

The Shadow of The Prodigy

[The text is excerpted from the novel *In the Shadow of the Prodigy* (2007).¹ The narrator of the story, Michael Paradine, is a young historian with a marginal academic position and a commission to write a book about the history of the enterprises of the Overton family. The excerpt relates part of the first encounter between Michael and Mrs Jones, the mother of Sarah, the girl he loves. The encounter takes place in a snack bar in Euston Railway Station in London. Although her much older husband lives on his farm in the north of the country, Mrs Jones resides in London where she is involved in social and political activism. The story is set in 1994, before the "Internet revolution".]

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(Tuesday afternoon, May 31st)

'Sarah told me you are into politics. Were you a candidate?'

She produced a gold-plated lighter, which she put upright on the table, and a wrinkled packet of cigarettes, which she gave a pitying look before trying to open it without crushing its contents any further.

'No, of course not, but it is true that I am active politically.'

'A lobbyist?'

'No... yes... sort of; not a hobbyist. I see myself as an activist. I am involved with several groups in various campaigns, mainly the NEI, Stanley Shawn's New Earth Initiative. Stanley is great, a true visionary and a tactical genius.' In other words, a pompous ass, I thought, remembering the anecdote David Allison had told me at our last dinner in Greenwich. 'Are you interested in the politics of the new social movements?'

'Very much so: they are changing the face of politics,' I said with exaggerated enthusiasm. It was a sycophantic lie, meant in part to please Sarah's mother and in part to mask the guilty smirk that the memory of David's gibe had brought to my face.

'And you like that?' she asked with a sigh as she discarded one crumpled or bent cigarette after another.

'Sure. There is not much to be said for the old face of politics, is there?' That pleased her very much and she raised a thumb to show her approbation. To keep the initiative, I asked her, 'An activist—is that what you do for a living?'

'There you are!' she said, addressing a cigarette in a reasonably straight condition. She held it aloft, then carefully lodged it between her index and middle fingers. To me she said, 'Yes, does that surprise you? Of course, being married to the heir of the Simms fortune helps defray a few expenses.' She let out a sardonic laugh. 'As they say, money is odourless. You know my husband, don't you?'

'Yes, I spoke to him when I was in Wainock, where I met Sarah. Are you working together with him? He too seems to be very active in various groups with political designs.'

She gave me a queer look as if she suspected some hidden purpose behind my question: 'We may be working towards the same goal, perhaps, but our strategies are entirely different. He is seventy-five, you know, and has old-fashioned views. He has this notion that there is an established ruling elite and that we should influence as many of its members as we can. It is so top-down, so passé. The truth is that there is no ruling elite; power lies with the masses. Only a bottom-up approach can work.'

'So you expect to meet him when you are halfway up?'

She ignored my little pun. 'Ralph, my husband, still thinks that it is a matter of finding the right "responsible" arguments. That might work with the elite, if there were an elite, because the elite is supposed to have palpable, tangible interests and articulate ideologies. Not so the masses: they are swayed by emotions, and their emotions sway the politicians. Forget the elite. What you may think of as the elite is either irrelevant or a

¹ Details at <http://users.ugent.be/~frvandun/Shapro.htm> .

mere snapshot of the current face of public opinion—all those worthless celebrities and talking heads on television, all parroting the same bromides.’

‘I am not sure that I understand.’

‘It is elementary, Dr Paradine; this is a democracy. There is no political reward in being responsible; there is in being responsive. What do the masses expect from a politician? Let me tell you: they want to hear him say what they feel. They are animal instincts, all the way. Take their emotions and throw them back at them as poignant propositions, preferably one-liners—then you have defined public opinion. Define public opinion and the rest follows—and that rest includes the academics and the scientists. Nobody has the guts to stand up to public opinion nowadays, certainly not the average Consumer Jekyll and Voter Hyde. Marketing directors at the big corporations know that all too well. They are quicker to respond than the politicians are, because for them every day is Election Day. They know how much money there is in being responsive and how little in being responsible.’ She finally got around to lighting her cigarette. Without taking her eyes off me, she allowed a wavelet of smoke to roll outside over her lower lip before sucking it back in. ‘Only feelings and emotions are reliably constant; beliefs and ideas are ephemeral. If there is one lesson to be learned from the past century, it is that people—I am talking about the masses of course—can be made to believe anything as long as one changes the paradigm at least once every thirty years or so. Every generation must feel it is entering a New Age, one that is unlike anything that went before, for it is part of the lesson that modern man cannot stand the notion that he owes anything to the past. Already I have seen history courses that start in 1945, when out of an earth that was without form, void and dark, the Holy Trinity—that is Roosevelt, Stalin and Churchill—created light and order.’

‘Is that not a bit too cynical?’

‘It is realism, Michael. If you have not discovered that by now, you will as you grow up. How old are you?’ Twenty-nine, I told her. ‘You’d better hurry then. Do not get me wrong; I am an idealist. But to be an effective idealist one must be a realist. That is not hard to understand, is it?’ I smiled at her; I was thinking of David Allison: Realism is not the same thing as opportunism. ‘That means that you must learn to control the power of the masses, to channel their emotions. You cannot do that Ralph’s way. The masses distrust the Establishment. They want leaders but only leaders that are in touch with their emotions.’

‘Are those leaders not the Establishment?’

‘No, though some take on its airs. Ralph is as good an example as any man is. Once he was so close to the truth, but now he is just a regular at those frequent meetings of the irrelevant.’

