

*Masculinity as Religion:
Transcendence and Nihilism*

THE AFFECTIVE SPIRITUALITY of the Middle Ages, we noted, had two dimensions. The first of these was, as we have seen, bridal mysticism and its variations, but the second was the militancy of the Crusades and chivalric devotion to Mary. When bridal mysticism came to dominate the life of the Christian church, the feminization of Christianity set the ideology of masculinity free from the faith.

Masculinity is a natural religion, and in many ways resembles the Christianity of which it is a foretaste. Can men worship a savior unless they know what it is to be a savior? A man wants to become a god. He wants to be a savior, protecting all those in his care, giving his own life to save theirs. In other words, he wants to transcend the limits of mere humanity, but that transcendence is dangerous. When he faces death a man can die the death of the body; but he can also die the death of the soul, the second death. All too easily he may be fascinated by darkness and become a partisan and emissary of death—a demon. The further masculinity consciously distances itself from Christianity, the greater the danger that it will make men agents of death—nihilists—because in nothingness they see the ultimate self-transcendence.

SACRED SEXUALITY

Until the end of the nineteenth century, masculinity had been thought of as manliness, a stoic ideal of reserve and self-control. Most of the founders of the American Republic, whatever their formal allegiance, were at heart more stoic than Christian. This ideal was an aristocratic one, but as civilization grew tiresome, both Europe and America experienced a new interest in the primitive, in the savage, in the uncivilized, in the passions of youth. Youth had the promise of contact with the elemental forces of life. This fascination with youth and the primitive was a product of Romanticism and eventually replaced the aristocratic ideal of manliness with a proletarian ideal of masculinity.

In America, the frontiersmen, Natty Bumppo and his successors, became the symbol of natural man, passionate and self-reliant. Gail Bederman examines the veneration of the savage and the primitive in American culture of the late nineteenth century, a veneration that also was present in European culture: Americans had the Indians, the Europeans, Africans and Polynesians.¹ Picasso used Polynesian masks as models of abstraction, as did Emil Nolde, revering in the primitive a violent energy that would shatter the effeminate bourgeois surface of European life. Nolde was among the first members of the Nazi party and was favored by Nazis who wanted total revolution, an unleashing of savage male energies. In America, the older forms of civilized manliness that emphasized prudence and self-restraint were replaced by an ideal of masculinity that saw savage sexual energy as a necessary component of complete manhood.

Young men have always shown a great enthusiasm for sexual intercourse, not only for the physical pleasure it gives, but perhaps even more because they think it shows they are men. Intercourse "is the ultimate self-validation, the undeniable proof of one's maleness and masculinity (which has always been a problem with men)."² But in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries male sexuality has sometimes been given a quasi-divine status. Men have venerated their sexuality, and have experienced in it a transcendent world: "Sex has become the religion of the Western world, the bearer of most

people's hopes of encountering something truly 'other'. . . . The search for the other, for the Eternal Feminine, Goddess or Whore, or the dark forces of the blood and semen, is the search for transcendence. Sex is the cry for the other, union with the transcendent."³ Men are even willing to sacrifice themselves to their sexuality, preferring death to celibacy. In the Middle Ages, the minnesinger spoke of erotic love as if it were a religion. Wagner chose Tristan and Isolde as subjects for his opera because he too felt that romantic love was the ultimate experience of transcendence and that a love-death, *Liebestod*, was a way to escape the prison of self. But it is not so much romantic love as sexuality, and especially male sexuality, that has been deified.

Male sexual energy is deified because it is the sexual part of the self-sacrifice that gives masculinity its nobility. Men experience self-giving through separation in their role in sexual intercourse, because they give of themselves in ejaculation rather than receive in insemination. They attain the ability to do this at puberty, and many societies that have initiation rites therefore choose puberty as the time for these rites. G. Stanley Hall, a late-nineteenth-century educational psychologist, reversed the Victorian mistrust of sex. Hall believed that "it was no accidental synchronism of unrelated events that the age of religion and age of sexual maturity coincide."⁴ Summarizing Hall's thought, Gail Bederman explains that "at sexual maturity, when a boy received the capacity for paternity, he ceased to exist merely for himself, and began to exist as a potential contributor to the divine process of racial evolution and the advancement of civilization. Adolescence was thus a holy time, when sexuality and spirituality burst upon a young man simultaneously, through the physiological second birth."⁵ Testosterone replaced the Holy Spirit as the source of new life.

For Hall, the orgasm was a holy experience, because through it the man participated in the continuity of the race: "In the most unitary of all acts, which is the epitome and pleroma of life, we have the most intense of all affirmations of the will to live, and realize that the only true God is love, and the center of life is worship. . . . This sacrament is the annunciation hour, with hosannas which the whole

world reflects. . . . Now is the race incarnated in the individual and remembers its lost paradise.”⁶ In Hall we see the worship of male sexuality, a worship which has found expression both in popular and high culture.

Hemingway and Lawrence, and others far less respectable, have participated in this worship. Lawrence worshipped male sexuality, seeing in it an experience of the divine.⁷ Hemingway worshiped masculinity, “the code which is all we have in the place of God,” and saw sexuality as a central part of masculinity. Violence and sexuality continue to be intrinsic to the American popular ideal of manhood. Although liberals who give lip service to feminism dominate Hollywood, most movies are aimed at the adolescent male and glorify violence and sexuality. Such films reinforce the popular culture and are responsible for the adulation that celebrity-criminals often receive. Society may find it hard to discipline young men whom it is sending to die in war, but even now in peacetime the sexual misbehavior of athletes is not only excused, but venerated. Feminism has made only a slight dent in this veneration among the middle classes, and none at all among the black proletariat. The search for self-transcendence in sexuality is especially pernicious, because it confuses the spiritual code of masculinity with physical maleness. A worship of the semen and the blood is a worship of dark gods and undermines the positive aspects of masculinity.

AIDS has given prominence to the homosexual as sexual hero. Homosexuals are far more promiscuous than heterosexuals, and when they infect themselves with a fatal venereal disease they become objects of worship, as in *Angels in America*. Indeed, Harvey Milk has been made into a saint with his own Byzantine-style icon. Homosexuals feel keenly the connection between love and death and routinely frustrate the public health measures that are designed to protect them. They have unprotected intercourse with partners they know are infected because they feel that only by a joint death can the barriers of the self be overcome. This is a perverse version of comradeship in war, which not unsurprisingly, as we shall see, shares gestures and language with homosexuality.

THE PLAYING FIELDS

Agonistic masculine play was the origin of civilization. In the modern world, sports are the emotional center of countless men. Sports are a traditional means to attain masculinity. The athlete is the one who faces and overcomes challenges and thereby escapes human limitations. The Greeks honored the transfiguration of the athlete: Pindar's odes celebrated the divinity that clothed the victor in the games. In modern America, the coach is the mentor who brings boys into manhood. He teaches them to endure pain, develop self-discipline, work as a team, and give themselves to others, and often (a sure sign of his initiatory role) instructs them in the mysteries of sexuality. Why athletic coaches (rather than, say, biology teachers) should be thought the appropriate teacher for sex education is a mystery from a pedagogical perspective, but entirely comprehensible if sports is the primary way a boy becomes a man.

