

# A Word from London

## Herbert London

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### **American Perfectibility: The New Religion**

**P**erfectibility, the act of seeking perfection, is a national obsession. On one level this state of affairs is understandable. Affluence is at unprecedented levels. If you don't have it, you might be able to buy it.

On another level the frantic search for perfection has resulted in the neurotic pursuit of the unattainable. From politics to liposuction, practitioners promise what cannot be delivered to a public increasingly convinced it can defy the limits of nature.

In politics there are several tell-tale signs of charlatanism. When a pol starts a speech by saying "Not one American should have to. . ." You can fill in the blank with any of the following options: "live in marginal housing," "go to bed hungry," "be denied medical care," "reside in a crime-riddled community." Here are perfect examples of perfectibility.

Unless human nature is altered or wealth is dematerialized, remote but plausible possibilities, crime—to cite one illustration—will not disappear and someone will live with it. Those sharing imperfectible assumptions might say crime may be reduced and evil might be reduced, but the odds of elimination are close to zero. However, in a world searching for perfectibility this modest assertion won't fly.

Like the politician selling nirvana, those selling prescriptions of eternal youth contend aging is unnecessary. The contemporary Ponce de Leon sells ointments, massages, herbal cures, face lifts, tummy tucks, liposuction, hair weaves, transplants, breast enhancement, breast reduction, tooth whiteners, enzymes, hormone additives, vitamins, weight loss pills and liquids. Each day a new product is put on the market for the delectation of perfectionists.

Defying the aging process is merely one way of expressing the desire for perfection. "Be all you can be" also takes the form of mental gymnastics. Magazines are replete with ads to improve your memory, reduce stress, increase your sexual appetite, improve your vocabulary to impress your friends, help you relax, find a zest for life, have the perfect orgasm. The psyche is presumably as manipulatable as the body.

Lest my detractors assume I am a complete cynic, I should hastily note that some products deliver on their promises. However youth is rarely restored and the complete makeover is rarely complete. But the pursuit does not end.

While the American spirit for the new and innovative is unquenchable, perfectibility has insinuated itself into the culture because imperfectibility is increasingly rejected. By imperfectibility I'm referring to the belief that some conditions do not change, that they are imposed by nature or providential will.

On a theological level Pelagians, who assume all people are good and life can be perfected, are in conflict with those who adhere to a belief in Original Sin, or imperfectibility. Needless to say, Pelagians are in the ascendancy.

For Pelagians there aren't any limits. A secular heaven on earth can be created. Immortality can be defied and taboos are regarded as mere superstitions to be discarded like used tissues. Therefore the makeover isn't make believe or exaggerated, but is the manifestation of a religion, perfectibility.

Each day it finds new adherents even when the simple solutions don't offer what is advertised. The pursuit continues in order to find a better product or service than the one that disappointed.

Overheard in Bloomingdale's was a conversation in which one middle aged woman said to her friend "that lotion took ten years off my face." "Ten years," said her companion, "well, I found a lotion that took 20 years off my face." Suppose, I thought, you can find a lotion that takes 30 years off your face, what would one look like with a 15 year-old face on a 50 year-old body? Never mind, the body repair job is on the way.

However after being waxed and cleansed, psychologized and herbalized, offered panaceas and nirvana, life as we know it has not changed substantially. Good and evil still exist. Passion isn't manufactured. Truth endures. Beauty is admired. There are foundational conditions that don't change, despite the best effort of perfectionists.

In the end the final judgment is not based on how youthful you are but how pure your soul is. On the matter of soul, perfectionists do not have an easy answer.

### ***American Beauty* Is Truly Ugly**

The critics have decreed that *American Beauty* is one of the great films of the year.

One critic gushes: "A triumph for this year . . . ranks with the finest movies of the '90s."

Another contends it is "a rich, brilliant and unnerving work—a funny movie that hurts. By far the strongest American film of the year."

And yet a third argues *American Beauty* "is genuinely a thing of beauty."

However, this film, already dubbed a masterpiece, is one of the most perverse and cliché-riddled films I have ever seen. It is merely another in Hollywood's long line of nightmarish visions of American life.

Here is a mosaic of sick and broken lives in what is alleged to be a prototypically suburban America.

*American Beauty* marks the feature debut of its screenwriter, Alan Ball, and its director, Sam Mendes, an Englishman with stage experience such as "The Blue Room," a play based on a variety of sexual encounters in a woman's life.

