THE LIMITS OF THE AMERICAN UTOPIAN IMAGINATION
Reflections on David Brooks, Poet of Our Middle Class

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America is *the* middle-class nation. That doesn't mean there's not great economic inequality in America. It doesn't even mean that there aren't people who aren't really middle class. Most of us can't imagine ourselves as more or less than middle class, and all of us imagine that human beings who are more than middle class (aristocrats) or less than that class (slaves, tenant farmers) are evidence of monstrous injustice and just plain un-American. So almost all of us think of the "underclass" as the product of un-American social policy. Liberals mainly blame racism (a residue of the aristocratic South) and the conservatives blame welfare (which rewards people for not working). They both blame some form of discredited paternalism that keeps people from being treated as free and equal members of the middle class.

The good news about being members of the middle class is that we're all equally free. The bad is that we all have to work. This middle-class view of being human we view as both American and the truth about human nature. Aristocrats, in their leisure, arrogantly and unjustly mistake themselves for gods. Slaves are treated as if they were naturally unfree, or just like all the other animals. Beings between the other animals and God, of course, are metaphysically middle class.

The great criticism of middle-class life is that it is boring, insipid, and unconcerned with human excellence. For our critics, America is the most productive or workaholic and least civilized or poetic of the countries. But the truth is that middle-class life is quite complex and quite unstable; there's little or nothing more wonderful in the whole universe than beings caught in the middle. American instability is reflected, for

example, in our view of the truth: We're pragmatists. We believe that theory is for practice, that thinking, like everything else, is work to make ourselves and the world better. For some aristocrat, freedom is achieved by transcending the vulgar world of work through pure, leisurely thought. But for us, we are free only to and by transforming the world and ourselves.

The best American pragmatists see that our work both needs to be inspired and is inspirational, and so they write poetically to ennoble by revealing the spiritual dimension of middle-class life. They see America, as Richard Rorty writes, as "romantic utopians trying to imagine a better future,"[1] and they write to shape that poetic imagination. It's un-American, Rorty rightly claims, not to be able to imagine and work for the future "possibility of human happiness," a possibility that has not yet become real.[2] Rorty encourages us to hope and work for a softer and less competitive future, one which will be less workaholic or self-obsessive and nicer or more egalitarian and less cruel. But Rorty's efforts are not really so middle class. He says he writes, for now, as an American chauvinist, but his distant hope is that all that is distinctive about America will wither away. He seems to see nothing good or enduring in the free being who works. Rorty's Deweyan pragmatism, as Michael Barone has recently shown, is too "Soft" to see the transcendence—what is not only productive but good and noble—in our basically "Hard" lives.[3] Our softness, Barone explains, doesn't point backward toward aristocratic excellence but forward to hapless dependence, to a world in which we would neither work nor be free. The right-wing or pro-capitalist pragmatist sees that it's not only noble but useful to celebrate the greatness and misery of middle-class life.

The New Whitman

Better than Rorty is our most recent pragmatic poetic, David Brooks, who celebrates the facts that we members of American middle class seem to be stuck with both our freedom and our work, both of which have less to do with our bodily needs as animals than with our imaginary obsession with our transcendent futures. Brooks, the most conservative columnist at the *New York Times*, calls himself a "progressive conservative." He wants to conserve by ennobling our progressive or productive middle-class tradition. That tradition, he explains, is "built on an admiration for a certain sort of individual: the young, ambitious striver who works hard, makes something of himself, creates opportunities for others and goes on to advance America's unique mission in the world."[4] Our true tradition is a combination of capitalism and messianic nationalism, a story of individuals who by fulfilling themselves serve their nation and the world.

Brooks pragmatic poetry poses, for the most part, as comic sociology with a serious moral and political undertone. His first book concerned a narrow slice of the upper middle class—the bourgeois bohemians, the Americans he claimed that were the role models for all the rest of us. It was hard to tell whether he was merely describing or mocking or ennobling the Bobo way of life.[5] Brooks' new topic is our middle class as a whole, and so he considers our suburbs—which exist in between the cities and the country—as a whole. His approach is far more ambitious and earnest, and his writing blurs the distinction between poetry and prose. His poetry has become less comic and less sociological; he uses what he has seen in the suburbs with his own eyes, as well as what he has learned from

various social scientific studies. But like any poet, he ignores, plays with, and exaggerates all kinds of facts. He also quotes often from authors in the American literary tradition in order to situate himself in that tradition. He gives an edifying history of the American imagination, which culminates with his own contribution to it. Despite his protestations about the limits of his literary ability and reminding us more than once that he's trying to be funny, Brooks clearly means to be our country's new Walt Whitman.

Both the old and the new Whitman thought that part of the greatness of democracy is to foster a way of life in which each person enjoys and is compelled to maintain his or her moral independence or fluid or always provisional sense of self. But even this freedom, to be maintained, needs limits; American citizens need the poet to help find reasons to acknowledge his or her similarities and sympathize with his or her fellow citizens. Despite our many divisions, we, the poet shows us, share a common greatness. Whitman found that greatness largely through his reflections on the common or "unionist" effort that was the Civil War; Brooks, going one democratic step further, finds our greatness or transcendence in the achievements inspired by our common dreams or imaginings. "The United States themselves," as Whitman wrote, "are essentially the greatest poem."[6] And the new Whitman finds our "national union" in the imagination that inspires the "social mobility" that—despite our many differences—we all share.[7]

Brooks ends his book by affirming with Whitman that "America is the Solution." He doesn't mean that it's the solution to the human problem of how to find love or happiness or just serenity in this life. The book almost opens with the author

complaining that "If you were to judge from the literature of the past century, nobody is happy in suburbia" (5).[8] But Brooks himself seems to provide plenty of evidence to confirm that literary judgment. He says that suburban Americans deprive themselves of real happiness in the present by focusing on the imaginary "promise of total happiness" (270) that they will enjoy as result of their work at some indefinite point in the future. Americans under this "Paradise Spell" are "more attached to the glorious future than to the temporary and unsatisfactory present" (263). We constantly distract ourselves from our present misery by losing ourselves in "mirages of the future" (273). These mirages, it seems, are the opiate of the middle class, but an opiate mixed with speed. The drug is the source of our singularly energetic productivity.

