

Final Edition

Volume I nº 1 (the last issue)

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by Jonathan Schell

Wallace Shawn Interviews
Noam Chomsky

The Webern Variations
a poem by Mark Strand

Before the Election—
Fragments from a Diary 2004
by Wallace Shawn

Twilight of the Superheroes
a short story by Deborah Eisenberg

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Interview with Noam Chomsky

by Wallace Shawn

TIME: September 17, 2004

PLACE: Chomsky's office in the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy at M.I.T.

WS: A lot of what you've written has to do with the ways in which human beings use their minds—use their very capacity for rationality, one could say—not to seek truth, but on the contrary to distort truth—to twist truth, often so as to justify various crimes they want to commit or have already committed. And this doesn't have to do so much with our personal behavior but with our behavior in groups. So-called leaders dream up the justifications, and everybody else absorbs and accepts them.

NC: It's simply very easy to subordinate oneself to a worldview that's supportive of one's own interests. Most of us don't go around murdering people or stealing food from children. There are a lot of activities that we just regard as pathological when we do them individually. On the other hand, when they're done collectively, they're considered necessary and appropriate. Clinton, Kennedy: they all carried out mass murder, but they didn't think that that was what they were doing—nor does Bush. You know, they were defending justice and democracy from greater evils. And in fact I think you'd find it hard to discover a mass murderer in history who didn't think that. . . . It's kind of interesting to read the Russian archives, which are coming out now. They're being sold, like everything in Russia, and so we're learning something about the internal discussions of the Russian leaders, and they talked to each other the same way they talked publicly. I mean, these gangsters, you know, who were taking over Eastern Europe in the late '40s and early '50s—they were talking to each other soberly about how we have to defend East European democracy from the fascists who are trying to undermine it. It's pretty much the public rhetoric, and I don't doubt that they believed it.

WS: But one has to say about human beings—well, human beings did manage to invent the concepts of truth and falsity, and that's a remarkable accomplishment. And surely if people really used the concepts of truth and falsity rigorously, if they applied the laws of rationality rigorously, they would be forced to confront the true nature of the things they might be planning to do, and that might be enough to prevent them from doing many terrible things.

After all, most justifications for mass murder flatly contradict the perpetrator's professed beliefs—and are based on factually false assumptions as well. Couldn't education somehow lead people to use their capacity for rational thought on a more regular basis, to take rationality more seriously? So that they *couldn't* accept absurd justifications for things? As we're sitting here in the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy, wouldn't it benefit the world if more people studied philosophy?

NC: Take Heidegger, one of the leading philosophers of the twentieth century. I mean, just read his straight philosophical work, "Introduction To Metaphysics." A few pages in, it starts off with the Greeks, as the origins of civilization, and the Germans as the inheritors of the Greeks, and we have to protect the Greek heritage. . . . This was written in 1935. The most civilized people in the West, namely the Germans—Germany was the most educated country in the world—the Germans were coming under the delusion that their existence, and in fact the existence of Western Civilization since the Greeks, was threatened by fierce enemies against whom they had to protect themselves. I mean, it was deeply imbued in the general culture—in part including German Jews. There's a book by a major humanistic figure of modern Jewish life, Joachim Prinz. He was in Germany in the '30s, and he wrote a book called *Wir Juden* (We Jews), in which he said, Look, we don't like the anti-Semitic undertones of what the Nazis are doing, but we should bear in mind that much of what they're saying is right, and we agree with it. In particular their emphasis on blood and land—*Blut und Boden*. Basically we agree with that. We think that the identity of blood

is very important, and the emphasis on the land is very important. And the tie between blood and land is important. And in fact as late as 1941, influential figures in the Jewish Palestinian community, the pre-state community, including the group headed by Yitzhak Shamir, who later became Prime Minister, and leading intellectuals, considered rather left intellectuals, sent a delegation to try to reach, I think, Himmler—somebody high up—to tell them that they would like to make an arrangement with the Germans, and they would be the outpost for Germany in the Middle East, because they basically agreed with them on a lot of things. Like these things. This was, I think, in January, 1941. Now, no one would suggest this was the mainstream, by any means, but it also wasn't a pathological fringe.

