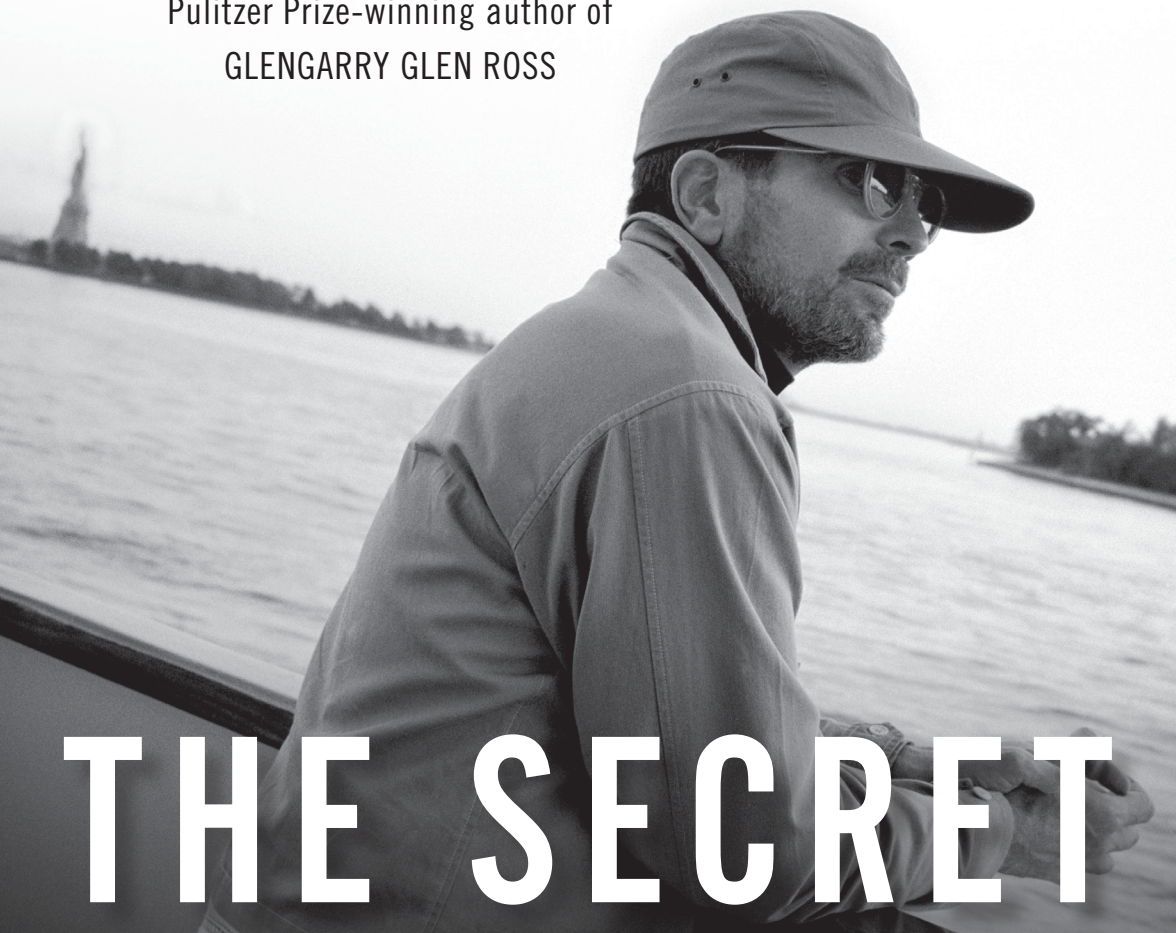


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GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS



THE SECRET KNOWLEDGE

On the Dismantling of American Culture

“The struggle of the Left to rationalize its positions is an intolerable, Sisyphian burden. I speak as a reformed Liberal.”

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DAVID MAMET

SENTINEL

1 | THE POLITICAL IMPULSE

All religions stem from the same universal needs. Each contains awe, obedience, grace, study, prayer, and submission. Each religion will order and stress these elements differently, but their root is the same—a desire to understand the Divine and its intentions for humankind.

The political impulse, similarly, must, however manifested, proceed from a universal urge to order social relations.

Emotions may elevate practical partisan differences to the realm of the spiritual or doctrinal, which is to say, the irreconcilable—Democrats, notably, are more likely to credit terrorists taken in battle against our country rather than Republicans, and many liberal Jews to believe the statements of Hamas rather than those of Israel.

In the election of 2008, environmental, social, and financial change were the concerns of both parties. The Right held that a return to first principles would arrest or re-channel this momentum toward bankruptcy and its attendant geopolitical dangers. It suggested fiscal conservatism, greater and more efficient exploitation of natural resources, lower taxes, a stronger military. The Left's view was to suggest that Change was good in itself—that a problem need not be dealt with mechanically (by acts whose historical efficacy was demonstrable) but could be addressed psychologically, by identifying “change itself” as a solution.

