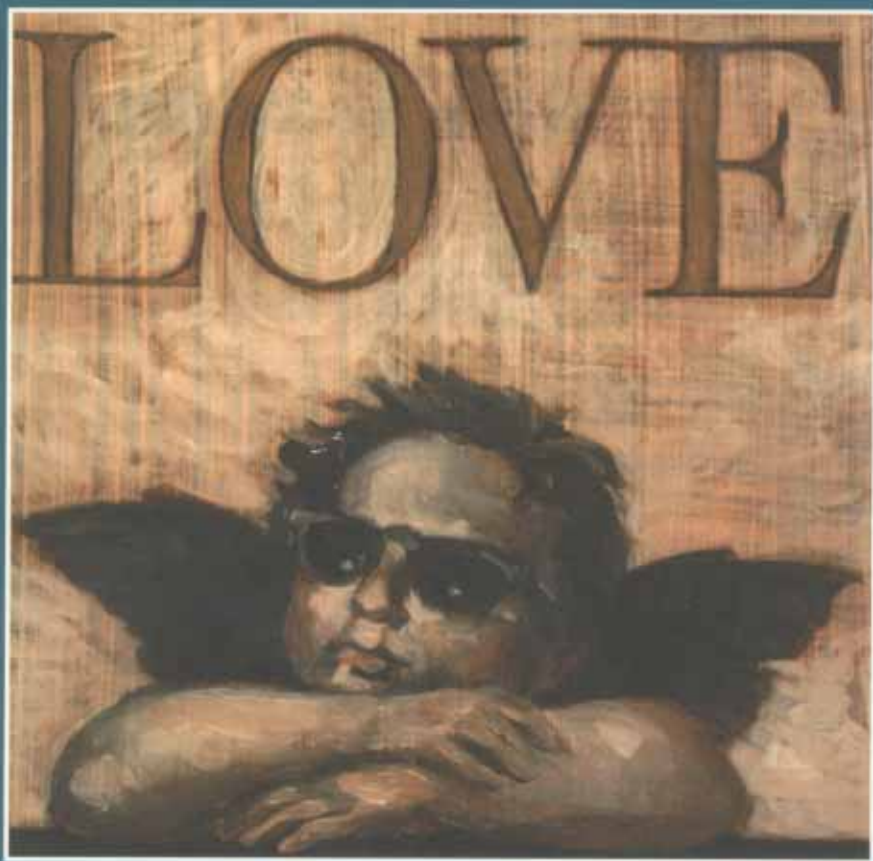


HARVARD REVIEW



NUMBER NINE
FALL 1995



Société Imaginaire

VACLAV HAVEL

A "Courageous and Magnanimous Creation"



Vaclav Havel, Prague 1969
Inge Morath, Magnum Photos, Inc.

One evening not long ago I was sitting in an outdoor restaurant by the water. My chair was almost identical to the chairs they have in restaurants by the Vltava River in Prague. They were playing the same rock music they play in most Czech restaurants. I saw advertisements I'm familiar with back home. Above all, I was surrounded by young people who were similarly dressed, who drank familiar-looking drinks, and who behaved as casually as their contemporaries in Prague. Only their complexion and their facial features were different—for I was in Singapore.

I sat there thinking about this and again—for the umpteenth time—I realized an almost banal truth: that we now live in a single global civilization. The identity of

this civilization does not lie merely in similar forms of dress, or similar drinks, or in the constant buzz of the same commercial music all around the world, or even in international advertising. It lies in something deeper: thanks to the modern idea of constant progress, with its inherent expansionism, and to the rapid evolution of science that comes directly from it, our planet has, for the first time in the long history of the human race, been covered in the space of a very few decades by a single civilization—one that is essentially technological. The world is now enmeshed in webs of telecommunication networks consisting of millions of tiny threads or capillaries that not only transmit information of all kinds at lightning speed, but also convey integrated models of social, political, and economic behavior. They are conduits for legal norms, as well as for billions and billions of dollars crisscrossing the world while remaining invisible even to those who deal directly with them. The life of the human race is completely interconnected not only in the informational sense, but in the causal sense as well. Anecdotally, I could illustrate this by

reminding you, since I've already mentioned Singapore, that today all it takes is a single shady transaction initiated by a single devious bank clerk in Singapore to bring down a bank on the other side of the world. Thanks to the accomplishments of this civilization, practically all of us know what cheques, bonds, bills of exchange, and stocks are. We are familiar with CNN and Chernobyl, and we know who the Rolling Stones, or Nelson Mandela, or Salman Rushdie are. More than that, the capillaries that have so radically integrated this civilization also convey information about certain modes of human coexistence that have proven their worth, like democracy, respect for human rights, the rule of law, the laws of the marketplace. Such information flows around the world and, in varying degrees, takes root in different places.

In modern times this global civilization emerged in the territory occupied by European and ultimately by Euro-American culture. Historically, it evolved from a combination of traditions—Classical, Judaic and Christian. In theory, at least, it gives people not only the capacity for worldwide communication, but also a coordinated means of defending themselves against many common dangers. It can also, in an unprecedented way, make our life on this earth easier and open up to us hitherto unexplored horizons in our knowledge of ourselves and the world we live in.

And yet there is something not quite right about it.

Allow me to use this ceremonial gathering for a brief meditation on a subject which I have dwelt upon a great deal, and which I often bring up on occasions resembling this one. I want to focus today on the source of the dangers that threaten humanity in spite of this global civilization, and often directly because of it. Above all, I would like to speak about the ways in which these dangers can be confronted.

Many of the great problems we face today, as far as I understand them, have their origin in the fact that this global civilization, though in evidence everywhere, is no more than a thin veneer over the sum total of human awareness, if I may put it that way. This civilization is immensely fresh, young, new, and fragile, and the human spirit has accepted it with dizzying alacrity, without itself changing in any essential way. Humanity has evolved over long millennia in all manner of civilizations and cultures that gradually, and in very diverse ways, shaped our habits of mind, our relationship to the world, our models of behavior and the values we accept and recognize. In essence, this new, single epidermis of world civilization merely covers or conceals the immense variety of cultures, of peoples, of religious worlds, of historical traditions and historically formed attitudes, all of which in a sense lie "beneath" it. At the same time, even as the veneer of world civilization expands, this "underside" of humanity, this hidden dimension of it, demands more and more clearly to be heard and to be granted a right to life.

