Representations of the Intellectual

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ARE INTELLECTUALS a very large or an extremely small and highly selective group of people? Two of the most famous twentieth-century descriptions of intellectuals are fundamentally opposed on that point. Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist, activist, journalist and brilliant political philosopher who was imprisoned by Mussolini between 1926 and 1937, wrote in his Prison Notebooks that “all men are intellectuals, one could therefore say: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals.” Gramsci’s own career exemplifies the role he ascribed to the intellectual: a trained philologist, he was both an organizer of the Italian working-class movement and, in his own journalism, one of the most consciously reflective of social analysts, whose purpose was to build not just a social move-

ment but an entire cultural formation associated with the movement.

Those who do perform the intellectual function in society, Gramsci tries to show, can be divided into two types: first, traditional intellectuals such as teachers, priests, and administrators, who continue to do the same thing from generation to generation; and second, organic intellectuals, whom Gramsci saw as directly connected to classes or enterprises that used intellectuals to organize interests, gain more power, get more control. Thus, Gramsci says about the organic intellectual, “the capitalist entrepreneur creates alongside himself the industrial technician, the specialist in political economy, the organizers of a new culture, of a new legal system, etc.”2 Today’s advertising or public relations expert, who devises techniques for winning a detergent or airline company a larger share of the market, would be considered an organic intellectual according to Gramsci, someone who in a democratic society tries to gain the consent of potential customers, win approval, marshal consumer or voter opinion. Gramsci believed that organic intellectuals are actively involved in society, that is, they constantly struggle to change minds and expand markets; unlike teachers and priests, who seem more or less to remain in place, doing the same kind of work year in year out, organic intellectuals are always on the move, on the make.

At the other extreme there is Julien Benda’s celebrated definition of intellectuals as a tiny band of super-gifted and morally endowed philosopher-kings who constitute the conscience of mankind. While it is true that Benda’s treatise La trabison des clercs—The betrayal of the intellectuals—has lived in posterity more as a blistering attack on intellectuals who abandon their calling and compromise their principles than as a systematic analysis of intellectual life, he does in fact cite a small number of names and major characteristics of those whom he considered to be real intellectuals. Socrates and Jesus are frequently mentioned, as are more recent exemplars like Spinoza, Voltaire and Ernest Renan. Real intellectuals constitute a clerisy, very rare creatures indeed, since what they uphold are eternal standards of truth and justice that are precisely not of this world. Hence Benda’s religious term for them—clerics—a distinction in status and performance that he always counterposes against the laity, those ordinary human beings who are interested in material advantage, personal advancement, and, if at all possible, a close relationship with secular powers. Real intellectuals, he says, are “those whose activity is essentially not the pursuit of practical aims, all those who seek their joy in the practice of an art or a science or metaphysical speculation, in short in the possession of non-material advantages, and hence in a certain manner say: ‘My kingdom is not of this world.’ ”3

Benda’s examples, however, make it quite clear that he does not endorse the notion of totally disengaged, other

2 Ibid., p. 4.

worldly, ivory-towered thinkers, intensely private and devoted to abstruse, perhaps even occult subjects. Real intellectuals are never more themselves than when, moved by metaphysical passion and disinterested principles of justice and truth, they denounce corruption, defend the weak, defy imperfect or oppressive authority. “Need I recall,” he says, “how Fenelon and Massillon denounced certain wars of Louis XIV? How Voltaire condemned the destruction of the Palatinate? How Renan denounced the violations of Napoleon? Buckle, the intolerances of England toward the French Revolution? And, in our times, Nietzsche, the brutalities of Germany towards France?”

The trouble with today’s lot according to Benda is that they have conceded their moral authority to what, in a prescient phrase, he calls “the organization of collective passions” such as sectarianism, mass sentiment, nationalist belligerence, class interests. Benda was writing in 1927, well before the age of the mass media, but he sensed how important it was for governments to have as their servants those intellectuals who could be called on not to lead, but to consolidate the government’s policy, to spew out propaganda against official enemies, euphemisms and, on a larger scale, whole systems of Orwellian Newspeak, which could disguise the truth of what was occurring in the name of institutional “expediency” or “national honor.”

