The Women's Movement

By JOAN DIDION

To make an omelette you need not only those broken eggs but someone "oppressed" to beat them: every revolutionist is presumed to understand that, and also every women, with either does or does not make 51 per cent of the population of the United States a potentially revolutionary class. The creation of this revolutionary class was from the virtual beginning the "idea" of the women's movement, and the tendency for popular discussion of the movement still to center around daycare centers is yet another instance of that studied resistance to the possibility of political ideas which characterizes our national life.

"The new feminism is not just the revival of a serious political movement for social equality," the feminist theorist Shulamith Firestone announced flatly in 1970. "It is the second wave of the most important revolution in history." This was scarcely a statement of purpose anyone could find cryptic, and it was scarcely the only statement of its kind in the literature of the movement. Nonetheless, in 1972, in a "special issue" on women, Time was still musing genially that the movement might well succeed in bringing about "fewer diapers and more Dante."

That was a very pretty image, the idle ladies sitting in the gazebo and murmuring lasciate ogni speranza, but it depended entirely upon the popular view of the movement as some kind of collective inchoate yearning for "fulfillment" or "self-expression," a yearning absolutely devoid of ideas and therefore of any but the most pro forma benevolent interest. In fact there was an idea, and the idea was Marxist, and it was precisely to the extent that there was this Marxist idea that the curious historical anomaly known as the women's movement would have seemed to have any interest at all.

Marxism in this country had even been an eccentric and quixotic passion. One oppressed class after another had seemed finally to miss the point. The have-nots, it turned out, aspired mainly to having. The
minorities seemed to promise more, but finally disappointed: it
developed that they actually cared about the issues, that they tended to
see the integration of the luncheonette and the seat in the front of the
bus as real goals, and only rarely as ploys, counters in a larger game.
They resisted that essential inductive leap from the immediate reform to
the social ideal, and, just as disappointingly, they failed to perceive
their common cause with other minorities, continued to exhibit a self-
interest disconcerting in the extreme to organizers steeped in the
rhetoric of "brotherhood."

And then, at that exact dispirited moment when there seemed no one at
all willing to play the proletariat, along came the women's movement,
and the invention of women as a "class." One could not help admiring
the radical simplicity of this instant transfiguration. The notion that, in
the absence of a cooperative proletariat, a revolutionary class might
simply be invented, made up, "named" and so brought into existence,
seemed at once so pragmatic and so visionary, so precisely Emersonian,
that it took the breath away, exactly confirmed one's idea of where
19th-century transcendental instincts crossed with a late reading of
Engels and Marx might lead. To read the theorists of the women's
movement was to think not of Mary Wollstonecraft but of Margaret
Fuller at her most high-minded, of rushing position papers off to mimeo
and drinking tea from paper cups in lieu of eating lunch; of thin
raincoats on bitter nights. If the family was the last fortress of
capitalism, then let us abolish the family. If the necessity for
conventional reproduction of the species seemed unfair to women, then
let us transcend, via technology, "the very organization of nature," the
oppression, as Shulamith Firestone saw it, "that goes back through
recorded history to the animal kingdom itself." I accept the universe,
Margaret Fuller had finally allowed: Shulamith Firestone did not.

It seemed very New England, this febrile and cerebral passion. The
solemn a priori idealism in the guise of radical materialism somehow
bespoke old-fashioned self-reliance and prudent sacrifice. The clumsy
torrents of words became a principle, a renunciation of style as
unserious. The rhetorical willingness to break eggs became, in practice ,
only a thrifty capacity for finding the sermon in every stone. Burn the
literature, Ti-Grace Atkinson said in effect when it was suggested that,
even come the revolution, thee would still be left the whole body of
"sexist" Western literature.

But of course no books would be burned: the women of this movement
were perfectly capable of crafting didactic revisions of whatever
apparently intractable material came to hand. "As a parent you should

become an interpreter of myths," advised Letty Cottin Pogrebin in the
preview issue of Ms. Magazine. "Portions of any fairy tale or children's
story can be salvaged during a critique session with your child." Other
literary analysts devised ways to salvage other books: Isabel Archer in
"The Portrait of a Lady" need no longer be the victim of a sexist
society, a woman who had "internalized the conventional definition of
wife," "The Company of Men" by McCarthy "The Company She Keeps."
The narrator of Mary McCarthy's "The Company She Keeps" could be seen as "enslaved because she persists in looking for her identity in a man." Similarly, Miss McCarthy's "The Group" could serve to illustrate "what happens to women who have been educated at first-rate women's colleges-taught philosophy and history-and then are consigned to breast-feeding and gourmet cooking."

That fiction has certain irreducible ambiguities seemed never to occur to these women, nor should it have, for fiction is in most ways hostile to ideology. They had invented a class; now they had only to make that class conscious. They seized as a political technique a kind of shared testimony at first called a "rap session," then called "consciousness-raising," and in any case a therapeutically-oriented American reinterpretation, according to the British feminist Juliet Mitchell, of a Chinese revolutionary practice known as "speaking bitterness." They purged and regrouped and purged again, worried out one another's errors and deviations, the "elitism" here, the "careerism" there.

It would have been merely sententious to call some of their thinking Stalinist: of course it was. It would have been pointless even to speak of whether one considered these women "right" or "wrong," meaningless to dwell upon the obvious, upon the coarsening of moral imagination to which such social idealism so often leads. To believe in "the greater good" is to operated, necessarily, in a certain ethical suspension. Ask anyone committed to Marxist analysis how many angels dance on the head of a pin, and you will be asked in return to never mind the angels, tell me who controls the production of pins.

To those of us who remained committed mainly to the exploration of moral distinctions and ambiguities, the feminist analysis may have seemed a particularly narrow and cracked determinism. Nonetheless it was serious, and for these high-strung idealists to find themselves out of the mimeo room and onto the Cavett Show must have been in certain ways more unsettling to them than it ever was to the viewers. They were being heard, and yet not really. Attention was finally being paid, and yet that attention was mired in the trivial. Even the brightest movement women found themselves engaged in sullen public colloquies about the inequities of dishwashing and the intolerable humiliations of being observed by construction workers on Sixth Avenue. (This grievance was not atypic in that discussion of it always seemed to take on unexplored Ms. Scarlett overtones, suggestions of fragile cultivated flowers being "spoken to," and therefore violated, by uppity proles.)

They totted up the pans scoured, the towels picked off the bathroom floor, the loads of laundry done in a lifetime. Cooking a meal could only be "dogwork," and to claim any pleasure from it was evidence of craven acquiescence in one's own forced labor. Small children could only be odious mechanisms for the spilling and digesting of food, for robbing women of their "freedom." It was a long way from Simone de Beauvoir's grave and awesome recognition of woman's role as "the
Beauvoir's grave and awesome recognition of woman's role as "the Other" to the notion that the first step in changing that role was Alix Kates Shulman's marriage contract ("wife strips beds, husband remakes them") reproduced in Ms; but it was toward just such trivialization that the women's movement seemed to be heading.

Of course this litany of trivia was crucial to the movement in the beginning, a key technique in the politicizing of women who perhaps had been conditioned to obscure their resentments even from themselves. Mrs. Shulman's discovery that she had less time than her husband seemed to have was precisely the kind of chord the movement had hoped to strike in all women (the "click of recognition," as Jane O'Reilly described it), but such discoveries could be of no use at all if one refused to perceive the larger point, failed to make that inductive leap from the personal to the political.

Spliting up the week into hours during which the children were directed to address their "personal questions" to either one parent or another might or might not have improved the quality of Mr. and Mrs. Shulman's marriage, but the improvement of marriages would not a revolution make. It could be very useful to call housework, as Lenin did, "the most unproductive, the most barbarous and the most arduous work a woman can do," but it could be useful only as the first step in a political process, only in the "awakening" of a class to its position, useful only as a metaphor: to believe, during the late 1960's and early 1970's in the United States of America, that the words had literal meaning was not only to stall the movement in the personal but to seriously delude one's self.

More and more, as the literature of the movement began to reflect the thinking of women who did not really understand the movement's ideological base, one had the sense of this stall, this delusion, the sense that the drilling of the theorists had struck only some psychic hardpan dense with superstitions and little sophistries, wish-fulfillment, self-loathing and bitter fancies. To read even desultorily in this literature was to recognize instantly a certain dolorous phantasm, an imagined Everywoman with whom the authors seemed to identify all too entirely. This ubiquitous construct was everyone's victim but her own. She was persecuted even by her gynecologist, who made her beg in vain for contraceptives. She particularly needed contraceptives because she was raped on every date, raped by her husband, and raped finally on the abortionist's table. During the fashion for shoes with pointed toes, she, like "many women," had her toes amputated. She was so intimidated by cosmetic advertising that she would sleep "huge portions" of her day in order to forestall wrinkling, and when awake she was enslaved by detergent commercials on television. She sent her child to a nursery school where the little girls huddled in a "doll corner," and were forcibly restrained from playing with building blocks. Should she work, she was paid "three to ten times less" than an (always) unqualified man holding the same job, was prevented from attending business lunches because she would be "embarrassed" to appear in public with a man not
because she would be "embarrassed" to appear in public with a man not her husband, and, when she traveled alone, faced a choice between humiliation in a restaurant and "eating a doughnut" in her hotel room.

The half-truths, repeated, authenticated themselves. The bitter fancies assumed their own logic. To ask the obvious-why she did not get herself another gynecologist, another job, why she did not get out of bed and turn off the television set, or why, the most eccentric detail, she stayed in hotels where only doughnuts could be obtained from room service-was to join this argument at its own spooky level, a level which had only the most tenuous and unfortunate relationship to the actual condition of being a woman. That many women are victims of condescension and exploitation and sex-role stereotyping was scarcely news, but neither was it news that other women are not: nobody forces women to buy the package.

But of course something other than an objection to being "discriminated against" was at work here, something other than an aversion to being "stereotyped" in one's sex role. Increasingly it seemed that the aversion was to adult sexual life itself: how much cleaner to stay forever children. One is constantly struck, in the accounts of lesbian relationships which appear from time to time in the movement literature, by the emphasis on the superior "tenderness" of the relationship, the "gentleness" of the sexual connection, as if the participants were wounded birds. The derogation of assertiveness as "machismo" has achieved such currency that one imagines several million women to delicate to deal with a man more overtly sexual than, say, David Cassidy. Just as one had gotten the unintended but inescapable suggestion, when told about the "terror and revulsion" experienced by women in the vicinity of construction sites, of creatures too "tender" for the abrasiveness of daily life, too fragile for the streets, so now one was getting, in the later literature of the movement, the impression of women too "sensitive" for the difficulties and ambiguities of adult life, women unequipped for reality and grasping at the movement as a rationale for denying that reality.

The transient stab of dread and loss which accompanies menstruation simply never happens: we only thought it happened because a male-chauvinist psychiatrist told us so. No woman need have bad dreams after an abortion: she has only been told she should. The power of sex is just an oppressive myth, no longer to be feared, because what the sexual connection really amounts to, we learn in one liberated woman's account of a postmarital affair, is "wisecracking and laughing" and "lying together and then leaping up to play and sing the entire Sesame Street Songbook" All one's actual apprehension of what it is to be like a woman, the irreconcilable difference of it-that sense of living one's deepest life underwater, that dark involvement with blood and birth and death-could now be declared invalid, unnecessary, one never felt it at all.

One was only told it, and now one is to be re-programmed, fixed up, rendered again as inviolate and unstained as the "modern" little girls in
The wishful voices of just such perpetual adolescents, the voices of women scarred by resentment not of their class position as women but at the failure of their childhood expectations and misapprehensions. "Nobody ever so much as mentioned" to Susan Edmiston "that when you say 'I do,' what you are doing is not, as you thought, vowing your eternal love, but rather subscribing to a whole system of right, obligations and responsibilities that may well be anathema to your most cherished beliefs."

To Ellen Peck "the birth of children too often means the dissolution of romance, the loss of freedom, the abandonment of ideals to economics."

A young woman described on the cover of a recent issue of New York magazine as "the Suburban Housewife Who Bought the Promises of Women's Lib and Came to the City to Live Them" tells us what promises she bought: "The chance to respond to the bright lights and civilization of the Big Apple, yes. The chance to compete, yes. But most of all, the chance to have some fun. Fun is what's been missing."

