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The Varieties of Hemlock

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*Address by Associate Professor Robert W. Burda
on the occasion of the
Century Club Dinner
May 4, 1973
Memorial Student Center
Illinois Wesleyan University*

*Mr. Burda had been chosen by the faculty,
students and administration as recipient of the
Century Club Award for 1973*

THE VARIETIES OF HEMLOCK

By Robert W. Burda

My subject isn't a literary one: I hope that's all right. I attended an English conference at Illinois State two years ago and one of the deans, a political scientist, welcomed us by saying he wished he had done his professional work in literature. His reason? He had always wanted to be able to walk into a classroom and talk about anything he liked. There's a measure of truth in that, usually supported by saying that "literature is life." It isn't, of course. It's a substitute for the unsatisfactoriness of life, as is any art. Nevertheless, I'm going to claim the measure of truth in the dean's remark—without offering any support. For I'm interested in what I'm trapped by.

I know that I'm trapped by my skin, my language, my sex, my heredity, my environment and my own psychic structure as a result of these. What concerns me is that I am also trapped by a Judaic-Christian culture that has glorified the self-damaging act; that I, and therefore you, have been nurtured by a Western civilization that interweaves its highest achievements with self-destruction. Now we all know what self-destruction is: that's what *other* people do to themselves. Psychoanalysis has made us familiar with its many forms, all the way from suicide to the individual who is continually saying "the wrong thing"—although persons who are always "putting their foot in their mouths" seldom perceive that they are driven by self-damaging impulses to do so.

Jonah, the Old Testament figure, is a good example—Fromm uses it somewhere—of what we may understand by a man who does a self-damaging act. An authoritative voice told Jonah to go to Nineveh to save its people, but Jonah didn't care much for people; in fact, he was a kind of crank. He went to Joppa instead—I think

that's Tel Aviv today—and caught a tramp steamer: He wanted to get as far from Nineveh as he could. As soon as he got on board he went into the hold of the ship and fell asleep. A storm blew up and he went on deck. The sailors wondered whether he, a mysterious stranger, might not be the cause of the storm and Jonah quickly said: "Why don't you throw me in and find out?" The sailors were very humane: They didn't want to throw Jonah overboard, but he insisted upon it so they finally did. He sank into the sea where he was swallowed by a fish, and after enduring it for three days he cried out to be released. All of Jonah's actions are a series of withdrawals: Going away to sea, going into the ship, going into the belly of the ship, going to sleep, eagerly going into the ocean, at last going into the belly of a fish within the ocean. To Jonah they seemed to be a defense against an unwanted reality, but they were actually a series of steps toward deeper and more destructive self-entrapment. It is very old story: What appears to be a refuge is in reality a prison. There is no one here who does not personally understand that, providing he or she is able to acknowledge it.

But Jonah's story is of minor importance compared to the stories we read in Western tragedy and what we read in the lives of Socrates and Christ. For these examples are held up to us in the name of heritage: Artistically in the case of tragedy, intellectually in the case of Socrates, religiously in the case of Christ.

II

I read recently that tragic heroes always get what they want. I didn't believe it at first but then I tested it and was forced to accept it. The only catch is that they must pay for what they get. And most often they pay with their lives. We witness a great achievement but the price of pursuing the achievement is their existence: Hamlet, Antigone, Brand, Joan, Macbeth, Phaedre, Brutus, Cleopatra. Sometimes we witness a self-mutilation or self-maiming, as with Oedipus, but everywhere we witness men and women who set their feet on self-damaging roads to achieve a momentous if sometimes dubious goal. What troubles me is that our civilization gives the highest accolades to an art form that revels in this union of self-destruction with achievement. We see a performance

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of *Hamlet*, of a young man whose opening soliloquy is a wish for death; whose central soliloquy on being and not-being has become a byword in our language; we witness mental derangement and multiple murders, watch his pathetic end and say to one another on the sidewalks of the theatre: "Wasn't that wonderful? Isn't Shakespeare great?" Which very well may be—but it raises certain questions about such a people that have not yet been answered. No doubt, it is serious entertainment; but nevertheless it *entertains* us. It is "an evening out." I am familiar with the usual rationalizations given for "tragic pleasure," but they do not detract from the fact that this is a curious way for a culture to get its better kicks.

Intellectually, Socrates is one of Western civilization's consummate achievements. I take it he is because of his method: The dialogue. He laid the foundation upon which the analytical philosophy of this century has built; namely, that reason is internal language, that all philosophy is at bottom philology. The writer of the fourth Gospel echoes Socrates: In the beginning was the speech, the Word. This is his achievement and, as we know, it became wedded to destruction.

