Chapter One

Ignorant Perfection

The Westerner, after centuries of extroverted science, and determined philosophical attempts to remove soul from conversation, architecture, observation and education, sees inside himself, and sees what the ancients saw, but can hardly believe it. He confesses that he must be seeing wrong.

—Robert Bly[1]

In an essay written in 1969, Georg Lukács described the works of Alexander Solzhenitsyn as representative of what Marx called "plebeianism"—an ethic that expressed "the ignorant perfection of ordinary people."[2] Ordinary people—those not privileged by extraordinary wealth, power, or position—were perfect in that they saw through the frauds and tyrannies of their day. But they were also ignorant in that they didn't know where those tyrannies came from or what to do about them. For Marx and Lukács, plebeians simply did not possess the sense of history or the dispassionate scientific method to understand their place in the sociopolitical scheme of things.[3] Mystified by the market (or misled by propaganda), ordinary people succumbed to simplistic explanations that distorted their understanding of experience and perverted their moral instincts. This lack of critical consciousness made them easy prey to ideologies that fed their parochial self-interests and tendencies toward self-aggrandizement. Religion was to be their predictable opiate, and fascism their grand temptation.

Marx wanted to educate the masses beyond this ignorance—and inoculate them against fascism—by subjecting to criticism the ideologies that constituted their mystification. Dialectical materialism was to give intellectual authority to what the people instinctively already knew: that *real* life, the life of concrete human relationships, empirical, moral, common life is the base upon which all else stands. And if this life, as it was experienced *by the people*, was unjust or ignoble, then no explanatory ideology, theory, or religion should be allowed to stand in

the way of honest reform. In fact, if any theory did explain away injustice that, in itself, was proof that it was an expression of "false consciousness."

But the irony here is that Marx ended up discrediting popular experience at the very moment he sought to redeem it. By adopting materialist premises and turning Hegel right-side up, Marx modernized the dogmas of nineteenth-century natural science, making them new, setting them into historical motion, and inscribing ontology within their reductionist epistemological parameters. Dialectics rather than consensus or conscience became the key to reality. This move eliminated personal intuition, common sense, memory, moral outrage, and ordinary language as valid sources of truth. From a dialectical perspective, such expressions were fatally compromised by the accidents of history and the illogic of the masses. Lacking any scientific foundation, popular consciousness and the will of the people could be more or less dismissed as inevitably reactionary. Marx put it this way:

> The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that never existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language.[4]

Thus even in the most revolutionary of times people tend to fall back on what they know, and what they know, sadly enough, is the history and language of mystification. From this perspective, the entire Romantic movement in the nineteenth-century, like all popular revolutions of consciousness, was never anything more than conservative nostalgia, doomed from the start to be an ineffectual protest against the brave new industrial world. So unless ordinary people were initiated into the method of dialectical analysis, by definition they were incapable of knowing what was happening to them in any ethical or abstract sense. From the world-historical perspective of the whole, what seemed like injustice and deprivation might actually be just. And what seemed like lies, distortions, and deceptions might just be the necessary dialectical corrections needed to carry forward the unfolding wisdom of the evolving historical totality.

The disorienting effects of such moral inversions were brilliantly dramatized in Arthur Koestler's *Darkness At Noon* and in the works of

George Orwell, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Milan Kundera, and that whole panoply of Eastern European artists and intellectuals (one might even include Georg Lukács here) whose personal sense of truth and integrity clashed with Marxist philosophic hubris.[5] Their works made it abundantly clear that at the very moment Marx corrected plebeian ignorance, he destroyed any sense of plebeian perfection.

This disillusionment might not have been so bad had it issued merely in a new skepticism toward the pieties of bourgeois society. But coupled to the positivist and utilitarian orientation of the Victorian mind, Marx's critique gave birth to a totalizing, and eventually totalitarian, philosophy harboring all the ancient vices of the Gnostic heresy. Marxist *cognoscenti* reinterpreted all problems as ritualized ideological conflicts to be overcome through political interventions.

