Snow White and the Social Construction of Purity

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Be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow...

—Hamlet

Introduction

In the last decade, with the collapse of the Iron Curtain, the breakup of the Soviet Union, and the end of the Cold War, one might have expected an era of peace and tranquility. Yet, from Rwanda to Bosnia, from Kosovo to Kashmir, from Chechnya to East Timor, we have seen an epidemic of rampant and unmediated intolerance. While efforts toward understanding, whether in Israel with its Arab neighbors, or in Ireland between Irish and Catholic compatriots, have made some progress, this past decade has seen a breakout of a very virulent and contagious form of ethnic prejudice. There is much to deplore in the behavior of the Serbs, but they are hardly the only bigots left in the world. More than ever, we need to understand, better than we do at present, the roots of prejudice. It is not enough to dismiss prejudice for the evil that it is; one must inquire into its origin so that one can, eventually, minimize their effect. And what underlies prejudice is a certain logic of self-preservation based on several pseudo-assumptions fueled by the engine of fear. To eliminate prejudice, one must dispel those misconceptions that underlie behavior, and eliminate the fear that causes apprehension and generates misapprehension. In my view, some of these misapprehen-
sions stem from the pseudo assumptions that surround the notion of purity.

Three aspects of purity concern me; actual—purity that’s measurable and demonstrable; metaphorical—purity by association and analogy; and symbolic—purity by tradition and semiotic convention. In the second case, purity by association and analogy, we must contend with the axiomatic presumption that virtue is virginal; in the third case, purity by tradition and semiotic convention, we are confronted subliminally with the notion—sanctioned by practice and by custom in some cultures—that the color white is emblematic of purity. This speculative essay is a first foray into what is at once a very abstract and a very visceral subject. Our subject is abstract, because the notion of “purity”, as I hope to show, is a social and cultural construction; and it is visceral because it touches on personal matters: hygiene and racial identity. The recent campaigns of “ethnic cleansing” in the former Yugoslavia will, of course, remind us that the ramifications our inquiry are not merely literary and lexical.

Let us begin with the biases in favor of “purity” and its apposite concepts: “pure gold” suggest something superior to “impure gold”; “pure delight” is understood as synonymous with “unalloyed delight”—as if less than one hundred percent pleasure were somehow distasteful. “Pure virgin” is, of course, an implicit redundancy, because a virgin is, by definition, unsullied and pure.2

Other near synonyms for “pure” are paradigmatically positive: “authentic”, “genuine”, “real”, “unadulterated”, “undiluted”, “neat”.3 By contrast, terms for things impure are barely neutral if not negative: “mongrel”, “mulatto”, “half-breed”, “mutant”, “deviant”; or, in its non-biological forms, mixtures tend to be characterized as incoherent and illogical, as in “muddle”, “a smorgasbord”, “a jumble”, “confusion”, “hotchpotch” (of “hodge-podge”); other markers of “impurities” are at best only neutral: “amalgam”, “diversity”, “composite”, “conglomeration”, “heterogeneity”, “potpourri”, “medley”. 
"concoction", and "melange".

Quantifiability of Purity: The Influence of Science

The quantitative measure of purity maybe borrowed from analyses of efficiency in machines, which are perceived to operate on a definitive spectrum and a finite capacity. The analogy which conceives of the human body as a machine is suspect, if too familiar, but its inappropriateness would not be difficult to demonstrate. To measure efficiency, there must be some agreement as to the function and the purpose of the machine, and one must be clear what would be optimum for the machine. When applied to humans, however, the answer to these questions is far from obvious, and border on the philosophical. Indeed, it may be difficult to find agreement as to what question to pose? There is no universal agreement on what the function of a human being is (to survive? to thrive? to exist? to work? to acquire power over others? to do good works? to be happy? to perpetuate the species?), nor can one agree easily on what the productivity of a human being might be (to reproduce? to achieve? to affect others?). In view of the impossibility of establishing a basis to calculate function and productivity in humans, any purported estimate of "efficiency" when applied to the human body, can only be fanciful.

