of *future* good can arise from bad, how can a person object? Well, a person can't object, or shouldn't, so far as I can see. But as one goes more thoroughly into the review, certain things one finds there—or, more

accurately, fails to find—become more and more deeply unsettling, even excruciatingly so.

4

Exactly what catastrophes does Solnit choose to write about? We get that information from Garner:

In “A Paradise Built in Hell” Ms. Solnit probes five disasters in depth: the 1906 earthquake and fires in San Francisco, the Halifax munitions cargo ship explosion of 1917, the Mexico City earthquake of 1985, the events of 9/11 and [Hurricane Katrina](#). She also writes about the London blitz, Chernobyl and many other upheavals and examines the growing field of disaster studies.

That there *is* a “growing field of disaster studies”—a field growing, I assume, in colleges and universities—strikes me as horrible news in itself, a reaction that any reader of *A Nation Gone Blind* might expect from me. What’s wrong with history, sociology, psychology as means for such studies? Why on earth does anyone need “*disaster*” studies, any more than they need Black studies, women’s studies, gay studies, or any of the other parochializing, profiteering, and self-aggrandizing false “areas” that academia is the dying heir to?

Any writer, like Garner, who uses a phrase like “the growing field of disaster studies” without any hint of contempt, discomfort, or disapproval is telling a good deal about him- or herself. Just as any writer—like me—who *does* react with contempt, discomfort, or disapproval is doing ditto. If you’re curious about all this, read [A Nation Gone Blind](#).

But now on to other matters.

I wish I knew what your own responses, dear readers, might be to Solnit’s choice of “disasters” to “study.”

For myself, I’m called back to some of the words that Garner used earlier, and in fact I’m going to quote them again, now that we know more about which disasters Rebecca Solnit has in mind. Here:

These disasters differ, of course, in fundamental ways. But the altruistic human response to them was consistent, Ms. Solnit writes. She compares the odd joy of living in their wake to existing in benign anarchies of the kind Thomas Paine described in “The Rights of Man.”

I know perfectly well what Solnit is talking about, just as *you* know perfectly well what she’s talking about. In itself, it may be significant or it may not, but anyone who’s been through even a mini-disaster—say, being on a street corner when a bad car accident takes place. Some people just gawk, sure. But lots of others do behave in certain other ways. It’s true that “Everyday concerns and societal strictures vanish.” People from social ranks high and low talk to one another as if they were old friends or acquaintances. Maybe even

“a strange kind of liberation fills the air,” though I’m a good bit less willing to go exactly that far or to want to hear quite exactly that Pollyanna choice of words, accurate or not in representing what Solnit actually thinks. More undeniably true is that in such situations “Social alienation seems to vanish.” Briefly, but, yes, vanish.

But what is it, then, that’s bothering and troubling me so badly? Even though I might find it shallow or slight, still, if I can’t wholly *denounce* Solnit’s simple essential premise—that disasters tend to bring people together—then what in the devil is it that’s driving me crazy and forcing me into all the miserable trouble and effort of slaving over this, my own piece of writing?

Well, all right. What can I do other than just spill it?

It’s this: It’s that neither Garner nor Solnit have the least clue of what they’re really talking about. Either that *or* the two of them are both actively engaged in treason. That is to say, they are both actively and wittingly engaged in maintaining and keeping absolutely leak-proof the blackout that now governs the mainstream news and all mainstream publishing in the U.S. This is the blackout that now exists and that will prove, when the republic does die, to have been the single, most powerful, efficient, and deadly of all the weapons to have been used to bring that national death, unspeakable and ugly, about.

5

As far as I can find or see, *not one shred* of the political itself or of political *consciousness* is revealed either in Garner’s review or, assuming the review to be a reliable reflection of it, in Rebecca Solnit’s book.

And so, you ask? Does all writing, if it’s going to be considered deserving, have to include in itself it “political consciousness”?

And the answer is, well, yes and no. The more complete and whole and conscious *any* work is, the more it will be superior to any other work. The work of figures as different as Emily Dickenson and A. J. Liebling have exactly that trait of consciousness and completeness in common: They both excel, have depth, and remain meaningful beyond the time of their origin by merit of the very great degree in them of completeness, wholeness, and, as already said, of *consciousness*.

That consciousness may or may not necessarily be political. On the other hand, if *the very subject of the work itself is political* and yet that work, or its creator, contains no political consciousness whatsoever—what can we possibly conclude other than that the work is thin, superficial, incomplete, and very possibly also just plain and overtly *wrong*?

And that’s the situation we have here. Few would argue that the San Francisco and Mexico City earthquakes were events brought about by political energies, or that the

Halifax armaments explosion was, either. More, however, might find there to be political origins in the Chernobyl failures, if only as a result of the very risks posed all along by the construction of plants for nuclear power that were driven by and for political ends. Still, the direct political cause remains debatable. In the cases of 9/11 and Katrina, however, we have events that were solely, only, purely, completely, and absolutely political in their origins, political in their planning, political in their intent, and political in their horrendous and ruinous outcomes and results. And yet even here we find not one shred of the political or of political consciousness to be evident either in Solnit's book or in the treatment given it by its reviewer.

Yes, a hurricane is a "natural phenomenon." Yet at the same time I know that I for one am light years from being ready to consider Katrina as a "natural" force—especially not one that had *anything* to do with a resulting "paradise" or "joy"—until I'm able to detect *at the very least* evidence that the person asking me to give such consideration to the big storm has plenty of awareness of [HAARP](#), of what HAARP is, of [who supports and funds it](#), of why they do so, of the [kinds of purposes they're putting it to](#) or are likely to put it to, *and* of the [extraordinary amount and extent of material available](#) that has been dedicated to the subjects of [military and government research into control of the weather](#) for use either in war or in "social organization and planning."

If you wonder what I mean, google the words "[steering Katrina](#)" and see what you find.

If Dwight Garner's review is accurate in reflecting its subject, Solnit's book is not only uninformed about the military and governmental politics that are intimately related to the subject of Katrina, but (again, if the review is a guide) when the author *does* begin to touch on political matters, the result is a mix of gibberish, shallowness, and contradiction—a mix that Garner in fact seems as happy with as a kid with candy.

Catastrophes, presumably, bring out human good, bring out an "odd joy," and result in "altruistic. . . responses." Yet that's far from all that happened in New Orleans, even though what Solnit describes *did* happen. The evidence is writ large in Garner's review. He tells us that Solnit's "book's most absorbing and eye-opening section" is not one devoted to "joy" or "altruism" or "delight" at all, but instead the part devoted to her "examination of elite panic in New Orleans after Katrina."

At least in this "most absorbing and eye-opening" *non-part* of the book, maybe *some* consciousness of the political will enter in to explain what's actually meant by the "elite panic" that brought about not joy and not altruism and not delight but that instead caused "New Orleans [to be] turned into a prison [where] . . . [p]eople were treated like animals."

Pardon me? Well, here's the explanation of how it is that the book's thesis isn't really the book's thesis. It seems, according to Garner's telling, that Solnit thinks that

the news media and other factors have conditioned those in power to believe that people tend to behave badly in times of crisis and to believe the Hobbesian notion that "we are

all easily activated antisocial bombs waiting to go off.” Thus a mentality she calls “elite panic” sets in.

What “other factors” are, I’ll have to go to my reward without knowing, but they do *seem* to be related to “the news media” (and thus to the *New York Times*, I should think). An equally unanswerable question is the one of just who “those in power” are—especially if, even though they’re “in power” they’re also at the same time being “conditioned” by “other” influences, suggesting—to me, anyway—that those other influences and “factors” must be the ones that are *really* in power, since they have the strength to condition the ones *putatively* in power.

Well, however it happens, and whoever the “elite” may actually be, the argument goes that it was this “elite” that went into “panic,” and that it was this “elite panic” that then made the *really* catastrophic stuff happen:

The true disasters [in New Orleans, Solnit] suggests, happened largely because of fear and unexamined beliefs about human nature. Myths spread about things like the rape of children in the Louisiana Superdome, of mass looting, of black mobs menacing white property. Tape loops of the very worst behavior ran over and over on television, obscuring what life in the city was really like.

Who held those “unexamined beliefs”? And why did they hold them? Were these the “elite”? Were they the ones “in power”? Reading about Solnit’s book by means of Garner’s review, it seems *as though no one was responsible for what happened*. Of one of the most politically influenced, affected, charged, manipulated, and both purposely and ruinously handled events in recent history, the review gives no sense whatsoever of who actually did what or of why they actually did it. I take it that the book gives none either.

“Myths spread.” Well, how? Via what agency? From what source or origin? These myths were about “things like” child-rape, looting, and mobs. But as to who originated and who perpetrated and who promulgated these myths—not a word, not a syllable.

Please look at this sentence and read it very, very carefully:

Tape loops of the very worst behavior ran over and over on television, obscuring what life in the city was really like.

What do you notice? Well, at least part of what I notice is the cowardly use of the passive voice, or at least of a construction that effectively creates the same *effect* as the passive voice: The true passive voice would go “Tape loops of the very worst behavior *were run*.” But, insofar as the party that *should* be in the subject position of the sentence is replaced by “tape loops,” the effect is the same: The “tape loops ran the tape loops.” Who or what was in *actuality* responsible for running those tape loops “over and over on television” goes unnamed. Who or what *was* it? *No* one? An unknown agency or force, from outer space, perhaps? The point is that politically speaking, the entire sentence—just like, it would seem, the entire book and the entire review of it—is *politically* naïve, unassertive, non-investigative, pallid, and ideologically acquiescent and un-alive to a point far, far past what common sense would allow as believable.

Yet, even so, there's worse to come. The "loops," even though they were "run" by powers totally and entirely unknown and unidentified, did the absolutely most strange thing you can imagine: They "[obscured] *what life in the city was really like.*"

But please, I beg of you, wait just a moment. What *was* "life in the city" really like? I thought that life in New Orleans was like "a prison" where people "were treated like animals." And don't the "loops" portray "life in the city" as something much like that?

It would seem that both Rebecca Solnit and Dwight Garner are less than razor-sharp in their ability to distinguish between what's real and what's not real. Here's something that Garner writes about Solnit:

She notes that the British intellectual Timothy Garton Ash fed stereotypes after Katrina, saying that the storm's "big lesson is that the crust of civilization on which we tread is always wafer thin." Ms. Solnit's optimistic book advances just the opposite worldview.

Her *optimistic* book? How can it conceivably be *optimistic* if it can't even identify where the true causes lay that brought about the entire catastrophe? It can be, it would appear to any normal reader, only because Dwight Garner says so.

But let's look at something else Dwight Garner says in the same review and *then* decide whether or not we can trust him on distinguishing between an optimistic or a pessimistic—a whole or a partial—book. The passage I'm thinking of is here, in a passage where Garner is citing what he takes as Solnit's weaknesses and flaws:

"A Paradise Built in Hell" has its problems. Ms. Solnit occasionally falls into jargon. (Looting by citizens is, at one point, "improvised attempts to aggrandize their resources.") She has no feel for popular culture, and her analysis of disaster movies feels ham-handed. When she criticizes the television series "Survivor" for cynically setting people against one another in contradiction to how they would really behave, she's as guilty of underestimating average citizens as any government. We know it's just a TV show.

A person reads such reviews as this one, such passages as this one, and sinks into horror, disbelief, and despair. Solnit is confused by what she thinks is the difference between how people "really behave" and the way they "behave" on "reality shows." Garner pooh-poohs her confusion, declaring that in her naïveté she fails to see and understand what other and more astute observers see and understand ever so clearly. Says he, "*We know it's just a TV show.*"

Those italics aren't Garner's, they're mine. *I'm* the one who added them. And I added them because I was so shocked—shocked because *I could not believe* that a major reviewer at the *New York Times*, a person of presumably good education, wide experience, and broad reading, *could say such a thing as that*. What does Dwight Garner *think*? Does he *really not know* that he's absolutely, dead wrong in the idea he hopes to express when he says "*We know it's just a TV show*"? Has he read *nothing* of Orwell, Marshall McLuhan, or Samuel Beckett, and has he *no* powers of individual observation

left that he *actually* is able to say that what's *on* TV isn't real, and what's *not* on TV *is* real?

