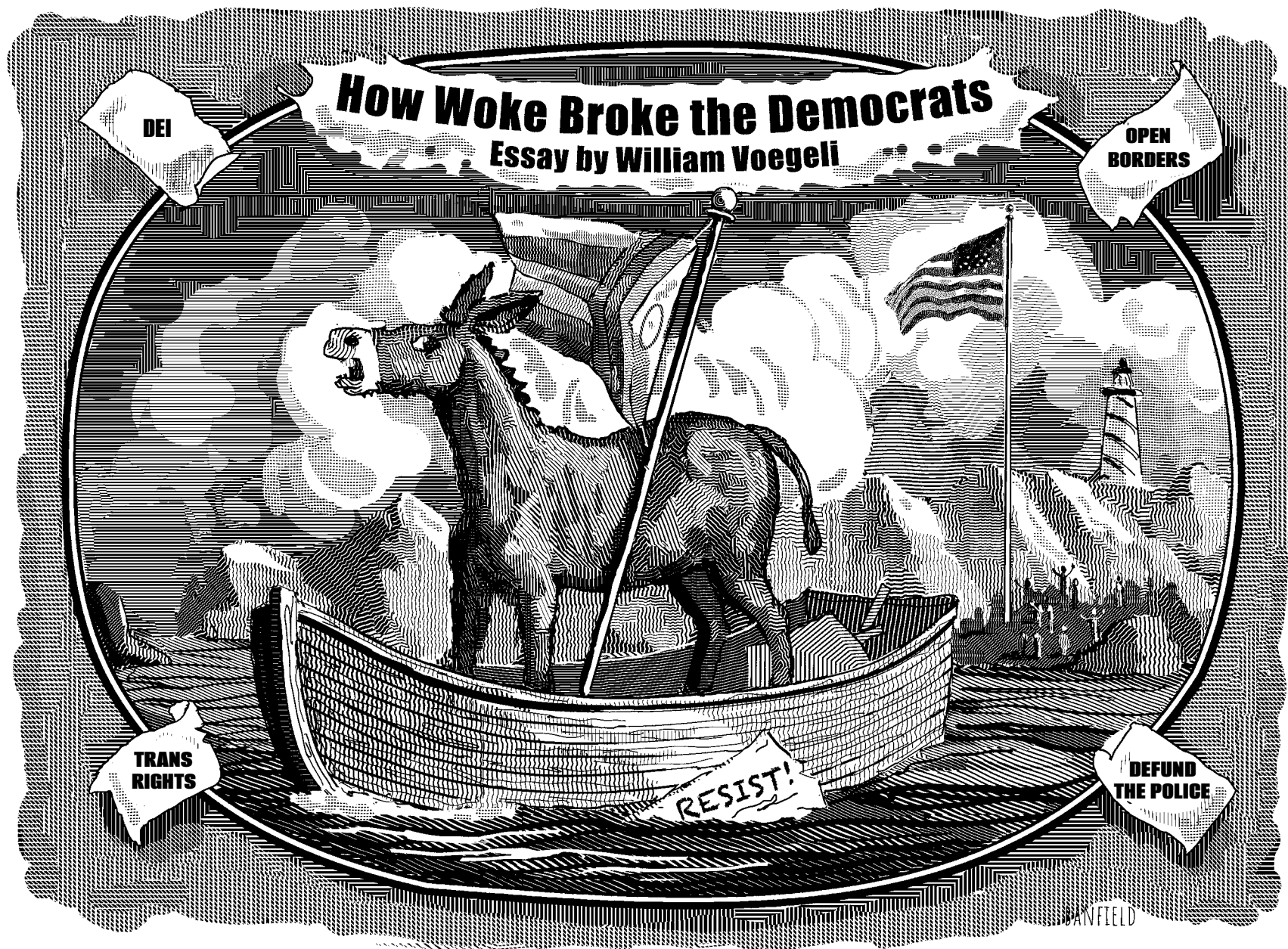


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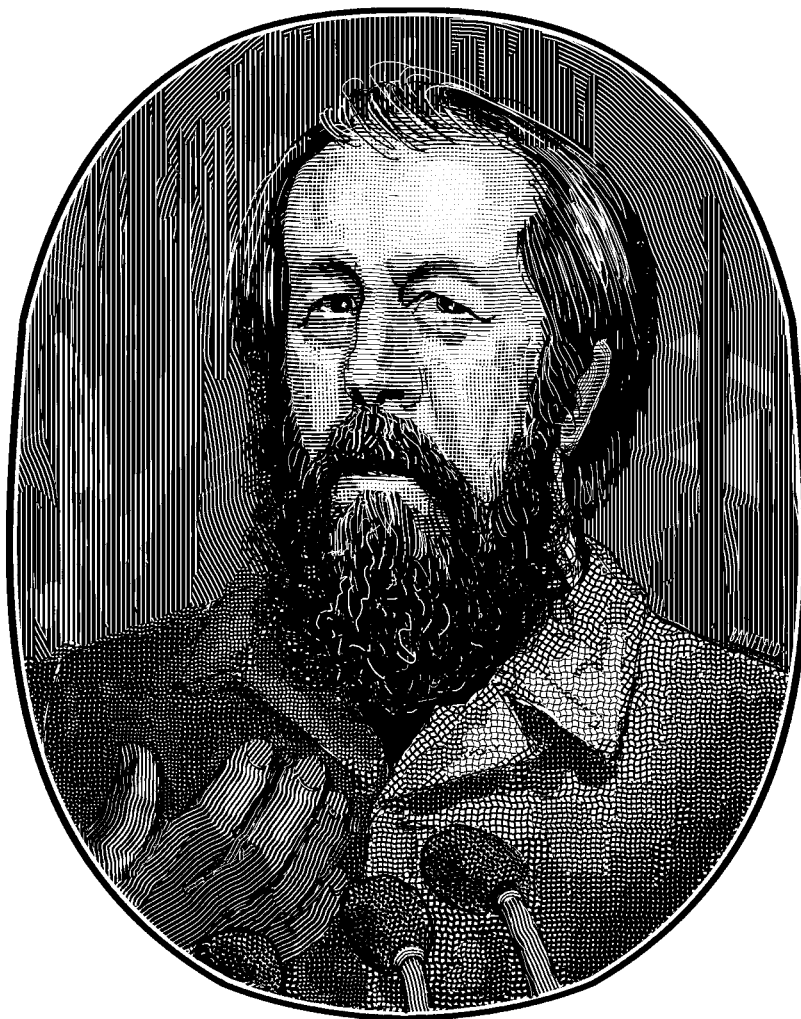
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Book Review by Daniel J. Mahoney

FROM RUSSIA, WITH TOUGH LOVE

We Have Ceased to See the Purpose: Essential Speeches of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, edited by Ignat Solzhenitsyn.
University of Notre Dame Press, 208 pages, \$28



No, all hope cannot be pinned on science, technology, or economic growth. Victorious technological civilization has simultaneously instilled in us a spiritual insecurity. Certainly, its gifts enrich, but enslave us as well. All is interests, we must not neglect our interests, all is a struggle for material things; but an inner voice faintly prompts us that we've lost something pure, elevated—and fragile. We have ceased to see the purpose.

—Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "We Have Ceased to See the Purpose,"
September 14, 1993

IN *WE HAVE CEASED TO SEE THE PURPOSE: Essential Speeches of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn*, the estimable musician and conductor Ignat Solzhenitsyn collects and annotates the ten most stirring public addresses of his father, Russian Nobel laureate Aleksandr

Solzhenitsyn. Most of them were delivered during Solzhenitsyn's 20 years of forced exile in the West between 1974 and 1994. At that time, he was perhaps better known for these speeches than for his properly artistic and historical works—except, of course, for *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973), the powerful "experiment in literary investigation" that fearlessly exposed Communist totalitarianism in all its savagery. A careful reading of that magisterial work can help inform sustained engagement with this new collection.

