2. The Classical Roots of the Mass Culture Debate

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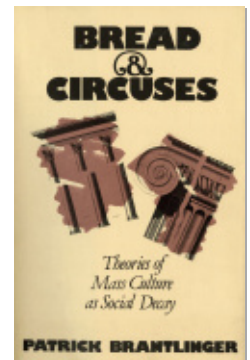BREAD & CIRCUSES

Theories of
Mass Culture
as Social Decay

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The Classical Roots of the Mass Culture Debate

From my tutor: not to be a Green or a Blue partisan at the races, or a supporter of the lightly armed or heavily armed gladiators at the Circus.

—MARCUS AURELIUS

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PATTERNS of both "high" and "mass" culture can be drawn from ancient history. The Athenians provide the core of what modern classicists wish to preserve: not just Greek literature and works of art, but above all the Greek example of intellectual transcendence and objectivity. The Romans of the Empire provide, along with much else, the pattern of negative classicism, bread and circuses, decadence and barbarism.

Present in Greek and Roman political theories, moreover, are most of the elements in modern critiques of mass culture and mass society. Discussions of the types of government, as in Plato's *Republic*, foreshadow modern discussions of the possible relationships between political institutions, culture, and the masses. For modern classicists, the political categories of Plato and Aristotle have a special significance: the terms of current discourse, already derived from the past, are reinforced by reference to the authority of that same past. Further, hostility between men of ideas and ordinary people is as old as Western philosophy. Thus, Heraclitus matches one of his modern emulators, Friedrich Nietzsche, in his insistence that most people are blind to or even actively hostile toward moral and cultural excellence:

> Heraclitus am I. Why do ye drag me up and down, ye illiterate? It
> was not for you I toiled, but for such as might understand me. One
> man in my sight is a match for thirty thousand, but the countless
> hosts do not make a single one.[1]

When about 500 B.C. the elder Ephesians banished Hermodorus,
Heraclitus thought that they "would do well to hang themselves and
leave their city to the boys," for Hermodorus "was the best man of
them," and their treatment of him proved their vulgar enmity toward
"the best." Heraclitus describes them as reasoning, or rather as failing
to reason, in the following manner: "We would have none among us
who is best; if there be such an one, let him be so elsewhere among
other people" (505). This may be the earliest extant version of the idea
that the masses prefer mediocrity to excellence. In other fragments,
Heraclitus expresses the same aristocratic scorn for the failure of most
people to value the high and noble: "For what mind or sense have
they? They follow the bards and use the multitude as their teacher,
not realizing that there are many bad but few good. For the best
choose one thing over all others, immortal glory among mortals, while
the many are glutted like beasts" (505).

Heraclitus presents in miniature two of the basic assumptions be-
hind many later criticisms of democracy, the common man, and mass
culture, including those that underlie negative classicism. The first is
that whatever is common or average or many contradicts whatever is
good, true, and beautiful. The "best" is few or even singular and the
"bad" is many, as anyone who wishes to be a prophet and a critic of his
times must assert in some fashion. Heraclitus unconsciously projects
the properties of words onto the affairs of men, an error that philoso-
phers have been committing ever since and that is apparent in much
contemporary theorizing about mass culture and society as unitary or
totalitarian phenomena. Of course the "best" tends to be rare or even
singular, but the "better" and the "good" are more clearly plural as
are the "worse" and the "bad," whereas the "worst" by such linguistic
reckoning must be just as rare or singular as the highest excellence.
Thus the word "mass" arises in modern discourse as a unifying con-
cept at times synonymous with the "worst," even though the former is

1. Heraclitus, *On the Universe*, together with Hippocrates, IV, tr. W. H. S. Jones
(New York: Loeb Classical Library, 1931), pp. 467–68.

logically multitudinous and the latter singular.

Heraclitus's argument from words to things leads to the contradictory idea that the individual may be good, but that many individuals taken together cannot be. Much the same idea shapes those modern dystopian fantasies that depict a solitary character—Franz Kafka's Josef K. or George Orwell's Winston Smith—struggling against the implacable machinery of a vast bureaucratic state, fictional versions of "mass society." It hardly matters that Winston Smith is himself very much an "average man" with no outstanding qualities. He is "the one," the everyman hero of a melodrama that pits a solitary individual against a monolithic society, thereby reducing the archetypal conflict between individual and society in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel to its barest elements.[2] In *The Trial*, Kafka comes closer to the truth of the pattern by making the melodrama seem very much the projection of the deranged imagination of his "average man," Josef K. But the dystopian visions of both novelists depend on the same idea that we see in Heraclitus: though the one may be good, the many are evil.

The second aspect of Heraclitus's social thought that recurs often in later cultural and political theory is his likening of "the multitude" to animals, a common metaphoric equivalent for "barbarians." The "few good" are spiritual beings, choosing "immortal glory among mortals"; but "the many are glutted like beasts." Here is one ancestor of Nietzsche's "herd instinct" and T. S. Eliot's "apeneck Sweeney." It appears to be an idea as old as civilization itself that the "uncivilized" are "barbarians," little better than the "brute creation." Homer's description of the cave-dwelling Cyclopes, "an unruly people, who have no settled customs," suggest how men of the *polis* came to view "barbarians."[3] Part of Heraclitus's originality may consist in his application of the same lycanthropic terminology to the civilized as well, so that there are internal or "vertical barbarians" inside the city walls. It follows that most people are either internal or external barbarians,

2. See Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971).

3. For Homer on the Cyclopes, see Cosmo Rodewald, ed., *Democracy: Ideas and Realities*, in the series "The Ancient World: Source Books" (London: Dent and Hakkert, 1975). See also Catherine H. and Ronald M. Berndt, *The Barbarians: An Anthropological View* (London: Watts, 1971).

because it is always difficult to live up to the highest standards of a culture—another way of saying that civilization is always at least a partial failure, undergoing decline and fall even at the moment of its highest development.

The Heraclitean assumption of the rarity of "the best" recurs often in Greek thought. In one of the earliest extant excursions into political theory, Herodotus describes the debate of three Persians about the relative merits of democracy, oligarchy, and monarchy. The hypothetical democrat, Otanes, proposes to "do away with monarchy and raise the People to power, for in the multitude all things are comprehended."4 But the oligarchist contends that "there is nothing more unintelligent or more violent than a crowd; a crowd is good for nothing. To escape from a despot's violence only to be caught up in the violence of an unruly mob would be utterly intolerable. What a despot does, he does knowingly; the common folk do not even know what they are doing. How could they, since they are untaught and have had no experience of the finer things of life?" But it is the monarchist, Darius, who prevails; he asserts that the best state is the one ruled by the best man in it, an argument similar to Heraclitus's idea of the rarity of "the best." Democracy defeats itself anyway, Darius thinks, for "where commoners rule there cannot fail to be corruption."