I mean, George Kennan, who, in the spectrum of policy-makers, is sort of on the humane liberal side, was the American consul in Berlin before the war, before Pearl Harbor. And I think it must have been in mid-April, 1941, pretty late, he was sending back messages saying, you know, we shouldn't be too critical of the Nazis, they were doing some bad things, but there are good things about them, and we have to recognize the importance of what they're doing in holding back the Bolsheviks and suppressing the labor movement and so on. Roosevelt, too. Roosevelt was always quite pro-Fascist, thought Mussolini was "that admirable Italian gentleman," as he called him. As late as 1939, he was saying that Fascism was an important experiment that they were carrying out, until it was distorted by the relation to Hitler. And this was almost twenty years after they destroyed the Parliament, broke up the labor movement, raided Ethiopia with all the atrocities . . .

WS: A lot of people feel that hope for humanity lies not so much in the progress of rationality but rather in the possibility that more people will fall under the influence of moral principles or moral codes, such as the ethical systems developed by various religions. After all, if everyone were seriously committed to moral ideals, then . . .

NC: Moral codes . . . You can find things in the traditional religions which are very benign and decent and wonderful and so on, but I mean, the Bible is probably the most genocidal book in the literary canon. The God of the Bible—not only did he order His chosen people to carry out literal genocide—I mean, wipe out every Amalekite to the last man, woman, child, and, you know, donkey and so on, because hundreds of years ago they got in your way when you were trying to cross the desert—not only did He do things like that, but, after all, the God of the Bible was ready to destroy every living creature on earth because some humans irritated Him. That's the story of Noah. I mean, that's *beyond* genocide—you don't know how to describe this creature. Somebody offended Him, and He was going to destroy every living being on earth? And then He was talked into allowing two of each species to stay alive—that's supposed to be gentle and wonderful.

WS: Hmm . . . If moral codes themselves can't be relied upon, it's hard to know what to cling to if we want to avoid falling into moral nightmares. In a way, it seems to be simply our obsessive need to have a high opinion of ourselves that leads us repeatedly into idiotic thinking. If our vestigial rationality detects a conflict between our actions and our principles—well, we don't want to change our

actions, and it's embarrassing to change our principles, so we wield the blow-torch against our rationality, bending it till it's willing to say that our principles and actions are well-aligned. We're prisoners of self-love.

NC: We understand the crimes of others but can't understand our own. Take that picture over there on the wall. What it is is the Angel of Death, obviously. Off on the right is Archbishop Romero, who was assassinated in 1980. The figures below are the six leading Jesuit intellectuals who had their brains blown out in 1989, and their housekeeper and her daughter, who were also murdered. Now, they were murdered by an elite battalion armed, trained, and directed by the United States. The Archbishop was murdered pretty much by the same hands. Well, a couple of weeks ago there was a court case in California where some members of the family of Romero brought some kind of a civil suit against one of the likely killers and actually won their case. Well, that's a pretty important precedent, but it was barely reported in the United States. Nobody wants to listen. You know, Czeslaw Milosz was a courageous, good person. And when he died there were huge stories. But he and his associates faced nothing in Eastern Europe like what intellectuals faced in our domains. I mean, Havel was put in jail. He didn't have his brains blown out by elite battalions trained by the Russians. In Rwanda, for about a hundred days they were killing about eight thousand people a day. And we just went through the tenth anniversary. There was a lot of lamentation about how we didn't do anything about it, and how awful, and we ought to do something about other people's crimes, and so on. That's an easy one—to do something about other

people's crimes. But you know, every single day, about the same number of people—children—are dying in Southern Africa from easily treatable diseases. Are we doing anything about it? I mean, that's Rwanda-level killing, just children, just Southern Africa, every day—not a hundred days but all the time. It doesn't take military intervention. We don't need to worry about who's going to protect our forces. What it takes is bribing totalitarian institutions to produce drugs. It costs pennies. Do we think about it? Do we do it? Do we ask what kind of a civilization is it where we have to bribe totalitarian institutions in order to get them to produce drugs to stop Rwanda-level killing every day? It's just easier not to think about it.