The force of Benda’s jeremiad against the betrayal of the intellectuals is not the subtlety of his argument, nor his quite impossible absolutism when it comes to his totally uncompromising view of the intellectual’s mission. Real intellectuals, according to Benda’s definition, are supposed to risk being burned at the stake, ostracized, or crucified. They are symbolic personages marked by their unyielding distance from practical concerns. As such therefore they cannot be many in number, nor routinely developed. They have to be thoroughgoing individuals with powerful personalities and, above all, they have to be in a state of almost permanent opposition to the status quo: for all these reasons Benda’s intellectuals are inevitably a small, highly visible group of men—he never includes women—whose stentorian voices and indelicate imprecations are hurled at humankind from on high. Benda never suggests how it is that these men know the truth, or whether their blinding insights into eternal principles might, like those of Don Quixote, be little more than private fantasies.

But there is no doubt in my mind at least that the image of a real intellectual as generally conceived by Benda remains an attractive and compelling one. Many of his positive, as well as negative, examples are persuasive: Voltaire’s public defense of the Calas family, for instance, or—at the opposite end—the appalling nationalism of French writers like Maurice Barrès, whom Benda credits with perpetuating a “romanticism of harshness and contempt” in the name of French national honor. Benda was spiritually

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1 In 1762 a Protestant merchant, Jean Calas of Toulouse, was judged, then executed for the alleged murder of his son, about to convert to Catholicism. The evidence was flimsy, yet what produced the speedy verdict was the widespread belief that Protestants were fanatics who simply did away with any other Protestant who wanted to convert. Voltaire led a
shaped by the Dreyfus Affair and World War One, both of them rigorous tests for intellectuals, who could either choose to speak up courageously against an act of anti-Semitic military injustice and nationalist fervor, or sheepishly go along with the herd, refusing to defend the unfairly condemned Jewish officer Alfred Dreyfus, chanting jingoist slogans in order to stir up war fever against everything German. After World War Two Benda republished his book, this time adding a series of attacks against intellectuals who collaborated with the Nazis as well as against those who were uncritically enthusiastic about the Communists. But deep in the combative rhetoric of Benda's basically very conservative work is to be found this figure of the intellectual as a being set apart, someone able to speak the truth to power, a crusty, eloquent, fantastically courageous and angry individual for whom no worldly power is too big and imposing to be criticized and pointedly taken to task.

Gramsci's social analysis of the intellectual as a person who fulfills a particular set of functions in the society is much closer to the reality than anything Benda gives us, particularly in the late twentieth century when so many new professions—broadcasters, academic professionals, computer analysts, sports and media lawyers, management consultants, policy experts, government advisers, authors of specialized market reports, and indeed the whole field of modern mass journalism itself—have vindicated Gramsci's vision.

Today, everyone who works in any field connected either with the production or distribution of knowledge is an intellectual in Gramsci's sense. In most industrialized Western societies the ratio between so-called knowledge industries and those having to do with actual physical production has increased steeply in favor of the knowledge industries. The American sociologist Alvin Gouldner said several years ago of intellectuals that they were the new class, and that intellectual managers had now pretty much replaced the old monied and propertied classes. Yet Gouldner also said that as part of their ascendancy intellectuals were no longer people who addressed a wide public; instead they had become members of what he called a culture of critical discourse. Each intellectual, the book editor and the author, the military strategist and the international lawyer, speaks and deals in a language that has become specialized and usable by other members of the same field, specialized experts addressing other specialized experts in a lingua franca largely unintelligible to unspecialized people.

Similarly, the French philosopher Michel Foucault has said that the so-called universal intellectual (he probably

6 La Trahison was republished by Bernard Grasset in 1946.  
had Jean-Paul Sartre in mind) has had his or her place taken by the “specific” intellectual, someone who works inside a discipline but who is able to use his expertise anyway. Here Foucault was thinking specifically of American physicist Robert Oppenheimer, who moved outside his specialist field when he was an organizer of the Los Alamos atomic bomb project in 1942-45 and later became a sort of commissar of scientific affairs in the U.S.