This inversion of Marxism from liberating critique to oppressive state philosophy, coming as it did not so long after capitalism had already erased the spirituality of the Christian Middle Ages, generated an ethical vacuum in the common, practical life of Western civilization. There could be no simple return to the values of the past, and yet no revolution in good conscience. We had entered an age of relativism and fanaticism where the best lacked all conviction, the worst were full of passionate intensity, and ordinary people—to paraphrase Santayana—oscillated between a radical transcendentalizing (reduced to a solipsism of the living moment) and a materialism posited as a presupposition of conventional sanity.[6] Unlike the philosopher, most ordinary people bounced back and forth between these poles unknowingly with classic bourgeois duplicity, still believing themselves to be integrated persons of faith or persons of reason, when in fact, they were more truly mirrors of the prevailing cultural schizophrenia: torn between the mobile freedom of modernization and the anxiety for order characteristic of the displaced Victorian mind.

As Philip Rieff so deftly described in *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (1966) ordinary moderns negotiated an uneasy, often disingenuous, truce between the world they revered and the world they lived in and had become, denying the vast abyss between their actions and their ideals. Any pretense of plebeian perfection had long since been rejected as the sentimental excesses of an obsolete humanism. Private therapies replaced common culture as the means for self-perfection and ethical accomplishment.

Some avant-garde critics of ordinary life such as Theodore Adorno and Jurgen Habermas were so taken by the extent of modern false consciousness and bad faith that they came to the conclusion that not only were ordinary people inauthentic, but persons as such really didn't even exist and perhaps they never had existed. What really

exists are structures, residual existential projects, the debris of past institutional needs, sign systems, and ideologies, all of which presses upon the brain of the body politic like a nightmare. In a modernist rendition of the old Marxist project, they sought to refurbish dialectics from the inside out, using more sophisticated analytical tools borrowed from such fields as linguistics, cybernetics, psychoanalysis, and even artificial intelligence.[7]

Orthodox Marxism, therefore, did not really resolve the tension between the plebeian longing for universal justice and the conditional circumstances of social life. It merely defined this paradox away, deferred it to another time, and so drove moral rebellion underground. In our day this tension has reemerged in a whole series of popular uprisings, from Tiananmen Square to the Gdansk shipyards. Dialectical materialism itself has been exposed as a tool for the mystification of the masses as alienating as any other form of false consciousness. However refined its analyses of the anthropological origins of values or however complex its descriptions of multilayered mediations, dialectics still sees common, everyday human experience as an epiphenomenon of more fundamental realities that are accessible only to its own special methodology. Thus, Marxism continues to exclude from serious consideration commonsense appeals by ordinary people to alter its programs, adapt its agenda, or acknowledge a reality outside its materialist ken.

And yet cultural theorists and activists did emerge who sought to preserve the perfection of ordinary people by bringing the traditions of, let us call it, "the deep self" into dialogue with contemporary history. I am speaking of religious plebeian activists such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King and politically progressive personalists such as Emmanuel Mounier and Martin Buber, who accepted the modern criticisms of plebeian ethnocentricism, sentimentality, and self-interest but rejected the materialist and reductionist premises of such critiques in favor of a more constructive philosophy. Like Stephen Dedalus, they sought to fly by the nets of parochial family life, jingoistic nationalism, and superstitious religious practice. But unlike Joyce's hero, they did not fly into the silence, exile, and cunning of the modernist mind, but into the redeemed narrative speech and mythic return of the plebeian postmodern. Let me explain.

Modernists, like Joyce, saw themselves as residing at a turning point in history, if not at its climax. Their theories miniaturized the past and took it up as an element of the present, dissolving its structures, revealing its hidden dynamics, and announcing a new age. Whether that new age was characterized by the Kantian revolution, the Hegelian completion of philosophy, or the Surrealist manifesto, it

amounted to the same thing: a tearing down of the old cultural foundations in order to replace them with something new, something more inclusive and less self-deceived.

