IN PRAISE OF CIVILITY

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Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man.* New York: Knopf-Random House of Canada, 1976, pp. xiii, 373, $17.95 cloth.

The Fall of Public Man is an important and serious book, and well written enough to be accessible to the moderately patient general reader. It deals with questions which are of some urgency to us in the social crises through which we are at present passing and, though I do not agree with all Richard Sennett's premises and do not share all his conclusions, I have no hesitation in saying that his book contributes a great deal to our understanding of why politics and social arrangements in the modern democratic world so often fail to produce what those who still have faith in their leaders expect from their efforts.

Richard Sennett, it is obvious, has no faith in such leaders and his distrust springs from one of the central themes of his book — that we have shifted from the objective consideration of political aims and practices to the cult of personality which means that we support a politician for what he appears to be rather than for what he proposes to do; thus we are always and inevitably disappointed, as we are in all endeavours to achieve practical results through emotionally based relationships.

I can best illustrate Sennett's view of what has happened in our society by quoting two paragraphs from the final pages that together summarize the *leitmotif* of his whole book, whose divagations into illustrative historical episodes and trends always swing back to this central theme. Sennett talks of the ''long historical process . . . in which the very terms of human nature have been transformed, into that individual, unstable and self-absorbed phenomenon we call 'personality'.'' And he continues:

> That history is of the erosion of a delicate balance which maintained society in the first flush of its secular and capitalist existence. It was a balance between public and private life, a balance between an impersonal realm in which men could invest one kind of passion and a personal realm in which they could invest another. This geography of society was governed by an image of human nature based on the idea of a natural human character; this character was not created by the experiences of a lifetime, but was revealed in them. It belonged to Nature and was

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reflected in man. As both secularity and capitalism arrived at new forms in the last century, this idea of a transcendent nature gradually lost its meaning. Men came to believe that they were the authors of their own characters, that every event in their lives must have a meaning in terms of defining themselves, but what this meaning was, the instabilities and contradictions of their lives made it difficult to say. Yet the sheer attention and involvement in matters of personality grew ever greater. Gradually this mysterious, dangerous force which was the self came to define social relations. It became a social principle. At that point, the public realm of impersonal meaning and impersonal action began to wither.

The society we inhabit today is burdened with the consequences of that history, the effacement of the *res publica* by the belief that social meanings are generated by the feelings of individual human beings. This change has obscured for us two areas of social life. One is the realm of power, the other is the realm of the settlements in which we live.

In order to establish his thesis, Sennett goes through the elaborate historical and sociological analysis of change which forms the main body of his work. He poses a time when there was a balance between the impersonality of public life, the realm of culture, and the personality of the private life, the realm of nature. And he traces how, during the nineteenth century, the dams of convention parting the two realms were broken down and personality flooded into the realm of social relationships — the *res publica* — in which it had no place.

Given Sennett's concern with balance, it is appropriate that his book should be divided into carefully poised sections. After two introductory chapters, there are three groups of four chapters each, discussing respectively the society of the *ancien régime* in major cities, its nineteenth century disintegration and the narcissistic present with its dominating and disastrous cult of personality.

The two introductory chapters discuss the ''public problem'', which Sennett sees as the fact that modern man has sought to ''make the fact of being private, alone with ourselves and with family and intimate friends, an end in itself'', and that the pursuit of this end has infected the public realm, so that: ''In the *ancien régime* public experience was connected to the formation of social order; in the last century, public experience came to be connected to the formation of personality.'' In other words, the public and the private have in our time

coalesced to the detriment of society, whereas in the past the danger of this very development was recognized. Of the mid-eighteenth century city Sennett remarks:

> The line drawn between public and private was essentially the one on which the claims of civility — epitomized by cosmopolitan, public behaviour — were balanced against the claims of nature epitomized by the family. They saw these claims in conflict, and the complexity of their vision lay in that they refused to prefer the one over the other, but held the two in a state of equilibrium.

The next four chapters are mainly devoted to a description of the patrician society of the great eighteenth century cities, Paris and to a less extent London, and particularly the extent to which public behaviour was governed by an elaborate series of conventions and disguises, so that dress, coiffure and makeup formed a mask to which the code of manners (including highly formalized types of speech) was the counterpart in action, to the extent that even conflict was formalized and thus largely defused. Sennett admits that such a situation could exist only in a "society" restricted in extent and numbers, an elite in which everyone knew the rules of the game, and he is frank in admitting that he excludes from consideration the poor and the menial, who were in any case regarded as outside the world where power was played.