Because sports provide an initiation into masculinity, they can easily become a religion. Sports are often the way the boy puts away the soft, sheltering world of the mother and her femininity and enters the world of challenge and danger that makes him a man.⁸ Sports helped men be transformed and reborn: "In its pretense toward regenerative functions, it approximated a religious sensibility for men, albeit material and secular."⁹ Team sports develop masculinity; they are "the civilized substitute for war"¹⁰ and sublimate male aggression into channels less harmful than crime. They develop the virtue of comradeship, and teammates in sports like football become "blood brothers, men who assemble together to undertake dangerous exploits under conditions of duress and threat."¹¹ Michael Messner quotes a former high school athlete: "I'd say that most of my meaningful relationships have started through sports and have been maintained through sports. There's nothing so strong, to form that bond, as sports. Just like in war too—there are no closer friends than guys who are in the same foxhole together trying to stay alive. You know, hardship breeds friendship, breeds intense familiarity. . . . You have to endure something together—sweat together, bleed together, cry together. Sports provide that."¹²

Sports form character, “manly straightforward character, a scorn of lying and meanness, habits of obedience and command, and fearless courage.”¹³ For modern men, team sports are more transforming than religion because they provide a greater escape from the self. Paul Jones, a Dulwich boy who was killed in World War 1, claimed that in the attempts to develop team spirit, “Religion has failed, intellect has failed, art has failed, science has failed. It is clear why: because each of these has laid emphasis on man’s *selfish side*; the saving of his *own soul*, the cultivation of his *own mind*, the pleasing of his *own senses*. But your sportman joins the Colours because in his games he has felt the real spirit of unselfishness, and has become accustomed to give all for a body to whose service he is sworn.”¹⁴ Sports on this view are a better school of charity than religion, for the ultimate test of charity is the willingness to die in war. Not only were wars won, but souls were saved on the playing fields of England.

A player who is “in form” has had a form descend on him as if from above; he is in “a state of grace. It is as if some transcendental power had given the player his blessing.”¹⁵ Although most players and spectators would not seriously call sports a religion, it nevertheless functions as one for them. It is “a secular means for tapping transcendental sources and powers, or restoring some fleeting contact with the sacred, or testing whether the gods are on your side or not.”¹⁶ Michael Novak regards sports as a natural religion.¹⁷ Charles Prebish also thinks “*sport is religion* for growing numbers of Americans.”¹⁸ Religion enables man to transcend the secular, ordinary world; sports are the main way that many men attain this transcendence, whether directly as an athlete or vicariously as a spectator. In both cases, “the individual goes beyond his or her own ego bonds.”¹⁹ As Howard Slusher says, “Within the movements of the athlete a wonderful mystery of life is present, a mystical experience that is too close to the religious to call it anything else.”²⁰ The dancer becomes the dance, and the athlete becomes the sport. He is transfigured; he may have a peak experience and the form may shine through him to the spectator, who sees the glory of transfigured being. Novak writes from his own experience of sport: “Athletic achievement, like the achievements of the heroes and gods of Greece, is the momentary

attainment of perfect form—as though there were, hidden away from mortal eyes, a perfect way to execute a play, and suddenly a player or team has found it and sneaked a demonstration down to earth. A great play is a revelation. The curtains of ordinary life part, and perfection flashes for an instant before the eye.”²¹

A strong agonistic element dominates all types of sports. The *agon* or struggle may be with another team or another individual or it may be with nature and the limitations of the athlete’s own body. This contest distinguishes sports from art and perhaps explains why men tend to regard art as trivial and unworthy of masculine attention, even though ballet may be more physically demanding than even baseball or gymnastics. Pain is an inescapable part of sports and distinguishes it from the mere game (which art seems to be for most men). For the athlete, “true fulfillment arises in the confrontation and overcoming of self, not in fantasy but through pain and agony and the realization of life at a far greater and deeper level.”²² The mountain climber Maurice Herzog claimed that “in overstepping our limitations, in touching the extreme boundaries of man’s world, we have come to know something of its true splendor. In my worst moments of anguish, I seemed to discover the deep significance of existence which till then I had been unaware.”²³ Sports functions as the religion of many men in Western culture because it reveals the meaning of life.

This is not the same as *Sportianity*, as some deride the combination of sports and evangelical Protestantism in movements like the Fellowship of Christian Athletes.²⁴ Billy Sunday, baseball player turned evangelist, had no doubts about the nature of his religion: it was Christianity (in a muscular, aggressive form) and not baseball. For Christian athletes, sports are but a means to evangelize for their true religion, Christianity.²⁵ Sports can, like any human activity, be consecrated to God, although the competitive nature of sports creates some problems for Christian athletes. Yet Pope John Paul II, a dedicated sportsman, thinks that competition itself can be a good.

The transforming power of athletics can also be seen in individualist sports such as bodybuilding. We are fortunate to have an account of bodybuilding written by a literate, self-aware young man,

Sam Fussell. In 1983, Fussell graduated from Oxford and took a job in Manhattan in publishing before his planned enrollment in American Studies at Yale. This tall, thin, young scion of an academic family had been raised in Princeton, attended Lawrenceville and Oxford, and had been sheltered from urban American life. His size (six feet, four inches), skinniness, and academic demeanor made him a target. He came down with chronic diarrhea and pleurisy from his state of anxiety and fear. His parents had just divorced, and he had nowhere to go. He was tired of being hurt physically and emotionally by life and decided to take up bodybuilding.²⁶

It was a change from Oxford and Princeton. Ever the academic, he researched the subject in bodybuilding magazines before he took the plunge. Yet the gym at the YMCA was not what he expected from the paeans to the wholesome nature of bodybuilding that filled the magazines he had read: it was full of homosexuals and maniacs who had built shells around themselves to protect themselves from reality. Fussell built himself up to 257 pounds, and was able to bench press 405 pounds. He left his publishing job to avoid getting fired for throwing a co-worker through a door. He moved to California, studied under professionals, and became a trainer in a gym. Filling himself with steroids, he entered shows, but fortunately lost. Perhaps it was the disappointment that brought him to his senses. He realized that he had started too late (twenty-six!) ever to have a great body, decided to quit, and return to the family tradition of writing.

Fussell (whose father, Paul Fussell, wrote *The Great War and Modern Memory*) uses throughout his book the metaphor of bodybuilding as military action. He speaks of men being in the trenches too long, and of a buttock scarred from steroid injections as looking like an aerial photograph of Ypres. Like the soldier in combat, Fussell descends into an abnormal and dangerous world, and there attains some wisdom. He is very ironic about himself and realizes the ersatz nature of this heroism, but he does come to understand the folly of building shells as protection from pain, is able to return to normal life, and warn others about the danger of the sport he rejects.

Bodybuilding is a profound warping of masculinity. Bodybuilders quote slogans reminiscent of Nietzsche: "That which doesn't kill

you makes you stronger”; “Only the strong survive”; “No kindness forgotten, no transgression forgiven.” They wear hats that say “Pray for War.” When his mother came to visit him in the bunker apartment he had found, Fussell was wearing “military fatigues camouflaged to look like tree bark, spit-shined black combat boots, a T-shirt which read ‘respect my spirit, for our spirits are one’. . . . A cardboard cutout of Arnold Schwarzenegger with loincloth and sword as Conan the Barbarian stood against one wall. . . . I could see from the look in her eyes that her worst fears were realized. All that was missing was a rifle and the President’s travel itinerary.”²⁷ For all its ridiculousness, bodybuilding is taken seriously by millions of men, for whom it has become a religion, a means to die to the old, weak self and to be reborn as the new, strong self, “the promise of metamorphosis.”²⁸ Bodybuilding is only a hobby, and is non-political,²⁹ but other politicized forms of distorted hyper-masculinity have left their marks on the world-historical stage.