The underlying question, common to both sides, was how to deal with this problematic change; the Conservative answer, increased exploitation of the exploitable and conservation of needless expen-

diture—in effect, sound business practice; that of the Liberals a cessation of the same. Each were and are interested in Security, the Liberals suggesting détente and the Conservatives increased armament; each side was interested in Justice, the Conservatives holding it will best be served by the strict rule of law, the Liberals by an increase in the granting of Rights.

This opposition appealed to me as a dramatist. For a good drama aspires to be and a tragedy *must* be a depiction of a human interaction in which both antagonists are, arguably, in the right.

My early plays, *American Buffalo*, *The Water Engine*, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, concerned Capitalism and business. This subject consumed me as I was trying to support myself, and like many another young man or woman, had come up against the blunt fact of a world which did not care.

I never questioned my tribal assumption that Capitalism was bad, although I, simultaneously, never acted upon these feelings. I supported myself, as do all those not on the government dole, through the operation of the Free Market.

As a youth I enjoyed—indeed, like most of my contemporaries, revered—the agitprop plays of Brecht, and his indictments of Capitalism. It later occurred to me that his plays were copyrighted, and that he, like I, was living through the operations of that same free market. His protestations were not borne out by his actions, neither *could* they be. Why, then, did he profess Communism? Because it sold. The public's endorsement of his plays kept him alive; as Marx was kept alive by the fortune Engels's family had made selling furniture; as universities, established and funded by the Free Enterprise system—which is to say by the accrual of wealth—house, support, and coddle generations of the young in their dissertations on the evils of America.

We cannot live without trade. A society can neither advance nor improve without excess of disposable income. This excess can only be amassed through the production of goods and services necessary or attractive to the mass. A financial system which allows this leads to inequality; one that does not leads to mass starvation.

Brecht, an East German, was allowed by the Communists to keep his wealth and live at his ease in Switzerland—a show dog of Communism. His accomplishments, however, must be seen not as an indictment, but as a ratification of the power of free enterprise. As must the seemingly ineradicable vogue for the notion of Government Control.

The free market in ideas keeps this folly as current as any entertainment reviled by the Left as “mindless.” But the fiction of top-down Government Control, of a Command Economy, is, at essence, like a Reality Show, which is to say, a fraud. The Good Causes of the Left may generally be compared to NASCAR; they offer the diversion of watching things go excitingly around in a circle, getting nowhere.

Who does not want Justice? Each of us, of course, wants justice for himself, and all but the conscienceless few realize that we deserve well from each other.

The question is one of apportionment, for justice cannot be infinite. There is a finite amount of time, knowledge, wisdom, and money—and to tax the mass endlessly, even in the pursuit of justice, must cause injustice somewhere.

One may be just to the trees of the Northwest, impoverish loggers, and raise the cost of home construction; if all prisoners are allowed unlimited and endless access to all courts, whose time and energy is as finite as every other thing, the court system must stint other applicants. One may extend Justice to the snail darter and cripple the Port of New York; and a legitimate aversion to racial profiling may not only inconvenience but mortally endanger the traveling public.

My revelation came upon reading Friedrich Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom*. It was that there is a cost to *everything*, that nothing is without cost, and that energy spent on A cannot be spent on B, and that this is the meaning of *cost*—it represents the renunciation of other employments of the money. He wrote that there are no solutions; there are only tradeoffs—money spent on more crossing guards cannot be spent on books. Both are necessary, a choice must be made, and that this is the Tragic view of life.

It made sense to me. Now, like the Fibonacci sequence, I began to see it everywhere. Milton Friedman pointed out that the cavil, “It would seem that a country that could put a man on the moon could provide free lunches for its schoolchildren,” missed the point: the country could not supply the free lunches *because* it put the man on the moon—there is only so much money. I understood this because I have a checkbook, and my reading inspired me to realize the equation did not differ at the National Level—there was only so much money, and choices must be made.

Money, I further learned, was just an efficient way of keeping track of the production of individuals—of their work and the capacity of that work to benefit their fellows. The more the money moved around, the more the mass benefited. The Government could do little with this product save waste it: it did not produce. It could tax or confiscate, but it could not allocate with greater justice than the Free Market;* it could and should, then, provide only those services of which the Free Market was incapable: the roads, the sewers, the Judiciary, the streetlights, the Legislature, and the Common Defense—the notion that it could do more was an illusion and nowhere demonstrable.† The Government could only profess to do more, its bureaucrats and politicians playing on our human need for

*I do not think I am naïve. I have been supporting myself for quite a while, and, as a young man, took every job I could get. I was very glad to have them, but my happiness was neither gratitude toward my employers, nor insensitivity to the various slights, uncertainties, and thefts to which the unskilled, myself among them, were all subject. I was glad to have the money, and looked (and look) for any opportunity to earn more with less expenditure of effort and in more congenial circumstances. This attitude, I believe, is fairly widely shared, cutting across even the most deeply riven political lines.