Reflecting on the seismic impact of his masterpiece at the time of its release, Solzhenitsyn quoted Shakespeare's *Macbeth*: with the publication of the *Archipelago*, "Birnam Wood was moving." Like Shakespeare's paranoid monarch, the despots of Soviet Russia found the ruinous consequences of their villainy closing in on them at the end of 1973 and in the immediate years that followed, when the

three volumes of Solzhenitsyn's book first appeared. In it, Solzhenitsyn denounced what he later called the "Ideological Lie": the illusion that evil is not a perennial danger intrinsic to every human heart, but a product of unjust and historically contingent social systems, kept in place by ruthlessly self-interested parties. Vladimir Lenin, in his January 1918 essay on "How to Organize the Competition," had already stated the inevitable conclusion of this grim reasoning: since the oppressive classes are irredeemably wicked, they must be "purged" like "harmful insects."

SOLZHENITSYN WAS AMONG THOSE whom the Soviets attempted to "purge." He spent the years of 1945 to 1956 in prisons, camps, and internal exile. During this bitter pilgrimage he discovered what he called "the truth of the soul." He found that human beings, however forlorn their external

circumstances may be, can reject the diabolical temptations to lies, violence, and individual or collective self-deification. Refusing to “survive at any price,” he came to insist upon the real distinction between moral good and evil. There was nothing remotely sectarian or fanatical in this outlook—even if some of Solzhenitsyn’s more fevered critics, from the historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. to the Russianist Richard Pipes, absurdly associated him with Ivan the Terrible and the Salem witch trials. Really, he was only recovering truths affirmed by the best philosophical and religious traditions throughout time but denied by modernity’s dark prophets.

In fact, as Solzhenitsyn *files* observes, Solzhenitsyn *père* always spoke about his own religious convictions with great discretion:

Solzhenitsyn was highly mindful of handling religion carefully in his writing and speaking, both because he felt it unseemly for a layman to pontificate on faith and out of natural, tactful respect for those readers who shared his ethical and spiritual moorings but without an express belief in an omnipotent, providential God. This is also the reason why, at various times in these speeches, the author refers to a Supreme Spirit, Supreme Power, or even just “something Supreme above us,” rather than identifying God more concretely or directly.

Only in his 1983 Templeton Address, accepting a prize for his insight into religion, did Solzhenitsyn speak more freely about contemporary man having “forgotten God.” Alas, not a few of Solzhenitsyn’s most fervent admirers, not to mention his bitter critics, have failed to notice Solzhenitsyn’s discretion, or self-limitation, in addressing spiritual matters.

STILL, THE RELIGIOUS CONVICTIONS Solzhenitsyn formed in the Gulag suffuse the ten addresses collected in *We Have Ceased to See the Purpose*. Written with estimable grace, flair, and passion, these speeches exemplify the judicious mix of reason and courage that Solzhenitsyn often invoked. His son has translated several of the texts and lightly edited long-established translations of several others (especially the outstanding ones by the Russianist Alexis Klimoff). Solzhenitsyn, who had a working command of English and German (his wife, editor, and intellectual partner Natalia Dmitrievna Solzhenitsyna spoke English and read French), cared deeply about faithful renderings of his texts in other languages. He was disturbed by early, hasty translations

of his speeches and writings. When his sons Yermolai, Ignat, and Stephan reached adulthood, they filled a void by providing faithful and stylistically accurate English-language versions of some of their father’s most important speeches and addresses.

In this volume, Ignat Solzhenitsyn makes well-known formulations even more vivid, preserves the striking syntax of the originals, and capitalizes crucial words of literary and spiritual significance (e.g., Earth, History, or Beauty) as the author intended. These new versions both convey and renew the texts’ vitality and literary panache. The enduring resonance of each one makes it apparent that Solzhenitsyn’s concerns were always much more than topical.