The controlled violence of sport often overflows into other types of violence. European football matches regularly end in mob scenes; soccer hooligans travel from country to country making life miserable for all who have the misfortune to be in their vicinity. A German woman told me of a case in point (totally ignored in the Western press). Visiting Leipzig when it was still under Communist rule, she arrived just after a football match, and the neo-Nazis who made up a large segment of the soccer hooligans had turned the city into a repeat of Kristallnacht. Not a shop window remained unbroken between the train station and the museum she was visiting. Even the Communist security apparatus was helpless to prevent this violence; nor is it rare. A 1969 soccer game between El Salvador and Honduras led to a riot and then to a shooting war that lasted one hundred hours. The toll was “6,000 dead and 12,000 wounded. Fifty thousand people lost their homes and fields. Many villages were destroyed.”³⁰ War is sports pursued by other means.

Extreme Sports

Team sports like baseball and soccer and football no longer provide

thrills adequate for the most daring athletes. Even standard mountain climbing and surfing have become *passé*. The adrenaline-driven have taken up sky surfing. They leap from airplanes with a surfboard, and ride air currents down thousands of feet until they finally deploy their parachutes. Others do illegal BASE jumping—Building, Antenna Tower, Span, Earth. One person jumped from the center of the St. Louis Arch—and was arrested. Mountain climbing has given way to rock climbing of vertical faces, to mountain biking, to mountain running. Swimming has given way to scuba diving in caves, canoeing to kayaking over waterfalls. Death is courted in a thousand ways.

Most participants are in it for the adrenaline rush. Nevertheless, as they spend more and more time on the borders of life and death, participants begin to notice some highly unusual phenomena. Michael Bane decided to try the thirteen most difficult sports he could think of, risking death in various ways. When he was in the Iditarod bike race in the Alaska winter, he suddenly heard “a voice.” “It is my friend Sandy back in Florida, and she appears to be praying.” He is “dumbfounded.”³¹ At the race banquet, another racer asks Bane “Did you . . . hear any voices out there on the trail?”³² He had also heard . . . something.

Bob Schultheis is an anthropologist, and the title of his book tells his story, *Bone Games: Extreme Sports, Shamanism, Zen, and the Search for Transcendence*.³³ While descending a mountain under the threat of death, he found himself becoming a “strange person.”³⁴ He did “impossible things,”³⁵ his “old life” was “gone”; he was filled with “joy.”³⁶ He died and was reborn—for a brief period. He discovered that skiers experience “stress-triggered ecstasy,”³⁷ that kayakers see helpful ghosts,³⁸ as did Lindbergh on his historic flight.³⁹ (He tried to duplicate the visions by controlled oxygen deprivation, but was never able to experience them again.) Western athletes experience rarely and intermittently a transformed state of being that shamans can achieve at will after long training.⁴⁰

Is this purely subjective, albeit unusual? Or is there something Out There, at the “very edge of death”?⁴¹ Schultheis considers the demonstrated effect that mind can have on body in yogis, but he

wonders also about other possibilities. A reliable and truthful friend told of how, while mountain running, he admired Bear Peak and decided to run to the peak “as a kind of physical prayer to the peak, a ritual ordeal.”⁴² His prayer was heard. He felt an immense presence (possibly subjective): “Suddenly, several small sparrow hawks appeared around the mountain-top and began diving around him, so close that a couple of times he could feel the air blast from their wings. They wove around him, zooming away and then returning, again and again. . . . The sparrow hawks flew away as abruptly as they had appeared. Then from the four quarters of the sky, four ravens came flying; they approached the top of Bear Peak and then hovered in position, a hundred feet or so from where he stood: a hollow square, with him in the epicenter.”⁴³ He tried to descend, but “one of the black birds flew around in front of him and blocked his way, hanging there in the air, cawing at him.”⁴⁴ He went back. Four redbill hawks came, and they too maneuvered around him, then four turkey vultures, and at last a golden eagle. He had had enough, and left.

Schultheis concludes that extreme athletes are “making a kind of religion.”⁴⁵ He is correct. Men are seeking transcendence by achieving states of extreme stress in which life becomes transparent. The ascetic discipline required by this effort surpasses any undergone by the desert saints. Men will do anything, will come as close to death as possible, will even die because of their sport, if only they can have the possibility of tasting this transcendence through athletic mysticism.

BROTHERHOODS

Fraternal organizations originated in Europe with the independent, often anti-clerical, and sometimes anti-Christian groups that are loosely called freemasonic. The Masons are the prototype of the fraternal orders of the modern world. Masonry is generally considered a product of the Enlightenment in that it emphasized a mild theism free of denominational narrowness. Although it originated in the early eighteenth century in England, it seems to be more a product

of English hermeticism than of the Enlightenment.⁴⁶ English hermeticism was a by-product of the Renaissance which, in its Platonic form, sought to revive the secret wisdom of the ancients, identified with the mystery religion of the Thrice-Great Hermes, Hermes Trismegistus, whence the name of the movement. Masonry took over not only much of the mystifying language and arcane symbolism of this rather muddled movement (which also produced Rosicrucianism) but also its character as a mystery religion.⁴⁷

Masonry is a modern revival of the mystery religions. Like Mithraism, and for much the same reason, "Masonry was a male institution."⁴⁸ Indeed, Masons proclaimed that the lodge was for men, the church for women.⁴⁹ Both Masonry and the fraternal organizations that aped it used a confrontation with death, a necessary part of a masculine initiation, as part of their initiation. While renovating the International Order of Odd Fellows building in Baltimore in the 1970s, contractors discovered several skeletons and reported it to the police, who investigated and decided that the skeletons had been legitimately obtained as part of an initiation ceremony. This initiation can be more or less impressive and taken with greater or lesser seriousness. That some Masons took it very seriously is clear from the incident that gave birth to the anti-Masonic party of the 1840s, the murder of an ex-Mason who had threatened to reveal the secrets of Masonry. The murder was not only perpetrated by Masons, but the murderers were protected from prosecution by fellow Masons in government positions. The strength of Masonic feeling was also shown by the decision of Sam Houston to release the captured Santa Ana, when he discovered that his Mexican foe was also a Mason. Clearly Masonry had replaced Christianity as a serious spiritual bond among men.

