From Irony in the Age of Empire by Cynthia Willett

ONE

LAUGHTER AGAINST HUBRIS

A PREEMPTIVE STRIKE

Tragic Beginnings

For twelve years, the United States had stood alone and uncontested as the sole world superpower. Then came the terror of September 11, the crumbling World Trade towers, the damaged face of the Pentagon, and thousands dead. The deaths and destruction prompted much speculation on the reasons for anti-American sentiments and on how the United States might exert its power with a sense of cosmopolitan responsibility. The terror also brought about widespread sympathy for the United States. When French president Jacques Chirac proclaimed that "we are all Americans now," there was a real chance for the United States to exercise global leadership and to lay the groundwork for world peace. But then something went wrong. Instead of seeking world peace, the United States announced a thinly veiled and highly risky strategy for global domination. We were to be engaged in a war against terrorism without definition or end. With plans to invade Iraq, the United States lost the sympathy it had gained from the attack, and France joined with Germany to lead world opinion in the United Nations against American aggression. "When

France is accusing the U.S. of arrogance, and Germany doesn't want to go to war, you know something is wrong," philosopher-at-large Chris Rock quipped and for good reason.[1] To be sure, the U.S. has a sporadic history of imperialist invasion, but the post-9/11 agenda shifted that imperialism into high gear.

The anger unleashed in the 9/11 attacks surprised Americans, who were for the most part genuinely unaware of our long history of imperialist invasion and the hostility that cultural and economic domination, let alone the presence of U.S. troops, can generate abroad. Mainstream historians have preferred to portray the United States as a passive defender of democracy, not as an active imperialist power. Those historians who portray the United States as an active empire typically insist that this imperial role is for the good. Prominent historian John Lewis Gaddis, for example, claims that the politics of the cold war required that the United States assert its power as "a new kind of empire—a democratic empire."[2] Only a few historians have seen through such claims of American innocence as one more romance with American exceptionalism. And yet extensive empirical research demonstrates fairly clearly that, in the words of historian Marilyn Young, "US. foreign policy aims first and foremost for a 'world safe and assessable for the American economic system'" (*GP*, 279). The United States rarely advances pro-democracy programs, and only then when the costs are perceived to be slight. The typical consequence of American imperialism is to subjugate foreign people, viewed as racially or culturally inferior, and to drain their resources. Even the high moral rhetoric commonly used to defend an American empire is hardly exceptional. The French and the British empires also claimed to bestow the rule of law and democracy on inferior populations. Regardless of the rhetoric, imperialism's strategies are sadly the same: to tear down and replace preexisting socioeconomic structures with hitherto unknown systems of dependency.

Whatever we might think about the historical likelihood of a moral empire, the ironies that characterized the surge of patriotism following the 9/11 attack are telling. Stunned by terror in the homeland, citizens who had enjoyed, somewhat cynically perhaps, the stock market bubble of the '90s asked what they might give back to a nation in need. In the mood of shock and mourning that followed the terror, these citizens seemed poised to break out of the exaggerated schedules of work and consumption that had shaped the years before. President Bush, claiming to be, if not our popularly elected leader, at least our "moral leader," did not call out to us to respond to the crisis with a republican ethic of sacrifice. We were not asked for the sake of the nation to ration, buy savings bonds, or trade in

the keys to our SUVs for some hybrid model. On the contrary, we were asked to spend, and spend lavishly, as though our lives would depend upon it. In a time of crisis, we peered into the soul of our nation and found it difficult to see past the veneer of materialism that continues to both mesmerize and disturb us. The president's redefinition of duty brought to national consciousness the impact of an economy rooted more in consumption than in production, and even more precariously, in consumer confidence. And so, in the anxiety of post-9/11, we were called upon not to make sacrifices, but to consume and to do so with undaunted confidence. Of course, the call to consume came to constitute an exceedingly pleasant if somewhat unusual embodiment of citizen duty. Many of us were ready to do our part.

The hedonistic embodiment of patriotic duty was, however, definitely going to mess with some basic philosophical distinctions that had emerged in the twelve years of the post–cold war era. In the carnivalized atmosphere of globalization that followed the fall of the Berlin wall, the world-system *seemed* to divide between what German philosopher Cornelia Klinger portrays as the postmodernism of the rich and the communitarianism of the poor.[3] For those who could enjoy the elite postmodern lifestyle, globalization might be experienced as the freeing of the subject from essentializing categories of identity, patriotism among them. This was to be a time for enjoying bodies and their pleasures, the narcissism of unencumbered individualism, the negative freedom of fluid boundaries in a transsexual, transgender, and transnational world. It seemed as though this could be paradise. On the underside of the world-system, disenfranchised populations were left struggling for a sense of belonging or recognition, a positive sense of identity and freedom, and new forms of communitarianism, nationalism, and fundamentalism.

Or so, as I say, it seemed. For, it was never so clear that pomo consumerism, at least the American brand, was not a way after all to write upon the world an American identity—in other words, just one more form of nationalism. The beauty of the first response to 9/11 was that we could have it all. We could be nationalistic citizens and pleasure-loving consumers. We could wave our flags as proud Americans and yet yield to our most hedonistic urges—as long as these urges could be satisfied in the malls and not on the streets. (Buying drugs, according to the ongoing national campaign, finances the terrorists.) What could be more safely delicious?

And yet, as easy as this first response to 9/11 was to be, it was not going to satisfy our nation's conservative moral leadership. Perhaps the emphasis on consumption seemed a bit too feminine—not quite manly

enough.[4] In any case, over the next few months, the administration would exploit the sense of national emergency and compensate for any perceived passivity in our nation's identity with a more kick-ass model of citizenship. This second response took the shape of the 2002 National Security Strategy, a project originally laid out by Paul Wolfowitz in 1992, and proposed by Bush as part of his rationale for invading Iraq. The new policy would entitle the United States to so-called preemptive strikes against perceived enemies, indeed, against any power that challenges U.S. global supremacy.[5] This policy turn promised to be full of risk, excitement, and adventure—and manlier, too.