And thus, while the world as a whole increasingly accepts the new habits of global civilization, another contradictory process is taking place: ancient traditions are reviving, different religions and cultures are awakening to new ways of being, seeking new room to exist, and struggling with

growing fervor to realize what is unique to them and what makes them different from others. Ultimately they seek to give their individuality a political expression.

It is often said that, in our time, every valley cries out for its own independence or will even fight for it. Many nations, or parts of them at least, are struggling against modern civilization or its main proponents for the right to worship their ancient gods and obey the ancient divine injunctions. They carry on their struggle using weapons provided by the very civilization they oppose. They employ radar, computers, lasers, nerve gases, and perhaps, in the future, even nuclear weapons—all products of the world they challenge—to help defend their ancient heritage against the erosions of modern civilization. In contrast with these technological inventions, other products of this civilization, like democracy or the idea of human rights, are not accepted in many places in the world because they are deemed to be hostile to local traditions.

In other words: the Euro-American world has equipped other parts of the globe with instruments that not only could effectively destroy the enlightened values which, among other things, made possible the invention of precisely these instruments, but which could well cripple the capacity of people to live together on this earth.

What follows from all of this?

It is my belief that this state of affairs contains a clear challenge not only to the Euro-American world but to our present-day civilization as a whole. It is a challenge to this civilization to start understanding itself as a multicultural and multipolar civilization, whose meaning lies not in undermining the individuality of different spheres of culture and civilization but in allowing them to be more completely themselves. This will only be possible, even conceivable, if we all accept a basic code of mutual coexistence, a kind of common minimum we can all share, one that will enable us to go on living side by side. Yet such a code won't stand a chance if it is merely the product of a few who then proceed to force it on the rest. It must be an expression of the authentic will of everyone, growing out of the genuine spiritual roots hidden beneath the skin of our common, global civilization. If it is merely disseminated through the capillaries of this skin, the way Coca-Cola ads are—as a commodity offered by some to others—such a code can hardly be expected to take hold in any profound or universal way.

But is humanity capable of such an undertaking? Is it not a hopelessly utopian idea? Haven't we so lost control of our destiny that we are condemned to gradual extinction in ever harsher high-tech clashes between cultures, because of our fatal inability to cooperate in the face of impending catastrophes, be they ecological, social, or demographic, or of dangers generated by the state of our civilization as such?

I don't know, but I have not lost hope.

I have not lost hope because I am persuaded again and again that, lying dormant in the deepest roots of most, if not all, cultures there is an

essential similarity, something that could be made, if the will to do so existed, a genuinely unifying starting point for that new code of human coexistence that would be firmly anchored in the great diversity of human traditions.

Don't we find somewhere in the foundations of most religions and cultures, though they may take a thousand and one distinct forms, common elements such as respect for what transcends us, whether we mean the mystery of being, or a moral order that stands above us; certain imperatives that come to us from heaven, or from nature, or from our own hearts; a belief that our deeds will live after us; respect for our neighbors, for our families, for certain natural authorities; respect for human dignity and for nature; a sense of solidarity and benevolence towards guests who come with good intentions?

Isn't the common, ancient origin or human roots of our diverse spiritualities, each of which is merely another kind of human understanding of the same reality, the thing that can genuinely bring people of different cultures together?

And aren't the basic commandments of this archetypal spirituality in harmony with what even an unreligious person, without knowing exactly why, may consider proper and meaningful?

Naturally, I am not suggesting that modern people be compelled to worship ancient deities and accept rituals they have long since abandoned. I am suggesting something quite different: we must come to understand the deep mutual connection or kinship between the various forms of our spirituality. We must recollect our original spiritual and moral substance, which grew out of the same essential experience of humanity. I believe that this is the only way to achieve a genuine renewal of our sense of responsibility for ourselves and for the world. And at the same time, it is the only way to achieve a deeper understanding among cultures that will enable them to work together in a truly ecumenical way to create a new order for the world.

The veneer of global civilization that envelops the modern world and the consciousness of humanity, as we all know, has a dual nature, bringing into question at every step of the way, the very values it is based upon or which it propagates. The thousands of marvelous achievements of this civilization that work for us so well and enrich us can equally impoverish, diminish, and destroy our lives, and frequently do. Instead of serving people, many of these creations enslave them. Instead of helping people to develop their identities, they take them away. Almost every invention or discovery—from the splitting of the atom and the discovery of DNA to television and the computer—can be turned against us and used to our detriment. How much easier it is today than it was during the First World War to destroy an entire metropolis in a single air raid. And how much easier would it be today, in the era of television, for a madman like Hitler or Stalin to pervert the spirit of a whole nation? When have people ever had the power we now possess to alter the climate of the planet or deplete its mineral resources or the wealth of its fauna and flora in the space of a few short decades? And how much more

destructive potential do terrorists have at their disposal today than at the beginning of this century?

In our era, it would seem that one part of the human brain, the rational part which has made all these morally neutral discoveries, has undergone exceptional development, while the other part, which should be alert to ensure that these discoveries really serve humanity and will not destroy it, has lagged behind catastrophically.

Yes, regardless of where I begin my thinking about the problems facing our civilization, I always return to the theme of human responsibility, which seems incapable of keeping pace with civilization and preventing it from turning against the human race. It's as though the world has simply become too much for us to deal with.

There is no way back. Only a dreamer can believe that the solution lies in curtailing the progress of civilization in some way or other. The main task in the coming era is something else: a radical renewal of our sense of responsibility. Our conscience must catch up to our reason, otherwise we are lost.

It is my profound belief that there is only one way to achieve this: we must divest ourselves of our egotistical anthropocentrism, our habit of seeing ourselves as masters of the universe who can do whatever occurs to us. We must discover a new respect for what transcends us: for the universe, for the earth, for nature, for life, and for reality. Our respect for other people, for other nations, and for other cultures, can only grow from a humble respect for the cosmic order and from an awareness that we are a part of it, that we share in it and that nothing of what we do is lost, but rather becomes part of the eternal memory of Being, where it is judged.

A better alternative for the future of humanity, therefore, clearly lies in imbuing our civilization with a spiritual dimension. It's not just a matter of understanding its multicultural nature and finding inspiration for the creation of a new world order in the common roots of all cultures. It is also essential that the Euro-American cultural sphere—the one which created this civilization and taught humanity its destructive pride—now return to its own spiritual roots and become an example to the rest of the world in the search for a new humility.