In nineteenth-century America men found their spiritual sustenance in fraternal movements. The thousands of Masonic temples and Knights of Pythias lodges and Independent Order of Odd Fellows halls that dot every American city and small town are relics of that movement.⁵⁰ The fraternal orders had the primary purpose of conducting initiation rituals.⁵¹ These rituals were drawn from ancient mysteries (as revealed in romantic novels) and from puberty

rites of primitive societies, such as the American Indian,⁵² although without the bloodshed that primitive rites often incorporated. The modern American lodge members were all male and kept their rituals secret from women. Through darkness, mysterious actions, speeches about pain and death, and even occasional confrontations with skeletons, men escaped shallowness and realized the seriousness of life. Men loved it and flocked to these fraternal orders throughout the nineteenth century, seeking initiation after initiation.⁵³ Men could not find the initiation they sought in Christianity, especially in its dominant liberal form. According to Mark Carnes, “Whereas for the liberals death confirmed the goodness of God, the perfectibility of man, and the moral values of Christian nurture, fraternal rituals taught that God was imposing and distant, that man was fundamentally flawed, and that human understanding of human and moral issues was imperfect. Only by experiencing the greatest of transformations—death—could man begin to comprehend the truths of human existence.”⁵⁴ As liberal Protestantism abandoned the Puritan message of death and transfiguration, fraternalism took it up.⁵⁵ The evangelist Finney later perceived that for men “fraternal initiation could serve as a substitute for religious conversion.”⁵⁶ In some ways fraternalism, because it emphasized the necessity of dying to a lower state and being reborn to a higher one, was closer to the orthodox Christianity than was liberal Protestantism, which had largely lost its sense of the drama of sin and redemption and tried to tame and domesticate Christianity by omitting or de-emphasizing the warfare with demons, the threats of hell, and the awesomeness of death, all of which are prominent in the New Testament.

Fraternalism was at best an ersatz religion and therefore resembles the Symbolist movement in Western culture. Fraternalism, like Symbolism, used traditional symbols detached from their historic context, whether they were Jewish (the Temple), Christian (the Bible), or pagan (the skeleton). All these symbols were fraught with meaning, but no one, least of all the Masonic specialist, could tell exactly what they meant. Nevertheless, the emotional pull of fraternalism was strong, and fraternalism declined in this century only af-

ter the real confrontation with death in war replaced the ritual confrontation in the lodge as the source of initiation for men.

IMITATIONS OF WAR

When war is absent, men seek “the moral equivalent of war” in their recreation. Boys’ activities, of which the most successful is the Boy Scouts, are a remote preparation for war. For adults, military reenactments provide some of the thrill and even the pathos of war. Adult excitement and adrenaline rushes are available through combat games of varying degrees of seriousness. For those who want more realism, paramilitary groups and militias conduct exercises in pretend (and sometimes not-so-pretend) violence.

The Boy Scouts

The Boy Scouts were founded by Baden-Powell because recruits for the British army were too often found to be physically unfit—unfit, that is, for military service.⁵⁷ The British Scouts encouraged physical fitness by teaching boys to be observers and trackers. The Boy Scouts of America (BSA) do not cultivate this particular area of military expertise. Instead, the regimen of the Scouts is designed to teach boys how to endure moderate discomfort, cooperate with others, and ultimately save others. The BSA’S disavowal of military intent is sometimes a little disingenuous. It is true that military discipline is not enforced, that drill (except to present colors) and paramilitary training are forbidden, and that the atmosphere of most scout encampments is military only in that it shares in “the havoc of war and the battle’s confusion.” Before America became involved in World War I, parents were assured that “Boy Scouts are looked upon as soldiers in the making. If by making soldiers is meant training boys for intelligent public service, cultivating character, self-reliance, mutual helpfulness, and the capacity to achieve success in the field of chosen endeavor, then the Boy Scout movement may properly be regarded as military. If by making soldiers is meant cultivating a spirit

of pugnacity and the glorification of war, then the Boy Scout movement is non-military. These elements are not found in it.”⁵⁸ But military recruiters place advertisements in *Boys' Life*, the scouting magazine, which in its articles often portrays the positive aspects of war—excitement and self-sacrifice.

Boys' Life holds the sacrificial ideal of manhood before its young readers, and shows them how fighting in war can be the ultimate sacrifice. One article tells the story of a mountain man, Alvin York, a “One-Man Army.”⁵⁹ In his youth he “had been a wild character, a hard drinker and a brawler.” Like the Trukese described by David Gilmore⁶⁰ and American blue-collar workers, York had been a rough character, but he had grown up and become a sober, responsible man, “a church elder.” He followed the same path that the Trukese boys follow. After praying for guidance, he decided to go to war, to the Great War. It was not sheer belligerence that led him to fight, but a vocation from God. His aggressive spirit and his fighting skills sharpened in his youth would now be at the service of others: “He was a good shot, and his expert marksmanship would *save* [emphasis added] many American lives.” Masculine aggressiveness is cultivated, not ultimately for the purpose of destruction, although destruction may be a necessary means, but finally for the purpose of salvation. The Germans had trapped five hundred American soldiers at the Argonne; “to *save* [emphasis added] them, the German machine guns had to be put out of action.” During the attack on the Germans, York was “pinned down,” and had to fire sixty yards uphill, “the most difficult shooting imaginable.” York killed twenty-five and captured 132 Germans. For this he received the Congressional Medal of Honor. But a man does not fight for reward or for his own benefit. After the war, York was celebrated as a hero and offered jobs all around the United States, but he turned them down and returned to Tennessee where he “used his fame to help found a school to educate mountain children.” A man lives not for himself, but for others, even in his aggressiveness.

Boys' Life has a regular feature, a cartoon panel which recounts “A True Story of Scouts” in which a Scout by his quick thinking and decisive action takes responsibility for a situation and saves someone

from danger or death. The Boy Scout Honor Award is for those who save others from the danger of death while risking their own lives. One recipient earned it this way:

Early Dec. 21, 1985, Webelos Scout Steven Beeson, 10, was awakened by a neighbor pounding on the door of his home in San Antonio, Tex.

Crystal Santellana, 13, told Steven that her house was on fire and her two brothers, ages 2 and 6, were still inside the house. The 6-year-old had been playing with a lighter under the bed and started the fire.

The room billowed with smoke, and flames burned through the floor in several spots. Steven quickly picked up the 2-year-old and took him outside, leaving him with Steven's older sister and Crystal. He went back in the house and rescued the 6-year-old and the family dog.⁶¹

My son's troop (in which I am an assistant scoutmaster) saved a family from rapids; their canoe had swamped, and was crushing the father against a rock. The scouts formed a human chain, pulled the canoe off the father, and brought everyone to shore. Once when I went on a weekend camping trip with my son's Scout troop, an Eagle Scout who had been in the troop and was now at the Naval Academy came along to help. He was returning directly to the Academy after the outing, so he had his uniform and white hat hanging in the rear of his car. It was a little visual reminder of the ultimate purpose of the Scout's training: to lead boys to accept responsibility and sacrifice, even, although this is rarely mentioned among men even in the military, to the point of dying for their country.

Military Reenactors

For adults who want to play war, military reenactments, especially of the Civil War, are popular. Initially, the male camaraderie and military ritual attract participants. But as men study their dramatic roles, by reading letters and memoirs left by the soldiers and by experiencing some of the hardships that soldiers undergo (marching, camp

food, camping in harsh weather), something changes. As they become more immersed, mind and body, in the lives of the soldiers, reenactors gain a deep respect for soldiers who were willing to submit to a life of hardship, danger, and pain for the causes they believed in.