I did not know what to say to that. It was embarrassing to listen to her dismissive opinions of her husband. Was she perhaps trying to provoke me? Had Sarah told her about my misgivings about her father? ‘What do you mean, close to the truth?’ I asked.

‘Ralph once showed me a brilliant piece on politics that he had written as a young man, “The Game of Religion” I believe it was called. He has forgotten all about it, but I have not.’ I had seen a paper with a similar title in Jacob Salomon’s bundle. Maybe I should read it.

‘What did it say?’

‘Let me explain.’ She pushed the cups on the table aside, as if she needed an unencumbered desk to lay out the argument. ‘It was a demonstration, almost a mathematical proof: the fundamental theorem of politics, if you like. Fear is the basic emotion on which all of politics rests; hope is merely a derivative of fear. That is where you start. Ralph’s genius was in grasping that, at bottom, men fear only two things: the judgement of God and the power of Man.’

‘Why is that genius?’ The judgement of God and the power of Man—was that not the distinction upon which George Holbrook had insisted so feverishly at the end of our discussion three weeks earlier? It was hard to believe that George and Ralph Jones would be on the same side of any important question. Had they perhaps read the same book?

‘Why is that genius? Do you not see? As long as men fear the judgement of God above all else, they are likely to be fearless with respect to one another. They stand their ground; they consult their conscience, because they need to know what is justified or not. They know or at least *expect* themselves and all others to be self-respecting persons. That is why they are convinced that it is right to respect one another, and right to accommodate themselves to each other under the Law of Equilibrium: the Law that tells them to let one another be in peace. Then Ralph pointed out that where that Law rules, politics is held in check and therefore impotent to change the world for the better.’

‘I see; nobody in his right mind would describe politics as the art of leaving others in peace.’

She did not take notice of my remark: ‘Try ruling fearless persons! They are too jealous of their own power to surrender it. Try being a politician if people constantly remind you that you are answerable to a higher law! Politics, you have to understand, is the power of Man over Man; in its pure form, politics is organized humankind ruling itself. Therefore, to make a better world, to combine and unleash the power of politics, the fear of divine judgement has to go.’ She spoke with such stirring enthusiasm that I could not help looking around to see if she was perhaps addressing a larger audience than just me. The place was crowded, but nobody was paying any attention to us.

‘Instead of the fear of God, let us have man’s fear of other men. Judgement has to make way for Power; truth and logic for efficacy and efficiency. Is that what you are saying?’ I caught myself sounding exactly like George Holbrook. ‘I mean, forget God and embrace politics?’

‘Exactly, well... almost. Teach men the futility of praying for good judgement and they will pray only for power. Ralph saw that politics could escape from under the weight of religion only by downplaying God’s Judgement and exalting his Power: present God as a partisan warlord, or rather a congeries of warlords; and then repudiate him because he is a warlord—an ineffective warlord.’

‘Surely that had been done long before your husband was born, already at the time of the Crusades and certainly when the nationalists in various countries had the idea that they could nationalize God.’

‘Of course! Ralph merely pointed out that any attempt to regulate politics with the sanction of the divine inevitably leads to the politicisation of the divine. That is how Christendom became Europe—is that not what you historians have taught us? But the Warlord-God, the partisan God, is only the first step to the victory of Man. Why? Because when men lose faith in good judgement, they must turn to effective power—there is no alternative. That was Ralph’s great insight.’ It was also George’s argument, except that he was on the side of good judgement, definitely not on the side of power. George and Mrs Jones seemed to be close to the point where opposites meet, where no compromises are possible. Moreover, there was a curious asymmetry here: one can imagine power being made wholesome under the guidance of good judgement; but what would become of judgement, if it were no more than the servant of power, a slave of the emotions?

Mrs Jones was still lecturing, speaking rapidly as if repeating a text she had already used innumerable times in the past: ‘Tell people that they ought to fear God because he is almighty, and experience will soon teach them that he is well-nigh powerless. That is when they transfer their fear from God to other men. Keep them in fear of one another and they will not want to stand their ground—fearful people do not consult their conscience. They will run for help, seek guidance in defeating others. They will become pliable, easy to rule, and eager to subject others to the same rule. Do you get it now?’ I thought that I did but I was not sure. I merely responded with a skewed nod. That was not good enough. With obvious impatience and in a shriller voice, she proceeded with her argument: ‘They will pray for power. Now, to whom will they pray? Not to a powerless God but to other men, obviously! That is the current state of politics: men pray that others should rule them. The problem is different persons pray to different men.’ It was a reasonable conclusion but I was sceptical of the slant she imparted to it. She sensed my reluctance: ‘You do not believe that, do you? Maybe that is because you think like Ralph. He did not follow his own argument to its logical conclusion, and rather than to make the effort, he chose to forget it.’

‘What then is the logical conclusion? That all of us should pray to the same men?’

‘Certainly not! Ralph was right to stress the emotion of fear, but he did not go beyond “Who fears whom?” Another relevant question, of course, is “Fear for what?”’

‘Of course.’ I had no idea where her argument was going.

Mrs Jones leaned back. For a while, she kept gazing pensively at me. Then she said almost ruefully, ‘I should not be too hard on my husband. Ralph grew up when the old socialism still looked as if it was the wave of the future. You cannot deny that in the meantime all the traditional parties, Left, Right, and Centre, all over Europe and elsewhere, have become socialist. There is a problem? It is Society’s fault, so lets reform, if need be re-form, Society. That is what politics today is all about, isn’t it?’