The movie's plot—if one can call it that—is based on two dysfunctional families living next door to one another. In the Burnham house, father longs for an affair with his sixteen-year-old daughter's best friend, and mom, driven by a desire for success, is having an affair with the king of local real estate.

Next door live the Fitts. Young Ricky, the son in the house, deals drugs and engages in voyeurism with the object of his affections in the Burnham household. His mother has lost the ability to communicate as depression dominates every waking moment. Father, Colonel Fitts, is a retired Marine who, in the warped imagination of Mr. Mendes, is a sadist who routinely beats his son, is a collector of Nazi memorabilia (what else?) and who, on top of every other crackpot cliché, is a latent homosexual.

In this environment, where joy has been eviscerated, the American dystopia is in full flower. Frustration abounds as everyone longs for release from the stifling 'burbs, everyone that is but the homosexual couple who are the only contented people in this suburban hell.

Homosexuals, presumably, don't suffer from longing for something they cannot have. In the film, one is a tax attorney, the other is an anesthesiologist; both are welcoming neighbors, decent citizens and thoroughly satisfied. They jog each morning and cannot understand why everyone isn't as happy as they.

As I watched this horror unfold, with acting by Kevin Spacey and Annette Benning that is mostly over the top, I kept wondering what kind of impression this film would leave with foreign audiences unfamiliar with American life.

Could they possibly believe that American suburbs are filled with demented souls? Might they believe sex dominates the fantasies of mature men? Should they believe that the suburbs foster depraved lives?

The Ball-Mendes vision of America is reliant on the radical critique that emerged in the late sixties. I can recall the ludicrous claim of a youthful true believer who said "You don't know what hell is like till you've lived in Scarsdale."

This is, of course, the hell reprised in *American Beauty*. It is a story retold by the children of affluence—the most privileged people the world has known and among the most spiritually bankrupt.

Yet not everyone shares this gloomy picture of suburbia. For many Americans suburbia represents liberation from inferior public schools, high crime rates, congestion on the roads and obscene rental rates.

Moreover, the search for meaning that seems to afflict the leading characters in the film, is a national concern which isn't restricted to any one venue. One might even conclude, based on indices of public health, that the suburbs are more wholesome than cities.

But *American Beauty* isn't about any suburb; it is the suburb in the perverse imagination of writer and director. It is yet another manifestation of antipathy to American life which is now a contagion in filmdom.

*American Beauty* isn't a film, it's a screed against bourgeois life. In an art world where criticism of the bourgeoisie is confused with imagination, it's easy to

understand the praise heaped on this film.

However, one shouldn't be taken in by the hype. *American Beauty* is a sick, morally bereft, morose view of America that only confirms the stereotypes that emerged from the overheated sixties.

### **It Was Once Bad For You**

There was a time not so long ago when most of the foods I enjoyed were bad for me. My physician said don't consume more than two eggs a week, stay away from chocolate and don't eat oily dishes.

Like a character in Woody Allen's *Sleeper* I've awakened from a decade-long sleep to discover that almost everything I was told may be bad for me is now healthy.

Allen's character contends that in the next century milk shakes and marbled steak will turn out to be healthy foods. He wasn't far off the mark.

Recently a medical report noted that chocolate, the former scourge of healthy bodies, is an effective antioxidant, more powerful than dark tea and tomatoes.

For years my doctor and parents deprived me of a restorative substance because they believed in the myth of chocolate's evil. Yet it turns out that I was right and they were wrong. Will they recant? I think not.

When I reached my middle years, eggs became a food I was advised to avoid. "Too much fat," "eat only egg whites," were a continual lamentation. I yearned for two eggs over easy with hash brown potatoes, but I—relying on expert advice—resisted.

Recent medical reports suggest that the consumption of eggs won't contribute to reduced longevity and may actually have a salutary effect on the body. So much for expert advice.

A staple among nutritionists was the claim that oily foods clog your arteries. The claim was made without refinement—oil was bad for you except for mineral oil which was necessary for your digestive system and castor oil which was a magical potion for healthy bodies, but tasted like liquified bad breath.

So I avoided oily foods. To my astonishment reports have emerged that olive oil is not only desirable, it has a positive influence on my circulatory system. It actually stems the flow of the bad triglycerides and promotes the good ones. Greeks and Italians went from having the worst to the best dietary practices.

