

Notes from New York, July 2005

MOLLY NESBIT

Around 1844, Bronson Alcott helped Henry David Thoreau get the roof on his cabin at Walden Pond, just outside Boston. After they had finished, Thoreau wrote of him:

I think that he should keep an inn, a caravansery, on the world's highway, where the thinkers of all nations might put up, and on his sign should be written^a Enter all ye that have leisure and a quiet mind, who earnestly and without anxiety seek the right road . A thought floats as serenely and as much at home in his mind as a duck pluming herself on a far inland lake^a Ah, such discourse as we had ; hermit and philosopher^a It expanded and cracked my little house.¹

Thoreau went on to write his essay "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" just before the revolutions of 1848. This was the essay that impressed Gandhi and Martin Luther King, and many more advocates of nonviolent politics. Remember the opening lines?

I heartily accept the motto, 'That Government is best which governs least'; and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe ; 'That government is best which governs not at all' ; and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have. Government is at best but an expedient; but most governments are usually, and all governments are sometimes, inexpedient. The objections which have been brought against a standing army, and they are many

and weighty, and deserve to prevail, may also at last be brought against a standing government. The standing army is only an arm of the standing government. The government itself, which is only the mode which the people have chosen to execute their will, is equally liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act through it. Witness the present Mexican war, the work of comparatively a few individuals using the standing government as their tool; for, in the outset, the people would not have consented to this measure.

This American government ; what is it but a tradition, though a recent one, endeavouring to transmit itself unimpaired to posterity, but each instant losing some of its integrity? It has not the vitality and force of a single living man; for a single man can bend it to his will. It is a sort of wooden gun to the people themselves; and, if ever they should use it in earnest as a real one against each other, it will surely split. But it is not the less necessary for this; for the people must have some complicated machinery or other, and hear its din, to satisfy that idea of government which they have. Governments show thus how successfully men can be imposed on, even impose on themselves, for their own advantage. It is excellent, we must all allow; yet this government never of itself furthered any enterprise, but by the alacrity with which it got out of its way. It does not keep the country free. It does not settle the West. It does not educate. The character inherent in the American people has done all that has been accomplished; and it would have done somewhat more, if the government had not sometimes got in its way. For government is an expedient by which men would fain succeed in letting one another alone; and, as has been said, when it is most expedient, the governed are most let alone by it. Trade and commerce, if they were not made of India rubber, would never manage to bounce over the obstacles which legislators are continually putting in their way; and, if one were to judge these men wholly by the effects of their actions, and not partly by their intentions, they would deserve to be classed and punished with those mischievous persons who put obstructions on the railroads.

But, to speak practically and as a citizen, unlike those who call themselves no-government men, I ask for, not at once no government, but at once a better government. Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it.



For the first-rate artist, there is a moment when he's really getting revved up, and the time just flows into him. It only happens once. It happens without his awareness at all. He planned nothing. He was just going ahead doing this next thing^{f2}, Mike Nichols observed, sounding like a latter-day Hegel, writing about Tony Kushner. The time is history. It cracks our little houses open.



Periodically, while writing about something else, American writers stop to open the door for air. Two did so this past year, as they mulled over the words coming from the government, specifically, those of an advisor to the President of the United States. The advisor had told Ron Suskind, a reporter, that he and other people like him lived "in what we call the reality-based community", which the advisor defined as those believing "that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality". The advisor cut the idea down. "That's not the way the world really works any more. We're an empire nowf, he declared, "and when we act, we create our own realityf.

Anthony Grafton dropped these words abruptly into the essay he was writing on the work of Sir Isaac Newton. This gave them even darker purpose. "We Americansf, Grafton had just explained to the reader, "trace our origins, spiritual and intellectual, largely to the heralds of the Newtonian movement: writers and doers like Benjamin Franklin. The creators of the United States couched their arguments for its independence and their visions of its constitution in the Newtonian language of reason, nature's laws, and factual evidence. Nowadays, powerful leaders around the world defy these forms of intellectual self-disciplinef³. In other words, nowadays an applecart spills over the Enlightenment and the world as a whole. What once could only have been satire, or farce, is now policy. In the case of the United States, one could say that this policy flaunts its ideology to such a degree that it reveals itself to be smokescreen, or plain old smoke.