IN A RICH AND ELEGANTLY WRITTEN introductory essay, Solzhenitsyn *files* highlights the deeper concerns that animated his father’s speeches and addresses: the connections between art, truth, and goodness; the power of literary art so understood to help defeat violence and lies; the sterility of “anthropocentric humanism,” which replaces faith in “a Supreme Spirit” with an untenable “humanist-socialist ideal”; and the need for freedom and rule of law (precious things in themselves) to be balanced against other human needs and goods, both physical and spiritual. The reader comes to appreciate that Solzhenitsyn was playing for the long run, while the media and the chattering classes were obsessed with his views on “détente... the Iron Lady!...Reagan!...Chernenko!...nuclear freeze!” In fact, Solzhenitsyn always had multiple audiences in mind: those in the present and those to come, those in the East and those in the West. His “warnings to the West” were often scathing, as when he indicted modern Americans and Europeans for their loss of civic courage, “spiritual concentration,” and moral purpose. Yet he always spoke to Westerners as a self-described “friend.”

Two of his major themes were ethical realism and political responsibility. But as a novelist, he never forgot that literature has a role to play in achieving both aims. In his Nobel lecture and a subsequent 1993 address to the National Arts Club in New York (“Playing Upon the Strings of Emptiness”), he insists that art should seek to convey truth—which is never merely subjective, fictive, or arbitrary. A true artistic spirit should be measured and self-critical; it is inseparable from devotion to the good of one’s people and one’s country. In the 1993 speech, Solzhenitsyn argues that pre-revolutionary Russian “futurists,” in toying with essential moral norms and precious literary traditions, paved the way for a more

thoroughgoing “experimentation” with human lives. They contributed, however unwittingly, to 70 years of soul- and body-destroying totalitarianism.

Likewise, Solzhenitsyn saw Western postmodernism as “a forced playing upon the strings of emptiness.” The strained faux-playfulness of the postmodernists concealed a “relentless cult of novelty” whose priests insisted unceasingly that “there is no God, there is no truth, the universe is chaotic, all is relative.” In a desperate effort to flee from the natural human longing to worship, these reckless iconoclasts upended “the great cultural tradition of foregoing centuries together with the spiritual foundations from which it grew.” Solzhenitsyn’s verdict: “Nothing worthy can be fashioned on a neglect of higher meanings or on a relativistic view of concepts and culture as a whole.”

BUT IT IS IN HIS HARVARD COMMENCEMENT address of June 8, 1978 that, in his son’s words, “the author’s worldview is crystallized and presented to the world in its full maturity and breadth.” Solzhenitsyn’s concerns in that speech, aptly summarized by the younger Solzhenitsyn, are the West’s “manifest decline in courage...[the] debilitation that accompanies material well-being...an excessive legalism unworthy of man...freedom’s tilt toward irresponsible destructiveness...the suppression of unfashionable ideas...[and] a growing shortsightedness and loss of will.” As Gary Saul Morson pointed out in a recent article in *Commentary* (“Solzhenitsyn Warned Us,” July/August 2024), Solzhenitsyn drew punishing fire for this speech but was largely proven correct. “The real crux of the speech,” as his son suggests, is Solzhenitsyn’s emphasis on the “unexpected kinship” between East and West, which shared to differing degrees in “materialist humanism as the common cause and moral poverty the common consequence.” Most of his critics were either happy to cheer on the moral and cultural dissolution Solzhenitsyn deplored, or determined to bury their heads in the sand.

Both in the Harvard address and in a brief but beautiful speech in Zurich in May 1974 (“An Orbital Journey”), Solzhenitsyn pleads with his audience to recognize the need for “repentance and self-limitation.” Without ever indulging in the fantasy of an impossible and undesirable return to the past, he aspires to “an ascent to a height of vision, to a new level of life, where neither will our physical nature be consigned to perdition—as in the Middle Ages—nor will our spiritual nature, all the more crucially, be trampled upon, as in the Modern Era.” In “An Orbital Journey,” Solzhenitsyn suggests that this spiritual ascent would entail

“salvific revolutions” that “we have yet to discover, discern, or bring to life.”