Yet, despite its illogic, when it comes to health and wholesomeness, we routinely quantify the quality of life. Part of this notion of purity stems from chemistry, where one can quantitatively measure purity to the extent of one part in a thousand, or even, one part in a million. Studies of toxicity, studies of disease, are based on the assumption that the "purer" the substance, the healthier the environment. This zealousness for absolute cleanliness is part of the myth of modernization, where technology, plumbing, and sanitation make possible a degree of cleanliness scarcely imaginable before. The construction of the most sophisticated elements of high technology, the microprocessor, is conducted in the most antiseptic chambers, where no impurity—whether dirt or dust or virus
or organism—is permitted to intrude. It is no coincidence that three of the most technologically advanced countries in the world—the United States, Japan, and Switzerland—are also among the most sanitary and hygienic.  

Puritanizing Purity: The Influence of Religion

The value of purity is not only highlighted by science, it is also sanctioned by religion. There is a powerful myth in Christianity that suggests that all God’s creation is perfect: nothing from His hand, according to this myth, can be anything less, lest He be diminished. The metaphors for sin—stain, sickness, injury, dirtiness, deviancy—establish two subconscious and complementary equations: that virtue is purity, and sin is pollution. The myth of the Garden of Eden in Genesis presupposes that virtue came first, that before there was original sin, there was original virtue. That this need not be inevitable, familiar though it may be to the Western mindset, will, I hope, become clear as we proceed. Edenic innocence reflects immaculateness of two kinds—being unstained by sin and being unconscious of evil. For if eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge is “the original sin”, then the “knowledge of good and evil” is what prompts the expulsion from paradise and the loss of heaven. In the fairy tale, it is an apple, after all, that the evil stepmother gives to Snow White. Moral purity, therefore, precedes moral knowledge, and innocence precedes decadence. We start off clean, and bit by bit, we are soiled. To be saved is to be cleansed of one’s sins, to expurgate the noxious evil in one’s life, to expel the demon of disease. The rhetoric of religion, most prominently in its Protestant phase, is awash with appeals to spiritual wholesomeness, and to a purity, not only of the soul and of the heart, but also of the body. “Cleanliness is next to Godliness” is only the most aphoristic enunciation of this familiar conception of virtue as purity. In surveying traditional attitudes toward disease, Susan Sontag writes:

Responses to illnesses associated with sinners and the poor, invariably recommended the adoption of middle-class values: the regular
habits, productivity, and emotional self-control. Health itself was eventually identified with these values, which were religious as well as mercantile, health being evidence of virtue as disease was of depravity. The dictum that cleanliness is next to godliness is to be taken quite literally. (55)

There is a clear "ideological" dimension to this definition of health, which is staunchly "mercantile", Calvinist, Puritanical, and bourgeois.

In Japan, which is hardly Calvinistic, the Shinto faith also stresses purity, initially in its ritual aspect, but ultimately touching on all aspects of life. What Shinto and Calvinism have in common is the emphasis on purity as the ideal of faith: the differences are matters only of emphasis—where Shinto stresses ritual purity, Calvinism stresses spiritual purity. Christian imagery requires the belief that Christ came into the world, not through the "unclean" act of sex, but immaculately conceived, and born of a virgin.  

In this cluster of associations, there is also an element of social status: the higher the class, the more unstained the reputation. Jane Austin brilliantly satirized this attitude in Emma, when, speaking of Harriet Smith's humble birth, out of wedlock, she wrote: "The stain of illegitimacy unbleached by nobility and wealth would have been a stain indeed." Nobility and wealth are coupled—in the Puritan ethic—as virtually synonymous, with status not far behind. The implication in Jane Austin's use of the word 'bleach' reflects the suggestion that making things white is to rid them of dirt, make them free of stain. The equation between wealth and good grooming is hard to resist, for indeed cleanliness is a rich man's proposition, and it takes money to keep oneself clean. Adequate plumbing, ample opportunities for bathing, leisure time, fresh clothes—all these accoutrements of cleanliness are not vouchsafed to the poor.  But it is clear that Jane Austin sees nobility as an innate, not cosmetic, superiority.

Equating physical grooming with moral uprightness was inevitable, and cleanliness became a hallmark not merely of social, but of moral, su-
periority, as we can see from the following lines from a Kipling character in praise of Gunga Din:

"An for all 'is dirty' ide/' E was white, clear white, inside/ When' e went to tend the wounded under fire!"