‘Is it not the basic tenet of socialism that an individual’s primary obligation is to Society?’

She leaned forward again. ‘That is the beauty of it. It teaches you to worship the thing that is to blame for every evil that befalls you. In that respect, it is like that silly religion of the Almighty God. But unlike that religion, it immediately offers a way out: Society is merely *other* people. That is what is wrong with Society. To right that wrong you must take command of Society and use its powers—the powers of others—to solve your problems. Re-make others the way you want them to be. It is all there: fear and hope—fear others and hope to defeat them, hope to make them do your bidding.’ She paused for effect. This time I nodded emphatically to indicate that I understood, although I would not have bet any money that I did. ‘Ralph was stuck in that morass, the old-socialist way of thinking. He thought that people were afraid of one another because they feared that competition would... What the hell is that?’

Suddenly the station resonated with crackling sounds—as if jumping jacks were exploding all around—followed by shrill but rapidly fading wailing. Then, in the general hush, the re-adjusted public-address system announced the delayed arrival of a train. Mrs Jones, visibly shaken, reached for her cup and took a few nervous sips. ‘Can they do nothing right?’ she snarled furiously. After a few more sips, and a fruitless search for another usable cigarette, Mrs Jones, still seething with irritation, returned to her critique of her husband’s views.

‘As I was saying, socialism thrives on the fear of people for one another all right, but it also offers the hope that they can win. It raises expectations that it cannot fulfil. Worse, it offers a ready-made scapegoat and an effective absolution for all their sins, the perfect whitewash: Society, other people.’

‘We are blameless, the others are at fault?’

‘Exactly: blameless or victims or both.’ She seemed at ease again. ‘The old socialism aims at a contradiction: you do what you want while society takes care of your every need. Can you make sense of that: *everybody* doing what he wants while attempting to make *all others* take care of his needs? That is a recipe for endless conflict. How can Society protect you from other people when it is nothing but other people?’

‘Are you saying then that there is no hope?’

‘That is *not* the point!’ she upbraided me sharply, suddenly on the verge of anger. ‘The point is that it is not enough to fear for something as transient as one’s livelihood, even one’s life. People *know* they are going to die, for Christ’s sake! Unless they fear the end of everything—not only their individual existence but also the end of the world, life itself, the planet, whatever—their fears are bound to remain as fickle as they themselves are. That is why the fear of others is not enough.’

‘What is it, then, that they should also be made to fear?’

Her eyes lit up. She had been waiting for that question. ‘Themselves, obviously! Only people who fear themselves as much as or more than they fear others will understand that they must be protected not only from others but also and in the first place from themselves.’ That, presumably, was the logical conclusion that Ralph Jones had failed to reach. ‘Right now, you have all those politicians shouting: “Do not trust *them*! Trust *us*!” The results are pathetic. Now imagine the shape of politics when people start crying out: “We do not trust anybody, not even ourselves.” Imagine what becomes possible once people recognize that they cannot live without fear unless they forsake their very own selves. Have you ever thought of that?’

‘That is what you are going to teach people: that they cannot trust themselves, that they should discard self-respect?’

She nodded her approval and proceeded in a warm, almost motherly way: ‘It is an old commonplace that only selfless people can be happy. If you take “selfless” to mean kind or nice to others, it is of course a falsehood. But given the literal sense of “without self”, it is the greatest truth of all.’

In the land of the sightless the one-eyed man is king—but what character would rule in the land of the selfless? Would she laugh if I asked that question? Maybe not, but I did not want to interrupt her didactic stride now that I seemed to have her sanction: ‘How are you going to make people selfless in that sense?’

‘That is easy. Make men a role model for girls, and women a role model for boys; and they all end up as insecure, vulnerable, childish whiners—and proud of it too.’ She burst out in acerbic laughter but immediately recovered her poise: ‘Do not mind that, it is a private joke.’ She continued her lecture: ‘Begin, say, with guns: “I cannot be trusted with a gun.” Many people already believe that. They want nothing more than that the government disarm them. “Self-defence, self-protection? No way, it is Society’s job to protect and defend us.” That is how it is, Michael: people do not want to be safe; they want to *feel* safe. A ban on guns makes them feel safe even as it leaves them defenceless if they abide by it. You do not understand politics if you do not realize that for the masses safety is an emotion, not a real condition.’

‘I often think that Hitler would have loved it if guns had already been banned in the countries he invaded. Imagine the French resistance movement brandishing hay forks at the Gestapo!’

Acknowledging my remark with no more than a quizzical look, Mrs Jones proceeded: ‘From guns, move on to cars, medicines, cigarettes, children, animals, food, even a raw egg, anything. “No, thank you,” they say, “these things are not safe in our hands. Let Society take the responsibility for our use of them.” Why should Society refuse to honour that request? How could it refuse?’

‘But why this concern with selflessness?’

‘It is the way to focus the emotions of mankind. Tell people that *they* are destroying themselves as individuals *and as a species*. Better yet, tell them they are destroying the very basis of their existence. Get them to admit that they cannot trust themselves with their own body, their own judgement—their own life—and they will pray that something else will lead their life for them.’

‘And that something else is Society?’

‘Exactly! Of course, when I say “Society”, I do not mean a society of threatening strangers, a society of *other men*. I mean a society of nobodies like themselves. As soon as people fear themselves above all else, they rush to submit to organized mankind, that mindless powerful machine that we call Society. Then the most tenacious illusions of the old religion, Truth and Judgement, are shattered for good. Indeed, every day, every hour, Society emanates its own substitute for truth, namely public opinion; and it does not judge, it administers.’

