Mixed Feelings and the Duty to Love

Over the second half of the nineteenth century the Russian partisans of constitutional liberty, gradual reform and enlightenment along Western lines found themselves in an intolerable bind, caught between a hatred of autocracy and aversion to a radical left contemptuous of half-measures and dismissive of the cultural achievements and bourgeois freedoms the liberals prized above all else. Pinned in this untenable position, many "suffered from complex forms of guilt."[1] Some were tempted to resolve the tension in favor of the liberals' "natural" allies on the left—tempted, that is, to quench their doubts in the certainties and messianic dogmas of the revolutionary faith. Perhaps the only time liberals of the West were comparably driven by the force of their sentiments to forsake liberalism itself was during the Great Depression, when the capitalist system appeared to be in its final crisis, as if in confirmation of the Marxist vision of the course and logic of history.

With millions in dire poverty and capitalism seemingly in its last hours, many a liberal confronted a crisis of conscience. Simply commiserating with the poor was not enough. The comfortable had long commiserated with the poor—the Victorian middle class had had its social conscience touched—and what good had it done? Such a conventional response did not answer the times. Against the extremity of the Great Depression traditional palliatives like charity were of no avail, and the impulse of sympathy from which they arose was itself weak,

even false. It was not enough to sympathize with the poor. You must love them, all the more because they are the chosen of history, soon to inherit the world.

In a revaluation of English literature of the 1930s and the crisis of conscience provoked by the era, Frank Kermode brings out this theme of the duty to love. Intellectuals investigating how the workers actually lived, like Orwell visiting Wigan, "wished to learn about and possibly love the unknown, the Other." They wished to love; they also felt enjoined to love. Kermode quotes from a poem about this Other, the working class, in which the poet seems to be saying to himself and those like him, "This is what we must learn to love."[2] Even Orwell, who was to portray the proles as breeders (though still alien and mysterious) in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, felt at one time that "the writer must search for and love an ordinary wisdom different from his own."[3] (Anyone who read Orwell's dissection of his own motives in "Shooting an Elephant" should have known then and there that he was not reliably of the left, however. He was at once too hostile to the oppressed and too attached to traditional norms of responsibility.) This imperative to love, Kermode observes, "isn't the slight ache of conscience over breakfast; it isn't anything Morris or Ruskin or Shaw would have felt."[4] It differs from all that went before just as an era when capitalism reaches its midnight hour marks the passage to a new order of things. And underlining the necessity to love the workers, giving it the character of a moral command, was the fact that they themselves by an edict of history bore this future.

One who found himself in a crisis of conscience like that described by Kermode is Stephen Spender. Of a live-in companion Spender writes:

> The differences of class and interest between Jimmy and me certainly did provide some element of mystery which corresponded almost to a difference of sex. . . . At such moments, too, I was very close to certain emotions awakened in childhood by the workers, who to us seemed at the same time coarse, unclean, and yet with something about them of forbidden fruit, and also of warm-heartedness which suddenly flashed across the cold gulf of class, secret and unspoken.[5]

But true "Communist love"[6] extends not to one but to multitudes and demands the surrender of self in the name not of the reasons of the heart but historical necessity. And this sacrifice of self Spender could never make.

> I was impressed by the overwhelming accusation made by Communism against bourgeois society, an accusation not only against all its institutions but also reaching deep into the individual soul. . . . [But] I failed to find myself convinced by Communism.
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> Even when I had accepted in my own mind the possibility of having to sacrifice everything I gained by living in a bourgeois society, I still could not abandon my liberal concepts of freedom and truth. . . .

> When I had admitted to myself the force behind the Marxist arguments, I still found in myself a core of resistance . . .[7]

"I failed to . . . I still could not . . . I still found in myself. . . " In this tone of admission we sense the power of a political creed to compel the searching of the soul like a religion (and it's almost impossible to discuss the power of the Marxist ideal during the Depression without using terms like "convert" and "proselytize" and "sacrifice"). But we also sense the pressure exerted on the writer by an ideal that turns the self against itself, as if the use of persons as means to advance the Communist cause carried over to the exploitation of a force at the person's core: guilt. Spender never did achieve Communist love, and indeed came to recognize it as code for ruthlessness.