Good heartedness indisputably reflected a white heart: a black heart was all meanness and vulgarity and pettiness. When white people saw something in black people to admire, they, not without vanity, saw a bit of themselves. Blake recognized the arbitrariness of these black–white bifurcations in "The Little Black Boy":

My mother bore me in the southern wild, / And I am black, but O! my soul is white; / White as an angel is the English child, /

But I am black, as if bereav'd of light.

The last line is as pitiable as the preceding line is sweet: the Black is shown to be deprived, bereft of light, as if light had died ("bereav'd"); he is, in short, benighted. What this implies is that light has an affinity with white, and as light is virtual metonymy for reason and knowledge ("the light of reason"), the inescapable logic is to equate the color white with superior intelligence. 7

Christianity has, of course, been a major factor. As Richard Dyer has written: "...indelibly marking its culture and consciousness, it has also been thought and felt in distinctly white ways for most of its history, seen in relation to, for instance, the following: the persistence of the Manichean dualism of black; white that could mapped on to skin colour difference; the role of the Crusades in racialising the idea of Christendom (making national/geographic others into enemies of Christ); the gentilising and whitening of the image of Christ and the Virgin in painting; the ready appeal to the God of Christianity in the prosecution of doctrines of racial superiority and imperialism. (17)

It would be both unfair and inaccurate to attribute these metaphorical equations of superiority solely to the vanity of Caucasians. The color white does have an affinity for light: light bounces off white colors whereas dark colors tend to absorb rather than reflect light. This detail of
physics is not subject to political correction. As Dyer has written:

All technologies work within material parameters that cannot be wished away. Human skin does have different colours which reflect light differently. Methods of calculating this differ, but the degree of difference is roughly the same: Millerson (1972: 31), discussing colour television, gives light skin 43 per cent light reflectance and dark skin 29 per cent; Malkiweicz (1985: 53) states that ‘a Caucasian face has about 35 percent reflectance but a black face reflects less than 16 percent’. This creates problems if shooting very light and very dark people in the same frame. (89)

The differences in the behavior of light with light-skinned and dark-skinned subjects are empirically demonstrable, but the strategies based on this datum of physics are socially constructed and manipulated: Dyer, for example, insists that “The photographic media and, a fortiori, movie lighting assume, privilege and construct whiteness” (89). The depiction of whiteness with an emphasis on “Purity, cleanliness, virginity” is an extended story, too long to delve into here. But where I differ from discoverers of the “absence”, the “unmarkedness” of whiteness, who maintain that whiteness (in whatever degrees of disparity from reality) pervades most discourses on race even while it is taken for granted, is that I see whiteness not as absence, but as default, and default in more than one sense. Whiteness as a perspective has been assumed, taken for granted, as the ground of reference: Dyer, Falkenburg and others have explored the subtle implications of this unmarkedness. But what interests me here is that, underneath the presumption of whiteness lurks certain pernicious assumptions about purity and cleanliness. If whiteness has gone unremarked, then the conceptual premises deserve to be unmasked as well.

There is a demonizing of dirt in capitalist societies, sanctioned not only by institutional Christianity, as we have seen, but exploited by chemical companies and their advertisers, and by the Martha Stewarts of...
the world, to achieve a purity and a cleanliness in this world that is far from realistic. We are persuaded, subliminally, to act out Lady Macbeth's obsession with cleanliness and immaculateness: "Out, out, damn spot."— as if wash day were the day of atonement. Of course, we are like to be as unsuccessful as Lady Macbeth.

Hegemonizing Purity: The Influence of Ideology

There is a third factor in the persistence of notions of purity, in addition to the scientific and religious bias in the Christian West. At bottom, notions of purity are binary, Manichaean: they posit clearcut distinctions between light and dark, between good and evil, between right and wrong; and they assume a strict form of binary logic which makes it not only impossible but also inconceivable to be both good and evil, both right and wrong, both light and dark. Oftentimes, the popular conception of these antitheses are more categorical than polar: they do not admit of gradations between two poles, but rather posit absolutely decisive lines separating the two realms of meaning. The inability (or unwillingness) to conceive of gradations and of clines, in which opposite elements might be melded together, means that we have rejected polar opposites (like North and South, like rheostats, dimmers, that can modulate the brightness of lights, like twilight which is both light and dark) in favor of mutually exclusive categories (like plus and minus). In the tradition of categoricalness, one is either in one box or the other, one cannot be partially in one and mostly in the other. One cannot be both positive and negative, both right and wrong, both good and evil. It is an all-or-nothing proposition.