The American imagination, Brooks shows, spins what would be the pragmatists' knowledge of the utter contingency of each human life into good news. The truth, after all, is that all our problems are temporary. The insight that nothing is permanent, properly imagined, can even be an antidote to "the tragic view of life that is supposedly the prerequisite for the probing and profound soul" (181). Sin and death—the limits that we have been given that seem to frustrate all our plans for self-liberation—need not be part of our imaginary futures. That's why, according to Brooks, writers like St. Augustine mean little to Americans.

Americans, in our pragmatic way, put the individual's pursuit of happiness first, and so "whatever serves [our] self-journey toward happiness...must be godly and true." God himself is nothing more than an image of one's own future perfection, and so the self on the way to perfection "becomes semidivinized" (276). The truth is whatever helps free me from my un-divine or contingent present; the truth is whatever helps me leave my

present condition behind. "If there's an idea" Americans "don't like, they don't bother refuting it, they talk about something else, and the original idea dies from intention" (47). That thought originates with Santayana, but Rorty used it as an American or as just good advice. Brooks echoes Rorty in encouraging us to leave death, God, and even love behind by just not talking about them.

The imaginary cure to the problem of existentialism, we Americans know, doesn't depend on a real solution. So, as Rorty explains, "Whitman thought that we Americans have the most poetical nature because we are the first thoroughgoing experiment in national self-creation: the first nation-state with nobody but itself to please—not even God….We redefine God as our future selves."[9] "It is not," in Brooks' words, "our duty to obey God's law…It s our duty to create and explore the self" (276). We are the most poetical people, our two Whitmans agree, because we believe ourselves to be purely the products of our own self-creation.

In *Bobos in Paradise*, Brooks might be taken to have echoed Allan Bloom or Francis Fukuyama: The irony is that we Americans have worked so hard to bring history or our idea of the future to an end. But now, like Rorty, he works hard to distinguish the hopeful view of Americans from the fashionable European despair about the irredeemable flatness of American souls today. Bloom and Fukuyama, our pragmatists judge with some justice, succumbed too readily to alien thought. The transcendent or specific human contradiction that shows the Americans have souls is that "we are utter failures when it comes to living the simple life, which we profess to desire" (274). American life is the incessant pursuit of a future that is not only impossible but would

make us workaholics miserable if we actually achieved it. Our transcendence, our greatness is being driven forward by mirages and in never really being happy.

American idealism, as Brooks presents it, seems to be an extreme version of the insoluble human problem of restless self-deception, of diversion, described so well by Pascal and Tocqueville. But it is also "the solution to bourgeois flatness, to materialistic complacency, to mass-media shallowness, because America...arouses the most strenuous efforts" (279). There is no evidence that Americans will not continue to remain productively enthralled by imaginary possibilities. We're saved by the fact that we're so easily diverted from what we really know: The simple life is not a real human possibility.

The Transcendent American Imagination

Brooks is at his most condescending in describing the various forms of the inanity of the American imagination. One especially prevalent suburban utopian vision is golf, which he claims moves us far more than "war or literature or philosophy." The golfer who finally achieves the elusive state of "par" is in the "suburb's view of nirvana," "a state of harmony," "a mystical groove." And that's because "he has defeated his primary foe—anxiety" (40-41). American Buddhism—devoid as it is of real personal spiritual discipline—is mission impossible.

With this insight in mind, Brooks' new book denies the real possibility of the bourgeois bohemian reconciliation of the seeming opposites of bourgeois productivity and bohemian self-fulfillment he described in *Bobos in Paradise*.[10] He no longer sees what Kay Hymowitz calls "ecstatic capitalism," or the coexistence of "playful exuberance…with a zealous work ethic."[11] The Bobos, playfully and happily achieving in abundance, think they're already in paradise, and Brooks describes them as the most self-

satisfied and conservative generation in history. Their imagination has no need of a utopian dimension. But now Brooks says that all or almost all Americans live in the future, because the present is anything but paradise.

He mentions almost in passing that he discovered a few genuine bohemians in the small "crunchy" zones of the suburbs, but they are an insignificant minority. Those he described as Bobos appear in this book as the inhabitants of the suburban "inner ring." These brainy, well-educated, and productive sophisticates are able to live in large, expensive, and tasteful houses near the city's artistic center. They, like other middle-class suburbanites, have "deep simplicity longings, visions of having enough money and space so they can finally rest. Yet you know they are wired for hard work, because they feel compelled to put offices in every room of the house....The dream of perfect serenity and domestic bliss will just have to be transferred to the vacation home" (31). The inner-ring people are not wired for serenity but only to work in response to their illusory longing for it. They are evidence in support of Brooks' generalization that the middle-class imagination—the imagination of free beings who work—levels every significant effort to establish a counterculture in America.

The American contradiction that unites the apparently disparate "cliques" that compose our suburbs is that we are the most future-oriented or time-bound people ever, but we are driven by our imagination of "a new Eden," a place where "time does not exist" and we "will feel liberated from the burden of the future" (273). Just as the old Eden was sometime in the indefinite past, the new one is sometime in the indefinite future. We are constantly driven by our anticipation of a world without anticipation.

Our imagination of happiness is not of some sort of positive fulfillment—of love or wisdom or union with God. If it were, we Americans would be separated by our purposes. But we all share the illusory longing to be free from the burden of our freedom. The evidence that we are transcendent beings is that we are all driven by our longing to be rid of our transcendence.

The transcendent longings we all share, Brooks explains, are neither absurd, as the existentialist would say, nor natural, as Aristotle or Thomas Aquinas would say. They are quite distinctively *American*. His, in its own way, is a post-9/11, national greatness poem. He shows us what it is about being an American that arouses the hostility and envy of the world, and he separates us from unnamed bourgeois nations where the human imagination about future possibilities has all but withered away. We "have built a society that opens up opportunity and undermines security….It is easier to get rich her, but more miserable to be poor here" (272-73). We have all the greatness and misery of a meritocratic people without safety nets. America—as the only imaginatively middle-class nation—works against every feature of the present—including any form of human permanence or security--with the imaginary future in mind. That's why our "Suburban Empire" now dominates the world as a basically but not completely benevolent kind of wrecking ball.