It may be a fault of my own, but I find myself unable to believe that the transparently juvenile and disingenuous “thinking” that Garner reveals in his own review, and that he attributes to Solnit in her book, can possibly themselves be real and not an act. I think these writers are lying, both of them. Either that, or they're so ignorant that it's impossible to believe that they're published, one of them, by the Viking press, or that they're employed, the other of them, by what passes for the nation's premier daily paper.

The review, and the book as the review portrays it, are beneath contempt. Both of them are dangers to us, to our nation, and to our intellectual self respect.

6

And so we turn to 9/11, another of the “disasters” helping nudge people toward “paradise” that Solnit includes in her book. And here, with 9/11, we come to the realm of simple, purposeful, outright fraud and deceit, to the realm where truth is abused so egregiously and in the context of an importance so enormous—that any reader who has taken it upon him or herself to find or make a way to peer through the massive, criminal, and treasonous blackout of news and information—such a reader will, yet again, be overwhelmed at the degree of ignorance shown here, if that be what it is, or at the degree of criminality, deceit, and treason, if *that* be what it is.

That Solnit can write about 9/11 and find *anything* of positive value in it is shocking to any reader of conscience who also knows the history of 9/11. And that Garner can blithely say *nothing* about so grievous a wrong as Solnit's is shows him only, [yet once more, to be a deadman, a wrongman, a stooge for traitors, and a traitor himself](#).

Strong talk—indeed it may seem so. But the simplest of plain truths can sound like the very thunders of Armageddon if the layers of falsehoods used to cover up that truth have grown deep enough and have themselves come to be taken *as the truth*. The only anodyne to ignorance is knowledge. And so let us now turn to some more homework.

Go to [this page and decide which book of the nineteen listed about 9/11 and surrounding matters](#) you'll choose as a beginning for your reading. This suggestion applies, of course, not only to my general readers, or to any happenstance readers, but also to Rebecca Solnit and Dwight Garner, both of whom, I continue to pray, are actually dwellers in an immeasurably deep ignorance rather than committers of treason.

Any reader who might like help or advice in deciding which to pick first from the list of nineteen, please [email me](#) and I'll be glad to help. I've read all nineteen of them, and one of them I wrote.

Next, for another very powerful example of the great question of ignorance versus treason, you can hardly do better than read this piece from November 2007 by Carolyn Baker entitled “[Naomi Klein’s *Shock Doctrine*’s Shocking Short Shrift.](#)” Here’s the essence of Baker’s reason for being shocked:

With respect to 9/11, Klein’s incisive grasp of disaster capitalism’s brilliantly devised, superbly-engineered machinations alongside her stochastic insistence that the administration did not deviously plot the catastrophe defies all logic. By Page 400, the reader has digested an encyclopedia of conspiracies carried out by a series of U.S. administrations of both political parties, but on Page 426 is nevertheless asked to believe that 9/11 “just happened”.

On that page comes the most breathtaking statement of all—that quote to which I promised to return. Arguing that the U.S. government did not have a hand in the attacks, Klein states:

The truth is at once less sinister and more dangerous. An economic system that requires constant growth, while bucking almost all serious attempts at environmental regulation, generates a steady stream of disasters all on its own, whether military, ecological or financial.

I could not agree with Klein more in terms of economies based on growth generating a steady stream of disasters, but 9/11 is a bit more than a few molecules in a “steady stream.” It was and is the defining moment in the history of disaster capitalism. The truth of 9/11, says Klein is “less sinister, and more dangerous”? What could be more dangerous than the U.S. government orchestrating the attacks in order to achieve all of the motivations that Klein has so incisively and painstakingly explained? After 425 pages of unrelenting recitations of bona fide conspiracy, I am asked to swallow the stochastic non-analysis of a steady stream in which 9/11 just happened to rear its ugly head?

You’ll notice that Klein’s *The Shock Doctrine* isn’t on my list of nineteen books. That omission is for the very good reason that, rather than telling the truth about 9/11, Klein—like others we’ve been reading about—*hides* the truth. My suggestion [about going to this page](#) of nineteen books is one I extend also to Naomi Klein. If *she* would like some help deciding where to start reading, I hope that she won’t hesitate to [email me](#) either.

7

Now, a very serious question and one, moreover, that’s absolutely essential to the matter of our republic’s very survival. Here is that question: Just *how deeply* corrupted, soiled, perverted, criminalized, anti-educated, de-intellectualized, infected, diseased, infantilized, deprived of both conscience and of consciousness, made self-deceptive, delusional, and driven crazy *have* the United States and its people been made since 9/11?

The answer is: Widely, profoundly, and devastatingly. The republic may in fact be lost already, having been reduced to a condition making it no longer capable of recovery from the forms of tyranny that have, even now, already eaten away great pieces of its most vital elements and that are poised in readiness to devour the entirety, digest it, and pass it on through as a perfected police state.

And all of this is happening *why*?

All of this is happening because too many—because *so* many—people in positions of authority, responsibility, and power have betrayed their own consciences and have betrayed also the people to whom they *should have remained* responsible, by choosing to honor and follow the lies of a vicious, murderous, plotting tyranny and refusing to follow instead the simple truth—for no matter how horrendous or how frightening or how intimidating, that truth *is* still simple, the truth that our own leadership inside our own intelligence agencies, military, and government was responsible for planning, plotting, and executing the events of 9/11 as a means to seize and centralize power, strip the nation of its civil and Constitutional rights, freedoms, and liberties, and engage in a global military undertaking aimed at achieving world hegemony.

The people who have shut their eyes in order to reject this truth and in its place both accept and celebrate *as truth* the many, feeble, fraudulent, and scientifically infantile lies put in place to cover up and putatively deny that truth are journalists, writers, editors, broadcasters, teachers, professors, college presidents, administrative officers, deans, sub-deans, and mini-deans, counselors, corporate managers, directors, and heads, figures from and throughout government at every level from the White House down to the most junior member of the least significant committee in congress. People who have turned from the adult truth and have embraced the infantile falsehoods that will destroy the nation at best, and far more at worst, include people working in every capacity not only in the so-called “mainstream” media but also throughout the even *more* so-called “liberal” or “progressive” media, including those at NPR, Pacifica Radio, *The Progressive Magazine*, and *The Nation*, and they include also writers, bloggers, and journalists working under the auspices of The Nation Institute. They include owners, board members, editors, columnists, journalists, and writers at all major newspapers like, for example, the *New York Times*, where the rejection of the truth, the embrace of the infantile lies, and the busy activity of proselytizing *about* the lies in order to pass them off *as* the real truth begins with those towering corporate figures who direct and control chief editor Bob Keller, extends through Keller himself and on down to the many names you’re familiar with if you’re either a reader *of* the *Times*, say, or a reader of the pieces of my own that I’ve put up on my web site over the past three years. You’ll find the names of many but far, far from all of them listed in [this essay from a year and a half ago](#).

You doubtless remember that I began section seven of this present essay with a list of emotional and intellectual deficiencies, perversions, and corruptions that are now endemic in the nation and that I attribute in very great part to the corruption and perversion of thought, of honor, and of social, ethical, and moral responsibility that have burgeoned in the wake of 9/11 and, in addition, that have been brought about and nurtured by the countless dismal, corrupting, pernicious, infantilizing influences that have come into play in a nation where, as in *1984*, lies are truth, war is peace, silence is patriotism, and the individual conscience is ostracism and death. Ours is now a nation, you might say, where TV has won and reality has lost. That victory has been helped, aided, and abetted by our leaders and advisors of each and every type I listed a moment

ago. Every single one of them, every last type, position, title, or office-holder among them, is a traitor.

One of the perversions I mentioned at the outset of this section seven was “self-deception.” Another was “infantilization.” There are overlaps between these two, doubtless, as there are among many of the other insufficiencies, corruptions, and inadequacies on the list. But I propose looking at an example of each of these particular two, self-deception and infantilization, before we begin drawing this essay to its poor, dreary, and grievous close.

It happens that the two examples I have in mind, first of self-deception and then of infantilization, are, again, examples from the *New York Times*. It happens also that both derive from Thomas L. Friedman.

On October 13 of his year, Patrick Martin published a piece called “[Thomas Friedman Glorifies American Militarism](#).” In it, Martin refers to Friedman’s *Times* column of Sunday, October 11, saying that in it Friedman “devotes his entire column to a grotesque celebration of the role of the American military, presenting its operations, particularly in Afghanistan and Iraq, as humanitarian and liberating.”

Martin continues:

He takes the occasion of the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Barack Obama to suggest the US president go to Oslo in December, decline the award for himself, and then declare, “I will accept it on behalf of the most important peacekeepers in the world for the last century—the men and women of the US Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps.”

Friedman mentions a series of actions by the American military, including the Normandy landing of June 1944, the Berlin Airlift of 1948, the stationing of US troops in Europe throughout the Cold War, the troop presence in South Korea, and the ongoing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. The very length of this list might give a reader pause—there is no other country whose military actions over the last 70 years would require a full column merely to name.

The recital, in Martin’s view, is not merely incomplete but also false by merit of its omissions. “Friedman’s account of the ‘last century,’” he writes,

is highly selective. He leaves out more American wars than he includes. Left off his list are World War I, the Korean War, the Vietnam War and the first Gulf War. He makes no mention of the dozens of US military interventions in Central America and the Caribbean, including invasions and occupations of Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Grenada, Nicaragua, Panama and Mexico.

Nor does he make reference to the use of American military, paramilitary and intelligence forces to overthrow governments, suppress popular revolts and establish dictatorships around the world. A partial list would include Iran, Indonesia, Pakistan, Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Peru, Venezuela, Paraguay, Bolivia, Uruguay, Guatemala, El Salvador, Greece, Turkey, and numerous African countries.

“Even in the wars Friedman does mention,” Martin continues, “his account is one-sided and false.”

He refers to Normandy and the liberation of Buchenwald, but not Hiroshima, Nagasaki, or the firebombing of Tokyo, Dresden and Hamburg. He describes the role of US forces today in Iraq and Afghanistan as “peacekeeping,” without noting the sea of blood that accompanied the invasion and conquest of those countries.

The most egregious omission, however, is that Friedman fails so much as even to mention Vietnam. This is “the most telling exposure of Friedman’s attempt to dress up American imperialism in ‘democratic’ and ‘humanitarian’ garb.”

Martin is unsurprised by Friedman’s dodge, since he finds the columnist to be now and to have been in the past less correspondent than propagandist:

Friedman’s column is only the latest effort to banish the “Vietnam syndrome” and revive a democratic façade for US military operations. His role is predictable, as the *Times* foreign affairs columnist has long been an apologist for American militarism.

Martin’s piece functions as an accurate and just condemnation of the *Times* as betrayer of the truth, in this case not about 9/11 directly but about the military consequences of 9/11. Still, of greater interest right now, or of greater interest for the purposes of this particular essay, are Martin’s last two paragraphs. The interest these hold is due in part to their muted passion, and it’s due in part also to their clarity as they describe the extent to which “news media” like the *Times* have been corrupted, or have allowed themselves to be corrupted, or have corrupted *themselves* into purveyors of pure propaganda, of a “product” intended, in the case of the *Times*, for a very particular readership, a readership for whom the *Times* has become a purveyor of falsehoods built on a foundation of lies. Here are the two paragraphs:

The *New York Times* speaks in particular for a social layer, a generation of the upper-middle-class that has enriched itself over the past three decades and dropped any previous association with perspectives of social reform, let alone opposition to American militarism. Ex-radical or ex-liberal, they recognize that it is impossible to present Vietnam as a great humanitarian effort, so they seek to pass over this seminal experience of their youth in guilty silence.