The manner of Socrates' death is something we have learned to accept within the scheme of things: That the community will always persecute the uncommon individual, that mediocrity has an absolute genius for putting excellence to death. Let's accept what we must—that Socrates *was* subversive. You can pick a group of names out of a hat—Beethoven, Lenin, Shaw, Hemingway and Einstein; what they have in common is that they were all subversive. Whether it is the symphony, the state, drama, the novel or physics, none of these forms is the same after these men get done with them. They shake the foundation of what exists. Whenever an extraordinary man asserts his own values he undermines and threatens the values of others. The leaders of a community—any community: The state, the church, the university or the boy scouts, it doesn't matter—do an interesting thing. They identify their own lives with the life of the organization they have taken over. So they say the same thing, century after century: "We are committed to this organization. Your example shakes us. We must get rid of you." What they mean is: "Your example shakes *me*"—and cannot

acknowledge that they are hiding, individually or personally, behind the organization.

So we have the persistent image of the Cup in Western civilization. Of hemlock; of something terrible or poisonous to swallow; a cup with a killing burden in it. Jesus underscored this image when he requested in Gethsemane that "this cup might pass from me." I was surprised when Adlai Stevenson once used this image when referring to himself. He stood before the national assembly of the Democratic party to accept a presidential nomination and said he had prayed that this cup might pass from him—but there it was, being handed to him—against his will. I voted for Stevenson but I admit that the recollection of his excessive self-dramatization made me wince a bit as I put my mark on the ballot.

I also wince when I read the documents that deal with the last days of Socrates' life. For one thing is clear: Socrates may have been given hemlock to *drink*, but we are not entitled to the picture of an old man drinking a bitter potion against his will. For he tossed the hemlock down like a working man does a shot of whiskey at a bar. No man co-operated more fully with a group of corrupt men to bring about his own destruction. He knew that the state had wronged him, that it was in error, that its judgment was a gross misjudgment; yet he abjectly obeyed it. His beliefs helped him do it, of course. His belief that "death served philosophers right"; his belief that "true philosophers are half dead" even when they are alive. He said "Ordinary people seem not to realize that those who really apply themselves in the right way to philosophy are directly and of their own accord preparing themselves for dying and death . . . They have actually been looking forward to death all their lives." Whether this is so for "true philosophers" or not—and I do not believe that it is: Heidegger's notion of death as a possibility rather than an eventuality has revolutionized our conceptualizations of death—what is unmistakable is that *he* is looking forward to it. He puts such a verbal smokescreen in front of his self-damaging impulse that it is difficult to see how he could take one look at a corrupt state and fall on his knees in adoration. Yet through that smokescreen it is possible to see that he made a terrible mistake: He mistook the state for his father.

He mistook it so completely that he even gave it procreative

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powers. He imagines the state speaking in this manner: "Anyone who disobeys is guilty of doing wrong on three counts: because we are its parents, because we are its guardians, and because—as our child—you promise obedience." You must do whatever the *state* orders because violence is a sin against your *parents*. You are to placate the anger of your country because you must placate the anger of your father. Even more than your father, say Socrates, for your country is more precious than your mother and father. If it leads you to war, to be wounded or killed, you must comply. This is not the victory of conscience, this is the triumph of authority. He asks us, as always, to challenge his arguments—and that is very easy. What cannot be challenged are his convictions, his determination to co-operate with a damaging judgment against himself. The documents dealing with the last days of Socrates do not belong to the history of philosophy so much as they belong to the history of pathology. Squinting through the fog of his own rhetoric, Socrates saw the figure of his father, and all it really was was city hall.

We are also easily confused by this form of self-destructive capitulation. I once walked into the principal's office at University High School and saw framed on the wall: "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." That has always been the cry of the state, the cry of the politician. Yet I take it that all of us, after we squint through the fog of that rhetoric, believe that another man spoke the truth, which is exactly the opposite: That all things were made for man, including the sabbath. That the state, the church, the schools, the synagogue and the Fourth of July are made for men, and not men for them. No human being has ever been created to serve an institution or a ritual.

III

If Socrates was an old man who in his final days became a son who obeyed a father to the point of death, Jesus was another man—a young man—who permitted himself to be destroyed by the will of someone he also called his "father." This time the cup wasn't passed from the community to the individual. There isn't any cup: it's an image in Jesus' mind. I hesitate to say that Jesus was in-

sincere when he asked for the cup to pass from him, but what I mean by that, and what we all know, is that when he said it, *he knew better*. He knew that it was too late; everything had already gone too far; he himself had pushed it to an unreturnable distance.