The beefed-up role of patriot as warrior of an active empire (and not merely consumer in a passive empire) may or may not serve to advance the cause of freedom. Much depends on how freedom is defined. Certainly, the double role of consumer and warrior is geared to add overwhelming military force to make the world "safe and assessable for the American economic system" and its ideology of free markets. But the doctrine of preemptive strike would also begin to cast dark shades of meaning on the motto of mall culture, "shop till you drop." If just prior to 9/11, Young could draw the conclusion that the United States aims to be "at once powerful and passive," the National Security Strategy of 2002 changed all of that, and for clear motives. The new get-tough security policy redresses a degree of vulnerability that mainstream America has not known before and compensates for whatever hint of passivity there may be in a service economy—countering any force that threatens to feminize us. After the 1999 film *Fight Club,* I am inclined to view our national evolution to the Wolfowitz doctrine through Brad Pitt's "Project Mayhem."[6] "Let's evolve," Brad Pitt says to the timid Ed Norton. Of course, Paul Wolfowitz is not as cool as Brad Pitt, and George W's Project Mayhem (I take the W as standing for George's alter ego, Wolfowitz) does not target the credit companies; George W's Project Mayhem is aggressively pro-capitalist, capitalist with a vengeance, perhaps even a tragic kind of vengeance—or at least this has been the widespread concern.

It is said that as Americans we lack a sense of the tragic. Certainly, the miscalculations of the Bush administration brought this country more trouble than it was ever able to foresee. The weird mix of consumer capitalism and Project Mayhem militarism, symbolized in the minds of our frightful enemies by the World Trade towers and the Pentagon, profile the dangers of excess and arrogance that we have become. In the ancient logic that defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld dismissed as part of "Old Europe," these twin dangers spell hubris. And the tragic consequences, in political theater as in classic drama, have been clear in advance to all but the doer of

the deed. Old Europe's tales warn that it is of the nature of unrivaled power to overstep limits, setting loose the furies that bring it down. Of course, it has been a genuine hope among some that the United States would avoid the usual traps and use its immense power for moral purposes. The liberal philosopher, journalist, and human rights advocate Michael Ignatieff has made perhaps the most thoughtful case for the moral use of our imperial power, and I will examine his arguments more carefully in a moment. But as allies and enemies warn, the imperial logic of the superpower may not allow for the happy ending to which America aspires. Unchecked and unbalanced, power cannot sustain a clear moral path (if there ever was one).[7] Power breeds hubris, and hubris brings about resentment, anger, and doom. The intentions, moral or not, hardly matter.

After 9/11, worldly neoliberal capitalists joined with flag-waving republican patriots to rally behind an active role for an American empire and spread freedom abroad. Ignatieff among others termed this active power "liberal imperialism." Of course, future administrations may lead the United States down a more cautious path of imperialism, one that operates more carefully through economic partnerships with powerful allies. However, this return to pre-Bush-style imperialism does not address the underlying hubris that brought about 9/11 to begin with. One wonders if our country is doomed to repeat a formula of capitalism and militarism, narcissism and nationalism, excess and arrogance—a very old logic of tragic recoil that we cannot even see. Is there an alternative role for a superpower?

Martha Nussbaum contrasts the sense of inevitability one finds in classical tragedy with the comic mindset of the American sensibility (*UT*, 675). If ancient tragedians mourned the blunders that bring about downfall, the comic sensibility acknowledges vulnerability and dependence on others and thereby avoids tragic ruin. Nussbaum does not herself explore the ethics of comedy beyond her brief allusion to its formal character, the avoidance of conflict. But what if we were to play along with Nussbaum's broader claim, and grant that she has steered us toward a truly salutary element of mainstream American identity? Might we find on the surface of American culture some profound comic insight that takes us beyond the blindness to excess and arrogance that the American disavowal of tragedy otherwise implies?

That Awesome Thing: Liberal Empire

In a January 2003 *New York Times Magazine* article, "The Burden," Ignatieff gently urges the United States to wake to its new responsibility as

empire.[8] "Ever since George Washington warned his countrymen against foreign entanglements, empire abroad has been seen as the republic's permanent temptation and its potential nemesis. Yet what word but 'empire' describes the awesome thing that America is becoming?" (*B*, 22). "The 21st century imperium is a new invention in the annals of political science, . . . a global hegemony whose grace notes are free markets, human rights and democracy, enforced by the most awesome military power the world has ever known. . . . In this vein, the president's National Security Strategy . . . commits America to lead other nations toward 'the single sustainable model for national success,' . . . free markets and liberal democracy" (*B*, 24).

Ignatieff cautions that this mission is not without its danger. "As the United States faces this moment of truth, John Quincy Adams's warning of 1821 remains stark and pertinent," he writes; citing the words of the famous founding father, we have "to ask whether in becoming an empire [America] risks losing its soul as a republic" (*B*, 24). "What every schoolchild also knows about empires is that they eventually face nemeses. . . . To call America the new Rome is at once to recall Rome's glory and its eventual fate. . . . [T]he city on a hill . . . now has to confront . . . a remote possibility that seems to haunt the history of empire: hubris followed by defeat" (*B*, 25).

Ignatieff is among a booming chorus of voices that warn the United States of its arrogance. In 1999, before 9/11 alerted the American public to the hostility that imperial power provokes abroad, Thomas Friedman reported on a shift in the discourse of our extreme critics in the Middle East. In 1996, "Iran's mullahs had begun calling America something other than the 'Great Satan.' They had begun calling it 'the capital of global arrogance.'"[9] The shift from the theological language of good and evil to the older language of hubris reflects in part the need to forge a political ethics that translates across cultural boundaries. The Bush administration might take note: the pagan discourse of hubris may indeed garner a transnational appeal that the self-righteous quasi-Christian discourse of good and evil lacks. "Enron embodies Nobel-class hubris," we hear after the corporation's fiasco.[10] This is a deregulated world of out-of-control corporate monopolies; a post-Columbine world of queen bees and out-of-control bullies in the public schools; a global society in which one superpower is no longer balanced by another.[11]

The resentment toward the hubris of the American lifestyle of deregulated power not only resonates at home, it crosses boundaries. The toned-down accusations of the mullahs might not have shifted the brunt of the perception of fanaticism away from the Islamists toward the Americans.