But Vietnam was no aberration. It was the template for the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The historical balance sheet is the direct opposite of the claims made by Friedman about a democratic and humanitarian role for the US military. Vietnam, Korea, Iraq, Latin America—the victims mount into the millions. In the half century since Hitler and Stalin, no institution has killed more people in wars and other acts of barbarism than the government of the United States and its military-intelligence apparatus.

8

And so there’s our example of “self-deception.” Does Friedman *know* what he’s saying (and *not* saying)? Does he actually believe that he’s representing one truth when in fact he’s representing something wholly divergent from it? Is he *conscious* of what he’s doing

and saying? Is he *not* conscious of it? Assuming that self-deception—being delusional—is a form or aspect of instability, we’re logically required to ask whether Thomas Friedman is stable or unstable. Whether he’s crazy or sane. Delusional or not.

Now, what would it do to help us answer this question if we were to find that Friedman definitely *is* infantilized? Certainty is a hard thing to come by in such matters, but my own sense of it in Friedman was strengthened by my reading of his column a week after the one Martin wrote about. As an aid to maintaining my own mental and intellectual hygiene, I had stopped reading Friedman, as I have stopped reading certain other of the *Times* columnists. It’s intellectually *cleaner* to skip them. But on October 18, not only was my eye caught by the Friedman headline—“The Power in 11/9”—but I saw the familiar “9/11” in the column’s first line.

Whenever I happen to see a well-known mainstreamer *directly* addressing the great lie of 9/11, I tend to take a look, since it’s on such occasions that writers of this sort are most likely to expose the truth about themselves. The truth? That means the truth of whether they’re lying purposely and outright—shamelessly—or whether they’re actually infantilized and thus lying out of deep, fawning, delusional, perhaps even obedient ignorance. In the latter case, shamefully.

And, indeed, Friedman passed—that is, he failed—the test brilliantly. It’s a long time since I’ve seen a more infantile piece of writing in so public a place.

Here are the first two paragraphs:

A few weeks ago, Americans “observed” the eighth anniversary of 9/11—that day in 2001 when the Twin Towers were brought down by Al Qaeda. In a few weeks, Germans will “celebrate” the 20th anniversary of 11/9—that day in 1989 when the Berlin Wall was brought down by one of the greatest manifestations of people power ever seen.

As the Obama team tries to figure out how to proceed vis-à-vis Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, it is worth reflecting for a moment on why Germans are celebrating 11/9 and we are reliving 9/11—basically debating whether to re-invade Afghanistan to prevent it again from becoming an Al Qaeda haven and to prevent Pakistan from tipping into civil war.

It’s so obvious, the infantile phrase, that it’s like being poked in the eye with a stick. Not only is it a lie, but it makes you feel you’re being treated like a kindergartner—as indeed you are, with this stupid sentence out of a child’s primer: “that day in 2001 when the Twin Towers were brought down by Al Qaeda.” It’s conceivable, I suppose, though just *barely*, that Friedman is so powerfully and profoundly ignorant—Mr. Friedman, which book of the nineteen do *you* want to begin with? [Please write](#) me—that he imagines he’s telling the truth. But, as any capable writing critic or analyst can see, it’s much more likely that he’s lying through his teeth. And that’s where the infantilism comes in. We’re infantilized by the way *he’s* treating *us*, but *he’s* infantilized by the slavish toy-dog-tricks—sit up! shake! say yes!—he performs, absolutely without the least hint of adult embarrassment, for his masters.

Adult version: “that day in 2001 when the Twin Towers came down.”

Adult version: “that day in 2001 when the Twin Towers were brought down.”

Adult version: “that day in 2001 when the Twin Towers were brought down by our own leaders in government, the intelligence agencies, and the military in order that they could blame the disaster, falsely, on Osama bin Laden and nineteen young Arabs with box cutters (who really weren’t even on the planes at all, if there even were planes) and begin a global war for profit, power, and plunder, claiming it to be a war of defense against the imaginary jihadist enemy.”

And now the infantilized version: “that day in 2001 when the Twin Towers were brought down by Al Qaeda.”

Nothing can conceivably explain the presence here of the phrase “*by Al Qaeda*” except two possibilities. First, Friedman is *so dim a bulb, so ill-read, so uninformed, and so isolated* from any and all sophisticated people in power or positions of authority around the whole world that he actually believes his own infantile nonsense. He is, in this reading of his words, at the very best a basket case and moron.

The second possibility is even worse. It shows him to be a hack, a shill, a performing animal for his owners—and it shows him to be *without the least presence or vestige of dignity, decency, conscience, or of fidelity to his people, to his country, or to the Constitution under which they are governed.*

The second possibility, that is, shows him doing exactly what he’s told to do by his owners. And what his owners tell him to do is, pure and simple, to lie. And so, possessing no conscience whatsoever, he does so. But he’s so bad at it—and the lie is *so far-fetched and plain dumb*—that as he’s doing his duty to the traitors who own him, his infantile behavior is positively *telegraphed* to anyone with any brains or any knowledge *through his hopelessly infantile language.*

Absurd! No fewer than *eight long years* have passed, and he’s *still* “reminding” his readers that “Al Qaeda did it”!⁶

The inanity is beyond the contemptible and can fall only into the comic, pathetic, dark, and absurd: So much time has passed that Friedman’s owners are now frightened that his readers *may have forgotten the lie!* So part of his job now is to remind them of it. And so he does, trained circus-dog dancing in tutu, trained “correspondent” re-declaring the lie.

And, in doing so, making himself sound like a baby-talker.

The column’s idea is that the fall of the Berlin wall—11/9—is different from 9/11. The Germans *got* something from their 11/9 because *their* event was brought about and driven by “people power.” Friedman writes:

⁶ Though they didn’t.

Germans showed the world how good ideas about expanding human freedom—amplified by people power—can bring down a wall and an entire autocratic power structure, without a shot. There is now a Dunkin’ Donuts on Paris Square adjacent to the Brandenburg Gate, where all that people power was concentrated. Normally, I am horrified by American fast-food brands near iconic sites, but in the case of this once open sore between East and West, I find it something of a balm. The war over Europe is indeed over. People power won. We can stand down—pass the donuts.

The thinking in “The Power of 11/9” is the “thinking” of an ignorant little child—or a traitorous little child, but child either way. Friedman’s next paragraph:

The events of 9/11, by contrast, demonstrated how bad ideas—amplified by a willingness of just a few people to commit suicide—can bring down skyscrapers and tie a great country in knots.

And *that* little paragraph, readers, is an example of baby-talk, of baby-thinking, the telling of a baby-story, doing so in baby-language. *This* is what Friedman’s owners pay him to say and to write. *This* is the language of the fraudulent, the ignorant, or the delusional. It is *not the language of an adult mind*. It is an infantilized language that grows out of cowardice, ignorance, emptiness, and meanness. It is the language of tyranny, the language of emptiness and false-truth, the language that America has somehow been manipulated into speaking and into doing its thinking in. It is the language of children—children kept indoors, away from experience, window shades drawn, watching cartoons.

9

And so we come toward our end by returning to the great question that caused all of this searching—Can there be a literary life in a post-1984 nation? Can there be a literary life in a nation of the kind the United States has become over the past decade, especially since 9/11? The answer is very clear. No, there can’t and won’t be a literary life in such a time and place, *nor* will there be the production of a *literature* of depth, complexity, authenticity, significance, or durability.

Why not? Because the creation of a true, real, or significant literature is impossible when a people lives or is forced to live in ignorance of the whole truth of their own lives, of their nation’s life, and of the lives of those they live among. For so long as America remains a nation straitened, encumbered, and diminished by its idiotically determined dedication to a cheap lie—every bit as cheap as the lie under which Nazi Germany suffered, dwelled, and died—neither it nor its people can or will be productive in the arts in any way except in that same way as they live: Cheaply and falsely. For so long as Americans continue to be deprived of, or continue to be conditioned *into* an inability to see and know at least half of the truth of what their own lives *are*, and at least half of the truth of what their own nation *is* and is *doing*, they will remain at the very best halfpeople living halflives in halfblindness and thinking in halfthought. In this, in the condition that Americans and American intellectuals now live in they won’t be (aren’t) any different

from the wretches chained into their seats in the bottom of Plato's cave, believing falsehood to be reality, shadows to be substance, lies to be truth.

Any art that isn't inclusive of the whole of life, or any art that lacks a *consciousness* of the whole of life, or that lacks even the *potential* for a consciousness of the whole of life, will fail to rise to the level either of significant or durability. We said something about this earlier, in the cases of Emily Dickenson and A. J. Liebling, and it remains a great and essential truth about the arts.⁷ In an interview, Marilynne Robinson once put forth something very close to the same idea:

Any writer, or any moment in writing, when the imagination seems to be *as alert as possible to everything that can be understood out of a moment or situation*, seems to me to be when that impulse is being made into art.⁸

Throughout this essay, example after example has come up of writers in one way or another, wittingly or unwittingly, intentionally or through self-delusion or through an ignorance that they've been encouraged to maintain, *failing* to be "as alert as possible to everything that can be understood out of a moment or situation."

All writing holds the potential for reaching the level of art, but *no* writing, if it takes place under limitations like those just named, or if it is undertaken by *writers* with limitations like those just named—no such writing can or will ever reach the level of art, and all such writing will be feeble, diseased, impure, partial, and incomplete. All such writing, in and because of its incompleteness, will hold in itself a debilitating essence of falsehood, untruth, and non-life, flaws and absences that will destine it to live only briefly, weakly, and without dignity or strength. And so will those who write it.

Examples are everywhere of writing (and of thought) that's unable to rise above the cheap, the feeble, and the conventional, even the phony, since it itself, the writers of it, and even the publishers and reviewers of it—all of them, being residents of a malevolent, blind, and deceitful nation where lies are truth, fail to be imbued with life in any true degree of wholeness or completeness.

Cheap, phony, and feeble literature is the best that America will produce until such time as the nation will or can admit its citizens again into a full and free consciousness of the entirety and therefore the truth of the lives they lead as citizens of a nation comprised of flesh and blood men and women possessed of fully capable minds and hearts of their own—rather than in a nation of infantile quack-talk and half-minded gibberish speakers like Frank Rich, Dwight Garner, Thomas Friedman, Rebecca Solnit and the manifold number of others here unnamed.

On May 27, 2007, the *New York Times* gave over the front page of its book review to the opening paragraphs of [Frank Rich's hyper-laudatory piece on *Falling Man*](#), the Don

⁷ Anyone interested in this idea about the arts might like to see the "[interview with myself](#)" that I wrote in 2006.

⁸ *Iowa Writers' Workshop Newsletter*, Fall 2001.

DeLillo novel ostensibly “about” 9/11. Rich’s review was so wrong in so many ways—and at the same time so giddy, positively silly in its praise (I’ll show you some in a minute) that, my deceit-detector on alert, I bought the book right away. As I’d expected, it was awful. It was terrible in almost every way a piece of today’s “quality fiction” can *be* terrible. It was lazy in its way of lolling up against one old lamppost of “story” after another, shuffling over to a lamppost of “character,” another of “setting,” and so on, not a one of them in the least real but, instead, composed from a mixture of glue and perhaps ten or twenty compacted bushels of the sawdust that has gathered over the past hundred years on the floor of the Novel Workshop of the World. Even the book’s central symbolic conceit—a performance artist who “hangs” from one point or another around the city in a supposed visual echo of the man photographed falling upside down from the north tower on 9/11—even this image is gimmicky, far-fetched, in no way whatsoever moving, and, furthermore, in no way a part of the texture, fabric, or flesh of the rest of the novel.