Mrs Jones reached for her cup and drank from it, although to me it looked empty already. She radiated self-confidence. How ironic! She had just told me that the way to the future is to destroy everybody’s self-confidence. Not knowing what to say, I merely exclaimed: ‘Wow! That is the most radical political philosophy I have ever come across.’

She took it as a compliment. ‘It is, isn’t it? Let me tell you another thing. It is not just a philosophy; it is an evolving reality. Give or take a few exceptions that prove the rule, we are at the point where people consider themselves victims, right? The next step is to make sure that they see themselves as the culprits.’

‘When will that happen?’

‘It is happening now. On the scale that I mentioned a moment ago, how close to the raw egg have we come? In a few years, you will hear people clamouring for instructions on how to do even the simplest things; and there will be plenty of social authorities to tell them. What to eat, drink, read, and wear, how to handle their children, dispose of their garbage, spend their free time, you name it—they will be waiting for the manual, nay for the instructor.’

‘Who are these supposed social authorities?’ I asked her. ‘Are they bureaucrats, functionaries who will tell people only what it is their job to tell them?’

‘Excellent, Michael, you have got it: bureaucrats and functionaries, employees, consultants and experts in the pay of large corporations in the public and the private sector! Functionaries executing orders issued by other functionaries executing orders from still other functionaries, and so on; and all orders originating in committees and other collective bodies of interchangeable functionaries. Total, impersonal, depersonalised, anonymous social power, without a trace of personal judgement, responsibility or liability—that is the answer to man's fear of Man.’ I gaped at her, and she took that as a symptom of bewilderment. ‘I know,’ she said indulgently, ‘you are tempted to say, “On the one side anonymous social power, on the other side mindless rule following.” But that is not the case because, in fact, the two sides are identical. Do you understand what that means? Society is made whole; the problem of social antagonism is solved. That is what it means.’

I stared at her in disbelief. Expecting nothing less than wholehearted assent, she was proposing a world where men would be pawns acting out the moves prescribed in rule-books composed by other pawns. How had David Allison put it? No Rule of Law, just the law of rules—rules that receive their authority from the stamp of some office, any office. Moreover, what was all the fuss about? Surely, the philosophy of the human anthill was not something new, and neither was the conception of men and women as made-to-measure cogs in the efficient machinery of Society.

Mrs Jones's piercing impatient look made it clear that she wanted me to say something. After all, she had just solved the problem of Man's existential angst: make everybody a nobody and the fear of everybody else resolves itself into the fear of nobody. Neat. ‘Where are you going to find such functionaries? Who is going to train them to make the right decisions?’ I asked facetiously, as if I did not know. Well, it turned out I did not know the answer. She replied with a mixture of exasperation and condescension in her voice:

‘Hello, Ralph Junior! Are you listening? Right or wrong—what does that mean? We can leave that safely to public opinion, can we not? Right or wrong, indeed! The point is that no one, whether he is a functionary or not, *ever* should have the sense of making a consequential decision himself. That is the essence of human freedom: to be free from oneself. It is what people deep down really want, the *only* thing they want.’

I wanted to demur but she would not let me: ‘Think about that. They want to be nobodies and to be proud of it. How do you satisfy that want? Make them identify themselves with their function in Society, their job! There is no need for us to train functionaries; others do that for us, every school, every employer. Look around you: already Society is flooded with people who have never seen anything but a classroom and the office where they sit at their desk. They have a comfortable life, if they do as they are told. They never see the real consequences of what they are doing; in fact, they have no idea of what they are doing—and neither do those who tell them what to do. They are all little else than Job Descriptions Incarnated. Do you not see that today this process of on-the-job nobodification runs virtually unopposed?’ Her eyes gleaming archly, she explained: ‘Stanley came up with that word the other day; it is horrible but it makes the point very well. Anyway, take our prime minister: he has vastly more powers than, say, Elisabeth I, James I, or Napoleon ever had. Do people fear him? No! Why not? Let me tell you: because he is *only doing his job*. He says so himself, and they are taught, and they happily believe, that apart from his job he is a nobody just as they are.’ I thought of Dad and his political metaphor of the passengers and the robber in a train. He should bring his punch line up to date: Do not worry, people; this is nothing personal, as I am only doing the job you expect me to do.

‘Now, is that not beautiful? People like that will do and believe everything they are told, as long as it looks nice and innocent on paper; better yet, if it is part of something too complex for them to want to understand and too important to suffer any delay. Then the participation mystique kicks in: the meaning of my life is doing what I am expected to do; I must not stand in the way.’

That reminded me of Overton's motto and I asked her, ‘In sum, you want people to be what they do. Why?’

‘Be what you do—that is a nice philosophical way of putting it. I should remember that. You ask why? Here is why: all those people together are an enormous quantity of power and they are swayed by emotions, by their fear of having to do something on their own, their fear of themselves. The traditional parties try to mobilize them by appealing to their fear of others, which is divisive and therefore counterproductive—it fragments power. With them, politics will never get beyond the power of some over others. We appeal to their fear of themselves, which unifies power. We shall make politics whole: the power of Man over Man.’

She studied my face with benign smugness. Come on now, her eyes seemed to say, I am sure you have other questions that I shall be delighted to answer; do not disappoint me. I obliged by asking, ‘Who is going to pay for that worldwide bureaucratic network?’

