

AN INTERVIEW  
with  
Eric Larsen  
On the occasion of the  
Publication of  
*A Nation Gone Blind*  
(2006)

Q: You're a literary person, with two novels, many articles, innumerable book reviews to your credit, not to mention over 35 years as an instructor and professor of literature and writing. Yet what you've written is a political book. Or it seems so. Which is it, a literary book or a political one?

A: Well, it's a book about the present life of our nation, but about that life as seen by a literary person.

Q: So it's also both personal and political?

A: Yes, I think so. I once actually called it an intellectual autobiography, though that may be stretching the notion. But it's completely true that the book is in fact about my own intellectual education, from college on, but mostly in college, and what that education has led or allowed me to observe in the political and literary culture over the past forty years.

Q: And what have you observed?

A: Awful things, really. The middle chapter of the three in the book is called "The Death of Literary Thinking in America," and that suggests one thing I've seen, which is the growing anemia and then collapse of our literary culture—perhaps above all, the collapse of academic humanities. The chapter before that is called "Watching America Go Blind." It shows how fifty or more years of consumerism and the influence of the mass media have literally blinded Americans—including writers, artists, and intellectuals—to much of what's real. These are all inter-related developments, but, even so, the worst comes last, in a chapter with a very long title: "Consumerism,

Victimology, and the Disappearance of the Meaningful Self.” The loss of that self is what has led to the worst loss of all. Setting aside the debate over whether it’s occurred yet or not, that one is the loss of our free democratic republic.

Q: The loss of it to what?

A: To tyranny, which is the only thing that *can* replace freedom, or the only thing that *can* replace a free state. You can call it almost what you will—police state, fascist state, corporate state. Or you could hearken back to General Eisenhower and just rename America the Military-Industrial Complex.

Q: These are enormous subjects. In fact, massive, especially the last one. It’s hardly something many people would be readily willing to entertain, let alone agree with. What kind of evidence do you have to support the truth of these things you’ve seen, including the loss of the free republic?

A: Well, that’s where the book really is personal, I think, an intellectual autobiography, as I said, or certainly a book written by a writer—somebody who’s spent forty years watching literary writing—art writing—grow steadily more simple and thin. Forty years is a long time, and that’s about the length of time I myself have been writing, and following writing, and about the length of time I’ve spent in the classroom, where a person also does a lot of watching and looking. And the pattern I’ve seen over these decades has been invariably toward the more simple, passive, and shallow—in the arts, in people, and in politics. Of course, all three of those are in many ways the same. At one point in the book when I’m talking about these changes, I have a sentence that goes “The evidence of it is everywhere, while the *results* of it are everywhere denied.” So my “evidence” comes from decades of personal experience and observation.

Q: Well, couldn’t almost anyone, then, make the same arguments or reach your same conclusions?

A: They certainly could, and I devoutly wish they would. But almost none do. Thomas de Zengotita has done it in a brilliant book called *Mediated*, about people’s actual individual selves having been stolen away or transformed by the media. Our arguments use different terms and metaphors but are parallel. Mine is called “A Nation Gone Blind” because the question, literally, is whether people can see what’s true or can see only what’s been media-pre-fabricated for them, and whether they can therefore think clearly any more or not. My own conclusion is that they can’t. With all the awful consequences I’ve mentioned.

Q: Yes, those awful consequences. That is, if they’re real. Early in chapter one, you make an incredibly strong statement about the mass media’s influence on America over the past sixty or so years. You choose 1947 as a starting date, right?

A: Yes, 1947. For reasons partly personal, partly political, and partly historical. I was six years old that year and starting to see, observe, and remember things. It was also around the time when television began its first huge, exponential growth. And it was the year when the National Security Council was created, with the result that corporate interests were no longer related to the interests of the federal government only indirectly, as they always had been, but directly. It was an institutional change that in effect brought corporate and governmental interests into a single structural unit. An invitation of the fox into the hen house, I call it. I think everyone—everyone in the whole nation—ought to see Eugene Jarecki’s extraordinary movie—Why We Fight—on the subject. On the subject, that is, of corporate drive for profit, since 1947 or so, having become the actual fuel that invariably causes and drives American wars.

