

The avant-garde, which emerged with its “adversarial” gestures in the late 19th century, Kimball avers, “has become a casualty of its own success. Having won battle after battle, it gradually transformed a recalcitrant bourgeois culture into a willing collaborator in its raids on established taste. But in this victory were the seeds of its own irrelevance, for without credible resistance, its oppositional gestures degenerated into a kind of aesthetic buffoonery.”

Too much is made, Kimball contends, of the tribulations of the 19th-century avant-garde artists, such as Edouard Manet, Paul Gauguin, and Vincent Van Gogh. “The fact that these great talents went unappreciated has had the undesirable effect of encouraging the thought that *because* one is unappreciated one is there-

fore a genius.” The truth, however, writes Kimball, is that, in any era, “most art is bad. And in our time, most art is not only bad but also dishonest: a form of therapy or political grumbling masquerading as art.”

The contemporary art world, in his view, has lost touch with beauty—and “without an allegiance to beauty, art degenerates into a caricature of itself.” Yet a purely aesthetic conception of art, divorced from the rest of life, is also unsatisfactory. Art needs “an ethical dimension,” Kimball insists. “We have come a long way since Dostoyevsky could declare that, ‘Incredible as it may seem, the day will come when man will quarrel more fiercely about art than God.’ Whether that trek has described a journey of progress is perhaps an open question.”

## *Mailer the Meteor*

In an interview in *New England Review* (Summer 1999), novelist Norman Mailer tells of the impact early fame had on him.

*One reason I've always been interested in movie stars is because of the sudden success of The Naked and the Dead [1948]. I really have the inner biography, in an odd way, of some young actor who has a hit, and is catapulted from being someone who haunts the spiritual bread lines to someone who's worth millions—I'm not talking now about money but of the shift in one's ego. I had that experience. After all, I was utterly unknown. By my own lights I'd not been much of a soldier, and that ate at me. In a squad of 12 men I would have been number seven, eight, or nine, if you're going to rank them by ability. I was always at the bottom half of the squad. That hurt me; I wasn't a good soldier and I wanted to be one. . . . So I was without any large idea of myself and my abilities as a man, and abruptly I was catapulted upward. Suddenly I possessed a power that came to me from my work. Yet it didn't feel as if it had come from what I had done. Indeed, I was very much like a young movie actor who doesn't know where he is, and who he is. I hadn't heard in those days of identity crises, but I was in one. Movie stars have always fascinated me since. I felt I knew something about their lives that other authors don't. . . . It took me 20 years to come to terms with who I was and to recognize that my experience was the only experience that I was ever going to have.*

## OTHER NATIONS

### *The Russian Silence*

“The Weakness of Russian Nationalism” by Anatol Lieven, in *Survival* (Summer 1999), International Institute for Strategic Studies, 23 Tavistock St., London WC2E 7NQ, United Kingdom.

It's another case of Sherlock Holmes's dog that didn't bark: the absence during

the 1990s in the former Soviet region of any mass mobilization of Russians along

ethnic, nationalist lines. Why hasn't the region gone the bloody way of Yugoslavia, as many in 1992 feared it would?

"Soviet totalitarian rule (which under Lenin and Stalin at least was vastly more thorough and ruthless than anything attempted by Tito in Yugoslavia) destroyed or greatly weakened" the Orthodox Church and the nobility in Russia, as well as nascent civil institutions that had emerged in the final decades of tsarist rule, explains Lieven, a Research Fellow at London's International Institute for Strategic Studies. While this devastated condition has been "a grave weakness for contemporary democracy in Russia and most of the other former Soviet republics," it also has made for relative peace, despite "the extreme economic hardship and psychological and cultural dislocation" experienced by the populace.

Fortunately for Russia, its neighbors, and the West, Lieven says, "Russian national identity in recent centuries . . . has been focused on non-ethnic allegiances." The Soviet state was explicitly founded not on nationalism but on a communist ideology that "contained genuine and important elements of 'internationalism.'" While the Soviets exploited Russian national symbols and traditions during and after World War II, they drained them of almost all meaning other than the "imposed Soviet one." Before the Soviet Union was formed, Lieven says, the Russian Empire, "though much more clearly a Russian state," stressed "loyalty to the Tsar and the Orthodox faith," not ethnicity.

Unlike many other nationalisms, Russian nationalism, as shaped by Soviet rule, conceived of the Russian nation "not as a separate

ethnos but as the leader of other nations," Lieven says. The absence of a strong sense of Russian ethnic identity, he notes, also "reflected historical and demographic reality. . . . From the 15th century, Russia conquered and absorbed many other ethnic groups." Hostility exhibited at times toward particular ethnic groups, such as Jews or Caucasians, he says, was "a *focused* hostility . . . for particular reasons, usually economic."

Russians outside Russia have rarely come under physical attack in this decade. Russian president Boris Yeltsin's government stated more than once that it would use force, if necessary, to protect the Russians in the Baltics and elsewhere. Though Estonia and Latvia, after gaining their independence, moved to restrict the rights of their Russian minorities, they did so peacefully, by legislative or administrative means, and most of the local Russians reacted calmly "and did not join the hard-line Soviet loyalist movements which opposed Baltic independence," Lieven notes. In Ukraine and Kazakhstan, the governments did not take any measures against their Russian minorities. And—despite the bluster of ultranationalist political figures such as Vladimir Zhirinovskiy—the Russian government, Lieven says, for the most part has not encouraged Russian secession movements in the other republics.

But "as Russia loses its role and its self-perception as the leader of other nations," Lieven fears, it could "develop a new form of patriotism which is not pluralist and multi-ethnic but one which is resentful, closed, and ethnically-based." If that happens, he warns, it could well prove "a disaster for the whole region."

## *The Unwelcome Wedding Guest*

"Dowry Deaths in India" by Paul Mandelbaum, in *Commonweal* (Oct. 8, 1999), 475 Riverside Dr., Rm. 405, New York, N.Y. 10115.

Every year in India, some 6,000 newly wed brides—and perhaps as many as 15,000—are murdered or driven to suicide in disputes over their dowries, reports Mandelbaum, a journalist and novelist. Modernization, far from reducing the toll of "dowry deaths," seems to be pushing it higher.

As in the past, most Indian marriages today are arranged by parents seeking "a suitable match within an appropriate range of sub-

castes," Mandelbaum reports. But with more Indians migrating to the cities or abroad in search of opportunity, the families involved in a match are less likely to have known each other previously. Increasingly, the marital arrangements are made blindly, through brokers, classified ads, and Internet services. And, in a corruption of ancient Hindu customs, Mandelbaum says, the brides and their families now "feel compelled to buy their