‘Young man, you do have a lot to learn! In five, maybe ten years, nobody will use cash anymore. It will be electronic transfers from A to Z. Every payment, every transfer will pass through the banks’ computers; and that is also where all their savings will be. Is that not simply glorious? All those computers, all of them linked to the central bank *and* to the treasury. Information, Organization, Discipline—that is what it is all about. Once we have the information, the rest is easy. Eventually, all the central banks and all the treasuries in the world will be linked together—a global system of control where it counts: the purse.’

Information, Organization, Discipline—that, Sarah had told me, was Ralph Jones’s motto. There was a paper in Jacob’s bundle with the title *Why Banks Matter*. I should look it up.

‘Of course, it is not going to stop with banks. Not just financial but also industrial, commercial, medical, and personal information, your fingerprints, photographs, detailed records of your whereabouts, correspondence, conversations will be stored in computers linked over a single network.’ Patty had told me about that during our first encounter in the then brand-new computer room at the Institute. It had seemed interesting then; it made me shudder now.

‘Some fools believe that ready access to such a network will increase personal freedom. They forget that the network is not a market based on property rights and freedom of contract. It is a gigantic infrastructure like a national road or telephone system: cables, tubes, and machines. It is easy to regulate it. It is easy to control the relatively few points of entry, where the access providers are. The thing is the ideal object for central management and supervision by nameless, invisible functionaries. You will see in ten to twenty years from now, or sooner, if there is another war.’

A woman carrying a suitcase in one hand and a tray with a glass of juice and a sandwich in the other asked if the third seat at our table, where Sarah had sat, was free. ‘No, it is not,’ Mrs Jones said curtly. She ostentatiously put her purse on the seat and pointed to the array of empty cups. ‘Can you not see that there are three of us here?’ The woman muttered an apology and moved away. She sat down on her suitcase in front of a flowerpot with a bare branch of a tortuosa tree, and put her tray on her knees. I envied her, but Mrs Jones proceeded with a derisory smirk: ‘Where was I? Oh, yes, the technology-sets-free enthusiasts. They look at the technology and they say: “Now, is that not great! Consider all the things *I* shall be able to do with it.” These boys-with-toys never stop to think what large organisations, governments and corporations, with functionaries in round-the-clock shifts, will be able to do with the technology.’

‘Some people think their freedom is secure, because they assume that the quantities of information in the system defy monitoring, but that is a delusion. Our specialists are convinced that it will soon be possible to perfect search engines that can retrieve any particular item of information from any database, no matter how large, in a couple of seconds, minutes at the most; monitor every communication on the fly. Eventually, information retrieval will be nearly instantaneous: absolute transparency. The truth is that governments and corporations—all of them run by functionaries—control the rules and protocols of the information infrastructure. Modern technology means that functionaries have the means of control before there is anything to control. All that private persons do when they use the network is only seconds away from being fully visible to the controlling bureaucracies. Privacy is an illusion; private persons are a nearly extinct species.’

‘But you do not want them on the endangered-species list?’

‘No, let them go unmourned, the quicker the better.’

Maybe she was just rehearsing for the panel discussion about which she had told me but, even so, I found her message deeply repellent. She must have sensed some of my horror: ‘You think full transparency is scary? It is fine with us. People do not care about freedom anyhow; they only care for convenience and comfort. They do not want a meaningful life; they want a vacation. They want to be like babies: pampered useless consumers, expecting gratification merely for crying out for it.

‘In their desire to vacate themselves, instead of carrying their life within themselves, they will not hesitate to store it in external databases, where others can see it, edit it, replace it, erase it, with or without their consent.’ She repeated that last phrase a couple of times with increasing emphasis, as if she had just now fully understood its significance. Then, grinning mischievously, she went on: ‘Let them be hooked on virtual reality, where there are no property rights and where there is no personal freedom. Incidentally, you do not think that people like that care about private property or freedom in the real world, the one place from which they want to escape at all costs, do you?’ I shook my head. ‘Of course not,’ she continued cheerily; ‘from school to job to nursing home, the only thing they know is the command economy in one form or another, where they can prosper safely merely by being good, docile boys and girls. Property and freedom frighten them because these entail responsibility and liability rather than mindless obedience to tailor-made rules. Introduce such people to the network and, for a few moments, they will indulge themselves in its possibilities. Inevitably, they will get stung in the process. Then they will *beg* for regulation—regulation made easy by the same technology that makes their virtual freedom possible. Sure, they will get “safeguards” to protect their privacy, just as there are safeguards now to keep central banks and governments honest: paper safeguards that flap in the wind.’

I did not see myself behaving in the way she expected everybody to behave. ‘And what about those who stay out of the network?’

‘They will be the wretched of the Earth: dreadfully poor or else under suspicion of being criminals. Look at the present system of making payments. Only the poor still use cash. If you are not poor and you do use cash, you are suspect. In 1982—that is already twelve years ago, Michael, I was in Washington D.C., and I wanted to buy a one hundred and fifty dollar gift for Ralph and pay cash for it. That was in a department store in a shopping mall. The sales clerk panicked, and it required the intervention of a manager before she agreed to accept my money. That opened my eyes, let me tell you, about not just the so-called Land of the Free but also the future of the world. It made sense. Why should you even want to be invisible to the machine, if you are not a criminal? Remember, people want to be nobodies ruled by nobodies: the perfect egalitarian democracy.’

‘Slaves ruled by slaves on leave.’

‘We do not do slavery anymore. People who expect to be visible in all they do will try to make sure that they conform to the rules in all they do. They will beg the experts for guidance.’