WS: Totalitarian institutions—you mean the drug companies?

NC: Yes. What are they? The drug companies are just totalitarian institutions which are subsidized: most of the basic research is funded by the public, there are huge profits, and of course from a business point of view it not only makes sense, but it's legally required for them to produce lifestyle drugs for rich Westerners to get rid of wrinkles, instead of malaria treatments for dying children in Africa. It's required. It's legally required.

WS: How do we get out from under that?

NC: Well, the first thing we have to do is face it. Until you face it, you can't get out from under it. Take fairly recent things like the feminist movement—women's rights. I mean, if you had asked my grandmother if she was oppressed she would have said no. She

wouldn't have known what you were talking about. Of course she was stuck in the kitchen all day, and she followed orders. And the idea that her husband would do anything around the house . . . I mean, my mother would not *allow* my father, or me, for that matter, into the kitchen. Literally. Because we were supposed to be studying the Talmud or something. But did they think they were oppressed? Well, actually, my mother already felt that she was. But my grandmother didn't. And to get that awareness—you know, it's not easy.

India is interesting in this respect. There have been some very careful studies, and one of the best was about the province of Uttar Pradesh. It has one of the lowest female to male ratios in the world, not because of female infanticide, but because of the shitty way women are treated. And I mean, I was shocked to discover that in the town where I live, Lexington, which is a professional, upper middle class community—you know, doctors, lawyers, academics, stockbrokers, mostly that sort of thing—the police have a special unit for domestic abuse which has two or three 911 calls a week. Now, you know, that's important. Because thirty years ago, they *didn't* have that, because domestic abuse was not considered a problem. Now at least it's considered a problem, and police forces deal with it, and the courts deal with it in some fashion. Well, you know, that takes work—it takes work to recognize that oppression is going on.

This was very striking to me in the student movement in the '60s. I mean, I was pretty close to it, and those kids were involved in something very serious. You know, they were very upset, and they hated the war, and they hated racism, and their choices weren't always the right ones by any means, but they were very emotional about it, for very good reasons. . . .

I was involved particularly with the resisters, who were refusing to serve in the army. They're now called "draft evaders" and so on, but that's bullshit. I mean, almost all of them could have gotten out of the draft easily. A lot of them were theology students, and others—you'd go to your doctor, and he'd say you were a homosexual or something. It was nothing for a privileged kid to get out of the army if he wanted to. They were *choosing* to resist. And facing serious penalties. For an eighteen-year-old kid to go to jail for years or live their life in exile was not an easy choice—especially when, of course, if you conformed, you would just shoot up there and be part of the elite. But they chose it, and it was a courageous decision, and they were denounced for it and condemned for it and so on. . . . At some stage of the game, the feminist movement began. In the early stages of the resistance, the women were supposed to be supportive, you know, to these resisters. And at some stage these young women began to ask, Why are we doing the shit-work? I mean, why are we the ones who are supposed to look up in awe at *them*, when we're doing most of the work? And they began to regard themselves as being oppressed. Now that caused a rather serious psychological problem for the boys. Because they thought, and rightly, that they were doing something courageous and noble, and here suddenly they had to face up to the fact that they were oppressors, and that was hard. I mean, I know people who committed suicide. Literally. Because they couldn't face it.