†See the educative outpouring of admiration, after September 11, for the police and firefighters, and the military—for those of our fellow Americans actually involved in the *legitimate* operation of Government. See also, *per contra*, Government’s affection for privatization—of the Chicago parking system, of various national prisons, of toll roads, of the care and feeding of troops. These among the few, legitimate enterprises of Government have in common a benefit to the citizenry greater through government oversight than would be delivered by the Free Market competition. Privatization is called “outsourcing,” but it is merely sale by incumbents of the property which is the people’s. Can anyone believe that any franchise has ever been sold by any government anywhere other than with the accrual of some personal benefit to the executives and legislators involved in the sale?

guidance and certainty, and, indeed, our desire for Justice. But these members of Government, Right and Left, were as likely to exploit their position as you or I; and, like Brecht, as likely to mine human credulity as to alleviate human need.

Politics, then, seemed to me, like business, a delightful panoply of deceit and error and strife—a brand-new tide pool for the naturalist.

I wrote a political play.

Writers are asked, “How could you know so much about [fill in the profession]?” The answer, if the writing satisfies, is that one makes it up. And the job, my job, as a dramatist, was not to write accurately, but to write *persuasively*. If and when I do my job well, subsequent cowboys, as it were, will talk like *me*.

In order to write well, however, the good dramatist must absolutely identify with his subject. This does not mean to be in “sympathy with,” but “to become the same as.”

In writing my political play I realized, then, that I was in no way immune from the folly of partisanship, of muddle-headedness, and of rancor in political thought; that I enjoyed the righteous indignation and the licensed spectacle as much as anyone, for the feeling of superiority it gave me. That I was, in short, a fool.

That, for a writer, is an excellent place to begin.

A friend came to our house for Thanksgiving. She’d flown from D.C. to Los Angeles, and the first-class cabin of her plane had been occupied by two turkeys “pardoned” by President Bush, and sold or lent to the Disney Corporation, to lead its Thanksgiving parade down the Main Street of Disneyland.

This intersection of these two hucksterisms drew me irresistibly to a fantasy.

All people being venal by nature, and politicians doubly so by profession, was it not clear that a President would not pardon turkeys save for some consideration? My fantasy had a despised incumbent, scant weeks from Election Day with no hope of reelection. His party has stopped advertising his hopeless run. He is asked to pardon a

couple of turkeys in return for a small campaign contribution. He becomes inspired and tells the turkey manufacturers he wants two hundred million dollars or he will pardon every turkey in America.

So far so good, and here's the kicker—in order to convince the American People to endorse his ban on turkey, he enlists the genius of his treasured speechwriter. She, a Lesbian, has just returned from China, whither she and her partner had gone to purchase a baby. She says she will write the speech only if the President, in return, will marry her and her partner on National TV. Pretty funny play. And its theme, I believe, is not only that we are “all human,” but, better, that we are all Americans.

Here is Clarice Bernstein (the Speechwriter) reading a draft of her speech to Charles Smith, the President:

The fellow or the woman at the watercooler? We don't know their politics. We judge their character by the simple things: are they respectful, are they punctual, can they listen, “can they get along” . . . we care if they paint their fence. We don't know who they vote for. We don't know what they “do in bed.” Who would be disrespectful enough to enquire? If you look at the polls it seems we are a “nation divided.” But we aren't “a nation divided.” Sir. We're a Democracy. We hold different opinions. But: we laugh at the same jokes, we clap each other on the back when we've made that month's quota; and, sir, I'm not at all sure that we don't love each other. (from November)

There is a final reconciliation of Right and Left, straight and gay, and everything is made right by the *deus ex machina*, Chief Dwight Grackle of the Micmac Nation, who has come to assassinate the President, and the curtain line is “Jesus, I love this country.” As do I. And my love increased the more I thought about it. I considered the play a love letter to America.

A local New York paper tried to close the play. Their fellow was outraged, finding it politically incorrect, in which he was, astonishingly, acute.

Now, the plot thickening, the *Village Voice* asked me to write an article on the play's politics. I wrote them an essay titled "Political Civility," which laid out my views as above. I knew, however, that the *Voice* (a) has always been the voice of the Left; and (b) that they, over the years, had generally accepted my work only kicking and screaming. So I schemed to ensnare them. I began my essay on civility and consideration with an anecdote about the *Village Voice*.

Norman Mailer reviewed the first production in America of *Waiting for Godot* in the *Village Voice*. He called it trash. He went home though, and thought about it and returned to see the play again. He recognized it now as a work of genius, and bought a page in the *Voice* renouncing his review, and praising the play. I began my essay with this anecdote.

Aha. The *Voice* took the bait and published the article. They, however, retitled it "Why I Am No Longer a Brain-Dead Liberal." The New York paper, enraged, *rereviewed* my play, giving it a worse notice than the first time around, and I was embraced by the Right.

Then I was asked to write a book on politics. And, in the words of Gertrude Stein, so I did, and this is it.