Aside from the fact that this perspective is, like any metaphorical paradigm, arbitrary, it also distorts the reality of things. For example, absolute darkness, as a scientist friend has reported, is extremely difficult to achieve; even in the blackness of space, there is cosmic radiance that makes total darkness, the total absence of light, impossible. Light and darkness are not two mutually exclusive entities, but one thing and its
absence. Darkness cannot exist except as the relative absence of light.

Octavio Paz, the Mexican Nobel Prize winning poet, put the matter memorably: “Ever since Parmenides, our world has been one of clear-cut distinctions between what is and what in not... This first uprooting—for it was a wrenching of being out of primordial chaos—constitutes the basis of our thought... The identity of contraries postulated by the Eastern tradition is also a central affirmation of many Western mystics and poets. But among us this is a subterranean vein that contradict the principles our culture is founded on.”

There is an absolutism in categorical thinking which often leads to conceptual errors. Something is designated as perfect which cannot be improved upon, which cannot, and should not, be changed. Yet this idealization of the good, understood as the Platonic form of the Good, is too often applied not to idealizations, but to realities already achieved. In the United States, there is a subconscious assumption that what is good, what is “perfect” is what is normal, and being normal, therefore healthy. In both the notion of normality and in the notion of health, an unnatural ideality is imposed, subsumed in the notion of “purity”.

The question is whether being normal is equivalent to being perfect? Is normality, for example, a logical index of health? The intolerance for the “abnormal” is, in the United States at least, fueled by a subliminal assumption that the abnormal is subnormal, deviant and unwholesome. Conceptions of normality and health as perfectible or as quantifiable, do not take into account dynamic equilibrium and homeostasis. One says that someone is in “perfect health”, as if it were possible to quantify healthiness on a numerical scale, as if it were impossible to be more than 100% healthy, or that illness and disease can be presented as a percentage of health. But the notion of perfection is incompatible with either the notion of a statistical norm or the concept of the average human being, which specifically designate populations far from perfection. The consequences of this pseudo equation—of normality being not merely as a reference point, but an index of perfection—are pernicious as well as
The burden of the question, why aren’t abnormal people normal? is imposed on anyone who deviates from the norm. All sorts of prejudice, at that point, become inevitable, but what underlies them all is the provincial question, “Why can’t they be more like us?” The provincial “we” is then established as the sine qua non of existence, which automatically elevates those in the in-group and demotes those in the out-group. Add to this egocentricity the natural association of a “pure” norm—which seems like a contradiction in terms. Yet, phrases like “100% American” or “All-American” abound in mainstream discourse. These seeming markers of “true-blue” patriots can lead to the witchhunts in the United States in the early 1950’s, when U.S. citizens were called upon to prove before the likes of Joseph McCarthy and Pat McCarran that they were not “Un-American.”

This opposition of purity as good and of impurity as bad is reflected in the longstanding bias—even to the point of prejudice—that white is good and black is bad. One of the woman Ruth Falkenburg interviewed told her that her mother insisted on her own version of the Genesis story version which is far from canonical, but which may be believed by many: “when Adam and Eve sinned, they had a Black child” (97). The practicalities of everyday life reinforce our notions of white as good: language, for example, persuades us that a “white lie” is a good lie, that a “black day” or a “black mark” is a bad thing; the semiotics of dress persuades us that the white of the Western bridal gown connotes ritual purity and chastity, that the white robe of the surgeon reflects the highest standards of hygiene; that the white uniform of the milkman reminds us of the absolute wholesomeness of milk; commercial propaganda try to persuade us subliminally: not only is Ivory soap completely white, it is also 99 44/100% pure.

The trouble with this kind of thinking is not only that it leads to unwarranted assumptions about people (dirty people are bad, clean folk are good), but that it locks us into a static vision of life. We begin to believe that purity is something to be retrieved rather than something to be
achieved. For purity conceived as a condition to be restored rather than as a state to aspire to encourages a regressiveness, a timidity about change and the future. The characterization of tradition—whether religious, cultural, political, linguistic—as something static, like an artifact in a museum, that needs to be preserved underestimates the force and dynamism of live traditions. This notion of a tradition to be preserved is not unlike the notion of a purity that must be restored: it bespeaks an attitude fearful of difference, intolerant of the new, and apprehensive about change.

