

Interpretation

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In *Recovering the Liberal Spirit*, Steven F. Pittz has written an engaging defense of liberalism which rests on the fundamental claim that liberalism “can provide the spiritual nourishment that human beings require” (1). Pittz argues, contra liberalism’s critics, that liberalism does not impoverish the human spirit but may, in fact, make possible the achievement of individual “spiritual fulfillment” and “higher meaning.” In other words, liberalism is *not* a successful conspiracy against man’s spiritual nature but provides, rather, for its ultimate fulfillment.

The golden thread running through this broad and far-ranging work—a work which discusses thinkers as dissimilar as Nietzsche and C. S. Lewis—is the author’s desire to reinvigorate contemporary liberalism through an endorsement of the value of *spiritual* freedom. Such an endeavor requires the articulation of a new (or perhaps rediscovered) understanding of the liberal individual. In fact, for Pittz, liberalism has little to do with a particular institutional framework and everything to do with the free development of the individual. That being said, Pittz believes the liberal individual must raise his eyes from time to time above what Leo Strauss called the “low but solid ground” of liberalism. One could say that Pittz shares Patrick Deneen’s trepidations about liberalism’s preoccupation with material acquisition; he is far more sanguine than Deneen, however, regarding its actual capacity to nourish the spirit. The bulk of the book is therefore dedicated to a description of what such a *spirited* liberal might look like.

To make this overarching argument, Pittz sketches out a novel—perhaps one should say, nontraditional—understanding of the “spirit” and of one’s spiritual needs. Upon this conceptual pillar rests the whole argument, and therefore his notion of the spirit will receive special attention here. It is important, moreover, because it reveals a profound divide among Americans as to *what sort* of liberation is ultimately needed and *from what*. We all agree that there are societal dogmas that need to be resisted in the interest of free investigation; however, the solution to the problem of conformity probably does not lie in still more self-generated spirituality, when it is precisely our quest for individuality that led us to our contemporary impasse. Before we engage in judgment, however, let us consider the argument in full.

THE “SPIRIT” OF LIBERALISM

Pitz aims to make a “spiritual defense” of liberalism, on the grounds that *spiritual freedom*—a term he seeks to bring to the table—is a necessary component of any truly liberal order. Unlike political or economic freedom, spiritual freedom admits no strict definition. At the outset, Pittz describes it as “intellectual freedom plus a concern for spiritual fullness” (4). In other words, one should be free to think as one might and to cultivate an individual spirit—which is largely defined by one’s subjective desires, beliefs, and preferences. Here it should be clear that Pittz departs from other thinkers concerned with the spirit, for he is adamant that an individual can achieve spiritual fulfillment *outside* the four walls of churches, the confines of tradition, and the embrace of family. For Pittz, the words “spirit” and “spiritual” are nonreligious, referring instead to one’s interiority and one’s “affective attachment to existence and life” (16). Pittz has in mind something like Rousseau’s “sentiment of existence.” Yet Nietzsche, rather than Rousseau, proves the great inspiration behind his notion of the free spirit.

According to Nietzsche, there is a rare sort of man who is liberated from convention and who “hover[s] over men, customs, laws and the traditional evaluations of things” (quoted on 22). Such a man is able to look with fortitude upon the “terrible truths” of human existence, including death, meaningless suffering, and ceaseless desire. More than that, he is able to bring himself to stand upright in a world devoid of “true knowledge of the physical world or of metaphysics” (26). The free spirit overlaps therefore with the *skeptic*—one who stands scrupulously aloof from the “dogmata” (the claims of certitude) of a given society (31). To be clear, this is not a thoroughgoing skepticism, which undermines its own philosophical footing; it is something akin to

an inherent distrust of popular *doxa*, whether social, political, or religious. Yet to be skeptical alone is not enough, for a free spirit must be the sort of skeptic who maintains a “cheerful” temperament and affirmative disposition towards existence itself. The free spirit must not be bowed before what Edmund Burke called our “naked, shivering natures.” If “perspective” is truly “the basic condition of all life,” as Pittz suggests, then *cheerfulness* amounts to the best of all perspectives—the most valuable of all values (33–35). Channeling Nietzsche, Pittz summarizes the free spirit as follows: he is “a skeptic with a cheerful temperament who seeks above all to confront life and existence directly, fearlessly hovering over the illusions of tradition, metaphysics, and customary morality” (38). Such a person, Pittz hopes, will be found once again in our liberal societies.