Modernism had its hopeful side in a positivist faith in progress and its pessimistic side in a rebellious concern with the existential meaning of our cultural disinheritance. Both sides, however, shared the same sense of historical discontinuity and the same preoccupation with the foundations of knowledge and culture. Through their aesthetic and philosophic experiments they succeeded in exposing the epistemological hubris of existing religious traditions, their classical allies, and any new emergent essentialisms.

Unfortunately, their successes had the effect of turning western civilization away from any common collective moral life—the life Marx's plebeians revered—toward a multiplicity of disciplines, specializations, jargons, and, in the realm of aesthetics, bohemian sects. The art world found itself awash in a plurality of virtuoso performances and over-determined creations that contained within their structures their own theoretical self-justifications. The works of Igor Stravinsky and Pablo Picasso, for example, contained within them their own immanent teleologies. While political leaders found themselves rummaging through the fragments of a thousand renounced ideologies, searching for some fact or premise to shore up discredited institutions or to justify bloody revolutions. The old mythologies were to be replaced by new methodologies, and these methodologies were to be grounded in theoretically self-conscious sciences, either experimental or phenomenological. Ordinary life ceased to be ordinary, and schizophrenia became the ontological rule rather than the psychological exception.

Nonetheless, many plebeian thinkers out of loyalty to their heritage resist such a usurpation of posterity. They read the present as a moment of historical recurrence miniaturized, in you will, in the ancient memory-aesthetic of the tribe: an aesthetic embodied in the recollective idioms of myth, narrative, ritual, and symbol. These idioms do not so much assume the significance of direct experience as create it. Moreover they exist in a time beyond mere chronological time, in a time that is not so much eternal as omni-temporal.[8]

What distinguished these new plebeian apologists from their predecessors was that they sought to reaffirm historical continuity, the reality of the person, and the value of common experience by moving more deeply into the modernist recognition that all of us are the products of particular national, historical, psychological, and religious contexts and consequently our existence is as much defined by our roots, our ethnicity, and our difference as it is by our existential freedom to remake ourselves. They asserted, moreover, that as different as our

roots and peculiarities might be, all of us share certain hard-core, commonsensical premises that define a resistant and resilient humanism. These premises include the notion that persons should never be treated merely as means but always as ends and the idea that since life ends in death, its meaning and significance must transcend mere material well-being.

And so these postmodern plebeians offer a qualified yes-and-no to the modernist outlook: yes to its critique of classical absolutes, but no to its radical usurpation of posterity into the reductive categories of materialist science, and no to its dissolution of direct experience into the problematics of epistemology. They reject the apocalyptic historicism in modernism without rejecting history itself. Their way of thinking resembles the thought before history, which is myth, and the thought outside of history, which is mysticism; and yet it is neither, because its main concern is with concrete events in all their manifest particularity.

In other words, plebeian postmoderns psychologize and spiritualize the ancient traditions by particularizing and qualifying their claims; at the same time they subject modernity itself to a historical accounting. Their perspective is an amalgam of traditionalist virtues linked to an agenda of social reform and brought up to date through a dialectical yes and no to the modernist critique of metaphysics. This perspective rejects elitism and romantic excess for pragmatic, prudent loyalities. It is a view of the world from the ground up, an urge to universality within the constraints of the particular. It is the Beautitudes. The poet before the philosopher. Solzhenitsyn over Lukács. Walesa before Gorbachev. It is the awareness that our humanity is neither a fiction nor a birthright but an ethical accomplishment.

The great plebeian theme is not alienation, but the problematics of assimilation—surviving modernity without giving up too much of that rich blend of commitments and obligations that constitute one's heritage, one's spirituality, one's character, one's best self. Put most simply, *plebeian postmodernism* represents the awakened consciousness of common men and women to their need to find their own bearings in history without sacrificing their sense of the sacred.

The revelation here is that our true being resides neither within us encoded in some special psychological destiny, nor high above above us in abstract revolutionary ideals, but rather all around us, perpetually at hand in our families, our pasts, our public and private lives, our rites and our works, and in our possibilities and responsibilities. For it is in these concrete, particular matters that the world addresses us, asks us who we are, and calls upon us to recollect our origins with gratitude and a resolute love of life.