The Ironies of Change

The preservers of any tradition make a logical mistake. They celebrate the processes that led to the development of the tradition, where change is viewed as progress, but they assume themselves to be the apes of that progress, from which any further change must be deplored. It is ultimate in cultural hubris. There is in this logic two errors: one that at a certain time change is salutary, and at other times baleful; the other is that change can be discontinuous, that it can proceed to a certain point of achievement (literally, a final point), after which it must stop. Of course, this final point, before which change is good, and after which change is bad, always seems to coincide with the lifetimes of the guardians of tradition. Every rearguard action of “preserving” a phenomenon which is the product of change inherently misunderstands change, and misconstrues the nature of tradition. Tradition, in any meaningful sense of the term, is dynamic, not static.

Self-appointed guardians of tradition, reactionaries on the extreme right, assume that the change that has led to their present is good, and that any change thereafter is to be discouraged. On the other hand, revolutionaries and utopians, radicals on the extreme left, assume the opposite: that change before their time is bad, but change after their time—after the revolution, after the establishment of a utopian society—is good. (The interesting thing is how reactionary radicals become after a successful revolution.) The difference between the guardian
of tradition and the revolutionary is that the former assumes that purity has been achieved and must be preserved, whereas the latter assumes that purity must still be sought. The failures of many revolutions, as the Russian novelist and revolutionary Victor Serge pointed out generations ago, are generic; they succeed when they most fail, and fail where they most succeed. The revolution which triumphs is over, and the spirit of revolution dies with it; the revolution which fails, or the revolution which is not yet complete, can, and most often does, persist. The massive betrayals in the Reign of Terror after the French Revolution; the travesty of the Russian Revolution, which betrayed the very people that it professed to support; the turnabout of Castro in Cuba from a revolutionary to an oppressor of the people, are but some obvious examples. Mao Zedong recognized this generic paradox of a successful revolution when he designed a “pseudo-revolution” in the “Cultural Revolution” to capture some of the very fervor and zeal that led China to overthrow centuries of feudal thinking. He was, of course, brilliantly perceptive in his thinking, and tragically misbegotten in his motives.

There are, however, successful revolutions: the American revolution, by all accounts, was a success; the Industrial Revolution succeeded in freeing humans from the tyranny of manual labor; the computer revolution, it appears, is succeeding without either a destructive backlash or an entrenched complacency. One must ask why these phenomena succeeded in overcoming their generic self-destructiveness. One answer may be that, in all three, it was because the revolution, in a sense, never ended.

To take but the most interesting case, the American Revolution was merely the prelude to a period of geographic expansion that lasted almost a hundred years and an ideological expansion that as lasted two hundred years, and—for better or worse—still continues. The principles of democracy and of capitalism, the twin engines of the American Revolution, are still part of the revolutionary spirit in the United States. In defending freedom and in spreading the benefits of capitalism—even in
forms that some consider dubious of futile, from President Carter's use of sanctions against the Soviet Union to protest the abrogation of human rights in Afghanistan, or President Reagan's supporting "freedom fighters" in Central America, or Clinton's guaranteeing democratic principles in Haiti—America, for good or ill, reaffirms its revolutionary dynamic. One can argue that the intrusions of American notions of freedom and democracy violate the territorial sovereignty of other countries, from South Africa to Vietnam to Kosovo. Yet, natural as it would be for the United States to adopt an isolationist policy, to ignore the economic and political developments elsewhere in the world would be not only futile in an increasingly interlocked community of nations, it would—again, for good or ill—rub against the American character.

For the United States to establish itself as an Empire is to lose the very source of its revolutionary strength, is to forget its unique revolutionary destiny. America smug and complacent—as it was in the 50's and the 80's—is an America that has forgotten how to be revolutionary. In a real sense, from the perspective of history, it is too early to decide whether the American Revolution has succeeded; a nation that has practiced "brinkmanship" to prevent not only its own destruction but the annihilation of the world, a nation that appears unable to fulfill its revolutionary promise to the wretched and the homeless, a nation that may yet explode in violence that is self-inflicted with defenders and victims of the Second Amendment—from Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado to Mark Barton's grudge killings in Atlanta—cannot be said to have succeeded in realizing the objectives of the American Revolution, one of which was to "achieve domestic tranquility". What lends a particular fervor to those who defend the right to bear arms, however misguided it may be on other counts, is the visceral conviction that the fight for the American revolution is not over, and that the laying down of one's arms is also the deathknell of that revolution.