General observations of this type are certainly not difficult to make, nor are they new or revolutionary. Modern people are masters at describing the crises and the misery of the world which we shape and for which we are responsible. We are much less adept at putting things right.

So what specifically is to be done?

I do not believe in some universal key or panacea. I am not an advocate of what Karl Popper called "holistic social engineering," particularly because I had to live most of my adult life in circumstances that resulted from an attempt to create a holistic Marxist utopia. I know more than enough, therefore, about efforts of this kind.

This does not relieve me, however, of the responsibility to think of

ways to make the world better.

It will certainly not be easy to awaken in people a new sense of responsibility for the world, an ability to conduct themselves as if they were to live on this earth forever, and to be held answerable for its condition one day. Who knows how many horrific cataclysms humanity may have to go through before such a sense of responsibility is generally accepted. But this does not mean that those who wish to work for it cannot begin at once. It is a great task for teachers, educators, intellectuals, the clergy, artists, entrepreneurs, journalists, people active in all forms of public life.

Above all it is a task for politicians.

Even in the most democratic of conditions, politicians have immense influence, perhaps more than they themselves realize. This influence does not lie in their actual mandates, which in any case are considerably limited. It lies in something else: in the spontaneous impact their charisma has on the public.

The main task of the present generation of politicians is not, I think, to ingratiate themselves with the public through the decisions they take or their smiles on television. It is not to go on winning elections and ensuring themselves a place in the sun until the end of their days. Their role is something quite different: to assume their share of responsibility for the long-range prospects of our world and thus to set an example for the public in whose sight they work. Their responsibility is to think ahead boldly, not to fear the disfavor of the crowd, to imbue their actions with a spiritual dimension (which of course is not the same thing as ostentatious attendance at religious services), to explain again and again—both to the public and to their colleagues—that politics must do far more than reflect the interests of particular groups or lobbies. After all, politics is a matter of serving the community, which means that it is morality in practice. And how better to serve the community and practice morality than by seeking in the midst of the global (and globally threatened) civilization their own global political responsibility: that is, their responsibility for the very survival of the human race?

I don't believe that a politician who sets out on this risky path will inevitably jeopardize his or her political survival. This is a wrongheaded notion which assumes that the citizen is a fool and that political success depends on playing to this folly. That is not the way it is. A conscience slumbers in every human being, something divine. And that is what we have to put our trust in.

Ladies and gentlemen, I find myself at perhaps the most famous university in the most powerful country in the world. With your permission, I will say a few words on the subject of the politics of a great power.

It is obvious that those who have the greatest power and influence also bear the greatest responsibility. Like it or not, the United States of America now bears probably the greatest responsibility for the direction our world will take. The United States, therefore, should reflect most deeply on this responsibility.

Isolationism has never paid off for the United States. Had it entered the First World War earlier, perhaps it would not have had to pay with anything like the casualties it actually incurred.

The same is true of the Second World War. When Hitler was getting ready to invade Czechoslovakia, and in so doing finally expose the lack of courage on the part of the western democracies, your President wrote a letter to the Czechoslovak President imploring him to come to some agreement with Hitler. Had he not deceived himself and the whole world into believing that an agreement could be made with this madman, had he instead shown a few teeth, perhaps the Second World War need not have happened, and tens of thousands of young Americans need not have died fighting in it.

Likewise, just before the end of that war, had your President, who was otherwise an outstanding man, said a clear "no" to Stalin's decision to divide the world, perhaps the Cold War, which cost the United States hundreds of billions of dollars, need not have happened either.

I beg you: do not repeat these mistakes! You yourselves have always paid a heavy price for them! There is simply no escaping the responsibility you have as the most powerful country in the world.

There is far more at stake here than simply standing up to those who would like once again to divide the world into spheres of interest, or subjugate others who are different from them, and weaker. What is now at stake is saving the human race. In other words, it's a question of what I've already talked about: of understanding modern civilization as a multicultural and multipolar civilization, of turning our attention to the original spiritual sources of human culture and above all, of our own culture, of drawing from these sources the strength for a courageous and magnanimous creation of a new order for the world.

Not long ago I was at a gala dinner to mark an important anniversary. There were fifty heads of state present, perhaps more, who came to honor the heroes and victims of the greatest war in human history. This was not a political conference, but the kind of social event that is meant principally to show hospitality and respect to the invited guests. When the seating plan was given out, I discovered to my surprise that those sitting at the table next to mine were not identified simply as representatives of a particular state, as was the case with all the other tables; they were referred to as "permanent members of the UN Security Council and the G7." I had mixed feelings about this. On the one hand, I thought how marvelous that the richest and most powerful of this world see each other often and even at this dinner, can talk informally and get to know each other better. On the other hand, a slight chill went down my spine, for I could not help observing that one table had been singled out as being special and particularly important. It was a table for the big powers. Somewhat perversely, I began to imagine that the people sitting at it were, along with their Russian caviar, dividing the rest of us up among themselves, without asking our opinion. Perhaps all this is merely the whimsy of a former and perhaps future playwright. But I wanted to express it here. For one simple reason: to emphasize the terrible gap that exists

between the responsibility of the great powers and their hubris. The architect of that seating arrangement—I should think it was none of the attending Presidents—was not guided by a sense of responsibility for the world, but by the banal pride of the powerful.

But pride is precisely what will lead the world to hell. I am suggesting an alternative: humbly accepting our responsibility for the world.

There is one great opportunity in the matter of coexistence between nations and spheres of civilization, culture, and religion that should be grasped and exploited to the limit. This is the appearance of supranational or regional communities. By now, there are many such communities in the world, with diverse characteristics and differing degrees of integration. I believe in this approach. I believe in the importance of organisms that lie somewhere between nation states and a world community, organisms that can be an important medium of global communication and cooperation. I believe that this trend towards integration in a world where, as I've said, every valley longs for independence, must be given the greatest possible support. These organisms, however, must not be an expression of integration merely for the sake of integration. They must be one of the many instruments enabling each region, each nation, to be both itself and capable of cooperation with others. That is, they must be one of the instruments enabling countries and peoples who are close to each other geographically, ethnically, culturally, and economically and who have common security interests, to form associations and better communicate with each other and with the rest of the world. At the same time, all such regional communities must rid themselves of fear that other like communities are directed against them. Regional groupings in areas that have common traditions and a common political culture ought to be a natural part of the complex political architecture of the world. Cooperation between such regions ought to be a natural component of cooperation on a worldwide scale. As long as the broadening of NATO membership to include countries who feel culturally and politically a part of the region the Alliance was created to defend is seen by Russia, for example, as an anti-Russian undertaking, it will be a sign that Russia has not yet understood the challenge of this era.

