The Narcissism of Minor Difference

I

Mirkovci, March 1993, 4:00 a.m. Mirkovci is a village in eastern Croatia that was cut in two by the Serb-Croat war between September 1991 and January 1992. Full-scale ethnic war has shifted south to Bosnia, but here, every night, Serb and Croat militias, dug in around Mirkovci, still exchange small-arms fire and the occasional bazooka round. I am in an abandoned farmhouse basement that serves as the command post of the local Serbian militia. The Croatsians are about two hundred and fifty yards away, somewhere in the darkness.

This is a village war. The men on either side of the front line once were neighbors. The Serbs on guard duty—most of them tired, middle-aged reservists, who'd much rather be in bed—all went to school with the Croats, just as tired, probably just as middle-aged, in the bunker close by. Before the war, they had been to the same schools, worked in the same garage, went with the same girls. In the last national census of Yugoslavia, taken in 1990, the town of Vukovar, which is about twenty miles away, and the villages nearby had rates of ethnic intermarriage as high as 30 percent. Nearly a quarter of the population claimed their nationality as Yugoslav, that is, as belonging to neither Croat, Serb, nor Muslim.

There are about a dozen soldiers in the farmhouse. From time to time, one of them slings his rifle on his shoulder and tramps up and down in a slit trench that cuts through the gardens and clotheslines. The rest sit on army cots, gossiping, smoking, dozing, and cleaning their weapons. Most of them are reservists, but there is a paramilitary called Chobi who wears a black toque emblazoned with the motto SERBIA: LIBERTY OR DEATH. He calls up an old friend on the CB radio. "Ustashe," he taunts, "are you still going with that girl?" "Why should I tell you?" the Croat replies: "Chetnik psychopath." Pleasantries continue, and then they hang up. They talk on the phone most evenings, it appears.

I've been sitting with them most of the night while they doze, play cards, clean their weapons. I want to understand how neighbors are turned into enemies, how people who once had a lot in common end up having nothing in common but war. Wherever I've seen this process happen—in Afghanistan, Rwanda, Northern Ireland—I've found it puzzling. I've never accepted the idea that nationalist war is an eruption of tribal hatreds and ancient enmities. Theorists like Samuel Huntington would lead me to believe that there is a fault line running through the back gardens of Mirkovci, with the Croats in the bunker representing the civilization of the Catholic Roman West and the Serbs nearby representing Byzantium, Orthodoxy, and the Cyrillic East. Certainly that is how the more self-inflated ideologues on either side see the
conflict. But at worm’s-eye level, here in Mirkovci, I don’t see civilizational fault lines, geological templates that have split apart. These metaphors take for granted what needs to be explained: how neighbors once ignorant of the very idea that they belong to opposed civilizations begin to think—and hate—in these terms; how they vilify and demonize people they once called friends; how, in short, the seeds of mutual paranoia are sown, grain by grain, on the soil of a common life.

On the bunk next to me, leaning against the wall, wearing combat fatigues, is a compact and dapper middle-aged man with bright, wily eyes and a thick, stylish mustache. With a certain false naïveté, I venture the thought that I can’t tell Serbs and Croats apart. “What makes you think you’re so different?”

He looks scornful and takes a cigarette pack out of his khaki jacket. “See this? These are Serbian cigarettes. Over there,” he says, gesturing out the window, “they smoke Croatian cigarettes.”

“But they’re both cigarettes, right?”

“Foreigners don’t understand anything.” He shrugs and resumes cleaning his Zastovo machine pistol.

But the question I’ve asked bothers him, so a couple of minutes later he tosses the weapon on the bunk between us and says, “Look, here’s how it is. Those Croats, they think they’re better than us. They want to be the gentlemen. Think they’re fancy Europeans. I’ll tell you something. We’re all just Balkan shit.”

First he tells me that Croats and Serbs have nothing in common. Everything about them is different, down to their cigarettes. A minute later, he tells me that the real problem with Croats is that they think they’re “better than us.” Finally, he decides: We’re actually all the same.

Yes, civilizational antagonisms are present in what he says, but they are part of an ambiguous dialogue between myth and experience, fantasy and reality. It is as if the nationalist myth—Serbs and Croats are radically distinct peoples with nothing in common—is struggling with this man’s lived experience that, really, not much distinguishes him from his Croat neighbors. The two planes of consciousness—the political and the personal—coexist but do not confront each other. Somewhere in him, there is a sliver of doubt that might lead to questioning and even refusal, but there are no newspapers, no radio stations, no alternative language in which he can frame his doubts and discover that others have doubts just like him. So the contradictions float around in his head. In the watches of the night, he waits, tense and restless, for the next mortar round. Firing off a few rounds may be a way of resolving the tension. To hell with it, he may curse. They don’t pay me to think. Let’s keep it simple. Violence does that, at least: it keeps things simple.