Eternal love, romance, fun. The Big Apple. These are relatively rare expectations in the arrangements of consenting adults, although not in those of children, and it wrenches the heart to read about these women in their brave new lives. An ex-wife and mother of three speaks of her plan "to play out my college girl's dream. I am going to New York to become this famous writer. Or this working writer. Failing that, I will get a job in publishing." She mentions a friend, another young woman who "had never had any other life than as a daughter or wife or mother" but who is "just discovering herself to be a gifted potter." The childlike resourcefulness-to get a job in publishing, to be a gifted potter-bewilders the imagination. The astral discontent with actual lives, actual men, the denial of the real ambiguities and the real generative or malignant possibilities of adult sexual life, somehow touches beyond words.

"It is the right of the oppressed to organize around their oppression as they see and define it," the movement theorists insist doggedly in an effort to solve the question of these women, to convince themselves that what is going on is still a political process; but the handwriting is already on the wall. These are converts who want not a revolution but "romance," who believe not in the oppression of women but in their own chances for a new life in exactly the mold of their old life. In certain ways they tell us sadder things about what the culture has done to them than the theorists did, and they also tell us, I suspect, that the women's movement is no longer a cause but a symptom.

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Believe Me, It’s Torture

What more can be added to the debate over U.S. interrogation methods, and whether waterboarding is torture? Try firsthand experience. The author undergoes the controversial drowning technique, at the hands of men who once trained American soldiers to resist—not inflict—it.

By Christopher Hitchens  Photographs by Gasper Tringale

The author catches his breath after undergoing his first waterboarding session.

Here is the most chilling way I can find of stating the matter. Until recently, “waterboarding” was something that Americans did to other Americans. It was inflicted, and endured, by those members of the Special Forces who underwent the advanced form of training known as SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape). In these harsh exercises, brave men and women were introduced to the sorts of barbarism that they might expect to meet at the hands of a lawless foe who disregarded the Geneva Conventions. But it was something that Americans were being trained to resist, not to inflict.

Exploring this narrow but deep distinction, on a gorgeous day last May I found myself deep in the hill country of western North Carolina, preparing to be surprised by a team of extremely hardened veterans who had confronted their country’s enemies in highly arduous terrain all over the world. They knew about everything from unarmed combat to enhanced interrogation and, in exchange for anonymity, were going to show me as nearly as possible what real waterboarding might be like.

It goes without saying that I knew I could stop the
process at any time, and that when it was all over I would be released into happy daylight rather than returned to a darkened cell. But it’s been well said that cowards die many times before their deaths, and it was difficult for me to completely forget the clause in the contract of indemnification that I had signed. This document (written by one who knew) stated revealingly:

“Waterboarding” is a potentially dangerous activity in which the participant can receive serious and permanent (physical, emotional and psychological) injuries and even death, including injuries and death due to the respiratory and neurological systems of the body.

As the agreement went on to say, there would be safeguards provided “during the ‘waterboarding’ process, however, these measures may fail and even if they work properly they may not prevent Hitchens from experiencing serious injury or death.”

On the night before the encounter I got to sleep with what I thought was creditable ease, but woke early and knew at once that I wasn’t going back to any sort of doze or snooze. The first specialist I had approached with the scheme had asked my age on the telephone and when told what it was (I am 59) had laughed out loud and told me to forget it. Waterboarding is for Green Berets in training, or wiry young jihadists whose teeth can bite through the gristle of an old goat. It’s not for wheezing, paunchy scribblers. For my current “handlers” I had had to produce a doctor’s certificate assuring them that I did not have asthma, but I wondered whether I should tell them about the 15,000 cigarettes I had inhaled every year for the last several decades. I was feeling apprehensive, in other words, and beginning to wish I hadn’t given myself so long to think about it.

I have to be opaque about exactly where I was later that day, but there came a moment when, sitting on a porch outside a remote house at the end of a winding country road, I was very gently yet firmly grabbed from behind, pulled to my feet, pinioned by my wrists (which were then cuffed to a belt), and cut off from the sunlight by having a black hood pulled over my face. I was then turned around a few times, I presume to assist in disorienting me, and led over some crunchy gravel into a darkened room. Well, mainly darkened: there were some oddly spaced bright lights that came as pinpoints through my hood. And some weird music assaulted my ears. (I’m no judge of these things, but I wouldn’t have expected former Special Forces types to be so fond of New Age techno-disco.) The outside world seemed very suddenly very distant indeed.

Arms already lost to me, I wasn’t able to flail as I was pushed onto a sloping board and positioned with my head lower than my heart. (That’s the main point: the angle can be slight or steep.) Then my legs were lashed together so that the board and I were one single and trussed unit. Not to bore you with my phobias, but if I don’t have at least two pillows I wake up with acid reflux and mild sleep apnea, so even a merely supine position makes me uneasy. And, to tell you something I had been keeping from myself as well as from my new experimental friends, I do have a fear of drowning that comes from a bad childhood moment on the Isle of Wight, when I got out of my depth. As a boy reading the climactic torture scene of 1984, where what is in Room 101 is the worst thing in the world, I realize that somewhere in my version of that hideous chamber comes the moment when the wave washes over me. Not that that makes me special: I don’t know anyone who likes the idea of drowning. As mammals we may have originated in the ocean, but water has many ways of
reminding us that when we are in it we are out of our element. In brief, when it comes to breathing, give me good old air every time.

You may have read by now the official lie about this treatment, which is that it "simulates" the feeling of drowning. This is not the case. You feel that you are drowning because you are drowning—or, rather, being drowned, albeit slowly and under controlled conditions and at the mercy (or otherwise) of those who are applying the pressure. The "board" is the instrument, not the method. You are not being boarded. You are being watered. This was very rapidly brought home to me when, on top of the hood, which still admitted a few flashes of random and worrying strobe light to my vision, three layers of enveloping towel were added. In this pregnant darkness, head downward, I waited for a while until I abruptly felt a slow cascade of water going up my nose. Determined to resist if only for the honor of my navy ancestors who had so often been in peril on the sea, I held my breath for a while and then had to exhale and—as you might expect—inhale in turn. The inhalation brought the damp cloths tight against my nostrils, as if a huge, wet paw had been suddenly and annihilatingly clamped over my face. Unable to determine whether I was breathing in or out, and flooded more with sheer panic than with mere water, I triggered the pre-arranged signal and felt the unbelievable relief of being pulled upright and having the soaking and stifling layers pulled off me. I find I don't want to tell you how little time I lasted.

This is because I had read that Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, invariably referred to as the "mastermind" of the atrocities of September 11, 2001, had impressed his interrogators by holding out for upwards of two minutes before cracking. (By the way, this story is not confirmed. My North Carolina friends jeered at it. "Hell," said one, "from what I heard they only washed his damn face before he babbled.") But, hell, I thought in my turn, no Hitchens is going to do worse than that. Well, O.K., I admit I didn’t outdo him. And so then I said, with slightly more bravado than was justified, that I’d like to try it one more time. There was a paramedic present who checked my racing pulse and warned me about adrenaline rush. An interval was ordered, and then I felt the mask come down again. Steeling myself to remember what it had been like last time, and to learn from the previous panic attack, I fought down the first, and some of the second, wave of nausea and terror but soon found that I was an abject prisoner of my gag reflex. The interrogators would hardly have had time to ask me any questions, and I knew that I would quite readily have agreed to supply any answer. I still feel ashamed when I think about it. Also, in case it’s of interest, I have since woken up trying to push the bedcovers off my face, and if I do anything that makes me short of breath I find myself clawing at the air with a horrible sensation of smothering and claustrophobia. No doubt this will pass. As if detecting my misery and shame, one of my interrogators comfortingly said, "Any time is a long time when you’re breathing water." I could have hugged him for saying so, and just then I was hit with a ghastly sense of the sadomasochistic dimension that underlies the relationship between the torturer and the tortured. I apply the Abraham Lincoln test for moral casuistry: “If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong.” Well, then, if waterboarding does not constitute torture, then there is no such thing as torture.
I am somewhat proud of my ability to “keep my head,” as the saying goes, and to maintain presence of mind under trying circumstances. I was completely convinced that, when the water pressure had become intolerable, I had firmly uttered the pre-determined code word that would cause it to cease. But my interrogator told me that, rather to his surprise, I had not spoken a word. I had activated the “dead man’s handle” that signaled the onset of unconsciousness. So now I have to wonder about the role of false memory and delusion. What I do recall clearly, though, is a hard finger feeling for my solar plexus as the water was being poured. What was that for? “That’s to find out if you are trying to cheat, and timing your breathing to the doses. If you try that, we can outsmart you. We have all kinds of enhancements.” I was briefly embarrassed that I hadn’t earned or warranted these refinements, but it hit me yet again that this is certainly the language of torture.

Maybe I am being premature in phrasing it thus. Among the veterans there are at least two views on all this, which means in practice that there are two opinions on whether or not “waterboarding” constitutes torture. I have had some extremely serious conversations on the topic, with two groups of highly decent and serious men, and I think that both cases have to be stated at their strongest.

The team who agreed to give me a hard time in the woods of North Carolina belong to a highly honorable group. This group regards itself as out on the front line in defense of a society that is too spoiled and too ungrateful to appreciate those solid, underpaid volunteers who guard us while we sleep. These heroes stay on the ramparts at all hours and in all weather, and if they make a mistake they may be arraigned in order to scratch some domestic political itch. Faced with appalling enemies who make horror videos of torture and beheadings, they feel that they are the ones who confront denunciation in our press, and possible prosecution. As they have just tried to demonstrate to me, a man who has been waterboarded may well emerge from the experience a bit shaky, but he is in a mood to surrender the relevant information and is unmarked and undamaged and indeed ready for another bout in quite a short time. When contrasted to actual torture, waterboarding is more like foreplay. No thumbscrew, no pincers, no electrodes, no rack. Can one say this of those who have been captured by the tormentors and murderers of (say) Daniel Pearl? On this analysis, any call to indict the United States for torture is therefore a lame and diseased attempt to arrive at a moral equivalence between those who defend civilization and those who exploit its freedoms to hollow it out, and ultimately to bring it down. I myself do not trust anybody who does not clearly understand this viewpoint.

Against it, however, I call as my main witness Mr. Malcolm Nance. Mr. Nance is not what you call a bleeding heart. In fact, speaking of the coronary area, he has said that, in
battlefield conditions, he “would personally cut bin Laden’s heart out with a plastic M.R.E. spoon.” He was to the fore on September 11, 2001, dealing with the burning nightmare in the debris of the Pentagon. He has been involved with the SERE program since 1997. He speaks Arabic and has been on al-Qaeda’s tail since the early 1990s. His most recent book, *The Terrorists of Iraq,* is a highly potent analysis both of the jihadist threat in Mesopotamia and of the ways in which we have made its life easier. I passed one of the most dramatic evenings of my life listening to his cold but enraged denunciation of the adoption of waterboarding by the United States. The argument goes like this:

1. Waterboarding is a deliberate torture technique and has been prosecuted as such by our judicial arm when perpetrated by others.

2. If we allow it and justify it, we cannot complain if it is employed in the future by other regimes on captive U.S. citizens. It is a method of putting American prisoners in harm’s way.

3. It may be a means of extracting information, but it is also a means of extracting junk information. (Mr. Nance told me that he had heard of someone’s being compelled to confess that he was a hermaphrodite. I later had an awful twinge while wondering if I myself could have been “dunked” this far.) To put it briefly, even the C.I.A. sources for the *Washington Post* story on waterboarding conceded that the information they got out of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed was “not all of it reliable.” Just put a pencil line under that last phrase, or commit it to memory.

4. It opens a door that cannot be closed. Once you have posed the notorious “ticking bomb” question, and once you assume that you are in the right, what will you *not* do? Waterboarding not getting results fast enough? The terrorist’s clock still ticking? Well, then, bring on the thumbscrews and the pincers and the electrodes and the rack.

asked by these arguments, there lurks another very penetrating point. Nance doubts very much that Khalid Sheikh Mohammed lasted that long under the water treatment (and I am pathetically pleased to hear it). It’s also quite thinkable, *if* he did, that he was trying to attain martyrdom at our hands. But even if he endured so long, and since the United States has in any case bragged that *in fact* he did, one of our worst enemies has now become one of the founders of something that will someday disturb your sleep as well as mine. To quote Nance:

*Torture advocates hide behind the argument that an open discussion about specific American interrogation techniques will aid the enemy. Yet, convicted Al Qaeda members and innocent captives who were released to their host nations have already debriefed the world through hundreds of interviews, movies and documentaries on exactly what methods they were subjected to and how they endured. Our own missteps have created a cadre of highly experienced lecturers for Al Qaeda’s own virtual SERE school for terrorists.*

Which returns us to my starting point, about the distinction between training for something and training to resist it. One used to be told—and surely with truth—that the lethal fanatics of al-Qaeda were schooled to lie, and instructed to claim that they had been tortured and maltreated whether they had been tortured and maltreated or not. Did we notice what a frontier we had crossed when we admitted and even proclaimed that their stories might in fact be true? I had only a very slight encounter on that frontier, but I still wish that my experience were the only way in which the words “waterboard” and “American” could be mentioned in the same (gasping and sobbing) breath.
ESSAY

The Naked and the Conflicted

By KATIE ROIPHE

For a literary culture that fears it is on the brink of total annihilation, we are awfully cavalier about the Great Male Novelists of the last century. It has become popular to denounce those authors, and more particularly to deride the sex scenes in their novels. Even the young male writers who, in the scope of their ambition, would appear to be the heirs apparent have repudiated the aggressive virility of their predecessors.