The language does, however, reflect substantial ethical concerns with the single-mindedness of monopolistic capital and unipolar power. Friedman gave us a glimpse into how American zeal is viewed across the world in the same 1999 article: "We Americans are the apostles of the Fast World, the prophets of the free market and high priests of high tech. We want 'enlargement' of both our values and our Pizza Huts. We want the world to follow our lead and become democratic and capitalistic" (*NB*, 43). But if the internationalist agenda of prior administrations made enemies, the Bush sabotage of internationalism and the subsequent bravado of its National Security Strategy seems destined to do more than make enemies; the Bush sabotage, to cite a line from Aristotle's study of tragedy, has made "enemies out of our friends."[12]

The tragic warnings against hubris echo back before the days of Rome. In his genealogical studies of moral terms, Nietzsche contrasts the theological language of good and evil with the pagan ethics of the Greeks.[13] He explains that the common people, or *demos*, of ancient Athens used the category of hubris as a tool for restraining not only tyrants but all kinds of elites. While the Hellenic people encouraged competition (*agon*) for honor and status, they thought to establish restraints on power so that contests would not degenerate into what Nietzsche describes as "a fight of annihilation."[14] We might ponder, Nietzsche writes, "the original meaning of ostracism.... 'Among us, no one shall be the best; but if someone is, then let him be elsewhere.'... Why should no one be the best? Because then the contest would come to an end and the eternal source of life for the Hellenic state would be endangered" (*HC*, 36). What becomes of those whom the gods behold without a rival? They are "seduce[d by these same gods] to a deed of hubris," madness, and doom (*HC*, 38).

Despite the reference to the gods, Nietzsche's statement coheres with contemporary scholarship. This scholarship corrects the traditional view, which reduces hubris to the attitude of pride or a religious offense against the gods.[15] What liberals explain in terms of the "basic rights of the citizen not to be abused, or exploited or treated violently, Greeks often preferred to express... in terms of honour and shame" (*H*, 494). Charges of hubris were directed on behalf of conquered people or lower classes against imperialist states and the rich or ruling classes as "peasant-citizen democracy" grew more effective in Greek states (*H*, 494, 505). An attack on the honor of the individual or group was viewed as a major crime, destabilizing the community and risking social unrest or revolution and war (*H*, 493). Because of the danger of the elites, the people (or *demos*) demanded laws and ethical codes to protect them against hubris as well as to secure some degree of redistribution of the wealth (*H*, 493–94). Those who were the

target of hubristic acts or policies were expected to act out in rage and seek revenge. While classic scholarship traces the ethical codes against hubris at least as far as Egypt, Wole Soyinka observes that the codes extend into Sub-Saharan Africa.[16]

Today we understand the logic of nemesis in terms less of the fatal cycles of anger and revenge than of rational decisions and political fact. "Since the beginnings of the state system in the 16th century, international politics has seen one clear pattern—the formation of balances of power against the strong," observes Fareed Zakaria shortly after the invasion of Iraq in his *Newsweek* article "The Arrogant Empire."[17]

It is odd that contemporary defenders of an active American empire invoke the mythos of hubris repeatedly, as though compelled by some force that (after that theorist of madness, Freud) I am tempted to call a death wish. In any case, after invoking the specter of hubris, they do not back down. They prefer instead the bolder move, and demand more, not less, power: "The question, [Ignatieff writes]... is not whether America is too powerful but whether it is powerful enough" (*B*, 27). Similarly, citing foreign policy expert Michael Mandelbaum, Friedman writes just before the Iraq invasion, " 'the real threat to world stability is not too much American power. It is too little American power.' "[18] One has to wonder what perverse pleasure comes from tempting the fates.

The decision to invade Iraq is a case in point. Jonathan Schell observes that the global protest against the invasion of Iraq on February 15th of 2003 "will go down in history as the first time that the people of the world expressed their clear and concerted will in regard to a pressing global issue.... On that day, history may one day record, global democracy was born."[19] From these multitudes who spoke together against the tyranny of the United States emerged the voice of the *demos* of a global community. Perhaps this proclamation has turned out to be a bit optimistic, but still the irony of imposing democracy from above is clear. Such a politics may give rise to a democratic uprising, but it's not the democracy that the powers-that-be had in mind.

The apologists for the invasion of Iraq continue to claim to fight the forces of evil and to have moral right on their side. It may be that the cold war is over, but the new world system is also bipolar, Thomas Friedman and others insist in order to justify their norm-imposing imperial discourse: "instead of being divided between East and West, it is divided between the World of Order and the World of Disorder" (*PD*, 11). Friedman's imperial discourse may be a toned-down version of Samuel Huntington's 1993 article "The Clash of Civilizations?" As the cold war gave way to the culture wars, Huntington wrote, "[i]t is my hypothesis that the

fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind . . . will be cultural."[20] But if Friedman lacks the cheap melodrama of the clash of civilizations, his discourse nonetheless disguises a fact: there is a single major actor on the world stage, and that actor refuses all restraint. Given that our days are limited (think China and India), it might be wise to join with other nations to lay down some international rules for restraint. And in fact Ignatieff seems to have something like this in mind.

But for Ignatieff, it is not unrivaled power but the cheap use of power that finally concerns him. "After 1991 and the collapse of the Soviet empire, American presidents thought they could have imperial domination on the cheap, ruling the world without putting in place any new imperial architecture—new military alliances, new legal institutions, new international development organisms—for a postcolonial . . . world," he writes (*B*, 53). Ignatieff shares the concern for a multilateralism and an internationalism that neopragmatists have carried forward from the cold war days. "Putting the United States at the head of a revitalized United Nations is a huge task. . . . Yet it needs to be understood that the alternative is empire: a muddled, lurching America policing an ever more resistant world alone, with former allies sabotaging it at every turn. . . . Pax Americana must be multilateral, as Franklin Roosevelt realized, or it will not survive," Ignatieff writes in the fall of 2003 as the postwar chaos in Iraq began to threaten greater danger to U.S. hegemony than the ousted tyrant.[21] To be sure, Ignatieff's neopragmatism takes a step in the right direction, but the perception of U.S. arrogance predates the post-9/11 mayhem; in fact it predates the collapse of the Soviet empire. The perception of arrogance has haunted what is called the American century, and Ignatieff's gracious offer for the United States to head the United Nations is not going to make this perception go away, not at least any time soon.