And the proliferation of intellectuals has extended even into the very large number of fields in which intellectuals—possibly following on Gramsci’s pioneering suggestions in The Prison Notebooks which almost for the first time saw intellectuals, and not social classes, as pivotal to the workings of modern society—have become the object of study. Just put the words “of” and “and” next to the word “intellectuals” and almost immediately an entire library of studies about intellectuals that is quite daunting in its range and minutely focused in its detail rises before our eyes. There are thousands of different histories and sociologies of intellectuals available, as well as endless accounts of intellectuals and nationalism, and power, and tradition, and revolution, and on and on. Each region of the world has produced its intellectuals and each of those formations is debated and argued over with fiery passion. There has been no major revolution in modern history without intellectuals; conversely there has been no major counterrevolutionary movement without intellectuals. Intellectuals have been the fathers and mothers of movements, and of course sons and daughters, even nephews and nieces.

There is a danger that the figure or image of the intellectual might disappear in a mass of details, and that the intellectual might become only another professional or a figure in a social trend. What I shall be arguing in these lectures takes for granted these late-twentieth-century realities originally suggested by Gramsci, but I also want to insist that the intellectual is an individual with a specific public role in society that cannot be reduced simply to being a faceless professional, a competent member of a class just going about her/his business. The central fact for me is, I think, that the intellectual is an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public. And this role has an edge to it, and cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them), to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose raison d’être is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug. The intellectual does so on the basis of universal principles: that all human beings are entitled to expect decent standards of behavior concerning freedom and justice from worldly powers or nations, and that deliberate or inadvertent vi-

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lations of these standards need to be testified and fought against courageously.

Let me put this in personal terms: as an intellectual I present my concerns before an audience or constituency, but this is not just a matter of how I articulate them, but also of what I myself, as someone who is trying to advance the cause of freedom and justice, also represent. I say or write these things because after much reflection they are what I believe; and I also want to persuade others of this view. There is therefore this quite complicated mix between the private and the public worlds, my own history, values, writings and positions as they derive from my experiences, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, how these enter into the social world where people debate and make decisions about war and freedom and justice. There is no such thing as a private intellectual, since the moment you set down words and then publish them you have entered the public world. Nor is there only a public intellectual, someone who exists just as a figurehead or spokesperson or symbol of a cause, movement, or position. There is always the personal inflection and the private sensibility, and those give meaning to what is being said or written. Least of all should an intellectual be there to make his/her audiences feel good: the whole point is to be embarrassing, contrary, even unpleasant.

So in the end it is the intellectual as a representative figure that matters—someone who visibly represents a standpoint of some kind, and someone who makes articulate representations to his or her public despite all sorts of barriers. My argument is that intellectuals are individuals with a vocation for the art of representing, whether that is talking, writing, teaching, appearing on television. And that vocation is important to the extent that it is publicly recognizable and involves both commitment and risk, boldness and vulnerability; when I read Jean-Paul Sartre or Bertrand Russell it is their specific, individual voice and presence that makes an impression on me over and above their arguments because they are speaking out for their beliefs. They cannot be mistaken for an anonymous functionary or careful bureaucrat.

In the outpouring of studies about intellectuals there has been far too much defining of the intellectual, and not enough stock taken of the image, the signature, the actual intervention and performance, all of which taken together constitute the very lifeblood of every real intellectual. Isaiah Berlin has said of nineteenth-century Russian writers that, partly under the influence of German romanticism, their audiences were “made conscious that he was on a public stage, testifying.” Something of that quality still adheres to the public role of the modern intellectual as I see it. That is why when we remember an intellectual like Sartre we recall the personal mannerisms, the sense of an important personal stake, the sheer effort, risk, will to say things about colonialism, or about commitment, or about social conflict that infuriated his opponents and galvanized his friends and perhaps even embarrassed him retrospectively. When we read about Sartre’s involvement

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with Simone de Beauvoir, his dispute with Camus, his remarkable association with Jean Genet, we situate him (the word is Sartre’s) in his circumstances; in these circumstances, and to some extent because of them, Sartre was Sartre, the same person who also opposed France in Algeria and Vietnam. Far from disabling or disqualifying him as an intellectual, these complications give texture and tension to what he said, expose him as a fallible human being, not a dreary and moralistic preacher.