Brooks' poetic mission is to restore a political sense of our common destiny as a people, to connect our individual imaginations with our country's historical imagination, to restore the vision of our Founders and echoed in our deep-souled poets Lincoln and Whitman that the Americans "were not only the chosen people, they were the *final* people, the children of prophecy....Paradise would be realized on this new continent, and

the redemption of all mankind would spread out from here" (256). For "early Americans, the United States was not merely a nation, it was an eschatology" (118). Our Fathers articulated a middle-class theology of liberation through achievement. Brooks gives us no reason to believe that this prophetic eschatology can actually become true, except as the imaginary ideal that consciously or unconsciously animates all Americans as Americans. So our imagination is necessarily vague about how and for whom paradise will come.

Each individual achievement, "each [American] ascent," we should imagine, is connected to a "mission that will be realized only across generations and by institutions that transcend an individual lifetime" (182). For that reason, he endorses a program of universal national service: "There should be at least one moment in life when people are encouraged to serve a cause larger than self-interest," and that cause should "cultivate a spirit of citizenship."[12] The blurring of the distinction between our individual and historical destinies and between being a narcissistic individual and a devoted citizen is at the foundation of our "optimistic faith" that the "essential goodness" of "the true inner self" will shine forth once we have removed every obstacle to free human work in this world (149). The two Whitmans agree that the goodness of the American self must somehow transcend the distinction between self-fulfilling individualism and selfless republicanism. The self-obsessed efforts of suburban individuals, after all, have made the most powerful contributions to our nation's domination of the world.

It doesn't bother either Whitman that the imaginary effort to suppress the difference between individual and historical destinies has sometimes made Americans rather fanatical. Our optimistic imagination is the source of "political causes that promise

to purify the world," causing us to be "gripped sometimes by a zeal for purgative wars that will cleanse the world of some evil" (122). Only Americans could believe that they're fighting a war to end all wars, or that ridding the nation of slavery or alcohol would really purify human life. The historical side of the American theological pursuit of achievement, like the personal side, is driven by mirages of paradise. It aims at the creation of a world without war, poverty, or disease, a world without flawed and anxious human life as we know it. Both sides of the American imagination is at the expense of particular persons, of being in love at home in the present, of erotic attachment to contingent mortal being, of a longing and love for a personal God other than oneself. Our restless, utopian imagination drives us away from family and friends and even our fellow citizens into an indefinite and impersonal future.

Being Happy in Hope

The new Whitman hopes to move us to abandon the stock criticism of theologians and philosophers of the future-obsessed American, given most powerfully perhaps by Alexis de Tocqueville: We pursue happiness but never achieve it; we ridiculously pursue spiritual satisfaction through material pursuits. Brooks doesn't as much disagree with that view as redescribe it: He suggests that some American happiness is achieved by using the imagination to give future meaning to our endless work. Ours is an historical but not really secular—in the sense of realistic or empirical—version of the Christian, eschatological view that people—otherwise miserable—can be made happy in hope for things unseen. We are bound together, Brooks echoes Rorty, by a collective fantasy that is the common element in all our private fantasies. Our national greatness is an historical fantasy about our capacity to bring history to an end.

Sometimes Brooks appears to give a Machiavellian or capitalist argument for American superiority: What matters is that we employ the most effective imaginary means to material success. The proof of American greatness is the wealth and power generated by free beings who work. But reality is finally not the poet's standard at all. Brooks, like Rorty, like all imaginative pragmatists, doesn't quite buy the secular thought that there is a real or material world by which utopian visions should be measured. The truth, like everything else, doesn't exist independently of our wills. So Brooks writes that "Mentality matters and in the end, perhaps mentality is all that matters" (268). All that matters to us Americans is how we use the imagination to think of ourselves.

That noble if perhaps unreal thought is what separates American Transcendentalists from American materialists—Marxists and Lockeans—from the time of Emerson and Brownson until that of Brooks. Transcendentalists always say that human beings aren't moved or constituted by the harsh reality of material need but by their minds or imaginations. So there's no point in asking whether we're really happy or just deluded or diverted; if our thoughts and imaginations make us happy, then we really are happy.

That poetic conclusion, of course, is never completely convincing. The Americans are constantly at work—both productively and imaginatively—in response to their anxiety. Their anxiety must be fundamental, and it's what makes American life hard. Just because the Americans don't live well with love and death doesn't mean that they don't remain moved by them. The pragmatic Americans, Brooks claims, have no idea how to talk about morality, regarding it as nothing more than another tool to maximize our freedom. And so they have nothing to say about courage or loyalty or

gratitude. The professors at Princeton that Brooks describes view themselves as incompetent to form the character of their students, and the students imagine wrongly that they live in a time when character or virtue is pretty superfluous. In some ways nothing could be further from the truth; if Brooks is right, they live in a time when people are more on their own and so will need virtue more than ever. So even he can admit that the old WASP aristocrats—like all aristocrats a once endangered and now extinct species in America—were right to see that we pragmatic Americans are incapable of understanding—much less countering—the ways in which our "achievement ethics corrodes virtue" (179).

We see there's some truth in Brooks' observation that the profound experiences of soul that produced the tragic sense or St. Augustine are contrary to American optimism and so seem unreal to us. But we also know that those experiences are profound because they are true. They can always chasten the self-deceptive imagination with the invincible limits to human accomplishment, including the mysterious givenness of good and evil in each person's soul. We are tempted to conclude that the "subtext" of Brooks' poetry is that the greatness of the Americans is in their misery, in their inability to be grateful for what they have been given, to practice virtue of any real kind, to be in love in the present, or more generally ever to experience themselves at home. But for now, it's more important to emphasize that both the edifying text and the critical subtext of Brooks' book achieve their force through exaggeration. And he is honest enough to point to evidence that would modify his conclusions considerably: Some middle-class Americans really do act on their longing to be at home with their families in a particular place, and

some really do believe in a personal, judgmental God other than themselves. They understand themselves, fundamentally, as more than free beings who work.

The Exurbs

From Brooks' view, the (in some ways least characteristically American) suburbanites live in the suburbs' new outer-ring towns or "exurbs." People, he notices, move to these places not only to escape a culture of broken homes, crime, and drugs found closer to the city, but also from the social competition and cultural one-upmanship of the more pretentious or faux Bobo suburbs. In these new towns, nobody is very rich or really poor, and employment tends to be more managerial or bottom-line and less professional or status-conscious in orientation. People do value competition and achievement—they love sports, but more than most Americans they are seeking community.