Such a “moral revolution” would totally reject “bloody physical revolutions,” and every attempt to coerce physically the bodies or souls of human beings. In his insightful “Reflection on the Vendée Uprising” (September 25, 1993), Solzhenitsyn amplifies his critique of “bloody physical revolutions” such as the French and Bolshevik ones: they “disrupt the natural flow of life, destroy the best elements of the population while giving free rein to the worst;...no revolution can ever enrich a nation—but only a few shameless opportunists—while to the country as a whole it bears myriad deaths, widespread impoverishment, and, in the gravest cases, a long-lasting degeneration of the people.”

NOT ONLY “AN ORBITAL JOURNEY,” but also many of the other less well-known speeches in this volume show that Solzhenitsyn had been developing the themes of his Harvard lecture at practically every opportunity throughout his long career. A gem of the collection is Ignat Solzhenitsyn’s vivid and energetic translation of a radio address that Solzhenitsyn delivered on the BBC at the end of March 1976, entitled “If One

Doesn’t Wish to Be Blind.” Solzhenitsyn and his family were on the verge of relocating from Zurich, Switzerland to Cavendish, Vermont, and he decided to visit the United Kingdom in a “private” capacity before relocating to the United States. His address to the English is perhaps the most vigorous and insightful of his “Warnings to the West”; it remains of enduring interest. Solzhenitsyn incisively diagnoses the West’s continuing inability truly to understand “the savage framework and pitiless aims of the Communist world.” He expresses astonishment that “societies with access to every kind of information suddenly plunge into lethargic mass blindness, into voluntary self-deception.” And, prefiguring a theme that would later become central to the Harvard address, he laments the “extreme degree” to which “the West has already become a world of lost will, a world gradually petrifying in the face of danger, a world oppressed above all by the necessity of defending its freedom.”

Solzhenitsyn then invokes two proverbs, one German and one Latin, to suggest that once courage and reason are lost, “all is lost.” The West of the mid-1970s was precisely a world where the twin losses of courage and reason were “manifesting themselves simultaneously.” Pre-Thatcherite Britain, Solzhenitsyn

insinuates somewhat cruelly, has little more influence on the world scene than does Uganda or Romania. In the same tough-love vein, Solzhenitsyn reminds his listeners of certain bitter episodes from the not-so-remote past. England failed to give the Russian royal family refuge after the February 1917 Revolution; abandoned the White forces during the Russian Civil War; fostered an intellectual class that shamelessly indulged despotism in its “progressive” forms; and cherished the illusion of détente (which Solzhenitsyn saw as another manifestation of the “spirit of Munich” he had so strikingly diagnosed in his 1972 Nobel lecture). Yet Solzhenitsyn also pays fitting tribute to Britain’s “finest hour,” its valiant struggle against Hitler’s tyranny and aggression. He calls it “the very pearl...of the Western world,” this nation whose people have given expression to modern freedom “with particular brilliance—in both its good aspects and bad.”

SOLZHENITSYN TRACES THE CONTEMPORARY exhaustion of Britain (and the West as a whole) to the worldview of the “late Enlightenment,” which “proclaimed and accepted that there was no supreme power above man,” and thus fostered “materialistic excesses” and a misplaced confidence in man’s