A: Another huge idea. Do you want to say a bit more about it before we go on?

Q: No. I’d rather talk about the book. But I’ll note just in passing that this change dating from 1947 is what brought about Eisenhower’s “military-industrial complex” warning in 1961. He was talking about a phenomenon that had what you might call its grand opening in 1947. Gore Vidal is the man to read on the subject. But, no, I want to talk about my book. Not what started in 1947, but what’s happened as a result.

A: Okay. Back to your incredibly strong statement about the mass media’s cultural influence over sixty years. Here’s what you write, talking about the difference between pre-1947 America and post-1947 America: “The sixty years that have brought us the new America have brought us also a virtually perfected socio-political culture of lies and lying, a culture built on a foundation of lying, framed by walls of lying, covered by a roof of lying.” Another huge statement. Do you really believe it?

A: If only I could say no. But yes, I do believe it, literally. I can’t escape believing it. I see evidence of it everywhere around me, in everything from speech patterns and clothing styles to literature and the arts and the collapse of the humanities in academia. I wrote the book because I believe it. That’s what the book is about.

Q: And it’s the mass media’s fault?

A: Yes, it’s the mass media’s fault. Though it’s a little more complex than just that. After all, the mass media serve corporate interest, and corporate interest serves government interest, so nobody would want to say the fault lies just with guys who work, say, in television, or just with ad agencies, or just with members of congress, or just with corporate executives. But the mouthpiece, or the true controlling hand, of this whole enormous “complex”—to use Eisenhower’s word again—the thing that most immediately and directly and powerfully—and incessantly—influences what people see and how they think and even feel, well, that’s the mass media.

Q: And the trouble with that is?

A: The trouble with that is a little bit like the old Ivory soap slogan, that Ivory soap was ninety-nine and ninety-nine one-hundredths percent pure. The trouble with the mass media is that what it produces, purveys, and what it permeates the entire culture with is ninety-nine and ninety-nine one-hundredths percent impure. Ninety-nine and ninety-nine one-hundredths percent lies.

Q: Another mega-massive assertion.

A: It is, but a true one. And one that's been written about for decades and often very brilliantly—by the late Neil Postman, for just one example—but without helpful effect, the opposing powers being so monolithically great. Still, in regard to the assertion. Lies can be lies either of commission or omission. And the mass media—because their purpose is to serve corporate interest, almost entirely by conditioning people to serve corporate interest—since that's their purpose, they seldom tell the truth, and certainly not the whole truth. Above all, their portrayal of life in all its elements and from all its angles is far more simple than the actuality. And the huge trouble with this kind of lying, this kind of programmatic simplification, of leaving out all that's important or complex or all that in any way is touched by dialectic or achieves any kind of significant meaning—leaving out everything that would possibly raise the media's content above the level of simple, pure, incessant entertainment that's intended to discourage rather than encourage any form or degree of thinking at all: the trouble with all this is that the result, the phenomenon itself, has now so thoroughly permeated the culture that, if we were fish, it would be the very water we swim in. That is, the atmosphere, the look and feel, the ever-contentless content, what I call the aesthetic of the mass media, this has become what people consider real, and it has thus become the means by which they perceive the nature of life.

Q: Impossible.

A: I wish it were. Read de Zengotita. My own approach, again, is more personal than his, since it's a history of cultural changes I've seen myself, a history showing how the education I got back in the late 1950s and early 1960s—a liberal arts education and a literary one—how that education prepared me to be able to see things in a way that I don't think people are able to do anymore—at all.

Q: What did that education give you?

A: It gave me a powerful love of and respect for the true, an equally powerful detestation of the false, and the ability to tell the difference between the two. A little bit like the serenity prayer Vonnegut refers to in *Slaughterhouse Five*.

Q: The true and the false in what?