The exurbs are strange sorts of communities. They are without past or precedent, and people sometimes move to them without families, friends, or jobs. They are pursuing a dream about happiness. But their utopianism is rather singular, Brooks rightly says, because it is basically conservative. They imagined an idealized or improved version of "1950s suburban America," but in this case what the Americans imagine often becomes pretty real. What we really find in these new towns is "intact two-parent families, 2.3 kids, low crime, and a relatively flat divorce rate" (49). The family is far less pathological than in the rest of the suburbans, although people are less conformist and more thoughtful than those found in older, more "core" or split-level/cul-de-sac suburban areas.

In the old cities, community was intertwined with poverty, lack of mobility, and inescapable moral repression. It was no wonder that Americans characteristically fled that

life for the space and freedom of the suburbs. But in the new towns what is best for families and friendship is chosen by people who really have a choice. The choice has been made—to some extent—against the American grain by those who have experienced both the costs and the benefits of the progress of our moral freedom. Brooks sometimes implies that this choice has been too easy; exurban dwellers want all the benefits of freedom with all the benefits of community. There's some truth to that criticism, but it's also contradicted by demographic facts. Healthy families always depend on the acceptance of considerable dutiful or loving constraint on choice.

Brooks, despite his poetic intention, provides impressive evidence that the exurbs are a reflection of a maturing or humanizing of the middle-class imagination. The first people who moved to such towns clamored for homes near golf courses. But by 2000 their vision of perfection had changed. The demand for country clubs dropped, and the one for "walking paths, coffee shops, Kinko's, clubhouses, parks, and natural undeveloped land grew." In an age of perfect climate-controlled indoors, front porches have made quite an exurban comeback. The vision of timeless, tranquil solitude of suburban American Buddhism faded, replaced by the desire for diverse human connections somewhere with "a sense of place." Stores, restaurants, and so forth that are now designed by "themists" who cater to those desires (50-51) open up overnight with that promise that everyone will know your name and you will feel at home—bars with the look and feel of *Cheers* (which itself reproduces the look and feel of an Irish or English pub) and neighborhoods that appear as quaint and settled as Victorian villages.

Brooks, in effect, offers a correction to libertarian Virginia Postrel's account of the meaning of contemporary aesthetics. She sees the middle-class, having left the realm

of economic necessity or scarcity, as now free to give expression to each person's special feeling for style. Each of us is free to show how "smart and pretty" we are, to exhibit our distinctive taste. Postrel's view is that we are all libertarians—that is, bourgeois bohemians—now.[13] But the exurbs are evidence that we also want to be freed from the restless experience of being nowhere in particular and of having constantly to reinvent ourselves to please people we don't even know. The exurbs are actually evidence that the poet Brooks and Postrel are somewhat wrong: Our anxious longing is not to be free from families, friends, political responsibilities, and so forth; it is not for some serene new Eden without birth, time, and death.

The poet Brooks deliberately does not make conservative utopianism very appealing; it's fairly boring and un-American. He even makes the tired point that all the exurbanites want is an "updated Mayberry." But such a place would be very interesting. Mayberry was fairly bizarre, with no intact two-parent families among the main characters. There was only one kid (Opie), an underachieving single Dad (Andy), a spinster (Aunt Bea), a single schoolmarm (Helen), a charming—almost Bohemian—town drunk (Otis), and a variety of eccentric and ineffectual but not particularly Bohemian unattached men (Barney, Floyd, Goober, Howard, and others). The show's deep teaching was that Mayberry had no future, and so we might agree that it vaguely attracted harried American Buddhists.

No American today imagines living in Mayberry. But few can deny that Mayberry had some particularly attractive features; it was safe, unstratified, friendly, morally serious, and had a real sense of place. Those qualities, combined with some culture, achievement, and intact two-parent families, might be an appropriately human

middle-class mixture. The exurbs might be evidence that this mixture is more possible than those who dismiss idealized nostalgia as nothing but self-forgetting reaction against the both anxious and exhilarating realities of our world of liberated self-fulfillment.

Brooks also criticizes the exurban conservatives for not being conservative at all, for not being as different from other middle-class Americans as it seems. It's true that they vote Republican to protect what they have. But they didn't "stay and fight" against the growing decadence closer in; they choose to stay on the fringe of cultural and political conflict. They're Americans who, rather than face their problems, abandon them and move on (47). They're also like the Americans who abandoned the corruptions and confinements of civilization for the frontier, and certainly Brooks should have connected them better with the distinctively American capacity rapidly to build community and tradition out of nothing. But that observation is too simple: The exurbanites went to the frontier (of the suburbs, beyond which there is, so to speak, nothing) not mainly to escape civilization or find opportunity. (They often work much closer in.) Unlike their ancestors, they aimed to escape—if only partially—the frontier of the American imagination Brooks describes and find civilization.

People in the exurbs tend to know little about each other's jobs. They're too technical and complicated ("something with cellphones" or "some sort of marketing"). They are apparently often niche-product people, although not the most successful or driven of them. They know each other through leisure-time activities, mostly connected with kids and sports (50). Sports, as Brooks later explains, may be the best way people in the suburbs have of teaching children about the connections among personal achievement, community, and nobility. Children's coaches (usually parents, of course)

are often the most honorable and generous people around. What they show and know about character ought to shame the Princeton professors who snigger and squirm at the idea of character education.

It's true that exurban utopianism is only very ambiguously conservative in origin. The "new-urbanist ethos," Brooks reminds us, "started in socially conscious communities like Portland, Oregon." That seems, at first, to mean it's bourgeois bohemian. But the Bobos aren't really that socially conscious; they care more about the Rain Forest than the real poor. Trees, unlike people, can't help themselves. The original new urbanists were more like bohemian socialists, fighting against the suburban sprawl with visions of old and beautiful urban communities, but without the old injustice and poverty. The new urbanists, Brooks admits, have had the nationwide effect of making lives "better and more community-oriented" (51), although he doesn't follow up at all on that observation. From the poet's view, they make America in some ways less American.