Worst of all, though—and the thing, one suspects, that triggered Frank Rich into jumping and dancing for joy—was that DeLillo swallowed the entire phony story about 9/11 hook, line, and sinker. Not only did he swallow it, but, almost like a kid with a new toy, he set about to exploit and “celebrate” it, renting it out from this wonderful new “made in the USA” stock shop to use in setting up an ominous, ready-made atmosphere that was “morally-charged and dramatic” (the quotes are there to remind you of Dwight Garner’s “compelling moral drama”).

Astonishing, don’t you think? Here’s DeLillo, a writer who made himself very nearly king-of-the-hill in the realm of high paranoia, Pynchon-esque suspicion, certainty of there being ever-present cosmic trickery or a controlling “system” that looms balefully over everyone before coming down to seize them. Yet when the real thing comes about, he misses it totally, laps it up like a kitten does milk, and lets it shake him around by the nape of the neck—all this *even after he’s had five-and-a-half-years to read about it and think it through!*

How smart *are* we? How smart *are* our literary intellectuals? Who do they spend their time *talking* to? What do they *read*? Do they read at *all*?

And Frank Rich? His happy, happy dance of praise is positively intolerable. Don’t read this next quote without a basin handy:

If “Underworld” took its cues from the kinetic cinema of Eisenstein, “Falling Man,” up until its remarkable final sequence, is all oblique silences and enigmatic close-ups reminiscent of the domestic anomie of the New Wave. In DeLillo’s hands, this is not at all limiting or prosaic. There’s a method to the Resnais-like fogginess. The cumulative effect is devastating, as DeLillo in exquisite increments lowers the reader into an inexorable rendezvous with raw terror.

That is a paragraph of *such tripe* as to offend any normal and moral person, if such a person were to pay attention closely to what it says.

To you, Mr. Frank Rich, I say not “raw terror,” but *raw sewage*. How could *any* thinking, feeling, aesthetically (and politically) *complete* human being allow him or herself to *celebrate* such a thing as this, to *wallow* in the wondrous achievement of a mediocre novelist spinning up out of *this* material a “cumulative effect” that is “devastating” (believe me, in truth it’s claptrap and bunkum, but that makes no difference in a lying-exercise of this kind) by merit of its using “exquisite increments” (there’s not one “exquisite increment” in the whole book, but ditto as to, etc.) that “lower” us “into an inexorable rendezvous with raw terror.”

This is shameless, shameless junk. Whether Rich is lying first to himself and therefore only secondarily to us, or whether he’s lying through his teeth *only to us* (and to DeLillo? Who knows?) hardly makes a difference. Just look at these words. “Inexorable” is conniving and cheap, implying that the 9/11 attacks *were* inexorable when in truth they were not in *any* way so, but were plotted and planned far in advance, with fore-knowledge far up the gazoo. So also with “rendezvous,” a penurious, hollow bit of fakery plucked from the lines of cheap romances and thrillers (“*Oh, Raoul,*” she whispered, “*you and I have a rendezvous with destiny*”) implying that the jihadists did every last thing in the attacks *all by themselves* and were not to be outwitted or stopped by any man or any force known *to man*—while in reality the chief guy who needed to be stopped was Cheney, commanding the entire horror-show from the screen of his monitor in the White House bunker room.⁹

But let me come toward an end, lest I fall prey to heart seizure first.

Two things, both awful, both horrible, both deceitful, both abominations.

Some quoting at length is needed in order for the full quality of depravity, fraud, contempt, and delusion to be seen. Here is Rich’s sixth paragraph:

Bill Gray, the reclusive, Pynchonesque writer at the center of “Mao II,” laments that terrorists, the bomb makers and gunmen, have annexed the territory that once belonged to the novelist: the ability to “alter the inner life of the culture.” As he sees it, the “news of disaster is the only narrative people need,” and “the darker the news, the grander the narrative.” After 9/11, DeLillo picked up his fictional alter ego’s point in an essay for Harper’s, “In the Ruins of the Future,” that grappled with how a novelist might respond to terror now that it had hit home. “The narrative ends in the rubble and it is left to us to create the counternarrative,” DeLillo wrote. “People running for their lives are part of the story that is left to us” because “they take us beyond the hard numbers of dead and missing and give us a glimpse of elevated being.” An event like 9/11 cannot be bent to “the mercies of analogy or simile.” Primal terror—“the cellphones, the lost shoes, the handkerchiefs mashed in the faces of running men and women”—has to take precedence over politics, history and religion. “There is something empty in the sky,” he wrote. “The writer tries to give memory, tenderness and meaning to all that howling space.”

⁹ Full details of Cheney’s role and behavior in the bunker aren’t perfectly known, but many, many of them *are*—far in excess of what in a normal world would long before now have resulted in subpoenas, hearings, and *true* investigation followed doubtless by trial. [Let me know](#) if you’d like advice about where to start [among the nineteen books](#) for this particular material.

How can we not be doomed if minds like these really represent the minds of our literary intelligentsia? The sheer naïveté of it, the *silliness*, might be the most appalling thing, brought into existence through the prior embrace of a *truly wrong premise*. But the naïveté and silliness, whatever their origin, give way immediately to the greater horror of *the sheer atrocity of what this mini-thinking and propaganda actually come to be celebratory of*.

Let's go through it. Anyone who knows what literature really is, what it's for, what it's made of, and *why* it's made, will know instantly that DeLillo's "reclusive, Pynchonesque writer at the center of 'Mao II' is a dim bulb and preposterous in being poorly read. Here he is, disturbed because the evil, evil world is so busy co-opting the material that the *novelist* wants to use. Then and there, we see that he knows *nothing whatsoever* of the history of the novel. As for the things he wants to keep for *novel-writing*, they're really, really, really terrible and awful and ruthless and scary things, things done now by the "terrorists, the bomb makers and gunmen" (as if it hadn't been always thus). So now the "Pynchonesque" Bill Gray is crying like a fifth-grader elbowed out of a marbles game. But what, really, *is* that game that he's been elbowed out of? Well, it's this one: It's the game where "the novelist alters the inner life of the culture."

Pah! *That's* a dumb game. It's not even a real one, but only a delusional one. And, for absolute sure, it's light years away from *anything* having to do with novel-writing. *Comic* books, conceivably. But that's *it*.

DeLillo's pre-puberty, power-lusting, grade-school-level thinker, however, has no idea how foolish and misdirected his notion is. In fact, instead of being drawn to examining its obvious fallacies and limitations, as a grown-up thinker would (or a person who knew what literature was), all he does is make another braggadocio pronouncement trying to "explain" it. We've seen this passage already, but I'm going to repeat it, picking up right after the words that identified what Gray was afraid of losing, namely, "'the ability to 'alter the inner life of the culture.'" Read carefully and see if you can find the *truly* terrifying aspect of this short passage of terror-talk:

As he sees it, the "news of disaster is the only narrative people need," and "the darker the news, the grander the narrative." After 9/11, DeLillo picked up his fictional alter ego's point in an essay for Harper's, "In the Ruins of the Future," that grappled with how a novelist might respond to terror now that it had hit home. "The narrative ends in the rubble and it is left to us to create the counternarrative," DeLillo wrote. "People running for their lives are part of the story that is left to us" because "they take us beyond the hard numbers of dead and missing and give us a glimpse of elevated being."

Shall we talk about what's sick, demented, delusional, and infantile *now*, or shall we talk about it *later*?

Well, odious as it is, I suppose we'd better not put off the task. First, there's Gray's lie by omission, or, to put it another way, his lie-by-half-truth: "As he sees it, the 'news of disaster is the only narrative people need,' and 'the darker the news, the grander the narrative.'" In a single word, or in a single, two-syllable, compound word, we can evaluate Gray's "literary" pronouncement on its merits: Bullshit.

It's a staggeringly self-delusional half truth. It's wholly untrue that disaster-news "is the only narrative people need," even if they *do* rubber-neck at accident scenes on the highway or stand in sheep-flocks, reminiscent of audiences at the ancient Roman Coliseum, waiting, hours if need be, for would-be suicides to jump from bridge-spans or high sills. Still, two things. People may be incorrigibly addicted to "disaster," but it's simply a blunt falsehood that that's "all they need." Please insert our compound word again at this point. The truth is that most people feel tainted by self-disgust after having waited in *hopes* of seeing a "disaster." And even though most of us will ooh and aah at seeing a natural enormity—a St. Helen's or a Swiss avalanche—awe is quickly embued with the same taint of disgust at oneself, though less piercing than it is after having watched the destruction of something *human* rather than merely something of *nature*. Often the two are mixed, I know, as in the Indian Ocean tsunamis of December 2006. And the result in the watcher, in one for whom the fascination of the abomination was irresistible, will be to suffer the taint of self-loathing afterward.

Only if Bill Gray is thinking of *all* "people" as amoral, sub-ethical, non-sympathetic morons, only if he thinks of them as hordes of creatures all existing at a sixth-grader's comic-book level—only *then* can his half-truth hold even a modicum of validity. And at what cost, this "validity"? At the cost of stripping out of people everything that makes them human. And the truth is that for even the most ghoulish of us who do nevertheless remain human—my maternal grandmother, for example, who did indeed rise up to any least whiff of disaster—it's *still* an ugly, imperious, condescendingly dehumanizing falsehood to say that the "narrative" of disaster "is all they need."

Speak for yourself, John Galt.

Ditto for Gray's phrases "the darker the news, the grander the narrative." Here, DeLillo's character from *Mao II* is mixing even *himself* up. Here again he's wrong in all the ways we've seen him wrong before, but this time he's even wrong in his word "grander." Let's suppose that "dark" means "gory" or "ghoulish" or "sadistic" (after all, what in the devil's name *does* it mean?). Well, a "dark" narrative could be a story of only one person, *however* well it might satiate and feed the grim lusts of Gray-DeLillo's imagined comic-book-level readers. But the gorier is *not* going to mean the "grander," certainly. All it could mean is the more piercingly or sharply or acutely satisfying to the sexual deviant that our writer-guys seem to want and imagine as audience—but never the more "grand." Scenes of Napoleonic suffering in the enormous grandeur of the Russian winter—these the dark and gory slice-em-up show will never equal.

There we are, then: We've looked at Bill Gray's lie-by-omission and at some of the concerns it raises. That means it's time to go on to our "second" matter, this one being "the *truly* terrifying aspect of this short passage of terror-talk" that I asked you to be on the lookout for.

I need a break, and I'm sure you do too. While we're resting, look again for the truly awful thing. You could even [let me know if you've found it](#).

●

Awful, isn't it. In fact, it's almost beyond a person's ability to believe. After all, it looks as though DeLillo has done something that may be psychotic. It appears that he may have—has—*taken on as his own* the absurdities and limits of the tiny mind of his “Bill Gray” character from *Mao II*. I find this pitiful, appalling, and dangerous. Frank Rich, though—he *loves it*.

At first, it sounds harmless enough:

After 9/11, DeLillo picked up his fictional alter ego's point in an essay for Harper's, “In the Ruins of the Future,” that grappled with how a novelist might respond to terror now that it had hit home.

Well, from what we've seen of that “alter ego's” mind and thought, I'd strongly advise against even picking up “a point” from him, although if *that's all it is*, maybe no serious harm will be done. But we quickly learn the horrible truth that that's *far* from “all it is.”

No, DeLillo puts on the whole suit and skin of his wrong-seeing and wrong-thinking alter-ego, and he trades his very brain for Gray's. And so we find ourselves following now the thinking not of DeLillo and not of Gray, but of DeLillo-Gray. We pick up after the phrase “now that [terror] had hit home”:

“The narrative ends in the rubble and it is left to us to create the counternarrative,” DeLillo wrote. “People running for their lives are part of the story that is left to us” because “they take us beyond the hard numbers of dead and missing and give us a glimpse of elevated being.”