So, just in our lifetime, it's different. The kinds of things that were considered normal—not just normal, un-noticeable, you didn't see them—thirty or forty years ago, would be unspeakable

now. The same with gay rights. There have been big changes in consciousness, and they're important, and they make it a better world. But they do not affect *class* issues. Class is a dirty word in the United States. You can't talk about it.

One of my daughters teaches in a state college in which the aspirations of most of the students are to become a nurse or a policeman. The first day of class (she teaches history) she usually asks her students to identify their class background. And it turns out there are two answers. Either they're middle class, or they're underclass. If their father has a job, like as a janitor, they're middle class. If their father is in jail or transient, then it's underclass. That's it. Nobody's working class. It's just not a concept that exists. It's not just here—it's true in England too. I was in England a couple of months ago at the time of the Cannes Festival, when Michael Moore won, and one of the papers had a long interview with him, and the interviewer was suggesting that Michael Moore wasn't telling the truth when he said he came from a working class background. He said he came from a working class background, but his father had a car and owned a house, so, you know, what's this crap about coming from a working class background? Well, his father was an auto worker! I mean, the whole concept of class in any meaningful sense has just been driven out of people's heads. The fact that there are some people who give the orders and others who follow them—that is gone. And the only question is, how many goods do you have?—as if, if you have goods, you have to be middle class, even if you're just following the orders.

WS: What you possess determines how people see you and

how you see yourself. That defines you—your role in the social structure does not.

NC: People are trained—and massive efforts go into this—people are trained to perceive their identity and their aspirations and their value as people in terms of the things they amass. Nothing else. And in terms of *yourself*, not anyone else . . . It's kind of interesting to watch this campaign against Social Security going on, and to see the attitudes. I see it even among students. And the reason certain people hate Social Security so much is not just that if you privatize it, it's a bonanza for Wall Street. I'm sure that's part of it, but the main reason for the real visceral hatred of Social Security is that it's based on a principle that they want to drive out of people's heads—namely, that you care about somebody else. You know, Social Security is based on the idea that you care whether the disabled widow on the other side of town has enough food to eat. And you're not supposed to think that. That's a dangerous sentiment. You're supposed to just be out for yourself. And I get this from young people now. They say, Look, I don't see why I should be responsible for her. I'm not responsible for her. I didn't do anything to her. I mean, if she didn't invest properly or, you know, something like that, that's not my business. Why do I have to pay my taxes to keep her alive? And why do I care if the kid down the street can't go to school? I mean, *I* didn't keep him from going to school.

WS: But isn't that sort of demonstrably absurd? I mean, the student who doesn't think he's involved with the other people is simply wrong. He is not a self-created atom. He's a part of society and was

created by society. He didn't become whatever he is simply through his own individual efforts. It was society that gave him everything he has and everything he's ever used. He didn't invent the English language. He didn't invent the telephone.

NC: Yes, but people are very deluded about this, including professionals. Take professional economists. Most of them literally believe what Alan Greenspan and others talk about—that the economy flourishes because of entrepreneurial initiative and consumer choice and so on and so forth. You know, that's total bullshit. The economy flourishes because we have a dynamic state sector.

WS: You mean, the motor driving it all is the taxpayer's money being spent—or given away to private companies—by the state. The motor is *not* the individual consumer spending his money in the free market.

NC: Just about everything in the new economy comes out of state initiatives. I mean, what's M.I.T.? M.I.T. is overwhelmingly a taxpayer-funded institution, in which research and development is carried out at public cost and risk, and if anything comes out of it, some private corporation, like the guys who endowed this building, will get the profit from it. And almost everything works like that—from computers, internet, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals—you run through the dynamic parts of the economy, that's where they come from. I mean, with things like, say, computers and the internet, for example, consumer choice had no role at all! Consumers didn't even know these things

existed until they'd been developed for years at public expense. But we live in a world of illusion.