A: Well, first in words, language, metaphor, poems, stories, then in emotions—Shakespeare, Henry James, George Eliot, even Homer, are all about true and false emotion—and then after that the true and false in ideas and even—a word I generally try to avoid—in values. A strong argument can be made that instead of true and false, equally good terms and maybe better ones might be sound and unsound. So I was educated in great part through the influence of sound materials and sources, and also by sound approaches—with sound instructors, some of them spectacularly so. But today I no longer trust that colleges can do for people what my college did for me. Like the American population, the colleges themselves—and their instructors and administrators—are akin to the fish I mentioned in the mass media sea. By definition, a culture of simplification, half truths, and lies cannot educate people soundly. Not even my own colleagues are any longer educated soundly. I argue in the book that they don't know what literature is or what it's for. How *can* they, if they can't see the real for what it is?

Q: You're hard on your colleagues, as well as on your fellow writers, and you're certainly hard on publishers.

A: I am. But there's praise, too, for Billy Collins, for example, and the late Robert Creeley, and for the towering Marilynne Robinson. The publishing industry is another matter. My own definition of serious writing, or I suppose you could say my definition of all art, is that it's a matter of telling (or showing, or revealing) the truth in a way that's also true. The form and what the form holds or conveys must both be true. In addition, the truth has to be one expressible in no other way than through the particular art form that's brought it forth.

Q: What truth? The truth about what?

A: Well, about existence. 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 also true. And both of those short stories do exactly that, 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. Regain these, that is, in place of the false selves and non-authority that are and have been provided for them by the mass media. Since 1947, the very word "citizen" has disappeared, universally replaced by the word "consumer," originally a word only economists would use, and quite technically. The meaning of this switch is extraordinary. A "consumer" has to be passive, in-taking, something like a vacuum cleaner or a river-bottom cat fish. The less thinking the consumer is the better, since thought means the making of distinctions, and the process of thinking delays, discourages, even defeats consumption.

My own view is that Americans today no longer see out of their own eyes, but they see instead out of eyes that have been created for them by the media. People have been conditioned, tricked, made passive—have been, to use my own word—simplified, to the point where they now actually believe in this switch and accept it as normal, even something to be proud of, a right. They therefore can't any longer see the reality of actually existing *inside* existence, because now they're blind to existence, having been made able to see only through those new and fake eyes, the simplifying ones created and provided by the media.

So, no, no writer can write the truth about existing inside existence and do it in a way that's also true if that writer can't see the truth of what existence is. That's why most writing today, most art, is fake, hollow, simplistic. That's the subject, really, of my first chapter.

Q: Why don't you talk a little about that chapter, "Watching American Go Blind." I understand that it was really the inspiration for the whole book, or anyway its inception.

A: That's true, it was, not the inspiration but the inception. I wanted to write that first chapter, but there was so much necessary groundwork to lay before I could say what needed saying that I ended up writing the second essay first, then the third one, and only after that was I able to go back to the beginning and write the present first chapter.

What happened is that back in 2002, on Pearl Harbor Day, ironically, a piece appeared in the *New York Times* under the headline "U.S. Writers Do Cultural Battle Around the Globe." I have a quote from it here: "The Bush administration has recruited prominent American writers to contribute to a State Department anthology and give readings around the globe in a campaign started after 9/11 to use culture to further American diplomatic interests." There were fifteen writers, all asked to write on the subject of "what it means to be an American writer."

Needless to say, this was something I very much wanted to see, so I downloaded the pieces from the internet (due to the archaic Smith-Mundt Act of 1948, they weren't

allowed to be printed for distribution inside the U.S.) and read them. They were just awful. So I did the responsible thing. I read them again, very carefully, made a great many notes—and, having been an English prof for something like forty years, I graded them. A few were good, one A, one A-plus, a small handful of B's, but all the rest C's, D's, and F's. A dreadful, dreadful showing. The whole thing, this State Department collection of essays on the subject of what it means to be an American writer, the whole thing averaged out to a D.

What I saw was that these were people who'd gone blind. They thought they were seeing actual truths about the nature of their existing inside of existence and thought they were then making meaningful observations about those truths as related to the assignment they'd been given. But in actuality, they were seeing nothing beyond pre-fabricated abstractions and, about those, they were saying nothing. They had gone blind, "seeing" a false reality and taking it as a real reality.

