

AMELIORATING THE EFFECTS OF OUR HUMANITY

BY BOB ZASLAVSKY

What Juvenal said of early second century Rome is even truer today: "Difficile est saturam non scribere" ("It is difficult not to write satire"). (*Satires* I. 30). He meant that what was actually done and said was so bizarre that simply to record it and let it speak for itself was spontaneously satirical.

We see this around us on a daily basis. We see it in President Bush's blind and groundless optimism regarding, say, Iraq as it careens ever deeper into civil war. We see it in Rumsfeld's trotting out of the specter of Nazism whenever his back is against the wall. We see it in a press for which a "reader's digest" version of the news has replaced depth of realistic, contextualized coverage. We see it in Congress's attention to private lifestyle issues like gay marriage or practically irrelevant issues like flag burning to the detriment of any concern for the concrete public good. We see it in Gov. Sonny Perdue's celebration of Georgia's "meteoric" rise in relative state rankings of SAT scores from 50th to 46th, even though the scores themselves have declined.

And we see it most graphically in the inevitable knee-jerk responses to scientific and medical progress that affect the arena of human sexuality and procreation. In such responses, there is little coherence, consistency, knowledge, or rationality. Indeed, when it comes to our unalienable right to life, as the speaker in Yeats's "The Second Coming" says, "The best lack all conviction, while the worst/ Are full of passionate intensity." And frequently, the right to life of the unborn (unattached cell clusters) or undead (Terry Schiavo) trumps the right to life of the vibrantly alive.

The latest such issue to galvanize the apocalyptic visions of the busybodies who cloak themselves in the armor of guardians of faith and values is the FDA-approved over-the-counter availability of the Plan B emergency contraceptive pill. (Plan A, presumably, is safe, prudent, protected sex.)

The comments of those who react with horror to Plan B are typically filled with rhetorical questions implying that, again, we have come to the brink of the end of civilization as we know it. Of course, much to their consternation, civilization manages to muddle on even though we who are "human, all too human," as Nietzsche put it, do what humans have always done—namely, we behave thoughtlessly in moments of passion. And when we do, we look for ways to bail ourselves out of the dilemmas into which we have thrust ourselves. When we find a way, sometimes we learn from our own behavior. Sometimes we do not. But that is the price that we pay for our human immersion in the messiness of personal interaction and communication.

The opponents of expedients like Plan B have a solution: We must replace birth control with mind control, and then there will be utopia on earth. They often bolster their opinions with Biblical quotations (such as "be fruitful and multiply") ripped from their scriptural context. This is not new. As Anthonio in *The Merchant of Venice* says, "The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose." (I. iii. 102) And as Hamlet knew, "the devil hath power/ To assume a pleasing shape." (II. ii. 575-576) The self-proclaimed guardians of morality are such devils.

In other words, it is not the well-intentioned efforts of scientists trying to ameliorate our condition that heralds the end of civilization. Rather it is the domination of our public discourse by devils in saints' clothing.

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