SPENCER A. KLAVAN – *LIGHT OF THE MIND, LIGHT OF THE WORLD*

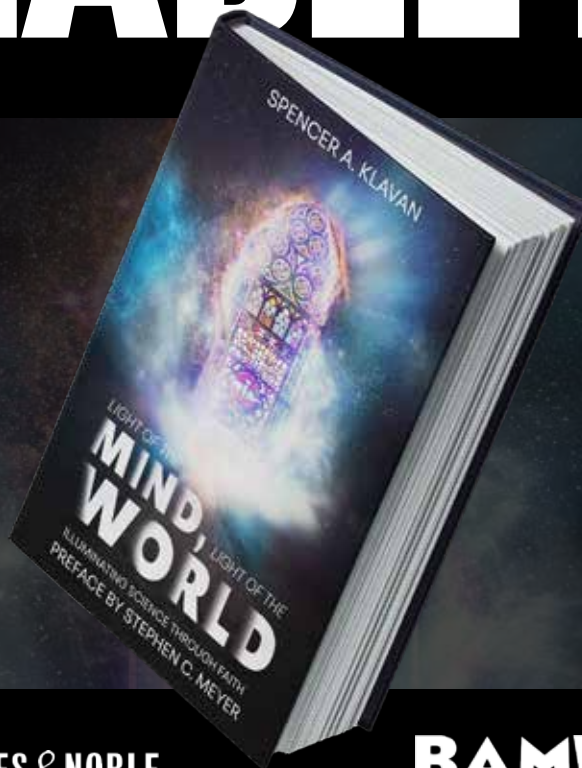
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capacity to remake the world. It was Russia's sad privilege to get an early taste of the "geological upheaval" and ideological turmoil that would later come to haunt the West:

The universal reverence of adult society for the opinion of children; the feverish infatuation, on the part of many young people, with vanishingly worthless ideas; the timorousness of professors to find themselves outside the latest trends; the failure of journalists to take responsibility for the words they fling so readily; the universal sympathy for revolutionary extremists; the muteness of people with serious objections; the passive defeatism of the majority; the feebleness of governments and the paralysis of society's defense mechanisms; the spiritual dismay leading to political cataclysm.

Thus, Solzhenitsyn concludes, Russian opponents of Communist totalitarianism "contemplate the West from your future, or else look back at our own seventy-year-old past suddenly repeating itself."

Solzhenitsyn makes clear that the "misty phantom of socialism" can provide no solution to the Western or the global crisis. Marxist socialism, in particular, is a mendacious "earthbound religion," though it is shamefully "defended with passionate irrationality" and "invulnerable to criticism" among progressive elites. Socialism in all its forms confuses equality with forcefully leveling "the basic elements of personality that display too much variability in education, aptitude, thought, and feeling." Hatred of religion, of human excellence, and of nobility as such are all central to the socialist enterprise. The Gulag archipelago, Solzhenitsyn insisted, is not an "Asiatic distortion of a lofty idea," but the "inescapable law" of an inhuman and coercive ideology.

YET DESPITE HIS VIGOROUS OPPOSITION to oppression and top-down control, Solzhenitsyn has been faulted as an "authoritarian." It is a myth that dies hard. Though a critic of soulless legalism, he also defended the rule of law as the indispensable foundation of a free and decent society. At the same time, he bitterly lamented "the shallowing of freedom," the title of an acceptance speech he gave upon receiving the American Friendship Medal from the Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge in 1976. Any worthy notion of freedom, Solzhenitsyn insisted, must come yoked to "an evaluation of the objectives of our earthly existence," and thus to a serious reflection on the ends and purposes of human freedom, that is, upon the nature

and needs of the human soul. Through his long years of imprisonment and deprivation, Solzhenitsyn came to affirm "that the life aim for each of us isn't a boundless enjoyment of material goods but, rather, a departure from this Earth as better persons than we arrived; better than our inborn inclinations alone would have made us; that is, a transversal, over the span of our life, of one path or another of spiritual improvement." Without ever devaluing what he called "external freedoms" like political and economic liberty, he insisted that they were "not a self-contained end for human beings and societies." External freedom is a valuable "means" for facilitating the "undistorted development" of human beings as human beings, thus giving us "a chance" "to live a human and not an animal existence."