The most important world organization is the United Nations. I think that the 50th anniversary of its birth could be an occasion to reflect on how to infuse it with a new ethos, a new strength, and a new meaning, and make it the truly most important arena of good cooperation among all cultures that make up our planetary civilization.

But neither the strengthening of regional structures nor the strengthening of the UN will save the world if both processes are not informed by that renewed spiritual charge which I see as the only hope that the human race will survive another millennium.

I have touched on what I think politicians should do.

There is, however, one more force that has at least as much, if not

more, influence on the general state of mind as politicians do.

That force is the mass media.

Only when fate sent me into the realm of high politics did I become fully aware of the media's double-edged power. Their dual impact is not a specialty of the media. It is merely a part, or an expression of the dual nature of today's civilization of which I have already spoken.

Thanks to television the whole world discovered in the course of an evening that there is a country called Rwanda where people are suffering beyond belief. Thanks to television it is possible to do at least a little to help those who are suffering. Thanks to television the whole world in the course of a few seconds was shocked and horrified about what happened in Oklahoma City and, at the same time, understood it as a great warning for all. Thanks to television the whole world knows that there exists an internationally recognized country called Bosnia and Herzegovina and that, from the moment it recognized this country, the international community has tried unsuccessfully to divide it into grotesque mini-states according to the wishes of warlords who have never been recognized by anyone as anyone's legitimate representatives.

That is the wonderful side of today's mass media, or rather, of those who gather the news. Humanity's thanks belong to all those courageous reporters who voluntarily risk their lives wherever something evil is happening in order to arouse the conscience of the world.

There is, however, another, less wonderful, aspect of television, one that merely revels in the horrors of the world or, unforgivably, makes them commonplace, or compels politicians to become, first of all, television stars. But where is it written that someone who is good on television is necessarily also a good politician? I never fail to be astonished at how much I am at the mercy of television directors and editors; at how my public image depends far more on them than it does on myself; at how important it is to smile appropriately on television or choose the right tie; at how television forces me to express my thoughts as sparsely as possible, in witticisms, slogans, or sound bites; at how easily my television image can be made to seem different from the real me. I am astonished by this and, at the same time, I fear it serves no good purpose. I know politicians who have learned to see themselves only as the television camera does. Television has thus expropriated their personalities, and made them into something like television shadows of their former selves. I sometimes wonder whether they even sleep in a way that will look good on television.

I am not outraged with television or the press for distorting what I say, or ignoring it, or editing me to appear like some strange monster. I am not angry with the media when I see that a politician's rise or fall often depends more on them than on the politician concerned. What interests me is something else: the responsibility of those who have the mass media in their hands. They too bear responsibility for the world, and for the future of humanity. Just as the splitting of the atom can immensely enrich humanity in a thousand and one ways and, at the same time, can also threaten it with destruction, so

television can have both good and evil consequences. Quickly, suggestively, and to an unprecedented degree it can disseminate the spirit of understanding, humanity, human solidarity, and spirituality, or it can stupefy whole nations and continents. And just as our use of atomic energy depends solely on our sense of responsibility, so the proper use of television's power to enter practically every household and every human mind depends on our sense of responsibility as well.

Whether our world is to be saved from everything that threatens it today depends above all on whether human beings come to their senses, whether they understand the degree of their responsibility and discover a new relationship to the very miracle of being. The world is in the hands of us all. And yet some have a greater influence on its fate than others. The more influence a person has—be they politician or television announcer—the greater the demands placed on their sense of responsibility and the less they should think merely about personal interests.

Ladies and gentlemen, in conclusion allow me a brief personal remark. I was born in Prague and I lived there for decades without being allowed to study properly or visit other countries. Nevertheless, my mother never abandoned one of her secret and quite extravagant dreams: that one day I would study at Harvard. Fate did not permit me to fulfill her dream. But something else happened, something that would never have occurred even to my mother: I have received a doctoral degree at Harvard without even having to study here.

More than that, I have been given to see Singapore and countless other exotic places. I have been given to understand how small this world is and how it torments itself with countless things it need not torment itself with if people could find within themselves a little more courage, a little more hope, a little more responsibility, a little more mutual understanding and love.

I don't know whether my mother is looking down at me from heaven, but, if she is, I can guess what she's probably thinking: she's thinking that I'm sticking my nose into matters that only people who have properly studied political science at Harvard have the right to stick their noses into.

I hope that you don't think so.

Thank you for your attention.

Commencement Address given at Harvard University, June 9, 1995. Reprinted from the *Harvard University Gazette*.

HANS MAGNUS ENZENSBERGER

The Entombment

Translated from the German by the author

Our mortal frame,
they call it.
But what did it hold?
The psychologist will say:
Your psyche.
Your soul,
the priest.
Your personality,
the personnel manager.

Furthermore,
there's the anima,
the imago, the daemon,
the identity and the Ego,
not to mention the Id
and the Super-Ego.

The butterfly which is to rise
from this very mixed lot
belongs to a species
about which nothing is known.

In Memory of Sir Hiram Maxim (1840-1916)

Translated from the German by the author

I (1945)

On the way to school, in the ditch,
the roar of the fighter-plane swooping down,
little clouds of dust to the left, in front of us,
to the right, soundless, and only a moment later
the aircraft gun's hammering.
We did not appreciate his invention.

II (1854-1878)

Later, much later did he emerge
from an old cyclopedia. A country boy.
Their farm in the wilderness, harassed
by bears, a long time ago. At fourteen,
a cartwright's apprentice. Sixteen hours a day
at four dollars a month. Scraped along
as a brass-founder, boxer, instrument maker,
shouting: a chronic inventor, that's me!
Improved mousetraps and curlers
and built a pneumatic merry-go-round.
His steam aeroplane, with a boiler
of 1200 pounds, three tons water supply,
broke down under its own dead weight.
Neither did his ersatz coffee take off.
He had to wait for the Great Paris Exhibition,
a fairy-world of arc lamps and filaments,
for the Legion of Honour and for his illumination.

