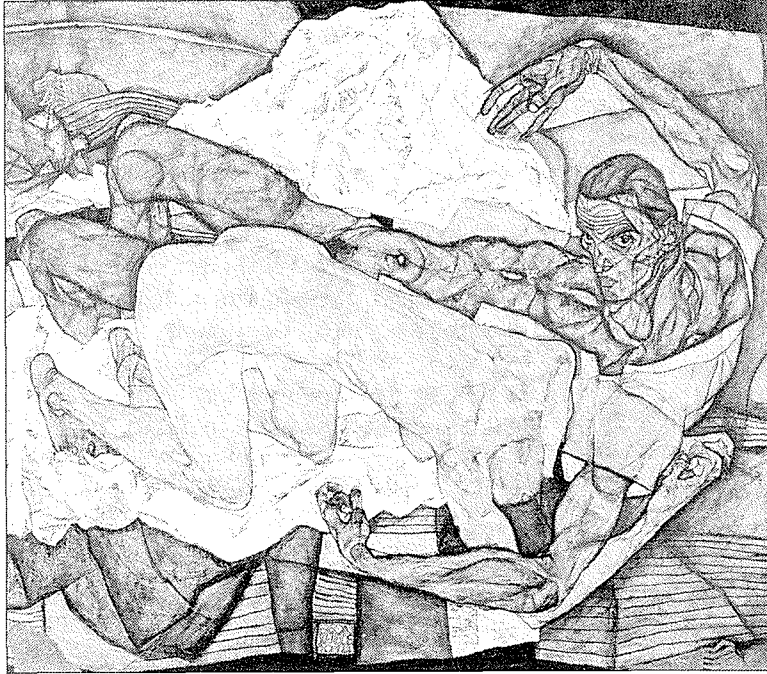

HOW TO AVOID DATE RAPE

BY NELSON W. ALDRICH, JR.



Egon Schiele's 1914 Man and Woman (Liebespaar)

What strikes some as an absurd tempest in a teapot is to others a crucial battle in the gender wars. Neither side gets the larger point of the date-rape controversy, says Nelson Aldrich.

Date rape, whirlpooling, *kultur*-rape in Bosnia, the Spur Posse in Southern California, the Manassas penis cutter—sexual horror stories shuddered through the media last year, each paroxysm more horrible than the last.

The erotic mayhem got so bad it even sustained an intelligent conversation for a few months. That's my subject—the talk, especially the talk about date rape and what to do about it. It has fascinated me. One reason, alas,

is personal. Legally, it may be true that rape is rape, and that “date” is a needless qualifier of a simple, brutal crime. Trouble is, it may qualify me. The topic reminds me of squalid scuffles in dimly lit rooms, of desperate moves in the back seats of cars. Legal rape is for the poor, the crazy, the unlucky. Date rape, I have to say, may, at least in its broader connotations, be for me.

The other reason for my fascination may have more general implications. Talk of date

rape is appallingly destructive for everyone, even for those who merely talk about it. Anyone peering into the thick cloud of charges and denials can see the corpses. Hope and love died on that date, some sort of hope, anyway—and some sort of love. The truth was another casualty. With charges of date rape, often, one doesn't even have the consolation of knowing that "someone here is lying." Maybe neither of them has been lying.

That's the worst of the destruction, isn't it? To language, to our faith that an apparently common language can create common understandings. Join an argument about date rape, and within minutes we are spinning around in a maelstrom of multiple perspectives. Round and round we go, down and down, until at last we all go gurgling out into Humpty-Dumpty land:

"When I use a word," Humpty-Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty-Dumpty, "which is to be Master—that's all."

Humpty-Dumpty land is where events like date rape may happen, or not happen, simply because someone's word, or spin on a word, masters all competing words, or spins. This land is our land. It's where we come out after our multiple perspectives are so thoroughly separated—each from others, each from itself over time—that all reality is suddenly up for cognitive grabs. In Humpty-Dumpty land every fourth word looks like it's suspended between sarcastic quotation marks. The simple *wasness* of things is lost in a dustup of desperately performative utterances. "Let there have been date rape!" says you; "Let there have been some good clean

sex!" says I. And in the end (if there ever is an end), since no one in Humpty-Dumpty land really is Master, all conflicts are settled by force—physical force, or, as we say, the forces of law and order.