Human beings need to breathe freely and, for that, external freedom is a vital "condition under which man may better carry out his earthly task." But liberty is not license, and human beings are ensouled persons—not merely

The future is not
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their individual and
collective destinies in line
with reason, honor, and
courage.

appetitive animals seeking pleasure after pleasure. In addition to external freedoms, "man needs unpolluted and uncrowded space for his soul, the opportunity to concentrate his spirit." This, he tellingly adds, is what "contemporary civilized freedom is reluctant to grant us." Hence the "shallowing" and "dwindling" of freedom "in comparison with preceding centuries," its reduction to "to freedom understood only on the legal level—and no higher."

SOLZHENITSYN ALSO HAS AN UNDESERVED reputation for issuing jeremiads in the prophetic mode rather than arguing in a reasonable and generally dispassionate manner. But this volume makes abundantly clear how lucid, eloquent, and deftly argued his speeches actually were. This is true even in the crucial paragraph of "The Shallowing of Freedom" in which Solzhenitsyn denounces 18 ways in which the concept of freedom has been cheapened and dangerously confused—with cheap advertising, with moral degradation (including pornography), with

teenagers reveling in "leisure and amusements instead of devoting themselves to concentrated study and moral growth," with lawyers delivering "exonerating speeches, when the lawyer himself is quite aware of the guilt of the accused." The discerning reader will notice that Solzhenitsyn has meticulously identified 18 "legally irreproachable, but morally...debased" freedoms that, in his son's formulation, "contribute little to human advancement." It is "a stream-of-consciousness oratorical tour de force" preceded and followed by perfectly measured moral and philosophical analysis. Solzhenitsyn knew what he was doing and remained in perfect control of his argument throughout. His appeal was not to a coercive, illiberal, or theocratic state, but to "a full consciousness of personal responsibility" and "voluntary self-limitation" in the name of "that which used to be called by the ancient—and, by now, peculiar—word: *honor*."

"The Shallowing of Freedom" ends with an expression of "profound faith in the soundness and health of the roots of the magnanimous and mighty American nation—with the painstaking honesty of its youth and its ever-alert moral awareness." Tellingly, Solzhenitsyn adds that he has seen "rural and small-town America" with his "own eyes" and places his "steadfast hope" specifically in *that* America, which has not yet lost touch with common sense, or the moral foundations of human liberty. As in the 1978 Harvard address, Solzhenitsyn appeals over the head of the corrupt intellectual class to those who preserve the best of the Western and American inheritance.

THIS CLOSING REMARK EXEMPLIFIES ANOTHER trend made evident by the collection, which is that Solzhenitsyn generally ended his speeches on a note of qualified hope—though it was a hard-won hope, often challenged by bitter experience. In his Nobel lecture, sent to Stockholm before he left Russia, Solzhenitsyn guardedly wonders whether literature of a certain kind might convey the bitter experience of one people to another, so that they might avoid the same experience. But in his BBC address, after just two years in the West, Solzhenitsyn notes with grave disappointment that "your society spurns our voices of warning." This seems to drive him, for a moment at least, to full-scale pessimism: "[O]ne must grievously conclude, it appears, that all experience is intransmissible—everyone must experience everything for himself." But in his brief foreword to Edward E. Ericson, Jr.'s authorized 1985 abridgment of *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn insists that he has "not given up all hope that human beings and nations may be able, in spite of all, to learn from

the experience of other people without having to live through it personally.” The soul set free from barbed wire always refused to despair. The future is not preordained. Human beings are free to shape their individual and collective destinies in line with reason, honor, and courage under what Solzhenitsyn, in his Templeton lecture, called the “warm hand of God.” Free will, guided by right reason and moral conscience, always makes possible a more balanced and humane future.