Aristotle contrasted legitimate and illegitimate regimes of power based on whether they aimed for the moderate social life that he termed "friendship."[22] A United States–led alliance of nations with or without the former imperial powers of Old Europe does not constitute the moderate life that he had in mind. He explains ostracism as the banishing of men or cities of outstanding influence (1284a17). Cities of such excellence and ambition may be humbled by other cities "made presumptuous by memories of having once had an empire themselves" (1284a17). One may protect oneself from the politics of leveling that hubris invokes by forming stronger alliances, but it is a misunderstanding to assume that multilateral coalitions serve in themselves to preempt charges of arrogance. As Aristotle makes clear, perverted regimes arise from an "abundance of connections" as well as excesses of wealth or power (1284b22). Only true excellence can serve to legitimate the unbalanced rule of the few. But then who can legitimately claim such unqualified excellence? The assertion of the claim itself provides grounds for the charge of tyranny. When has power ever exerted restraints on itself? It is "better policy," as Aristotle remarks, "to begin by ensuring that there shall be no people of outstanding eminence, than first to allow them to arise and then to attempt a remedy afterwards" (1302b5).

It is a mistake to understand the struggle against Westernism and its arrogance in the terms of the extremists who concocted the terror of September 11th. But the aftermath of 9/11 should sound an alarm for those lured by any new romance with American exceptionalism. The old claim that the United States escaped the class warfare of Europe and its subsequent flirtation with Marxism, reasserted recently by Richard Rorty, downplays the nation's original dependence on slave labor and the violent politics of race.[23] Today as our corporations move their sites of production overseas, our nation continues to depend upon cheap labor and natural resources from disenfranchised populations. Under the conditions of developing countries' neocolonial dependency on rich nations such as the United States, it is difficult to claim for the United States the status of a uniquely moral empire or, as Ignatieff prefers, liberal leadership. A simple return to the multilateralism of the Clinton era does not suffice to foster the kind of friendship that world stability would demand.

This is because any liberal defense of an American empire, with or without its expensive alliances, is in fact not even liberal, at least not if by liberal we mean to include a system of checks and balances that establishes firm limits on power. Ralph Ellison restates and appropriately radicalizes the liberal suspicion of power in the ancient idiom of tragedy as he tracks the psychic and social imbalances of white supremacy in race-torn America: "If the philosopher's observation that absolute power corrupts absolutely was also true, then an absolute power based on mere whiteness made a deification of madness."[24] The tragic echo of the terror of hubris may not be audible in American culture, but it is not absent either.

The romance of America as the moral center of a new world order blinds us to the ambiguity of the moral status of any unbalanced power in a unipolar world. Beware of your enemy, echoes an ancient claim, for your enemy is who you are destined to become. Even before 9/11, dissident voices were asking rather pointedly if "globalization and the political discourse of terrorism [share] a common root in fundamentalism . . . [for they] respectively hegemonize the markets and religion with limited participation from other sources?"[25] As the United States, now armed with

the doctrine of preemptive strike, prepares to face off with one evil enemy after another, voices around the world can be overheard pondering how to balance the demands of one kind of tyrant with another. Is there any way out of this uncanny hall of mirrors?

International capitalism penetrates every facet of culture and politics on a scale that is global. Some internationalists speculate that capitalism in one form or another might very well upstage even such a powerful nation-state as the United States. If so, U.S. nationalism no less than religious fundamentalism is doomed to be an ineffective if persistent reassertion of symbolic power against the neoliberal onslaught of capital. The romance of the American empire would be just another defensive shield against the demise of the nation-state, as reactionary as any other identity politics, in the face of the transnational meltdown of global capital.

Still Ignatieff gives us reasons to think that nationalism is not a thing of the past even if it is not the sole force on the world scene. He contrasts the "postmilitary and postnational" identity sought by European countries with the United States, which has remained "a nation in which flag, sacrifice and martial honor are central to national identity" (*B*, 50). If it seemed as though neoliberalism would render American-style nationalism a relic of the past, "Sept. 11 rubbed in the lesson that global power is still measured by military capability" (*B*, 50). At this time, only one nation possesses this kind of capability. For Ignatieff this means that the United States alone among nation-states is in the position to write the terms of the new world order.

Ignatieff's profound hope is that the United States will use its power to promote an international legal and economic system that protects a minimal list of basic human rights.[26] Prominent on the list are the classic liberal rights to free expression in speech and religion, property, and due process, or what Ignatieff's teacher Isaiah Berlin clarified as forms of "negative liberty" (*HR*, 57, 74). Following Berlin, he insists that these liberal rights protect individuals against the tyranny of families, churches, and organic communities. As Ignatieff admits, America's critics challenge the underlying individualism of liberalism as prejudicial against non-Western cultures and proclaim a proposal to universalize a particular conception of right as "arrogant" (*HR*, 92). But Ignatieff defends the minimal, liberal concept of right, and its underlying individualism, on the basis of its universal moral merit. His claim is that a list of rights that protect individuals from the tyranny of the family or community secures the greatest hope for freedom. He cannot imagine any better moral language for a global community than the liberal vision of negative freedom and the

individualism that this vision protects. And he wonders what proposal of moral right could be more free from arrogance than one that grants to each individual the agency to choose the life that is best for him- or herself.

Curiously, the kind of freedom of which Ignatieff speaks, the uprooting of the individual from the family, church, and state, can also be viewed as much as the effects of capitalism as of liberalism. If capitalism together with liberalism liberates individuals from authoritarian codes of meaning, it nonetheless produces its own blind power. In the eyes of the global community, however moral the intentions, an unchecked and unbalanced superpower already entails hubris, and this hubris unravels the social bonds that any minimal system of justice requires. The National Security Strategy pushes the logic of hubris one step further, daring to nihilate (borrowing Nietzsche's language) those who challenge American supremacy. Ignatieff warns against the patent arrogance of the Wolfowitz strategy, and he is right to do so. But he does not always seem to see the hubris that any assertion of a superpower status entails. However moral its intentions, the United States cannot escape the charge of hubris as long as it aims to occupy the position of an unrivaled world power. An unrivaled power constitutes a threat to the multitudes that compose the global community. The ancient democrats referred to any form of unrivaled power as tyranny, and they let it be known that for the sake of the community this kind of power must be brought down.