After reading a sex scene in Philip Roth’s latest novel, “The Humbling,” someone I know threw the book into the trash on a subway platform. It was not exactly feminist rage that motivated her. We have internalized the feminist critique pioneered by Kate Millett in “Sexual Politics” so completely that, as one of my students put it, “we can do the math ourselves.” Instead my acquaintance threw the book away on the grounds that the scene was disgusting, dated, redundant. But why, I kept wondering, did she have to throw it out? Did it perhaps retain a little of the provocative fire its author might have hoped for? Dovetailing with this private and admittedly limited anecdote, there is a punitive, vituperative quality in the published reviews that is always revealing of something larger in the culture, something beyond one aging writer's failure to produce fine enough sentences. All of which is to say: How is it possible that Philip Roth’s sex scenes are still enraging us?

In the early novels of Roth and his cohort there was in their dirty passages a sense of novelty, of news, of breaking out. Throughout the ’60s, with books like “An American Dream,” “Herzog,” “Rabbit, Run,” “Portnoy’s Complaint” and “Couples,” there was a feeling that their authors were reporting from a new frontier of sexual behavior: adultery, anal sex, oral sex, threesomes — all of it had the thrill of the new, or at least of the newly discussed. When “Couples,” John Updike’s tour de force of extramarital wanderlust set in a small New England town called Tarbox, came out in 1968, a Time magazine cover article declared that “the sexual scenes, and the language that accompanies them, are remarkably explicit, even for this new age of total freedom of expression.”

These novelists were writing about the bedrooms of middle-class life with the thrill of the censors at their backs, with the 1960 obscenity trial over “Lady Chatterley’s Lover” fresh in their minds. They would bring their talent, their analytic insights, their keen writerly observation, to the most intimate, most unspeakable moments, and the exhilaration, the mischief, the crackling energy was in the prose. These young writers —
Mailer, Roth, Updike — were taking up the X-rated subject matter of John O'Hara and Henry Miller, but with a dash of modern journalism splashed in.

In Philip Roth’s phenomenally successful 1969 novel “Portnoy’s Complaint,” the Jewish hero sleeps his way into mainstream America through the narrow loins of a series of crazy harridans and accommodating lovelies. But are the sex scenes meant to be taken seriously? In “The Counterlife,” Roth’s alter ego, the writer Nathan Zuckerman, calls himself a “sexual satirist,” and in that book and others Roth’s sex scenes do manage to be both comic and dirty at the same time: “The sight of the Zipper King’s daughter sitting on the edge of the bathtub with her legs flung apart, wantonly surrendering all 5 feet 9 inches of herself to a vegetable, was as mysterious and compelling a vision as any Zuckerman had ever seen.”

Roth’s explicit passages walk a fine, difficult line between darkness, humor and lust, and somehow the male hero emerges from all the comic clauses breathless, glorified. There is in these scenes rage, revenge and some garden-variety sexism, but they are — in their force, in their gale winds, in their intelligence — charismatic, a celebration of the virility of their bookish, yet oddly irresistible, protagonists. As the best scenes spool forward, they are maddening, beautiful, eloquent and repugnant all at once. One does not have to like Roth, or Zuckerman, or Portnoy, to admire the intensely narrated spectacle of their sexual adventures. Part of the suspense of a Roth passage, the tautness, the brilliance, the bravado in the sentences themselves, the high-wire performance of his prose, is how infuriating and ugly and vain he can be without losing his readers (and then every now and then he actually goes ahead and loses them).

In 1960, the 28-year-old Updike solidified his emerging reputation as the author of eerily beautiful stories with his novel “Rabbit, Run,” about a lanky ex-basketball player turned kitchen utensil salesman, Harry (Rabbit) Angstrom, who runs off from his family, has sex with a plump and promiscuous mistress and comes home to a wife who has drunkenly drowned their newborn baby. A few years later, Norman Mailer told Updike he should get back in the whorehouse and stop worrying about his prose style. But that was Updike’s unnerving gift: to be frank and aestheticizing all at once, to do poetry and whorehouse. In “Couples,” a graphic description of oral sex includes “the floral surfaces of her mouth.” In “Rabbit, Run,” we read of “lovely wobbly bubbles, heavy: perfume between. Taste, salt and sour, swirls back with his own saliva.” The hallmark of Updike’s sex scenes is the mingling of his usual brutal realism with a stepped-up rapture, a harsh scrutiny combined with prettiness. Everything is rose, milky, lilac, and then suddenly it is not.

For Rabbit, as with many Updike characters, sex offers an escape, an alternate life — a reprieve, even, in its finest moments, from mortality. In the Time cover article, Updike describes adultery as an “imaginative quest.” In “Marry Me,” among other books, he expands on the theme that leaving one marriage for another doesn’t resolve our deeper malaise, but he is interested in the motion, in the fantasy, in the impulse toward renewal: it is Rabbit running that he loves. As one of the characters in “Couples” puts it, adultery “is a way of giving yourself adventures. Of getting out in the world and seeking knowledge.”
Saul Bellow shared Updike’s interest in sexual adventuring, in a great, splashy, colorful comic-book war between men and women. Moses Herzog, he writes, “will never understand what women want. What do they want? They eat green salad and drink human blood.” Bellow’s novels are populated with dark, voluptuous, generous, maybe foreign Renatas and Ramonas, who are mistresses; and then there are the wives, shrewish, smart, treacherous, angular. While his sex scenes are generally more gentlemanly than those of Roth et al., he manages to get across something of his tussle with these big, fleshy, larger-than-life ladies: “Ramona had not learned those erotic monkey-shines in a manual, but in adventure, in confusion, and at times probably with a sinking heart, in brutal and often alien embraces.”

In his disordered, sprawling novels, Mailer takes a hopped-up, quasi-religious view of sex, with flights of D. H. Lawrence-inspired mysticism and a special interest in sodomy. In “An American Dream,” he describes a woman’s genitals: “It was no graveyard now, no warehouse, no, more like a chapel now, a modest decent place, but its walls were snug, its odor was green, there was a sweetness in the chapel.”

Mailer’s most controversial obsession is the violence in sex, the urge toward domination in its extreme. A sampling: “I wounded her, I knew it, she thrashed beneath me like a trapped little animal, making not a sound.” “He must subdue her, absorb her, rip her apart and consume her.” It is part of Mailer’s existentialism, his singular, loopy philosophy, that violence is good, natural and healthy, and it is this in his sex scenes that provokes. As in many of Mailer’s ventures, like his famous campaign for mayor of New York, it’s not entirely clear how much he means it and how much is for fun, for the virile show.

It would be too simple to call the explicit interludes of this new literature pornographic, as pornography has one purpose: to arouse. These passages are after several things at once — sadness, titillation, beauty, fear, comedy, disappointment, aspiration. The writers were interested in showing not just the triumphs of sexual conquest, but also its loneliness, its failures of connection. In his unruly defense of sexually explicit male literature in “The Prisoner of Sex,” Mailer wrote: “He has spent his literary life exploring the watershed of sex from that uncharted side which goes by the name of lust and it is an epic work for any man. . . . Lust exhibits all the attributes of junk. It dominates the mind and other habits, it appropriates loyalties, generalizes character, leaches character out, rides on the fuel of almost any emotional gas — whether hatred, affection, curiosity, even the pressures of boredom — yet it is never definable because it can alter to love or be as suddenly sealed from love.”

In the intervening decades, the feminists objected; the public consumed; the novelists themselves were much decorated. And then somewhat to their surprise, the old guard got old. In books like Roth’s “Exit Ghost” and Updike’s “Toward the End of Time,” they began to take up the subject of impotence in various forms. Was it possible that the young literary gods had fallen? Roth wrote in “Zuckerman Unbound”: “Life has its own flippant ideas about how to handle serious fellows like Zuckerman. All you have to do is wait and it teaches you all there is to know about the art of mockery.”

And so we come back to the copy of “The Humbling” in the garbage can on the subway platform. The
problem with the sex scenes in Philip Roth’s late work is not that they are pornographic, but that they fail as pornography. One feels that the author’s heart is not in it, that he is just going through the motions; one feels the impatient old master mapping out scenes (dildo, threesome), not writing them. The threesome in “The Humbling” has none of the quirkiness, the energy, the specificity of the threesomes in “Portnoy’s Complaint,” either the one where “the Monkey” eats a banana and gets her name, or the one where they pick up an Italian prostitute who later brings her son, all dressed up in his Sunday best, to see them. In the stripped-down later novels (“Everyman,” “Exit Ghost,” “Indignation”), Roth seems to have dispensed with the detail and idiosyncratic richness of his earlier work. As he writes about old men failing at sex, and raging about failing at sex, we see the old writer failing at writing about sex, which is, of course, a spectacle much more heartbreaking.

At this point, one might be thinking: enter the young men, stage right. But our new batch of young or youngish male novelists are not dreaming up Portnoys or Rabbits. The current sexual style is more childlike; innocence is more fashionable than virility, the cuddle preferable to sex. Prototypical is a scene in Dave Eggers’s road trip novel, “You Shall Know Our Velocity,” where the hero leaves a disco with a woman and she undresses and climbs on top of him, and they just lie there: “Her weight was the ideal weight and I was warm and wanted her to be warm”; or the relationship in Benjamin Kunkel’s “Indecision”: “We were sleeping together brother-sister style and mostly refraining from outright sex.”

Characters in the fiction of the heirs apparent are often repelled or uncomfortable when faced with a sexual situation. In “Infinite Jest,” David Foster Wallace writes: “He had never once had actual intercourse on marijuana. Frankly, the idea repelled him. Two dry mouths bumping at each other, trying to kiss, his self-conscious thoughts twisting around on themselves like a snake on a stick while he bucked and snorted dryly above her.” With another love interest, “his shame at what she might on the other hand perceive as his slimy phallocentric conduct toward her made it easier for him to avoid her, as well.” Gone the familiar swagger, the straightforward artistic reveling in the sexual act itself. In Kunkel’s version: “Maybe I was going to get lucky, something which, I reminded myself, following her up the stairs to our room and giving her ass a good review, wasn’t always a piece of unmixed luck, and shouldn’t automatically be hoped for any more than feared.”

Rather than an interest in conquest or consummation, there is an obsessive fascination with trepidation, and with a convoluted, postfeminist second-guessing. Compare Kunkel’s tentative and guilt-ridden masturbation scene in “Indecision” with Roth’s famous onanistic exuberance with apple cores, liver and candy wrappers in “Portnoy’s Complaint.” Kunkel: “Feeling extremely uncouth, I put my penis away. I might have thrown it away if I could.” Roth also writes about guilt, of course, but a guilt overridden and swept away, joyously subsumed in the sheer energy of taboo smashing: “How insane whipping out my joint like that! Imagine what would have been had I been caught red-handed! Imagine if I had gone ahead.” In other words, one rarely gets the sense in Roth that he would throw away his penis if he could.
The literary possibilities of their own ambivalence are what beguile this new generation, rather than anything that takes place in the bedroom. In Michael Chabon’s “Mysteries of Pittsburgh,” a woman in a green leather miniskirt and no underwear reads aloud from “The Story of O,” and the protagonist says primly, “I refuse to flog you.” Then take the following descriptions from Jonathan Franzen’s novel “The Corrections”: “As a seducer, he was hampered by ambivalence.” “He had, of course, been a lousy, anxious lover.” “He could hardly believe she hadn’t minded his attacks on her, all his pushing and pawing and poking. That she didn’t feel like a piece of meat that he’d been using.” (And of course there are writers like Jonathan Safran Foer who avoid the corruptions of adult sexuality by choosing children and virgins as their protagonists.)

