

all over it: a butterfly, a wedding dress, a mile of distance between fully clothed lovers.

Modern women want a more "grassroots philosophy of life," editor Anne Canadeo explains. But they won't find it in Christian romances. The stock plot—woman meets dangerous man, it's up to her to reform him—is still there. The only difference is now she has to drag him to church. And the lovers still only get married on the last page. To be truly grassroots, the books would have the lovers paying bills, changing diapers, going through post-honeymoon depression. Without the day after, it's still the devil's fantasy romance.

"He drew her into his arms, held her close and kissed her with a slow, tender passion. Then he said huskily, "Will you marry me, Victoria?"

"Yes, Phillip," she said, her voice light with joy. "Yes, yes, yes! . . . And no matter what happens, we'll never be alone, because our heavenly Father will be with us and watching over us forever." The End. Thank God. •

THE HARD QUESTIONS

EXCLUSIONARY RULE

By Glenn C. Loury

In the opening pages of his defense of free expression, *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill warns of "social tyranny more formidable than many kinds of political oppression"—what he calls "the tyranny of prevailing opinion and feeling." Often, Mill argues, it is the velvet glove of seduction, rather than the iron fists of legal repression, that poses the more formidable threat to a vigorous debate on sensitive questions.

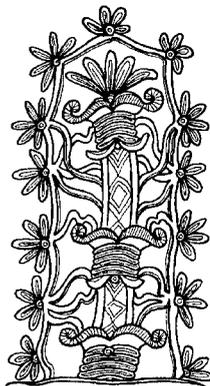
In fact, there really is no such thing as "free" speech. To voice an opinion—on abortion, the Clinton fund-raising scandal, or trade with China—is to raise questions about one's underlying political values, and this can be costly. One's friends can quickly become ones enemies, and vice versa.

This is particularly true in an environment of partisan conflict. We may dismiss the arguments of a declared political opponent by saying the critic merely wants to discredit our movement, but, when one of our own makes a similar argument, no such defense is available, and our opponents can exploit the existence of internal dissension to their advantage. The "insider critic," therefore, gives aid and comfort to his enemies. So, it comes as no surprise that such critics are often accused by their colleagues of being disloyal. (What kind of Jew would see merit in

Arafat's position? What "real" Democrat would support a capital gains tax cut?) This explains why, once a consensus on some vital issue is established among politically like-minded individuals, it becomes nearly impossible for those identifying with "the movement" to challenge "the party line."

I have observed this difficulty firsthand. Nearly 15 years ago, I began to write essays sharply critical of how the civil-rights leadership was responding to the growing underclass crisis. I quickly found that I had made enemies of a number of colleagues and associates, both blacks and whites. People began to call me a "black conservative," and it was not meant as a compliment. The question became, "Whose side are you on?" It was argued that, with Ronald Reagan in the White House busy turning back the clock on racial progress, only an enemy of the interests of African Americans would openly criticize the efforts of the traditional black leadership. But it was precisely because of the existence of a determined opposition that vigorous dissent from within the ranks of the faithful was so important. Otherwise, our intellectual defenses may prove too weak to withstand the partisan onslaught.

My reaction to being rejected by the racial progressives was to join "the other side." I became a soldier in the War of Ideas—a neoconservative combatant in the culture conflicts. And so I remain, though with increasing unease. The view from the right is that the universities, the media, and the bureaucracy are in the hands of a benighted liberal establishment that must be swept from the stage of history. The issue of race looms large in this conflict, for the core ideological dispute is over the necessity and the possibility of progressive social reform. So, the plight of the black poor is a major front in the War of Ideas. Persistent racial inequality provides the left with an indictment of the status quo, even as the intractability of this disparity in the face of various reform efforts helps convince the right that a socially engineered egalitarianism is a utopian dream. But it is here that my discomfort begins, for it has become increasingly clear to me that the conservative line on race is morally untenable.



Opposition to racial progressives, particularly on the issue of affirmative action, is now a key test of authenticity, and of political loyalty, on the right. Yet affirmative action, however prudently employed, has never been, and can never be, anything more than a marginal instrument for addressing the problem of racial inequality. Conservatives who bill their crusade against racial preferences as the Second Coming of the civil-rights movement display a ludicrous sense of misplaced priorities, making a totem of color-blindness, even as the social isolation of the urban black poor reveals how important "color" continues

to be in American society. So, there is good reason to criticize those who begin and end their discussion of racial issues with the insistence that affirmative action must go.