For some reenactors, role-playing comes to take on a ritual significance. They do not want the memory of those brave men to die and want to feel as close as possible a kinship with them. The physical hardships become a part of the appeal. In living through the weariness and cold and heat and filth that afflicted the original soldiers, the reenactors feel some sense of what it must have been to fight in the Civil War. They will march with blistered, bleeding feet and refuse well-intentioned offers of rides home, supporting each other instead and considering it a privilege to suffer in a small way like the soldiers they are imitating. One reenactor, whose interest began as an offshoot of his academic studies, says that after going through the experience of the reenactor he began for the first time to understand the Latin American piety that leads men to reenact the sufferings of Christ as closely as possible. The military reenactors take up their task voluntarily and rejoice in the fact that their own bodies become a physical memorial to those men they so admire. How much more would it be a privilege, an honor, a joy to suffer in the same way as the Redeemer, to feel in small the price he paid to redeem the world from death?

These sentiments are widespread among reenactors, although masculine inarticulateness about emotions prevents most from voicing them. Nevertheless, in a letter to the *Washington Post* in response to an article that described reenactment as entertainment, Ted Brennan speaks of his own reenactment experience. He admits that reenactment is “fun and educational,” but far more important, reenactors “get a deeper appreciation about what our ancestors had to endure.” Although the battles lack “blood and gore,” they have plenty of “drills, heat, dust, smoke, and sore feet.” Reenactors do not glorify war; with combat veterans, they know that “there is no glory in war—only pain, suffering, and death.” They find something much more important than glory: a glimpse of the love that soldiers feel for each other, and even for their foes and comrades in suffering.

Brennan mentions a Confederate survivor of Pickett's Charge who said "how good it would be to cross that field just one more time with all those young, smiling fellows." Brennan claims that is what reenactors do: "We cross it for him, in his memory and in the memory of all those who fell that day and in the days since." Brennan refers to another veteran who "believed that heaven was a place where men could have a battle and when the smoke cleared, all of the fallen could stand up and shake one another's hands."⁶² Such was the Viking idea of paradise. Valhalla, the Hall of the Slain described by Snorri Sturluson, in which warriors fight, die, and rise every day, contains an enduring appeal to men.

War Games

Military reenactment merges with war games, which have various degrees of seriousness. James William Gibson casts a jaundiced and leftist eye on freelance militarism in *Warrior Dreams: Paramilitary Culture in Post-Vietnam America*. He follows Klaus Theweleit's analysis of paramilitarism as an extreme manifestation of basic masculine patterns.⁶³ Men in America feel they have been betrayed by their own leaders and think they must band together to protect themselves and their families. Men must grow up to be warriors; war is "a primary rite of passage,"⁶⁴ "a relatively benign ritual transition from boyhood to adulthood."⁶⁵ They must leave behind the normal, safe world of women,⁶⁶ and plunge into chaos to confront the forces of darkness (Communists, terrorists, corrupt liberals). They may be scarred or die, but they are transformed and become gods, saviors. This is a religious world, a world of holy violence, in which men through sacrifice attain the mystery of communion.⁶⁷

Gibson admits that this world appeals to deep masculine desires. He tried combat pistol shooting to see why it attracted otherwise sane and normal men and found that it was a religious experience of the type men crave. Combat pistol shooting was a *rite de passage*, "and like many initiation rites, it involved great physical pain."⁶⁸ The shooters were led into "'the zone', a state of altered sensory perception in which time is experienced as moving very slowly while eye-

hand coordination dramatically increases.”⁶⁹ War and simulations of war are appealing to men, and Gibson seeks a moral equivalent of war so that men in peace can still experience the “enchantment” that war holds out, “the travels, challenges, stories, and male initiation.”⁷⁰ Gibson suggests wilderness adventure, but admits this “lacks war’s seriousness.”⁷¹ Gibson’s streak of leftist paranoia makes him exaggerate the threat that paramilitary organizations pose to public order. Yet Gibson is correct in identifying the deep appeal that this world view has for men and in characterizing paramilitarism as a form of religion.⁷²

WAR AS HEAVEN—AND HELL

Societies that have harsh environments or hostile neighbors send their men to face these dangers, and modern societies are as harsh on males as primitive societies. In 1991, of those killed by accidents during work, 92 percent were men. The British census before World War I showed there were already a million more women than men. The Industrial Revolution was hard on men: machinery is dangerous. Industrial warfare is even harder and more dangerous. After World War I, the census reported two million more women than men, and the big gap in the male ranks was in the twenty to thirty-five-year-old cohort, which had vanished into the mud of the trenches—literally vanished, as half the dead were never even found.

David Jones’s *In Parenthesis* is a long poem about a British soldier in World War II. The soldier, terrified by the prospect of going over the top, “wept for the pity of it all.” His comrades try to get him to shape up: “You can’t really behave like this in the face of the enemy and you see Cousin Dicky doesn’t cry not any of this nonsense—why, he ate his jam puff when they came to take Tiger away.”⁷³ It’s the voice every man hears when he faces pain—“Be a big boy and don’t cry.

The Spartans made their boys steal food or starve. A famous story tells of a Spartan boy who stole a fox and kept it under his cloak. When he was stopped by an adult, he refused to confess to the theft by letting the fox go. The fox ate into his intestines until he fell

dead. He was held up as an example to other boys. Spartan mothers' words to their sons going off to battle were "with it or on it"; that is, come back victorious with your shield or be carried back dead on it. The British adopted this model in their public schools: cold water, bad food, and bullying toughened the boys. Boys may also undergo the informal discipline of the schoolyard or city street, or the hard labor of the farm, or the combative education based on debate and competition, prizes and humiliation.⁷⁴ Military schools often provide rites of passage in modern societies, an equivalent of the puberty rites in tribal societies.

Warfare is a further initiation into the mysteries of life and death, indeed the ultimate initiation. As Mussolini proclaimed, "War is to man what motherhood is to woman,"⁷⁵ and he was simply articulating what many soldiers have felt. From his experience in Vietnam, William Broyles came to realize that "war was an initiation into the power of life and death. Women touch that power on the moment of birth; men at the edge of death."⁷⁶

David Jones draws parallels between the soldier and Christ. Jones used the machinery of the Arthurian legends to describe the experience of war, but beyond those was the death and resurrection of Christ. In one of his illustrations to the poem, Jones shows the lamb of God in the pose of the Easter lamb, but with the horns of the scapegoat, bearing the sins of the people, and driven out into the wilderness to die. The lamb is caught in the barbed wire of the battle field, and above him shines the Christmas star of Byzantine icons. The soldier is the new Christ, dying for the sins of his people.

But this transformation of the ordinary man into a savior-hero occurs in the context of war, which is a degrading horror. Even the work of anti-war poets such as Owen and Sassoon contains a disturbing implication: they hate war, but war brings out the highest and most beautiful form of human love.⁷⁷ Men may seek out war consciously or unconsciously as an escape from the suffocating selfishness of bourgeois society, as a way to transcend the calculation and boredom of materialism into the world of love and honor. But war is a cheat. In Evelyn Waugh's *The End of the Battle*, Mme. Kanyi addresses the hero, Guy Crouchback: "It seems to me that there was

a will to war, a death wish, everywhere. Even good men thought their private honor would be satisfied by war. They could assert their manhood by killing and being killed. They would accept hardships in recompense for having been selfish and lazy. Danger justified privilege. I knew Italians—not very many perhaps, who felt this. Were there none in England?’ ‘God forgive me,’ said Guy. ‘I was one of them.’”⁷⁸ The soldier thus brutalized by war can become a militarist; the warrior opens himself to the war god, the alien spirit that can take possession of men in combat.⁷⁹ The history of Germany after 1870 shows how a nation can descend into militarism. Ernst Jünger’s *Storm of Steel*, a German war memoir, inadvertently shows why the French and British felt they had to fight to the end.