III (1881-1961)

Three years later the Prince of Wales
could inspect in the vaults of Hatton Garden,
a miracle of precision:
it loaded, cocked, bolted and triggered,
opened the brooch-lock, ejected the shell,
reloaded, cocked, again and again, by itself,
and the cadence was fabulous: ten rounds
per second, continuous firing.
The recoil barrel, a stroke of genius!
cried the Duke of Cambridge. Never again
will war be what it used to be!
A weapon of unprecedented elegance!
The knighthood was not long in coming.

IV (1994)

Nowadays of course, with his masterpiece
being available on any high school yard,
we fail to feel what he must have felt:
the compulsive joy of a bearded mammal
with 270 patents to his credit.
As to us, his juniors by a hundred years,
we lay low as if dead in the ditch.

Selected Poems by Hans Magnus Enzensberger. Translated from the German by Hans Magnus Enzensberger and Michael Hamburger. Bloodaxe, 1994 (distributed by Dufour). \$18.95 ISBN 1852242914 (paper).

Born in 1929 in Bavaria and raised in Nuremberg, Hans Magnus Enzensberger has been a prominent figure in post-World War II German and European letters. Poet, editor, publisher, journalist, translator and anthologist of poetry from several languages, Enzensberger has been at the forefront of the esthetic, environmental, social, and political discourse (see his "Circus of Cultural Events," *Harvard Review* #6, Spring 1994) since 1957, the year of publication of his first collection of poems.

This 255-page edition brings together in chronological order substantial selections from six of Enzensberger's books of poetry, including *The Sinking of the Titanic* (1978) — an allusion to the post-war western civilization, which he began to write during a 1969 stay in Cuba. Michael Hamburger, a fine English poet himself, contributes a brief introduction and 37 of the 81 individual translations; the remaining 34 are rendered just as expertly into English by Enzensberger himself.

In both poetry and prose, (*Civil Wars* is his most recent collection of essays in English translation), Enzensberger is said to owe much to Marxism, but throughout his work there is ample evidence of opposition to the suppression of freedoms by Communist regimes. The following excerpts are from his *Selected Poems*:

Gigantic zaddik
I see you betrayed
by your disciples:
only your enemies
remained what they were
(*"Karl Heinrich Marx"*)

But his criticism is aimed in every direction with equal conviction and energy:

Then again, in August, and in remote places,
full of bulrushes, duckweed, etcetera,
he'd listen, after all stations have closed down,
to his heart's content, in the gleam of a satellite,
to the frogs. Residues.
His predilection for old houses,
old liberties, animals on the brink of extinction.
Nothing personal. Just the right
to croak or not to croak —
he'd insist on it.

(From *"The Frogs of Bikini"*)

From the post-war "German miracle" to the media blitz of advertisement and selective information, consumerism and the usual power politics, Enzensberger (called "the Conscience of his generation") often includes the self and the personal in the collective or common, so that what's political about his verse

is both broad and specific. Here is another example from "The Frogs of Bikini," an extraordinary longer poem included in the 1980 collection *The Fury of Disappearance* :

It is perfectly true, my dear girl,
I too, at times, have been thinking
of cars, houses, tax returns,
of putting an end to my worries,
of security, like a frog in his jar.

Reading through this volume of *Selected Poems*, one cannot miss the astute, contemporary intelligence at work, relaying a presence and voice over, whose thorough knowledge, lyricism, and often satire—extending even beyond national and cultural boundaries—rise above the relentless barrage of verbal banality found in information and ads.

Enzensberger's Marxian ethic/esthetic like Brecht's is imaginatively intellectual yet earthy, inventive yet pragmatic. Unlike Brecht's, it relies less on parable and more on analytical thought and intuition. Over the years, Enzensberger's work has evolved from "*poems for people who don't read poems*" (his title of an English selection published in 1968) to more complex and austere ambitions of form and content. The longer poems grapple with ideas about the human condition in our age—exploring and pondering rather than presuming to harness—a thematic adjustment that acknowledges the "march of time" and change, but always from that forefront:

Blast the old days.
What about now?

(From "Valse Triste et Sentimentale")

Or:

Those who have stayed so long
don't kid themselves much.

'I know that I know nothing':

Old married couples
have no use for overstatements;
they leave open
what cannot be settled.

(From "Old Couples")

That Socratic "I know one thing: I know nothing" is wisdom's apologia for what cannot be settled, what the vigor and idealism of a younger age have failed to settle. But with thinkers such as Hans Magnus Enzensberger, our (and the frog's) "right to croak or not to croak" may not after all be that unattainable. For "In any sufficiently rich system/ statements are possible/ which can neither be proved/ nor refuted within the system,/ unless the system itself/ is inconsistent" ("Homage to Gödel").

Stratis Haviaras

RACHEL HADAS

One of Life's Newest Hardships

Strange bedfellows—or not so strange, really, just an unexpected meeting of minds across a century and a half (and the Alps). The minds are those of the poets Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837) as expressed in his *Pensieri*, and Hans Magnus Enzensberger, writing in the Spring 1994 number of *Harvard Review*, and both men wax hot under the collar about the same obnoxious phenomenon—to wit, in W. S. Di Piero's translation of Leopardi, "the habit of reading or reciting one's own compositions to others." Clearly, this practice has only become more prevalent in the years that separate the two writers, for Enzensberger has a whole list of offenders: "symposia, presentations, introductions and implementations, conventions, reports, readings, round tables...and this by no means all."

Both Leopardi and Enzensberger associate the practice of reading aloud from one's writing with antiquity. "A very ancient custom," Leopardi calls it, and he cites amusing anecdotes from Horace and Martial to attest to the bad reputation of such readings even then. "A philologist friend of mine," he adds,

has noted that if Octavia really did faint when she heard Virgil read aloud from the sixth book of *The Aeneid*, it is likely that this was caused no more by the memory of her son Marcellus (as is often claimed) than by the boredom of hearing Virgil read.

"In past centuries," according to Leopardi, this "very ancient custom was a tolerable misery, since it was rare." If only it had remained rare. Alas, "today, when everybody can write and the hardest thing to find is someone who is *not* an author, this practice has become a scourge, a calamity, one of life's newest hardships."