If you haven't shivered or gotten goose bumps on your arms, or if the hairs on your nape haven't stirred—then you haven't read these words carefully enough. Go back, especially through the second half.

I feel much the way I imagine Paul Craig Roberts must have felt when, a few days ago,¹⁰ he wrote that “[Evidence that the US is a failed state is piling up faster than I can record it.](#)”

I never, ever, imagined that in my lifetime I would see such ugliness, falsehood, propaganda, misprision, insensitivity, misdirection, and plain vileness woven into the very *fabric* of literary “thinking” or of literary “thought” as I have seen over the past decade or maybe fifteen years and that I see right here in Don DeLillo and Frank Rich. I know all the old stories of political “failure” among literary folk and of literary failure among *political* folk—Ezra Pound can be an example of the first, Grace Paley one of the many thousands of the second. But I never, ever thought I would find myself having to say, in a piece of writing such as this one, to readers such as you, these particular words: “Imagine your way back to the middle or to the early-middle years of the Nazi period in

¹⁰ [Online Journal](#), Nov. 4, 2009.

Germany and ask yourself whether the notion that you've just read *here* would or wouldn't be the kind of thing you'd be likely to have read *there*.

Look at them, at these words:

“People running for their lives are part of the story that is left to us” because “they take us beyond the hard numbers of dead and missing and give us a glimpse of elevated being.”

We could be back in 1939, or 1942, when sacrifice of the mere individual, in the name of and for the sake of “the homeland,” was not only an expected thing, but even a *desirable* thing—and why? Because a certain unexamined abstraction was held to be most important of all things, and, in dying for the sake of that abstraction, there would be the enormous reward, for those left behind, of their having been given “a glimpse of elevated being.” The “hard numbers” of the dead give “us” the “elevation,” the *meaning*—no, not the meaning, but the *elevated* meaning. And what's that? What *is* this “elevated meaning”? How about trying out the word “glory”? How about the word “nation”? Or how about the word “*Homeland*”?

I can imagine readers, if they've come along this far, shaking their heads, disagreeing with me, then quickly growing adamant in that disagreement. *No*, they'd say. This isn't the same thing at all. Now isn't the same as then. This is *different* from Germany.

But it's not. In *kind* it's not. And even in degree and in severity, exactly how different is it, really, once you tally up *all* the numbers of *all* the mangled, ruined, poisoned, crippled, lost, or dead in the U.S., and in Iraq, and in Afghanistan, and in Pakistan, and once you tally up *all* of the tortured and *all* of the imprisoned and *all* of the victims of extraordinary rendition, not to mention the changes inside our own state, the eliminations and disappearances of constitutional liberties and rights, the preparation of internment camps, the lifting of Posse Comitatus, and on and on—how different is it, *really*?

As if, in any case, *numbers* were the only issue in questions of this kind.

Our nation, simply put, is turning inside out. We joined with allies in WW II to fight against the Axis, and now we *are* the axis. We were a nation of laws, not of men, and now our very “leaders” are criminals programmatically looting and robbing both the nation and its people blind. Take a look at Richard C. Cook's recent piece, “[America the Betrayed](#).” Here's a sample, though I urge you to look at the whole thing for yourself:

American family farming is practically dead and is under a new assault from speculators who are undercutting prices and forcing foreclosures. The local manufacturing sector never came back after the calamitous decline produced by the Paul Volcker recession of 1979-1983, when interest rates were deliberately raised to over 20 percent to kill off family-owned businesses so that global corporations could step in and take over. Since then we had the “Reagan Revolution” when the banks took over the economy, the Clinton dot.com bubble of the 1990s, which crashed in 2000, and the George W. Bush/Alan Greenspan housing bubble which blew up in 2008. Now Main Street lies shattered and shuttered as a result of the crimes and treacheries of the last 30 years.

This is the same argument as the one made by [A Nation Gone Blind](#), except that my own book stays away from banking and bubbles and “legal” robbery from the people by “government.” But *A Nation Gone Blind* does zero in on the likes of Don DeLillo, Dwight Garner, Rebecca Solnit, and Frank Rich—the literati who are as blind as [deadmen](#) to the actual truth of the very life right in front of their eyes.

Now, I’m still not convinced that Rich isn’t an asset of some handful of the agencies, planted to spew out disinformation from his bully pulpit in the *Times*. Either way, he’s a quisling, whether he’s spewing disinformation knowingly or out of an empty Grand Canyon’s worth of ignorance. But DeLillo? Solnit? Garner? Shall we go on? Roth? Updike? Grisham? King? Koontz? Crichton? Shall we toss in Bill Keller? And, then, shall we rise up out of the cellar? Chabon? Marcus? Moore? Eggers? Foer? Readers of *A Nation Gone Blind* may remember Birkerts, Butler, Ford.

But there’s no point in continuing. Bad enough is this awful fact: In all of America today *there are no* well-known literary—or even “literary”—writers either courageous enough, informed enough, or capable enough in the ability to see the *full* truth of life today—there are *none* sufficiently equipped in these ways so that they can or do use that full truth of our lives *as the material of their art*.

Fear, ignorance, hypocrisy, cowardice, treasonous criminality, or some lesser form of deceit—who knows the cause in each case? But we all know that in conditions like this, with writers like those we have now, nothing in our known, published, reviewed and acclaimed national literature is any longer true, but *all* of it is false. All of it is compromised. None of it can claim honesty,¹¹ and none of it can claim the stature either of art or of literature, let alone achieve perdurability.

We’re finished. Our “mainstream” writers, our recognizably “literary” writers, all of those who are now “known,” get visibly published, get reviewed in visible places, all are either witting traitors (probably few in the this category) or else they are blind, blinded, half-blind, self-blinded, purblind, or blind through mere—no, *sheer*—obliviousness, lassitude, anti-educational conditioning, and ignorance. Perhaps fear plays a part in many, although fear, however understandable, is no more excuse in this case than is ignorance of the law in the case of a legal infraction.

The situation is very, very near hopeless. How many writers may be like DeLillo in what we’re now going to take a look at, I don’t know, but it’s essential that we take this look nevertheless. Almost as if merely in passing, Frank Rich, in his review of *Falling Man*, mentions a misconception of literary art that’s so thunderously misconceived, so completely misguided and wrong, and so extraordinarily pernicious, that it demands correcting.

We’ve seen this passage already, but I’m not sure that everyone *saw* it—like a landmine that luckily got stepped *over* rather than *on* when we took this path before. The passage

¹¹ None of it can claim honesty insofar as none of it, to borrow a comparison, tells the truth, the whole truth, and nothing *but* the truth.

returns us to our good-buddy Bill Gray, who, as you'll remember, feels totally dissed and pissed because the "terrorists, the bomb makers and gunmen" have "annexed the territory that once belonged to the novelist"—those last are Frank Rich's words, and you'll notice that this now-stolen "territory," by a Richian bit of magic too devious and Mephistophelian to follow, somehow changes from a "territory" into an "ability," specifically, "the ability 'to alter the inner life of the culture.'" It's *this*, then—a "territory" that's been transmuted into an "ability 'to alter the inner life of the culture'"—that big novelist Bill is mad at being cheated out of by the bad guys, the very same "ability" that we cannot help but take as being as desirable to Don DeLillo as it is to Bill Gray, since DeLillo does, after all, in his *Harper's* article, snuggle comfortably into the skin of big Bill and start talking out of big Bill's mouth.

And what a travesty all of this Frank Rich-Bill Gray-Don DeLillo "territory" and "ability" and "inner life of the culture" stuff *is*. What a witch's brew of misbegotten, wrong-headed, non-literary, delusional, grandiose, under-educated, puff-brained false assumptions, erroneous purposes, fake powers and "abilities," curdled Romanticism, and essentially tyrant-minded stuff it is. Again, if *this* is an example of what America's literary intelligentsia is able to offer—well, as I said, we're finished. And so is our literature.

What *is* "the inner life of the culture"? And where *does* it come from? And, above all, how *does* it get "altered"?

I pride myself that I do know at least something about these questions and the answers to them, since these are essentially the questions that make up the substance and subject of *A Nation Gone Blind*. That book reveals my own great fears about the inner life of the culture (that it's been starved to death, lied to, made blind, all but destroyed); my understanding of its origin (that it can come into existence, be kept in existence, and can thrive only within one indissoluble and essential individual self at a time, and never in more than one at a time, *ever*), that it can be harmed, sickened, poisoned, crippled, and made impotent or diseased with infinitely greater ease and simplicity of method than the hard work, diligence, commitment, and complexity of effort that are required in order for it to be aided, nurtured, strengthened, deepened, made resilient, and generally kept alive, vibrant, whole, sensitive, rewarding, and fecund.

The good that exists in the "inner life of the culture" can be *learned* (by each single, indissoluble, individual self), but the good that exists in it *cannot* be dictated, forced, or compelled into existence.

It's infinitely easier to kill things than to bring them to life. This fact is as true of the "inner life of the culture" as it is of any other organic being or thing.

Over the past sixty years, America has done far more killing than creating. If that weren't the case, *A Nation Gone Blind* almost undoubtedly wouldn't have come into existence. But it did. When you're finished reading *it*, take a look at Richard C. Cook's recent short piece—we saw a bit from it a few minutes ago—"[America the Betrayed](#)."

And then, if you *still* don't think we're finished, you're more of an optimist than I am. That doesn't mean, however, that I've given up, or that I'm *going* to give up. I'm a writer, and I'll go on writing until I die. Why? In part, because my definition of writing is this: It's the telling of the truth in a way that's itself also true.¹² And "truth" means truth the way we were talking about it earlier—truth that's not just true but that's the whole truth and nothing but. *And* it means, lest we forget, also being "as alert as possible to *everything that can be understood out of*" that truth.

Writing is a serious and significant thing. Few any longer understand this fact, let alone care about it. If we can't increase the number who do understand it, and understand *why* it's true—well, I think we're finished.

The other part of the reason why I'll keep on writing until I—or we all—die is that there's only one thing that can protect us from Frank Rich, Dwight Garner, Rebecca Solnit, Bill DeLillo, Don Gray and all the others who, by falsifying and lying, are, whether they know it or *not*, on the side of the people and the forces now prepared and determined to destroy our republic, bleed its people, and then, once bled, more likely than not imprison them, or imprison at least those who are still actually alive, those who scream—or those who write.

The only thing that can prevent such loathsome and accursed things—along with the hateful, criminal, murderous, despicable events and undertakings that are *already* well under way—from being brought to completion once and for all is truth. As we've seen, there are very few examples of it around us these days. And even fewer practitioners *of* it.

That's why the arts—not Frank Rich, not Dwight Garner, not Rebecca Solnit, not Bill DeLillo, not Don Gray, but the *arts*—are so fundamentally, radically, profoundly important: Because that's what the arts are *for*, to show, portray, tell, manifest, or be made up of the truth. That's the *only* thing the arts are for. Any "arts" that *fail* to be constituted in this way or *fail* to exist for the purpose of being, showing, manifesting, consisting of, or revealing truth—any "arts" failing in these ways are, in a word, phony, they're phony art. In fact, they're beyond phony. They're beyond despicable. Often, especially these days, they're traitorous as well. Nowadays, though, the failed kind is just about the only kind we've got.



So. If art really does exist to tell the truth in a way that's *also* true—well, the question will come up, the truth about *what?* The answer is this: The truth about the condition and nature of life *and* the condition and nature of our existence *in* it. Life, of course, includes *every aspect and element* of life.¹³ This entirety—life and our existence inside it—provides and constitutes the subject, content, purpose, and form of all art.

¹² For more on this, see the "Interview with Myself" that's [on my web site](#).

¹³

Q: What truth? The truth about what?

That's what the arts are for. That's the *only* thing they're for.