Herodotus describes the auditors voting in favor of Darius and monarchy (there is no ironic intent in the democratic procedure followed in the debate). But the argument of Otanes in favor of democracy has its echoes in Greek literature, perhaps most notably in the funeral oration of Pericles in Thucydides, and also in *The Suppliants*, where Theseus defends democratic institutions against the criticisms of a herald from Creon. And in his *Politics*, while considering a range of arguments for and against democracy, Aristotle expresses the possibility that collective judgment may be superior to the judgment of an individual:

> It is possible that the many, no one of whom taken singly is a good man, may yet taken all together be better than the few, not individually but collectively, in the same way that a feast to which all contribute is better than one given at one man's expense. For where

4. Herodotus, *The Persian Wars*, tr. George Rawlinson (New York: Modern Library, 1942), Book III, chaps. 80–83.

> there are many people, each has some share of goodness and intel-
> ligence, and when these are brought together, they become as it
> were one multiple man with many pairs of feet and hands and many
> minds.[5]

Aristotle goes on to assert that "the general public is a better judge of
works of music and poetry [than the few]; some judge some parts,
some others, but their joint pronouncement is a verdict upon the
whole." One might construe this passage as a description of how
classics become classics, not through the scrutiny of a handful of dis-
cerning critics, but through a much broader process of popular accep-
tance which spans decades and generations. Far from being elitist,
true classics are the common possessions of mankind. But though
Aristotle's "multiple man"—body politic or social organism—points
toward modern theories of public opinion, he had reservations about
his theory of the collective wisdom of the multitude. Not all collec-
tivities are alike; groups of animals do not generate group wisdom or
group virtue; "and some men are hardly any better than wild
animals."

The argument of Otanes, that "in the multitude all things are com-
prehended," is in one sense a truism: "the multitude" is everything
and everybody. In another sense, however, it merely reverses the
faulty social arithmetic of Heraclitus, as does Aristotle's tentative pos-
tulation of collective wisdom. For just as the individual may be either
wise or unwise, virtuous or evil, so the "multiple man" of society may
be either virtuous or evil—or both at different times, or even both
simultaneously. There is no guarantee in numbers that a democratic
society will govern itself rationally any more than there is that a despot
will be enlightened. Besides, it is easier to believe in the existence of a
single good man than in goodness distributed among a number of
ordinary men who have vices as well as virtues. To be operative, such
diffused goodness must somehow be channeled through institutions
capable of activating it. Until the American and French revolutions,
the possibility of creating such institutions received little attention
from social theorists, who more often than not merely rehearsed the
two axioms of Heraclitus's politics: virtue is rare; the multitude is

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5. Aristotle, *The Politics*, tr. T. A. Sinclair (New York: Penguin, 1962), p. 123.

bestial; monarchy, oligarchy, and aristocracy are therefore the only viable forms of government. Contemporary theories of mass culture and society likewise often do little more than echo Heraclitus's axioms.

Another element in Greek political theory, not stemming from Heraclitus, shows up in modern conservative versions of negative classicism. Aristotle thinks of democracy as a decadent form of a better kind of government that he calls "polity" or "constitutional government," in which rule is "exercised by the bulk of the citizens for the good of the whole community." There are three basic kinds of government, each with a characteristic "deviation": as "tyranny" is the deviation from "kingship" and "oligarchy" from "aristocracy," so "democracy" is the deviation from "polity" (115–16). Aristotle seems to be echoing Plato's speculations about how forms of government succeed each other regressively rather than progressively. In the eighth book of *The Republic*, Socrates turns to the model of decadence in Hesiod, from the Golden Age through ages of silver and brass down to that of iron— the last a metaphor for the degenerate present. Socrates suggests that if the ideal state exists anywhere, it does not lie in the future but in the past, for types of government decline from better to worse: "timocracy" or "the government of honour" follows "aristocracy" or "the government of the best"; when the "timocratical man" falls prey to the pursuit of wealth, "oligarchy" arises, in which the pursuit of wealth makes the state even weaker. "And then the state falls sick, and is at war with itself." Socrates continues: "Then democracy comes into being after the poor have conquered their opponents, slaughtering some and banishing some, while to the remainder they give an equal share of freedom and power; and this is the form of government in which the magistrates are commonly elected by lot."[6]

Socrates has nothing but contempt for democracy, which he sees as a condition of mindless anarchy, though the form of government which succeeds it—"tyranny"—is undoubtedly worse. Socrates' description of democracy sounds very much like Edmund Burke's of the French Revolution or José Ortega y Gasset's of "the revolt of the masses": nobody pays any attention to traditional authority; the incompetent majority shoulder aside the competent minority; sons no

6. Plato, *The Republic*, tr. Benjamin Jowett (Cleveland: World, 1946), p. 302.

longer obey their fathers; even the animals are "infected" by the
pursuit of liberty at all costs:

> No one who does not know would believe, how much greater is the
> liberty which the animals who are under the dominion of man have
> in a democracy than in any other State: for truly, the she-dogs, as the
> proverb says, are as good as their she-mistresses, and the horses and
> asses have a way of marching along with all the rights and dignities of
> freemen; and they will run at anybody who come in their way if he
> does not leave the road clear for them: and all things are just ready to
> burst with liberty.   [310]

"The excessive increase of anything often causes a reaction in the
opposite direction," says Socrates. And "the excess of liberty, whether
in States or individuals, seems only to pass into excess of slavery."
Thus he expresses a paradox familiar in modern conservative and
liberal thought, from Burke and de Maistre through Tocqueville and
Mill down to Spengler, Ortega, and beyond: "Tyranny naturally arises
out of democracy, and the most aggravated form of tyranny and slav-
ery out of the most extreme form of liberty" (311).

Greek intellectuals thus offer versions of most of the assumptions to
be found in modern antidemocratic theory. Heraclitus and Plato, and,
more tentatively, Herodotus and Aristotle, believe that "the many"
are irrational or bestial; that they tend to be unruly and potentially
revolutionary; and that excellence is rare and "noble" while evil and
inferiority are "common" (or, to use a modern expression, "mass").
Further, Herodotus, Plato, and Aristotle all present the idea of the
inevitable degeneration of democracy into tyranny, a theory echoed
by Polybius. And from all of them may be inferred the existence of two
antithetical cultures or teachings: that which meets the standards of
the cultivated few and that which pleases the ignorant many. What
the Greek philosophers include in either category, however, is quite
different from what we now tend to classify as "high" and "mass"
culture. Though Aristotle thinks that poets express universal truths,
Plato banishes them from the Republic for defaming the gods and
misleading the people, and he criticizes other representational artists
for similar reasons. And Heraclitus speaks contemptuously of those
who "follow the bards." Only the discipline of reason can escape the
charge of mendacity which the more austere Greek philosophers level
against the arts.

The Greek classics line the most prominent shelves in the library of high culture. They also contain many statements to support the aristocratic or elitist views of the defenders of high culture against the threats of the modern and the mass. It is at least easier to find in Greek literature arguments against democracy than arguments for it.[7] But the Greek heritage is ambiguous, for while it provides many precedents for the argument that culture can only be aristocratic, it also suggests that the healthiest cultures grow in democratic soil. Even in antiquity it was commonly assumed that there must have been some correlation between the flourishing of the arts and the relative freedom of Athenian institutions in the fifth century. In discussing the decay of eloquence and the other arts in his own age (either the first or the third century A.D.), Longinus asks:

> Are we to accept the well-worn view that democracy is the kindly nurse of great men, and that great men of letters may be said to have flourished only under democracy and perished with it? For freedom, they say, has the power to foster the imaginations of high-souled men and to inspire them with hope, and with it there spreads the keenness of mutual rivalry and an eager competition for the first place. Furthermore, by reason of the prizes which are open to all in republics, the intellectual gifts of orators are continually sharpened by practice and as it were kept bright by rubbing, and, as might be expected, these gifts, fostered in freedom, help to shed light on the affairs of state.[8]

Though such a view was less "well-worn" among the original makers of Hellenic culture, they too sometimes made the connection between the partially democratic institutions of Athens and its cultural greatness. Even Herodotus, who made the monarchist Darius prevail over the democrat Otanes, could write: "The Athenians went from strength to strength, thus proving that equality is an excellent thing."[9] And in his funeral speech, Pericles declares that "our city is an education to Greece"—an example of patriotic hyperbole which history has transformed into meager understatement. "Just as our political life is

7. A. H. M. Jones, *Athenian Democracy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), especially chap. 3, "The Athenian Democracy and Its Critics." See also T. A. Sinclair, *A History of Greek Political Thought* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951).