Perpetual revolution might be another way of describing uninterrupted evolution; indeed, revolution may differ from tradition only in its
self-consciousness about change. The revolutionary calls attention to change; the true traditionalist changes without advertising the process. The question involves one’s attitude toward change. In Chinese, the compound for “easy” is comprised of two characters 容易: the character of “allow” or “hold of contain” rong (as in ronghuo 容或“perhaps” or in rongshu 容恕“to forgive”); and the character for “change”, yi (the same character as occurs in the Yijing, “The Book of Changes”). Perhaps there is some significance in the fact that the most durable civilization in the world should etymologically define what is “easy”, rongyi, as “accommodating change.”

Indeed, the attempt to resist change can be likened to trying to prevent water from slipping through one’s hands. It is—like the fearful—trying to hold back the night, or—like the romantic—trying to hold back the dawn. That’s why the famous quatrain on time and on sand written by William Blake is so trenchant:

To see the world in a grain of sand, / A heaven in a wild flower, / To hold infinity in the palm of the hand, / And eternity in an hour.

All the images are of time passing: of sand, emblematic of time and change; of a wild flower, that lives but for a season; of infinity and eternity which are endless successions of moments passing; and of an hour, which completes the logic of imagery, more for Blake than perhaps for us, because the hour—glass, which uses sand as both measure and metonymy of the innumerable instants in our experience, was more familiar for him as a marker of time than clocks and watches.

In an age when the silicon chip reminds us how prophetic Blake was, when larger and more complex “worlds” of information are imprinted in semiprocessors not much bigger than a grain of sand, one would do well to ponder the implications of Blake’s insight. For although the act of seeing what Blake sees—“the world in a grain of sand”, “a heaven in a wild flower”—represents a freeze-frame of reality, something fixed and captured in an image, the impulse of his thought transcends stasis. In these wondrous lines, Blake captures both the analytical genius of Par-
menides, who saw reality in slices of life, understood as unchanging concepts, and the phenomenological mysticism of Heraclitus, who saw reality as inevitable change and flux. For Parmenides, life was made of constituent photographs, each frame fixed and still; for Heraclitus, life consisted of the quick succession of those individual frames in the light of perception and experience; he saw life, in short, like a motion picture. Blake affirmed poetically the validity of both the Parmenidian and the Heraclitan view of reality.

Complementary Models

There are complementary models. The countries in which Islam and Buddhism dominate are not notably emphatic about sanitation or about sterilization. China, since time immemorial has maintained its agricultural production using “night soil” (human feces) as fertilizer. In Buddhism, the symbol of purity is the lotus, which flourishes out of the mire and mud at the bottom of the pond. Doubtless, examples can be found in the Western tradition as well.

What I wish to advance is a multiple definition of purity, and to expose the thinking that privileges one over any other. Like health, whose definition may also be subject to cultural factors, the notion purity may need to be culturally contextualized. An analogy between purity and health may be helpful. The natives of the New World were certainly “healthy” when Columbus arrived, but they were soon decimated by the viruses and germs that the conquistadors brought with them, against which the immune systems of the native population were helpless. The Indians in the Western hemisphere were strong and robust before the arrival of Cortez and Pisarro, indubitably healthy, but they were exterminated within one generation by a disease the Europeans imported but which they were themselves immune to. Clearly, and absolutist definition of health will elude us. One factor of health is the presence of antibodies powerful enough to fend off and neutralize external germs, viruses, and bacteria. Indeed, the entire principle of inoculation is the at-
tempt to deliberately stimulate the formation of these antibodies with a small sample of the disease-carrying agent. (Homeopathic medicine works on the same principle.) Health, therefore, particularly health that depends on inoculations and immunizations, is not 100% uninfected purity, but rather its near opposite: as far as the virus is concerned the body is deliberately made "impure", "corrupted" with a small sample of the disease, the better to develop strong antibodies. Health may be precisely the ability to handle an impure environment, the ability to defend against hostile epidemiological forces, rather than a total antiseptic absence of foreign substances.