The same crusading feminist critics who objected to Mailer, Bellow, Roth and Updike might be tempted to take this new sensitivity or softness or indifference to sexual adventuring as a sign of progress (Mailer called these critics “the ladies with their fierce ideas.”) But the sexism in the work of the heirs apparent is simply wilier and shrewder and harder to smoke out. What comes to mind is Franzen’s description of one of his female characters in “The Corrections”: “Denise at 32 was still beautiful.” To the esteemed ladies of the movement I would suggest this is not how our great male novelists would write in the feminist utopia.

The younger writers are so self-conscious, so steeped in a certain kind of liberal education, that their characters can’t condone even their own sexual impulses; they are, in short, too cool for sex. Even the mildest display of male aggression is a sign of being overly hopeful, overly earnest or politically untoward. For a character to feel himself, even fleetingly, a conquering hero is somehow passé. More precisely, for a character to attach too much importance to sex, or aspiration to it, to believe that it might be a force that could change things, and possibly for the better, would be hopelessly retrograde. Passivity, a paralyzed sweetness, a deep ambivalence about sexual appetite, are somehow taken as signs of a complex and admirable inner life. These are writers in love with irony, with the literary possibility of self-consciousness so extreme it almost precludes the minimal abandon necessary for the sexual act itself, and in direct rebellion against the Roth, Updike and Bellow their college girlfriends denounced. (Recounting one such denunciation, David Foster Wallace says a friend called Updike “just a penis with a thesaurus”).

This generation of writers is suspicious of what Michael Chabon, in “Wonder Boys,” calls “the artificial hopefulness of sex.” They are good guys, sensitive guys, and if their writing is denuded of a certain carnality, if it lacks a sense of possibility, of expansiveness, of the bewildering, transporting effects of physical love, it is because of a certain cultural shutting down, a deep, almost puritanical disapproval of their literary forebears and the shenanigans they lived through.

In a vitriolic attack on Updike’s “Toward the End of Time,” David Foster Wallace said of the novel’s narrator, Ben Turnbull, that “he persists in the bizarre adolescent idea that getting to have sex with whomever one wants whenever one wants is a cure for ontological despair,” and that Updike himself “makes it plain that he views the narrator’s impotence as catastrophic, as the ultimate symbol of death.
itself, and he clearly wants us to mourn it as much as Turnbull does. I'm not especially offended by this attitude; I mostly just don’t get it.”

In this same essay, Wallace goes on to attack Updike and, in passing, Roth and Mailer for being narcissists. But does this mean that the new generation of novelists is not narcissistic? I would suspect, narcissism being about as common among male novelists as brown eyes in the general public, that it does not. It means that we are simply witnessing the flowering of a new narcissism: boys too busy gazing at themselves in the mirror to think much about girls, boys lost in the beautiful vanity of “I was warm and wanted her to be warm,” or the noble purity of being just a tiny bit repelled by the crude advances of the desiring world.

After the sweep of the last half-century, our bookshelves look different than they did to the young Kate Millett, drinking her nightly martini in her downtown apartment, shoring up her courage to take great writers to task in “Sexual Politics” for the ways in which their sex scenes demeaned, insulted or oppressed women. These days the revolutionary attitude may be to stop dwelling on the drearier aspects of our more explicit literature. In contrast to their cautious, entangled, ambivalent, endlessly ironic heirs, there is something almost romantic in the old guard’s view of sex: it has a mystery and a power, at least. It makes things happen.

Kate Millett might prefer that Norman Mailer have a different taste in sexual position, or that Bellow’s fragrant ladies bear slightly less resemblance to one another, or that Rabbit not sleep with his daughter-in-law the day he comes home from heart surgery, but there is in these old paperbacks an abiding interest in the sexual connection.

Compared with the new purity, the self-conscious paralysis, the self-regarding ambivalence, Updike’s notion of sex as an “imaginative quest” has a certain vanished grandeur. The fluidity of Updike’s Tarbox, with its boozy volleyball games and adulterous couples copulating al fresco, has disappeared into the Starbucks lattes and minivans of our current suburbs, and our towns and cities are more solid, our marriages safer; we have landed upon a more conservative time. Why, then, should we be bothered by our literary lions’ continuing obsession with sex? Why should it threaten our insistent modern cynicism, our stern belief that sex is no cure for what David Foster Wallace called “ontological despair”? Why don’t we look at these older writers, who want to defeat death with sex, with the same fondness as we do the inventors of the first, failed airplanes, who stood on the tarmac with their unwieldy, impossible machines, and looked up at the sky?

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My Confession

EVERY age has a keyhole to which its eye is pasted. Spicy court-memoirs, the lives of gallant ladies, recollections of an ex-nun, a monk’s confession, an atheist’s repentance, true-to-life accounts of prostitution and bastardy gave our ancestors a penny peep into the forbidden room. In our own day, this type of sensational fact-fiction is being produced largely by ex-Communists. Public curiosity shows an almost prurient avidity for the details of political defloration, and the memoirs of ex-Communists have an odd resemblance to the confessions of a white slave. Two shuddering climaxes, two rendezvous with destiny, form the poles between which these narratives vibrate: the first describes the occasion when the subject was seduced by Communism; the second shows him wresting himself from the demon embrace. Variations on the form are possible. Senator McCarthy, for example, in his book, McCarthyism, the Fight for America, uses a tense series of flashbacks to dramatise his encounter with Communism: the country lies passive in Communism’s clasp; he is given a tryst with destiny in the lonely Arizona hills, where, surrounded by “real Americans without any synthetic sheen,” he attains the decision that will send him down the long marble corridors to the Senate Caucus Room to bare the shameful commerce.

The diapason of choice plays, like movie music, round today’s apostle to the Gentiles: Whittaker Chambers on a bench and, in a reprise, awake all night at a dark window, facing the void. These people, unlike ordinary beings, are shown the true course during a lightning storm of revelation, on the road to Damascus. And their decisions are lonely decisions, silhouetted against a background of public incomprehension and hostility.

I object. I have read the reminiscences of Mr. Chambers and Miss Bentley. I too have had a share in the political movements of our day, and my experience cries out against their experience. It is not the facts I balk at—I have never been an espionage agent—but the studio atmosphere of sublimity and purpose that enfolds the facts and the chief actor. When Whittaker Chambers is mounted on his tractor, or Elizabeth Bentley, alone, is meditating her decision in a white New England church, I have the sense that they are on location and that, at any moment, the director will call “Cut.” It has never been like that for me; events have never waited, like extras, while I toiled to make up my mind between good and evil. In fact, I have never known these mental convulsions, which appear quite strange to me when I read about them, even when I do not question the author’s sincerity.

Is it really so difficult to tell a good action from a bad one? I think one usually knows right away or a moment afterwards, in a horrid flash of regret. And when one genuinely hesitates—or at least it is so in my case—it is never about anything of importance, but about perplexing trivial things, such as whether to have fish or meat for dinner, or whether to take the bus or subway to reach a certain destination, or whether to wear the beige or the green. The “great” decisions—those I can look back on pensively and say, “That was a turning-point”—have been made without my awareness. Too late to do anything about it, I discover that I have chosen. And this is particularly striking when the choice has been political or historic. For me, in fact, the mark of the historic is the nonchalance with which it picks up an individual and deposits him in a trend, like a house playfully moved by a tornado.
My own experience with Communism prompts me to relate it, just because it had this inadvertence that seems to me lacking in the true confessions of reformed Communists. Like Stendhal’s hero, who took part in something confused and disarrayed and insignificant that he later learned was the Battle of Waterloo, I joined the anti-Communist movement without meaning to and only found out afterwards, through others, the meaning or “name” assigned to what I had done. This occurred in the late fall of 1936.

Three years before, I had graduated from college—Vassar, the same college Elizabeth Bentley had gone to—without having suffered any fracture of my political beliefs or moral frame. All through college, my official political philosophy was royalism; though I was not much interested in politics, it irritated me to be told that “you could not turn the clock back.” But I did not see much prospect for kingship in the United States (unless you imported one, like the Swedes), and, faute de mieux, I awarded my sympathies to the Democratic Party, which I tried to look on as the party of the Southern patriciate. At the same time, I had an aversion to Republicans—an instinctive feeling that had been with me since I was a child of eight pedalling my wagon up and down our cement driveway and howling, “Hurray for Cox,” at the Republican neighbours who passed by. I disliked business men and business attitudes partly, I think, because I came from a professional (though Republican) family and had picked up a disdain for business men as being beneath us, in education and general culture. And the anti-Catholic prejudice against Al Smith during the 1928 election, the tinkling amusement at Mrs. Smith’s vulgarity, democratized me a little in spite of myself: I was won by Smith’s plebeian charm, the big coarse nose, andubby politician’s smile.

But this same distrust of uniformity made me shrink, in 1932, from the sloppily dressed socialist girls at college who paraded for Norman Thomas and tirelessly argued over “cokes”; their eager fellowship and scrawled placards and heavy personalities bored me—there was something, to my mind, deeply athletic about this socialism. It was a kind of political hockey played by big, gaunt, dyspeptic girls in pants. It startled me a little, therefore, to learn that in an election poll taken of the faculty, several of my favourite teachers had voted for Thomas; in them, the socialist faith appeared rather charming, I decided—a gracious and attractive oddity, like the English Ovals they gave you when you came for tea. That was the winter Hitler was coming to power and, hearing of the anti-Jewish atrocities, I had a flurry of political indignation. I wrote a prose-poem that dealt, in a mixed-up way, with the Polish Corridor and the Jews. This poem was so unlike me that I did not know whether to be proud of it or ashamed of it when I saw it in a college magazine. At this period, we were interested in surrealism and automatic writing, and the poem had a certain renown because it had come out of my interior without much sense or order, just the way automatic writing was supposed to do. But there my political development stopped.

The depression was closer to home; in New York I used to see apple-sellers on the street corners, and, now and then, a bread-line, but I had a very thin awareness of mass poverty. The depression was too close to home to awaken anything but curiosity and wonder—the feelings of a child confronted with a death in the family. I was conscious of the suicides of stockbrokers and business men, and of the fact that some of my friends had to go on scholarships and had their dress allowances curtailed, while their mothers gaily turned to doing their own cooking. To most of us at Vassar, I think, the depression was chiefly an upper-class phenomenon.

My real interests were literary. In a paper for my English Renaissance seminar, I noted a resemblance between the Elizabethan puritan pundits and the school of Marxist criticism that was beginning to pontificate about proletarian literature in the New Masses. I disliked the modern fanatics, cold, envious little clerics, equally with the insufferable and ridiculous Gabriel Harvey—Cambridge pedant and friend of Spenser—who tried to introduce the rules of Latin quantity into English verse and vilified a
true poet who had died young, in squalor and misery. I really hated absolutism and officiousness of any kind (I preferred my kings martyred) and was pleased to be able to recognise a Zest-of-the-Land-Busy in proletarian dress. And it was through a novel that I first learned, in my senior year, about the Sacco-Vanzetti case. The discovery that two innocent men had been executed only a few years back while I, oblivious, was in boarding school, gave me a disturbing shock. The case was still so near that I was tantalised by a feeling that it was not too late to do something—try still another avenue, if Governor Fuller and the Supreme Court obstinately would not be moved. An unrectified case of injustice has a terrible way of lingering, restlessly, in the social atmosphere like an unfinished equation. I went on to the Mooney case, which vexed not only my sense of equity but my sense of plausibility—how was it possible for the prosecution to lie so, in broad daylight, with the whole world watching?

When in May, 1933, however, before graduation, I went down to apply for a job at the old New Republic offices, I was not drawn there by the magazine’s editorial policy—I hardly knew what it was—but because the book-review section seemed to me to possess a certain elegance and independence of thought that would be hospitable to a critical spirit like me. And I was badly taken aback when the book-review editor, to whom I had been shunted—there was no job—puffed his pipe and remarked that he would give me a review if I could show him that I was either a genius or starving. “I’m not starving,” I said quickly; I knew I was not a genius and I was not pleased by the suggestion that I would be taking bread from other people’s mouths. I did not think this a fair criterion and in a moment I said so. In reply, he put down his pipe, shrugged, reached out for the material I had brought with me, and half-promised, after an assaying glance, to send me a book. My notice finally appeared; it was not very good, but I did not know that and was elated. Soon I was reviewing novels and biographies for both the New Republic and the Nation and preening myself on the connection. Yet, whenever I entered the New Republic’s waiting-room, I was seized with a feeling of nervous guilt towards the shirt-sleeved editors upstairs and their busy social conscience, and, above all, towards the shabby young men who were waiting too and who had, my bones told me, a better claim than I to the book I hoped to take away with me. They looked poor, pinched, scholarly, and supercilious, and I did not know which of these qualities made me, with my clicking high heels and fall “ensemble,” seem more out of place.