The arts can't lie and be true. The arts can't be incomplete and be true—this means *all* arts, and *all* writing, *every* verbal and literary art, from Rich to Garner to Solnit to DeLillo to Birkerts to Butler to Friedman to Toni Morrison to [A. Stephen Engel](#).

Having come this far, it's much easier to see the real source of the cancer in Frank Rich's "[The Clear Blue Sky](#)" and to see the real source of the cancer in DeLillo's *Falling Man*.

The chief task of the arts is not "to alter the inner life of the culture." The arts, after all, are themselves a *part* of that very "inner life." And their chief task—a task that, in any healthy culture, constitutes the highest of callings—is to tell, show, manifest, or reveal the truth, first, the truth about the nature *of* that life, and the truth, second, of the nature of our existence *inside* it.

Art becomes propaganda the instant it conceives of itself as a *separate thing* from the life, or inner life, that it's a *part* of and can *only be* a part of. Bill Gray becomes a bully and a thug the instant he conceives of himself as one upon whom it's incumbent in the first place to "alter" the "inner life of the culture" or of anything else—just as every single writer becomes a bully and a thug, driven by ego and agenda, the instant he or she conceives of himself or herself as one upon whom it's incumbent, by means of novels, or of any other literary form, to "alter" the "inner life of the culture."

If you don't wholly, or quite, follow my meaning, try a word-substitution or two. Take that phrase I just used, "by means of novels," and substitute other words in place of "novels." Look at what you get:

the instant he or she conceives of himself or herself as one upon whom it's incumbent, by means of arguments, to "alter" the "inner life of the culture."

or

the instant he or she conceives of himself or herself as one upon whom it's incumbent, by means of knives, to "alter" the "inner life of the culture."

A: Well, about existence, of course. About the nature of existence and of being alive *in* existence, which is the only subject there is for any art, ever. I mean, art doesn't have to be high, ponderous, or philosophical, doesn't have to be *The Magic Mountain*, say, or *The Death of Virgil*, though it certainly can be. It might take up only a tiny little piece of the one subject that nourishes all art—something akin to the glittery-eyed fox fur in "Miss Brill" or the lump of clay in James Joyce's story by that same title, "Clay." But if it's going to be art, if it's going to be literature, you can bet your boots that that's what it's got to be about, the fact of our existing, and the nature of our existing within existence. And it's got to tell the truth about that and do so in a *way* that's true. And both of those stories do exactly so, you can bet your boots again.

Q: Tall order, that definition of writing.

A: It's been done for centuries. It's been done for millennia.

Q: And today writing doesn't do that?

A: Writing today *can't* do it. It can't do it unless writers somehow become able, a thing I increasingly despair of, become able to regain control of their own true authentic selves and therefore their own true authority as individuals. (Read more from this self-interview [here](#).)

or

the instant he or she conceives of himself or herself as one upon whom it's incumbent, by means of bombs, to "alter" the "inner life of the culture."

or

the instant he or she conceives of himself or herself as one upon whom it's incumbent, by means of terrorism, to "alter" the "inner life of the culture."

Many, I know—very possibly most—will pooh-pooh the very idea that, within the bounds of reason, "by means of novels" can be declared comparable to "by means of knives" or "by means of bombs" or "by means of terrorism."

Maybe not. I'll grant that I'd rather be "noveled" than knifed, bombed, or terrorized. On the other hand, if the phrase—as it must be—is expanded to "noveled to death," then the preferability of it over being knifed or bombed into the same state diminishes. Conceivably, the preferability disappears. Death is death. Also, spiritual death is spiritual death.

It's crucial to keep in mind what our real subject is. And, while that subject *is* death, it's not yet necessarily *physical* death that we're talking about, however soon that may become the case.¹⁴ For the moment, however, the subject is the death of conscience, the death of wholeness, the death of perceptiveness, and, corollary to all those, the death of art, truth, intellectual dignity, of the self, politics, freedom, liberty, of the republic; of America; and, if things continue unchecked in the direction they're now going, perhaps far more than only these.

When a culture collapses and proceeds to die, those living inside it may be among the least aware of what is happening. What people have become used to tends to be taken by them as "normal"¹⁵—thanks in part to "tyrant custom"¹⁶ or simply to habit, the "great deadener."¹⁷

¹⁴ And it has *already*, of course, become the subject of literal death for all those who died unnecessarily in Katrina, or on 9/11, or in Iraq, in Afghanistan, in Somalia, in Pakistan, and in Gaza—*so far*. And it's important to stay current with the potential for more deaths as suggested by news pieces like [this one](#) and [this one](#).

¹⁵ "Non-empiricism is after all a form of blindness: there are certain things that, except through empiricism, can't be shown and thus can't be seen. Nor can they, therefore, be contested. A government that is non-empiricist will revert to, or, by definition *be*, a tyranny. A *people* that is non-empiricist will be governable only by appeal to desire, by appeal to the voluptuary or sensate, not by appeal to *idea*."

"In the United States today, we have both a non-empiricist government and a non-empiricist population. The situation, as Lewis Lapham put it, 'doesn't hold out much promise for the American future.' In the absence of essential change, stability can't be relied on for much longer, certainly not stability in any remaining context of liberty or freedom. As for revolt, it may no longer be possible for it ever to come. It *certainly* won't come in the immediate future, since most things still *look* normal. Most things still *look* regular and familiar. Things don't look unreal, so nothing's alarming.

"And that's *really* alarming." (*A Nation Gone Blind*)

Habit—and six decades of powerful media persuasiveness encouraging people *to follow* habit—has led Americans to “believe” that elections are still honest and fair, that a President would never lie openly in order to begin a transparently illegal invasion abroad, that failure to bring relief to a major city struck by massive disaster could not conceivably be a failure by design but only by “ineptitude,” that all vaccines are “good”¹⁸ for you, that national and international health organizations have the interests of the people at heart,¹⁹ and that doctors and physicians, just like the *New York Times*, are to be trusted.²⁰ Habit led Americans to take as meaningful and “true” every glib phrase and empty platitude about “change” uttered by Obama throughout his campaign, even though *he himself* contradicted virtually everything he also claimed true.²¹

No news there, some may say—Americans have always been gullible, dumb, and behind the curve. Yes and no. Americans haven’t *always* had television. Americans haven’t *always* been non-readers to the extent they are now. Americans haven’t *always* been as isolated from social and community institutions, meeting places, forums, and cultural places and events [as they are now](#).

And, importantly, those relatively few Americans who *do* still read have never been *so poor at it* as they’ve come to be now. And ditto for their writing. Poor at reading, poor at writing: Enormous audiences are pathetically unequipped—partly from their habitual reluctance *to become equipped*, and partly from their *inability* to do so—to detect the lies both of omission and commission, the half-truths posing as whole ones, the ugly meanness and parochialism posing as the informed and fashionable, or to see for what they are the pure manglings and torturings of human feeling, common sense, morality, and simple truth when they’re transmuted into the ugly, [meretricious, vile, and propagandistic](#).

The arts, literature, intellectual wholeness, and with them political strength *inside* individuals, hence the individual ability to see the difference between smart and dumb, true and fake, real and unreal—all of these are weakened and to a great extent lost, leaving every single person who lacks them defenseless and exposed, helpless or even the happy victim equally of fraud, folly, falsehood, and lies.

What in the name of all heaven’s saints do Frank Rich and Don DeLillo mean when they put together, between them, a sentence like this one:

An event like 9/11 cannot be bent to “the mercies of analogy or simile.”

¹⁶ “The tyrant custom, most grave senators / Hath made the flinty and steel couch of war / My thrice-driven bed of down” (*Othello*, I, iii).

¹⁷ “But habit is a great deadener,” *Waiting for Godot*, Act II.

¹⁸ See [here](#).

¹⁹ See [here](#).

²⁰ See [here](#).

²¹ See Webster S. Tarpley, [Barack H. Obama: The Unauthorized Biography](#).

The stuff inside quotes is DeLillo's, the stuff outside is Rich's. What on earth does it mean that something can't be "bent" to analogy or simile? What does that metaphor of blacksmithing or ironworking *say* about Rich's assumptions regarding, first, the purposes and the uses and the *nature* of figures of speech; and, second, regarding the nature of those figures of speech in their relation to what—no matter *what* Rich cutely says or implies—can *still* be called *external reality*; and, third, regarding the work, role, and method of the artist in relation to those figures of speech, in relation to external reality, and in relation to the joining of the two?

Bent? Mercies? What are they *talking* about? Does "bent" mean that external reality is or must be falsified or changed in order for it to be expressed through figures of speech? On the other hand, does "mercies" mean that figures of speech do something *nice* to external reality—another way of suggesting that the external reality is to be *changed* by being expressed in figurative language?

These men, as we've already seen, are both grossly deceived in their apparent understanding of what the writing of narrative is, how it comes into being, and what it's traditionally and properly, in a *literary or artistic* way, intended for. We've seen already that what Rich and DeLillo seem like is "reality bullies." One of them wants to "bend" reality, the other apparently wants to bequeath "mercy" upon it, while at the *same* time he wants to use it as a tool that will force things—including "inner life"—to be *different* from before.

If that's not *bullying* reality, I don't know the meanings of those two words, "bullying" and "reality."

How much one wishes that these two were both more widely read, that they were both more sensitively and widely *educated*, that they both *knew more* about their own culture and its history, that they were more greatly experienced in the past and less reliant upon their experiences in and of the already-tawdry, falsified, meretricious simplifications of our present time.

How much would be gained if their understandings of art and narrative were drawn from sources more deeply seasoned by human thought, more threaded by consciousness of the past and of the arts of the past than can be provided to them by, say, comic books and television. Where else does big Bill Gray come from? The "bending" of reality to narrative? The use of art as a "tool" to "alter" a culture's "inner life"—something like putting art to its requisite uses under the likes of Hitler or Stalin.

How grateful all of us might be if DeLillo and Rich—let the classics go, let the middle ages go, let the Renaissance go, let Romanticism go—had merely read, and remembered, more Conrad, or more Ford Madox Ford, or more Virginia Woolf, these writers who showed the moderns (that is, until the moderns forgot it, started watching television, and themselves fell into being simple-minded reality-bullies) that the arts are powerful precisely because they show reality in *ways that are true to it* but in ways also that will allow people—who may never have seen or understood this before—*what reality really*

is. After *that* kind of experience, people can and will awaken, change, look more fully at their world, be inquisitive, become more independent. After being reality-bullied, on the other hand, people simply feel hopeless, or emptied, or drained—or bitterly, or sadly, or numbly compliant to the false-real they’ve been caused to “consume” and thus accept as the best they can get.

Propaganda is loathsome; art *cannot* be loathsome, no matter how “shocking” or “ugly” it *may* be. Ford Madox Ford famously wrote that he and Joseph Conrad “considered a novel to be a rendering of an affair.” It was a rendering, Ford went on,

of one embroilment, one set of embarrassments, one human coil, one psychological progression. From this the novel got its unity. No doubt it might have its caesura—or even several; but. . . the whole novel was to be an exhaustion of aspects, was to proceed to one culmination, to reveal once and for all, in the last sentence—or the penultimate—in the last phrase, or the one before it, the psychological significance of the whole.

It doesn’t “bend” that human significance, and it doesn’t give it “mercy” and it doesn’t “alter” it. Instead, it *shows* it, *reveals* it. A few sentences further on, even more famously, Ford wrote this:

For, in the end, Conrad and I found salvation not in any machined form, but in the sheer attempt to reproduce life as it presents itself to the intelligent observer. *I daresay, if we could only perceive it, life has a pattern.*²²

The emphasis is mine, to draw attention to Ford’s idea—to the profound simplicity of this one single aesthetic idea, or art-idea, the concept, and the one concept alone, that gives power and meaning and perdurability to art—all art—by merit of its being an idea, concept, or even an *act* that combines into *one* the *material* of an art and the *material* of external reality; and that combines these two things in such a way that a previously unseen or unfelt truth *about* external reality, or *about* the capabilities of the art’s material—or *about both*—will be made perceptible.