It is in modern public life seen as a novel or drama and not as a business or as the raw material for a sociological monograph that we can most readily see and understand how it is that intellectuals are representative, not just of some subterranean or large social movement, but of a quite peculiar, even abrasive style of life and social performance that is uniquely theirs. And where better to find that role first described than in certain unusual nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century novels—Turgenev’s Fathers and Sons, Flaubert’s Sentimental Education, Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man—in which the representation of social reality is profoundly influenced, even decisively changed by the sudden appearance of a new actor, the modern young intellectual.

Turgenev’s portrait of provincial Russia in the 1860s is idyllic and uneventful: young men of property inherit their habits of life from their parents, they marry and have children, and life more or less moves on. This is the case until an anarchic and yet highly concentrated figure, Bazarov, erupts into their lives. The first thing we notice about him is that he has severed his ties with his own parents, and seems less a son than a sort of self-produced character, challenging routine, assailing mediocrity and clichés, asserting new scientific and unsentimental values that appear to be rational and progressive. Turgenev said that he refused to dip Bazarov in syrup; he was meant to be “coarse, heartless, ruthlessly dry and brusque.” Bazarov makes fun of the Kirsanov family; when the middle-aged father plays Schubert, Bazarov laughs loudly at him. Bazarov propounds the ideas of German materialist science: nature for him is not a temple, it is a workshop. When he falls in love with Anna Sergeyevna she is attracted to him, but also terrified: to her, his untrammelled, often anarchical intellectual energy suggests chaos. Being with him, she says at one point, is like teetering at the edge of an abyss.

The beauty and pathos of the novel is that Turgenev suggests, and portrays, the incompatibility between a Russia governed by families, the continuities of love and filial affection, the old natural way of doing things, and at the same time, the nihilistically disruptive force of a Bazarov, whose history, unlike that of every other character in the novel, seems to be impossible to narrate. He appears, he challenges, and just as abruptly, he dies, infected by a sick peasant whom he had been treating. What we remember of Bazarov is the sheer unremitting force of his quest and deeply confrontational intellect; and although Turgenev claimed to have believed he was his most sympathetic character, even he was mystified and to some extent stopped by Bazarov’s heedless intellectual force, as well as by his readers’ quite bewilderingly turbulent reactions. Some readers thought that Bazarov was an attack on youth; others
praised the character as a true hero; still others thought him dangerous. Whatever we may feel about him as a person, Fathers and Sons cannot accommodate Bazarov as a character in the narrative; whereas his friends the Kirsanov family, and even his pathetic old parents, go on with their lives, his peremptoriness and defiance as an intellectual lift him out of the story, unsuited to it and somehow not fit for domestication.

This is even more explicitly the case with Joyce's young Stephen Dedalus, whose entire early career is a seesaw between the blandishments of institutions like the church, the profession of teaching, Irish nationalism, and his slowly emerging and stubborn selfhood as an intellectual whose motto is the Luciferian non serviam. Seamus Deane makes an excellent observation about Joyce's Portrait of the Artist: it is, he says, "the first novel in the English language in which a passion for thinking is fully presented." Neither the protagonists of Dickens, nor Thackeray, nor Austen, nor Hardy, nor even George Eliot are young men and women whose major concern is the life of the mind in society, whereas for young Dedalus "thinking is a mode of experiencing the world." Deane is quite correct in saying that before Dedalus the intellectual vocation had only "grotesque embodiments" in English fiction. Yet in part because Stephen is a young provincial, the product of a colonial environment, he must develop a resistant intellectual consciousness before he can become an artist.