There are lessons in this turn about. For one thing the experts know less than they think they know.

For another, common sense is the best guide to diet. Moderation being the most sensible bit of advice.

Third, what you like may not be bad for you. However, don't consume too much of anything.

And last, you can't be sure about "expert opinion."

Since an affluent America is flirting with dramatic age extension and living healthier lives longer, magical solutions for these conditions have become a preoccupation. The pages of vitamin booklets promise everything from the

Fountain of Youth to biceps like Mark McGuire.

Food has become the refuge of hucksters. If you eat brown rice—one guru notes—you cannot contract cancer.

If you eat fiber, you will defy the actuarial tables. Every expert selling a product has a promise of nirvana.

What they don't know is what science may discover. The food discovery of today may be the menace of tomorrow. Look at the history of milk, a product that went from essential to arterial bad boy.

Who knows, if chocolate is good for you, can cheesecake be far behind? My parents wanted the best for me, but the best turned out to be transitory. The fad of yesteryear may be passé today. Conversely, foods to be avoided may turn out to be essential.

Who would have thought chocolate is good for you?

Perhaps at some point in the not too distant future we will be told spinach is bad for you.

Redemption can be a beautiful thing.

#### **New Dirty Jeans: You've Got to Be Kidding**

Calvin Klein, the *soi disant* spokesman of American taste, recently announced that the "newest," most fashionable look for Spring 2000 is jeans that are beaten, bruised, tinted, and look as if they've been worn for years.

"I wanted something that was really relaxed and comfortable, and something that has an attitude that could look great on everyone," Mr. Klein told editors of *Women's Wear Daily*.

Klein's entire jeans advertising campaign of \$30 million will promote these "dirty jeans." As Klein, foreshadowing the ad campaign, noted,

Dirty denim looks and feels like it walked a thousand miles, then crawled a few more. . . . But this denim was never worn by anyone. It's been scientifically blasted, twisted, dyed and whipped by advanced machinery until it is perfectly, uniquely worn.

How much will these preordained dirty jeans cost? They will retail for \$78, compared to \$48 for your basic clean jeans. The price hike is a function of the blasting, twisting, dying and whipping the jeans must undergo.

Linda Wachner, CEO of the Warneco Company licensed to produce CK Jeans, said she believes the concept is "great" and expects retail sales to reach \$600 million next year.

Perhaps Ms. Wachner knows something I don't, but I remain dubious. Is it possible Americans will pay a premium to obtain dirty jeans?

If dirty denims sell for a premium, I would be pleased to sell my paint sustained, soiled faded jeans to Calvin Klein for \$50. That would be a bargain for Calvin and a gift for me.

Watching kids rolling in park dirt I came to the realization that there is a method to their play. They are actively involved in enhancing the value of their

jeans.

There was a time when people wore denims until, after many washings, jeans changed color and the stains would not disappear. But Calvin Klein has changed that. Now the stains and discoloration are arranged for you.

This is a peculiar kind of mechanical mimesis that creates the false impression upper middle class consumers are like the proletariat who get their stains the old fashioned way.

I can imagine the guffaws from truck drivers who are told some people will spend \$78 to buy jeans that are intentionally made to look worn and dirty.

Jeans have become part of an American uniform because they are an expression of national egalitarianism—a belief that rich and poor are undistinguishable. Of course poor folks don't buy \$78 CK Jeans. But then poor folks work at getting their denims stained.

Should the Calvin Klein approach become a trend, there is no telling where it will end. Shoes will be artificially worn down so they can be sold at a premium. Ties will be sold with food stains. Shirts will be made with moth generated holes.

It will be interesting to see if Calvin Klein's friends in the Hamptons buy his jeans. I can see it now, people in multi-million dollar homes buying dirty jeans that resemble the genuinely dirty jeans of their servants.

Determining the owners of these homes from the employees may not be so easy. But I guess that's the point. Wealthy people like to masquerade as the hoi polloi.

Why one wants jeans that feel as if they've walked a thousand miles eludes me. Are stained jeans more comfortable than their clean counterparts?

Perhaps marketers, like Calvin Klein, believes they can sell anything. And if pet rocks were once a fad, I guess dirty jeans can be one as well.