The Trick of Comedy

In *Upheavals of Thought*, Martha Nussbaum writes of a "characteristically American conjuring trick, turning tragedy into good news. . . . Does this determination to turn bad news into good show that . . . America . . . lack[s] a full-fledged sense of tragedy? If a full-fledged sense of tragedy entails giving up the hope that things can become better in this world, the answer to this question must be yes" (*UT*, 675–76). If Nussbaum is right, then how does this characteristically American conjuring trick work? And could it bring good news today?

Nussbaum refers us to the preface to the revised edition of *Fragility of Goodness* for further discussion.[27] While the preface does not elaborate directly upon the nature of comedy, it does give hints about how tragedy might be avoided. Her claims regarding tragedy in the preface have shifted significantly from the major arguments of the book itself. I shall recount her earlier and later views briefly in order to take them a bit further. Both

earlier and later arguments focus on the individual's vulnerability to external circumstances, obscuring the political ethics of hubris and the central role of social relationships for individual well-being.

Consider her early account of the two causes of tragedy. One typical cause of tragedy, Nussbaum explains, is bad luck. External circumstances can bring bad luck upon a basically good character. Her example is the somewhat rash but otherwise basically good character of Oedipus. The second cause of tragedy, according to Nussbaum, is hard choices forced on characters by external circumstances. For example, Antigone and Creon must choose between conflicting duties to family and state. In both kinds of tragedy, the audience feels fear and pity for noble characters who are not wicked and do not deserve to suffer.

Nussbaum's view of the tragic buttresses her modern liberal moral philosophy and neglects the communal context of ancient Greek tragedy. A partial clue to the communal context can be found in Aristotle's observation that tragedy enacts an ironic reversal of plot that turns friends into enemies. Aristotle himself does not develop the meaning of this ironic reversal at all and also indicates no interest in the role of hubris in tragic drama. However, his remarks on the tragic do point to the fact that the destruction of friendships is not incidental; the damage to friendships is part of the essence of tragedy. For a communal culture, the destruction of the web of connections leads to self-ruin. This is the meaning of tragic irony.

Following Aristotle, the early Nussbaum dismisses any claim that the noble protagonist of tragedy is hubristic on grounds that the audience would fail to identify with him or her. For Nussbaum, audience identification is important because it fosters the sympathy that she places at the center of a liberal moral education. A sympathetic response to the fallen characters prepares the audience to acknowledge a universal vulnerability to external circumstances. She consigns friendships to external conditions for individual well-being rather than including friendships as an intrinsic element of individual identity. Bad luck or a difficult decision can alienate friends, and we depend upon friendships and other external conditions for a full and happy life (*FG*, xiv, 387).

Choruses of classic tragedies such as Sophocles' *Oedipus* sing of bad luck, but more poignantly yet they warn of hubris. Listen to the chant of Sophocles' chorus: "Hubris breeds the tyrant, violent hubris, gorging, crammed to bursting with all that is overripe and rich with ruin—clawing up to the height, headlong pride crashes down the abyss—sheer doom! But the healthy strife that makes the city strong—I pray that god will never end that wrestling."[28] These are the lines that motivate the defense of

democratic moderation in Nietzsche's early philosophy. Nietzsche interprets this crime correctly as a provocation that disturbs the very friendships that sustain the self. Certainly, flashing forward to the provocations of an American empire, the loss of allies cannot be understood as a simple case of bad luck. The loss of friendships comes about as a direct effect of hubris. The loss of friendships is not a mere secondary effect of a hard life. The consequence of damage to others is a weakening of the self. It is characteristic of liberal theory to obscure this irony of tragic self-ruin.

In the newer preface to *Fragility of Goodness*, Nussbaum shifts the focus of her reading of tragedy from a moral to a political context. Now she argues that an Aristotelian appreciation of our common vulnerability to external conditions (including wealth, friends and family, honor and citizenship) articulates a liberal policy that goes beyond mere moral sympathy for bad luck. Reflections on tragedy support a full-fledged economic argument for the redistribution of wealth (*FG*, xxii).

Moreover, Nussbaum no longer interprets the aristocratic characters in ancient drama as basically good. Our sympathies are now viewed as turning against these characters in favor of the victims of their egregious power. Human tragedy does not come from bad luck per se so much as from "defective political arrangements," and these tragic circumstances are the result of "ignorance, greed, malice, and various other forms of badness" (*FG*, xxx). Her early work, she now believes, was too quick in its criticism of a Hegelian-style "synthesis" that would happily overcome bad political arrangements, including the clash of demands from the private and public spheres. As she explains, conflict between duties to family and career may make life difficult, but social policies might readjust the structure of employment to reflect the facts of family life. The trick of preempting tragedy, say of transforming the struggles of Antigone and Creon into a harmless battle of the sexes, is to set in place good social policies. "We must never forget that tragedies were vehicles of political deliberation and reflection at a sacred civic festival—in a city that held its empire as 'a tyranny' and killed countless innocent people," she writes (*FG*, xxxviii). The comic sensibility, or at least the optimistic mindset, of American life strives against such tragic vices as selfish ambition by cultivating both moral sympathy and structural change.

Nussbaum's new reflections take us far but still fall short of the dialectic of hubris that tragedy portends. This tragic dialectic renders what might otherwise be interpreted as a banal vice, such as vanity or greed, into the terrifying madness that hubris unleashes. Hubris, unlike any simple vice, does not just happen to leave the protagonist alone and without friends. Hubris names an assault on the web of friendships that con-

stitutes who we are. The consequences of destruction on self and others can be horrifying.

Does the logic of hubris carry any force in the contemporary world? No doubt, the dialectic of tragic recoil seems to be of little relevance for a republic that not only takes itself to be immune from the old logic of Europe but also thinks of itself as disconnected from the rest of the world, disconnected even from its own past. But September 11th and its disconcerting aftermath should have changed all that. Our new world should give us some glimmer of awareness that U.S. policies abroad will sooner or later boomerang to have consequences here at home. Moral sympathy and generous American liberal institutions are good, but they are not enough. (We shall return to the virtue of an "understanding heart" in our final chapter in the context of a discussion of irony.) A political ethics for a world that is in fact defined by interdependence and not independence (or what Nussbaum defends as the ontological separatism of liberal individualism) profits from a deeper understanding of the communal context of ancient theater than Nussbaum's liberalism allows.