Q: You're extraordinarily harsh with these writers. More or less, what you basically do is chew them up and spit them out.

A: Well, how about an analogy. You go to the doctor for an exam. Do you want the doctor to do the exam and give you a valid diagnosis or, on the other hand, either skip the exam or fake it, giving you a feel-good diagnosis so you walk out happy—when in actuality you're going to die in three months if you don't get treatment. These essays are also unwell, and on top of that they're hardly insignificant. They've been published by the Department of State and distributed all over the world. The writers of them have been chosen to tell the entire world what it means to be an American writer, speaking as diplomats, for you, for me, for everyone in the nation. And the best they can produce are inanities about race, class, gender, and ethnic identity, and they can't even do that coherently or even with the the modicum of focus or logic that would give them anything over a D in English 101. No, these are children of the Age of Simplification, unable to see except in terms of preconceived categories—race, class, gender, ethnicity—and being unable, therefore, to see what it really is like and what it really does mean to exist within existence as an authentic, single, sole, observing individual. Being unable to do that, they're as blind as the people in Plato's cave, declaring things to be real that are mere shadows, anything but real.

Q: You're passionate.

A: I am. But, then, I see our nation dying before my eyes, certainly dying as a free republic. Passionate responses are called for.

Q: Yes, perhaps so. But you're not saying, I assume, that racism doesn't exist. Or that class, gender, and ethnicity don't exist.

A: Obviously not. What I am saying is that whole realms of the population, including writers chosen by the State Department to represent the nation around the world, have been conditioned and simplified to the point where they not only rely on buzz words but actually think that the buzz words are correspondent with reality. That's absolute nonsense, like believing that a picture of an ice cream cone is an ice cream cone. It's a fallacy that's been written about and understood since Plato, and yet now here, in the early 21st century, it's a fallacy that governs the so-called "thinking," and certainly the "aesthetic thinking," of virtually everyone in the nation. How can we possibly survive an epidemic of this kind of simplification, passivity, and blindness? The idea itself of seeing all things—as academics in the humanities now do and as the writers in the anthology do—in terms of race, gender, class, and ethnicity, as if those "issues" contain all of life, or contain any of life at all—well, this is a matter of people seeing reality from at least one remove, assuming the abstraction to be the real thing, instead of first seeing whatever real reality does or may—or may not—underlie the abstraction. These are people who, if they in actuality behaved as they now so-called "think" and "see," would eat the menu instead of the dinner. And declare it delicious, believing it to have been the meal.

Q: You're exaggerating?

A: I am not exaggerating. Read the State Department anthology. Visit some literature classes in the colleges. Watch television for a while. See most movies. Read some literary fiction. Read de Zengotita. We're a population so simplified that we no longer can think. We're a population that over six decades has been encouraged so much toward passiveness and desire and discouraged so much away from free agency and the uses of intellectual discernment—well, that we no longer think but only feel, that we no longer discern but only want, that we no longer see but only feel certain that we do see. In the book I talk at some length about Voltaire and the Enlightenment and the invention of empiricism. Empiricism—acting on the basis of observable evidence and only on the basis of observable evidence, what was later called the scientific method—became the justification of the overthrow of monarchies and their replacement with democratic republics like our own, with its foundational—and empirical—premise that all men are created equal. But empiricism has been everywhere under assault for sixty years—by the media—and has now everywhere been all but abandoned. Even if people do see evidence, they don't act on it. That's why the [George W.] Bush administration's crimes don't result in punishment. Mark Danner has written about this. The population no longer sees empirical evidence as a logical or necessary prelude, or motive, to action. And the very greatest crime of the last six years is the one the country remains most blind to.

Q: What crime is that?