Yet, such criticism raises deeper questions. When the civil-rights struggle ended, victorious, a quarter-century ago, there was a clear need to ensure that the consequences of a century of second-class citizenship would not long endure among the black lower classes. Nothing more than a token effort was ever made to mobilize the American public behind this goal. The reason, it seems, is that while second-class treatment at law for Negroes was inconsistent with American political ideals, the nasty, brutish, and short lives of a sizable minority of the descendants of those Negroes can be rationalized as reflecting their deficiencies, rather than revealing any flaw in "our way of life." Nowhere is the ideological character of this rationalizing process more clearly revealed than in the celebration of immigrant success, over and against native black failure, which is so popular on the right. The former proves the openness and health of the system, even as the latter, however sadly, reveals the inadequacies of some to whom the system has now been fully opened.

But what morally reflective person could embrace this view as a governing philosophy for our nation as we enter the next century? •

Patent hyperbole in movie reviews.

OSCAR WILD

By James Wood

It is hard, as a critic, not to be drawn to the hysterical endorsements posing as criticism on movie advertisements. In fact, this is the only area of the newspaper I read with care. For here are the poor relations of criticism, reminding one, as in a Victorian melodrama, of the fragility of one's *arrivisme*. This is the poorhouse, the factory of criticism, and one watches with moralistic horror the syndicated chatterers, late-show companions, insomnia-healers, emotional escorts, and surrogate writers who "review" films in various media.

It is a comic, Lewis Carroll-like world, in which everything is upside down or back-to-front. Digits are giant-sized: "Two Big Thumbs Up!" A film is praised as "the best movie of 1997" but appears in February. The most ordinary statement has its exclamation mark, giving it the look of a punch line to a terrible joke: "Everything about *Boogie Nights* is unexpected!" And what is presumably the deepest expression of critical ecstasy is a mute, four-star exhalation, an expletive, a kind of curse of celebration: ★★★★★!

In this strange environment, the most amusing development may be the way the word, or trademark, "Oscar®" is now being used. One gets used to the

bleeping monitor of the "®" sign, stuck like a criminal's electronic tag to every movement of the word. But what is stranger is the certainty with which the word is used. Here are some examples: Brad Pitt "delivers an Oscar-caliber performance," according to Susan Granger of SSG Syndicate; "*Seven Years in Tibet* has Oscar® written all over it," argues Dave Weber of SW Entertainment News. "How good is Parker Posey? We're talking possible Oscar® Nomination!" yells Mick LaSalle of *The San Francisco Chronicle*. Siskel and Ebert think that *The Ice Storm* is "Definite Oscar® Material," while Jack Mathews of *Newsday* thinks it "A certain Oscar® contender." Joel Siegel shouts, of *Mrs. Brown*: "I'm looking for Oscar® Nominations for Judi Dench and Billy Connolly!"

First of all, and superficially, one notices that these people speak about Oscar as if it were an epic film for which the other films are auditioning. Thus *The Ice Storm* is not so much a finished film as "material" for a future showing of Oscar; Brad Pitt delivers not an Oscar-like performance but an Oscar-caliber one (as schoolteachers used to say of one's academic potential: "you are scholarship-caliber"). But more striking is the absolute standard that Oscar seems to be. This is paradoxical. Prizes are notoriously unpredictable, and, of all prizes, the Oscar judges are infamously fickle and foolish. Yet Susan Granger can be certain that what she has seen Brad Pitt give is an Oscar performance; Jack Mathews is sure that *The Ice Storm* is a "certain" contender for a prize that is annually uncertain.

How can it be that these filmgoers know what an Oscar movie looks like? Perhaps because "Oscar" refers to nothing at all. It refers to no ceremony or system of values, but simply to itself—or rather, to the little blinking "®" sign just above it. Oscar is nothing more than a trademark, an endorsement which means precisely that it can be used as an absolute standard, a kind of gold standard. The "Absolut Vodka" ads pun on just this idea that "Absolut" is both a trademark and a term of absolute value. All the better that "Oscar" is made out of gold and has its own logo—the mutant buddha handed to each winner.

The way Oscar is used gives us a chance to see what happens to language when it is contaminated by the enforced use of the trademark sign: meaning, itself, becomes a trademark. The people using the term "Oscar" become manufacturers; they themselves apply the trademark to the goods. In the way of commerce, this is a circular activity, with no reference to reality. To call a Coach bag a Coach bag is only to do that. Thus to call a performance Oscar-caliber can only mean "of the caliber of an Oscar." We cannot have this caliber explained because the trademark *is* the caliber. Similarly, when Siskel and Ebert and Jack Mathews say that they are "certain" that *The Ice Storm* is Oscar-worthy, or that it is "definite" Oscar material, they are not saying that they are "certain" about aesthetics, and they are not saying that they are "certain" the judges will select the film. For they cannot be. They are simply saying that they are certain that they

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