In the last German offensive in spring 1918, Jünger recognizes that “the turmoil of our feelings was called forth by rage, alcohol and thirst for blood.”⁸⁰ There was another spirit in him, “the pulse of heroism, the godlike and the bestial inextricably mingled,”⁸¹ a spirit not his own: “I was boiling with a fury now utterly inconceivable to me. The overpowering desire to kill winged my feet. Rage squeezed bitter tears from my eyes.”⁸² Christianity was no longer comprehensible: “Today we cannot understand the martyrs. . . . Their faith no longer exercises a compelling force.”⁸³ It is the Fatherland which is his god, the idea that has been made sacred by the sacrifices of the soldiers who die for it: “There is nothing to set against self-sacrifice that is not pale, insipid, and miserable.”⁸⁴ Self-sacrifice has become a god—and therefore a demon. These emotions, disturbing and full of portent as they are, are not even the worst products of militarism. They were felt in the ancient world and fill the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Aeneid*. Jünger sounds a modern note that is even more frightening.

Modern war produces a mechanical, inhuman objectivity and detachment: “The modern battlefield is like a huge, sleeping machine.”⁸⁵ Scientific war, which both sides experienced in its fullness at the battle of the Somme, transformed the soldier into a machine: “After this battle the German soldier wore the steel helmet, and in his features there were chiseled the lines of an energy stretched to the utmost pitch.”⁸⁶ A famous German war poster captures the transformation of the man into the soldier of scientific war.⁸⁷

It shows a young man in a trench with barbed wire around him. He looks up with a hard and chiseled face. His eyes glow with an inhuman light. We catch sight here of the man-machine, the robot, that haunts the pages of modern fiction, the man who has sacrificed his humanity in the service of humanity, who puts on the new mechanical armor so tightly that he fuses with it.

Nevertheless, in Christian societies war is often identified with Christ's sacrifice. In the Great War, the identification of the soldier and Christ was nearly complete. Such was the image shown to the British public in World War I in one of the most popular posters: a dead Tommy (with a neat bullet hole in his temple) lies against the wall of a trench, with the figure of the Crucified overshadowing him.⁸⁸ Much had changed since the seventeenth century, when soldiers had been on the same social level as prostitutes. Even in Wellington's army, the officers were upper-class, but the soldiers were often rank criminals. But after the French Revolution, the ordinary man entered the army, whether voluntarily or by compulsion. The German volunteers of the nineteenth century had been the objects of national veneration. When confronted with a young man who volunteered to die to protect his family and friends, the public attitude was at first honor, then veneration, then, perhaps literally, adoration. George L. Mosse, in his analysis of the German attitude to the war dead, observes that for Protestant Germans "it was not only the belief in the goals of the war which justified death for the fatherland, but death itself was transcended; the fallen were truly made sacred in the imitation of Christ. The cult of the fallen provided the nation with martyrs and, in their last resting place, with a shrine of national worship."⁸⁹ The soldier was the new martyr.⁹⁰ His death, like that of a martyr, was a baptism of blood, able to wash out all the sins of a life and give immediate entrance into heaven and to heal the torn world. Even the Marxist Henri Barbusse wrote of the soldiers' "Gethsemene"⁹¹ and saw their suffering as redemptive: a soldier "looked down at all the blood he had given for the healing of the world."⁹²

Ludwig Feuerbach had told the world of intelligent skeptics that religion was but the projection of the highest and best qualities of humanity, that God was only man writ large. The war poets saw

Christ as the Soldier writ large. As Paul Fussell notes, the landscape and the place names of the Flanders battlefield forced the comparison of Christ and the soldier even on the common soldier. Flanders had names like Paaschendaale and was filled with wayside shrines, crucifixion groups that startled the Protestant soldiers of England. It was hard to avoid the comparison of the two.

In a letter, Wilfred Owen claimed that “Christ was literally in no man’s land.” What did he mean? He had apparently abandoned belief in conventional Anglican Christianity, although his mother had hoped he would follow a clerical career. And he had earlier written quasi-homosexual poems, in which he had expressed a wish to kiss the brown hands of the altar boy rather than the crucifix the boy held for veneration. But the real meaning of this eros Owen felt was revealed to him in the war. In his poem “Greater Love,” he compares heterosexual eros unfavorably with the sacrificial love of soldiers for each other. In another letter, he recounted an incident in battle in which he cradled a young soldier in his arms as he bled to death. After a nervous breakdown caused by his being trapped for days in a shell hole littered with the body parts of a friend, he volunteered to go back to France because he thought he was a good officer and could help his men. He was killed by machine gun fire a week before the Armistice, and the news of his death reached his parents as the Armistice bells tolled.

Owen saw the soldier descending into hell and fulfilled his vocation as a poet by descending with him. The soldier, utterly forsaken by normal society, was thrust into a war that civilians could not imagine and left to die. He was degraded also by being forced to become a savage killer of other human beings. Owen curses all those who are indifferent to this suffering, and calls his future audience to remember the poor lads underground. It was perhaps in part the contemplation of such human suffering in the world wars that led the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar to his theology of Holy Saturday, to his emphasis on the descent of Christ among the damned and the dead, to be one with the damned and the dead, and therefore to revive the importance of the Harrowing of Hell, which had been lost in the West after the Middle Ages.

Comradeship is the love that is the unexpected fruit of the hell of war. The word *comrade* has a faintly foreign sound to American ears. *Buddy* is the usual American term but it doesn't convey the seriousness of the tie as well as *comrade*. J. Glenn Gray was a philosopher who observed combat closely as an intelligence officer in Europe during World War II. He was able to analyze and articulate his emotions, giving a voice in his book, *The Warriors*, to all those soldiers who fought and died without being able to explain why they did it. He saw that the isolation of the human person within the shell of the self is a terrible burden and that in times of crisis almost anything, including death, is preferable to that isolation. Friendship overcomes the isolation in one way. It is a love based on a common interest or dedication to something outside the self. But comradeship is not quite friendship; it focuses on the other, on the comrade. Men experience a fusion of personality with the comrade, *a union which is not interrupted by death*. Gray notes that the Germans do not say that soldiers die—they fall. As a soldier, Gray realizes, “I may fall, but I do not die, for that which is real in me goes forward and lives on in the comrades for whom I gave up my physical life.”⁹³ This fusion of personality is intoxicating, and veterans try to recapture the feeling at their reunions, although it seems that imminent danger is a necessary catalyst for this experience.⁹⁴

Comradeship and homosexuality have a common element. Like lovers, comrades focus on each other, and the fusion of personality in the ecstasy of self-sacrifice is *like* (not the same as) that in the ecstasy of sexual intercourse. Comrades, like lovers, focus on each other's sexual identity, or to be more precise, lovers focus on sexual identity, comrades on gender identity, that is, on masculinity.