How is it possible to love on command? Maybe I can work myself into a state of rage or feel an obligatory sympathy, but how can something that calls itself love be ordered into existence? Love at its most acute is so far from being under command that we speak of ourselves as helpless before it—we fall in love. Not the consonance but the conflict of love and duty is a theme of literature. Love answers no law but its own, the poets tell us. "Wostow nat [do you not know] wel the olde clerkes sawe [saying], / That 'who shal yeve [give] a lovere any lawe'?" demands Arcite in the Knight's Tale. The notorious Lovelace is quoted by Kermode as saying that "love, that deserves the name, never was under the dominion of prudence, or of any reasoning power";[8] the diction is eighteenth-century, the sentiment older. Granted, the love commanded by the intellectual's troubled conscience isn't the same as romantic love (though as Kermode shows, they strangely overlap) and has little of the anarchism of the love

celebrated by the poets. Love politically ordained fastens finally on no single person at all: it comprehends an entire class. But if compassion "by its very nature, cannot be touched off by the sufferings of a whole class or a people, or, least of all, by mankind as a whole,"[9] still less can love, which is exclusive in nature it. Not love but hatred is categorical. When an entire class of people—"Jews," "the bourgeoisie," "Communists"—elicits a strong emotion, it is going to be the abstract emotion of hatred.[10] The language of hatred is fond of categories, the language of classes pregnant with hatred. The menacing demand that I love those destined to overcome me may have hatred behind it like a threat backed up by force, but it is in any case a demand impossible to meet, one whose very terms seem designed to bring out the rebel in human nature.

Arising as it does from the depths of the self, love cannot be imposed from the top down, decreed. No amount of historical necessity, no persuasion that "I must love the working class because I am called by history to do so" can possibly endow love with the power it has when it arises as from a necessity of our own nature. "We must love one another or die," wrote Auden in a poem he came to repudiate after realizing that we'll die in any case, but who ever loved under compulsion? For Hamlet to love Claudius as a father as he is told to do in Act I is a moral impossibility, and this not because Hamlet is insubordinate by nature but because love cannot be ordered at all. As it happens, Kermode tells of us men wishing, trying, enjoining themselves to love, not really loving, although he lays the failure to their lingering aversions and "mixed feelings" as men of privilege rather than the sheer untenability of the project.[11] Compelling yourself to love is a utopian act, as well as a reminder of the coercive nature of utopias in literature and life. If we could overcome all mixed feelings, we would achieve that

state of being completely at one with ourselves, free of indeterminacy and indecision, that Bakhtin identifies with the finished world of the epic (the advent of Communism being officially the finish of history).[12] If a passion as intractable as love could be brought under control, then well might the engineers of humanity produce a New Man.

By reputation mixed feelings are the lot of the liberal, given to vacillation and caught between sympathy with the poor and fondness for property and privilege. But to despise mixed feelings as if they were the peculiar shame of that figure of failure, the liberal, is also to idealize the image of one not subject to doubt and division, a human block of stone—a monolith. And it is totalitarianism that brings out the full meaning of this glorification of granite. If the entire citizenry of the totalitarian state is to behave as "One Man of gigantic dimensions"[13]—an image consistent with the brute grandiosity of totalitarian rhetoric and imagery—by the same token each and every citizen is to exemplify this figure of undivided will. That totalitarian argument is marked by the rigorous avoidance of contradiction, as Hannah Arendt claimed, is surely untrue. Hitler bayed his contempt for the German master race; Stalin constructed his earthly paradise on the bones of millions. Absolute self-consistency is not a property of totalitarian argument but a demand placed on the citizen, who is expected to follow the party line, whatever its reversals and defiance of reason, with an obedience at once wholehearted and single-minded. The least spark of doubt or dissent thus becomes a criminal tendency.

In the course of being radicalized during the Great Depression, many liberals must have struggled both with a lack of single-mindedness and with mixed feelings that produced intolerable shame. In some, I imagine, reservations concerning the eradication of their way of

life, lingering loyalties to high culture, deficiencies of ardor came to be experienced and interpreted as signs of a sickness of the will, a will that could only be made well and whole by submerging itself in the totalitarian cult of absolute purpose. Particularly in their inability to love those chosen by history to overthrow them, liberals faced an inescapable reminder of their corruption. Before the command to love they stood guilty, and only by an act of contrition like the abasement of self demanded of those convicted of political crimes could such guilt be washed away.