I cannot help feeling, from my own knowledge of the history of this period, that Sennett is being even more restrictive than his own admissions suggest, and is presenting to us a model of an ordered society based on selected phenomena in eighteenth century cities rather than a picture of what actually existed. In many directions *ancien régime* society was not nearly as unanimously dedicated to the impersonality of social and political life as Sennett suggests. At this very time, after all, a cult of personality was already developing through the rise of Methodism, which was not entirely a religion of plebians, and middle class society had been considerably affected, in London certainly, by the tendency of the Quakers and to a lesser degree of other rich dissenters — some of them powerful men in the City of London and in the background of political life — to reject patrician dress and patrician manners in favour of simplicity and frankness. The cult of total frankness reached its apogee in Godwin's *Political Justice* (published in 1793), but Godwin represented the extreme development of a trend evident in British and specifically in London society at many levels throughout the eighteenth century.

The elitist conventions may indeed, as Sennett argues, have been observed in the theatres, largely because of the traditional patron-servant relationship between audience and player (though this was waning by mid-century, as Gaerick's independence showed), but the same was not the case in the novel, the rising literary form of the period, and in Richardson and his followers we already see a breaking down of the conventions of impersonality and an intrusion of the values of family life (the realm of nature which Sennett opposes to public life in the eighteenth century city) into the public world. Such tendencies, admittedly, were not so strong in eighteenth century Paris, though even there one encounters the curious fact of the anti-patrician plays of the watchmaker's son Beaumarchais having won their way against great opposition until they were accepted in inner court circles, and the equally curious fact that Rousseau — who on Sennett's own admission represents almost the opposite of the cult of convention and artifice — had so great an influence on the intellectual life of the Enlightenment.

Indeed, when I read this section of *The Fall of Public Man*, I was often reminded less of what I had read by eighteenth century writers than of the views on the value of artifice in life that were developed by the men of the 1890s — who looked back to an idealized Augustan age — and borrowed by them largely from Charles Baudelaire, a great pasticheur of eighteenth century attitudes. In a different way, much of the substance of Mr. Sennett's argument is contained in Wilde's essay, ''The Truth of Masks'', and even more in the work of that mask- and ritual-obsessed poet, W.B. Yeats, who is constantly juxtaposing the impersonal and the intimate in poems like ''A Prayer for My Daughter'':

> How but in custom and in ceremony
> Are innocence and beauty born?
> Ceremony's a name for the rich horn,
> And custom for the spreading laurel tree.

It must be said for the benefit of those who — like myself — have no great taste for the image of a world where women in yard-high head-dresses called *poufs au sentiment* screamed insults at actors (*how many* really wore *poufs* or screamed the insults?) that Mr. Sennett disclaims any desire to return to such a society, or any thought that its semblance might be reconstructed in the contemporary world. And we may indeed be doing better justice to the arguments in the remainder of *The Fall of Public Man* if we assume that in his chapters on the *ancien régime* Sennett is in fact creating a kind of Platonic

myth, an exemplary model, just as eighteenth century man created exemplary models out of a republican Rome that never existed as they conceived it. Otherwise, it would be hard to reconcile the urbanity and formalized confrontations of eighteenth century city existence as he presents it with the barbarity of the law and its administration, the callousness of social relations, the acceptance of slavery and the fact that the people who did something practical about these anomalies within such a society were mainly the very Methodists and dissenters who saw their religion in a personal rather than a ceremonial relationship to the deity, in an acceptance of natural law, including the laws of human nature, as immanent rather than transcendent.

But in the sense of Platonic or Sorelian myth, the four chapters on public and private man in the *ancien régime* do make sense and have their use in giving imaginable form to a concept of society in which a deliberate impersonalization of public affairs serves to protect the personal nature of private life — or, to put it another way, in which human culture protects human nature.

The four succeeding chapters appear under the general title of "The Turmoil of Public Life in the 19th Century". Sennett sees that turmoil as already anticipated in Rousseau's writings in which he detects the strange but prophetic conjunction of a "search for individual authenticity" and "political tyranny". But the turmoil expressed itself in the nineteenth century in the "fears and fantasies" of the bourgeoisie, which find their point of focussing tension in Balzac's Paris. It was — because of widespread ignorance even among industrialists and financiers of the real workings of capitalism — a highly unstable world. It was also a world in which the transcendant was replaced by the immanent, in which both the pietist's God and the rationalist's Human Nature gave way to a mystification of the individual and his potentialities — and since that individual had yet to be defined, men lived in uncertainty and fear. And so instead of dress and manners providing a reassurance since they indicated a predictable way of behaviour, they became threats because no one knew what lay behind and even the drabbest of appearances was watched for the minute signs that revealed the truth about its wearer. "There are no disguises; each mask is a face," says Sennett. One sought first to hide one's emotions, then to suppress them in case they should inadvertently become evident. Men in public became passive spectators: "In silence, watching life go by, a man was at last free." He was free because his silence and his sameness of appearance defended the personality of which he had become so apprehensively conscious. The complement to the silent, solitary men in the cafés and clubs was the politician who exposed and exploited rather than concealing his personality, and in this situation "the content of political belief recedes as in public people become more interested in the content of the politician's life." Though Sennett does not.use it, an appropriate comparison could be made between Wilkes in the

eighteenth century, about whose scandalous private life few of his followers were concerned, and Parnell in the nineteenth century, whose career was destroyed by the revelations of his affair with Kitty O'Shea. The content of life had undermined the content of belief.