‘Voluntary slavery, then?’

‘There is no such thing. Anyway, we should see the results in thirty to fifty years, when a younger generation that has never known anything else is in charge.’

Without taking her eyes off me, Mrs Jones leaned back, waiting for a comment or perhaps a compliment. What was there to say? *The Transparent Society and Its Enemies*: how long before someone would write that book? Could such a society have enemies? Where would they hide? Suddenly a memorable saying in the *Histories* of Herodotus sprang to my mind: ‘Bethink thee that a woman, with her clothes, puts off her bashfulness.’ Surely, that can stand generalization, I thought. ‘But does not total visibility carry the risk of leading to total shamelessness?’

Mrs Jones’s eyes glowed with appreciation. ‘If it is a risk, we are prepared to take it. There is nothing like shamelessness to wither the prestige of judgement. Someone told us at an NEI meeting that, according to the ancient Greeks, the feeling of shame is at the root of all morality. So what? If transparency engenders shamelessness, it will kill off the old order for good. Say goodbye to law and morality; here come regulation and

supervision!’ She laughed derisively but then continued in an almost contrite tone: ‘Of course, we are not talking about full transparency in the literal sense. If *everything* were fully transparent, there would be nothing to see!’ That was clever but I was sure I had read it somewhere before, probably in an assigned text at school in Luton, for I had a vague memory of a schoolyard joke about the spindly Miss Kelly, our English teacher. ‘We are talking about partial, selective, focused transparency. Besides, governments, especially the military of course, are already working hard to make themselves literally invisible. It is a question not only of miniaturization but also, I am told, of manipulating waves of light around planes, weapons and soldiers. Imagine: an invisible power, ruling people who cannot hide anything from it! Would that not be Paradise Regained?’ She waited a second to allow me to catch the allusion and then continued soothingly, ‘Mind you, we are not peddling a Utopia. We want a political system that responds immediately to what people want, no matter what that is. Then, when people get what they want and do not like it, when they discover that there is no satisfaction even in getting satisfaction, we shall have achieved our goal. For then they will know that they cannot trust anything that comes from within themselves.’

‘Who are the “we” to whom you keep referring? Is it a party?’

‘No, not in the formal sense. There is no need for it. This is not about imposing a regime but about creating a state of mind—a new religion, as my husband put it when he was still in uniform, a man of action rather than talk. Already enough people are whipping up the sort of emotion we need, telling everybody that we are all to blame. It works. Only a few remnants of the past still respond to such an insinuation by saying “Okay, I shall see what I can do about it.” Most people just line up to be told what they should do about it.’

‘How do you rhyme that with all the things we hear about the Me-generation?’

‘It is pathetic, isn’t it, how people try to keep a sense of uniqueness, individuality. They think they are special by virtue of one or another pet subject on which they dare to challenge public opinion. It does not matter. With respect to any particular expression of non-conformism, the conformism of the masses easily obliterates the few who grasp at that single straw. Moreover, having such a pet subject does not stop them from joining the herd in trampling others who clutch at a different straw. Even if everybody finds refuge in one or another niche, where he or she can feel good being unique, the overall picture does not change. The *political* point is a simple one: put one or a few persons, no matter how knowledgeable, against a thousand, no matter how ignorant, and the thousand win.’

‘Society loves big battalions.’

‘Society *is* big battalions; everybody loves big battalions.’

Mrs Jones took another mock-sip from her empty cup. ‘I am telling you: our time has come. We see where things are going; there lies our advantage. We are almost there.’ Then, with a sardonic smirk, she added, ‘God is dead and Plato is dead; opinion rules.’

The woman is mad, I thought, and her madness is of the kind that mistakes the logic of an idea for its historical inevitability, as if it is the key to Providence. I shivered—and not only because she kept her piercing eyes fixed on me. I needed to get away from her. ‘Sarah told me that you are an environmentalist, but I see now that that is not quite correct, is it?’

‘Environmentalist, consumer advocate, feminist, whatever: these words merely serve to create new masses. What matters is that one knows one’s goal. Sarah, poor thing, she has no vision of politics.’ Maybe not, but I found it hard to imagine that Sarah would actually want to ‘vacate’ herself, to give up her dream of being her own boss on her own farm—to live yet another person’s lie.

‘I must go now,’ I said, ‘as I have some work to do. Thank you for taking the trouble of explaining all of this. It was quite an education.’

‘I should hope so, Michael. Here is my card. Call me if you want further discussion, or if you want to join us. We can always use an extra hand. Good as the theory is, all the fun is in the action.’ I took her card and put it in my pocket. She looked at her watch. ‘Oh dear! I shall have to sit here for another twenty minutes at least. Before you go, get me one more cup of tea, will you? I do not want anybody to come and take my seat

while I am at the counter. And bring a pack of smokes.' When I came back with her tea and her cigarettes, I noticed that she had draped her vest over my chair.

'Goodbye, Mrs Jones.'

It was not hard to understand why Sarah, with parents like hers, wanted to devote her life to growing vegetables.

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[The second excerpt relates a discussion that ensues between Michael and his father, an engineer, when Michael happens to mention his conversation with Mrs Jones.]

(Friday, June 3rd)

'Thanks Dad, but take your time. Overton will not leave for his holiday for another three weeks. By the way, do you know anything about Stanley Shawn and his New Earth Initiative?'

'Not much; not too long ago, my colleague Ken Marks wrote a column in our newsletter criticizing their use, or rather abuse, of the data on asbestos-related risks. I gathered from his comments that it is all about scare mongering and creating media hype. Apart from that, I know no more than what I read in the newspaper. Why do you ask?'