The original new urbanists can't think highly of most exurbs. The people there lack social consciousness and aren't big on diversity; they're the most Republican and probably least socialist Americans. They care more about escaping America's pressing social problems than taking a lead in solving them. They often have bad taste and are easily fooled by corporate ventures to produce shoddy imitations of classic architecture. They don't even care that the restaurants and shops in their towns are rarely locally owned. And the food at Macaroni Grill (although good) only seems authentic to someone who's never really been to a real Little Italy. For entertainment they're too easily satisfied with bad and certainly not cutting-edge versions of popular music from the recent past. (Today's bogus versions of the Marvelettes, Drifters, Rascals, and so

forth draw big middle-aged, middle-class crowds touring the exurbs.) Maybe no indigenous music or art of any enduring excellence is likely to emerge from our new towns. We might add that the moral quality of their child-rearing is very uneven. Lots of exurban kids are corrupted by their parents' prosperity and middle-class ambivalence about their own authority, not to mention to the broader culture's moral indifference. The malls and patio parties are filled with girls dressed like and to some degree want boys to think they think like what Brooks calls "preppy prostitutes."

We can still say that the exurbs are in some way less corrupt than seemingly more authentic embodiments of the new urbanist vision. They're more affordable and less pretentious. They're not communities that look like America in all its diversity, but neither are they the most tastefully and expensively revitalized parts of our old cities. And the people who live in the exurbs really do have nothing against members of ethnic, racial, and religious minorities who are otherwise like them. They're good Americans in tending to believe that being middle class is more essential than any other human quality, and so they think (like Brooks himself) all the fuss over multiculturalism is counterproductive and silly. Arguably the corners the exurbs cut are inessential for the community possible in our time. Busy parents and children don't and probably shouldn't waste time thinking about how to make their homes authentic works of art. The attempt to live aristocratically in a middle-class world, as Tocqueville says, usually leads to little more than snobbish dissatisfaction.

Many of the people on the exurban frontier, whether they know it or not, stand in rebellion with the Bohemian lefty new urbanists against capitalism's tendency to treat human beings only as isolated, self-fulfilling individuals rather than as parents, children,

creatures, friends, and citizens. So they live, to some extent, in egalitarian rebellion against the extreme economic inequality of a pure meritocracy and against the elitism of the fake bohemian culture of aesthetic self-fulfillment of our libertarian sophisticates. They're guilty as charged of indifference to the injustice and decadence of metropolitan areas as wholes, but maybe that's because they limit their concerns to what they control. What can a man who sells cell phones do about the underclass? In response to the anxious sense of homelessness that characterizes the suburban middle class as a whole, they choose to do what they can to be at home. From the sociobiologist's perspective, the exurbs are some of the healthiest and most genuinely hopeful places in the prosperous and sophisticated Western world. There are few other places (such as wherever the Mormons live) where people are staying married, doing a decent job raising their kids, and, in fact, having more than enough kids to replace themselves.

The Evangelicals

Brooks chooses not to integrate the exurbs properly into his poetry. Creating places or homes out of nothing is not, on balance, transcendent enough because it is too real. Our new Whitman is most moved when we most clearly act and imagine as dissatisfied individuals against what we've been given by God, nature, or tradition. That's what explains the strangest omission: In a book full of references to transcendence, eschatology, paradise, and Eden, there is no serious or sustained treatment of American Christianity. That's not because Brooks somehow overlooks the fact that the suburbs have lots of people who call themselves Christians and go to church.

The new Whitman poetically proclaims the good news that American religion no longer has any distinctive content. He celebrates the "optimistic and easygoing"

character of American faiths, which, to their credit "emphasize personal growth over any fixed creed." Our religion, like everything else, is all about "mobility" and "blurry boundaries." We believers "do not preach at one another, but partner with each other." The good news is that "orthodox" religion neither divides us nor makes us intolerant; our religious imagination can no longer be distinguished from the middle-class imagination that unites us.[14] Brooks only hints at the corresponding bad news: If he is right, our religion no longer offers us any respite from what he calls "the culture of contingency,"[15] from "the provisional life" of individuals constantly on the move (275).

From that view, we Christians can notice that Brooks, despite his intention, comes pretty close to writing Christian apologetics. He suggests that only by allowing our imaginations to divert ourselves from we really know about the contingency of our beings are we future-minded Americans made happy in hope. Our secularized or historicized eschatology is less reasonable than real Christianity; we and Brooks know that we really can't free ourselves from our anxiety from our own efforts. Brooks' transcendent account of what drives us might be viewed as evidence that we're more animated than ever by longings that only a personal, transcendent God could satisfy. But Brooks' actual intention is to move us with the thought that America has transformed Christianity, and nothing can or should be done about that. Like Whitman or Rorty or any other pragmatic American poet, he need not refute the claims of orthodox religion; all he need do is convince us that we've left them behind. Our longings, after all, aren't natural, but American. They're not psychological necessities but historical or political products subject to change.

But Brooks doesn't shirk from mentioning certain facts that make his poetic impression questionable. A clear majority of Americans say that God is important in their lives, and an overwhelming majority believe in heaven. These two facts distinguish us at least as much as our productivity from the bourgeois Europeans, and surely they moderate our drive for historical and self-perfection. Brooks once connects the genuineness of our religious beliefs with our spirit of volunteerism and our strong nonprofit sector. He implies at least once that we might actually be charitable, although that Christian virtue is not a theme in either of his books. A close reader might conclude that he leaves us with the contradiction that America is at once the most Christian and the most post-Christian nation today. But he directs us away from dwelling on the thought that one form of eschatology might be dependent on the other.

Most of the evidence the poet presents is against the depth or reality of our belief. First is our singular propensity to switch religions. It's true—and disquieting to the orthodox—that we think of ourselves as almost as free to choose churches as cars, and American Protestants do often say they're "church shopping," especially when they've moved somewhere new. The exurbs are crawling with church shoppers. But our switching can partly be accounted by the fact that we take conversion or being "born again" (and sometimes again) so seriously. St. Paul was a famous switcher, but nobody doubts the sincerity or depth of his belief. American switching or conversion is tribute to our missionary or evangelical zeal—often celebrated by Brooks in pursuit of mirages—actually being used to spread the good news of salvation as described by biblical revelation. Christianity—because of the startling and unprecedented character of that news—is only an ambiguously traditional religion. And it's no surprise that the least

traditional versions of Christianity would flourish in America. Brooks notes—in passing—that forty percent of Americans call themselves evangelical Christians. Surely one basic sign of the depth of Christian belief is the desire to evangelize, and most of the missionaries in the world are now American evangelicals.