By the end of the novel he is no less critical and withdrawn from family and Fenians than he is from any ideological scheme whose effect would be to reduce his individuality and his often very unpleasant personality. Like Turgenev, Joyce pointedly enacts the incompatibility between the young intellectual and the sequential flow of human life. What begins as a conventional story of a young man growing up in a family, then moving on to school and university, decomposes into a series of elliptical jottings from Stephen's notebook. The intellectual will not adjust to domesticity or to humdrum routine. In the novel's most famous speech Stephen expresses what is in effect the intellectual's creed of freedom, although the melodramatic overstatement in Stephen's declaration is Joyce's way of undercutting the young man's pomposity: "I will tell you what I will do and what I will not do. I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use—silence, exile, and cunning."

Yet not even in Ulysses do we see Stephen as more than an obstinate and contrary young man. What is most striking in his credo is his affirmation of intellectual freedom. This is a major issue in the intellectual's performance since being a curmudgeon and a thoroughgoing wet blanket are hardly enough as goals. The purpose of the intellectual's activity is to advance human freedom and knowledge. This is still true, I believe, despite the often repeated charge that "grand narratives of emancipation and enlight-
enment,” as the contemporary French philosopher Lyotard calls such heroic ambitions associated with the previous “modern” age, are pronounced as no longer having any currency in the era of postmodernism. According to this view grand narratives have been replaced by local situations and language games; postmodern intellectuals now prize competence, not universal values like truth or freedom. I've always thought that Lyotard and his followers are admitting their own lazy incapacities, perhaps even indifference, rather than giving a correct assessment of what remains for the intellectual a truly vast array of opportunities despite postmodernism. For in fact governments still manifestly oppress people, grave miscarriages of justice still occur, the co-optation and inclusion of intellectuals by power can still effectively quieten their voices, and the deviation of intellectuals from their vocation is still very often the case.

In *The Sentimental Education* Flaubert expresses more disappointment with, and therefore a more merciless critique of, intellectuals than anyone. Set in the Parisian upheaval of 1848 to 1851, a period described by the famous British historian Lewis Namier as the revolution of the intellectuals, Flaubert’s novel is a wide-ranging panorama of bohemian and political life in “the capital of the nineteenth century.” At its center stand the two young provincials, Frédéric Moreau and Charles Deslauriers, whose exploits as young men-about-town express Flaubert’s rage at their inability to maintain a steady course as intellectuals. Much of Flaubert’s scorn for them comes from what is perhaps his exaggerated expectation of what they should have been. The result is the most brilliant representation of the intellectual adrift. The two young men start out as potential legal scholars, critics, historians, essayists, philosophers, and social theorists with public welfare as their goal. Moreau ends up “with his intellectual ambitions . . . dwindled. Years went by and he endured the idleness of his mind and the inertia of his heart.” Deslauriers becomes “director of colonization in Algeria, secretary to a pasha, manager of a newspaper, and an advertising agent; . . . at present he was employed as solicitor to an industrial company.”

The failures of 1848 are for Flaubert the failures of his generation. Prophetically, the fates of Moreau and Deslauriers are portrayed as the result of their own lack of focused will and also as the toll exacted by modern society, with its endless distractions, its whirl of pleasures, and, above all, the emergence of journalism, advertising, instant celebrity, and a sphere of constant circulation, in which all ideas are marketable, all values transmutable, all professions reduced to the pursuit of easy money and quick success. The novel’s major scenes are therefore organized symbolically around horse races, dances at cafés and bordellos, riots, processions, parades, and public meetings, in which Moreau tries ceaselessly to achieve love and intellectual fulfillment, but is continually deflected from doing so.

Bazarov, Dedalus, and Moreau are extremes of course, but they do serve the purpose, which is something panoramic realistic novels of the nineteenth century can do uniquely well, of showing us intellectuals in action,
beset with numerous difficulties and temptations, either maintaining or betraying their calling, not as a fixed task to be learned once and for all from a how-to-do-it manual but as a concrete experience constantly threatened by modern life itself. The intellectual's representations, his or her articulations of a cause or idea to society, are not meant primarily to fortify ego or celebrate status. Nor are they principally intended for service within powerful bureaucracies and with generous employers. Intellectual representations are the activity itself, dependent on a kind of consciousness that is skeptical, engaged, unremittingly devoted to rational investigation and moral judgment; and this puts the individual on record and on the line. Knowing how to use language well and knowing when to intervene in language are two essential features of intellectual action.