But pre-soiled jeans strikes me as a new level of fatuity. Imagine a new car that is intentionally battered and you get a sense of the foolishness.

In the Middle Ages the steps of churches developed grooves when generation after generation climbed the stairs on their knees. Two centuries later, churches were constructed with grooves in the stairs.

In the first instance, the evolution was natural; in the second, it was artificial—a replica without the spirit or religious zeal.

One might argue that on a superficial level Calvin Klein has done the same thing. If people feel comfortable in jeans they have worn over a long period of time, Klein gives them the comfort without the passage of time—and does so by charging \$30 more than conventional jeans.

The absurdity of charging more for dirty jeans may simply be next year's fashion joke. For those who buy these denims, the joke is also on them.

### **The Honorary Degree Hoax**

During the season for college graduates, that time when commencements occur, speeches are delivered and honorary degrees conferred. Arthur Levine, president of Teachers College at Columbia University, said honorary degrees “are used to reward donors who have given money; sometimes they are used to draw

celebrities to make the graduation special.”

He goes on to note that honorary degrees are “a last lesson a college can teach, by showing examples of people who most represent the values the institution stands for.” Alas, he is correct.

In ways Dr. Levine does not recognize, the selection of honorary degree recipients offers profound evidence of what colleges and universities have become.

Last year Judy Collins, Geena Davis, Quincy Jones, Muhammad Ali, Tito Puente, and that stand-by at graduations, Bill Cosby, were among the honorary degree recipients. In examining the line-up, several things are clear: there is an implicit affirmative action selection process at work; celebrity status is more important than actual achievement, and if there is a choice between liberal and conservative, go with the liberal. Surely this is a perfectly accurate depiction of university life.

In the last thirty years affirmative action sentiment has become ensconced in the thinking of higher education officials, notwithstanding the Hopwood decision which repudiates affirmative action as a principle. At several universities last year the honorary degree recipients represented each of the designated victim groups and, of course, a female.

It is also obvious that celebrity status is critical. Obscure names who engaged in serious research are routinely ignored. In fact, Bill Cosby doesn't even know how many honorary degrees he has received. He adds glitter to the graduation experience for students and parents, and that's what counts.

In the celebrity category are wealthy people who presumably are, or could become, contributors to the university. Georgia State University, for example, honored J. Mack Robinson, who gave \$10 million to its College of Business. Like wealthy people who want an ambassadorship, money is a critical factor in the honorary degree market.

Most of the time recipients don't even have to speak for their honor. Showing up, donning a robe and sitting on a platform for a couple of hours are all that is necessary. Some people like Father Hesburg, former president of Notre Dame, have become virtual professionals at the business of honorary degrees.

It helps, of course, to have a left-wing pedigree, in large part because universities embody only one political view, now cast as an orthodoxy. Jules Feiffer, the cartoonist, Sister Helen Prejean, author of *Dead Man Walking*, and Noam Chomsky, linguist and political pamphleteer, received their degrees as much for their political views as their accomplishments.

In Chomsky's case his political views are distinctly anti-American, a position that didn't hurt his chance of a degree during the commencement season.

There is indeed little doubt that honorary degrees represent the values of universities. On the other hand, these degrees are no longer related to the purpose for which they were intended.

The custom of bestowing them is centuries old, a custom Americans borrowed from their English forebears. At Oxford University the ceremony at which honorary degrees are granted is known as *Encaenia*, a Greek word meaning festival

of renewal. That “renewal” was scholarship that enhanced the fund of human knowledge or was a display of courage, fortitude, integrity or another noble trait. The singer of popular songs or a hitter who averaged over .300 in the course of a baseball career do not qualify.

That, of course, has changed. Now politics, money and celebrity status matter most. The university world has changed and not for the better. One can only wonder what message today’s graduates actually imbibe from commencement speakers.

My view about honorary degrees is very much like Thomas Jefferson’s. Jefferson believed universities should not grant these honors. He feared that a board of trustees might get caught up in political or religious enthusiasms rather than select a candidate based on scholarly merit. To this day the University of Virginia, which Jefferson founded, does not grant honorary degrees.

Jefferson was right. University boards of trustees have, in most instances, lost their way. The whirlpool of febrile opinion has vitiated the goal of honoring genuine scholarship. Instead, celebrities are on display in order to entertain and keep it light—just like most of the professors.   Ω

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