Humpty-Dumpty land has been on the map since long before Lewis Carroll. Pick your own Fall—with Heraclitus, Montaigne, Locke, whenever. And one can get fetched up in that country in the course of almost any sort of conversation. Political journalists, for example, spend most of their days there, dizzied and dizzying, as they put competitive spins on the spins of spin masters. This is dismaying enough: A pall of mistrust falls between ourselves and our democracy, our self-government. But imagine what it must be like to get into a word fight over . . . well, let's call it an "intercourse event." Such fights can have consequences for the body. A raped body feels different from a body that has enjoyed a truly erotic moment. A rapist's body (or a "date rapist's") feels different in jail than it does at large.

That was the sort of fight, and the stakes, that were at issue last fall, for example, when two undergraduates submitted their contest for mastery over an intercourse event to the arbitration of a court. The trial happened to be in London, but it might have been anywhere in the English-speaking world. She said she'd been raped. He said he'd been seduced, and was now the victim of the woman's "self-repugnance after the fact." His word was declared Master, it turned out, but as always in the woozy world of Humpty-Dumpty, it had been a near thing.

Nor was the contest over. Isabel Hilton, a columnist for London's *Independent*, confidently opined after the trial that wild bids for mastery such as this woman's are "an abuse of the power that many generations of feminists fought for—the power to *make* their word count and to be taken seriously" (*italics mine*). But Hilton is naive. Do courts have the final

Nelson W. Aldrich, Jr. is a New York writer and the author, most recently, of Old Money: The Mythology of America's Upper Class (Vintage). Copyright © 1994 by Nelson W. Aldrich, Jr.

word on other words? Can anyone but God, by saying the word, *make* it so?

But this is the horror: that meaning for the body should ever be contingent on the uses and abuses of *power*, yours, mine, and the next guy's, all mixing it up in a battle for mastery. Yet so it seems.

Many people find the prospect of endless semantic warfare extremely disagreeable. I know I do, which is why I am sympathetic to the largest and loudest group in the date-rape debate, the people who say they can't understand what all the fuss is about. I can tell one of them by the first words out of his or her mouth. "When I was dating. . .," they begin, and invariably go on to claim that they always knew how to get what they desired (or to avoid what they did not) without feeling bad about it, or being thought bad, or being punished as bad, or actually being bad.

The women I've heard on this topic say they knew how to behave on dates because someone taught them: say, how to drink without getting (too) drunk. Their mothers told them what sort of boys to avoid. Their girlfriends explained how to put off the really heavy breathers without enraging them. One would think, listening to these women, that they'd grown up in the oral traditions of a tribe.

The men knew how to date because . . . well, they just knew. As a friend of mine put it, "I was always easily discouraged, is all."

Gnostics of the dating game are Romantics, direct descendants of the divine Jean-Jacques, nostalgists (as he was) of the unconscious conscience. They may also be romantic, lovers of romance, though this is uncertain. But they are certainly naive, like Isabel Hilton. Their tone is usually complacent at first, even bored. But as soon as they find themselves gurgling into Humpty-Dumpty land, they become petulant, frightened, furious. Accusations follow, notably against the people who set off the date-rape alarm. Romantics insist that these people are lying, twisting words for

political, specifically feminist effect. A buzzword here is "problematize," as in, "Why are these women problematizing romance?"

But of course the Romantics want to be Master, too, though they seem scarcely aware of it. They want to be masters of the debate, to stop the spinning. It threatens something valuable to them, some broad understanding of "life," the common language that underwrites a pleasing, morale-sustaining arrangement of (moral) relationships and possibilities. Nietzsche called such an arrangement a "horizon," declaring that everyone must either draw one around himself, or "restrict [his] vision to the limits of a horizon drawn by another." We like to call such things a "culture."

Culture is a key concept in this debate. Romantics want one that exerts more or less preemptive control over our words and deeds. You can tell, listening to them, that what they have in mind is what we used to call a "second nature," a sort of quasireflex that mediates between our primal nature, where all our lusts and terrors and rages roil around, and the dry repressive artifacts of society, where our rewards and punishments come from. In a culture like that, laid down deep, knowledge of how to behave on dates, and elsewhere, appears to those who have it as simple realism, basic common sense.