Enzensberger too is nonplused (to put it mildly) by the recrudescence of a practice which he thinks ought by rights to have died a natural death long ago:

Those who step back a few paces to gain the proper perspective will see that an extremely bizarre phenomenon is at work. One is led to believe that neither Gutenberg nor Hertz nor Marconi ever lived; that printing had never been invented; that we lived in a world...without the technologies to duplicate and transmit. Toward the end of the 20th century a subculture has

taken shape right in front of our eyes, where things happen as they did in late antiquity or the Middle Ages. Traveling singers roam the country...

The parallel between the Italian and German poets' complaints is a striking one, it seems to me. Where Leopardi and Enzensberger part company is in their respective views of how these pestilential presentations, these endless readings, are received. For Leopardi, the whole phenomenon is grist to his misanthropic mill:

There are very few things that reveal the puerility of human nature and the extreme blindness, indeed stupidity, to which self-love leads a man...as does this business of reciting one's own writings. For we are all aware of the unspeakable annoyance we feel when listening to someone else's work.

Matters are murkier for Enzensberger, who stresses the role not of egotism but of bureaucracy and thus tends to blame not individual (or even universal) human nature so much as systems and groups, faceless, plural—functionaries, "event managers," PR people, granting agencies, arts councils, and so on and on. The enigma in all this is of course the public, or to put it more concretely, the people who actually attend the "frenzy of cultural events" to which Enzensberger's title refers. Enzensberger grants that people do quite often attend readings, a practice he is at a loss to account for: why hire a sitter, miss dinner, take the subway, all to hear bits of a book one could easily read at home? He does suggest one factor in such irrational behavior is "the illusion that the appearance of the guest is more authentic than all he can ever have printed and distributed." Whereas for Leopardi reading from one's work is an indulgence in ferocious egotism, for Enzensberger both performers and audience are manipulated by their faceless handlers, who are in turn activated by...market forces? mass hysteria? the *zeitgeist*? Leopardi's is a romantically individual view, though his sense of human nature owes more to Seneca than to the eighteenth century; Enzensberger, a child of the century of mass movements, wants to keep culture out of the clutches of collectivism.

Imaginative thinkers that they are, both poets offer modest proposals for stemming what they so eloquently depict as an unconscionable state of affairs. Enzensberger's proposal, probably Utopian, is truly modest: a two-year moratorium on "all these events with which I tired you in the beginning" unless such events are paid either by the performers themselves or by the audience—absolutely no organizational or institutional support allowed. All public funds thus saved should be dedicated "to the maintenance, repair, and improvement of public libraries." Good luck! The library in the town where I spend summers is proud of the grant it has just received—not to buy books but to finance four readings by local authors.

Leopardi, on the other hand, would actually like to find a cultural institution of sorts, "a school or academy" where—but let him describe it. What a grant proposal writer he would have been!

—a kind of athenaeum of auditing—where at any hour of day or night [my friends] or persons employed by them will listen to anyone who wants to read, at predetermined prices. For prose it will be one scudo for the first hour, two for the second, four for the third, eight for the fourth, and so on according to mathematical progression. For poetry, twice the price. For re-reading a passage already covered (which sometimes happens) one lira per line. If the listener falls asleep, one third the due fee shall be remitted to the reader. For convulsions, fainting spells, and other accidents slight and serious which might occur during the course of the reading, the school will be supplied with ointments and medicines to be dispersed free of charge.

Enzensberger, more concerned than Leopardi to be constructive, devotes a few wise words to what culture is and is not. "This one opens a book, that one plays a few tunes on the flute. Two people argue all night about God and the world...The composer leans over his score. The researcher conceives of an idea...All those things do not amount to much. All those things are not within the scope of a TV camera. All those things do not make it into the newspaper."

Most of these activities, unlike Enzensberger's laundry list of group events such as symposia, are conspicuously solitary. Those that do involve more than a single person can be thought of as dialogues (the argument about God) or duets (the result of two people's playing a few tunes on the flute together). I find myself wondering as well about another private but not solitary activity which also doesn't make it to the front—or indeed any—page: reading (to one or two other people, not a hallful) a work which is not one's own writing. In other words, not giving a reading, but reading aloud.

I hope it's not proof that I'm a Leopardian narcissist that I find it indescribably refreshing to read certain things aloud to my son—works I wish I had the genius to have written. I like to think it's not only I who am refreshed. Reading aloud "Calico Pie" or "The Old Gumbie Cat" refreshes the poems for me: I may find that I know them by heart, or remember the pictures that accompanied them in a book I owned as a seven-year-old, or I may effortlessly learn them for the first time. But it isn't only the words that are revived for me. Reading my son "The Pobble Who Has No Toes," I was startled to realize that I could clearly remember my grandmother's deep Virginia voice when she read me that enchanting and puzzling poem. (Was Aunt Jobiska any relation to Aunt Jemima? Did people really eat eggs and buttercups fried with fish?) Edward Lear and T.S. Eliot spring gleefully to life as I read—but so does my grandmother, a far more fugitive and hazy presence. She died when I was no more than six, and just about my only memories of her are memories of her reading to me.

Such a refreshment of words and mind and spirit is certainly culture. Enzensberger rightly stresses the unmediagenic solitude of many cultural pursuits, but surely the composer, the researcher, the writer were all led as children in the general direction of what came to be their lives' work. Not every child who is read to becomes a poet; but how many children become

poets who have never been read to?

That I stress the importance of the personal transmission of literature (a bureaucratic way of referring to reading aloud) doesn't mean that I endorse the neo-medieval troubadorism, the oral bardism that so bemuses Enzensberger. I am all for books, libraries, antisocial hours spent alone, reading to oneself—hours whose loss is not made up for by attending a hundred literary events a year. Nevertheless, my not very exceptional personal experience as a child, a teacher, and a mother convinces me that people do share an inchoate need for the human voice. And not just radio or television. If people unaccountably flock to readings, perhaps it is because the talking head they see has a body attached.

Most contemporary discussions of the end of print culture, be they jeremiads or glowing evocations of the future, stress orality in the sense that information will be coming from some other source than the printed page. Yet many such discussions also point to the dramatic proliferation of electronic images and thus emphasize the increasingly visual orientation of the cultural consumers of the future. Few writers other than Enzensberger, as far as I know, have made the point that in our frantic lust for the spoken word, our unquenchable thirst for conferences, readings, and symposia, we are behaving as if we lack the resources of technology and must therefore depend solely on the human voice.