Another time-honored strategy Brooks uses to disparage our Christianity is to connect with the idiocy of rural Americans. Those with brains and ambition have moved—they have had to move—to the cities and suburbs. The sociologist observes that "The executives are congregated at the corporate headquarters in affluent areas, the local decisions are made by formulas, and small towns no longer have much of an upper class." Local brains no longer determine the fate of rural folks, and so they have no incentive not to be stupider than ever. So they "love QVC...and the Pro Bowlers Tour," and "high schools close the first day of hunting season" (67). Rural taste is so unrefined that there's no market for a meal that costs more than twenty dollars.

Sara Issenberg took the time to discover that most of Brooks' observations about rural life are exaggerations or just wrong.[16] It even turns out that the bulk of QVC's audience is "suburban female baby boomers." But those exaggerations help the poet make a basic distinction between rural and suburban life: "In rural America, churches are everywhere; in suburban America, Thai restaurants are everywhere" (67). But the truth is that in many suburbs both restaurants and churches are everywhere, and lots of evangelicals enjoy Thai food. Brooks really knows that the resurgence of evangelical enthusiasm in America—particularly in various kinds of "megachurches"—is much more a suburban than rural phenomenon. It is not at all some residue of fading rural fundamentalism.

In understanding the megachurch, Brooks says he is indebted to the "superb" (284) analyses of American religion today by the sociologist Alan Wolfe. Wolfe's big claim is that the American idea of nonjudgmental moral freedom has decisively transformed American religion in an individualistic direction. Our religion, like everything else, is part of our feel-good "culture of narcissism"; its focus is the individual's quite subjective "needs."[17] "Americans," Wolfe asserts, "are practicing their faith in ways so personal and individualistic that their practices blend seamlessly into the culture around them."[18] The alleged culture war between "orthodox" and "progressive" believers has fizzled as both sides converged around individualism. Brooks understands Wolfe to say that "most Americans know very little for certain except what works for me is valid, and whatever works for you is probably valid too," and this opinion causes American churches to become less morally severe and more about comfortable illusion. There are, he adds, "many orthodox believers in America as rooted in absolute truth as a mountain is rooted in earth," but they are—like the genuine bohemians—an insignificant countercultural minority (277).

Brooks, I suspect, uses Wolfe more than his own observations to mock the narcissism of the megachurch, and to show that the exurbs lack any real moral depth. He admits that the exurbanites are "loud and proud" about their religion, but what they say about religion is no more interesting than their prattling on about traffic, sports, and Carnival cruises. He describes "the seeker-sensitive Willow Creek-style megachurch, which has a 3,800-seat multimedia worship auditorium," and where someone "in the mood, can watch the service via video in the outdoor cafe in the parking lot, or if he's feeling traditional, he can watch the video in the faux-Gothic basement stone chapel"

(51). And the comic sociologist continues his account along these hopelessly vulgar and shamelessly consumer-oriented lines.

There are megachurches with those silly features, and it's true enough that suburban evangelicals fall way short of orthodox rigor. "Those who know even a little evangelical history," Mark Noll reminds us, "know how prone evangelicals have been to violate decorum, compromise integrity, upset intellectual balance, and abuse artistic good taste."[19] In those respects, evangelical religion has contributed to as much as been a counterweight to the characteristic American excesses. Brooks could have gone on to make fun of the often terrible music—contemporary Christian (which often becomes karaoke night at church), praise music, and Christian rock. (As Hank says to his son on *King of the Hill*, "Son, you haven't made Christianity better, you've made rock and roll worse.") In evangelical literature touchy feely psychology often fills the vacuum formerly occupied by theology, and evangelical self-help books are sometimes ridiculously mindless and upbeat.

But Brooks' description is still quite one-sided. Suburban evangelicals (from now on I'm relying on my own observations) are routinely taught that pragmatism, relativism, and boundless moral freedom are anti-biblical. They really do believe that human beings are bound by the absolute truth of God's revelation, and that we've all been given very definite and sometimes demanding duties as parents, spouses, creatures, and citizens. The evangelical God is personal and loving, but at least somewhat judgmental. From the perspective of, say, an orthodox Jew or a traditionalist Catholic, it's fair to say that the evangelicals inhabit an unstable but real place between orthodoxy and individualism. Theirs may be middle-class Christianity, but it's no mere rationalization for a narcissistic

or even merely American imagination. The evangelicals see themselves as employing every American technique available—from communications technologies through popular music—in the service of the unchanging Word. Their anti-traditional thought that the medium by which the Word is spread is inessential is surely naïve. Indifference to the medium is surely the cause of what Clifford Orwin, for one, has observed: "I've not come upon a single evangelical book that rose above mediocrity"; evangelical intellectuals have been unable to come up a literary or artistic vision that reflects adequately the "impressive reproach" they give in their lives "to the gross defects of rampant secularism" [20] But a mediocre reproach in a decadent medium is often much better than nothing.

Most telling is the foundation American evangelical churches provide for family life. The megachurch "campus" is often huge because it aims to be a "whole life" church, giving a Christian dimension to every feature of family life. Kids play on the sports teams in the church's gym; there are all sorts of theme oriented activities for all ages, families take church-sponsored vacations and mission trips together. Christian bookstores—the home of our country's best-selling books (and DVDs etc.)—are filled with accounts of what the Bible says about everything we do. There we can learn, for example, that the Bible is against mortgages and debt in general, in part because they get in the way of tithing but also because they get in the way of planning prudently for the family's future. The exurban church—especially but not only in the South—is an important cause of the relative health of family life; often the high birth rate, low divorce rate, and sense of community owe more to the new churches than the new towns.