One cannot help connecting this mania for cleanliness, where health can be achieved only in the most nearly perfect antiseptic conditions, with that most modern of diseases, AIDS. For AIDS is precisely the breakdown of the body's ability to deal with the most ordinary viruses, which, absent the antibodies that naturally defend against them, can be ultimately fatal. AIDS disarms the immune system, so that one dies from other cause. "AIDS", Susan Sontag has written, "is one of the dystopian harbingers of the global village, that future which is already here and always before us, which no one knows how to refuse" (93). It may be that we need complementary models of purity to consider: if life can only exist in perfectly sanitary conditions, the least departure from that perfection spells death for the inhabitants. In order for human beings to survive, must we establish a world environment as dust-and-virus-free as the chambers in which we manufacture our microprocessors? How has our progressive tendency to identify purity with technological advancement and modernization affected our notions of normality and change?

Purity may be conceived as end, not origin. It may be, in fact, utopian, unachievable, not something preexistent in need of protection, but something that one aspires to, but always falls short of achievement. Christianity is not entirely lacking in models of purifications, not degradations, that follow innocence. Paul on the road to Damascus might be one instance; Augustine after a misspent youth might be another. In our
day, repentance—especially among Southern Baptists in the United States—appears to function as a purgation, if not a purification, of sorts. There is a subtle but persistent ethnocentrism in these perspectives, for not only are the cultures that subscribe to the purity-as-origin premise tend to be primarily western and Christian (Shinto-influenced Japan perhaps the only exception), they also tend to be the most highly developed technologically. We might almost say that purity is a hallmark of modernity. In the debate on globalization, and its corollary concern with modernization, the question of the social construction of purity is inescapable.

Meanwhile, there are lessons from biology and sociobiology, with its emphasis on biodiversity as a strategy for survival. Genetics and Darwinian theory remind us that without genetic "flaws"—known as "mutations"—there would have been no evolution, no progress. We may do well to ponder the "defamations" on dirt in the current version of modernity, for there is no possibility of eliminating all the dirt and the filth in the world. "Waste management" has become a profitable business, whether it's a recycling program, or a barge filled with garbage going from port to port to find a receptive landfill. It may be that our salvation lies not in how godly we are in our cleanliness, but how thriftily we dispose of our wastes. If we cannot follow the model of purity as reductive, we may have to explore purity as organic. We may have to look to the lotus as the more viable symbol of purity, for the lotus thrives on the detritus of life. The fault may lie not in an imperfect world, but in our conception of perfection. There are instances when being clean—as in ethnic cleaning—is heinous, and sanitation obscene.

"There is a crack", Emerson reminds us in his essays, "in everything God has made".

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Notes:

1 I am indebted to D. Barry Asker and Patricia Eoyang for trenchant criticisms of an earlier version.

2 Though I confess to be stymied by the concept of “extra virgin” (as in “extra virgin olive oil”): it is difficult to conceive how chastity can be measured in degrees.

3 Privatives like “unadulterated” and “undiluted” introduce other connotations perhaps: a soupcon of sin in “unadulterated” and a touch of venality in “undiluted”; “neat” has the other connotation of “clever”.

4 Max Frisch, the Swiss writer, characterized Switzerland as “so clean that one could hardly breathe for the hygiene”.

5 The irony is that this motif was borrowed from pre-Christian pagan mythology: cf. Marina Warner.

6 Indeed, until the second half of the century, it was not uncommon in the United States, even in families relatively well off, to confine one’s baths to one a week, usually on Saturday evenings.

7 These racist attitudes have not entirely disappeared; witness the publication of Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray’s The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life (A Free Press, 1996); Black’s poem did, of course, contemplate a society with-
out prejudice: "When I from black and he from white cloud free…"

8 El Archie la lira (Mexico City: 1956), p. 93f; quoted by Stephen Reck­
ert, Beyond Chrysanthemums (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 109. ).

9 Cf. Robert Kahn: "…the understanding of sickness and the response to sickness through healing vary greatly from time to time and place to place, fundamentally shaped by historical and cultural circumstance" (1).