Nussbaum interprets the demands of social justice entirely within the parameters of liberal individualism. Without an understanding of the social ontology of interdependence, it is difficult to grasp the impact of hubris. Perhaps it is not surprising then that liberals, however well-intentioned, remain vulnerable to charges of arrogance from all over the world. The offer of the stronger to help the weaker by imposing liberal values just does not suffice. Neither nations nor individuals can claim to stand alone, and yet liberalism relegates social interdependence to background conditions for self-flourishing. As a consequence, liberalism misses the symbolic gestures of domination (including forms of cultural imperialism) that can accompany even its most sincere moral claims. Nor does liberalism give serious consideration to the dependencies of strong nations on weaker ones (today we might think of the importance of oil for the over-industrialized nations or the reparations owed by Europe and the United States to the colonized) and the dialectical ironies that these dependencies portend.

The choruses of ancient tragedy represented the communal cry of the *demos* against hubris and the cycles of rage and terror that this crime would provoke. This old language of hubris translates across cultures and nation-states and provides elements of an ethics for a global community, what Schell calls "the will of the world." But then is the United States doomed to be the scapegoat for this re-emerging logic? Is there in American culture any basis for joining our voice with, and not against, the multitudes? Any distinctly American wisdom that might allow us to stand with, and not against, an emerging global community?

A headline in a *New York Times Magazine* article written just after the Iraq invasion reads, "My French neighbors like 'Rugrats' and Tex-Mex. It's our soul they don't want to import."[29] Tex-Mex is delicious, but it is the French fascination with American comedy that is interesting in our context. Nussbaum has claimed that ancient tragedy offers a liberal moral education about liberal virtues, especially generosity. Nietzsche, influenced by the dialectical thought of Hegel, encourages us to extend the lesson beyond liberal virtues to a tale about hubris and the irony of power. Might we not find some corresponding wisdom in mainstream American comedy, a genre that otherwise seems to exhibit nothing more than our passive delight in easy-to-consume pleasures? Might the American preference for the apparent superficialities of the comic demeanor open a deeper perspective on freedom and democracy that could revitalize our sense of who we are, one that could steer us away from the hubris of the flag-waving, honor-seeking nation-state or even of downward-looking liberal sympathy and toward a pleasure-loving social ethic of freedom? The *New York Times* article alludes to what our alienated European allies like and do not like about American culture: "[T]hey don't want to be American, because being American implies to them a willful amnesia, a loss of familial and societal ties," the author writes. Our comedies are popular abroad, while our liberal individualism and our neoliberal values are not. But then do our comedies reveal a larger vision of America, one that unmasks our high-flying moral rhetoric and rigid individualism—preempting tragic hubris through self-humbling laughter?

Rugrats is typical of American comedy, a genre that, Northrop Frye explains, portrays a society controlled by types of bondage transformed to one of "pragmatic freedom."[30] "Comedy usually moves toward a happy ending, and the normal response of the audience to a happy ending is 'this should be,' which sounds like a moral judgment. So it is, except that it is not moral in the restricted sense, but social," Frye observes (*AC*, 167). Comedy does not employ bipolar moral discourse that opposes good and evil, lest it risk its humor. But if American comedy offers a romantic vision of things, not as they are or ought to be, but as they should be, what is the pragmatic freedom that this broader vision portrays? What is this sense of things as they should be?

Two Concepts of Social Freedom, One Tragic, One Comic

The aftermath of September 11th brought conservative and liberal strategists to reconsider John Adams's famous warning whether in becoming an empire the United States risks losing her soul as a republic. As the country

comes to terms with its vulnerability to external forces, the model of the enclosed nation-state (with its illusion of separatism and self-sufficiency) has given way to the moral (i.e., naively self-righteous) claims of a liberal empire (needing oil). Of course, any project for American hegemony, even one that works through alliances, is going to be perceived by those who are excluded from its circle of power as hubris and may fuel what the Pentagon now calls "blowback." Hence the need for a third model of the nation-state, one that rests on interdependence in a global community. This third model would avoid imperialism's rhetoric of good and evil and would heed voices wary of arrogance and liberal empires. The comic element of U.S. culture offers us some glimpse into this alternative political ethics, one that deflates the arrogance of moralizing perspectives. The classic liberal conception of freedom as one version or another of independence does not address what a more full-bodied freedom might mean for a partner in the global community. Popular comedy, oddly enough, does.

At the beginning of the cold war, Berlin contrasted two concepts of freedom that continue to frame American moral and political thought and yet fail to capture what is at stake in global politics (*EL*). The first concept, "negative" freedom, anchors standard American liberalism. Berlin locates this freedom as an answer to the question " 'What is the area within which the subject . . . is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do without interference by other persons?' " (*EL*, 121). The second concept, "positive" freedom, "is involved in the answer to the question 'What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that' " (*EL*, 121–22). Berlin traces back this second concept to Kant's notion of rational autonomy. The Kantian notion severs from the empirical self an ideal self. For continental thinkers who came after Kant, including Hegel and Marx, this ideal self could be liberated only in a rational society. Such a society, Berlin warned, may open the door to the dangers of communist, nationalist, authoritarian, or totalitarian creeds.

While Berlin's cold war–era essay is focused on defending liberalism against the authoritarian dangers of this second concept of freedom, he ends the essay with a truncated discussion of a third concept of freedom. Berlin points out that the central aims of anti-colonial and nationalist movements have never been properly addressed by the first and second concepts of freedom. In response to these movements, a third freedom emerges, one that, Berlin insists, is not truly a quest for liberty or even equality, but a struggle for status and honor. More recently, since the culture wars of the 1990s, multiculturalists have reinterpreted this third

freedom (via Hegel) in terms of the politics of recognition. Berlin's neglected remarks on the third freedom shed light on these contemporary debates.