Only if the conquest of nature were perfected in the conquest of our own nature could love possibly be subjected to the will. If there were any crime for which a human being was by definition guilty, it would be the failure to love in conformity with an abstract dictate, because such love simply violates our constitution. And is it not the rebelliousness of our nature that calls forth the ruthless effort of the totalitarian state to subjugate it? If show trials justify the Party's rule by exposing threats to the state, the guilt of all who fail to conform to prescription (all who retain mixed feelings, for example) gives the machinery of suspicion and punishment its writ and its work.

By the same token, the good subject will interpret the state's betrayal of its professed ideals as his own betrayal, his own shame. The Soviet agent George Blake told an interviewer:

> A communist society is in a way a perfect society, and we are not perfect people. People have to change a great deal still. . . . I also think that it is a very noble experience, which deserves experiment, which deserved to be successful. But which wasn't successful because of human frailty. . . . That's how Donald

> Maclean felt. That's how Philby felt. That's how we all felt. That's how many, I think, Soviet people feel, it wasn't wrong, the idea was very noble, is still very noble, but at this stage in human history, unattainable.[14]

The perfect society is unattainable for now because humanity is too ignoble for it. Perhaps in the longed-for utopia the state's crimes would have been great enough to teach the citizen perfect abnegation.

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The doctrine of revolution grew out of the nineteenth-century belief that contrary to the evidence of bourgeois society's triumph, a great storm of violence was brewing that would sweep away the order of oppression and cleanse the earth. This sense of impending crisis is written into *The Princess Casamassima* (1886), Henry James's tale of a revolutionary with mixed feelings. In strange contrast to the hero is Christina Casamassima, who devotes herself to the cause of the people as a kind of sovereign act of will. Christina Casamassima, we are told, "wanted to know the people, and know them intimately—the toilers and strugglers and sufferers—because she was convinced they were the most interesting portion of society."[15] Its formulaic character all the more apparent in a work so attentive to shading and nuance, language like this suggests perhaps not so much a love of the people as an immolation of intelligence as penance for "human frailty."

One who claimed he *did* teach himself to love the oppressed was Tolstoy. As he tells in his *Confession*, Tolstoy's spiritual impasse broke with the realization that his very way of life was wrong; isolated from the peasants who made his existence possible and who alone lived well, he had lost touch with truth. Henceforth he must not just remember the peasants, he must love them. And as if to demonstrate that in spite of everything love *can* be rendered on command, Tolstoy reports success:

> And of such people, understanding the meaning of life and able to live and to die, I saw not two or three, or tens, but hundreds, thousands, and millions. . . . And I learnt to love these people. The more I came to know their life, the life of those who are living and of others who are dead of whom I read and heard, the more I loved them and the easier it became for me to live.[16]

In the image of Tolstoy immolating his intellect and undergoing the ceremonies of Orthodoxy to make himself one with the people, there is something of Claudius forcing himself to kneel. "Bow, stubborn knees." This much seems clear. If the kind of coercion Tolstoy used to humble his intellect and negate his pride were harnessed politically, the results would be fatal to liberty—possibly a despotism like the Grand Inquisitor's.[17]

In the Grand Inquisitor episode of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan brings to life an old cardinal who, convinced that human beings crave nothing so much as to be rid of their freedom, obligingly assumes that burden for them and arrests the returned Christ for subversion. The Inquisitor, Ivan tells us, loved humanity too greatly to leave it writhing under

the curse of freedom. Out of love he reduced it to submission. "All his life he loved humanity." He "could not shake off his incurable love of humanity." "I tell you frankly," says Ivan, his proclamation of candor rousing our doubts, "that I firmly believe that there has always been such a man" as the Grand Inquisitor at the head of the movement to found a benevolent totalitarian state.[18] Maybe Ivan has it wrong. Maybe the father of the totalitarian ideal isn't one who loved humanity so much that he thought to put it out of its pain, but one whose inability to love so categorically taught him that nothing less than iron discipline will bring human nature to heel. If we cannot subdue ourselves (like those whose mixed feelings inhibit love), we will have to be subdued from without. According to the Inquisitor himself, the multitude—the same multitude supposedly in full flight from its own freedom—"is everywhere now rebelling against our power. . . . But their childish delight will end; it will cost them dear."[19] Disobedience demands repression. Humanity is to be redeemed from its own unruliness and divided feelings, its conflict with itself. Through the cell and the stake, salvation. In accordance with the fatal closure of totalitarian logic, the fact that human beings do not conform to ideological blueprints only redoubles the effort to make them do so.