I cannot remember the moment when I ceased to air my old royalist convictions and stuffed them away in an inner closet as you do a dress or an ornament that you perceive strikes the wrong note. It was probably at the time when I first became aware of Communists as a distinct entity. I had known about them, certainly, in college, but it was not until I came to New York that I began to have certain people, celebrities, pointed out to me as Communists and to turn my head to look at them, wonderingly. I had no wish to be one of them, but the fact that they were there—an unreckoned factor—made my own political opinions take on a protective coloration. This process was accelerated by my marriage—a week after graduation—to an actor and playwright who was in some ways very much like me. He was the son of a Minnesota normal school administrator who had been the scapegoat in an academic scandal that had turned him out of his job and reduced him, for a time, when my husband was nine or ten, to selling artificial limbs and encyclopædia sets from door to door. My husband still brooded over his father’s misfortune, like Hamlet or a character in Ibsen, and this had given his nature a sardonic twist that inclined him to behave like a paradox—to follow the mode and despise it, live in a Beekman Place apartment while lacking the money to buy groceries, play bridge with society couples and poker with the stage electricians, dress in the English style and carry a walking-stick while wearing a red necktie.

He was an odd-looking man, prematurely bald, with a tense, arresting figure, a broken nose, a Standard English accent, and wry, circumflexed eyebrows. There was something about him both baleful and quizzical; whenever
he stepped on to the stage he had the ironic air of a symbol. This curious appearance of his disqualified him for most Broadway roles; he was too young for character parts and too bald for juveniles. Yet just this disturbing ambiguity—a Communist painter friend did a drawing of him that brought out a resemblance to Lenin—suited the portentous and equivocal atmosphere of left-wing drama. He smiled dryly at Marxist terminology, but there was social anger in him. During the years we were married, the only work he found was in productions of "social" significance. He played for the Theatre Union in *The Sailors of Cattaro*, about a mutiny in the Austrian fleet, and in *Black Pit*, about coal-miners; the following year, he was in *Winterset* and Archibald MacLeish’s *Panic*—the part of a blind man in both cases. He wrote revue sketches and unproduced plays, in a mocking, despairing, but none the less radical vein; he directed the book of a musical called *Americana* that featured the song, "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" I suppose there was something in him of both the victim and the leader, an undertone of totalitarianism; he was very much interested in the mythic qualities of leadership and talked briskly about a Farmer-Labour party in his stage English accent. Notions of the superman and the genius flickered across his thoughts. But this led him, as it happened, away from politics, into sheer personal vitalism, and it was only in plays that he entered "at the head of a mob." In personal life he was very winning, but that is beside the point here.

The point is that we both, through our professional connections, began to take part in a left-wing life, to which we felt superior, which we laughed at, but which nevertheless was influencing us without our being aware of it. If the composition of the body changes every seven years, the composition of our minds during the seven years of our engagement and marriage had slowly changed, so that though our thoughts looked the same to us, inside we had been altered, like an old car which has had part after part replaced in it under the hood.

We wore our rue with a difference; we should never have considered joining the Communist Party. We were not even fellow-travellers; we did not sign petitions or join "front" groups. We were not fools, after all, and were no more deceived by the League against War and Fascism, say, than by a Chinatown bus with a carload of shills aboard. It was part of our metropolitan sophistication to know the truth about Communist fronts. We accepted the need for social reform, but we declined to draw the "logical" inference that the Communists wanted us to draw from this. We argued with the comrades backstage in the dressing-rooms and at literary cocktail parties; I was attacked by a writer in the *New Masses*. We knew about Lovestoneites and Trotskyites, even while we were ignorant of the labour theory of value, the law of uneven development, the theory of permanent revolution v. socialism in one country, and so on. "Lovestone is a Lovestoneite!" John wrote in wax on his dressing-room mirror, and on his door in the old Civic Repertory he put up a sign: "Through these portals pass some of the most beautiful tractors in the Ukraine."

The comrades shrugged and laughed, a little unwillingly. They knew we were not hostile but merely unserious, politically. The comrades who knew us best used to assure us that our sophistication was just an armour; underneath, we must care for the same things they did. They were mistaken, I am afraid. Speaking for myself, I cannot remember a single broad altruistic emotion visiting me during that period—the kind of emotion the simpler comrades, with their shining eyes and exalted faces, seemed to have in copious secretion. And yet it was true: we were not hostile. We marched in May Day parades, just for the fun of it, and sang, "Hold the Fort, for We are Coming," and "Bandiera Rossa," and "The Internationale," though we always bellowed "The Socialist International shall be the human race," instead of "The International Soviet," to pique the Communists in our squad. We took part in evening clothes in a consumers’ walkout at the Waldorf to support a waiters’ strike; the Communists had nothing to do with this and we grew very excited (we did have negative feelings) when another young literary independent was arrested and booked. During a strike at a department store, John joined the
sympathetic picketing and saw two of his fellow-actors carried off in the Black Maria; they missed a matinee and set off a controversy about what was the first responsibility of a Communist playing in a proletarian drama. We went once or twice to a class for actors in Marxism, just to see what was up; we went to a debate on Freud and/or Marx, to a debate on the execution of the hundred and four White Guards following Kirov’s assassination.

Most ex-Communists nowadays, when they write their autobiographies or testify before congressional committees, are at pains to point out that their actions were very, very bad and their motives very, very good. I would say the reverse of myself, though without the intensives. I see no reason to disavow my actions, which were perfectly all right, but my motives give me a little embarrassment, and just because I cannot disavow them: that fevered, contentious, trivial show-off in the May Day parade is still recognisably me.

We went to dances at Webster Hall and took our uptown friends. We went to parties to raise money for the sharecroppers, for the Theatre Union, for the New Masses. These parties generally took place in a borrowed apartment, often a sculptor’s or commercial artist’s studio; you paid for your drinks, which were dispensed at a long, wet table; the liquor was dreadful; the glasses were small, and there was never enough ice. Long-haired men in turtle-necked sweaters marched into the room in processions and threw their overcoats on the floor, against the wall, and sat on them; they were only artists and bit-actors, but they gave these affairs a look of gangsterish menace, as if the room were guarded by the goons of the future. On couches with wrinkled slipcovers, little spiky-haired girls, like spiders, dressed in peasant blouses and carapaced with Mexican jewellery, made voracious passes at baby-faced juveniles; it was said that they “did it for the Party,” as a recruiting effort. Vague, soft-faced old women with dust mops of whitish hair wandered benevolently about seeking a listener; on a sofa against a wall, like a deity, sat a bearded scion of an old Boston family, stiff as a post. All of us, generally, became very drunk; the atmosphere was horribly sordid, with cigarette burns on tables, spilled drinks, ashes everywhere, people passed out on the bed with the coats or necking, you could not be sure which. Nobody cared what happened because there was no host or hostess. The fact that a moneyed person had been simple enough to lend the apartment seemed to make the guests want to desecrate it, to show that they were exercising not a privilege but a right.

Obviously, I must have hated these parties, but I went to them, partly because I was ashamed of my own squeamishness, and partly because I had a curiosity about the Communist men I used to see there, not the actors or writers, but the higher-ups, impresarios and theoreticians—dark, smooth-haired owls with large white lugubrious faces and glasses. These were the spiritual directors of the Communist cultural celebrities and they moved about at these parties like so many monks or abbés in a worldly salon. I had always liked to argue with the clergy, and I used to argue with these men, who always had the air, as they stood with folded arms, of listening not to a disagreement but to a confession. Whenever I became tight, I would bring up (oh, vino veritas) the Tsar and his family. I did not see why they all had had to be killed—the Tsar himself, yes, perhaps, and the Tsarina, but not the young girls and the children. I knew the answer, of course (the young Tsarevitch or one of his sisters might have served as a rallying point for the counter-revolutionary forces), but still I gazed hopefully into these docents’ faces, seeking a trace of scruple or compassion. But I saw only a marmoreal astuteness. The question was of bourgeois origin, they said with finality.

The next morning I was always bitterly ashamed. I had let these omniscient men see the real me underneath, and the other me squirmed and gritted her teeth and muttered, Never, never, never again. And yet they had not convinced me—there was the paradox. The superiority I felt to the Communists I knew had, for me at any rate, good grounding; it was based on their lack of humour, their fanaticism, and the slow drip of cant that thickened their utterance like a nasal catarrh. And yet I was tremendously impressed by them.
They made me feel petty and shallow; they had, shall I say, a daily ugliness in their life that made my pretty life tawdry. I think all of us who moved in that ambience must have felt something of the kind, even while we laughed at them. When John and I, for instance, would say of a certain actor, “He is a Party member,” our voices always contained a note of respect. This respect might be mixed with pity, as when we saw some blue-eyed young profile, fresh from his fraternity and his C average, join up because a sleazy girl had persuaded him. The literary Communists I sincerely despised because I was able to judge the quality of the work they published and see their dishonesty and contradictions; even so, when I beheld them in person, at a Webster Hall dance, I was troubled and felt perhaps I had wronged them—perhaps there was something in them that my vision could not perceive, as some eyes cannot perceive colour.

People sometimes say that they envied the Communists because they were so “sure.” In my case, this was not exactly it; I was sure, too, intellectually speaking, as far as I went. That is, I had a clear mind and was reasonably honest, while many of the Communists I knew were pathetically fogged up. In any case, my soul was not particularly hot for certainties.

And yet in another way I did envy the Communists, or, to be more accurate, wonder whether I ought to envy them. I could not, I saw, be a Communist because I was not “made that way.” Hence, to be a Communist was to possess a sort of privilege. And this privilege, like all privileges, appeared to be a source of power. Any form of idiocy or aberration can confer this distinction on its owner, at least in our age, which aspires to a “total” experience; in the thirties it was the Communists who seemed fearsomely to be the happy few, not because they had peace or certitude but because they were a mutation—a mutation that threatened, in the words of their own anthem, to become the human race.

There was something arcane in every Communist, and the larger this area was the more we respected him. That was why the literary Communists, who operated in the open, doing the hatchet work on artists’ reputations, were held in such relatively low esteem. An underground worker rated highest with us; next were the theoreticians and oracles; next were the activists, who mostly worked, we heard, on the waterfront. Last came the rank and file, whose work consisted of making speeches, distributing leaflets, attending party and fraction meetings, joining front organisations, marching in parades and demonstrations. These people we dismissed as uninteresting not so much because their work was routine but because the greater part of it was visible. In the same way, among individual comrades, we looked up to those who were close-lipped and stern about their beliefs and we disparaged the more voluble members—the forensic little actors who tried to harangue us in the dressing-rooms. The idea of a double life was what impressed us: the more talkative comrades seemed to have only one life, like us; but even they, we had to remind ourselves, had a secret annex to their personality, which was signified by their Party name. It is hard not to respect somebody who has an alias.

Of fellow-travellers, we had a very low opinion. People who were not willing to “go the whole way” filled us with impatient disdain. The only fellow-travellers who merited our notice were those of whom it was said: The Party prefers that they remain on the outside. I think some fellow-travellers circulated such stories about themselves deliberately, in order to appear more interesting. There was another type of fellow-traveller who let it be known that they stayed out of the Party because of some tiny doctrinal difference with Marxism. This tiny difference magnified them enormously in their own eyes and allowed them to bear gladly the accusation of cowardice. I knew one such person very well—a spruce, ingratiating swain, the heir to a large fortune—and I think it was not cowardice but a kind of pietistic vanity. He felt he cut more of a figure if he seemed to be doing the Party’s dirty work gratuitously, without compulsion, like an oblate.

In making these distinctions (which were the very distinctions the Party made), I had no idea, of course, that I was allowing myself to be
influenced by the Party in the field where I was most open to suasion—the field of social snobbery. Yet in fact I was being deterred from forming any political opinions of my own, lest I find I was that despised article, a “mere” socialist or watery liberal, in the same way that a young snob coming to college and seeing who the “right” people are will strive to make no friends rather than be caught with the wrong ones.