Thus, military poetry frequently uses language that sounds (especially to the post-Freudian ear) homoerotic. Sometimes it is, but more often, it is simply that sex and gender are closely connected. In praising the beauty of masculine self-sacrifice, poets, who use concrete language, often use physical and even sexual imagery. Wilfred Owen, again in “Greater Love”, sees the love of a woman as less than the love of the comrade who is blinded or knifed to death in saving his fellow soldier: “Kindness of wooed and wooer/Seems shameless

to their love pure.” Sassoon and Owen were transient homosexuals, but the language they used was in the tradition of Victorian sentimentality and would not have been perceived as homoerotic by contemporary readers. Paul Fussell, in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, devotes a whole chapter, “Soldier Boys,” to homoeroticism in the literature of that war,⁹⁵ but I think he places a mistaken emphasis on latent homosexuality. The two loves, one so honored that the soldier becomes Christ, and the other a disgrace and an abomination, find themselves forced to share the same language.

J. R. R. Tolkien transmuted his war experiences at the battle of the Somme into fantasy in *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien, when he wrote this book, was a devout Catholic and the father of several children, although his marriage seems not to have been happy. His closest relationships were with men. In the tradition of the poetry of the Great War, he draws upon erotic imagery to portray the love of comradeship which Frodo and Sam feel for each other, a relationship Tolkien said was modeled on that of the British officer and his batman (servant) in the Great War. When Frodo is captured by orcs, he is stripped and tortured. Sam surprises the orcs from behind and kills them: “[Sam] ran to the figure huddled on the floor. It was Frodo. He was naked, lying as if in a swoon on a heap of filthy rags; his arm was flung up, shielding his head, and across his side there was an ugly whip-weal. ‘Frodo! Mr. Frodo, my dear!’ cried Sam, tears almost blinding him. ‘It’s Sam, I’ve come!’ He half lifted his master and hugged him to his breast. Frodo opened his eyes. . . . [Frodo] lay back in Sam’s gentle arms, closing his eyes, like a child at rest when night-fears are driven away by some loved voice or hand. Sam felt that he could sit like that in endless happiness.”⁹⁶

Such language sounds unusual and suspect to modern ears, but Frodo’s nakedness is only the visible representation of his vulnerability in his sacrificial and masculine role, and Sam’s gestures of affection are an attempt to express the closeness of comradeship. As in the Renaissance and Baroque paintings of Jesus in which his genitals are at the focal point of the painting, it is not precisely sexuality, but masculinity and its connection to sacrifice that is of interest.⁹⁷

The eros of homosexuality and the eros of comradeship resemble one another in that the focus is on the one loved, but the mode of union is different. In homosexuality, eros tries to achieve union through genital activity. But sexual union is achieved not in pleasure alone, but in the act of conception, in which man and woman literally unite in one flesh, that of the child. It is the possibility of conception that suffuses erotic love between man and woman with the hope that the prison of the individual personality can be escaped, that love can overcome loneliness and even death in the continuity of the generations. In the eros of comradeship, the personalities are fused because of the willingness of each to die for the other. It is a blood-brotherhood, a brotherhood attained only in blood, in sacrifice, and in death, or at least under the shadow and threat of these. A man is willing to die for his comrade because he feels an identity with him. It is not an identity based upon common interests or background; it unites men from different races, classes, nationalities, sometimes men who cannot even speak each other's language. The only common characteristic that unites comrades is their masculinity. Masculinity, at heart, is a willingness to sacrifice oneself for the other.⁹⁸

THE FASCIST MALE

European fascism was self-consciously masculine. All varieties of European fascism cultivated the image of masculinity. The *Action Française* characterized the French situation in this fashion: "Democracy was equal to anarchy; it lacked the manly principles of action and initiative; it made the state the prey of rapaciousness and group interests; it was feminine, weak and evil."⁹⁹ The Italian Futurists were a group of artists who rebelled against the museum culture of early twentieth-century Italy. They wanted to escape from stultifying conventions, and to make an art out of the new industrial world, which was full of noise, motion, and violence. They rejected Christianity and women. Marinetti proclaimed in "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism" that "we will glorify war—the world's only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of the anarchist, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for women."¹⁰⁰

“Futurism exalted a militant masculinity which glorified conquest and war.”¹⁰¹ The Futurists hated pacifists, but welcomed and cheered Mussolini as they helped push Italy into World War I.¹⁰²

The avant-garde in art was also the avant-garde of the fascist (in the generic sense) political movement in Europe. This alliance has long been a source of embarrassment to historians of art, who sometimes simply ignore the connection. The Expressionist painter Emil Nolde was a member of one of the first proto-Nazi groups and did not resign his membership until the end of the war. He, like Mircea Eliade (who was involved in Romanian fascism), celebrated the conjunction of modernity and the primitive that characterized fascist movements. The avant-garde (a term itself drawn from war) was embraced by the revolutionary Nazis who were more radical than Hitler. They wanted civilized constraints to disappear, so that the primitive power of sex, blood, and violence would be free to create a new culture, more in tune with nature than the desiccated Europe of the bourgeoisie.

Italian fascism was the least bloody of the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, and much of its totalitarian talk was bombast, an attempt to hold together an Italy riven by regional and local loyalties, in which the majority of the inhabitants did not even speak standard Italian. Mussolini found Italy a nation of waiters and wanted to leave it a nation of soldiers. He commanded, for instance, that local officials should wear uniforms and engage in physical exercise. Such fascists were more devotees of masculinity than of totalitarianism, and this put a strain on their relationship with their allies, the Nazis. Mussolini exempted Jewish veterans, their sons, and Jewish Fascist Party members (one out of three adult Jews) from the anti-Semitic laws that were the price of his alliance with Hitler. The Fascist army protected the Jews in the areas it occupied, and even threatened battle with the Germans to protect Jews. The anti-fascist war journalist and novelist Curzio Malaparte was in and out of prison for his opposition to Mussolini, but he testifies to the courage of the occasional fascist military and civil official who tried to protect Jews from Germans and from pogroms in Eastern Europe: “A Fascist who risks his skin to pull doomed Jews out of their murderer’s hands

. . . deserves the respect of all free and civilized men.”¹⁰³ Masculinity has always meant protecting the weak of one’s own community, and the Italian fascists felt that Jews (unlike Ethiopians) were inside the European community.

German fascism was much more sinister, but it seems to be distinct from Nazism in that it was a celebration of masculinity rather than an ideology of race hatred masking total nihilism. Its immediate ideological ancestor is the Viennese Jew, Otto Weininger. Weininger anticipated many of the later psychological analyses of masculinity and femininity: he saw that femininity was the natural condition of all human beings, and that men were all originally bisexual, in that they contained the feminine in themselves, because of their birth from a woman and their early nurture from a woman. Weininger thought that women were the stronger sex and had an easier life: all they had to do to become women was to follow the logic of their own sexuality in reproduction. Men who chose to see reproduction as the fulfillment of their life, that is, the Jews, were effeminate men who had not taken up the challenge of transcendence.¹⁰⁴ Thus, Weininger rejected his own Jewishness, converting to Protestantism the day he received his doctorate. He also rejected the limitations of living in the body by committing suicide.