The Christian Palm Sunday portrayal of a man in recently laundered and pressed white gown astride an animal entering a city whose inhabitants throng to meet him is a very pleasant one. In the Palm Sunday picture that was placed before me as a child, I remember the beautiful pedicure that Jesus had. Since then I have spent enough time in the Middle East to know what a sandled Semitic foot really looks like. The texts themselves are embarrassing, you know. Matthew finds that there are two prophetic predictions as to how the messiah shall enter Jerusalem. One states that he shall be astride an ass, the other says it will be a colt. In his eagerness to prove his Christian point, Matthew has Jesus riding both of them at the same time.

The Christian purpose in portraying a grand entry into Jerusalem has never been a very commendable one: It was the same purpose that put ham on Christian tables at Easter. Since Christians knew that pork was unclean to the Jews, they dined on it at the celebration of the triumph of their messiah to show their contempt for Jewish belief. To the Christian, that persistent belief was stubbornness; to the Jew, of course, it was integrity. As Christian persecution of the Jews increased through the centuries, the picture of throngs of first century Jews welcoming Jesus to Jerusalem became increasingly important; it enabled the church to point its accusing finger at contemporary Jews who still refused to welcome Jesus. What concerns me here is that the Palm Sunday mythology obscures the tremendousness of what Jesus actually did. For it *was* tremendous: He knew that the value of his crucifixion depended upon his ability to get the Roman Empire to drive in the nails. The value of his life depended on his ability to get Rome, not just any power, to put him to death.

Consider his desperate circumstances: He was not only young, he was a country boy. He had never been to the New York or London of his day, had never set foot in a big city. He had a following, but they were all rustics. The way they recognized Peter

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in Jerusalem was by the way he talked; he had the Galilee twang in his voice. It says so in the 22nd chapter of Luke. Jesus was influential in the Appalachia of his day—the hills; but where it mattered—in Jerusalem, in the seat of Judaic power, where Solomon's temple still stood, where Rome governed, he was unknown. He remained sufficiently unknown right up to the moment of his trial: One of his own men had to point out who he was. Jesus was facing the crisis of his life. He was riding on the crest of rural popularity; he had to attract the attention of the authorities to himself before that crest broke. And he saw his chance: The week before Passover, when Jerusalem would be jammed. He chose that crowded and important week to put in his first and only appearance in that city.

Several biblical scholars agree that he arrived with a handful of his followers, and probably on foot. Put him on an animal if you wish—it does not alter the essential picture of this group of fishermen and hill people entering a sophisticated city. The most distinguishing characteristic about all of them, as Gethsemane and its aftermath showed, was that each was more inadequate than the next. Jesus could not have been such a poor judge of their characters as not to have known that for the confrontation he was seeking not one of them would prove reliable. Not only was he young and from the provinces, he was entering Jerusalem without support. Yet when he approached and saw the temple for the first time in his life, he acted with incredible speed.

We know what he saw: Among the overflow of activity and life, pigeons and goods were being sold and money was being changed. In the American churches this has all been interpreted, particularly the changing of money, with that peculiar Protestant horror of bingo being played in the basement of the Roman Catholic Church. But there was nothing wrong with it in Jerusalem; it was a common practice and it did not signify disrespect. Go to the temple of the Emerald Buddha in Bangkok and you will still see strange little platforms with roofs among the formal splendor. They are for people to cook, eat and sleep upon; they are open-air hotels for pilgrims. Go into Chartres cathedral and you will notice that the floor is two feet higher on one side than on the other. The entire

sweep of the north and south aisles is beveled. This is so because every morning they threw buckets of water on the high side and a crew of sweepers swept out all the refuse that had accumulated during the previous day and night. For the people slept there, prepared and ate their meals, and washed. Why not? Some had traveled half a year to get there; others, more. They were poor, they had no place to stay; the cathedral was home.