Smoke signals fire. The house could be burning down. When Mark Danner looked out to the assembly of literature students graduating from the University of California at Berkeley, he called upon them to look at the way the world was working and observed that we had lost the ability to act on the scandals in our time, like the illegal abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, and to prosecute these scandals as crimes. The scandals too were actions. Not a matter of "a few bad apples" as the Bush administration has claimed, but a matter of policy decisions taken at the top. This, Danner told the students, had happened since they had arrived at school in the fall of 2001. The conclusion? In the space of those four years, "our government decided to change this country from a nation that officially does not torture to one, officially, that doesf⁴.

"America has no empire to extend or utopia to establishf, George W. Bush had declared in 2002 when announcing his policy of pre-emptive war to the graduating class of West Point cadets, and to the country.⁵ These words, of seeming no purpose, have had enormous, terrible, and concrete, consequences both inside and outside the United States. They are there to be read, if one is willing to read, to fish the smoke and subterfuge and catch the facts. Danner advised the students to do just that, to remain determined Empiricists of the Word.

He gave them more evidence, more words and an example. He quoted more of the presidential advisor's counsel to the reality-based reporter. "And while you're studying that reality ; judiciously, as you willf, the advisor had said, slick, too confident, lordly, "we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort outf. A prophecy or a problem? Danner spoke with martial art. He recited Czeslaw Milosz's

strange sad lyric, *A Song on the End of the World*, written in 1944 in Warsaw during the throes of another war. It had not become defenceless with time. In *Song*^a, an old man binds his tomatoes, others cannot see the end happening; but the man sees the end's absolute banality and equates it with life:

*On the day the world ends
A bee circles a clover,
A fisherman mends a glimmering net.
Happy porpoises jump in the sea,
By the rainspout young sparrows are playing
And the snake is gold-skinned as it should always be.*

*On the day the world ends
Women walk through the fields under their umbrellas,
A drunkard grows sleepy at the edge of a lawn,
Vegetable peddlers shout in the street
And a yellow-sailed boat comes nearer the island.
The voice of a violin lasts in the air
And leads into a starry night.*

*And those who expected lightning and thunder
Are disappointed.
And those who expected signs and archangels' trumps
Do not believe it is happening now.
As long as the sun and the moon are above,
As long as the bumblebee visits a rose,
As long as rosy infants are born
No one believes it is happening now.*

*Only a white-haired old man, who would be a prophet
Yet is not a prophet, for he's much too busy,
Repeats while he binds his tomatoes:
There will be no other end of the world,
There will be no other end of the world.*

Apples and tomatoes too create the conditions that allow time to flow suddenly into a person. Remember Newton's gravity. Remember Milosz writing his song. Remember how history is actually made. Time flows through the facts in the poet's words too. Together an empiricist and a poet were raising the roof.

This text draws upon notes made in anticipation of the exhibition *Uncertain States of America: American Art in the Third Millennium*, curated by Daniel Birnbaum, Gunnar Kvaran and Hans Ulrich Obrist, at the Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art in Oslo, 8 October - 12 December 2005.

NOTES

1. From Thoreau's original manuscript for *Walden*, as cited by Geraldine Brooks, "Orpheus at the Plough: Louisa May Alcott's Difficult Father". In *The New Yorker*, 10 January 2005, p. 64.
2. Quoted by John Lahr, "After Angels: Tony Kushner's Political Theatre". In *The New Yorker*, 3 January 2005, p. 48.
3. Anthony Grafton. "The Ways of Genius". In *The New York Review of Books*, 2 December 2004, p. 37. He is quoting from the report of Ron Suskind, "Without a Doubt", *The New York Times Magazine*, 17 October 2004.
4. Mark Danner. "What Are You Going To Do With That?" In *The New York Review of Books*, 23 June 2005, pp. 52-56.
5. President George W. Bush. "Answering the Call of History". Address at the 2002 Graduation Exercise of the United States Military Academy, West Point, New York, 1 June 2002.
US Department of State: http://www.state.gov/images/i_spcr08.gif.