Berlin explains that positive and negative conceptions may acknowledge our interaction with others, but "I am a social being in a deeper sense. . . . For am I not what I am, to some degree, in virtue of what others think and feel me to be?" (*EL*, 155). "I desire to be understood and recognized, even if this means to be unpopular and disliked. And the only persons who can so recognize me . . . are the members of the society to which, historically, morally, economically, and perhaps ethnically, I feel that I belong," a society in which I am "recognized as a man and a rival" (*EL*, 156, 157). "It is this desire for reciprocal recognition that leads the most authoritarian democracies to be, at times, consciously preferred by its members to the most enlightened oligarchies"(*EL*, 157). Berlin notes that this third concept, really a hybrid notion, is referred to as "social freedom." It is "akin to what Mill called 'pagan self-assertion' " but extended beyond the individual to the personality of a class, group, or nation (*EL*, 160). Berlin suggests that this concept is involved in the question of "who is to govern us?" and he observes that the focus of this freedom is on assaults on social identity that are experienced as insults. "It is the non-recognition of this psychological and political fact . . . that has, perhaps, blinded some contemporary liberals" (*EL*, 162).

Liberals may aim less to be tragically blind to these social forces than to maintain a degree of autonomy if not anonymity from conventional norms of honor and status. Nussbaum, for example, explicitly warns against the illiberal pursuit of honor and wealth, and she emphasizes the importance of valorizing the individual choice instead.[31] As we have said, she rests her liberalism on an ontological commitment to the existence of separate individuals, and she opposes this liberal ontology rather sharply to any romantic view that subordinates the individual to an organic whole (*SS*, 10). What such a sharp opposition misses is a rich third alternative. However much Nussbaum addresses the importance of friendship for individual flourishing, her characterization of friendships as "external goods" and her portrayal of the social realm as a locus of dependency, neediness, and vulnerability (all forms of the devalued heteronomy) leave individual autonomy as our first and foremost moral and political value. This view fails to bring to the foreground of discussion the intersubjective realm where vital, complex, and troubled dimensions of the social being take root, and where a progressive theory of social freedom might be worked out. Compare Berlin's claim that the aims of nationalist and post-

colonial peoples are thoroughly heteronomous and threaten true liberty (*EL*, 156). Excluded from liberal theory is a third possibility for the free life beyond liberalism's autonomy/heteronomy dichotomy.

In an essay called "Home," Toni Morrison writes of concerns for "legitimacy, authenticity, community, and belonging" that motivate many of the narratives of freedom in American slave and post-slavery society. At first glance, these concerns for belonging would seem to recall the struggle for recognition that Berlin finds in nationalist projects, but in fact they diverge. As Morrison reflects upon her own literary project *Paradise*, a novel that juxtaposes two kinds of communities, one that is black nationalist and male-dominated in its inclinations, and the other that is not, she writes of the need to transform the "anxiety of belonging" away from the dangerous moral psychology of honor and revenge to more forgiving "discourses about home" (*HB*, 5). She wonders if "[black] figurations of nationhood and identity are . . . as raced themselves as the [white] racial house that defined them" and if there is not another image of the "world-as-home" (*HB*, 11).

Of course, since Homer's *Odyssey*, finding home has defined the center of comedy. But could the metaphor of home have any significant political value (that is, apart from the nationalist one that Morrison eschews)? Morrison offers another glimpse into the political meaning of the metaphor by drawing our attention to a popular misreading of her novel *Beloved*, one that "works at a level a bit too shallow" (*HB*, 7). The penultimate line of the novel ends with the word "kiss"; it is this word that she suspects may cloud the novel's driving force. She explains: "The driving force of the narrative is not love, or the fulfillment of physical desire. The action is driven by necessity, something that precedes love, follows love, informs love, shapes it, and to which love is subservient. In this case the necessity was for connection, acknowledgment, a paying out of homage still due" (*HB*, 7). The repetition of the word "necessity" indicates a drive that is not a choice because it is not an option. Some vague notion of belonging characterizes a vital human need.

Morrison understands the web of connections that define us in part through a sense of debt to the past, and for an African American writer, this includes unknowable ancestors and their unspeakable pathos. The term "home" names better than love or compassion the sense of connection that is for Morrison both spiritual and selfish and that compels the individual to encounter sources of meaning outside the self that also lie within. In its final pages, *Paradise* turns from bleak tragedy to a vision of "going home" that is almost comedy (and that invites comparisons with Dante's third part of *Divine Comedy*). "There is nothing to beat this

solace . . . of reaching age in the company of the other" the narration ends.[32] That is paradise.

Liberalism's individualism makes it difficult to understand the need for connection, acknowledgment, or homage still due as core political concepts. Standard political discourse with its socially minimalist rhetoric too readily flattens these needs to forms of security. In contrast, romantic comedy opens beyond liberal political dichotomies of autonomy versus heteronomy, the individual versus authority, or independence versus dependence, toward a more complex meaning of a free life. To be sure, like liberalism, comedies deflate the conventional values of status and honor and the political battles that ensue. But rather than cultivating a stoic indifference to the heteronomous claims, romantic comedy engages the free life through comedy's presiding genius, Eros (cf. *AC*, 181).

Interestingly, Patricia Hill Collins enlists the term "eros" to characterize the force that is at stake for women in the African American community.[33] In *Fighting Words*, Collins defines as a "visionary pragmatism" a theory of justice that fosters an "intense connectedness," and she cites Morrison's novel *Beloved* as exemplary (*FW*, 188). To develop the novel's central theme, she draws upon the classic essay by Audre Lorde, "The Uses of the Erotic."[34] Oppressive racial systems, Collins writes, "function by controlling the 'permission for desire'—in other words, by harnessing the energy of fully human relationships to the exigencies of domination" (*BFT*, 182). It is this specific concept of oppression that Collins finds in *Beloved*. For the characters of Morrison's novel, "freedom from slavery meant not only the absence of capricious masters . . . but . . . the power to 'love anything you chose' " (*BFT*, 166).

But then how can we conceptualize the novel's vision of freedom? Lorde's essay offers two elements. First, Lorde locates at the core of the person not the cognitive and individual capacity for self-reflection, but a libidinal capacity for creative work and meaningful social bonds. In contrast with the Freudian view of the erotic as fully sexual, Lorde explains, "the very word *erotic* comes from the Greek word *Eros* . . . personifying creative power" (*SO*, 55). A liberal theory typically focuses on the damage that oppression does to the capacity to reflect and make viable choices for oneself; and oppression can and does inflict this kind of harm. But, of course, oppression also sharpens critical insight into fundamental choices. Lorde focuses on assaults on the erotic core of the person. Oppression may render the individual unable to feel properly, and it is this emotional incapacity that defines for Lorde the salient political threat.