There is nothing timeless about this man’s national identity. It’s not some primordial essence, formed by history and tradition, latent within, waiting to carry him off to war. For him, identity is primarily a relational term. A Serb is someone who is not a Croat. A Croat is someone who is not a Serb. But when difference is relational, it is also an empty tautology. We are not what we are not. My dapper Serbian soldier simply cannot tell me what he is fighting for, other than his own survival. But survival doesn’t entirely explain why he is here, because he knows perfectly well that until a few years ago, his survival was not in question. How it has become so, why he now lives in a community of fear, united in hatred against another community of fear, is ultimately as mysterious to him as it is to me.

Nationalist ideology tries to fill this void inside him; tries to give the foot soldiers a reason to fight and die. But whatever this particular Serb has heard on his radio or read in his local paper does not swallow up the identity formed by his own personal
experience. The fit between national and personal identity is imperfect. The black-touped ethnic paramilitaries may be true believers, but ordinary people—the foot soldiers of ethnic war like him—dimly, sometimes agonizingly, perceive the gap between what they see with their own eyes and what they are told to believe.

Nationalism does not simply “express” a preexistent identity: it “constitutes” a new one. It would be false to the history of this part of the world to maintain that ethnic antagonisms were simply waiting, like the magma beneath a volcano, for a template to shift, a fissure to split open. It is an abuse of anthropological terminology to call Serbs and Croats ethnic groups at all: they speak more or less the same language; they are from the same racial stock of the south Balkan Slavs. There are differences between them, particularly in their family names, but these differences are nearly invisible to outsiders. In crude terms, you cannot tell them apart. Even if we allow ourselves to call them ethnic groups, the kind of Serb this man believes himself to have been before the descent into war is not the kind of Serb he became after the war. Before the war, he might have thought of himself as a Yugoslav or a café manager or a husband rather than as a Serb. Now as he sits in this farmhouse bunker, there are men two hundred and fifty yards away who would kill him. For them he is only a Serb, not a neighbor, not a friend, not a Yugoslav, not a former teammate at the football club. And because he is only a Serb for his enemies, he has become only a Serb to himself.

Nationalism is a fiction: it requires the willing suspension of disbelief. To believe in nationalist fictions is to forget certain realities. In this Serbian soldier’s case, it means forgetting that he was once a neighbor, brother, and friend to the people in the next trench. But how does nationalism “constitute”/create identity?

How did nationalism rework this particular man’s identity? We need to find a story that will explain how communities of fear are created out of communities of interest, a story that will connect the collapse of state power and the rise of nationalist paranoia down at the human level, in places like Mirkovci.

II

From 1945 to 1991 neighbors lived together in a state called Yugoslavia. There were differences between Serbs and Croats—one was Orthodox, the other Catholic—and a history of bad blood, a vivid memory of Croatian Ustashe persecution of ethnic minority Serbs in Croatia during World War II. There was a state, presided over by Tito, that held power by combining intimidation with appeals to “brotherhood and unity” among ethnic groups. The history of interethnic war between 1941 and 1945 was systematically repressed, and Tito did his best to prevent any one ethnic group from dominating the institutions of the federal state, though by the end, the Serbs occupied most of the leadership posts in the Yugoslav National Army. This strategy of “divide and rule,” coupled with calls for “brotherhood and unity,” did have a certain popular legitimacy. Many Yugoslavs of the 1960s and 1970s sincerely thought they had put ethnic hatred behind them. Where ethnic difference was stressed—by Croatian nationalists, for example—it was repressed. By 1990, the generation traumatized by World War II was beginning to die and the poisons of the past were leaching away. In a village like Mirkovci, “brotherhood and unity” actually meant a good deal of ethnic intermarriage, and while Serbs and Croats went to different churches, they did work together in local institutions. The most
important of these was the police station. If you had a problem, if someone stole your car radio, the police didn't ask your nationality first. You weren't necessarily offered an efficient process; but at least you weren't subjected to ethnic justice.