8. Longinus, in Cosmo Rodewald, ed., *Democracy: Ideas and Realities*, chap. 44.

9. Herodotus, *The Persian Wars*, pp. 407–8.

free and open," Pericles says, "so is our day-to-day life in our relations with each other." And freedom extends to the cultivation of the arts: "When our work is over, we are in a position to enjoy all kinds of recreation for our spirits. There are various kinds of contests and sacrifices regularly throughout the year; in our own homes we find a beauty and a good taste which delight us every day and which drive away our cares. Then the greatness of our city brings it about that all the good things from all over the world flow in to us."[10] One might suppose that freedom and cultivated leisure would make the Athenians unfit for war. Not so, says Pericles: "Our love of what is beautiful does not lead to extravagance; our love of the things of the mind does not make us soft" (118).

Although Marx cites the Greek experience to show "that certain periods of highest development of art stand in no direct connection with the general development of society," thus posing difficulties for those of his followers who have wanted to assert that the connection is always direct, other modern writers agree with Pericles and Longinus.[11] Hegel says that a "vital freedom" existed in Athens, "and a vital equality of manners and mental culture." The key aspects of Athenian character were "the independence of the social units and a culture animated by the spirit of beauty."[12] And Matthew Arnold, that key figure in the defense of the classics against the threats of democracy and of "ignorant armies clashing by night," agrees:

> "We have freedom," says Pericles, "for individual diversities of opinion and character; we do not take offense at the tastes and habits of our neighbour if they differ from our own." Yes in Greece, in the Athens of Pericles, there is toleration; but in England, in the England of the sixteenth century?—the Puritans are then in full growth. So that with regard to these characteristics of civilization of a modern spirit . . . the superiority . . . rests with the age of Pericles.[13]

10. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, tr. Rex Warner (Baltimore: Penguin, 1954), Book II, chap. 4, pp. 115–23.

11. Karl Marx, *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, section 8, in Lee Baxandall and Stefan Morawski, eds., *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art* (St. Louis: Telos, 1973), p. 134.

12. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, tr. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), p. 260.

13. Matthew Arnold, "On the Modern Element in Literature," in *On the Classical Tradition*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), p. 25.

One modern writer who insists that there is no correlation between democracy and the flourishing of Greek culture is Friedrich Nietzsche. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, he traces the origins of theater to the primitive synthesis of Apollonian and Dionysian tendencies in religious ritual. For the theory that sees an adumbration of Athenian democracy in the tragic chorus, he offers no comfort. The chorus was the original form of the drama; it was neither an "idealized spectator" nor a representative of "the populace over against" the nobility. "The latter interpretation, which sounds so grandly edifying to certain politicians . . . may have been suggested by a phrase in Aristotle, but this lofty notion can have had no influence whatever on the original formation of tragedy, whose purely religious origins would exclude not only the opposition between the people and their rulers, but any kind of political or social context."[14] Nietzsche thinks it is "blasphemous" to see in the chorus "a 'foreshadowing' of constitutional democracy, though others have not stuck at such blasphemy." On the contrary, he says, the death of tragedy occurred the moment a democratic note was sounded upon the stage, with the increased realism and secularism of Euripides. "Through him the common man found his way from the auditorium onto the stage." Through Euripides, too, Socratic skepticism found its way onto the stage, for he was "the first rational maker of tragedy" and "the poet of esthetic Socratism." With the appearance of these traits, there vanished the irrational, unashamedly noble Dionysian energy necessary to produce genuine tragedy. The age of Socrates was essentially "operatic" and inauthentic. Nietzsche offers a complicated analysis of the motives that he supposes drove Euripides unconsciously to undermine tragedy, but the result is simple enough: Greek drama "died by suicide" (69). But even if this disaster had not occurred, Nietzsche thinks, there would still be no reason to accept the thesis that democracy nurtured drama and the other arts, for "no ancient polity ever embodied constitutional democracy." What is more, "one dares to hope that ancient tragedy did not even foreshadow it" (47).

On this issue, however (as on many others), Nietzsche stands resolutely in the minority, for other students of Greece have continued to see a relationship between Athenian democracy and its culture. M. I. Finley says that "it would be foolhardy to make the . . . suggestion

14. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, tr. Francis Golffing (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1956), p. 47.

that the link between tragedy and democracy was a simple, direct one." But that there was a complex, indirect link he does not doubt: "Evidently fifth-century Athens somehow provided the atmosphere in which this art could flourish."[15] Finley thinks that the link may lie "in the way the dramatists were encouraged . . . to explore the human soul," despite the ritualistic limits established by theatrical tradition.

> [The playwrights] could probe with astonishing latitude and freedom into the traditional myths and beliefs, and into fresh problems soci- ety was throwing up, such as the new Socratic emphasis on reason, or the humanity of slaves, or the responsibilities and corruption of power. They did so annually under the auspices of the state and Dionysus, before the largest gatherings of men, women and children (and even slaves) ever assembled in Athens.   [86]

Less cautiously than Finley, the Marxist scholar George Thomson says that "Greek tragedy was one of the distinctive functions of Athenian democracy" and that Aeschylus was able "to take the tide of democ- racy at the flood."[16] According to Thomson, the first great tragedian "was a democrat who fought as well as wrote" (335). Thomson ac- knowledges that Athenian "democracy" was based on slave labor, which gradually eroded "free labor" and led to imperialist expansion and an increased reliance on money as a source of unity and power. "Such were the insoluble contradictions on which Athenian democ- racy wrecked itself" (338).

However that may be, both the right and the left have sought to enlist Greek culture and especially tragedy on their side of the ideo- logical struggle. In this debate, which runs from our own time back through Nietzsche, Arnold, Marx, Hegel, and beyond, tragedy be- comes a synecdoche for all that is highest and noblest in culture or civilization. As such, tragedy itself acts like a tragic hero with a thou- sand faces, repeatedly committing suicide and reviving from the time of Euripides forward. From one perspective or another, each new historical crisis is said to involve either the "death of tragedy" or its rebirth. By implication, at least, an age or a culture lacking "tragic vision" is an age or a culture decadent, hollow at the core. When he wrote *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche thought that the noblest of

15. M. I. Finley, *The Ancient Greeks: An Introduction to Their Life and Thought* (New York: Viking, 1964), p. 85.

16. George Thomson, *Aeschylus and Athens: A Study in the Social Origins of Drama* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1968 [1941]), pp. 1 and 331.