Romantics believe they have it, or, more accurately, that they are had by it. The Romantic notion of culture almost always betrays a longing for that prelapsarian state where moral choices (if choices they are) seem somehow to have merely *happened*, to have come about without the slightest sense of personal agency. Thus, in the Romantic view, dating is always being anthropologized ("a ritual"), or aestheticized ("a dance"), or otherwise jollied into some morally reassuring condition ("a game") in which everyone knows the "moves," the "signals," the "score."

Who can't sympathize with that? I can. What is supremely annoying about the date-rape debate is that it's making everyone hor-

ribly mistrustful and self-conscious about something that ought to proceed easily and naturally. "How absurd!" we say, about the dating rules in force at Antioch College. "You can't legislate courting behavior!" Rules for the management of sexual desire ought to be, as it were, *inherited*. They should do their thing as a trust fund does its thing, releasing their instructions directly into the nerves and fibers of the body, like dividends into the bank account, without the distressing necessity, as one might say, of "working at it."

I speak as a man, but there are Romantic women who are quite as annoyed by the date-rape alarmists as the men are. "What's the problem?" they ask. "Why can't they *handle* these guys?" One heard this refrain often during the Hill-Thomas hearings, when southern women, black and white, were reported to be scorning their beleaguered "sister." "What is the matter with that woman," they'd say, "to let a man treat her so bad?" Camille Paglia, catching the refrain, has made a media career out of sneering at abuse-sensitive feminists. To Paglia, they are a bunch of complainers who can't seem to seize the full possibilities of their liberation: that they, too, as *naturally* as any man, can yearn for an intercourse event.

The notion of deep culture serves Romantics well. Too well, say the feminists, the second-loudest participants in the date-rape debate. To them, it seems obvious that the culture that these latter-day Romantics want to defend is "patriarchy." Cut through the persiflage, feminists say, and what you find is the very source of date rape, men's domination of women. Date rape occurs because the deep-cultural structures of patriarchy—a "second nature" if there ever was one, founded on the "natural" physical power of men—cannot accommodate the right of women to say no.

Forgive me if I seem Clintonesque here, not to say wimpish, but I find that I am as sympathetic to the feminist drive to destroy patriarchy as I am to the Romantic desire to restore "ritual." I am a liberal, that is to say, a grate-

ful beneficiary of liberal revolutions, the American Revolution in particular. And what happened in that revolution, among other things, was a semantic struggle over "the King" in which we liberals gained the mastery. "The King," once a deep-cultural instruction of obligation and deference, was henceforth to be understood as a tyrannical claim on our deference and obedience. This justified the overthrow of the institution behind the word. American men today live on the spoils of that glorious triumph, and it seems to me that feminists want only to push it to its logical conclusion. As they see it, patriarchy lay at the bottom of the King, the Church, the Great Chain of Being, and God the Father. Patriarchy is the root system of a once-vast tree. The tree has been felled, by the American and other revolutions, but the roots still send up noxious shoots (such as rape) to pollute the good clean air of freedom and equality. This is feminism's self-appointed task: to whack away at these last extrusions of a deep, underlying culture—to cover it in darkness, so that it will die.

Romantics of the dating game can't be expected to applaud this task, but they can hardly protest it either, having profited so handsomely from its first cuts. The only thing they can do is ask the feminists the same question that was always asked of their predecessors in the liberal revolution: What happens when you've won? And if patriarchy is the last, deepest culture of them all, what on earth will take its place as a deep, preemptive control on our desires, as our new moral habit? And if nothing should take its place, how shall we ever be *good*?

Feminists seem not overly responsive to these questions. They appear much too busy with the more joyful part of their task, the liberating whacking part. Beyond that, they are usually content with the immemorial reply of previous liberal warriors. Deep dead cultures will simply have to be replaced by education. In the date-rape instance, this means, presumably, the marvelous educative powers of principle—No Fornication without Representa-