But what does the intellectual represent today? One of the best and most honest answers to this question was given, I think, by the American sociologist C. Wright Mills, a fiercely independent intellectual with an impassioned social vision and a remarkable capacity for communicating his ideas in a straightforward and compelling prose. He wrote in 1944 that independent intellectuals were faced either with a kind of despondent sense of powerlessness at their marginality, or with the choice of joining the ranks of institutions, corporations or governments as members of a relatively small group of insiders who made important decisions irresponsibly and on their own. To become the "hired" agent of an information industry is no solution either, since to achieve a relationship with audiences like Tom Paine's with his would therefore be impossible. In sum "the means of effective communication," which is the intellectual's currency, is thus being expropriated, leaving the independent thinker with one major task. Here is how Mills puts it:

The independent artist and intellectual are among the few remaining personalities equipped to resist and to fight the stereotyping and consequent death of genuinely living things. Fresh perception now involves the capacity to continually unmask and to smash the stereotypes of vision and intellect with which modern communications [i.e. modern systems of representation] swamp us. These worlds of mass-art and mass-thought are increasingly geared to the demands of politics. That is why it is in politics that intellectual solidarity and effort must be centered. If the thinker does not relate himself to the value of truth in political struggle, he cannot responsibly cope with the whole of live experience. 11

This passage deserves reading and rereading, so full of important signposts and emphases is it. Politics is everywhere; there can be no escape into the realms of pure art and thought or, for that matter, into the realm of disinterested objectivity or transcendental theory. Intellectuals are of their time, herded along by the mass politics of representations embodied by the information or media

industry, capable of resisting those only by disputing the images, official narratives, justifications of power circulated by an increasingly powerful media—and not only media but whole trends of thought that maintain the status quo, keep things within an acceptable and sanctioned perspective on actuality—by providing what Mills calls unmaskings or alternative versions in which to the best of one's ability the intellectual tries to tell the truth.

This is far from an easy task: the intellectual always stands between loneliness and alignment. How difficult it was during the recent Gulf War against Iraq to remind citizens that the U.S. was not an innocent or disinterested power (the invasions of Vietnam and Panama were conveniently forgotten by policy-makers), nor was it appointed by anyone except itself as the world's policeman. But this was, I believe, the intellectuals' task at the time, to unearth the forgotten, to make connections that were denied, to cite alternative courses of action that could have avoided war and its attendant goal of human destruction.

C. Wright Mills's main point is the opposition between the mass and the individual. There is an inherent discrepancy between the powers of large organizations, from governments to corporations, and the relative weakness not just of individuals but of human beings considered to have subaltern status, minorities, small peoples and states, inferior or lesser cultures and races. There is no question in my mind that the intellectual belongs on the same side with the weak and unrepresented. Robin Hood, some are likely to say. Yet it's not that simple a role, and therefore cannot be easily dismissed as just so much ro-

mantic idealism. At bottom, the intellectual, in my sense of the word, is neither a pacifier nor a consensus-builder, but someone whose whole being is staked on a critical sense, a sense of being unwilling to accept easy formulas, or ready-made clichés, or the smooth, ever-so-accommodating confirmations of what the powerful or conventional have to say, and what they do. Not just passively unwillingly, but actively willing to say so in public.

This is not always a matter of being a critic of government policy, but rather of thinking of the intellectual vocation as maintaining a state of constant alertness, of a perpetual willingness not to let half-truths or received ideas steer one along. That this involves a steady realism, an almost athletic rational energy, and a complicated struggle to balance the problems of one's own selfhood against the demands of publishing and speaking out in the public sphere is what makes it an everlasting effort, constitutively unfinished and necessarily imperfect. Yet its invigorations and complexities, for me at least, make one the richer for it, even though it doesn't make one particularly popular.