Again, the representation is simplified until the outlines of a myth emerge. A factual picture, literal in its detail, is not being presented. Anyone who knows much about London clubs in the Victorian age remembers that only in certain rooms was silence enjoined; anyone who knows something of the history of Parisian cafés like the d'Harcourt and the Closerie des Lilas is aware that these were not the gathering places of speechless and solitary men and women fantasizing over their glasses of absinthe. And what of the great balls of the Victorian age where marriageable girls were paraded like horses for their points to be observed? What of the salons where brilliant stylized conversation was cultivated and valued? What of the country house parties where people of a number of classes met and the celebrated British reserve of street encounters was abandoned? Nor, when one comes to the replacement of political ideas by political personality, should it be forgotten that this was the age of Ruskin as well as Dizzy, and that Christian and secular socialism both developed in this period a serious criticism of existing society that attracted converts from all classes because of its ideas, not because of the personalities of those who expounded them. Yet Sennett is again using his myth to isolate genuine trends and to simplify the complexities of an age when change was widespread and rapid.

In many ways we are more the descendants of the Victorians than we choose to admit, inheriting some of their attitudes unchanged and others in inverted form. Constant is the shift in politics from idea and concrete proposal to personality. Indeed, it had grown even more evident, so that one can say of the 1970s even more emphatically than Sennett says of the 1870s:

> To the extent that a politician in public arouses credence in himself as a person, to that extent those who are credulous lose a sense of themselves . . . They focus on who he is rather than on what he can do for them.

The difference is illustrated when we compare the fate of Parnell with the fate of Pierre Trudeau after the breakup of his marriage, which would have been fatal for a Victorian politician or indeed for any Canadian politician before 1960. Trudeau gained an access of popularity, largely because the incident seemed to exhibit a freedom of personal passions, the appearance of

spontaneous intimacy, that has become part of the cult of personality as in our day it swings towards paralysing narcissism.

Sennett sees the plight of our society signified in the loss of a real consciousness of the city as a social form, and in the fragmenting cult of quartiers and communities.

> Cities appear in present-day clichés as the ultimate in empty impersonality. In fact, the lack of a strong impersonal culture in the modern city instead has aroused a passion for fantasized intimate disclosures between people.

He defends the city and also civility, which, as he says, "has as its aim the shielding of others from being burdened with oneself."

There is no room even to summarize the detailed criticism of contemporary social trends with which *The Fall of Public Man* ends, but some critical points about these last chapters must be made.

I agree completely with Sennett's view that the cult of intimacy which has been fostered by the electronic media has largely destroyed true contact between people, and that personal encounter movements have been harmful and self-defeating. But I would not continue with him from that point to reject the trend towards creating smaller, more participatory communities within our cities. Clearly a return to the eighteenth century patrician order is impossible, and Sennett does not attempt to advocate it. (Indeed, he is almost entirely concerned with diagnosis and suggests no actual remedies.) The demographic evidence is enough to show our present predicament. Cities have grown so large that the elite groups which still exist in them have lost true significance among the masses of people and the vast neutral buildings that dominate modern city centres where these have not been destroyed entirely. Also, class structures and relationships have changed, so that vastly more people belong to the dominant culture such as it is and their needs can no longer be met in great metropolitan agglomerations. We must indeed attempt to preserve and to recover in a form appropriate to our time the values embraced in the word *civility*, but it is not impossible to see this happening in a group of interlocking communities. It is the isolation between such communities that has to be avoided, and the answer to that — to the problem of creating real local centres which are not wholly inward-looking — lies in the concept of federalism applied municipally, not in the hybrid form that passes for federalism in current Canadian politics, but in a form much closer to what Proudhon advocated in nineteenth century Paris.

I propose this tentative answer in terms of a possible direction towards the future only to suggest that urban and national decentralization may not be so negative a goal as Sennett believes. It is certainly not fatally linked to the galloping narcissism which he rightly sees as a malady — perhaps the major psychic malady — of our world. But essentially *The Fall of Public Man* must be judged by its validity as a diagnosis, and here, once one accepts the convention of sociological myth within which Sennett works, it is a penetrating, wide-ranging and salutary study.

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