IN MAY 1994, SOLZHENITSYN RETURNED home to a Russia liberated from the Communist yoke after 70 years of totalitarian despotism. During his 18 years in Vermont, he had completed *The Red Wheel*, a remarkable multivolume work of dramatized history that traces the myriad decisions made—or not made—in the lead-up to the revolutionary contagion of 1917. That work is now seeing the light of day in fine editions and translations from the University of Notre Dame Press. But all was not well upon Solzhenitsyn’s return home. As Solzhenitsyn put it at the beginning of his 1998 work *Russia in Collapse*, reprising a judgment he had already made in 1990, Russia had left Communism in the worst possible way. The country that Solzhenitsyn so loved risked being “crushed beneath the rubble” of a collapsing Communist state. Russia’s emerging “democracy” masked a new unaccountable oligarchy and ill-advised economic “reforms” that enriched the old Soviet apparatchiks, alongside the most unscrupulous of “businessmen,” at the expense of ordinary citizens. Residues of Sovietism coexisted with lawlessness and a complete neglect of public services; teachers and other public servants were not paid for years on end. Note well: these were the Boris Yeltsin years, not yet the Vladimir Putin ones.

In this atmosphere, Solzhenitsyn once more chose to “Live Not by Lies,” as in the title of his great manifesto of February 12,

1974. He gave several addresses excoriating Russia’s pseudo-democracy, lamenting public and private corruption, and repeatedly demanding repentance and accountability for the crimes of the Communist period. He travelled throughout his native land advocating a “democracy of small spaces,” where civic virtues could form, entrepreneurship could take root, and philanthropy could flourish. He would remain faithful to these principles until his death in 2008.

Above all, he defended an elevated and self-limiting patriotism, “a clean, loving, constructive patriotism...not of a radical nationalist bent (‘only our type,’ or ‘only our faith’); not of the elevation of one’s nationality above our higher spiritual plank, above our humble stance before Heaven.” He rejected equally both the reckless advocates of “shock therapy,” who favored sudden and extensive economic liberalization (inevitably accompanied by rampant corruption and lawlessness), and the Red-Brown coalition, an unholy alliance of Bolsheviks and ultranationalists. Both groups hate Solzhenitsyn to this day. The fundamental moderation of his moral and political stance was little appreciated in its time, at home or abroad. The old clichés (ultranationalist, religious fanatic, authoritarian, and so on) were recycled with abandon.

FROM THIS LAST PERIOD OF SOLZHENITSYN’S life, his son has chosen a text that conveys his father’s final reflections and concerns in a high-minded and thoughtful way. Elected to the Russian Academy of Sciences, Solzhenitsyn delivered a speech under its auspices on September 24, 1997: “The Depletion of Culture.” It is a speech that renews and deepens some of his essential themes and concerns. The social crisis that Russia was then undergoing, and the paucity of resources directed toward education, science, and cultural life more broadly, provide the backdrop

to Solzhenitsyn’s last great reflection on art and culture. He highlights the “perniciousness, for high culture” of its reduction to “utilitarian requirements, whether they flow from socialist-communist compulsion or from the market principle of sale and purchase.” Most fundamentally, he questions whether high culture, and art worthy of the name, can long survive the “loss of spiritual concentration and loftiness.”

Drawing on his own disappointing experience, Solzhenitsyn warns that Russia must not blindly imitate the increasingly post-Christian West. The land of his birth has its own rich spiritual and cultural traditions that must not be shunned or wasted (one thinks of the classical Russian novel and the best Orthodox spiritual and theological traditions). Yet Solzhenitsyn resists the temptation of Russian political or spiritual autarchy: “One thing we [Russians] must certainly absorb from the West is an active yet stable civic life.” That observation will no doubt surprise many of Solzhenitsyn’s critics, and even some of his admirers. The author of *The Gulag Archipelago* was in no way an enemy of political freedom.

Solzhenitsyn ends on an inspiring and challenging note, articulating the high “purpose” that gives its name to this volume: “[O]ur people’s survival or extinction will depend on those who persist through these dark times, by way of concentrated labor or its material support, in shielding from ruin, in lifting up, in strengthening and developing the inner life of our minds and souls—that life which is culture.”

These are wise words for ours or any other time.

Daniel J. Mahoney is a senior fellow of the Claremont Institute, professor emeritus of Assumption University, and the author, most recently, of The Persistence of the Ideological Lie: The Totalitarian Impulse Then and Now (Encounter Books).

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