ancient arts was being reborn in the works of Richard Wagner, an opinion that he soon repudiated with a vengeance. Wagner became for him the worst sort of artistic charlatan, mimicking the forms of the past in works that had none of their tragic content. In his later writings, Nietzsche equates Wagner with decadence and mass culture, the direct opposites of classical and tragic values: "Bayreuth is large-scale opera—and not even *good* opera. —The theater is a form of demolatry in matters of taste; the theater is a revolt of the masses, a plebiscite *against* good taste. —*This is precisely what is proved by the case of Wagner:* he won the crowd, he corrupted taste."[17]

Nietzsche proclaims the death of tragedy in the modern world as well as the death of God. Obituaries like his are frequent from the time of the French Revolution down to the present. The more recent the frame of reference, the more frequently the antithesis of tragedy turns out to be "mass culture"; the dramatic mass media—film, radio, television—are often held almost by definition to be destructive to tragic profundity. As Raymond Williams puts it, "In our own century, especially, when there has been a widespread sense of . . . civilisation being threatened, the use of the idea of tragedy to define a major tradition threatened or destroyed by an unruly present has been quite obvious."[18] In criticizing Nietzsche's theories, Williams also points out that Nietzsche transforms tragedy into an absolute, instead of into a historical series of genres or dramatic conventions that have evolved continuously and that are still adaptable to present conditions and media.

In *The Death of Tragedy* (1961), George Steiner, who like Nietzsche finds it difficult to believe that tragedy (or genuine culture) is alive and well in the modern era of democracy, industrialism, and bourgeois values, insists that "there is nothing democratic in the vision of tragedy."[19] Steiner argues that the democratization of the

17. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner,* tr. Walter Kaufmann, together with *The Birth of Tragedy* (New York: Vintage, 1967), p. 183.
18. Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), p. 16.
19. George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (New York: Knopf, 1963), p. 241. Another well-known statement of the idea that tragedy is not possible in modern society is Joseph Wood Krutch, "The Tragic Fallacy," in *The Modern Temper: A Study and a Confession* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929), pp. 115–43. For a refutation of Krutch, see Louis I. Bredvold, "The Modern Temper and Tragic Drama," *The Quarterly Review,* 61, 21 May 1955, pp. 207–13.

audience after the French Revolution has led to a decline in dramatic standards. Beset by secularization and commercialization, drama through the nineteenth century "was becoming what it is today: mere entertainment" (116). Again, Steiner is not far from Nietzsche, who interprets the entire span of modern history, from the advent of Christianity forward, as hostile to the tragic vision. Nietzsche's thinking about tragedy has at least two consequences for later theories of democracy and culture. One is to make "the tragic sense" an ideal attainable only by a few exceptional individuals, such as Nietzsche himself, "the first tragic philosopher." The other is to identify the artist or tragedian with the exceptional individual who understands the tragic, thus rendering the notion of an informed audience or a community of culture—a primary value in Raymond Williams's theories—extremely problematic. Both these consequences are evident in the elitist tendencies of the *fin de siècle* "decadent" and "symbolist" movements.

Steiner, like Nietzsche, identifies tragedy as almost exclusively Greek, with a few astonishing outcroppings and rebirths in the Renaissance, neoclassical France, and the era of Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg. Like Arnold and Nietzsche, Steiner juxtaposes Hebraism and Hellenism, arriving at the idea that the entire Judeo-Christian tradition has contributed to the demise of tragedy. Because Judaism and Christianity insist on justice and on some ultimate divine compensation for suffering, tragedy is alien to them. Steiner, moreover, again like Nietzsche, identifies socialism with Hebraism: "Marxism is characteristically Jewish in its insistence on justice and reason, and Marx repudiated the entire concept of tragedy" (4).

But Marx had only praise for Greek tragedy. Paul Lafargue records of his father-in-law that "every year he read Aeschylus in the Greek original."[20] Steiner's assertion runs counter to the idea that Marx was an economist "with a sense of the tragic." Michael Harrington, who makes this observation in his "hopeful book about decadence," *The Accidental Century* (1965), also defends the possibility of tragedy in democratic, modern conditions: "Abundance and technology certainly threaten the aristocratic right to tragedy. They could level everyone down to a common denominator, sating material needs and creating a

20. Paul Lafargue in Baxandall and Morawski, eds., *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art*, p. 150.

spiritual hunger. But they could also raise everyone up to the level of the tragic. It is quite possible that a decent society in which men die from death rather than plagues and famines will have a stark sense of the tragic."[21] Like Harrington, Raymond Williams in *Modern Tragedy* offers definitions compatible with Marxism, liberalism, democracy, and, perhaps most important, modernity. Tragedy is not one thing, identified with an irretrievable ideal past. It is instead a complex set of traditions, conventions, attitudes, talents, beliefs, theories, appearing and reappearing through history in many shapes. Defining a single tragic vision in terms of modern readings of Greek drama and identifying this vision as the primary element in genuine culture are illogical on several grounds. According to Williams:

> For the last century and a half (significantly during the loosening of Christian belief) many attempts have been made to systematise a Greek tragic philosophy, and to transmit it as absolute. But it is not only that the tragedies we have are extremely resistant to this kind of systematisation, with evident and intractable differences between the three major tragedians. It is also that these precise issues—of Fate, Necessity and the nature of the Gods—were not systematised by the Greeks themselves: it is a culture marked by an extraordinary network of beliefs connected to institutions, practices, and feelings, but not by the systematic and abstract doctrines we would now call a theology or a tragic philosophy.[22]

In terms of its social basis, it is at least possible to say, as even Nietzsche acknowledges, that Greek tragedy was a communal, participatory, popular art form, though whether it might also be accurately described as "democratic" is a different question. The role of the audiences as judges of the plays is perhaps analogous to democratic procedures in the assembly, but both Plato and Aristotle believed that this was not the best arrangement. Aristotle says that dramatists who "pander to the taste of the spectators" are making a mistake.[23] And in *The Laws*, Plato writes: "The ancient and common custom of Hellas . . . did certainly leave the judgment [of tragedy] to the body of spectators, who determined the victor by show of hands. But this custom has been the destruction of the poets; for they are now

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21. Michael Harrington, *The Accidental Century* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1966), pp. 162–63.
22. Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, p. 17.
23. Aristotle, *Poetics*, tr. T. S. Dorsch (Baltimore: Penguin, 1965), chap. 13, p. 49.

in the habit of composing with a view to please the bad taste of their judges."[24] Then as now, "giving the public what it wants" seemed an unsatisfactory method for producing lasting artistic achievement.

Despite such reservations, drama and the other arts were clearly and fully public in ancient Greece, crucial achievements and possessions of the commonwealth. In light of the communal basis of Greek drama, Aristophanes' comedy *The Knights* offers an ironic counterpoint. In the "new comedy" that emerged after Aristophanes, even more than in the tragedies of Euripides, Nietzsche sees an "ignoble" mentality marked by a "cleverness and cunning" which he associates both with "bourgeois mediocrity" and with "slave morality." Aristophanes escapes these charges partly because he is such an acute satirist of his age. *The Knights* is a satire upon democracy, no doubt much to Nietzsche's liking. Aristophanes invites his fellow Athenians to view themselves in the guise of the foolish Demos,

> hot
> Of temper, ignorant, full as full can be
> Of votes and motions, fretful, elderly,
> And slightly deaf. . . .[25]

The problem is that Demos has been misled by his slave, "a Paphlagonian tanner" who represents the Athenian demagogue Cleon. Two other slaves, representing the generals Demosthenes and Nicias, try to win Demos away from the Paphlagonian tanner by getting him to accept as his guide a despicable sausage-monger (who is later named "Agoracritus," or "chosen in the agora"). At first, modesty makes the sausage-monger reluctant:

> Just think of the eddication I ain't had—
> Bar letters; and I mostly learnt 'em bad!