For me, the Communist Party was the party, and even though I did not join it, I prided myself on knowing that it was the pinnacle. It is only now that I see the social component in my attitude. At the time, I simply supposed that I was being clear-sighted and logical. I used to do research and typing for a disgruntled middle-aged man who was a freak for that day—an anti-Communist Marxist—and I was bewildered by his anti-Party bias. While we were drinking hot tea, Russian style, from glasses during the intervals of our work, I would try to show him his mistake. “Don’t you think it’s rather futile,” I expostulated, “to criticise the Party the way you do, from the outside? After all, it’s the only working-class Party, and if I were a Marxist I would join it and try to reform it.” Snorting, he would raise his small deep-set blue eyes and stare at me and then try patiently to show me that there was no democracy in the Party. I listened disbelievingly. It seemed to me that it would just be a question of converting first one comrade and then another to your point of view till gradually you had achieved a majority. And when my employer assured me that they would throw you out if you tried that, my twenty-three-year-old wisdom cocked an eyebrow. I thought I knew what was the trouble: he was a pathologically lazy man and his growing criticisms of the Party were simply a form of malingering, like the aches and pains he used to manufacture to avoid working on an article. A real revolutionary who was not afraid of exertion would get into the Party and fight.

The curious idea that being critical of the Party was a compelling reason for joining it must have been in the air, for the same argument was brought to bear on me in the summer of 1936—the summer my husband and I separated and that I came closest to the gravitational pull of the Communist world. Just before I went off to Reno, there was a week in June when I stayed in Southampton with the young man I was planning to marry and a little Communist organiser in an old summer house furnished with rattan and wicker and Chinese matting and mother-of-pearl and paper fans. We had come there for a purpose. The little organiser had just been assigned a car—a battered old Ford roadster that had been turned over to the Party for the use of some poor organiser; it may have been the very car that figured in the Hiss case. My fiancé, who had known him for years, perhaps from the peace movement, was going to teach him to drive. We were all at a pause in our lives. The following week our friend was supposed to take the car to California and do propaganda work among the migrant fruit-pickers; I was to go to Reno; my fiancé, a vivacious young bachelor, was to conquer his habits of idleness and buckle down to a serious job. Those seven days, therefore, had a special, still quality, like the days of a novena you make in your childhood; a part of each of them was set aside for the Party’s task. It was early in June; the musty house that belonged to my fiancé’s parents still had the winter-smell of mice and old wood and rust and mildew. The summer colony had not yet arrived; the red flag, meaning that it was dangerous to swim, flew daily on the beach; the roads were nearly empty. Every afternoon we would take the old car, canvas flapping, to a deserted stretch of straight road in the dunes, where the neophyte could take the wheel.

He was a large-browed, dwarfish man in his late thirties, with a deep widow’s peak, a bristly short moustache, and a furry western accent—rather simple, open-natured, and cheerful, the sort of person who might have been a small-town salesman or itinerant newspaperman. There was an energetic, hopeful innocence about him that was not confined to his political convictions—he could not learn to drive. Every day the same thing happened; he would settle his frail yet stocky figure trustingly in the driver’s seat, grip the wheel,
step on the starter, and lose control of the car, which would shoot ahead in first or backward in reverse for a few perilous feet till my fiancé turned off the ignition; Ansel always mistook the gas for the brake and forgot to steer while he was shifting gears.

It was clear that he would never be able to pass the driver’s test at the county seat. In the evenings, to make up to him for his oncoming disappointment (we smiled when he said he could start without a licence), we encouraged him to talk about the Party and tried to take an intelligent interest. We would sit by the lamp and drink and ask questions, while he smoked his short pipe and from time to time took a long draught from his highball, like a man alone musing in a chair.

And finally one night, in the semi-dark, he knocked out his pipe and said to me: “You’re very critical of the Party. Why don’t you join it?” A thrill went through me, but I laughed, as when somebody has proposed to you and you are not sure whether they are serious. “I don’t think I’d make very good material.” “You’re wrong,” he said gravely. “You’re just the kind of person the Party needs. You’re young and idealistic and independent.” I broke in: “I thought independence was just what the Party didn’t want.” “The Party needs criticism,” he said. “But it needs it from the inside. If people like you who agree with its main objectives would come in and criticise, we wouldn’t be so narrow and sectarian.” “You admit the Party is narrow?” exclaimed my fiancé. “Sure, I admit it,” said Ansel, grinning. “But it’s partly the fault of people like Mary who won’t come in and broaden us.” And he confided that he himself made many of the same criticisms I did, but he made them from within the Party, and so could get himself listened to. “The big problem of the American Party,” said Ansel, puffing at his pipe, “is the smallness of the membership. People say we’re ruled from Moscow; I’ve never seen any sign of it. But let’s suppose it’s true, for the sake of argument. This just means that the American Party isn’t big enough yet to stand on its own feet. A big, indigenous party couldn’t be ruled from Moscow. The will of the members would have to rule it, just as their dues and contribu-

tions would support it.” “That’s where I come in, I suppose?” I said, teasing. “That’s where you come in,” he calmly agreed. He turned to my fiancé. “Not you,” he said. “You won’t have the time to give to it. But for Mary I think it would be an interesting experiment.”

An interesting experiment. . . . I let the thought wander through my mind. The subject recurred several times, by the lamplight, though with no particular urgency. Ansel, I thought (and still think), was speaking sincerely and partly in my own interest, almost as a spectator, as if he would be diverted to see how I worked out in the Party. All this gave me quite a new sense of Communism and of myself too; I had never looked upon my character in such a favourable light. And as a beneficiary of Ansel’s charity, I felt somewhat ashamed of the very doubt it raised: the suspicion that he might be blind to the real facts of inner Party life. I could admire where I could not follow, and, studying Ansel, I decided that I admired the Communists and would probably be one, if I were the person he thought me. Which I was afraid I was not. For me, such a wry conclusion is always uplifting, and I had the feeling that I mounted in understanding when Sunday morning came and I watched Ansel pack his sturdy suitcase and his briefcase full of leaflets into the old roadster. He had never yet driven more than a few yards by himself, and we stood on the front steps to await what was going to happen: he would not be able to get out of the driveway, and we would have to put him on the train and return the car to the Party when we came back to New York. As we watched, the car began to move; it picked up speed and grated into second, holding to the middle of the road as it turned out of the driveway. It hesitated and went into third: Ansel was driving! Through the back window we saw his figure hunched over the wheel; the road dipped and he vanished. We had witnessed a miracle, and we turned back into the house, frightened. All day we sat waiting for the call that would tell us there had been an accident, but the day passed without a sound, and by nightfall we accepted the phenomenon and pictured the little car on the highway,
travelling steadily west in one indefatigable thrust, not daring to stop for gas or refreshment, lest the will of the driver falter.

This parting glimpse of Ansel through the car's back window was, as it turned out, ultimate. Politically speaking, we reached a watershed that summer. The first Moscow trial took place in August. I knew nothing of this event because I was in Reno and did not see the New York papers. Nor did I know that the Party line had veered to the right and that all the fellow-travellers would be voting, not for Browder as I was now prepared to do (if only I remembered to register), but for Roosevelt. Isolated from these developments in the mountain altitudes, I was blossoming, like a lone winter rose overlooked by the frost, into a revolutionary thinker of the pure, uncompromising strain. The detached particles of the past three years' experience suddenly "made sense," and I saw myself as a radical.

"Book Bites Mary," wrote back a surprised literary editor when I sent him, from Reno, a radiant review of a novel about the Paris Commune that ended with the heroine sitting down to read the Communist Manifesto. In Seattle, when I came to stay with my grandparents, I found a strike on and instantly wired the Nation to ask if I could cover it. Every night I was off to the Labor Temple or a longshoreman's hall while my grandparents took comfort from the fact that I seemed to be against Roosevelt, the Democrats, and the tsars of the A. F. of L.—they did not quite grasp my explanation, that I was criticising "from the left."

Right here, I come up against a puzzle: why didn't I take the next step? But it is only a puzzle if one thinks of me not as a concrete entity but as a term in a logical operation: you agree with the Communist Party; ergo, you join it. I reasoned that way but I did not behave so. There was something in me that capriciously resisted being a term in logic, and the very fact that I cannot elicit any specific reason why I did not join the Party shows that I was never really contemplating it, though I can still hear my own voice, raised very authoritatively at a cafeteria-table at the Central Park Zoo, pointing out to a group of young intellectuals that if we were serious we would join the Communists.

This was in September and I was back in New York. The Spanish Civil War had begun. The pay-as-you-go parties were now all for the Loyalists, and young men were volunteering to go and fight in Spain. I read the paper every morning with tears of exaltation in my eyes, and my sympathies rained equally on Communists, Socialists, Anarchists, and the brave Catholic Basques. My heart was tense and swollen with Popular Front solidarity. I applauded the Lincoln Battalion, protested non-intervention, hurried into Wanamaker's to look for cotton-lace stockings: I was boycotting silk on account of Japan in China. I was careful to smoke only union-made cigarettes; the white package with Sir Walter Raleigh's portrait came proudly out of my pocketbook to rebuke Chesterfields and Luckies.

It was a period of intense happiness; the news from the battlefront was often encouraging and the practice of virtue was surprisingly easy. I moved into a one-room apartment on a crooked street in Greenwich Village and exulted in being poor and alone. I had a part-time job and read manuscripts for a publisher. the very riskiness of my situation was zestful—I had decided not to get married. The first month or so was scarifyingly lonely, but I survived this, and, starting early in November, I began to feel the first stirrings of popularity. A new set of people, rather smart and moneyed, young Communists with a little "name," progressive hosts and modernist hostesses, had discovered me. The fact that I was poor and lived in such a funny little apartment increased the interest felt: I was passed from hand to hand, as a novelty, like Gulliver among the Brobdignagians. During those first days in November, I was chiefly conscious of what a wonderful time I was starting to have. All this while, I had remained ignorant of the fissure that was opening. Nobody had told me of the trial of Zinoviev and Kamenev—the trial of the sixteen—or of the new trial that was being prepared in Moscow, the trial of Pyatakov and Radek.

Then, one afternoon in November, I was taken to a cocktail party, in honour of Art
Young, the old Masses cartoonist, whose book, The Best of Art Young, was being published that day. It was the first publisher's party I had ever been to, and my immediate sensation was one of disappointment: nearly all these people were strangers and, to me, quite unattractive. Art Young, a white-haired little kewpie, sitting in a corner, was pointed out to me, and I turned a respectful gaze on him, though I had no clear idea who he was or how he had distinguished himself. I presumed he was a veteran Communist, like a number of the stalwarts in the room, survivors of the old Masses and the Liberator. Their names were whispered to me and I nodded; this seemed to be a commemorative occasion, and the young men hovered in groups around the old men, as if to catch a word for posterity. On the outskirts of certain groups I noticed a few poorly dressed young men, bolder spirits, nervously flexing their lips, framing sentences that would propel them into the conversational centre, like actors with a single line to speak.

The solemnity of these proceedings made me feel terribly ill-at-ease. It was some time before I became aware that it was not just me who was nervous: the whole room was under a constraint. Some groups were avoiding other groups, and now and then an arrow of sarcasm would wing like a sniper's bullet from one conversation to another.

I was standing, rather bleakly, by the refreshment table, when a question was thrust at me: Did I think Trotsky was entitled to a hearing? It was a novelist friend of mine, dimple-faced, shaggy-headed, earnest, with a whole train of people, like a deputation, behind him. Trotsky? I glanced for help at a sour little man I had been talking with, but he merely shrugged. My friend made a beckoning gesture and a circle closed in. What had Trotsky done? Alas, I had to ask. A tumult of voices proffered explanations. My friend raised a hand for silence. Leaning on the table, he supplied the background, speaking very slowly, in his dragging, disconsolate voice, like a school-teacher wearied of his subject. Trotsky, it appeared, had been accused of fostering a counter-revolutionary plot in the Soviet Union—organising terrorist centres and conspiring with the Gestapo to murder the Soviet leaders. Sixteen old Bolsheviks had confessed and implicated him. It had been in the press since August.

I blushed; everybody seemed to be looking at me strangely. "Where has she been?" said a voice. I made a violent effort to take in what had been said. The enormity of the charge dazed me, and I supposed that some sort of poll was being taken and that I was being asked to pronounce on whether Trotsky was guilty or innocent. I could tell from my friend's low, even, melancholy tone that he regarded the charges as derisory. "What do you want me to say?" I protested. "I don't know anything about it." "Trotsky denies the charges," patiently intoned my friend. "He declares it's a GPU fabrication. Do you think he's entitled to a hearing?" My mind cleared. "Why, of course." I laughed—were there people who would say that Trotsky was not entitled to a hearing? But my friend's voice tolled a rebuke to this levity. "She says Trotsky is entitled to his day in court."

The sour little man beside me made a peculiar, sucking noise. "You disagree?" I demanded, wonderingly. "I'm smart," he retorted. "I don't let anybody ask me. You notice, he doesn't ask me?" "Shut up, George," said my novelist friend impatiently. "I'm asking her. One thing more, Mary," he continued gravely. "Do you believe that Trotsky should have the right of asylum?"