'I met one of Shawn's collaborators on Tuesday. I got the impression from her that it is a visionary thing—she did not mind using the word "religion", conjuring up a new sort of mentality. "Politics," she said, "is about tapping the power of the masses to use it to control the masses, to give them what they want."'

'She knows what the masses want?'

'That was the scary part: they do not want freedom but comfort and convenience—and from there she somehow got to the conclusion that they want to be nobodies, literally selfless persons.'

'Self-less person is a contradiction in terms, son: no self means no person. Mind you, she has a point. Satisfaction of wants, any wants, has been elevated to the guiding principle in ethics, economics, politics, and worst of all education. Everything that men aspire to is called a human right now, as if to suffer the slightest frustration is an injustice.'

'"I can't get no satisfaction" and that is bad.'

'Precisely! Well no: it is not just bad, it is felt to be wrong—as if one were *entitled* to satisfaction.'

'I see, psychology masquerades as morality: what I do not like is wrong because I do not like it. Is that it?'

'Yes. The problem, of course, is that people have conflicting desires. If you tell them that they have a right to the things they desire, and you permit them to satisfy their desires on their own initiative, then you have a war on your hands. That is the modern credo: desires translate into rights, and freedom of action translates into war. Therefore, to avert war, you must convince people that they can satisfy their desires only if they let the government decide which desires should be satisfied first. You must convince them that, although they have a right to everything they desire, they have no right to do anything about it without official authorization.'

'I see; to get satisfaction they must let the government—Society, that woman said—satisfy their wants for them. Politics trumps rights.'

'Exactly! "Let the politicians take care of your rights. Surrender your lives to the state, and everything will be fine and dandy." Once you have committed yourself to the idea that rights are want- or desire-based, your only alternatives are war and politics.'

'Very clever. Given that choice, who would not put his faith in politics? Who would not consider submission to the State the precondition of salvation?'

'Salvation is the right word. To imbue the state with religious meaning, to present the state as the victory of life over death—that was the whole point of Thomas Hobbes, the inventor of the desire-based conception of human rights. Of course, there is no reason

whatsoever why anybody but a retarded adolescent should think that want-satisfaction is the basic norm. Why not simply respect other persons rather than defer to their desires? Why not appeal to their self-respect instead of their craving for self-esteem.'

'Is there a difference there?'

'There is a big moral difference. Self-respect implies respect for others, never taking what belongs to them without their permission. That is why one can never have too much self-respect. On the other hand, it is easy to have far too much self-esteem. Self-respect is a moral practice. It underpins the virtue of humility, because it leads you to accept others for what they are: free persons with a life of their own. Seeking to maximize self-esteem without practicing self-respect is the vice of pride, the source of all immoral behaviour.

'Besides, look at the difference from a political perspective. It makes all the difference in the world whether politics is about maintaining the discipline of self-respect or about maximizing some aggregate of want-satisfaction. For what it is worth, the principle of mutual respect is one of the few sound foundations of our civilization, but politics today is all about statistics, processing data and setting targets—and statistics are no respecters of persons.'

'Is that not beside the point? Is there really an alternative to maximizing want-satisfaction, or utility, as the professors say? As far as I recall, most of my professors agreed that there is no alternative: we *are* utility-maximizing animals.'

'Are we? Are you? You are writing a book and you want it to be a good book, right? So, you discipline yourself to deem what you write unsatisfactory, especially at those dangerous, tempting moments when you feel quite satisfied with it. You write and rewrite until you cannot make it better, not until you *feel* satisfied. Am I wrong? At the same time, because you know that choices and sacrifices have to be made, you discipline yourself to consider many other things satisfactory, although they satisfy none of your desires. You are the writer. You are supposed to *judge* your book as you write it, not to sit back and register your satisfaction with it. Do you think it is different for living your life? I am sure you have had the experience of going to bed fully pleased with what you had written only to wake up in the morning knowing that it would not do.'

'Many times; that is why I appreciate your comments so much.'

'We are utility-maximizing animals? My foot! If you are half the man I hope you are, you are a goal-setting person, seeking to find the right goals to set and dedicating your life to achieving them within the boundaries of what is right and proper. I should pity you if you could think of no better goal than maximizing your want-satisfaction.'

'But the professors...'

'Do not let the professors fool you, especially those who have succeeded in fooling themselves. Consider this, son: do the professors teach their *own* children that they should maximize satisfaction of given wants, regardless of what those wants happen to be? I do not think so. Why then do they teach it to other people's children? Why do they teach governments to treat people as if they are resources with which to maximize the politically correct utility function of the day?'

'Maybe teaching has been separated from education. Maybe it has been allied with politics.' I remembered something George Holbrook had said, and added. 'Maybe the professors are just selling techniques of manipulation and control.'

'You are spot-on there, I am afraid. Modern public schools were started under the motto "Good citizens and productive workers!" Good citizens—they are docile, loyal servants of the state. In a democracy, that means telling people that they can serve their own interests no better than by handing over their lives to their representatives, who then authorize the government to control everything. Then you get the current confusion of public and private interests, the idea that the public interest is the greatest happiness of the greatest number, keeping the majority happy, or at least complacent.'

'It is not?'

'Not in my book; the public interest is not some statistical aggregate derived from opinion polls taken after interested parties have spent millions on propaganda and indoctrination.'

'It is called "social engineering", Dad.'