But Demosthenes reassures him:

> The pity is you learnt such things at all.
> 'Tis not for learning now that people call,
> Nor thoughtfulness, nor hearts of generous make.
> 'Tis ignorance and no scruples—   [32–33]

24. Plato, *The Laws*, in *Dialogues*, tr. Benjamin Jowett, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1953), IV, 659.
25. Aristophanes, *The Knights*, ed. and tr. Gilbert Murray (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1956).

advice that leads to the successful substitution of Agoracritus for the Paphlagonian tanner in the fickle heart of Demos.

It would be easy enough to interpret *The Knights* as an anti-democratic satire and let it go at that. But it can also be interpreted as a play that expresses Aristophanes' desire for democracy to work better and for his fellow citizens to make wiser choices. Demos is well-meaning enough, just bumbling and vain. *The Knights* in any event stands as a remarkable testament to the freedom and vigor of Athenian institutions, for when it appeared in 424 B.C. Cleon, Demosthenes, and Nicias were all powerful men. And if Demos in the assembly could be misled by a demagogue like Cleon, Demos in the theater could laugh at itself for being foolish. Such freedom to criticize and to laugh at both leaders and led, both "the few" and "the many," suggests the rightness of Matthew Arnold's estimate:

> Now the culminating age in the life of ancient Greece I call, beyond question, a great epoch; the life of Athens in the fifth century before our era I call one of the highly developed, one of the marking, one of the modern periods in the life of the whole human race. It has been said that the "Athens of Pericles was a vigorous man, at the summit of his bodily strength and mental energy." There was the utmost energy of life there, public and private; the most entire freedom, the most unprejudiced and intelligent observation of human affairs.[26]

In the Athens of Pericles, Socrates, and Aristophanes, it first became possible, as Arnold says in his sonnet on Sophocles, to "see life steadily and see it whole." And the sometimes opposed but sometimes also united ideas of popular participation in and state encouragement of the arts could not have grown sturdier roots.

ii

The experience of democracy in Athens did not give rise to a coherent and forceful tradition of democratic theory. Indeed, the debate about the best kind of government went mostly the other way, as in Herodotus and Plato. And reinforcing what the decline of the Greek city-states seemed to show, the history of Rome strongly suggested

26. Arnold, "On the Modern Element in Literature," p. 23.

that democratic institutions, even if desirable, were not durable. Rome became both an enormous city and an enormous empire, unmanageable by popular rule. The transition from republican government to imperial dictatorship under Augustus has served political theorists ever since as a model for the inevitable declension of democracy into its opposite, as in Oswald Spengler's "Caesarism," the ancestor of "Bonapartism" and "Hitlerism." Even among supporters of the Roman Republic, there was no great fondness for democracy: in contrast to Longinus, Cicero believed that the decline of Greece was due to its democratic institutions: "All Greek states are governed by impulsive votes taken while public meetings are in session. And to say nothing of present-day Greece, which has long since been dragged down into misery by the Greeks' own mismanagement, it was this one evil, the unrestrained and extravagant freedom of their public meetings, that brought about the destruction of the power, prosperity and glory that the Greeks at one time enjoyed."[27] In writing about ordinary men and women, most Roman intellectuals adhere to the contemptuous attitudes of Heraclitus. Ramsay MacMullen has culled a "lexicon of snobbery" from Roman writers.[28] Horace might be speaking for Roman stoicism as well as for the entire tradition of Roman satire when he writes, "I loathe the crowd and I avoid it" (*Odes III*, i, 1). He also considers his contemporaries degenerate versions of their forefathers, so that everything "modern" appears to be on a downhill slide. In a passage quoted by Ortega in *The Revolt of the Masses*, Horace writes: "Our fathers, viler than our grandfathers, begot us who are even viler, and we shall bring forth a progeny more degenerate still" (*Odes III*, vi, 46–48). These attitudes are also expressed by Juvenal, though he combines hatred for "the crowd" with sympathy for the poor man from the country who is cheated and abused by city slickers. The mob "rails against the condemned" Sejanus, although, had his conspiracy against Tiberius succeeded, it would gladly have proclaimed him emperor. "The people that once bestowed commands, consulships, legions and all else, now meddles no more and longs eagerly for just two things—*panem et circenses!*"

Juvenal's acerbic commentary contains several elements that recur

27. Cicero, in Cosmo Rodewald, ed., *Democracy: Ideas and Realities*, p. 118.

28. Ramsay MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations, 50 B.C. to A.D. 284* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 138–41.

in later assertions of the inability of ordinary people to manage their lives intelligently. These elements include: (1) contempt for the average person; (2) what might be called "decadentism," or the belief that things were once better than they are now; (3) the belief that ordinary people in fact have the capacity to make intelligent decisions, an idea that follows from decadentism (since people once did live more rationally than they do now) but that contradicts the first element in the list; (4) contempt for politics; (5) the idea that the average man follows no greater or wiser authority than fortune; (6) the idea that what the average man wants—to be fed and to be entertained—are not worthy ends. Above all, Juvenal suggests that the people who compose "the mob of Remus" do not know where their best interests lie, an axiom in all versions of political and cultural conservatism. With the exception of the third, these elements correspond closely to modern anti-democratic versions of negative classicism—for example, those of Nietzsche, Spengler, and Ortega.

But Juvenal is not merely expressing a conservative animadversion to the desires of the "mob," for he also makes clear that it was the conscious policy of the imperial administrators to encourage and to meet the mob's demands. Augustus established the imperial practice of providing both games and free distributions of grain, and both he and his successors (Tiberius was something of an exception) participated willingly in both. At Rome under Augustus, some sixty-six days a year were devoted to public games; the figure rose to one hundred and thirty-five under Marcus Aurelius, although he found the games boring; and to at least one hundred and seventy-five in the fourth century.[29] Regular attendance at the arena was necessary for an emperor to retain his popularity, though it is also clear that most of them enjoyed an exciting round of gladiatorial mayhem as much as any of their bloodthirsty subjects. There is also some reason to suppose that "circuses" were at least as important a part of the policy as "bread." "The excellence of a government is shown no less by its concern for pastimes than by its concern for serious matters," wrote Fronto. "The people are, all in all, less avid for money than for spectacles; and . . . though distributions of corn and foodstuffs are enough to satisfy men

29. Samuel Dill, *Roman Society from Nero to Marcus Aurelius* (London: Macmillan, 1911), p. 234.

as individuals, spectacles are needed to satisfy the people as a whole."[30]

The problem raised by Juvenal, then, was not simply that of a brutal populace demanding and receiving brutal entertainments from their rulers. The pattern was a much more symbiotic one, in which the ruling classes and the ruled developed between them forms of mass entertainment rooted in shared tastes and interests. That these tastes were debased and sadistic in the extreme only adds to the enormity of their unconscious collusion. "The two most quantitatively destructive institutions in history," Michael Grant writes, "are Nazism and the Roman gladiators."[31] In both cases, large segments of the population collaborated with their rulers in the institutionalization of mass murder, and in the case of the Roman games, mass murder was also served up as mass entertainment.

