

The Evil of Banality

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Perhaps the most repellent character in Joseph Heller's hilarious novel, *Good as Gold*, is one Maxwell Lieberman, the editor of a small, pretentious, once liberal now neoconservative monthly, a man who eats greedily with both hands, a New York Jewish intellectual whose sole literary output is a series of autobiographies celebrating his own life and thought. I have no way of knowing what Norman Podhoretz's eating habits are. But Podhoretz is a New York Jewish intellectual, the longtime editor of the pretentious, once liberal now neoconservative monthly *Commentary*, and a man whose most visible literary output consists of autobiographical volumes celebrating his own career.

Podhoretz's first autobiography was the notorious *Making It*, with its title and content proudly proclaiming its author the intellectual's Sammy Glick, a man who pushed and elbowed his way upward from the ranks to what passes for fame and fortune. In *Breaking Ranks*, the latest installment of his self-anointment, Podhoretz hails his own high courage in abandoning liberalism in the early 1960s for a then fashionable radicalism, and later swinging back to his current neoconservative stance. Podhoretz and his publisher have indeed managed to redefine the concept of "courage," for which the publisher's blurb expects his readers to be eternally grateful. Yeah. The high courage that it took our martyr to publish Paul Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd* in 1960, and then by 1970 to join with his neoconservative friends at the pinnacle of the New York literary and political establishment: to join with Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, with his associate editor Milton Himmelfarb, with Milton's sister Gertrude Himmelfarb Kristol, and with Milton's brother-in-law Irving Kristol, editor of the *Public Interest* and the man proudly proclaimed by his friends to be the "godfather" of the neoconservative movement.

But Podhoretz has not only redefined the concept of courage. By his very rise to preeminence in the intellectual world he has managed to change the meaning of the word "intellectual" as well. For, let us face it, this is a dumb book, a stupid book. In nearly four hundred pages of lowbrow blather, of plodding puffery, of idle humorless chitchat, and petty bickering and backbiting there is scarcely a single idea or

expression of thought. Instead, we find out what parties Podhoretz went to and what parties he gave. And amidst the descriptions of the endless social round, a central purpose shines through: to show how many important people Podhoretz has known, how he has rubbed elbows with people he, at least, considers great. And to show, too, in various clumsy and unsubtle ways, how the greats didn't really measure up to him and to his standards, and how he personally contributed an important slice of whatever worthwhile things they managed to do. Altogether a sleazy, smarmy performance.

When Podhoretz does attempt to tackle an idea, the self-serving again takes over. An example is the way he handles the famous controversy between F. R. Leavis and C. P. Snow on literature as against technology:

F.R. Leavis, with whom I had studied for three years at Cambridge and who had influenced my own thinking about literature more than anyone else, launched the most savage attack... Snow, at the time a fairly close friend, grew bitter.... Certainly, as a student of literature at major universities both in America and England, I had emerged after seven years of intensive reading, largely under the guidance of those very two men, with an idea about the literary tradition very close to Snow's.... I remembered him [Leavis] wince in ostentatious distaste whenever the sound of an airplane or an automobile penetrated into his garden at Cambridge.

One wonders if distaste at airplane noise in his garden really implies, as Podhoretz insists, that Leavis hated all of industrial civilization; one wonders, even more, what Leavis or Snow thought of his alleged disciple.

Part of Podhoretz's self-proclaimed courage was his breaking with the radicals by the end of the 1960s. It was then that Podhoretz stood brave and tall against what he calls the radical "terror." But when he gets down to it, what he *means* by terror is, for instance, the fact that Norman Mailer – of course a great and good friend – after telling Podhoretz that he would write a favorable review of *Making It*, for *Partisan Review*, actually blasted the book. What are we to make of a man whose concept of "terror" is getting a bad write-up in *Partisan Review*? To Podhoretz, this shift in Mailer's attitude conclusively demonstrates the radical terror at work. Mailer's own explanation for his change of mind on rereading the book is brusquely dismissed; not even considered is the even more likely explanation that Mailer was simply being polite to Podhoretz in the first place.