The right of asylum! I looked for someone to share my amusement—were we in ancient Greece or the Middle Ages? I was sure the U.S. government would be delighted to harbour such a distinguished foreigner. But nobody smiled back. Everybody watched dispassionately, as for form's sake I assented to the phrasing: yes, Trotsky, in my opinion, was entitled to the right of asylum.

I went home with the serene feeling that all these people were slightly crazy. Right of asylum, his day in court!—in a few hours I had forgotten the whole thing.

Four days later I tore open an envelope addressed to me by something that called itself "Committee for the Defense of Leon
Trotsky," and idly scanned the contents. "We demand for Leon Trotsky the right of a fair hearing and the right of asylum." Who were these demanders, I wondered, and, glancing down the letterhead, I discovered my own name. I sat down on my unmade studio couch, shaking. How dared they help themselves to my signature? This was the kind of thing the Communists were always being accused of pulling; apparently, Trotsky's admirers had gone to the same school. I had paid so little heed to the incident at the party that a connection was slow to establish itself. Reading over the list of signers, I recognised "names" that had been present there and remembered my novelist-friend going from person to person, methodically polling. . . .

How were they feeling, I wondered, when they opened their mail this morning? My own feelings were crisp. In two minutes I had decided to withdraw my name and write a note of protest. Trotsky had a right to a hearing, but I had a right to my signature. For even if there had been a legitimate misunderstanding (it occurred to me that perhaps I had been the only person there not to see the import of my answers), nothing I had said committed me to Trotsky's defence.

The "decision" was made, but according to my habit I procrastinated. The severe letter I proposed to write got put off till the next day and then the next. Probably I was not eager to offend somebody who had been a good friend to me. Nevertheless, the letter would undoubtedly have been written, had I been left to myself. But within the next forty-eight hours the phone calls began. People whom I had not seen for months or whom I knew very slightly telephoned to advise me to get off the newly formed Committee. These calls were not precisely threatening. Indeed, the caller often sounded terribly weak and awkward, as if he did not like the mission he had been assigned. But they were peculiar. For one thing, they always came after nightfall and sometimes quite late, when I was already in bed. Another thing, there was no real effort at persuasion: the caller stated his purpose in standardised phrases, usually plaintive in tone (the Committee was the tool of reaction, and all liberal people should dissociate themselves from its activities, which were an unwarranted intervention in the domestic affairs of the Soviet Union), and then hung up, almost immediately, before I had a proper chance to answer. Odd too—the voices were not those of my Communist friends but of virtual strangers. These people who admonished me to "think about it" were not people whose individual opinions could have had any weight with me. And when I did think about it, this very fact took on an ominous character: I was not being appealed to personally but impersonally warned.

Behind these phone calls there was a sense of massed power, as if all over the city the Party were wheeling its forces into disciplined formations, like a fleet or an army manœuvring. This, I later found, was true: a systematic telephone campaign was going on to dislodge members from the Committee. The phone calls generally came after dark and sometimes (especially when the recipient was elderly) in the small hours of the morning. The more prominent signers got anonymous messages and threats.

And in the morning papers and the columns of the liberal magazines I saw the results. During the first week, name after name fell off the Committee's letterhead. Prominent liberals and literary figures issued statements deploiring their mistake. And a number of people protested that their names had been used without permission. . . .

There, but for the grace of God, went I, I whispered, awestruck, to myself, hugging my guilty knowledge. Only Heaven—I plainly saw—by making me dilatory had preserved me from joining this sorry band. Here was the occasion when I should have been wrestling with my conscience or standing, floodlit, at the crossroads of choice. But in fact I was only aware that I had had a providential escape. I had been saved from having to decide about the Committee; I did not decide it—the Communists with their pressure tactics took the matter out of my hands. We all have an instinct that makes us side with the weak, if we do not stop to reason about it, the instinct that makes a householder shield a wounded fugitive.
without first conducting an inquiry into the rights and wrongs of his case. Such “decisions” are simple reflexes; they do not require courage; if they did, there would be fewer of them. When I saw what was happening, I rebounded to the defence of the Committee without a single hesitation—it was nobody’s business, I felt, how I happened to be on it, and if anybody had asked me, I should have lied without a scruple.

Of course, I did not foresee the far-reaching consequences of my act—how it would change my life. I had no notion that I was now an anti-Communist, where before I had been either indifferent or pro-Communist. I did, however, soon recognise that I was in a rather awkward predicament—not a moral quandary but a social one. I knew nothing about the cause I had espoused; I had never read a word of Lenin or Trotsky, nothing of Marx but the Communist Manifesto, nothing of Soviet history; the very names of the old Bolsheviks who had confessed were strange and almost barbarous in my ears. As for Trotsky, the only thing that made me think that he might be innocent was the odd behaviour of the Communists and the fellow-travelling liberals, who seemed to be infuriated at the idea of a free enquiry. All around me, in the fashionable Stalinist circles I was now frequenting, I began to meet with suppressed excitement and just-withheld disapproval. Jewelled lady-authors turned white and shook their bracelets angrily when I came into a soirée; rising young men in publishing or advertising tightened their neckties dubiously when I urged them to examine the case for themselves; out dancing in a night-club, tall, collegiate young Party members would press me to their shirt-bosoms and tell me not to be silly, honey.

And since I seemed to meet more Stalinists every day, I saw that I was going to have to get some arguments with which to defend myself. It was not enough, apparently, to say you were for a fair hearing; you had to rebut the entire case of the prosecution to get anybody to incline an ear in your direction. I began to read, headlong, the literature on the case—the pamphlets issued by Trotsky’s adherents, the Verbatim Report of the second trial published by the Soviet Union, the “bourgeois” press, the Communist press, the radical press. To my astonishment (for I had scarcely dared think it), the trials did indeed seem to be a monstrous frame-up. The defendant, Pyatakov, flew to Oslo to “conspire” with Trotsky during a winter when, according to the authorities, no planes landed at the Oslo airfield; the defendant, Holtzmann, met Trotsky’s son, Sedov, in 1936, at the Hotel Bristol in Copenhagen, which had burned down in 1912; the witness, Romm, met Trotsky in Paris at a time when numerous depositions testified that he had been in Royan, among clouds of witnesses, or on the way there from the south of France.

These were only the most glaring discrepancies—the ones that got in the newspapers. Everywhere you touched the case something crumbled. The carelessness of the case’s manufacture was to me its most terrifying aspect; the slovenly disregard for credibility defied credence, in its turn. How did they dare? I think I was more shaken by finding that I was on the right side than I would have been the other way round. And yet, except for a very few people, nobody seemed to mind whether the Hotel Bristol had burned down or not, whether a real plane had landed, whether Trotsky’s life and writings were congruent with the picture given of him in the trials. When confronted with the facts of the case, people’s minds sheered off from it like jelly from a spoon.

Anybody who has ever tried to rectify an injustice or set a record straight comes to feel that he is going mad. And from a social point of view, he is crazy, for he is trying to undo something that is finished, to unravel the social fabric. That is why my liberal friends looked so grave and solemn when I would press them to come to a meeting and listen to a presentation of the facts—for them this was a Decision, too awful to be considered lightly. The Moscow trials were an historical fact and those of us who tried to undo them were uneasily felt to be crackpots, who were trying to turn the clock back. And of course the less we were listened to, the more insistent and earnest we became,
My Confession

even while we realised we were doing our cause harm. It is impossible to take a moderate tone under such conditions. If I admitted, though, to being a little bit hipped on the subject of Trotsky, I could sometimes gain an indulgent if flickering attention—the kind of attention that stipulates, "She's a bit off but let's hear her story." And now and then, by sheer chance, one of my hearers would be arrested by some stray point in my narrative; the disparaging smile would slowly fade from his features, leaving a look of blank consternation. He would go off and investigate for himself, and in a few days, when we met again, he would be a crackpot too.

Most of us who became anti-Communists at the time of the trials were drawn in, like me, by accident and almost unwillingly. Looking back, as on a love-affair, a man could say that if he had not had lunch in a certain restaurant on a certain day, he might not have been led to ponder the facts of the Moscow trials. Or not then at any rate. And had he pondered them at a later date, other considerations would have entered and his conversion would have had a different style. On the whole, those of us who became anti-Communists during that year, 1936–37, have remained liberals—a thing that is less true of people of our generation who were converted earlier or later. A certain doubt of orthodoxy and independence of mass opinion was riveted into our anti-Communism by the heat of that period. As soon as I make this statement, exceptions leap into my mind, but I think as a generalisation it will stand. Those who became anti-Communist earlier fell into two classes: the experts and those to whom any socialist ideal was repugnant. Those whose eyes were opened later, by the Nazi-Soviet pact, or still later, by God knows what, were left bruised and full of self-hatred or self-commiseration, because they had palliated so much and truckled to a power-centre; to them, Communism's chief sin seems to be that it deceived them, and their public atonement takes on both a vindicating and a vindictive character.

We were luckier. Our anti-Communism came to us neither as the fruit of a special wisdom nor as a humiliating awakening from a prolonged deception, but as a natural event, the product of chance and propinquity. One thing followed another, and the will had little to say about it. For my part, during that year, I realised, with a certain wistfulness, that it was too late for me to become any kind of Marxist. Marxism, I saw, from the learned young man I listened to at Committee meetings, was something you had to take up young, like ballet dancing.

So, I did not try to be a Marxist or a Trotskyite, though for the first time I read a little in the Marxist canon. But I got the name of being a Trotskyite, which meant, in the end, that I saw less of the conventional Stalinists I had been mingling with and less of conventional people generally. (My definition of a conventional person was quite broad: it included anyone who could hear of the Moscow trials and maintain an unruffled serenity.) This, then, was a break or a rupture, not very noticeable at first, that gradually widened and widened, without any conscious effort on my part, sometimes to my regret. This estrangement was not marked by any definite stages; it was a matter of tiny choices. Shortly after the Moscow trials, for instance, I changed from the Herald-Tribune to the Times; soon I had stopped doing crossword puzzles, playing bridge, reading detective stories and popular novels. I did not "give up" these things; they departed from me, as it were, on tiptoe, seeing that my thoughts were elsewhere.

To change from the Herald-Tribune to the Times, is not, I am aware, as serious a step as breaking with international Communism when you have been its agent; and it occurs to me that Mr. Chambers and Miss Bentley might well protest the comparison, pointing out that they were profoundly dedicated people, while I was a mere trifler, that their decisions partook of the sublime, where mine descended to the ridiculous—as Mr. Chambers says, he was ready to give his life for his beliefs. Fortunately (though I could argue the point, for we all give our lives for our beliefs, piecemeal or whole), I have a surprise witness to call for my side, who did literally die for his political views.
I am referring to Trotsky, the small, frail, pertinacious old man who wore whiskers, wrinkles, glasses, shock of grizzled hair, like a gleeful disguise for the erect young student, the dangerous revolutionary within him. Nothing could be more alien to the convulsed and tormented moonscapes of the true confessions of ex-Communists than Trotsky’s populous, matter-of-fact recollections set out in My Life. I have just been re-reading this volume, and though I no longer subscribe to its views, which have certainly an authoritarian and doctrinaire cast that troubles me today, nevertheless, I experience a sense of recognition here that I cannot find in the pages of our own repentant “revolutionaries.” The old man remained unregenerate; he never admitted that he had sinned. That is probably why nobody seems to care for, or feel apologetic to, his memory. It is an interesting point—and relevant, I think, to my story—that many people today actually have the impression that Trotsky died a natural death.

In a certain sense, this is perfectly true. I do not mean that he lived by violence and therefore might reasonably be expected to die by violence. He was a man of words primarily, a pamphleteer and orator. He was armed, as he said, with a pen and peppered his enemies with a fusillade of articles. Hear the concluding passages of his autobiography. “Since my exile, I have more than once read musings in the newspapers on the subject of the ‘tragedy’ that has befallen me. I know no personal tragedy. I know the change of two chapters of revolution. One American paper which published an article of mine accompanied it with a profound note to the effect that in spite of the blows the author had suffered, he had, as evidenced by his article, preserved his clarity of reason. I can only express my astonishment at the philistine attempt to establish a connection between the power of reasoning and a government post, between mental balance and the present situation. I do not know, and I never have known, of any such connection. In prison, with a book or pen in my hand, I experienced the same sense of deep satisfaction that I did at mass-meetings of the revolution. I felt the mechanics of power as an inescapable burden, rather than as a spiritual satisfaction.”

