

MIRROR, MIRROR

by

Willard Thurston

If you've been following the money trail in the world's secret tax havens in the last few years, you may sometimes wonder what's fuelling the acquisitive dynamic — what measure of cupidity, credulity, hubris, paranoia, cynicism, lust, entropy, sophistry, fiendishness, misanthropy, et cetera. Some will simply say that if you really have to ask you'll never know, and leave it at that. Still, some of us do wonder. Joseph Conrad in his novel Nostromo (the silent character in the novel being a much sought after gold mine) spoke of "the credulity of covetousness" — a pithy phrase that serves as well as any. You want something bad enough you tend to overlook things. But what really is coveted? The wealth is only a means to an end — so what end? Well, I'd sooner be an unhappy rich man than an unhappy poor man, you say. Fair enough. But newly rich folk are likely to do specific things they had only imagined doing before. And such 'doings' do not guarantee satisfaction or peace of mind.

A telling journalistic study (reported in Maclean's Magazine) a few years back was done on the winners of lotteries — the big winners. How had the windfall changed their lives in the happiness department. Well, the folks who pretty well had their act together before the windfall were about the same afterward, according to the happiness quotients used; whereas, the folks whose lives were less satisfactory and unsettled before, were in general little better off. Some even worse.

Mind you, we're talking only a few million here — not 'real money,' as it's now designated, the trillions that make up the government debt supported by the population of the United States, say, exemplified

in the Cato Institute prediction of about 21 trillion by the end of the Obama Presidency. So what indeed is the engine driving the momentum — the 'rationale' that would prompt seemingly intelligent people to repackage subpar mortgages and loans as triple A investments, or the impulse at street level to beat up another being for a pair of sneakers, say? Has the American Dream been so oversold or, at least, made untenable for so many, the advertising molestation reaching critical mass, such that well being, health and comeliness, appear as chimeras for more and more people, thus showcasing all manifest ill luck?...

A few years back, with the help of some friends, I set about to revisit the question of luck and attractiveness in a graphic novel called *Eurydice (the creature you descend to Hades — Tartarus — to retrieve)*. What alerted our curiosity at the time was the mushrooming health industry in North America, in particular the resurgence of 'eugenics', the awesome promise fed by the advances in genetic engineering, in particular the obsessions germane to our day — the prospect of exemplary health and comely looks for all. Given the growing, if not accelerating preoccupation with acceptable appearance and well-being, it seemed the early editors of *Cosmopolitan* were more discerning than I bargained for. My only measure or touchstone of such touted endowment was rather subjective and not a little shopworn — the creatures of Fifth Century Athenian sculpture, such as the Greek relief sculpture of Eurydice (from a Roman copy), which incidentally showed that the modern approval of thinness, at least for women, was uncredited then. Of little help, of course. Especially now that the antecedents of traditional Western culture are generally deemed destructive, sexist and racist according to the PC rendering. Still, the Greek ideals of 'Know Thyself' and 'Nothing in Excess' were a long way from the modern mantra which more and more seems to read, 'Without excess nothing'! Moreover, Greek art was umbered if not tarnished by the Nazi

appropriation of it — so we were counselled following the rise of German National Socialism. Yet very early on I thought that such 'idealized' art, particularly the sculpture the Nazis commissioned themselves, wasn't really Greek in intuition, in 'genius' or finally in mytho-poetics. The serenity, the equanimity, the impartiality was gone. So it seemed to me. The Fascist sculptural paragons were essentially demoniac not divine, fanatics, energumen* not immortals. The extra wrenching needed to achieve the regnant posturing served as problematic visitations for me — when it came to the question of elegance and serenity. Every sculptural tic and stylized affect you find in the Nazi gallery: a figure analogous to Polyclitus's museful Hermes gets turned into an imperious transcendent Vandal or Hun, and the ample placid Eurydice, a haughty, beefy Valkyrie. The aesthetic sense born of Fascism, it seemed, as popularly defined by many of my peers, was in fact a very subversion of the ideal it pretended to honor. So I thought and still think. The more fool me, perhaps.

Yet what also concerned about the modern infatuation with looks and salubrity were the proliferating products the West was producing to flatter them. People were spending large amounts of their income on purely cosmetic trappings — in North America, if you include implant and plastic surgery, nugatory apparel as well as cosmetics in general, many billions of dollars. Products, moreover, that upstage the pollution sewn in fashioning them. The 'squeaky clean', costly researched, chemical and preservative laden, 'galvanizing' image, eclipses a lot of manufacturing 'dirt'— some of the discard mess in our proliferating trash dumps.** It is interesting to note that in many polluted areas of the globe, people are using additional cleansers to clean away the growing air pollution of hair and skin! Thus endemnifying the 'cost of salubrity' which yet seems necessary to the viability of restless, acquisitive, thriftless populations! But to what end? For and by whom?

And what's being overlooked — in the merchandising of beauty and health that essentially must end in molesting folks — instigating a seemingly inherent, endless, even malicious 'passion play'...?

It does get intimidating. And pervasive. The presumption that no one must feel slighted has taken root. 'Check your privilege' is the new mantra. If you're healthy, lucky, complacent, cis-gendered and well favoured, you may be one of the undeservedly oppressive humans in the PC arena. S. J. Perelman's phrase — 'You owe it to yourself to drop dead and rid the world of a roach!' — may have lost some of its debonair frivolity for some groups of humans.

Improvement too, the idol of the age, is fed with many a victim.

William Cowper 1731-1800

* Energumen: a person believed to be possessed by a malevolent spirit.

**A list of some of the dynamic, scene-changing players: 1) P-phenylenediamine, a coal-tar derived chemical most found in dark hair colouring and lipsticks; has long term effects on many aquatic species. 2) Preservatives BHA and BHT, sythetic antioxidants found in lipsticks and moisurizers. 3) Dioxane, a carinogenic, endocrine disruptive chemical in many cosmetic ingredients, including polyethylene glycols, sodium laureth sulfate and siloxane during the manufacturing process. 4) Dibutyl phthalate, DBP, (also used to make PVC pipe), added to nail polish and introduced to environment when polish is removed. 5) Triclolcan, the antibacterial chemical used in cleansers, hand-sanitizers, deodorant, and laundry detergent. 6) Diethanolamine, DEA, a ph adjuster, is added to almost every cosmetic and personal care product on the market. 7) The microplastic beads used in many cleansers that are too small to be filtered by sewage-treatment plants and cause anomalies in fish, mussels and crabs.]