At this juncture, one must remark upon Pittz’s efforts at appropriating Nietzsche to liberal societies—a task Nietzsche himself would deem futile. While Pittz knows full well that Nietzsche detested liberalism, and that he leveled scathing critiques against its tendency towards conformity, he nevertheless thinks that Nietzsche’s insights into the free spirit can benefit liberal societies. It is hard to believe, however, that the man who called liberalism “herd-animalization” would admit that the free spirit could be anything but crushed by liberalism. Even in ideal political circumstances, Nietzsche thought, “free spirits” were something exceedingly rare—perhaps encountered only a few times each generation. So, Pittz has the unfortunate task of having to *liberalize* and *democratize* the Nietzschean ideal, to make it useful in our own context. To make his case, Pittz weaves in and out of the Nietzsche scholarship. Nietzsche scholars will quibble with his conclusions, but, in my view, the minute discussions therein will be out of place in a book of such great breadth and aspiration. In fact, one wonders why Pittz expends so much effort to make Nietzsche his guiding spirit, when someone like John Stuart Mill would be more to the point.

More interesting than his attempt to define a free spirit *abstractly* is his investigation of how spiritual freedom is embodied in certain figures—that is, in *actual* free spirits. Since Pittz employs an expansive notion of a free spirit, the cast of characters he assembles is wide-ranging: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Herman Hesse, C. S. Lewis, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau. What unites these disparate individuals is that they deliberately avoided politics, dissented from broader society, and cultivated in themselves a certain spiritual depth. This is not to say that they were unconcerned with the common good, but that they eschewed day-to-day politics

and shallow interactions in favor of deeper pursuits and more meaningful relationships. By standing scrupulously aloof from the dogmas of society and the burdens therein, each could see the deeper (and often imperceptible) currents of human thought and action—something Pittz wishes for individuals in our own society.

From Goethe, we learn the virtue of *solitude*, for Goethe openly lamented that his poetic muse—and indeed his quest for total self-realization—was stymied by the responsibilities of politics and life in modern society (59–64). From Hesse, too, we learn the virtue of *detachment*—of withdrawal from an external society obsessed with “mass” and “quantity,” in favor of an inner life of “depth” and “quality” (64–71). From Lewis we learn that the events that make news are largely illusory and obfuscate the deeper movements of human history (71–77). Lewis, one must comment, is the strangest addition to the list, given that he certainly adhered to Christian dogma; however, Lewis’s scrupulous eschewal of politics—to say nothing of his distrust of democratic society and human wisdom—earns him a spot in this pantheon of skeptics. Finally, from Emerson and Thoreau we learn the virtue of *self-reliance*—of looking inward, and not outward, for the moral values by which to orient ourselves and our lives (77–89). These individuals share a “skepticism, or antidogmatism, and intellectual humility; a detachment from politics and a focus on inner, spiritual life; a yearning for affective attachment to something greater than oneself; and a stubbornness in the face of public opinion and a strong resistance to conformity” (88).

Like Mill, Pittz is concerned with the circumstances under which free spirits—or “energetic natures”—flourish. What conditions, in other words, prove favorable to the emergence of a Goethe, a Lewis, an Emerson? Negative liberties, while a necessary component of any liberal order, are less important than the individual’s positive ability to craft for himself a novel “aesthetic perspective,” or the generation of his values. Such a pursuit requires the space to follow one’s own dictates and therefore a social context immune to conformity. Or at the very least, society must generate in individuals the strength of character to look upon its homogenizing tendencies with contempt. To paraphrase Mill, eccentricity is the soil in which genius thrives; yet we have few geniuses, for, the argument runs, we must not be comfortable with eccentricity. The norm in liberal societies, Pittz argues, is “borrowing thoughts others have generated,” and no amount of liberal “rights” makes for “true independence of mind,” though they often help (100). Pittz is undoubtedly correct

about this fact, and his discussion causes one to question which thoughts exactly are “borrowed” and which untimely truths are needed today.