Juvenal's reaction, of course, is not the modern one of humanitarian horror, but that of the satirist railing against the fickleness of the mob, the loss of freedom, and the degeneracy of the age. But the Roman games and the dole can be interpreted as the customs of an imperial civilization at the height of its vitality, rather than as symptoms of decadence. In the fullest study of this aspect of ancient history, *Le pain et le cirque* (1978), Paul Veyne has challenged the leftist idea that "bread and circuses" involved a conspiracy of the ruling classes to bribe the masses into political acquiescence. *Panem et circenses*, Veyne believes, must instead be viewed in light of "the sociology of the gift" as an ancient example of public munificence or *évergétisme*, similar to the building of temples, roads, and aqueducts. The gladiatorial games may seem to us, as they seemed to Juvenal, a sign of the "depoliticization" of the masses and of the waning of public spirit. Not so, Veyne suggests: their provision by the emperors and the public demand for them show an engagement in the affairs of the city on at least a symbolic level. "The emperor's luxury was not only an egoistic consumption; it was also that of a public benefactor who gives specta-

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30. Fronto quoted by Roland Auguet, *Cruelty and Civilization: The Roman Games* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1972), p. 187.

31. Michael Grant, *Gladiators* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1967), p. 8. The same judgment has been made by others—for example, by Simone Weil in "The Great Beast," *Selected Essays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 121 and 130.

cles to his subjects. The egoism of the potentate who drinks all alone
passed, wrongly, for the conduct of a tyrant; as an act of propaganda,
in the true sense of the word, Vespasian ordered the demolition of the
palace of gold that Nero had built for himself and erected on the site
the ampitheatre of the Coliseum, destined to receive the Roman peo-
ple."[32] Veyne's study provides a good antidote for the easy assump-
tion that "bread and circuses" was a Machiavellian strategy of the
Roman emperors or even that it necessarily corresponded to "dec-
adence." Citing David Riesman and Thorstein Veblen on "conspiracy
theories" of mass culture, Veyne argues that the notion of exchanging
absorption in circuses for political responsibility is historically inaccu-
rate, and also that the high point of "bread and circuses" corresponds
to the high point of the Roman Empire and not to its decline.[33] But
that there was a sort of decadence in the development of "bread and
circuses" is evident from Veyne's own analysis of the evolution from
the duties of the wealthier citizens of the Greek city-states, who were
expected to raise, equip, and feed armies and erect public works, to
the *liberalitas* of the Roman emperors and nobles, who supported and
entertained the unemployed urban masses through a cloying com-
bination of welfare and spectacle which helped to undermine the
imperial economy and ultimately their own power.

   If there was not a conscious conspiracy on the part of the rulers to
bribe the masses, there was still an unconscious collusion through
which the emperors and the urban "rabble" gradually weakened the
position of the senatorial nobles. In his *Considerations on the Causes
of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline*, Montesquieu gives
an account of this collusion:

> The people of Rome, who were called *plebs*, did not hate the worst
> emperors. After they had lost their power, and were no longer
> occupied with war, they had become the vilest of all peoples. They
> regarded commerce and the arts as things fit for slaves, and the
> distributions of grain that they received made them neglect the land.
> They had been accustomed to games and spectacles. When they no
> longer had tribunes to listen to or magistrates to elect, these useless
> things became necessities, and idleness increased their taste for

   32. Paul Veyne, *Le pain et le cirque: Sociologie historique d'un pluralisme politique*
(Paris: Seuil, 1976), p. 681 (my translation).
   33. Ibid., p. 85.

them. Thus Caligula, Nero, Commodus, and Caracalla were lamented by the people because of their very madness, for they wildly loved what the people loved, and contributed with all their power and even their persons to the people's pleasures. For them these rulers were prodigal of all the riches of the empire, and when these were exhausted, the people—looking on untroubled while all the great families were being despoiled—enjoyed the fruits of the tyranny. And their joy was pure, for they found security in their own baseness. Such princes naturally hated good men: they knew they were not approved of by them. Indignant at meeting contradiction or silence from an austere citizen, intoxicated by the plaudits of the populace, they succeeded in imagining that their government produced public felicity, and that only ill-intentioned men could censure it.[34]

It would be difficult to compose a better commentary on Juvenal than Montesquieu's, or for that matter a better description of one sort of mass tyranny.

That no Roman citizen thought of the gladiatorial combats as murder goes without saying. Juvenal is silent on the matter, but his contempt for gladiators, women gladiators, and aristocrats who follow the games too avidly suggests that his view is probably close to the one expressed by Tacitus. Describing the gladiatorial games given in honor of Germanicus and Drusus, Tacitus complains that "the latter was abnormally fond of bloodshed." But he adds: "Admittedly it was worthless blood."[35] There could be no grounds for humanitarian protest when it was felt that the victims were not fully human. In his gruesome celebration of the games, *De Spectaculis*, Martial speaks of the "dangerous crowd" of "the guilty" being so numerous that "the huge arena" cannot hold them all; they deserve what they get. Martial thinks it quite wonderful to see a criminal crucified and torn to shreds by a "Caledonian bear." The criminal's "mangled limbs lived, though the parts dripped gore, and in all his body was nowhere a body's shape." Martial continues in this vein for some thirty-three sections, praising Caesar and extolling spilled blood and guts as signs of Rome's

34. Montesquieu, *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline*, tr. David Lowenthal (New York: The Free Press and Collier-Macmillan, 1965), p. 137.

35. Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, tr. Michael Grant (New York: Penguin, 1977), p. 75.

greatness.[36] In contrast to Pericles' funeral oration, here is patriotic hyperbole that history has caused to look grossly inflated. As W. E. H. Lecky wrote in his *History of European Morals*, Martial's *De Spectaculis* "is not more horrible from the atrocities it recounts than from the perfect absence of all feeling of repulsion or compassion it everywhere displays."[37]

In contrast to Lecky, Nietzsche sees no reason to criticize the games on moral grounds, except as symptoms of social and esthetic decadence. He can even mention them in the same breath as tragedy, claiming both to be motivated by the lust for cruelty. He seems to contradict his more frequent and characteristic insistence on the uniqueness, profundity, and cultural primacy of tragedy when he rejects the Aristotelian ideas of catharsis and "tragic pity":

> What constitutes the painful voluptuousness of tragedy is cruelty; what seems agreeable in so-called tragic pity, and at bottom in everything sublime, up to the highest and most delicate shudders of metaphysics, receives its sweetness solely from the admixture of cruelty. What the Roman in the arena, the Christian in the ecstasies of the cross, the Spaniard at an auto-da-fe or bullfight, the Japanese of today when he flocks to tragedies, the laborer in a Parisian suburb who feels a nostalgia for bloody revolutions, the Wagnerienne who "submits to" *Tristan and Isolde*, her will suspended—what all of them enjoy and seek to drink in with mysterious ardor are the spicy potions of the great Circe, "cruelty."[38]

Perhaps all culture has sadomasochistic roots, as Nietzsche here contends. If so, how is one to claim primacy for tragedy over other forms of cruelty, including the Roman games? Instead of occupying a transcendent, ideal category, tragedy blurs into the general ruck of cultural production, with nothing to distinguish it from the kind of bloody spectacle celebrated by Martial. This is hardly the tendency in Nietzsche's other writings about tragedy, in which he gives it the status of the highest, rarest, least accessible value.