A: I thought you might ask. But I'm not going to give you an answer, because then we'd end up talking about that and not about my book. Let me just say that it happened on

the 11<sup>th</sup> of September. I don't want to say more, just as I don't want to name the writers in the State Department anthology because then we'd end up talking about *them*. I'd rather have people buy the book to find out who those writers are. And what the crime is. That is, a crime besides lying under oath, invading nations without cause, routinely using torture, and tossing out habeas corpus. Not to mention stealing from the poor to pay the rich, or exposing undercover agents, or wiretapping without warrant.

A: What is there that could be left? Treason?

Q: My lips are sealed. Let the book do the talking, or at least let it talk first. But, now that the word treason is out, I will say again that the book's true subject is the death of the republic. Not to speak out about a thing of such enormity—in the face of such knowledge as that, *not* to speak out would seem to me the treasonable thing, a high crime. That sense provided a large part of the force that kept me working on the book.

Q: Yet you'll stick by your claim that it's also a literary book?

A: Oh, yes, very much. There's a passage in the first chapter, well, if there's time, I'll just read it: "Artists and the arts; writers and poets and literature; musicians and movie makers: these institutions of the arts, and the people who practice within them, are the eyes of a people or nation. The arts are the means for a people or nation to see through the false, the clichéd, or the tendentious, to see through the propagandistic, the trumped up, hyperbolized, popularized, falsified, or glamorized, and to see thereby what a people or nation really is, what's important about it, what's true about it, what's good and what's bad about it, what characterizes it at its most valued, true, and revered level of being." Now, if the arts, or certainly the literary arts, no longer serve that purpose because they've gone blind and can't see what's true as opposed to what's empty and false—well, that's a literary catastrophe as well as a deeply, deeply political one.

Q: Is this book likely to win you any friends?

A: I wish it would win me half a nation of friends. But it will be hard going. There's a line in it, speaking about the lack of popular reaction against the Bush administration's crimes, that goes, "But the blind don't rebel." And they don't. They don't think things over, either. If attacked, as I attack them, they tend to become only more righteous, rigid, and self-assuring. The substitution of feeling for thinking, after all, the corporate media's aim for sixty years, is a powerful and enormous thing—it was necessary, for example, in order for Nazi Germany to be possible. I bend over backwards all the way through the book to point out that the writers and academics who are doing so incredibly much damage—I declare that instead of educating their students, they're poking out their students' eyes—I point out over and over that this disaster has come about through an originating desire to do good. But doing good and growing up in the Age of Simplification just don't work well together. The minute the person with the

impulse to do good also stops thinking, or stops seeing what's real, that person becomes not a doer of good but a zealot. Blind. And the zealot can never do good, only harm.

Q: And you're accusing your very own colleagues of zealotry?

A: I am. It's a zealotry born of putting feeling in the place of thinking, and it's also, ironically and at the same time, a zealotry of the self. Liberalism, both inside and outside of academia, has destroyed itself, or allowed itself to be destroyed, by this sort of zealotry, which you can call "me-ism" or "self-rights" or "identity politics" or "victimology," all amounting to the same thing. Whole ranges of the courses, methods, approaches, entire programs of study that have been established in academia over the past thirty years are the products of this same thing. The humanities have been "politicized," which really means simplified, and every branch of identity politics has its original foundation and manifestation in the victimology courses, programs, and majors inside academia, all of their inventors and practitioners thinking inside and only inside the little blind boxes of, first, self, and then those other blind little boxes that substitute for reality and for thought in the Age of Simplification, the familiar litany of race, class, gender, and ethnicity. Liberalism itself, as an institution and as a method of thought, has foundered on the shoals of identity politics and victimology, been broken into a thousand useless pieces and has thus given up, or lost, all its power. The far right wing has trounced liberalism and will continue to trounce it—and the nation—until liberalism can be reinvented, restored, or brought back to health. Politically, liberalism has got to become a true people's force again, not a floppy and anemic pseudo-conception fabricated out of me-ism and self-righteousness.

Q: Can it happen?

A: That's the single last, and greatest question, for the arts and for the republic. I do know that liberalism of and for—and by—the people can't conceivably come back into existence until those very people can somehow regain their sight in order that they can once again see—and therefore think—for themselves. If that's impossible, then the prognosis is dire indeed.