THE ANTIOCH COLLEGE SEXUAL OFFENSE POLICY

1. For the purpose of this policy, "consent" shall be defined as follows: the act of willingly and verbally agreeing to engage in specific sexual contact or conduct.
2. If sexual contact and/or conduct is not mutually and simultaneously initiated, then the person who initiates sexual contact/conduct is responsible for getting the verbal consent of the other individual(s) involved.
3. Obtaining consent is an on-going process in any sexual interaction. Verbal consent should be obtained with each new level of physical and/or sexual contact/conduct in any given interaction, regardless of who initiates it. Asking "Do you want to have sex with me?" is not enough. The request for consent must be specific to each act.
4. The person with whom sexual contact/conduct is initiated is responsible to express verbally and/or physically her/his willingness or lack of willingness when reasonably possible.
5. If someone has initially consented but then stops consenting during a sexual interaction, she/he should communicate withdrawal verbally and/or through physical resistance. The other individual(s) must stop immediately.
6. To knowingly take advantage of someone who is under the influence of alcohol, drugs and/or prescribed medication is not acceptable behavior in the Antioch community.

A section of Antioch College's 1993 "sexual violence and safety" policy.

tion! Failing that, feminists will demand contracts, like Antioch's. Failing those, they will call, as exasperated liberals always do, for lashings of laws and punishments.

Somehow the liberal response doesn't seem to satisfy anymore, not as it used to. It especially doesn't satisfy those, such as Charles Taylor, Robert Bellah, and others, who are often called communitarians. Communitarians have a strong voice in the date-rape debate, and in some of them, the softer ones, it throbs equally with Romance and alarm. Like the feminists, if far less enthusiastically, the communitarians acknowledge that daters should treat each other as equals, lest there be no self-respect and mutual respect on dates. For, without those, dating will always be prone to corruption, unhappiness, and lousy sex.

Like Romantics, however, communitarians believe that it will take more than freedom and equality, more even than education,

Antioch-like contracts, and the police, to assure smooth dating. Like Romantics, they believe it will take a culture. Daters need a culture to preserve the romance of dating, of course, but even more urgently they need one to save civil society from increasing violence. Or rather, to save us from two great evils that lead to violence.

One evil was flagged first by Jean-Jacques himself: the hypocrisy, the falsity, that comes with studied behavior. To that one might add the *gaucherie*. If "education" is all that stands between us and moral chaos, then good behavior is all a matter of study. It doesn't matter what sort of study, whether one gets it in school, or from how-to books, or at the feet of preachers, gurus, or fee-for-service therapists, or from any of the thousands of moral curricula that modern society has generated to help us control our desires. It might even come

from the always-handly "discipline of the marketplace." As soon as we depend on "study" or "work," we find ourselves on the slippery slope from frustration to rage, thence to the divine afflatus of fury that lifts us high, high, high above all conflict, mistrust, restraint, and lets us scream out at last the most blissful obscenity of rejection.

And that evil leads straight to the other: a society that has to whip itself into obedience with laws, rules, and regulations, all backed up by the police, the courts, and the prisons. The pendulum of American violence swings like that—back and forth between antinomian ecstasy and Arminian wrath.

No surprise there, say the communitarians. America, more than any other modern society, has neglected its communities. It is only "community," they say, that can provide us with both a Romantic's notion of culture and a feminist's notion of equality. More accurately, a strong, pervasive, and, yes, mildly repressive *sense* of community is what is needed. It takes a whole village, goes a favorite communitarian proverb, to raise a child. Cultures do not insinuate themselves, by themselves, into the mainsprings of people's behavior, as many Romantics seem to believe. They are cultivated, and constantly reinforced, by the example, the pressure, the approval, and if need be the condemnation, of members of a community. To imagine that "culture" could be an agent of self-government without community, as Romantics often do, is to imagine that Ralph Lauren breeds ladies and gentlemen. This is not just romantic; it is hopelessly romantic.

Against the feminist-liberals, on the other hand, communitarians take a decidedly skeptical view of freedom. Liberation is okay, apparently: freeing us from the oppression of inequality. Liberty is more dubious. But "community" subdues liberty, almost without our knowing it. It does this by replacing liberty with the great human goods that liberation has uprooted: a sense of place, of belonging,

of the givenness of things; continuity between the generations; and, derived from these goods, a common, dependable language of speech and gesture, and a "horizon" to embrace and contain a renewed order of self-government.