36. Martial, *De Spectaculis Liber*, in *Epigrams*, tr. Walter Ker, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Loeb Classical Library, 1919), I, pp. 7–9.

37. W. E. H. Lecky, *The History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne*, 2 vols. (New York: Appleton, 1910), I, 280, n. 3.

38. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, tr. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1966), pp. 158–59.

As the Roman games grew more popular, the fine arts declined. Longinus was not alone in worrying about "the decay of eloquence" which marked his age. In the *Satyricon*, Petronius has Eumolpus say: "As for our own times, why, we are so besotted with drink, so steeped in debauchery, that we lack the strength even to study the great achievements of the past. One and all we traduce the dead and slander our great tradition."[39] How much of the decadence that Petronius records can be blamed on the bread and circuses policy is uncertain, but it is at least clear that "the influence of the games gradually pervaded the whole texture of Roman life."[40] One of the victims of the arena was the theater. Tragedy and comedy had to compete with gladiatorial combats and chariot races for spectators, and the arena won a slow victory over the stage. Terence had audiences walk out of his plays to watch rope dancers and gladiators.[41] The theaters themselves came to be used for combats and displays of wild beasts. Cruder types of dramatic entertainment, pantomime and farce, evolved partly to meet the competition of the games, and these relied heavily on stage effects, obscenity, and other forms of sensationalism. Gradually the viciousness of the stage approximated the viciousness of the arena. It is no wonder that Juvenal and other writers treat actors and actresses with as much contempt as they treat gladiators; if anything, they see the stage as even more corrupt and corrupting than the arena.[42]

Christianity eventually brought about the abolition of gladiatorial combats (and of the persecution of Christians); it also caused the closing of the theaters.[43] Before its spread, humanitarian protests against the bloodshed in the arenas were rare. Of the few that were made, the most forceful was Seneca's. He especially disapproved of the slaughter of defenseless criminals and other non-gladiators who were merely herded into the arenas between main performances and mowed down like cattle. "In the morning they throw men to the lions and the bears; at noon, they throw them to the spectators." Seneca

39. Petronius, *Satyricon*, tr. William Arrowsmith (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1959), p. 90.
40. Lecky, *History of European Morals*, I, 274.
41. Margarette Bieber, *The History of the Greek and Roman Theatre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1939), p. 312.
42. Dill, *Roman Society from Nero to Marcus Aurelius*, p. 86.
43. Bieber, *The History of the Greek and Roman Theatre*, p. 428.

believed that these gruesome proceedings devalued life and bru-
talized the characters of the audience. "Man is a thing which is sacred
to mankind. But nowadays he is killed in play, for fun!"[44]

As Roman stoicism generally foreshadows the ascetic ideals of
Christianity, so Seneca's protest foreshadows the more effective pro-
tests of the church fathers. Special credit in this regard must go to the
monk Telemachus, who in 404 A.D. entered an arena to stop a gladi-
atorial combat:

> A sudden strength from heaven,
> As some great shock may wake a palsied limb,
> Turn'd him again to boy, for up he sprang,
> And glided lightly down the stairs, and o'er
> The barrier that divided beast from man
> Slipt, and ran on, and flung himself between
> The gladiatorial swords, and call'd "Forbear
> In the great name of Him who died for men,
> Christ Jesus!" For one moment afterward
> A silence follow'd as of death, and then
> A hiss as from a wilderness of snakes,
> Then one deep roar as of a breaking sea,
> And then a shower of stones that stoned him dead,
> And then once more a silence as of death.
> His dream became a deed that waked the world.[45]

This event, described here in Tennyson's poem "St. Telemachus,"
caused the emperor Honorius to prohibit gladiatorial contests, though
this prohibition was not very effective and though other games—
chariot racing, animal baiting—continued wherever there were arenas
and audiences.

One who agreed with Telemachus that the games were an abomina-
tion was Salvianus, the presbyter of Marseilles. About 450 A.D., Sal-
vianus recorded his sorrow and rage against those of his fellow Chris-
tians who, in the midst of barbarian depredations, continued to
demand circuses.

44. Seneca's protest is cited and commented upon by Michael Grant in *Gladiators*,
pp. 117–18.

45. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "St. Telemachus," in Christopher Ricks, ed., *The
Poems of Tennyson* (New York: Norton, 1969), pp. 1431–33.

> Do you then seek public shows, O citizen of Treves [capital of Gaul]? Where, pray, are they to be given? Over the pyres and ashes, the bodies and blood of the dead? For what part of your city is free from these? Where has blood not been shed, where are bodies and mangled limbs not strewn? Everywhere the city's appearance betrays its capture, everywhere are the horror of captivity and the image of death. The remains of a most unhappy people lie on the graves of their dead, yet you ask for circuses; the city is blackened by fire, yet you put on a festive countenance![46]

The image of the decadent citizens of Treves reveling at the circus while the barbarians pound down the gates sums up the association of "bread and circuses" with social calamity which is usually at least implicit in modern literature. To this image, Salvianus adds an idea that also recurs through the ages: the coming of the barbarians may be preferable to urban decadence and wantonness, a necessary scourge or cleansing, God's just wrath visited upon the wicked imperial capitals as it had once been visited upon the cities of the plain. For the barbarians, though pagan, are innocent of civilized corruptions: "I must return again to my oft-repeated contention, what have the barbarians like this? Where in their lands are circuses, where are theaters, where those other wicked vices that are the ruin of our hope and salvation? Even if they had such things, being pagans, their error would involve less offence to what is sacred" (168). Salvianus's praise of barbarian innocence has recurred in many contexts through the ages, down to Byron's "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" and beyond.

"Mark well, O Christian, how many unclean names have made the circus their own."[47] Telemachus and Salvianus were not the only early Christians who protested against the circuses and gladiatorial games. In his *De Spectaculis*, the most energetic and sweeping of all the protests made by the church fathers against the public amusements and games of the ancient world, the "gloomy Tertullian" writes: "If we can plead that cruelty is allowed us, if impiety, if brute savagery, by all means let us go to the amphitheatre." There one would see as many

46. Salvianus, *On the Government of God*, tr. Eva M. Sanford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1930), pp. 184–85.

47. Tertullian, *Apology and De Spectaculis*, tr. T. R. Glover (New York: The Loeb Classical Library, 1931), p. 253.

demons as men reveling in violence and the pleasures of the flesh. The public shows are "idolatry"; they "belong to the devil, his pomp and his angels." Tertullian acknowledges that Saint Paul had referred not unfavorably to the Greek games at Tarsus (1 Cor. 9:24), but he condemns boxing, wrestling, and all athletic contests anyway. The fact that the Greek games had involved public participation but that the Roman games had become purely "spectator sports" had caused as much concern among the Romans as any of the games' other features, and may have been the origin of the maxim "Many spectators and few men."[48] But this is not a distinction that Tertullian cares to make. Nor does he distinguish between gladiatorial combats and chariot races on the one hand, and theatrical and musical entertainments on the other: "tragedies and comedies" are just as "bloody and lustful, impious and prodigal" as gladiator shows; they also "teach outrage and lust." *De Spectaculis*, then, condemns all forms of public amusement: "*Omne enim spectaculum sine concussione spiritus non est*" (There is no public spectacle without violence to the spirit) (268–71).