How far is *that* from the undertakings of reality-bullies, or the undertakings of liars, cover-up artists, or propagandists?

I’m sorry, but we’ve got to look yet again at some of the same Rich-DeLillo conjurings that we’ve seen already but haven’t seen as deeply as we can now. Everyone will remember “An event like 9/11 cannot be bent to ‘the mercies of analogy or simile.’” But here’s the sentence that follows it, again with what’s inside the quotes coming from DeLillo, what’s outside from Rich. Look closely at what’s being said. You can do this by looking for the *bully-verb*:

Primal terror—“the cellphones, the lost shoes, the handkerchiefs mashed in the faces of running men and women”—has to take precedence over politics, history and religion.

²² Ford Madox Ford, *Return to Yesterday* (Liveright, 1932), pp. 203-204 (Liveright Paperbound Edition 1972).

I'm sure you saw it right away. And, may I ask, just *why* is it, Mr. Rich, that “primal terror” *has* (bully-verb) “to take precedence over politics, history and religion”? Those first two are *your* words, “primal terror.” But what you follow them with—DeLillo’s words—scarcely justifies your choice. “[The] cellphones, the lost shoes, the handkerchiefs mashed in the faces of running men and women”—do you mean also that we “*have*” to accept these details as “primal terror”? You’re quite, quite wrong. What you’ve provided is simply a list of three details of external reality. Now you’re saying that we “*have*” to accept them as “primal terror,” which in simple fact they’re *not*. What *are* they? They’re three details of external reality, and *you’re* insisting that they be taken as something else than that. No, you’re a bully-writer, and this is a classic example of bully-writing. You set out not to convey external reality. Nor do you set out to reveal something previously unseen in external reality. No, *you* set out to weave something *into* external reality that *isn’t really there*. And then you say that we *have* to believe you, and you play dirty tricks, tell lies, and twist arms to “make” us do it.

Why? Why would you or any other writer wittingly *do* such things? And look at the shameless extremes you go to in your dictatorial *making* of us see things in external reality that aren’t there—look at everything that, according to you, we *have* to ignore, everything we *have* to give up in order to follow your notion of what’s *in* this external reality:

Primal terror—“the cellphones, the lost shoes, the handkerchiefs mashed in the faces of running men and women”—has to take precedence over politics, history and religion.

Quite a lot of external reality, isn’t it, that you say we’ve “got” to ignore. We’ve *got* to ignore politics. We’ve *got* to ignore history. We’ve *got* to ignore religion.

“Ignore” means remain ignorant of. Pretty quickly, at the pace you set, we’ll achieve a degree of ignorance that’s positively American! We’ll be right there in league with you yourself, for example, or maybe even with Rebecca Solnit, Thomas Friedman, and Dwight Garner.

Perhaps we can get jobs at the *Times*. Just look at you, Mr. *Times*man. You seem to know even less about 9/11 than anybody with his or her own *eyes*. Let me address not you, any longer, but my own readers. Let me give you, *my* readers, another sentence from Frank Rich’s breathless and idolatrous piece about DeLillo’s lazy, inane, and ignorant novel. I’ll propose a quiz, pass or fail. In this sentence about things that happen in the novel, find a single word showing that the writer of the sentence either *has no eyes* of his own or has *never used them* in looking at the external reality of 9/11. Whether he hasn’t got them or has never used them doesn’t really matter very much, since the result is the same. The sentence:

Keith, a lawyer nearing 40, narrowly makes it out of one of the buckling towers, then turns up, “all blood and slag” and with “a gaze that had no focus in it,” at the door of the wife, Lianne, from whom he has long been separated.

And yet again you got it in a trice. You're very, very good. Now, take a good long look [at this website](#) and see if you can find *any* justification whatsoever for using the word "buckling" in describing how any of the three towers fell. Then go to this one next, called "[Some of the principal data that must be explained](#)" if the collapse of the three buildings is to be understood correctly. Here, too, just keep on looking.

If we were in freshman English, and if Frank Rich had submitted his "review" as an assignment in such a class, the instructor would have marked "WW" in the margin and drawn a circle around Rich's word "buckling." In case you don't remember, "WW" means "wrong word."

But what do you do in a case so much bigger, so much more powerful, significant, and important—not to mention criminal, heinous, and treasonous—than merely another routine essay in freshman English?

What's the mark for *this* "wrong word," for the word "buckling" when no such thing as "buckling" ever took place?

Two points and we end. The first is a point that reveals merely fraudulence and two lies. The second is a point that reveals the degradation and corruption, the rot and sickening poison replacing all the goodness that may once have existed in the hearts and minds of those who lie and choose to bully external reality, whether they do so from blindness and ignorance on the one hand, or from malice, treason, self-interest, and deceit on the other.

Let's take the easy one first, the simple fraudulence and two lies.

Rich explains that DeLillo, in his novel, makes use of a

mysterious, fictional²³ performance artist who starts to pop up around New York after the attacks. Falling Man's shtick is to appear unannounced and terrify onlookers with daredevil headfirst falls that in the end are broken by a safety harness.

If I may insert a small particle of truth here, these "appearances" by "Falling Man" are in no way terrifying to anyone, certainly not the reader. They are, however, in every way banal, anti-climactic, and silly. But let it go; propaganda has certain requirements. About this "fictional" actor, Rich goes on to explain that

A New School panel discussion can't decide whether he's a "Heartless Exhibitionist or Brave New Chronicler of the Age of Terror," but in any case he touches the third rail of 9/11 taboos.

No, he doesn't. The so-called "third rail of 9/11 taboos" has nothing to do with dangling in safety harnesses here and there. No, the "third rail" has to do with one thing and one thing only: That is, with telling the truth, all of it, about 9/11. No way does either DeLillo or his inane little dangling man do *that*.

²³ Why on *earth* does Rich put in that wholly superfluous word "fictional"? Just asking. But, please, think about it. Think hard.

Rich, in fact, is so powerfully smitten with starry-eyed love for this pet little propaganda-novel he's discovered that he walks right onto an open trapdoor of his own making and doesn't even notice the fall he takes. He's already told us that a "New School panel"—would that be a "fictional" panel, do you suppose?—can't decide which of two equal falsehoods about the dangling guy is "true." Now he tells us, right after that bit about the "third rail," this:

In "Falling Man," as in life, no one wants to watch a re-enactment of the Associated Press photo of a man falling headfirst from the north tower—an image that was largely pulled from circulation after 9/12.

Interesting, isn't it. And *all wrong*. It makes me positively yearn for even a small bit of truth. How *cleansing* it would be, even a *small bit* of that wondrous thing.

The first hypocrisy and error lies in Rich's saying that "no one wants to watch a re-enactment of the Associated Press photo of a man falling headfirst," etc. He may be right in the "re-enactment" part (DeLillo's novel is tedious in the extreme), but he's absolutely dead wrong about the rest of it: *Everybody* wanted, and *wants*, to stare and stare and stare and stare at that photo, the one that Rich so professionally reminds us is, or was, an AP image. "Was"? Yes, "was." Rich remains deadpan, being not even *conscious* of his second hypocrisy and error, even though it both underscores his first hypocrisy and error and introduces his second. The photo might as well not even exist any more, since it was "largely pulled from circulation after 9/12."

The writer of propaganda, aimed to control minds, alludes obviously to the state apparatus that *also* controls minds by censorship either de jure or de facto, and alludes also to the state apparatus that controls its own assets and agents. Why, *really*, was that photo pulled? Well, it was *not* because "no one [wanted]" to look at it. No, Frank Rich is lying when he tells you that, or when he even hints it. The photo was pulled because the real 9/11 perpetrators were afraid of it. They were afraid that it might backfire on them, revealing plainly to everyone, by means of its pure and riveting horror, exactly how they'd gone just a *little bit too far in doing what they did* to all those people who died in the towers. After all, instead of pulling the image, why didn't they, the way they did with *so very many* other things and details and atrocities, simply use it to "prove" yet again how unmercifully hate-filled, how monstrous, how murderous and utterly cold-blooded the nineteen young jihadist hijackers really were, to *do* such a thing, with the backing and direction of their big bearded boss, in his Afghan cave, sneering and hissing?

But such a ploy couldn't be taken, not in this case. And that's because something about the image was truly shocking. Not even the real 9/11 perps wanted anything to do with it. It was too strong. *This* one could backfire if it were ever discovered that the Bush-Cheneys and their agents and generals had done such a thing as *this*.

The truth about this image is that it was *too real*. This image *really* told the truth. And it, therefore, [had itself to be covered up](#).

The photo disappeared because Frank Rich's bosses and his boss's bosses told him and every other flunky throughout all of the media in all of the nation, whether explicitly or implicitly, that it was up to them to disappear it. And, as usual, Frank Rich and all the other quislings across the entire face of our great nation of self-reliant and independent people did exactly as they were told.



And so we come to the end of this long journey we've taken together, with two questions left to answer. The first is this: How can it be that Americans have become *so* thoroughly *evil*? There are those among us who lie, and there are those—most Americans, I suppose—among us who turn their backs on the lies, leaving them alone, just going along as though the lies were truth. But lying destroys you, even if you're not the one *doing* it; turning your back on lies *also* destroys you. These two things together—lies and people's turning of their backs on lies—destroy entire nations, turning them evil first, as has happened to ours already, then bringing ruin to them, as is happening to ours now.

Just look at the madness. Don DeLillo, supposedly a literary man, is clearly *not* one and has been made crazy by turning his back on the lies, accepting them as truth. He is now working not for art, not for life, and not for truth, but he is working instead for our murderers.

Here's a place where it's revealed. We've already seen Frank Rich bullying us into accepting lies and, along with them, happily welcoming greater and greater degrees of ignorance ("Primal terror—'the cellphones, the lost shoes, the handkerchiefs mashed in the faces of running men and women'—*has to take precedence* over politics, history and religion").

But we haven't seen DeLillo, in the two sentences following that one, reveal to us, all unwittingly, the degree of his *own* state of insanity. Here are the two insanity-revealing sentences, with Frank Rich quoting DeLillo from *Harper's*:

"There is something empty in the sky," he wrote. "The writer tries to give memory, tenderness and meaning to all that howling space."

DeLillo still thinks, as he may have all his life, that the writer's job is to alter external reality (or psychological reality) rather than to explore and reveal it. Dangerous stuff. He doesn't *seem* dangerous, of course, since what he wants to "give" to reality are things that *sound* nice ("memory, tenderness and meaning"). The truth is that they may or may not be nice. But let it go, and look instead at what it is that he wants to change so that it *will* be nice: He wants to change emptiness ("something empty in the sky"), I *guess* so that it won't be empty any more; and he wants to change something else that sounds truly, truly dreadful ("all that howling space") so that *it* will be—well, nice, *too*.

And what exactly are those things that he wants to change, the empty thing and the howling thing? Well, in the context of his novel, and of his *Harper's* piece, and of Rich's

review of his novel, it's perfectly clear that those things are 9/11. So what he wants to do is make 9/11 *nice*. He wants to give 9/11 tenderness, meaning, and memory.

He wants to propagandize, just like Rich, and *that* means, with his stupid tenderness and "meaning," that he's covering up the truth, protecting the real perpetrators and murderers, and that he's ignorantly doing *their* most devoutly wished-for bidding. He's working for Satan himself. No *wonder* Frank Rich thinks he's the greatest thing since zippers.