Accordingly, the final pair of chapters seeks to defend both the *possibility* and *desirability* of individual autonomy—a defense that takes aim at progressive and communitarian critics alike. Pittz argues here that such individual soulfulness is “not only enabled by liberal society, but benefits that society as well” (113). Distinguishing himself from other liberal theorists, Pittz reasons backwards from the existence of free spirits to the political and philosophical foundations of liberalism itself. One needs no state of nature doctrine (or Rawlsian veil of ignorance) upon which to found an edifice of individual rights; one need only show how individual rights buoy the free spirit. Where Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Rawls might have had to hypothesize about the individual, we can look to existing persons—to free spirits—who prove the value of considering humans as autonomous individuals. As Pittz puts it, “the existence of the free spirit points to the existence of the autonomous individual” (138). The individual “emerges out of society,” but he should never remain there. The individual must, in important respects, liberate himself from society in the name of autonomy.

Pitz makes an important distinction late in the argument: individual autonomy does not mean “unencumbered choice,” but rather “mastery over one’s drives” (129–30). Because Pittz is a skeptic, something like *consistency* here must replace any external ideal—as it tends to do in all existentialist arguments. This point about mastery over oneself is supposedly what makes it possible for Pittz to speak of Nietzsche in the same breath as C. S. Lewis, for both seem deeply concerned with the fickleness of human desires. What Pittz hopes to effect is a consistency of character and intention across one’s life that stands in contrast to the typical person tossed about by this or that opinion. This is well and good, but he says very little about the values toward which the individual should orient himself (138). In other words, which drives should sit atop the hierarchy of human desires? For Pittz, the individual must decide for himself. No answers are given or can be given. But can one really be agnostic between, say, Nietzsche and Lewis? Do not Nietzsche and Lewis have incommensurable notions of what dogmas must be resisted (to say nothing of what dogmas must be believed)? These are the sorts of questions one is left asking upon finishing Pittz’s book.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISMS

What Pittz seeks to inculcate, most of all, is something much needed today: a strength of character which enables one to dissent from the dogmas of contemporary culture. However, one's final judgment of the matter will depend upon whether one believes Pittz has correctly identified the dogmas that today must be resisted. A person who is liberated from *traditional attachments*, Pittz argues, is best able to serve as "a bulwark against spiritual and political oppression" (169). A free spirit's skepticism, he argues, can "loosen the knot of ideology" and immunize a society against the "tyranny of public opinion" (171). If you agree with Pittz's claims—namely, that the greatest threat to spiritual freedom comes from unthinking adherence to religion, tradition, conventional morality, and society—then you will likely agree with his prescriptions (173). Others will think that our hyperindividualistic society could use more grounding in religion, tradition, conventional morality, and (perhaps) society itself. I find myself leaning towards the latter opinion.

Liberation from traditional attachments may well be of some value in a highly traditional society. But Americans inhabit a culture dedicated to undermining tradition at every turn. A call to greater detachment from tradition would only exacerbate this dedication. In fact, the most profoundly countercultural position these days is to commit oneself to a traditional vision of life. Pittz seems unaware, or gives no indication, that our contemporary dogmas come not from religion but from a pseudo-religious adherence to the doctrines of liberal progress. The real source of incontestable dogma in modern-day society is not religious fundamentalists, as Pittz seems to suggest, but "woke" liberals and their "cancel culture"—who demand the sort of bottom-up censorship of which tyrants could only dream. Perhaps Pittz detests religious fundamentalists and woke liberals alike, and with equal vigor. But his emphasis on the former will lead a great number of his readers to suppose he thinks only traditionalist forces are now arrayed against liberty. This is the most disappointing of Pittz's errors and the reason his argument does not rise to a true defense of the liberal spirit in our age. Such a defense would see the dangers on either side and call out each with equal candor. However, one must remember that there are "third rails" in liberal society that even the freest of spirits must not touch.

Second, much as one might admire the high-minded individual who emerges from Pittz's book, one cannot shake the thought that this is simply the byproduct of a felicitous selection of noble or exceptional souls. To put this another way, do we find the idea of free spirit appealing, or do we simply find

Goethe, Hesse, Lewis, Emerson, and Thoreau appealing? Are there not other sorts of free spirits we might dislike? Is it really their liberation from tradition that generates our admiration for the former? Pittz grapples with this in his conclusion, where he admits the possibility of “bad” free spirits, and that most free spirits might boil down to “free riders.” While he ably dismantles these criticisms, he never asks whether the free spirit might be sprung from the crooked timber of humanity or whether it might be a whole lot more mediocre and laughable than the serious cast he has brought together here. We appreciate Goethe, Hesse, Lewis, Emerson, and Thoreau, but do we really think that our fellows would act and think in similar fashion with a greater infusion of individuality?