To the extent that Podhoretz's ideological goals extend beyond his own navel, they rest fully and squarely in his own ethnic group. Explicitly and unabashedly, Podhoretz assumes ideological positions "on the basis of the old question 'Is it good for the Jews?'" Not for Podhoretz the older, broader, but presumably namby-pamby ideal of the intellectual as citizen of the world. And so, Podhoretz opposes

affirmative action, not on the basis of justice, but because it would be bad for the (male) Jews. His foreign policy is grounded on an all-out and unmitigated support for the state of Israel, which he identifies with the cause of Jewry. A foreign policy of nonintervention is attacked, not on the basis of moral principle or even of American security, but because it "represented a direct threat to the security of Israel."

Podhoretz seems not to have given a thought to the fact that *Breaking Ranks* is bad for the Jews. For what if American non-Jews, who are after all in the vast majority, begin to gauge foreign policy on the basis of the question: Is it good for the gentiles? By confirming the worst fears of overriding loyalty to the state of Israel, *Breaking Ranks* can hardly fail to harm Podhoretz's own cause. But we do have the consolation that few people outside of his circle of back-stabbing friends will bother to read this book.

In short, what Podhoretz has plenty of is neither courage nor intellect butchutzpah. Thechutzpah, for example, to talk about his "radical" phase in the 1960s, which consisted mainly of opposing the Vietnam War, not of course on moral grounds, but because we weren't going to win – it was "the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time." And thechutzpah to sneer at another of his great and good friends, the late Hannah Arendt, for being excessively pro-German and, by implication, just a bit anti-Semitic. It is characteristic of Podhoretz that in telling his tale of disagreement with Arendt he should say that the two of them, in a public debate, "spent most of our time on arcane philosophical questions." Sure. I personally would have gone a long way to hear this pretentious nerd instruct Hannah Arendt in the niceties of Husserl's philosophy of meaning.

One of the themes of the book is Podhoretz's attack on the narcissism of the New Left and of the current Me Decade, a "plague" that "attack [s] the vital organs of the entire species, preventing men from fathering children and women from mothering them." Of course it never occurs to him that this very book is an exercise in narcissism more blatant than anything his opponents have ever come up with. At one point it does dimly enter Podhoretz's brain that the politics that *he* is promoting – the avid pursuit of narrow self-interest by such groups as labor unions and Jews – may also be attacked as selfishness and narcissism. A crucial point, which cuts to the heart of the Podhoretz world outlook.

His reply is instructive: His credo is not "a politics of selfishness" because "it is [being] pursued in the context of a pluralistic society like our own." Not only is this a whopping non sequitur, since pluralism in this sense is precisely the institutionalization of selfish greed and grab, but the Me Decade people are of course also pursuing their goals in the context of the self-same pluralist society. And so we are left with Podhoretz, when he rises from mindless chitchat to attempts at lucubration, demolished by his own hand. Since his final chapter is an attempt to psychoanalyze his opponents as really being consumed with suicidal self-hatred, the quick destruction by Podhoretz of his own thesis could be considered high irony – although the point is of course lost on the author himself; who is far more a plodding boob than a

tragic hero.

In fact, there is a still greater irony in the Podhoretz saga. He jabs at Arendt's concept of the "banality of evil," but his very own life demonstrates that Arendt was right. For Norman Podhoretz has not only fostered evil by his corrosion of true intellectual standards, his ethnic narcissism, and his promotion of the statist status quo; he also represents banality through and through. Were this a just society, Podhoretz would be spending his years as a writer for some AFL-CIO sheet, trotted out at union conventions as one of their resident intellectuals. As it is, we all have to put up with the continuing infliction of this schmendrick upon our consciousness, and we will have to begin to brace ourselves for the inevitable next installment of the living legend of Norman Podhoretz.