I went into the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem where Jesus is said to have been entombed. Inside the small stone enclosure within the massive church—you have to bend your neck to get in—sat a Greek Orthodox priest. On the slab that marked Jesus' tomb he had an uncorked bottle of wine, there was a bag with some food in it, and he was eating a sausage sandwich. And that's exactly what he should have been doing. You see, in this nation we have no concept of a holy place or comprehension of pilgrimage, and never will have. Because we all know where our home is: It is a house around which we plant petunias and cut grass. But to a religious person every place except the sacred place is exile. When a sojourner to the Passover reached the Temple, when a pilgrim reached Chartres, when he reached the Emerald Buddha, as the Moslem today reaches Mecca—he has reached home. It was there that he took off his shoes and relaxed; where he could laugh, breathe and enjoy—not life, which was oppressive—but his hope of life. It was a place of exuberance, and it was wonderful. To Jerusalem they came from all over the fertile crescent. After traveling for weeks some needed a new garment, so there was cloth they could buy; they needed food, so there were pigeons. And the few coins that they had brought from distant provinces could be exchanged for Roman currency. I admit it is regrettable that Jews who walked all the way from the very edges of the Negev in the first century were without an American Express card.

Jesus had no objection to what he saw: no moral objection, no religious objection. As he entered Jerusalem one fact dominated his mind: He was unknown. And a religious leader who is unknown in a city is a religious leader who is by definition ineffective in that city. Solomon's temple was the Vatican of his day and he

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had to get the attention of that Vatican. Necessarily, courageously, shrewdly—sure of himself and with an unerring instinct—he took a rope from the animal beneath him, if you have him riding; or he pushed his way through the crowds and seized a rope from one of the dealers, and stunned everyone with an act of violence. He overturned tables, hurled cages of pigeons aside, and lashed out with a rope. He left Jerusalem and went as far as Bethany to hide for the night. The next morning he crossed into the city, cursed a helpless fig tree on his way—an act which helps us understand the state of his mind—and went directly to the temple. His approach had its expected effect: The eyes of the scribes and elders went wide—“Here comes that man again.” This time he stayed to quarrel, debate, argue, wrangle and threaten. You need only to read the text to see how often he raised his voice. When he was finished, he left the city again; but this time he did not go far to wait for the inevitable and for what he deserved—to be answerable for what he had done.

But he wouldn't answer.

He suddenly had nothing to say. He was brought before the Sanhedrin, the Sanhedrin sent him to Pilate, Pilate sent him to Herod, Herod sent him back again, and Pilate—absolutely disgusted with what he knew was a judicial farce—washed his hands of the whole affair and gave him up to the people. And all because Jesus wouldn't defend himself. If Socrates co-operated with corrupt men to bring about his own destruction after his trial, Jesus co-operated with such men to bring about his own destruction during his trial. His two deliberately self-damaging statements were: “Let the people tell you what I said”—and, “You say so, I didn't.” He wilfully let his enemies talk for him. Pilate was stunned. But it was a master-stroke. Jesus did not defend himself against death because he was where he wanted to be: Before a foreigner, before a Roman. He was there on a trumped-up and patently absurd charge of treason; if he spoke he would have been cleared of political charges and faced religious ones. This would have put him back before the Sanhedrin where the whole affair may have gone down in history as another minor religious squabble among Jews. He would have been stoned by his own people, of course;

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not crucified. It is not that he preferred nails to stones. For the nails were nothing. It was the Roman hammer—*that* was everything. When he got Rome to bend and lift its arm, it hammered the first and mightiest nail into its own coffin. Christianity did not fulfill Judaism; it replaced it. We did not become the Jerusalem Catholic Church, we became the Roman Catholic Church. Jesus' achievement was incredible; the price was familiar.

Which is why another religious and political genius who wanted to topple the most expansive empire since Rome—Gandhi, who was not a Christian—had a picture of Jesus hanging on the otherwise barren walls of his room. And the vehicle of self-destruction that he deliberately chose to achieve his end was systematic and periodic starvation.

IV

This leaves us exactly where I knew it would: In Memorial Center on Friday night. Robert Montgomery said he was going to set an alarm for thirty minutes. At first I thought I might try to get my colleagues to elect me to this position again and then I could continue another year. But becoming Century Club Honoree is a little like becoming an Eagle Scout: They only let you do it once. So what I shall do is indicate where I believe the search for an answer to this phenomenon lies—and then leave it buried there without uncovering it. I know this will seem unsatisfactory to many of you, but I confess it is highly satisfactory to me. Most of this audience is composed of business people, and if you are in the same business you know what you do: You steal customers from each other. In the university we steal ideas from each other. As Hemingway said: "If you talk about it, you lose it." And I can't afford to lose it. Every year I am elected by myself as the faculty member who most desperately needs to publish.