WS: People's view of how it's all working is wrong. And of course most people are just totally immersed intellectually in their own personal economic struggle—their struggle to get, basically, things. But you know, when you say that people are trained to focus their aspirations entirely on things—goods—well, that has terrifying implications. To say that people may not even be aware that their lives consist of following orders—that's terrifying. It's as if people don't acknowledge that their ability to make choices about their lives, their degree of power over their own environment, is an important issue.

NC: No, what you're taught from infancy is that the only choices you're supposed to make are choices of commodities. It's none of your business how the government works or what government policies are or how the community's organized or anything else. Your job is to purchase commodities. And that's been put in people's heads from infancy. And that's why we have farcical elections. I mean, the elections do not turn on issues. I mean, nobody knows where the candidates stand on issues. It would take a research project to figure out where they stand on health care or something—if they even have a position. I mean, what you're supposed to focus on are qualities. You know, Is he a “strong leader”? Is he going to protect us? Is he likeable? Would you like to meet him in a bar? I mean, the thing that's called an election here—we would simply ridicule it if it were happening somewhere else. I mean, what's the election?—you know,

two guys—same background—wealth, political influence, went to the same elite university, joined the same secret society where you're trained to be a ruler—they both can run because they're financed by the same corporate institutions. At the Democratic Convention, Barack Obama said, "Only in this country, only in America, could someone like me appear here." Well, in some other countries, people much poorer than him would not only talk at the convention—they'd be elected president! Take Lula. The president of Brazil is a guy with a peasant background, a union organizer, never went to school, he's the president of the second-biggest country in the hemisphere! Only in America? I mean, there they actually have elections where you can choose somebody from your own ranks. With different policies! That's inconceivable in the United States. And it's true of even the dissidents. There is a huge propaganda effort to reduce political participation to showing up every four years to push a lever in a personalized electoral extravaganza, and then go home and let "your representatives" run the world. Dissidents are often caught up in this too, and reinforce these delusions. Presidential elections exist, and can't be ignored. But the real world of serious political action isn't a once-in-four-years vote-for-me affair. That's not the way Lula got elected.

A lot of it's conscious. There's a conscious strain in sort of liberal, intellectual thought, it goes way back, that the people really don't have any right to participate in the political system. They are supposed to choose among the responsible men.

WS: But it's funny that the people themselves go along with it, because it seems insulting. Why aren't people more insulted?

They're not even insulted when they're blatantly lied to! They seem to laugh it off. But in their own lives, in daily life, people would resent it a lot—you know, being lied to.

NC: No—not when people in power lie to you. Somehow there's some law that that's the way it works. I mean, do people get upset if their boss lies to them?

WS: Maybe not, maybe not . . . Well, you know, what you've been saying is scary, but it's also invigorating in a way. Obviously you're not a particularly sentimental person, I would say, and it's not your style to make starry-eyed statements, but in a way you're opening up a rather extraordinary vision of human possibility here. I feel like saying that your approach to discussing these things is a bit like the approach of a sculptor—with hammer and chisel you attack the big block of marble, and from a certain point of view, all your gestures could be seen as rather hostile or aggressive as you pursue the somewhat negative activity of cutting down the stone, but in the end something rather glorious is revealed. You're suggesting that rather than being deluded and passive intellectual followers of the prevailing world-view of our time and place, we might wake up and think for ourselves. And I think you're suggesting that all human beings have the capacity to collaborate in the task of guiding their own lives, and the life of the place where they work, and the life of their community, and the life of the world. And that to live in illusion, to be a slave to the world-view of your time and place, or to be all your life a follower of orders, or to not even be aware that you have the capacity to participate in the direction of things—these are

all in a way different forms of oppression. And it's a terrible thing, but people go along with it.

NC: Slaves went along with it, women went along with it, oppressed people often go along with it. Until they—I mean, to learn that you *are* being oppressed, and you don't have to be, is hard.

WS: Right. It's hard. That's an understatement. But it's something to work for, over the centuries, if we survive. Anyway—thanks. For the interview and in general.