A second contrast concerns the direction of the psyche. The liberal view valorizes the capacity to turn inward and reflect upon motives and

beliefs. Lorde does not take this capacity lightly, but alters its focus to the growth that begins, and culminates, in relationships. The idea of expanding the self by turning outward appears throughout American visions of individuality, including John Dewey and W. E. B. Du Bois as well as Morrison. In *Beloved,* Morrison describes love through the image of a turtle able to stretch its head outside its shell, or defensive "shield" (*BE,* 105). As Lorde explains, the Greek term "eros" names not a turn inward, but a centrifugal pull of the self outward. The individual grows with, not in reflective distance from, the community.

Lorde's poetic essay on erotic drive takes us some way toward understanding the visionary pragmatism of U.S. culture and its multidimensional quest for freedom. Still, the ethic of eros will strike the liberal defender of autonomy as overly sentimental, and in part for good reason. As we have seen, Morrison herself cautions against overemphasizing the importance of love in her novel. Lorde's essay, written in the cultural climate of the 1970s, articulates libidinal sources of selfhood, but does not lay out in full the sense of connection that defines the center of Morrison's work. The driving force of the narrative is not love, Morrison notes, or at least not the "fulfillment of physical desire" (*BE,* 7). The driving force of the novel is not love but precedes love. In Morrison's *Beloved,* Collins glosses freedom as "the power to 'love anything you chose' "; but Morrison had not written the word "power." Morrison's text reads: "a place where you could love anything you chose . . . *that* was freedom" (*BE, 105*). Instead of power, and indeed, what might be reduced to an individual capacity, she had written of freedom as though it were a place, a haunted but necessary place.

We can understand the connections that Morrison's characters enjoyed and suffered in terms having less to do with the sublimation of libidinal desire, as Lorde's essay would suggest, than with a sense of responsive connection with the past as well as the present and the future. Place as a web of belonging names what a people in diaspora may most of all seek.

A liberal conception of autonomy acknowledges that social relations play a role in individual well-being, but consigns them to the background, as props for the care of the self-reflective subject. The primary focus of the liberal subject is on a first-person narrative of self-ownership. A larger pragmatist vision (pragmatist in Frye's sense) focuses on social entanglements and unfolds in a drama of relationships. Relationships move to the foreground of the plot.

In order to capture the "intense connectedness," we might re-name the

force that drives Morrison's narrative "social eros." The term fits with Morrison's reference to ancient Greek and African cultures to articulate the American sensibility that she explores. She explains that a "large part of the satisfaction I have always received from reading Greek tragedy, for example, is in its similarity to Afro-American communal structures (the function of song and chorus, the heroic struggle between the claims of community and individual hubris) and African religion and philosophy."[35]

But if social eros were to replace autonomy on the central axis of normative theory, then what term best names the harm that oppression does? Morrison meditates on the "the concept of racial superiority," and she describes this concept as "a moral outrage within the bounds of man to repair" (*UU,* 39). "Moral outrage" is a common translation for the Greek term "hubris." In "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," she points out that the struggles of the community against hubris often define the plot of tragic drama. In Greek tragedy, it may be the function of the chorus (representing the *demos,* or common people) to warn against hubris. Not surprisingly, Morrison lists as characteristic of black art: "the real presence of a chorus. Meaning the community."[36]

Aristotle defined hubris as an "insult," or "a form of slighting, since it consists in doing and saying things that cause shame to the victim . . . simply for the pleasure involved. . . . The cause of the pleasure thus enjoyed by the insolent man is that he thinks himself greatly superior to others when ill-treating them."[37] Today in the context of both domestic and international politics, we might think of hubris as an act of arrogance, or a crime of humiliation, and understand its perverse pleasure as what those who are morally righteous sometimes seek. The ancient Greek *demos* established codes against hubris and invoked these codes in an effort to control the elites. Morrison returns to ancient sources of democracy through her interest in classical tragedy, but she does not take as central to society the values of honor and status, and the contests in which these stakes were claimed. But if we join with liberal theorists to disparage the culture of honor, we might nonetheless re-engage a vision of the free life that classic comedy relates. Morrison's romantic vision of a home reinvents the meaning of democracy—and of what one might call, after Berlin, a new type of social freedom. The central axis of ethical discourse does not turn around the poles of autonomy and heteronomy. Morrison's focus is on neither liberal independence nor nationalist struggles for honor and recognition. Morrison's central focus is on the acknowledgment of friendships and communities, the outrageous acts that tear these bonds apart, and the comic wisdom that allows for their repair. If the comic mindset

frames a prevailing American conception of freedom, then this mindset might be mined for something more than its form alone. From the comic vision, we might find a political ethics of eros and hubris that represents the field of force that Morrison calls home. In the next chapter we anchor this dream called home in the visionary pragmatism of Cornel West.

TWO

Laughing to Keep from Crying

Cornel West, Pragmatism, and Progressive Comedy

It isn't easy synthesizing the work of the master synthesizer, Cornel West. Cornel West's glimpse into life is as wide and deep as his roots in music and religion. His evangelical message of hope, the syncopated rhythms of unexpected joy against the unyielding absurd, have earned him the title of the blues man of philosophy, jazz king of thought. I may contort the vision of this jazz thinker, this blues preacher, beyond his comprehension, perhaps in the manner of white musicians who, as West remarks, divert the sublime rhythms of the jazz tradition into the easy lyricism of swing.[1] I can only defend myself by stealing a line from that wise councilor (played by West) in *Matrix Reloaded* (Andy Wachowski and Larry Wachowski, 2003): "Comprehension is not requisite for cooperation."[2] And in fact, as you shall see, comprehension turns out to be less important than cooperation in what I have to say.

Now it may sound as though I am mocking Cornel West's fine work, but in fact I take his work quite seriously. As author no less than scholar of wisdom literature, Cornel West struggles against the sweet truths that veil the dark ones. From a melancholic sojourn of thought emerges a voice