But they're crazy as loons, both of them. Near the end of his review, Rich writes that "Keith must descend back into the hell of 9/11 if DeLillo is to provide the counternarrative to terrorism he promised," whatever in hell this "counternarrative" actually *is* that they both seem to understand so perfectly. Anyway, DeLillo promised it, and so he's "got" (god knows why) to give his readers the really, really juicy stuff, namely, a guided (whoopie!) tour back into a soon-to-collapse tower. *Goodie! Goodie! Maybe we'll see it happen all over again! Oh, wow!*

This "counternarrative," explains Dr. Rich, is

the story that takes us beyond the hard, anonymous numbers of the dead to retrieve what [DeLillo] called in Harper's "human beauty in the crush of meshed steel."

"Human beauty in the crush of meshed steel." Contemptible. Insane. And disgusting. Absolutely disgusting.

10

The remaining question is the one I began this series of essays in order to answer: "Can the literary life exist in a post-1984 nation?"

Or that I began this series of essays in order to *try* to answer.

It's not looking very good, is it. A nation composed entirely of liars on the one hand and, on the other, of the self-deluded who either believe the lies or accept them in an ever-expanding and endlessly adaptable ignorance—such a nation will never have a literature. How could it? None of the writers we've met in this essay would ever conceivably be able to provide even the barest rudiments of a literature. As for the "literary life," well, all that means is "literary person," isn't it? Same answer. So long as anyone is either lying to others or lying to him- or herself about the full and actual nature of the external reality they live within, such a person can't possibly be literary. Sure, they can write poems, stories, and novels—but those will be (as most are already) empty ones, shells, imitations of pieces that once may have been written for *real*, but these copies will be nothing more than copies, lacking the wholeness, the purpose, and the aesthetic drive of the originals. *These* won't be aesthetically meaningful, nor will they be aesthetically complete, and *these* won't be intellectually meaningful, nor will they be intellectually complete, since not only will they be imitations but they'll furthermore be born out of a false-world, or at best a half-world, with half-emotions, half-knowledge, half-feelings—a distant cry from

Marilynne Robinson's true and indispensable notion that the readiness for art comes only "when the imagination seems to be *as alert as possible to everything that can be understood out of a moment or situation.*" Ignorance, self-delusion, and a life's diet of falsehood are no recipe for this kind of wholeness and completeness.

As far as the nation's present path indicates, if we continue on it as we are now, we're destined to become a nation only more and more ignorant, more and more empty, more and more insane. All of these developments are well advanced already, the spread and growth of ignorance, emptiness, and insanity. I know of no *public* literary figure of an eminence sufficient to make him or her generally recognizable who is doing anything whatsoever to prevent or slow our descent into an empty and ignorant madness. On the other hand, I know many—a great, great many indeed—literary, near-literary, or semi-literary figures, who are doing everything possible, some wittingly and others not, to accelerate that same descent. These extend from the DeLillos and Riches on through the tribes of Philip Roths and Dwight Garners, further through the millions of soulless and ignorant academics, on to publishers and editors of every sort, from Robert Silvers and Sam Tanenhaus through, shall we say, Matthew Rothschild, Jonathan Galassi, Jacob Weisberg, going from these and their like to the thousands of others, including librarians, publishers, professors, agents, booksellers, journalists, reviewers.

The literary establishment, in this way parallel to the political establishment, has become the enemy of literature itself, and certainly the enemy of what I've been calling the literary life. Those dwelling in this establishment destroy what's alive and then live off its ashes, doing their best to deceive everyone (and very likely also themselves) into believing that the ashes are honeysuckle, brightness, and morning dew. But the whole enterprise is built out of nothing other than lies: Lies driving ever more people ever more deeply into mediocrity and ignorance and hopeless insanity.

I've decided that the world of these establishments as they have come to exist now in this country—establishments literary, political, and intellectual—are capable of nothing other than the destruction of those who may attempt to work within them—whether in an effort to oppose them, or to improve them, or to gain from them, or simply in the desperate effort to find *some* affirmative means of addressing, enhancing, protecting, and enriching life.

All such efforts are doomed if one either chooses or tries to work from within these establishments. They have grown increasingly into death-machines. As The Manager of The CityPlex comments in A. Stephen Engel's *Topiary—A Novel*, "The CityPlex is a slaughter house of entertainment." And so it is. So are all of our corporatized "establishments." Nothing is left to do—at least for the time being—except to escape from them if at all possible and seek out small patches and areas of life, unnoticed places on the north sides of hills or in anonymous back bedrooms in distant cities and towns where *something* real has survived, however small, something still authentic, complete, thoughtful, and whole that the establishments haven't yet found, bled, trampled, and killed.

Instead of surrendering, therefore, instead of capitulating to this universe of lies, madness, profits, and deceit that I have been describing in this essay, I have decided to hold out, insofar as possible, by turning to the secret rear-guard activity of searching for bits of life that the great-booted thunderers, hypocrites, and destroyers haven't yet succeeded in eliminating.

In my case, it's literary life that I'm after. I'm in search of pieces of work that have the truth in them up to the bursting point, that are themselves *made out of* the truth, that are unique in having found a way to combine themselves *with the truth* to the detriment of neither the truth nor the art and to the enhanced and revelatory capacity of both. Such works as these are few. Quite often they are either hidden or actually *in* hiding, and usually they are quiet. But they're well worth looking for.

Without them we won't survive. Not a chance.

I will close by giving an example of one of them.

—[Eric Larsen](#)

—November 16, 2009



From Section Ten of
[*Topiary—A Novel*](#)

“THE POSSESSED”

The Possessed Man is not a bad man, nor a good one. He is terrified. Alone among friends and family, he “works” to support his family, but is not exactly sure of what he does. He “administrates creative product strategies,” according to the Job Description on file at Human Resources.

The Health Insurance covers his wife and two kids, both under seven years of age and subject to all manner of illness and disease. Then there were the pregnancies themselves (reproduction is not cheap), and the drugs he must take daily to function at his job without drinking to black-out, or veering to violence, or bursting into tears. He's covered by the company plan, but loopholes open and money falls through. Deductibles. Co-payments.

He is no longer interested in his friends, the few that he has left, or in having friends at all. What good are they, except to drink with, and he's not supposed to drink while on his pills—though he does anyway. And don't think this is all confidential, that ‘they’ don't know, the ‘they’ at the company, whoever they might be, that he sees a head-drugger to stay on top of things.

He's thirty-nine and still paying student loans.

Graduate program at the University. MBA. Had to do it. Or else how would he have climbed to even his middling position on the ladder? He's reached his final rung. He knows he hasn't

the energy to kill, the will that would enable him to climb further. In fact, the remaining energies of his life will be directed toward hanging on to the rung he's reached. To remaining at his place on the limitless ladder to the sky. He can barely see the people at the bottom, but he would need quite a powerful telescope indeed to even glimpse the stars at the top.

The kids must go to college. His wife, also a mediocrity, but in a different capacity at a different firm, a different profession, will grow stronger, as women tend to after fifty, after the sex and procreation, after the body, just when he is starting to collapse. Rapid rise from twenty to forty, slow descent, then at fifty the cascading tumble. Unless you're at the top of the ladder, in which case fifty is not fifty, due to special treatments, physical training, private cooks, drugs, vitamins and surgeries. . . . He's reached the end of something, he knows, but he has the responsibility to see things through, at least until the kids are out of school. But of course college won't be enough. It wasn't for him. He needed a Masters. His kids will need PhD s.

He worries that somehow The System will fail him. It has not failed him to this point, merely placed him at his rightful place in the hierarchy. But he fears that the system, based on protocols, laws, unwritten rules, tacit agreements among powerful entities, and technologies that he can never hope to understand, will collapse of its own weight and intricacy. He does not understand how the Network works, or how food gets to the supermarkets, or how the parent company trickles his paycheck down the many holding companies and through his department and into his bank account. He does not understand the high level of partnership between the bank and the corporation it owns, which is the parent of the company he works for, and where he will spend his days before being traded or shuffled off in some arcane corporate deal or merger, or is fired outright. Laid off. Terminated. Gone. And then what? Sending out resumes as he'd done as a kid fresh out of college and as a young married man with his expensive MBA?

He fears limited resources, so he does not read the hard copy of The City News, but browses the paper's site on The Network. But when does he have time to read this, working nine to five as he does, which is not nine to five at all, but eight to six, seven, sometimes ten o'clock? By which point he is exhausted, despite his clockwork consumption of caffeine and nicotine.

And when he does call up the news from The Network sites, he realizes how small he and his life are, even in the context of the corporation, not to mention the role of the parent company in international affairs. Good god. The corporation is everywhere, in nearly every country. Many of these countries are at war with each other, and if the corporation's interests are seriously threatened, might go to war with The Nation.

But The Nation is already at war. He is glad that The Nation possesses the most well-trained, technologically advanced military force on the planet. He had not gone to the last war, for he was in graduate school. But the current war terrifies him, the destruction The Nation wreaks upon its challenger with missiles paid for with his tax money. He has been extremely nervous since the current war began. But he does not doubt that after the slaughter the Citizens will be treated to parades and celebrations on television and he will watch flag-waving marchers outside his office window.

He is neither angry nor satisfied with the affairs of The Nation any more than he is or could be with the machinations of The Company. It is all beyond his grasp. He is, if not happy,

grateful to be able to rise each morning, take his pills, and begin the commute to his job and arrive at his job, no matter how demanding. No matter how trivial. No matter how wasteful of his time on earth. The countless meetings, the talk talk talk. The assignments from his superiors that he organizes and delegates to his subordinates. Often he finds himself with nothing to do, no actual work, but virtual work, deadlines planned for the future, the possibility of truckloads of data hanging over his head. So he spends many hours—those not spent attending meetings—creating plans and memos and scenarios for the monstrous jobs, the impossible tasks to come.

He finds his wife attractive. They go to the gym. He forces himself to “pump iron,” not to postpone the inevitable descent, but to make the landing smoother. He’s seen many a man crash. But he doesn’t have the energy for his wife that he once had. Maybe once a week, if that. And of course she has her career too, and they are both busy with the children.

He feels, given the uncertainty of the world, that he should own a gun, at least a rifle. The Police exist to protect his property, not his family—anyway, they are always there when you need them, but seldom here where they could save your life, if so inclined. But he is confused by The City’s Byzantine gun laws, and he is not comfortable letting The Government know he has a weapon. Should The Government turn for the worse, the gun owners in The Database will be the first ones visited by police. But he fears being caught with an illegal weapon, a mandatory jail term, and the end of his career and all he’d striven for. Only those outside The System can flourish unregistered weapons with impunity.

Truly, he would rather be dead. He might live another forty years. Forty years of this. Maybe fifty. Another reason to own a gun. He can think of no better way to exit. Effective drugs are as illegal as guns, and the medications the head-drugger prescribes won’t kill him. Worse, they might put him to sleep, and he’d be caught holding the bag—or pill bottle—trying to escape, a Federal crime. He worked too hard for too long to lose it that way. If he must exit this earth, he will buy a gun. On the black market. What and wherever that is. If he makes the decision, it will not matter that his corpse is found holding an illegal weapon. Then again, if he gets caught in the act, before pulling the trigger, or chickens out, they will send him to an institution. Again, that would ruin him.

Of course, this is all hypothetical. Daydream talk. He has a deep responsibility to his family. His children. His is the kind of ethic that was instilled in his subconscious forcefully, frequently, and early on. It is so part of his psyche that he cannot even attempt to fathom it. Just accept it, passively, silently, albeit reluctantly.

Nevertheless, he does think critically about his children. He wonders aloud—to himself, of course—if he actually loves his children. His own childhood seems both distant and parallel. That is, he often feels mired in his own childhood and resents the adult, paternal role he must play. Also, he feels sorry for his children and fears for them. He does not understand the structure of the world outside his home and office cubicle, but he believes it is heading for a fall, collapse, chaos. What then? What of his children? What right had he and his wife to yank them from the peace of Cosmic Nothingness and thrust them into Time and Consciousness against their will?