Philip Longman has discovered, in fact, that American "[f]ertility correlates strongly with religious conviction. In the United States, fully 47 percent of those who attend church weekly say that their ideal family size is three or more children. By contrast, only 27 percent of those who seldom attend church want that many church." Birth rates among various ethnic groups "have either remained low or fallen dramatically" over the last fifteen years, and it would appear that in the absence of our religious conservatives our birth rate would approximate that of rapidly aging France. Any sociobiological study would have to give "a strong evolutionary advantage" to families on the evangelical side of our cultural divide.[21]

It's still true, of course, evangelical imagination is as future-obsessed as the American one Brooks describes. It is often driven by the thought that human history is about to end, but that end has nothing to do with the efforts of free beings who work. The obsession is often with the Apocalypse, the Rapture, and the Second Coming, as well as one's own salvation through faith. The evangelical imagination so stirred by Mel Gibson's *The Passion* is, if nothing else, far more psychologically complex and less narcissistic than any part of the American imagination Brooks celebrates. Our intellectuals have a hard time believing that connecting intense, virtually unendurable personal suffering with human redemption could be anything but sado-masochistic. The evangelicals, of course, are finally more genuinely optimistic about human destiny than Brooks' Americans. And that genuine optimism about the future is part of what allows evangelical families to be in love with each other in the present, to be at home with the homelessness they cannot help but experience.

Suburban evangelicals are usually very patriotic. It's easy, even in these tough times, to get them to cheer for our men and women in Iraq. They identify Christian America ("under God") with the real America, and they're the Americans most likely to believe that our country is a force for good in the world. Few of them agree with, say, theologian Stanley Hauerwas, who disparages patriotism as un-Christian and claims that we Christians in America should think of ourselves as "resident aliens." [22] Evangelicals are not so Augustinian because they don't think they live in a pagan or alien place.

The more secularly sophisticated Americans become today, the more they view patriotism as old-fashioned and unjust. For the enlightened, it should transform itself into cosmopolitanism. The American empire, from this view, is not the end of history, but that end or perfection might be the consequence of the withering away of all nations, especially ours. It's natural but out-of-touch to blame Christianity for weaning us away from our political attachments. The City of God—which should include all human beings—should alienate us some from the cities of man. But for we Americans, there has always been a close connection between believing Christianity and genuine patriotism. That may be because the Christian is more grateful than the American Brooks describes for all he or she has been given. And for the Christian, political cosmopolitanism—especially when mixed with historical eschatology—appears as a heretical distortion of our true unity under God. Brooks' vision of our nation's greatness, in fact, seems to have no real place for patriotism, for our natural attachment to our worldly home. The evangelicals—like most ordinary Americans—are attached to the American *nation*—not to some amorphous version of the imperial American future. They are not likely to endorse Brooks' plan for universal national service, even as they would support a draft

for their nation’s real defense needs. Evangelicals don’t think that national service is the only or the best way Americans should have for getting their minds off themselves. On that point they agree with Tocqueville, who relied more on religion that citizenship to curb our nation’s narcissistic tendencies.

Many individuals who consider themselves good citizens have still withdrawn quite consciously from the land of nonjudgmental self-fulfillment Brooks describes, seeing it as a dangerous corruption of the real America. The megachurch sometimes understands itself as a citadel-like defense against the sinful confusion of excessive moral freedom, as is the rapid and fascinating growth of home schooling, another quite distinctively American phenomenon Brooks ignores. “Ordinary evangelicals,” Wolfe writes, “believe that abortion is wrong and homosexuality a sin, and many of them detest what their children learn in public schools as well as the way they learn it.”[23] There is, of course, no gap between ordinary evangelicals and their leaders on such issues, and the ordinary evangelical is as well educated as his or her secular or religiously liberal counterpart. These facts nuance Wolfe’s argument; his more subtle point seems to be that American religion cannot resist being corrupted by American nonjudgmentalism over the long run. So Americans with politically correct opinions concerning our moral freedom shouldn’t worry so much. They shouldn’t, in fact; our evangelicals pose no threat to our free political institutions. But the nuance is entirely missing from Brooks’ poetry.

Brooks and Marriage

When it comes to connecting faith to family life, all Americans (including many with more orthodox beliefs) have lots to learn from the rather uniquely American evangelical

churches. Brooks himself wrote, in probably his most famous column, that American marriage is "in crisis," because "marriage, which relies on a culture of fidelity, is now asked to survive in a culture of contingency." For us, the marriage bond, like every other human connection, "is now most likely to be seen as an easily cancelled contract." Brooks goes on to make a judgment completely absent from his book: "the culture of contingency...when it comes to intimate and sacred relations, is an abomination." Abomination is pretty close to the most judgmental biblical word! It suggests that an America without genuine religious belief distorts what is most important about our lives, causing confusion and degradation.

Brooks lectures conservatives that they "must make the important moral case for marriage," employing, from his view, very un-American language. But he doesn't explain why they should expect much success in reviving the culture of fidelity today, especially without religious divisiveness or the culture war. He even asks them to include in their conservative case an argument for same-sex marriage! Why should homosexuals be forced to remain alone in the culture of contingency?[24] That question seems fair enough, except that any argument for same-sex marriage presupposes a very contingent understanding of that institution. Brooks asks conservatives to do the impossible.

The old-fashioned relatively secular view of marriage was that it was a license to have sex—that included the corresponding duties of sexual fidelity and raising children. Same-sex marriage was thought to be impossible, for many reasons. There's the obvious one about children. But no case for same-sex marriage that I've read—including the relatively conservative, responsible, and moving ones by Jonathan Rauch and Andrew

Sullivan[25]—include the expectation of sexual fidelity within marriage or abstaining from sex until marriage. And they presuppose the very easygoing divorce laws—especially for childless couples—that we now have. Gay marriage only makes sense to gays if marriage is understood, under the law, as a contract to be broken at will. It seems that marriage has become a duty-free system of entitlements, and that's why it should be made available to all Americans.

At least the most thoughtful evangelicals (and others) oppose same-sex marriage not out of any animosity toward homosexuals, but because they see clearly what the various stages of development of liberal individualism or "moral freedom" has done to all institutions based on fidelity or loyalty. Marriage as it now exists—as a virtually toothless and nearly purposeless secular license—would do little to save homosexuals from the culture of contingency that disorients us all. It's because understanding marriage as just another contract is an abomination that evangelicals believe it depends on a religious foundation. And when we look at marriage in America today, we see contradictory extremes: Divorce may be somewhat more rampant here than in Europe, but we also take the responsibility of marriage and the family considerably more seriously. We return to the thought that we are somehow the most post-Christian (or secular eschatological) and Christian of nations, and an adequate American poetry would show those contradictory kinds of thought and imagination manage to support each other. To be caught between Christianity and post-Christianity—to be not so much Christ-centered as Christ-haunted (in all our eschatological imaginings)—is another way of describing our middle-class existence.