This type of masculinity escapes from femininity only to fall into the void. The complete pattern of masculinity contains both the escape from the feminine and the return to it. The hyper-masculinity which sees only the initial rejection and escape ends in nihilism, in a worship of the void and death. In these can be found the final confrontation with darkness, a confrontation which becomes a union, and a total and final rejection of the world of the feminine, of life and love and society.

Most European ideologies of masculinity do not go this far, but many of them have a strong tendency to nihilism. The final rejection of the feminine also explains why a tendency to homosexuality was a strong component of these attempts to regain masculinity. Heterosexual desire is the main force that keeps men from spinning off totally into the void and which therefore tends to reunite them with the world of women. If women must be totally rejected, heterosexual

desire must also be rejected, and few men can be happy in permanent celibacy.

The immediate political roots of Nazism were in the Freikorps, the bodies of soldiers organized after World War I to keep order in a Germany on the edge of revolution. The corps were like other warriors, the Cossacks and the Tartars, who lived by plunder and killing. As Barbara Ehrenreich points out in her introduction to Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies*, the fascist kills because he likes killing. It is not a substitute for something else, for instance, sex, but something desired in itself. Moreover, this desire is not a quasi-psychotic aberration, but based on a fundamental condition in the psychological constitution of the male. The Freikorps' "perpetual war was undertaken to escape women."¹⁰⁵ The fundamental fear of men is the fear of falling back into the feminine world of infancy: "It is a dread, ultimately, of dissolution—of being swallowed, engulfed, annihilated. Women's bodies are the holes, swamps, pits of muck that can engulf."¹⁰⁶ German fascists feared the loss of identity in the "other," in communism, in miscegenation between German and Jew. Anti-Semitism was not originally a prominent part of German fascism of the Freikorps variety, which was more like Prussian militarism, a celebration of the male as leader and protector. But males were insecure in a ruined and defeated Germany.¹⁰⁷

Nazis promised to organize Germany as *Männerbund*, a society that understood men's inner life and provided for it.¹⁰⁸ Josef Goebbels proclaimed that "the National Socialist movement is in its nature a masculine movement."¹⁰⁹ Hitler and the rituals of the Nazi Party gave the young men of Germany a substitute for the generation of fathers that had been lost in the First World War. Comradeship was held up as the highest form of love, and the German Christians who were not simply opportunistic anti-Semites tried to show that comradeship was to be found in its highest form in Christ, who lay down his life for his friends.

National Socialism, although it cloaked itself in a veneer of romantic nationalism (which did not deceive nationalists like Ernst Jünger) was at best racist, and at worst purely nihilist. Hitler valued Germany only as a means to achieve the dominance of the Aryan

race, and the Aryan race only as a means to achieve absolute, unlimited, universal power. The lust for power is the only appetite that remains in the masculine abyss. The naked assertion of self in the will to power was the answer to the death of God. Indeed, the cruelties of Nazism were calculated ones: they killed their victims with the maximum of pain, so as to harden the executioners.

Nazism shows most fully the dangers inherent in masculinity. The male, to become masculine, must first move away from the normal, feminine, domestic world, face danger and darkness, and then return to the normal world transfigured by his experience. The motion away from the normal is dangerous. It should be a parabola, leaving the base line of the normal only to return to it, but it can become a hyperbola, plunging off forever into the nothingness of infinity. Initially, it can be very hard to see the difference between the two trajectories. Nor are they predetermined. The male has a free will and can choose one or the other. Nor can a society avoid the dangers of nihilistic masculinity by renouncing masculinity. Any society that faces dangers must have an ideology that convinces some to face those dangers voluntarily for the sake of others, and if a society is to survive, those who face the dangers must be men, not women on whom the biological continuity of society depends. Nor can nihilistic masculinity be defeated by femininity, in a renunciation of separation and difference in an orgiastic communion. If a man goes wrong and heads off into nothingness, he can be defeated only by a man who has faced the darkness and not been conquered by it. Ernst Jünger could have joined the Freikorps and become a Nazi; it was precisely his masculinity that saved him. He despised the Nazis as soft; they killed the weak. Germans who took masculinity seriously would eventually have found themselves in the position of the Italian Fascists who subverted the Holocaust.

THE HEART OF DARKNESS

The search for self-transcendence in war, a search that has captivated millions of men in our century, is a warning that masculinity contains a dangerous dynamic. Because a man feels that he must die to

the old self, that he must somehow confront the mystery of life, including the mystery of evil, he is in danger of making death and evil and nothingness the end of his quest. Masculinity can easily become nihilism, a worship of the nothingness whose darkness and emptiness fascinate because they contain the promise of the final and ultimate death, a death that somehow seems necessary to complete rebirth. But the rebirth can be forgotten, and only death and emptiness remain.

Nihilism is not simply a philosophical error, but a religious one. Since for the nihilist the final truth of the universe is that it is a void, the good has no source outside the ego. To a nihilist the good is only what he wants. A soft nihilism is the ideal of modern European society, in which sex and possessions and amusements are the goal of life. Moral relativism is a disguised nihilism because it destroys the objective and imperious character of the good. A good that is not an absolute is no true good at all. A good that can be reduced to an instrumentality, that is not recognized as an absolute in its own right, becomes simply another means for the ego to pursue its ends. Soft nihilism is an easy path to hard nihilism: Weimar was the logical predecessor of the Nazi state.¹¹⁰ Hard or revolutionary nihilism, in Herman Rauschnig's perception, was the heart of Nazi ideology. The talk of blood and race and nation was a smokescreen, only a ruse for the masses to facilitate the pursuit of the true goal, absolute power.¹¹¹ The nihilist ends by adoring power; at the heart of the will to power is a void that nothing can fill.

Nihilism is a characteristically, but not uniquely, masculine fault. Women have been less affected by this particular fascination with the void or by the attraction of the power to do evil, although feminists have started to fall under its spell. For them everything is politics; facts are simply mental constructs to be manipulated in the service of their quest for power. But they are toying with fire. The man attracted to soft nihilism often falls into hard nihilism, because power is seductive and compelling. For many men, power is all that there is, the only reality in the world. It begins with the feelings of sexual power in adolescence, in which the body is filled with a force that seems to come from outside oneself but to fill and control

the self. As the muscles grow and harden, the adolescent male feels the power of his body and uses it to frighten other people. Swaggering male adolescents enjoy the looks on an adult's face, the fear or terror that their mere presence inspires.

This attraction to power can be disciplined and sent into socially useful channels, or at least channels that do not threaten to destroy society immediately. But the common element in the deformations of masculinity that result from an exaggeration of some masculine characteristics is their more or less explicit worship of power in crime, Satanism, fascism, Nazism—all of which are practical forms of nihilism.

The men who perpetrate the crimes of the twentieth century know they are damning themselves; but they are damning themselves, cutting themselves off forever from the mutual love of society, *out of love for and service to that society*. It is this mysticism of sin that has haunted the literature, politics, and even the theology of this century, but it has roots in the religious situation of Europe in which masculinity has become more and more alienated from Christianity. This perverted masculinity appeals to men because it is not a total lie, but a partial truth close to the real truth. Jesus is the embodiment of perfect masculinity in that he descends into death and hell, there to confront and conquer them and to return to his bride, the Church, as King and Spouse. But if a man in his own power tries to descend into hell, he finds there only a defeat, and is taken captive by the powers of darkness he wishes to conquer.