On the surface, at least, Tertullian's *De Spectaculis* could not be more opposed to the crass sadism of Martial's *De Spectaculis*. The contrast illustrates the extremes of moral viewpoint which existed in the ancient world. Both Martial and Tertullian were educated men— intellectuals of sorts—but their attitudes toward "spectacles" were hardly restricted to the intellectual elites. Martial's brutality had its obvious reflection in the brutality of the mass audiences that filled the arenas, whereas Tertullian's opposition to that brutality had its reflection in the mass movement of Christianity. The examples of Martial and Tertullian should help to dispel any facile division of people, ancient or modern, into brutalized masses and sensitive elites, for it is usually the case that the worst and the best *moral* features of a culture appeal to everyone, whether educated or not. In contrast to literacy, philosophical and scientific ideas, and perhaps esthetic sensibility (though this is much more dubious), morality has never been the monopoly of an aristocratic or intellectual elite.

At about the time that Telemachus was martyred, Saint Augustine recorded the seduction of his friend Alypius by the games. It is a familiar story, retold with countless variations, perhaps most fre-

48. Cited by Auguet, *Cruelty and Civilization*, p. 195.

quently in puritanical pamphlets and sermons (themselves staples of popular culture in all ages), warning the innocent against the seductiveness of wine, women, song, games, gambling, plays, dancing, painting, novels. One thinks of Don Quixote's seduction by romances, although Alypius falls prey to something obviously more pernicious than *Amadis of Gaul.* A more exact analogy with Augustine's account would be the innumerable recent studies of the deleterious effects of televised violence on our own society of spectators. Because of its suggestiveness as a pattern, I quote it in its entirety:

> [Alypius] went to Rome ahead of me to study law and there, strange to relate, he became obsessed with an extraordinary craving for gladiatorial shows. At first he detested these displays and refused to attend them. But one day during the season for this cruel and bloodthirsty sport he happened to meet some friends and fellow-students returning from their dinner. In a friendly way they brushed aside his resistance . . . and carried him off to the arena.
>
> "You may drag me there bodily," he protested, "but do you imagine that you can make me watch the show and give my mind to it? I shall be there, but it will be just as if I were not present, and I shall prove myself stronger than you or the games."
>
> He did not manage to deter them by what he said, and perhaps the very reason why they took him with them was to discover whether he would be as good as his word. When they arrived at the arena, the place was seething with the lust for cruelty. They found seats as best they could and Alypius shut his eyes tightly, determined to have nothing to do with these atrocities. If only he had closed his ears as well! For an incident in the fight drew a great roar from the crowd, and this thrilled him so deeply that he could not contain his curiosity. Whatever had caused the uproar, he was confident that, if he saw it, he would find it repulsive and remain master of himself. So he opened his eyes, and his soul was stabbed with a wound more deadly than any which the gladiator, whom he was so anxious to see, had received in his body. He fell, and fell more pitifully than the man whose fall had drawn that roar of excitement from the crowd. The din had pierced his ears and forced him to open his eyes, laying his soul open to receive the wound which struck it down. This was presumption, not courage. The weakness of his soul was in relying upon itself instead of trusting in You.
>
> When he saw the blood, it was as though he had drunk a deep draught of savage passion. Instead of turning away, he fixed his eyes upon the scene and drank in all its frenzy, unaware of what he was doing. He revelled in the wickedness of the fighting and was drunk

with the fascination of bloodshed. He was no longer the man who had come to the arena, but simply one of the crowd which he had joined, a fit companion for the friends who had brought him.

Need I say more? He watched and cheered and grew hot with excitement, and when he left the arena, he carried away with him a diseased mind which would leave him no peace until he came back again, no longer simply together with the friends who had first dragged him there, but at their head, leading new sheep to the slaughter. Yet you stretched out your almighty, ever merciful hand, O God, and rescued him from this madness.[49]

In 1972, under the aegis of Senator Richard Pastore's Senate Communications Subcommittee, the United States Surgeon General's Office issued a report titled *Television and Growing Up.* Having surveyed hundreds of supposedly scientific studies, the report concluded that too much televised violence makes our society more violent and more frightening than it would be without televised violence. Ten years later a second government report reached the same conclusion. These reports seem doomed to be historically tautological; Augustine anticipated them by fifteen centuries.

Before the influence of Christianity closed the arenas and the theaters, the views expressed by Suetonius in his *Lives of the Caesars* were probably typical of those held by the majority of Romans. When he complains about Caligula's cruelty, Seutonius has in mind cruelty to the public rather than to the victims of the arena. The idea seems to be that Caligula did not restrict his sadism within the limits of decency and that he violated the standards for bread and circuses established by Augustus: "During gladiatorial shows he would have the canopies removed at the hottest time of the day and forbid anyone to leave; or cancel the regular programme, and pit feeble old fighters against decrepit criminals; or stage comic duels between respectable householders who happened to be physically disabled in some way or another. More than once he closed down the granaries and let the people go hungry."[50] Suetonius finds nothing more monstrous than Caligula's willful reversals of Augustus's policy, depriving his subjects both of food and of well-managed, sufficiently gory amusements. Suetonis goes on to list numerous instances of Caligula's "bloody-

49. Augustine, *Confessions*, tr. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Baltimore: Penguin, 1961), Book VI, part 8, pp. 122–23.
50. Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, tr. Robert Graves (New York: Penguin, 1957), p. 163.

mindedness," but his grounds for doing so are not clearly humanitarian. He is more disturbed by Caligula's capriciousness, his dangerous unpredictability, than by his sadism. With a few notable exceptions such as Commodus, most of the other emperors were less irregular in their administration of cruelty than Caligula. But it cannot be doubted that cruelty was institutionalized in the Roman games and that it formed the basis of a pattern of mass entertainment that lasted for centuries. The idea of state-sponsored mass culture could not have had a worse beginning.

Though Greek and Roman writers offer numerous arguments against democracy, the actual record of ancient history offers little support to those theorists who seek to combine aristocratic elitism with literary classicism. Greek culture flourished in conditions of communal participation and equality—conditions that approximated democracy even though based on slavery. In contrast, the political and cultural decadence of imperial Rome Juvenal blames on "the mob of Remus" who want only "bread and circuses." But Juvenal also believes decadence to be linked to the forfeiture of popular power and responsibility in the transition from the Republic to the Empire. Bread and circuses is not a result of democracy, but of the destruction of republican (that is, of partially democratic) institutions through the triumph of Caesarism. The ancient legacy, then, suggests in several ways that democracy and cultural greatness are not antithetical but may instead be symbiotic. From the perspective of the two classicisms, however, democracy is only a prelude to tyranny, as it is according to Plato and Polybius. "Bread and circuses" becomes a name for the process by which democracy turns into its opposite, the Republic into the Empire, the aristocratic Senate giving way to the urban mob—or, in modern terms, the process by which a liberal though hierarchical society, with its "creative elites" protected by class institutions, turns into "mass society." But it has never been apparent that democracy contains the seeds of its own destruction, and its preservation and extension may be the only means of continuing the work of cultural growth and averting the disasters foreseen by negative classicism. That the Athenian precedent of communal participation in cultural greatness was short-lived suggests only how easily a culture shared by both the few and the many can be corrupted by tyranny, greed, poverty, and the machinery of empire.