I have praised American evangelicals for seeing themselves as more than individuals, as friends, parents, children, citizens, and creatures. I have agreed with Tocqueville that American religion is a powerful support for these countercultural inclinations. Most Americans are not evangelicals (or orthodox), and maybe half of them have the tendency to confuse God with themselves. But my criticism of the new Whitman—a criticism he himself is capable of making—still merely expresses what we all really know. Waller Newell, an obviously non-religious writer, can still say today that "the five main ingredients of a satisfying life" are "love, courage, pride, family, and country."[26] That's because we Americans "have the same heartfelt yearnings for love, honor, and spiritual fulfillment as previous generations." In some cases, "these yearnings may be keener and deeper because they have been denied any constructive outlet."[27] The Americans Brooks describes have hard lives because their perverse imaginative transcendence is evidence of their denial and distortion of the most profound and noble aspects of their natures. Much of the greatness of we workaholics is in our misery, and thank God both our anxiety and our love continue to point us beyond ourselves. We can't be nonjudgmental about the purposes that drive our efforts; our wealth and power have to serve human goods.

I've already suggested, of course, that Brooks does not do justice to Christian virtue, including humility. But in some respects the Americans he describes are altogether too humble. The only theologian our new Whitman quotes and praises is (the German!) Jurgen Moltmann, who contends that "Man has no subsistence in himself, but is always on the way towards something and realizes himself in light of some expected whole" (149). Moltmann's rhetorical force comes from seeing how Marx and other philosophers

of historical achievement echoed biblical language: We are now nothing, but we shall make ourselves everything. Because there is no otherworldly God to save us, our humility about our present condition spurs us on toward an incessant effort to save ourselves, to make ourselves whole.

Because Brooks distorts or exaggerates our humility, he also confuses us about pride. His poetry, from one view, is about American pride, but it is finally pride in our misery. Our anxious misery about the contingency of our being drives us forward, producing thoughts and achievements that are singularly free and singularly American. So we should be proud that we are emphatically not "last men" or live in some Brave New World; all the evidence is that we are free or transcendent beings. We should be proud about how driven our lives are even in the midst of prosperity, that we are stuck—and not primarily by material need--with living in "the future tense."

But human pride, properly speaking, is a pleasure consciousness of what we have accomplished. Brooks suggests in many ways that Americans must have that experience in thinking about what they have accomplished in their tough jobs, with their homes and churches, in raising their children, and in serving their country. He says that Americans who flourish according to the narrow and often ridiculous standards of their particular cliques or niches hardly suffer from pride deficit; they, in fact, characteristically overrate themselves. It's surely true that studies show that "90 percent of all Americans have way too much self-esteem" (73). Being proud of what we are counterbalances in many ways the anxiety we have about how much work the future is going to require of us. The successful American evangelical athlete and entrepreneur who credits all that he had done to God is never fully convincing.

Maybe the deepest definition of the middle class character of human beings in the Western world—which includes, of course, our American world—is to be caught between pride and humility. Pride, properly understood, is in the great things we have done, and humility is the knowledge we still cannot help but have about the ineradicable contingency of our being with all our flaws and sins. We sometimes can't help but think that our greatness is almost divine, and sometimes we see so clearly the truth that we are some great distance from being God and remain dependent on Him for our very being. Our pragmatism—our historical imagination and action—will, thank God, will never really free us from the true greatness and misery of our middle-class existence.

[1] Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America* (Harvard University Press, 1998), 86.
[2] Rorty, 130.
[3] Michael Barone, *Hard America, Soft America: Coddling and the Battle for America's Future* (Crown Forum, 2004)
[4] David Brooks, "How to Reinvent the GOP," *The New York Times Magazine,* August 30, 2004. 35.
[5] David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (Simon and Schuster, 2002).
[6] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, as quoted by Rorty, 22.
[7] Brooks, "How to Reinvent the GOP," 35.
[8] Page numbers in parenthesis in the text are to David Brooks, *On Paradise Drive: How We Live Now (And Always Have) in the Future Tense* (Simon and Schuster, 2004)
[9] Rorty, p. 22
[10] David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (Simon and Schuster, 2002).
[11] Kay S. Hymowitz, *Liberation's Children: Parents and Kids in a Postmodern Age* (Ivan Dee, 2003), 153.
[12] Brooks, "How to Reinvent the GOP," 56.
[13] Virginia Postrel, *The Substance of Style: How the Rise of Aesthetic Value is Remaking Commerce, Culture, and Consciousness* (HarperCollins, 2003)
[14] David Brooks, "The National Creed," *The New York Times*, December, 30, 2003
[15] David Brooks, "The Power of Marriage," The New York Times, November 22, 2003.
[16] Sara Issenberg, "Boo-Boos in Paradise," *Philadelphia Magazine*, April, 2004.
[17] Alan Wolfe, *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith* (Free Press, 2003), 24
[18] Wolfe, 38.
[19] "Understanding American Evangelicals: A Conversation with Mark Noll and Jay Tolson," *Center Conversations* (Washington D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, June 2004), 5.
[20] Clifford Orwin, "The Unraveling of Christianity in America," *Public Interest*, 155 (Spring, 2004), 29-30.
[21] Philip Longman, "From Here to Maternity," *Washington Post*, September 2, 2004.
[22] Stanley Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens: Life in a Christian Colony* (Abington Press, 1989).
[23] Wolfe, 256.
[24]Brooks, "The Power of Marriage."
[25] Jonathan Rauch, *Gay Marriage: Why It is Good for Gays, Good for Straights, and Good for America* (Times Book, 2004); Andrew Sullivan, *Virtually Normal: An Argument About Homosexuality* (Vintage Books, 1996).
[26] Waller Newell, *The Code of Man: Love, Courage, Pride, Family, Country* (Regan Books, 2003), xi.
[27] Newell, 356.