"I must make you one confession," Ivan tells his younger brother, the statement an ironic one in view of his inability, later in the novel, to confess in any intelligible way his role in the murder of his father. "I could never understand how one can love one's neighbours. It's just one's neighbours, to my mind, that one can't love, though one might love those at a distance."[20] Does Ivan mean it's somehow easier to love humanity in the abstract than to love someone in the flesh? In any case, he proceeds to document crimes against children in a strangely remote and polemical manner, using the outrages as ammunition in his case against

God. Expressions of abstract love, as of the workers or the people, readily take on a rhetorical character as well, quite as if they were being used for something else. They are used as weapons of discipline, instruments of subjugation. Just as Ivan's theory of abstract love yields to the qualifier that men and women are actually "unworthy of love,"[21] the political savior's professed love of the people justifies the subjection of the people themselves, as well as the branding of critics as enemies of the people; and so "political pity"[22] covers for the utmost ruthlessness.

The rhetoric of love serves perhaps one function above all. If love proverbially conquers all, if no command or precept avails against it, the redeemers of the oppressed let nothing stand in their way and even allow themselves to dream of world conquest. Just because it is utopian and therefore, it would seem, completely hollow, the duty to love possesses great rhetorical power. In the name of love there is no prohibition or inhibition that can't be transgressed. "Everything is permitted."

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[1] Isaiah Berlin, Romanes Lecture, 1970; reprinted as the Introduction to Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, tr. Rosemary Edmonds (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1975), p. 52.

[2] Frank Kermode, *History and Value* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 48-49. It is said that into his middle years Anthony Blunt, the now-notorious spy, retained "the romantic view of the working class, left over from his Cambridge days" of the 1930s. Miranda Carter, *Anthony Blunt: His Lives* (New York: Picador, 2001), pp. 390-91.

[3] Kermode, *History and Value*, p. 51. The words are Kermode's.

[4] Kermode, *History and Value*, p. 51. On Morris see *William Morris: Selected Writings and Designs*, ed. Asa Briggs (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1968), p. 140: "Indeed I have been ashamed when I

have thought of the contrast between my happy working hours and the unpraised, unrewarded, monotonous drudgery which most men are condemned to."

[5] Stephen Spender, *World Within World* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1951), pp. 167-68.

[6] Spender, *World Within World*, p. 260.

[7] Spender, *World Within World*, pp. 122-23.

[8] Kermode, *History and Value*, p. 19.

[9] Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Pelican, 1963), p. 85.

[10] By the same token, when Gulliver comes to regard his own family with the detestation he feels for the human race in general, we know he has lost his mind.

[11] Thus too the inability of Anthony Blunt, newly recruited as a Soviet spy, to love proletarian art in accordance with the dictates of his political creed. "Blunt was far from unaware that there was a gulf between what he thought he should think [about art] and what his personal preferences were. He had come to believe that he must simply discount the latter"—sacrifice his own personality. Carter, *Anthony Blunt,* p. 203.

[12] M. M. Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel" in *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

[13] Hannah Arendt, *Totalitarianism*; Part Three of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1951), p. 164.

[14] Interview with George Blake. Published at www.pbs.org, Sept. 28, 1999.

[15] Henry James, *The Princess Casamassima* (New York: Alfred A, Knopf, 1991), p. 216. Christina Casamassima's words are reflected here.

[16] Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession* in *The Portable Tolstoy*, ed. John Bayley, tr. Aylmer and Louise Maude (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1978), p. 710.

[17] On Tolstoy and the Grand Inquisitor, see George Steiner, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 336f.

[18] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, tr. Constance Garnett (New York: Modern Library, 1950), pp. 310-11.

[19] Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, p. 304.

[20] Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, p. 281. Swift claimed, on the contrary, to detest mankind but love individuals.

[21] Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, p. 282.

[22] Gary Saul Morson, "Prosaic Bakhtin: *Landmarks*, Anti-Intelligentsialism, and the Russian Counter-Tradition," *Common Knowledge* 2 (1993): 64.