As it happens, I have some personal experience of these benefits of "community." I grew up in as realistic a copy of a village culture as you'll find in America. Not among the Amish or the Hassidim; nor in an assimilation-resistant ghetto, immigrant or drug-infested. These places are arguably not in America, or not yet. I was raised in patrician Boston, with its bleak virtues of thriftiness, trustworthiness, grim fortitude, and moral candor; its *cursus honorum* of boarding school, outdoor discipline, and Harvard; and its endless, manifold repressions—sexual repression not least among them. This culture was laid down deep in me, or was supposed to have been, and to a quite specific purpose—the breeding of an all 'round boy, who would become a prudent, gentlemanly, civic-minded man, a sort of Renaissance trustee.

But the culture, deep as it was, was not deep enough. It did not take. Nor did it take with my childhood friends. It couldn't have: The Fall had occurred. Even in Boston, there is no inherited culture; it must be chosen, worked for, studied.

This was the great flaw in Katie Roiphe's famous *New York Times Magazine* article of last summer, which brought the date-rape debate home to her parents' generation. Roiphe is an apostle of a rather Pagli-esque sort of Romanticism in dating. "No problem" is her view of date rape: How can it be rape if I'm loving it? (No, I am unfair. Her view is more like, "I may not be loving it, but it's not rape, either.") Still, she does try to account for the date rapes—in her view, the very few date rapes—that do happen. And her answer is: cross-cultural dating on today's multicultural campuses. In my terms this translates as: If I'd only stuck to ladylike Bostonians in my dating career, I could never even imagine, as I can now imagine all too

well, that I had ever committed date rape.

But Roiphe has made a truly nasty problem for herself here, and it's a problem I don't see communitarians finessing, either. For if it's true that our erotic mayhem, such as it may be, is a consequence of crossed cultural signals, then all we have to do to fix matters is a little cultural cleansing. Schools, singles bars, neighborhoods, municipal swimming pools, cruise ships, wherever people meet to date and mate (and possibly to rape), need only be segregated by village culture, that is, by the variety of second-nature nurture they received at birth, merely because of their birth, and all will be well.

This is dangerous rubbish. Cultural cleansing may cut down rape within cultures, assuming there is such a thing, but at the cost of increasing it along their (always expanding, always violent) frontiers. Moreover, Nazis, fascists, and Greater Serbians have all tried this sort of hygiene, and none has managed to remain clean for long.

Beyond the rubbish, though, I want to ask Roiphe what cultures she has in mind, in this New World, that are so determinative of male dating behavior that the word "no" actually gets translated as "yes."

To me, the Romantic-communitarian theory of cultured behavior is just another twitch of tribal nostalgia. "Culture" serves these people as does the chauvinism of a typically mixed-ethnic American who, of all the leaves in his genetic salad, chooses to claim the one called "German." Such ploys are just some of the desperate ways we have of coping with, by somehow delimiting, the single greatest constitutive achievement of modern societies, certainly of American society—our democratization of the franchise of desire. Anybody has the right to want anything, even to *be* anything.

It's easy to forget that not long ago a full range of desires was possible only for the privileged, by birth or traditional office. Everyone else was embedded in ignorance

and poverty, surviving on fatalism, faith, and the remissive powers of alcohol. Today everyone, including our children, especially our children, is promised the freedom, the opportunity, the *possibility* of wanting almost everything there is to want—and the possibility of getting what he or she wants. (Not wanting, in fact, is a form of invisibility, a kind of death.) This achievement is the glorious reward of our long, bloody struggle for freedom and equality against kings, nobles, priests, and (soon now) patriarchs. It's as if all those old oligopolists had been dispossessed of their estates, with the privileges auctioned off to the richest bidders (richest in talents, luck, and money), and their hopes and dreams given freely to everyone else. In America, where the franchise of desire has spread wider and gone deeper than anywhere else in the world, this magnificent process is called the pursuit of happiness.

But no culture, not even Boston's, can possibly withstand the temptations of democratized desire. First, the franchise sends everything spinning. It may be an accident that the "Rashomon effect," everybody's favorite denominator of the vertigo of multiple perspectives, refers to a movie about a rape. But a drama of desire it had to be, of one kind or another. Desire is what pumps Humpty-Dumpty up.