I have no key to this puzzle except my certainty that people need to hear human voices. The ideal voice is probably one we know and love—probably a parent's voice, and certainly a voice that is not disembodied. In Elliott Liebow's account of the lives of homeless women, *Tell Them Who I Am*, one woman evokes her childhood in foster care with a series of eloquent rhetorical questions. "Imagine belonging to the state? What the hell is that? How can you belong to something so big and vague? Can you come home to the state? Can it hold you and make you feel safe?"

Hearing my grandmother read me Edward Lear made me feel so safe that I can still remember her voice. Reading Jonathan "The Old Grumbie Cat" and now David Copperfield makes me feel contingently, temporarily, apprehensively, humanly safe. Can this provide a clue as to why people venture out on cold nights to be read to—even if the readers are reading (shudder) their own works? (And not always: New Yorkers line up to read Joyce and Dante aloud). However ironic, Leopardi is absolutely right that too much listening, especially less than voluntary listening, can cause physical distress. My own chief symptom this spring, at the end of the reading season, was nausea, as if I'd been filed beyond bursting (I had). I'd had it up to *here* with poetry readings—until October, maybe. Nevertheless, I wonder if all the readings we go to aren't a kind of literary foster care—too impersonal to feel really comforting, maybe misguided and ersatz, but still better than nothing at all—an acknowledgment, however clumsy or even mistaken, of some real need.

CHARLES SIMIC

Cut the Comedy

The cow that goes to heaven must take its body for not having enough brain to remember itself in spirit.

It's an unhappy time of struggle. The cow mooning. It is no less difficult than a breech birth.

But if a cow should die it must be raised toward heaven, lest it perish in forgetfulness, the sleep of pastures.

The farmer is trying to get the cow into the hayloft, "nearer, my God, to Thee," pulling the cow with ropes; the cow trying to get a footing over the tractor and bales of hay piled for the ascension. . .

—The cow mooning, the farmer praying, and his wife crying, scandal, scandal, scandal!
(Russell Edson "The Ascension of the Cow")

If it's funny, then, obviously, it can't be serious, people will tell you.

I disagree. Comedy says as much about the world as does tragedy. In fact, if you seek true seriousness, you must make room for both comic and tragic vision. Still, almost everybody prefers to be pitied than to be laughed at. For every million poems lamenting the cruel fate of a much-misunderstood and endlessly suffering soul, we get one funny Russell Edson or Kenneth Koch poem.

The dirtiest little secret around is that there are as many people without a sense of humor as there are people with no aesthetic sense. How do you convey to someone that something is funny or that something is beautiful? Well, you can't. It's not often that one hears people confess that they don't understand jokes. Humorless folk regard the rest of us as being merely silly. Our verbal acrobatics and our faces distorted by laughter are annoying and childish. Only if they are vastly outnumbered, do they plead to have the joke explained. Everyone has, at one time or another, witnessed or participated in such a hopeless attempt. It can't be done. You are better off telling a blind man about the glory of a sunset, and a deaf man about a Charlie Parker solo.

Aesthetic sense can be cultivated or developed, but what of the comic? Is one born with a sense of humor, or can it be acquired?

I suppose both, but it's not easy. If you love yourself too much, your chances are poor. The vainglorious want the world to tiptoe around them and draw near only to gaze at them in wordless admiration. The whole notion of hierarchy and its various supporting institutions depends on the absence of humor. The ridiculousness of authority must not be mentioned. The church, the state, and the academy are in complete accord about that. The Emperor

who has no clothes always strolls past silent courtiers. All that is spiritual, lofty, and abstract regards the comic as profane and blasphemous.

It is impossible to imagine a Christian or a Fascist theory of humor. Like poetry, humor is subversive. The only remedy, the ideologues of all stripes will tell you, is complete prohibition. Moral uplift is a grim business and the dictatorship of virtue, as we know, has the air of funeral home and graveyard about it. Irony and cutting wit are reserved solely for the superior classes and their closest flunkies. The servants of the mighty and their dogs are allowed to show their teeth and bite when necessary.

We ordinarily anticipate good literature to be solemn, boring, and therefore edifying. I attended, for example, one of the first performances of Beckett's "Krapp's Last Tape" in New York. The audience in the small theater was made up of intellectual types of both sexes. Early on in the play, the old guy on the stage is trying to open the drawer of the desk he's sitting at. It's stuck. He's got to pull hard and rest between attempts. Finally, it comes loose. He opens the drawer halfway, looks at us, gropes inside and finds what he's looking for. We can't see it, of course, but he can, and he's very happy with his find. Slowly, he brings into view an ordinary banana. After a pause for dramatic effect, he begins to peel it.

At that point, a man sitting behind me began to cackle loudly. To my astonishment people started hissing pssst, some even turning around to shake their fists angrily in his face. "Stupid, stupid man," said the beautiful woman sitting next to me. She meant: no side-splitting hilarity allowed in the presence of high art. Like an obedient concertgoer snoozing through a Mahler symphony and awakening at the end to applaud vigorously, we are expected to submit to art and literature joylessly as to a foul-tasting but beneficial medicine.

Serious literature, supposedly, has an important message to impart and the problem with the comic is that it does not. In any case, if it has a "message," it's not the one we are comfortable with. The philosophy of laughter reminds us that we live in the midst of contradictions, pulled the this way by the head, pulled that way by the heart, and still another way by our sex organs.

Don't forget the eternal shouts of the flesh: Oh! Ah! and Ha-ha!

If humor ever became extinct, human beings would be left without souls.

Philosophically, we must start with the idea of laughter. I cannot imagine anything more horrible than a society where laughter and poetry are prohibited, where the morbid self-absorption of the rich and the powerful and the hypocrisies of our clergymen and politicians go unchecked. Protecting from ridicule those who proclaim eternal truths is where most intellectual energy is expended in our world.

The Greeks, on the other hand, were able to poke fun at their gods.

I ask you, is there anything more healthy than that?

I would consider any society near-perfect where the arts of highest irreverence were practiced and Russell Edson was a Poet Laureate.

The Adventures of Maqroll: Four Novellas by Alvaro Mutis, translated by Edith Grossman. HarperCollins, 1994. \$22.00 ISBN 0060170042.

While working a review of *Maqroll* for the *Sunday Times* (February 26), I actually completed two rather different versions. One, friends advised, was over the top. The other, published, sounded—or this was the plan—judicious. Even it contained what you might consider tip-off words and phrases: “brilliant,” “clearly mastered,” etc. I now believe that I miscalculated. But you must forgive me, reader: you too would lose your cool in similar circumstance. After all, what is the correct response to a masterpiece?