This was not a man of violence. Nevertheless, one can say that he died a natural death—a death that was in keeping with the open manner of his life. There was nothing arcane in Trotsky; that was his charm. Like an ordinary person, he was hospitably open to hazard and accident. In his autobiography, he cannot date the moment when he became a socialist.

One factor in his losing out in the power-struggle at the time of Lenin’s death was his delay in getting the telegram that should have called him home from the Caucasus, where he was convalescing, to appear at Lenin’s funeral—had he got the telegram, perhaps the outcome would have been different. Or again, perhaps not. It may be that the whims of chance are really the importunities of design. But if there is a Design, it aims, in real lives, like the reader’s or mine or Trotsky’s, to look natural and fortuitous; that is how it gets us into its web.

Trotsky himself, looking at his life in retrospect, was struck, as most of us are on such occasions, by the role chance had played in it. He tells how one day, during Lenin’s last illness, he went duck-shooting with an old hunter in a canoe on the River Dubna, walked through a bog in felt boots—only a hundred steps—and contracted influenza. This was the reason he was ordered to Sukhu for the cure, missed Lenin’s funeral, and had to stay in bed during the struggle for primacy that raged that autumn and winter. “I cannot help noting,” he says, “how obligingly the accidental helps the historical law. Broadly speaking, the entire historical process is a refraction of historical law through the accidental. In the language of biology, one might say that the historical law is realised through the natural selection of accidents.” And with a faint touch of quizzical gaiety he sums up the problem as a Marxian: “One can foresee the consequences of a revolution or a war, but it is impossible to foresee the consequences of an autumn shooting-trip for wild ducks.” This shrug before the unforeseen implies an acceptance of consequences that is a far cry from penance and prophecy. Such, it concedes, is life. Bravo, old sport, I say, even though the hall is empty.
In a 1981 interview, the essayist and journalist Rebecca West was asked about a phrase she once deployed to characterize the difference between a male sensibility and a female one. “Idiots and lunatics,” she said. “It’s a perfectly good division.” West is rightly thought of as one of the twentieth century’s pithiest feminists, but she was never exactly part of a movement. “I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat or a prostitute,” she once wrote. Nor did she pull any punches when it came to her own sex. In a five-part series published in The New Republic in 1916, she declared that women were “the world’s worst failure”—the phrase was also used as the title for the series—and complained that they had settled into complacent inactivity. Chief among the culprits was the sorry state of female education, her own included: “There is only one period in my life on which I look back with the feeling that then I was in prison,” she wrote. It was there that “the intellectual passion of adolescence” sadly died.

There is only one period in my life on which I look back with the feeling that then I was in prison, that then I was held back, by something more than my own inertness, from the upward movement of life towards the self-comprehension; and that was the time when I lived in a world made by women. For fifty years the will of the picked women has worked unfettered at the making of the system of secondary education for girls, and it has resulted in one of the most successful of mankind’s many attempts to make youth a hateful thing. The intellectual passion of the adolescence is perhaps more intense and is certainly more beautiful than first love; but because of these dusty schools where the message of learning is chalked on blackboards by women of no achievements it dies young in most of us and knows no such glad recoveries as come to love. I, who love learning very greatly, fled from school at sixteen, utterly regardless of how precarious the future might be, so long as it did not contain the certainty of a university career. The next thing I found myself doing was digging rhubarb roots in a market-garden on the wet hillside one drizzling November; and I can remember halting at that task, my face stung with the weather and my boots heavy in the fat mud, and looking down without regret on the university spires and the towers of my school that pierced the white curdle of mist in the valley between me and the snow-ribbed mountains, I looked on them with the degrading sort of hatred that a pauper might feel for a soup-kitchen where they gave watery soup. The teachers had promised, with the air of superiority which is part of school discipline, to give one all the wealth of the world's mind, and had imposed upon one so rigorously the idea of their aloof and mystic authority that one dared not charge them with manifest failure to carry out their contract. But it is not to be disputed that by a fundamental wrongness of attitude to their own womanhood they made education as sentimental, as destructive to the crystal hardness of
the mind, as ultimately desolating, as an eternal afternoon spent listening to Tosti or Mendelssohn.

These women had nothing to give. Not only was it necessary that a teacher should attend her school in inconspicuous clothes and give carefully prepared lessons on chosen textbooks, it was also all that the educational system permitted her to do. It was bad form for a teacher to have a conspicuously beautiful and adorned body, to be hotly involved in politics or love, to make art or be interested in any artists but the infinitely dead. It was unfortunate and invalidated the whole claim of education that these definitely excluded activities happen to be the only ways by which the soul can lay up in itself riches. The one teacher who could best afford to be generous was a girl with pale gold hair and a wintry prettiness that suggested that she was sweetly enduring a rule of poverty, who taught mathematics; and all she could give was answering smiles to intelligence, and infinitely pathetic evening parties for the older girls. She would receive us a little shyly, being very conscious that she had changed the business-like blouse and skirt which all day made her boyish body look like a prop caught in a sheet, for a sage-green djibbah and a bright fillet in her hair. Her photogravures of the Italian primitives were only part of a general wrongness which included amphorae, and bits of copperwork and della Robbia tiles, and all the clutter of unrelated second-hand stuff that that kind of culture carts about with it because Ruskin once told it to. In this tremulous and absurd atmosphere of conscious unusualness we would sit by the fire and drink cocoa while she talked with earnest and undiscriminating passion about gods and half-gods, Browning and George Frederick Watts; and, leaning a little forward with her eyes intent on a distant glory, she became much more significant than the words she spoke, like a prisoner in the camp of the enemy whispering the splendors of his fatherland in veiled phrases of his captor's tongue.

A thousand beginnings of imaginative phrases, innumerable arrested gestures of her lovely body showed that this girl had been born an heiress of the mind, born to spend lavishly its treasures, and I could not guess what had reduced her to so blue and starved a beggary, until in later life I learned precisely what was involved by her statement that she had been at Oxford: Oxford, where women students of history are unable to study military strategy because shortness of wind forbids the official chaperons to go the necessary expeditions over the hills and dales of Oxfordshire; Oxford, where no woman can attend a lecture alone unless she has one of these chaperons sewing red flannel petticoats or knitting a sock at her elbow; Oxford, which breeds women to this conformity, this renouncement of the gift of personal vividness, this resolute practice of dulness as a form of hygiene which no clean person could neglect, which made that golden girl shine no brighter than a dying rushlight, and all the other teachers a mere string of shadows in which any vileness, by simply turning its face from the light, could join undetected. For unquestionably it was joined by women whose society was not less brutalizing to their pupils in school than it would have been in the dark places of the city to which they properly belonged, and perhaps more brutalizing, since their beings fretted to savagery at the unnatural cleanliness of their lives.

There was one woman with red, square, slightly overhanging cheeks and a mouth inflamed to purple with evil temper, the like of whom I never met until years later I strayed into the Thames police court and saw one Mary Huggins tried for mutilating the face of her paramour with a pewter pint pot. And there was a little black thing with a tight smiling mouth, a creature of lies and spite and moist unwholesome glances at the visiting masters, whom I have seen a thousand times since, as neat and nice and base as ever in the downward yellow of street-lamps. If the atmosphere of the school had been hot with discussion these must have caught fire and shown their quality by the foulness of their flame. As it was they smouldered dimly, giving no light or heat, like all the rest. It is the worst of women's misfortunes that we are unwinnowed by adventure and the chaff stays among us always.

But it did not matter so much that among these shadows there was evil—for whatever else the company of
the wicked may do to the young it also makes them deride sin—as that nobility passed on its way without shedding its rare peculiar radiance, I remember the headmistress, a silver-haired lady in costly dresses of quiet but rich ineffectiveness in neutral tints, but unquestionably fine; but it was a fineness in \textit{vacuo}. I cannot recollect her saying anything fine, or doing anything at all, and it would be violently at variance with her theory of the serene inactivity proper to teachers that any of her pupils should perceive her championing a cause. Yet I am so convinced that she was made of that steel from which swords are forged that I want to go back to that office where she still sits, busy but immobile, before her desk, doubtless imagining herself high and calm like an aging Minerva, yet in reality stirring up such suspicions of sickness as one might form if one saw a race-horse of beautiful action shut day after day in its box, I want to find out why she so deliberately and with so proud a conviction of her rightness professed an abstinence from action which one would pardon only in the dead, and why she taught us that nothing could be more desirable in life than the stillness and fixity which are the very characters of death, "Why," I would ask her, if I could stand again in the office where I last stood, indicted for the comic crime of writing a poem on "The Death of God" in the cookery class, "why did you tell me nothing of life?

"No, I have not fallen into bad hands since I left school and joined the cranks. I do not mean that you should have given us what is known as * sex instruction,' I regard your omission to do so as one of the few claims you have upon my respect, for\textsuperscript{a} so far as I can judge from such stages in the development of myself and my schoolfellows as merged into consciousness and remain in the memory, your intervention in this matter would have put the last touch of ruin to our already shattered relations. It is best that one should learn these things from other human beings at the same stage of development as oneself, so that one is not obliged to believe them, but can push out of one's belief any fact that comes too soon, while registering it for further reference when one is old enough to assimilate it. But every statement that comes from a teacher must be accepted at once as true or the whole sanction of education is gone. Are you then going to teach a little girl the facts of motherhood before she is old enough to appreciate the physical and psychical rewards that lighten that cruel failure of the human structure? Or are you going to lie, as every handbook on sex instruction that I have ever seen has lied, and pretend that motherhood is a pretty and sentimental occasion like the first communion in a cheap French holograph, and be recognized by your pupils, as soon as they had knowledge and became people whose opinions mattered, as a liar?

"I do not mean to reproach you for your sexual nothingness. Not long ago I met a Frenchwoman who had been much loved, and she was more nearly nothing than even you: a shadow cast on the wall by the bodies of idle men, which vanished when they were called away to the business of life. Because sexual love is the most useful and common type of excitement we are apt to think it necessary to life, when the truth is that it is excitement itself which is life's essential. Saint Teresa knew no more of passion than that first love which sprang green to a sudden withering, as spring things do in her country, on the grey rocks of Avila; yet she was a stronger personality than any woman who ever lived. The most one can say is that had she been admitted to the company of lovers and become an executor of the laws of life she probably would have spent her genius more sensibly than in the multiplication of convents to the economic ruin of Spain. Any intensity of excitement, whether it be evoked by one behind the stars or within one's arms, acts upon the life of the soul like sunlight upon the growth of a plant. Adventurers swept by an irrational passion for the unknown abandon comfort and security and sail up new rivers to new continents. Artists and scientists, too eager about life to settle down to the business of prosperity, find out new truths. Excited lovers cast off the freedom of sterility and make new lives. Without this light struck by men's nerves the world would stand dark in the universe like a great house unlit in the night.

"From this essential of life you debarred and even dissuaded us by your blank monotony of voice and
appearance, your silence about art and the government of the world, your dreary advocacy of non-inquiry and acquiescence. You cannot excuse yourself by saying that at least you attended to your business of teaching; that, being so dead, you could hardly do. If there is one thing certain about God it is that he thinks in mathematics, for the worlds which are his thoughts are planned by that. But it was hard to perceive the divinity of the subject from the teaching of your dispirited staff, so deliberately rubbed down to dulness."

My eye roves round the room to discover in its familiarity something that I had overlooked, something that holds the key to this riddle of designed worthlessness. It emerges from my memory with the clearness that disregarded facts sometimes preserve through the years. It is the photogravure of an Italian madonna: her limp hands hold the Holy Child negligently and distastefully, as though she considered that the advantages of being the Mother of God have been much exaggerated, and she lowers to us a blank oval face with a narrow forehead which is the very throne of nothingness. I am shocked into speech. “Of course, that is your ideal I But surely you see that that is not the Virgin chosen by God to mother the Son of Man, but the virgin who is foolishly desired by men? This is not the woman who bore her child in a manger, who lifted him to the adoration of the kings, who saved him by the flight into Egypt. This is the creation of that lust in the hearts of the baser sort of men which is a perverted form of fatherhood. They desire at once to love and give life, and so they imagine fair pieces of flesh that have gained no wealth from the world, who have hardly done more than breathe before their lovers come to them. It is monstrous that men should desire any human being to stand aside even for the period of their youth from man’s task of experience, and any human being who consents to stand aside sins against the spirit within him. And that is what you are doing. You are not free women, for all your economic independence; you are still slaves to men’s desire. You weary and starve your pupils with your deliberate vacuity, because men like unmarried women to be blank pages on which they may write what they will. You too live on the favor of men. You too are given up body and soul to the instinct for elegance.”