I believe the man by whom Western civilization is trapped, by whom you and I within a Judaic-Christian culture are ensnared, is Moses. He not only stands, he towers, behind the marriage of great achievement with self-damage. His influence is far greater than Socrates', and—count however many Christian heads or churches you will—more influential than Christ's. The power of

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his influence resides in the fact that he embodies the image of the law-giver, the image of an authority beyond and above the wills of men. It is to him that we can trace the fatal twist that bends great achievement in upon itself. For every law-giver is a death-carrier. He is because the law-giver does not believe in life: He believes in the ordering of life. He withdraws from life, goes up his mountain and returns with the precepts by which life shall be forced into a mold. His limitations are exposed the minute he returns to life; impulse frightens him. He can't stand whim; a sudden dance around a golden calf makes him drop his tablets in horror. Moses, not Henry V, is the man who rejected Falstaff. It is significant that he does not discuss the conflict between law and impulse with these people, but withdraws from life again, goes back up his lonely mountain and returns with the authority that he shall impose. His great achievement is that he can get himself through a wilderness; he can survive and endure forty years of chaos—and do not mistake me, I do not belittle that achievement.

But there is one place his great system of law and authority will not get him. To the Promised Land. There is something irrational about this law-giver: He is forced to a deliberately self-destructive act. He takes his staff, which is the symbol of his authority, and he smashes it against the ground to get water in the misguided belief that his authority will quench man's thirst in the desert of human existence. The law-giver believes that authority can tap that essential source of life, water. And for that arrogance he is punished with his own death before the Promised Land can be reached. Moses started out to know the unknowable—he saw a burning bush; that was a laudable beginning. But he ended by becoming the organizer of communal purposes. I do not know whether such a life is tragic or pathetic.

Were I to continue I would want to talk about the profound difference between Socrates and Christ. That Socrates could see his cup externally—grasp it in his fingers, feel its texture, its weight; that Jesus could only see his cup internally, in his mind's eye, within. And I would want to talk about their profound similarity: That each drank the content of their respective cups at the command of the same voice, authority. And that the internal authority (or fath-

er) of Jesus is far more burdensome and dangerous than the external authority (or father) of Socrates. I would want to talk about the fact that Socrates had no quarrel with Moses. He believed in law. He believed in upholding it before he believed in upholding his own life. Jesus did quarrel with Moses—and lost the argument. He lost the argument not only because he substituted new laws for old, and said so; not only because the youth movement of the last decade has reminded us of the sad truth: That love is the law and if we break it we are damned; but because he did not believe in life, either. No deeply religious person can believe in life. They believe in the life to come. Their kingdom, as they always remind us, is not of this world. I would talk about our pride in being a “government of laws, not of men” and the inherent evils in such a government. I would talk about a man who spent the major portion of his life studying the internal authorities to which all of us submit, Freud—and how he bewilderedly discovered that authority-ridden people deliberately seek, more often than not, pain rather than pleasure. So much so that he was driven to conclude that at the bottom of the lives of those who obeyed or wished to establish a new authority there was a death instinct.

Finally, I would want to explain my personal relationship to this Western marriage of great achievement with self-damage. As for achievement, there’s no problem. When Albert Camus was my age he had already won the Nobel Prize; when Shakespeare was my age he was getting ready to retire; when Mozart was my age he had already been dead for six years. As for destruction, I sympathize with a certain pig that walked off a farm in southern Illinois the other day accompanied by a chicken. They spent the day in Carbondale and as they walked the streets they kept seeing signs in restaurant windows that read: “Ham and eggs. Breakfast 24 hours a day. We never close. Ham and eggs anytime.” After a while the chicken’s breast and feathers began to fluff out and she said, “Doesn’t that make you feel good! Doesn’t that make you feel just great to be making such a contribution to the American way of life?” The pig was silent and after a moment conceded, “I understand how you feel about it, but with me it’s a question of *personal sacrifice*.”

This lecture is the fourteenth in a series prepared by Illinois Wesleyan University faculty members for presentation at the annual Century Club dinner. Mrs. William R. Beadles, president of the club, was Master of Ceremonies.

PAST CENTURY CLUB HONOREES

- 1960 William T. Beadles, Insurance
- 1961 Wayne W. Wantland, Biology
- 1962 R. Dwight Drexler, Piano
- 1963 Elizabeth H. Oggel, English
- 1964 Rupert Kilgore, Art
- 1965 Dorothea S. Franzen, Biology
- 1966 Joseph H. Meyers, English
- 1967 Marie J. Robinson, Speech
- 1968 Bunyan H. Andrew, History
- 1969 Wendell W. Hess, Chemistry
- 1970 Jerry Stone, Religion
- 1971 Doris C. Meyers, Philosophy
- 1972 John Ficca, Drama
- 1973 Robert W. Burda, English
- 1974 Max A. Pape, Sociology