Do you summarize the story? Ridiculous, with a work as intricate as this. Watch: of indeterminate age, carrying a Cypriot passport (probably false), our hero Maqroll, a sailor of sorts, is the eternal wanderer. Wherever water flows, there Maqroll finds a welcome mat unfurled. We follow him and his vivid cohorts from Helsinki to Hollywood, from the Middle East to South America, from East Asia to Western Europe. Mutis, now in his seventies, poses as Maqroll’s admiring chronicler, who keeps uncovering new bits about his friend’s fantastic voyages.

The first story follows Maqroll as he squirrels for gold in the Peruvian Andes. Indifferent to the civil war simmering around him, Maqroll steadily harvests his modest vein until a spurned lover tries setting him on fire. With Zen calm, Maqroll shuts the books on his gold-digging and seeks his fortune elsewhere. Public affairs hold little interest for him: I noted one reference to World War I and a handful to World War II. At the same time, domestic relations appear utterly out of his reach. He remains detached from everything but his campaign of the moment. As that is inevitably doomed, the reader waits eagerly for the next failure to drive the Gaviero, as Maqroll is also known, to new and weirder territories.

The Gaviero (which means *lookout*, as in crow’s nest, etc.) has his dark moment of doubt over his vagabond existence: they pass. His contempt for the bourgeois life, however, remains his north star. He is wonderful to watch in his physical excesses. His passion for alcohol is not a disease: it is a positive affection for all earth’s distillations as well as a recognition that “our only victory is the triumph of the senses on the ephemeral but true field of pleasure.” Do you agree with that aesthetic? Who cares?

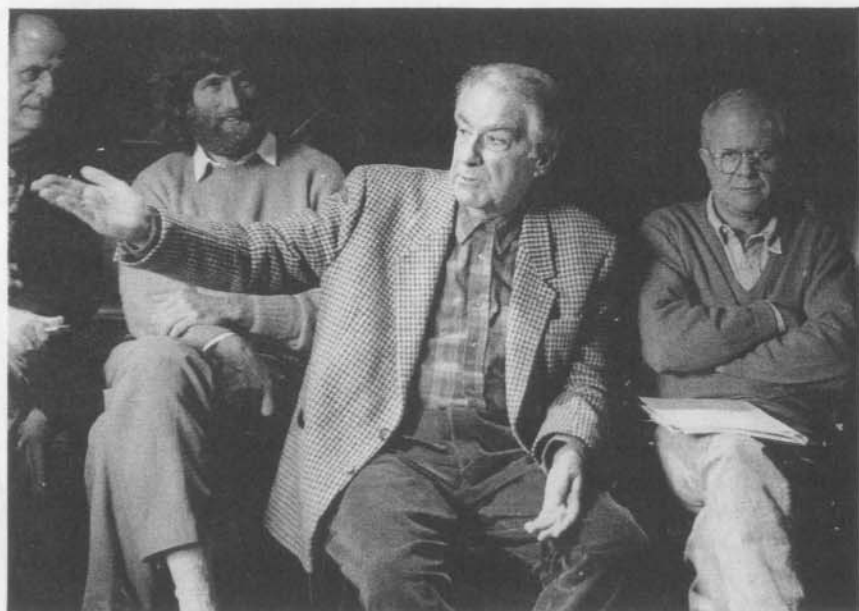
The adventure themselves, not all of which center on Maqroll, are less significant than the passengers we meet on these lunatic journeys. Mutis has a genius for reminding us how strange this long trip really is. Only consider the trajectory of the Vacarersco twins, formerly of Lvov, now working a lesbian act in Southampton, UK; of Yosip, the Muslim Croat escapee from the French Foreign Legion, who winds up a motel clerk in LA; and then there’s Abdul Bashur, Maqroll’s comrade-in-arms, whose obsessive hunt for the perfect boat earns him his own novella. There’s something Jerry Garcia in the way Maqroll just keeps trucking through the madness.

Sometimes I worry that our culture can embrace only one great writer per generation per country—hell, most nations can barely float even

that past our past our publishers. This is a pity, because Alvaro Mutis' gift places him on a plane beside his friend Garcia Marquez, who has accurately appraised him as "one of the greatest writers of our time." The men share a brilliant translator in Edith Grossman.

I think Mutis is powerful enough to overcome our seof-serving resistance. His narrative improvisations and his skill at spinning an image recall Selma Lagerloff and Isaak Dinesen. His sophisticated exuberance evokes the best of Bellow. I closed the first paragraph of my scrapped review with this assessment: "...Mutis has compiled a cycle of tales deserving of a place among the world's great adventure stories for adults: *Huckleberry Finn*, *Zorba the Greek*, *Don Quixote*." Six months later, I stand by it.

Askold Melnyczuk



Alvaro Mutis (far right) and friends at a Société Imaginaire gathering in Berlin 1991.

Inge Morath, Magnum Photos, Inc.

MARK STRAND

People ask. "What is the Société Imaginaire? Does it exist? Or is it an illusion?" The answer is: the Société Imaginaire exists, but it can not be summarized without its subtlety being blunted or its fluency being compromised. It lives by refusal, by saying "no" to what other groups or societies depend on for survival. It has no manifesto, and will not be bound by any explicit formulation of its aims. It exists as a paradox; it is most alive when its life can be least assumed. Although it welcomes attempts to define what it is, it knows none will be right. If its members are evasive when asked to explain it, it is because they know that any answer, once uttered, comes too late. It is committed to "beyondness," to being always one step ahead of what can be said about it. Thus, it keeps growing. And though it has a history, a past amply documented with poems, prints, and statements of various sorts, it is always in the act of discarding them. Its archive is not just the natural by-product of its existence, but the repository of what should not be repeated. Its attention is fixed on the blank where the features of its new face will take shape. Its members are everywhere. They write to each other, and collaborate on projects that are dedicated to simultaneously establishing the Société and abolishing it, giving it an artifactual and literary history that it must forget. It is not dedicated to the cliché that we learn by experience. Rather, it believes that experience must be mistrusted, only then is learning possible. Its aim is not to describe the world, but to remystify it. It offers creation as a mode of life and a condition for living; at least for a time. This time.

Altzella, June 5, 1995