Second, the free-market system combines with the franchise to abstract cultures and communities from their settings—to commodify, package, and send them to market. (Watch: In a generation or so, someone is sure to be selling us on the beauties of the Patriarchal lifestyle.) All the so-called cultures available in the modern world—the "culture" (which is also the "community," mind you) of your business, your favorite sport, your neighborhood, your social class, your region, your neurosis, your religion, your taste in food and drink, your therapy, your profession, and on and on—all the desire-control devices manufactured by a desire-driven polity are all simply elective cur-

ricula, more or less costly, more or less exchangeable, more or less thorough. But all, lest desire be hedged about, perfectly shallow.

Therefore, *pace* Katie Roiphe, it is not communities of common culture that intradate and make love, or interdate and rape, on campuses these days; it is individual closets of cultures. They may be a bit jumbled, these closets, Ralph Lauren suits on the hangers, grunge outfits on the floor. But the kids can't be expected to have their own personal style right off the dime, can they? Not any more than adults can be expected to keep a lifestyle for the length of a life. The modern principle applies to young and old: Mix and match your own cultures! Be your own Humpty-Dumpty! Select, don't settle.

Finally, to finish off any lingering fantasy we may have about cultivating deep cultures, there's the only common, truly pervasive culture we have, the consumer culture. Its Idol, as Auden called it, is possibility. The cultural horizons of communitarian nostalgia exerted desire-control by letting poverty, fatalism, religion edit (out, for the most part) possibility. There were some things you just did not want or do; they were utterly unimaginable. Humpty-Dumpty sat on his wall. Moreover, these pre- and proscriptions did seem inherited, "natural" as egg and sperm and "blood" are natural. However, as an added assurance of good behavior, the moral culture was passed along with an equally "natural" inherited status—as Slave, say, or Father, or First-Born Son, or Woman. Without a hereditary-status hierarchy, in fact, no community culture of the sort longed for by communitarians has ever existed. Nor, thanks to our democratic access to the sense of possibility, will it ever exist again.

Thus, in the actual world, it is impossibility that is unimaginable—for everyone. With the glory of liberation now hard-wired to the universality of the consumer "culture," the most compelling instruction of modern life, and of the whole worldwide economy built

upon it, is that there is not now, nor ought there *ever* to be, any controls on our possibilities, our desires, at all.

Some communitarians seem to recognize the hopelessness of their cause. Like Charles Taylor, they pray that we may somehow see, and choose, the wisdom of embedding ourselves in some sort of community, of restricting ourselves within some Nietzschean horizon of the possible. But to judge by the activities of some of their agents—for example, the American Association for Rights & Responsibilities—the only way many communitarians can think of to accomplish this feat is to help "communities" lash the miscreants in their midst with new laws, more police, and harsher punishments. Any old liberal could have thought of that. But thought, too, that it will never do the trick.

No wonder date rape managed to get a good conversation going. The date is the perfect synecdoche for our modern predicament. We are always out on dates of some sort or other, petting and being petted, breathing heavily, tumescent, possessed by the passion to possess—something. Even objects of desire (subject to fear) have this experience. But at the same time, in the shadow of this heady arousal, the thought occurs that we can't get all we want all the time. There are too few resources, too many desires, too many objects of desire, too many ways of getting what we desire. Not to mention too many other desirers, each with multiple needs, wants, yearnings of their own, and multiple perspectives to go with them. It's enough to drive one mad.

Whereupon we sense the melancholy summons to self-government. The thing is melancholy in just about every way. It means choosing, which eliminates possibilities and reminds us that no one is chosen, that nothing is given. It means taking responsibility, thereby inhibiting desire and inviting blame. It means calculation, plans, cost-benefit analyses, all of which promote self-consciousness, prepare for embarrassment, and stifle romance. Above all,

self-government is terribly difficult, and not just because of the possibilities and temptations of desire. For the fact is that all the King's horses of "community," and all the King's men of "culture," cannot disguise the fact that we govern ourselves alone, and that we have to choose our own stars to guide us. It's only when we fail to do so that we find we have company—the police, for example.

Other help is available. Self-government is depressing, but not impossible. As Philip Rieff reminded us 30 years ago in *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, all the while that "cultures" were being rendered elective, and their "communities" with them, portable culture substitutes were being prepared in the consulting rooms of psychotherapists. Of course it's a highly contentious question in Humpty-Dumpty land how helpful fee-for-service therapy may be to self-government. Many Romantics loathe it as another plague of self-consciousness, another blight on romance. Many communitarians complain that without family, neighborhood, and peer group to reinforce the therapized behavior, the help will come to naught. And many feminists consider most schools of therapy just so many shoots of the old patriarchal root system, to be slashed and buried. No one claims that it will do anything for the loneliness of the task.