Gandhi found himself addressed by the Indian masses; Martin Luther King Jr. by the African-American Church; Solzhenitsyn, by the zeks of the Soviet gulag; Mother Teresa, by the poorest of the poor on the streets of Calcutta, and Elie Wiesel, by the Jews of Auschwitz and Buchenwald. The concrete values, commitments, and existential absolutes that emerged from these encounters offer us a way of resisting the reductive materialism of the prevailing powers without betraying those who have gone before or those who are yet to come. Moreover, the particular perspectives that emerge from such historically situated ethical projects make us sensitive to the sufferings of others, and increase, rather than limit, our sense of solidarity with all peoples.

Plebeian postmodernism is, thus, reflected in a consortium of thinkers and doers who share an ethic that honors the concrete deed before the abstract stance and the claims of the family before the fictions of the state. It judges the quality of one's practice by the good it concretely accomplishes rather than by the party it serves, the money it makes, or the coherence of the theory upon which it is based. And it refuses the claim that concrete good cannot be defined, for good is defined every day in feeding the hungry and ministering to the sick. Plebeian postmodernism is an ethic existing within time, unfolding in history, rather than an atemporal system floating in abstract philosophical space. This is one reason why it is so much easier to illustrate than to define.

Plebeian postmodernism does not just represent a populist political orientation or the survival of the religious sensibility in its perennial clash with the untransformed world. The ethic stands for an inclusive complex of preindustrial values, mytho-poetic practices, and humanist categories of thought that have survived into our time as sanctuaries of the sacred, making up what Lech Walesa once referred to as effective immunities against the totalitarian plague.[9] The totalitarian plague refers not just to totalitarian governments and institutions but also to the mind-set that wishes to escape "the judgement of the past and our responsibility for past injustice."[10] Totalitarianism is, in this sense, more a psychological orientation, a species of folly, than it is a political philosophy.

Plebeian values and categories, in so far as they are expressions of traditional cultural practices qualified by common sense and practical need, resist this folly and cut across international boundaries to link indigenous peoples to First-World plebeians and progressive postmoderns. The right-left political spectrum which had emerged from the assumption that modernization was the fundamental political reality has now been superceeded by a new politics that redefines the

political axis in terms of the contradictions between folk cultures and empire, between the plebeian desire for a meaningful life and the desire of market managers to erase as many moral and space-time distinctions as possible from the commercial environment.[11] The question is no longer, How fast we should modernize or even whether we dare to modernize; rather the question is, What we can salvage of human dignity and meaning in a modernized world? How can our souls survive our histories?

The movement postmodern plebeianism represents is not from liberal humanism to religious mysticism; rather it seeks to reconcile the egalitarian forces of history with the the aristocratic ideals built into traditional notions of the self. Postmodern plebeians seek reform, but not at the expense of the heroic standard that judges virtue by accomplishment. They stand counter to any parties and philosophical schemes that would explain away their moral and spiritual aspirations as belonging to another time or lesser reality. They affirm the self at the same time as they affirm equality by stressing the sanctity of the individual. They refuse to collapse character into culture or morality into private life. For them the fullest individuality issues in the most developed social conscience. To paraphrase Martin Luther King Jr., plebeian postmoderns agree that one has not started to live until one has ceased to identify with one's private problems so as to identify with the sufferings of all humanity.

The destruction of the old metaphysic that so worried our noble Victorian forebears and gave birth to such mighty works of moral reflection as Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1830), John Cardinal Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita* (1864), and Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1868), has led to neither nihilism nor Leninism nor positivism but, in the case of the figures examined here, to a brave resistance to all three in the name of human solidarity and nonviolence. Whole nations within nations have refused to give up their gods, but not failed to redefine their roles in history. As a result a new kind of historical consciousness is emerging, which is represented by ordinary people living out extraordinary ideals. These people hold to ancient ethical values without superstition and seek to perfect a practical form of spirituality that does not evade the challenges of the modern world but rather meets them on its own soul-centered terms with remorseless self-honesty.