That made him scowl. ‘I know what engineering is, son; it is manipulating things. Social engineering is manipulating people; it is not education. What are you going to teach your children? *That* is the question where education is concerned.’

It was not his habit to speak that long on any subject. I must have touched a nerve there. Wanting to end the discussion, I merely said, ‘Well, that woman seemed pretty sure of her analysis.’ It was to no avail.

‘Do not call it analysis, Michael; it is a diagnosis at best, and one that is based on the dubious philosophy of utility maximization. I am talking about the power-worshipping Thomas Hobbes, Jeremy Bentham, the original control freak...’

‘Was Bentham a control freak?’

‘Who else but a control freak would gloat over the notion that any person's life is controlled only by pain and pleasure, the two sensations which one man can most easily induce in another? If anyone wrote the book on manipulating, managing others, it was he. Besides, he came up with the idea that society should be like his model prison, the Panopticon: every citizen-inmate visible to the supervising authorities, the authorities invisible to the citizens.’ Before I could mention Mrs Jones's enthusiastic endorsement of that vision, Dad went on: ‘And then there was his student, the awful John Stuart Mill with his devious, fawning advocacy of Auguste Comte's Religion of Humanity, probably the first truly modern collectivist doctrine.’

‘Before Mill and Bentham there was, of course, the young David Hume, who packed the philosophy of utility in exquisite, suave sophistry. He was sharp and witty, but also an adolescent with an ambition to be the English Voltaire, and on top of that a childless bachelor—not your obvious choice if you are looking for one who would ground the moral sciences on sound principles, which is precisely what he claimed to be doing. Yet, he could not even account for his own life in terms of his philosophy. He confessed that he would not have got through a single day if he had stuck to the principles that made him famous among the literati.’

I knew only the mature Hume's *History of England* and a few of his *Essays*, but Dad was referring to the young Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*, which I had not read, although there was a copy in his library in that very room.

‘The worst part is this: Hume did not consider what his fundamental idea would do to education, if it were ever taken seriously—and, alas, it is now arguably a ruling dogma of Western and Westernised intellectual elites all over the world. I mean his idea that reason is and ought to be the slave of the passions. Try educating a child on *that* principle! For a start, think about this practical application: the schools and the universities are and ought to be the slaves of politics—of public opinion, if you prefer. It is the betrayal of our civilization, but it is where we are now.’

‘All slaves of public opinion, that is exactly what the woman proposed. I thought she was mad.’

‘Is she mad? If she is, then she is not alone in her madness.’

‘How did that madness become the received wisdom?’

‘It is a tall order to answer that question. However, confusion about the nature of society certainly is a big part of the answer. In the past, the general term “society” referred primarily to the conditions of peaceful co-existence among people, the conditions of conviviality. At the latest from the French Revolution onwards, the term began to refer to the order imposed by a state on people living in the territory under the dominion of that state. Society was nationalized. “Society” became a political concept.’

‘Explain.’

‘In the convivial order, you meet and deal with people as such. It does not matter whether they and you are members of the same organization, or even members of any organisation. That is why the rights of people in the convivial order are called natural rights, the rights of natural persons, bound to respect one another as what they are: free persons of the same kind.’

‘And in the state-imposed order?’

‘The state is an organization, an artificial construction. In an organization, your rights and duties depend on your rank, position or function in the organization. These rights and duties are not determined by your human nature but by how the directors seek to

realize the goals of the organization. In an organization, *you* do not have rights but *your position* has.'

'But we were discussing the state.'

'The state is an organization, not a convivial order.'

'Meaning that the state and natural rights cannot go together?'

'Exactly! The state is a system of positions and functions. The state can deal with people only to the extent that they have a place or function in its organizational schemes. That is why it has its own human resources management programmes. It seeks to make people identify fully with the positions and the functions to which it assigns them. A person who does not comply with the legal-positional requirements is treated as a deviant, a suitable target for "corrective" policies of a penal, fiscal or therapeutic nature.'

'In short, it seeks to transform people into legal placeholders? Job Descriptions Incarnated—that is how that woman put it.'

'Indeed. Its goal is the socialisation of the convivial order, but, given the modern meaning of "society", that is a euphemism for the politicisation of all human relationships. Socialists, so-called progressive liberals and today's clueless conservatives—they all share that goal; they are all power worshippers at heart.'

'That is almost word for word what the lady said, but she was definitely enthusiastic about politics. But where is the madness?'

'Organizations, including those state-dominated societies, are artificial things, yet unwary people are wont to take them for reality. They are surrounded by artificial things, created and maintained by little else than fashionable opinions, and they come to accept these opinions as defining the real world. They end up like people who cannot tell whether they are awake or dreaming—and that is a sure sign of madness, do you not agree?'

'By the way, she used an expression that I thought you would like: Consumer Jekyll and Voter Hyde.'

'That is indeed astute, son, as good an expression of the madcap duality of Man and Citizen as any. If Consumer Jekyll wants something but thinks it is too expensive, he will put on his Citizen cap, turn into Voter Hyde, and authorize his representatives to supply it at the expense of other people. That is the illusion of politics: invite everybody to live at the expense of everybody else, and to empower the politicians to take over the lives of everybody.'

'In other words, vote... write a blank cheque.'

'Yes, by all means, write a blank cheque. Then say, "I have done my duty, and damn the consequences. When I am asked to do so, I shall write another blank cheque."' Dad sighed deeply, struck a match to light his cigar again, and resumed reading the report that he had put aside when I had come into his study.