But even here help may be on the way. People have been "problematizing" the franchise of desire and the worship of possibility for a very long time. And again and again they've concluded that what's needed is to reverse the whole economic ethos that underwrites the franchise and the idolatry. This means turning upside down some of our most cherished values—"economic growth," "mobility" (always upward of course), the whole ideological apparatus that Plato condemned as "pleonexia," more-more-ism, the fatal disease of democracy.

The question is, how? There's been a surprising unanimity about this. Generation after generation of worriers about behavior have hit upon the same old counterethos—asceticism. It has been propounded in many forms, Chris-

tian mostly, but also classical. Among my sort of Bostonians, for example, the secret appetite suppressant (and capital preservative) was Stoicism. Today it seems to me that there are more asceticisms on the morality market than ever before: Buddhism, New Ageisms, especially varieties based on Native American practices, radical environmentalism, and so on. More to the point of date rape, a vast network of quasicommunities, ad hoc villages, has grown up around the possibility of impossibility and the folly of insatiable desire. This is the 12-Step movement set in motion by Alcoholics Anonymous, but now established among "communities" of incontinents of every conceivable description—including the lustful, the panicky, and the enraged.

But of course none of these curricula will make much headway against pleonexia so long as the marketplace keeps up its relentless arousal of desire. James Madison knew this in the 1790s, as did William James in the 1890s. Jimmy Carter knew it, too, when he echoed James's call for the moral equivalent of war to ground a new asceticism for the 1970s. Poor Carter. But now the rage for more, more, more is bumping up against a tiny but fully mobilized political opposition, as well as some brutal denials of desire in the environment. If it weren't for injustice, the sickening (and widening) gap between the desire possibilities of the rich and the poor, one might even suggest that the ascetic curriculum looks like a good long-term investment. There are no grounds for optimism, as Christopher Lasch pointed out recently, but we can always hope.

Meanwhile, as we await the future of asceticism, two things will change. The conversation about date rape will move on to other frightful subjects, and fewer and fewer intercourse events will be performatively declared "date rapes" by feminist-alarmist Humpty-Dumpties. The reason is not that these events will become universally consensual, still less that we'll all wrap ourselves in horizons of factitious culture communities and date only

within them. The reason is that, long before society becomes just or we become ascetics, the feminist revolution will succeed and patriarchy will die.

After that it seems likely that the worst fears of the Romantics will come true. Mistrust and self-mistrust should become even more commonplace than they have been, spreading deeper and deeper into all social relations and all activities—schooling, politics, art, therapies. With this, love should become even less “natural,” even more of a studied achievement, than it already is. Perhaps, then, we will finally accept what we hear so often, but don’t want to believe: that love is “hard work.”

Self-government, meanwhile, will be as hard as it always was, even with a proliferation of rules and contracts. And its failures, like rape, will be what they’ve always been in liberal regimes—ever more harshly, ever more ineffectually punished crimes. If you have seen Antioch, you have seen the future of America. And (up to a point) it works.

If this sounds disagreeable, as it surely does already to many millions of people, something can be done about it without waiting for the doubtful triumph of asceticism.

There are any number of groups dedicated to the promulgation of a stable, inerrant language, and to a “natural,” unequivocal moral law. These groups differ in the warrant they believe they’ve found for these certainties: the Bible, the Koran, the Roman Catholic doctrine of natural law, the tribe, the “original intent” of the Founders of the Republic, God’s Word, your genes, and so on. They vary, too, in their attitude toward the free market and its indefatigable spirit of consumerism. But they do not vary in their hostility to liberty, to possibility, to democratic desire, and to individual self-government.

This is a high price to pay, it seems to a conversationalist like me, merely for a little semantic security. Moreover, it seems extremely unlikely that merely by subjecting himself to one Humpty-Dumpty, enclosing himself within the wall of his horizon, that anyone can put him back together again. And even if one could, what of the H-Ds on the other side? What of the H-Ds inside one’s own head? We know now that the fat boys are here, there, everywhere. And as we’ll never be able to forget it, we will never be together again, either.