One is glad that Pittz has brought together such a wonderful constellation of sympathetic authors; yet the picture might look entirely different with another cast of characters. There is probably a reason that Pittz chose Goethe, Hesse, Lewis, Emerson, and Thoreau as examples of free spirits, and ignored Camus, Kafka, Lovecraft, and Foucault. The latter’s versions of the Nietzschean free spirit lack the cheerful temperament Pittz so values. In fact, their version seems fated to end in madness, suicide, or things yet worse. Is the cheerful Nietzschean a real human type, or simply a chimera—a combination of words signifying nothing real in nature? The buoyant and life-affirming Nietzschean seems nowhere to be found, least of all in Nietzsche himself. We find cheerfulness in a Chesterton, not a Nietzsche.

Perhaps the most fundamental difficulty for Pittz is *democracy* and especially our *commercial democracy*. As Tocqueville perceived, we have both a tendency toward the sacralization of the individual and a corresponding tendency towards group homogenization and mediocrity. We strain towards individuality only to achieve a new and yet more pervasive conformity. The conscious quest for individuality in our situation, as the past half century demonstrates, results primarily in bohemians, hippies, and hipsters—a strange conformist (and so commercially exploitable) brand of rebellious individuality. Perhaps the eccentricity of hippies and hipsters proves fertile soil for Millian geniuses and Nietzschean *Übermenschen*, but one has one’s doubts. I cannot shake the sense that Pittz’s advice would only exacerbate our preexisting tendency to follow our individual desires directly into banal conformity. Virtues often differentiate men, but vices homogenize. The cult of individuality, moreover, lends itself directly to commercial manipulation and results in anthropological sameness. Though I am no communitarian, I have my doubts that deep meaning can be generated from within, and I

cannot help but be skeptical when Pittz offers each of us a direct, individual attachment “to life and existence” (160). I know of no person who has created, *ex nihilo*, “an affective attachment to existence, engendering love of life and the world” (160). Such attachments, Christopher Lasch has taught us, generally come only after we have renounced our individual right to pursue happiness, subjectively understood.

Finally, one cannot help but wish Pittz consulted yet another free spirit, Fyodor Dostoevsky. Though himself an individual of the highest sort, Dostoevsky nevertheless turned his rhetorical talents against other free spirits whose skepticism severed their already tenuous connections to tradition, religion, and civilization itself. Dostoevsky understood that a revolutionary age has need of the sort of free spirits who dissent from popular opinion precisely in order to uphold its inheritances. Perhaps Pittz and I simply disagree as to whether we live in a revolutionary age.

CONCLUSION

It is fitting to conclude with a return to the beginning—in this case, a return, not to the first page, but to the first thing that strikes one’s eye. Emblazoned on the book cover is Caspar David Friedrich’s *Woman before the Rising/Setting Sun*, curiously rendered so as to make it darker and more foreboding than the original. The choice of illustration is fitting, given both Pittz’s and Friedrich’s Romantic, if not Nietzschean, themes—most of all, their shared interest in the lone individual’s communion with nature. There is, however, something odd about this selection of painting. For one, the darkness of the book cover seems at odds with the desire for a fundamentally cheerful temperament in the face of brute nature. Second, the meaning of the painting is intentionally ambiguous: because we cannot see the woman’s face we cannot know whether the woman’s outstretched arms represent her enthusiastic welcoming of the rising sun, or her tragic resignation to the setting sun. Perhaps this ambiguity actually reveals two fundamental human types: those who view the scene as the rising sun, bringing enlightenment to a heretofore benighted world, will likely agree with Pittz’s argument about the possibility of individual (or, individualistic) spiritual fulfillment; those of us who interpret the painting as a tragic dying of the light, however, will be unconvinced by a life of what amounts to expressive individualism.

Both the book and the painting bring to mind the sublimity of the individual, and what we will conclude ultimately depends on whether we believe sublimity to be that which is impressive or awe-inspiring or that which reveals

man's essential smallness. What I see when I survey this landscape, and the human landscape, is the utter inability of individuals to achieve spiritual fulfillment on their own terms. The quest for individuality itself, in a deeply individualistic culture, can lead only to the blandest sort of conformity. If one seeks a *true* critical distance from our deepest social dogmas, we must first understand the purchase expressive individualism has on our souls.