Then in May 1980 Tito died. States whose legitimacy depends on the personal charisma of one individual can only fall apart when that individual dies. Tito was the last of the Hapsburgs, the last ruler of the south Balkan peninsula with the legitimacy and the guile to make divide-and-rule work. After his death, power began to ebb away from the center to the Communist elites in the republics. But these elites now felt the legitimacy of their own authority eroding. Without Tito, they became little more than networks of corrupt ethnic patronage. By 1989, the collapse of Communism lent an edge of panic to their search for legitimacy. Throughout Eastern Europe, after 1989, Communist parties tried to convert themselves into social democratic electoral machines. Theirs was a pantomime act, but however insincere, it did help to create what the electorates of these societies wanted, a "normal" (i.e., pluralistic) political system. Such was the path taken by former Communists in East Germany, Hungary, Ukraine, and Poland; they accepted the vernacular of democracy and appealed to citizens as individual voters. The question is, Why did this liberal civic vision, which was available in Yugoslavia, never take hold? Why were the Yugoslav elites incapable even of democratic pantomime? For the appeal of the liberal political option ought to have been much stronger. Tito allowed Yugoslavs to travel; they came back with some idea of how democracy looked and sounded. Yugoslavia enjoyed one of the freest civil societies in Eastern Europe, with opposition journals, philosophical discussion groups like the Belgrade Circle, a vivid café life, art, theater, and cinema. In retrospect, it seems clear that the relative freedom of this civil society was in fact the source of its weakness. The opposition existed on sufferance; it knew, in its heart of hearts, that it was one of Tito's cunning indulgences. It was a cultural opposition, not a political opposition. It never challenged the regime in the name of an explicitly democratic vision. The illusion that, under Tito, things were better than they were elsewhere in Eastern Europe co-opted the opposition and prevented it from mobilizing people as citizens. In nearby Czechoslovakia much harsher police repression taught the opposition to expect nothing from the regime; taught it that cultural freedoms of the type enjoyed by the Yugoslavs meant little unless they also enjoyed political power. The Yugoslav opposition never benefited, to use Timothy Garton Ash's phrase, from the "uses of adversity." Tito's relative indulgence emasculated the opposition. They failed to find a plausible rhetoric of interethnic appeal to replace "brotherhood and unity." By 1990, more than a quarter of the Yugoslav population identified themselves as "Yugoslavs." This was the constituency that might have been mobilized by the opposition in all the republics in defense of multiethnic politics. But by then, the Communist system had so balkanized politics, republic by republic, that the civic oppositions in each of them could never get together to marshal a common defense of civic values against the ethnic nationalism that was pulling the country apart. By then, Communism was collapsing, and the heroes of the hour were those who had suffered under Communism, which in Yugoslavia's case were the nationalists like Tudjman in Croatia.

In the mid-1980s, the Communist elite left in place after Tito's death realized that the dictator's departure and the inner decay of Communism required them to invent a new language of popular appeal. Even in a one-party state, a new rhetoric was needed to mobilize the public. The fact that Serbs had been slowly
reduced to ethnic minority status in the hilly southwestern region of Kosovo provided Serbian leader Milosevic with just such a rallying cry. Ethnic Albanians made up 90 percent of the population, and they were demanding independence or annexation to nearby Albania. Serbs might have accepted minority status were it not that Kosovo occupied such a central place in the Serbian imagination: it was where their most ancient and beautiful medieval churches were located, and Kosovo field was the site of the fateful battle with the Turks in 1389 that led to five centuries of Turkish imperial occupation. Until the 1980s, most Serbs ignored the condition of their cousins in backward Kosovo. But the five-hundredth anniversary of the defeat at Kosovo provided Milosevic with an opportunity to claim that Kosovo remained the heartland of Serbian national life, despite the fact that few Serbs actually lived there anymore.

It is doubtful that Milosevic actually took the cause of Kosovo to his heart. For him, nationalist demagoguery was a language game, a rhetorical strategy for electoral survival in the uncertain world of the post-Titoist succession battle. He was apparently surprised that he had chanced upon a winning formula. During a meeting with Kosovan Serbs, who were protesting ethnic Albanian demands for independence or autonomy, Milosevic remarked, apparently off the cuff, that “they will never beat you again.” Since it was ethnic Albanians rather than Serbs who were being beaten by Milosevic’s police, the remark was a curious inversion of realities, but it did tap into deep reservoirs of Serb self-pity: a victim nation, who had fought for liberty against the Turks, who had fought the Austrians, who had been persecuted by the Ustashe, who had been prevented by Tito—a Croat—from dominating the federal Yugoslavia, and who were now suffering at the hands of a Muslim majority in their own heartland. This combustible mixture of genuine grievance and self-pitying paranoia was ignited by Milosevic’s remark, and by his subsequent program to annul the autonomy of Kosovo and reabsorb it within the Serbian republic. Moreover, in the mid-1980s, Serbian self-pity and frustrated dreams of historical grandeur coincided with a deepening economic crisis. The nationalist dream of uniting Serbs within one state not only provided a Communist elite with a language of electoral mobilization, but offered a diversion. It was a politics of fantasy, leading the population away from real issues, such as the deepening economic difficulties of Serbia and the stubborn backwardness of the south Balkans. The Greater Serbian project was a fantasy at another level too. Because of the dispersion of the Serbian population within adjacent republics, the project of reunifying the Serbs (or any other ethnic group for that matter) could be achieved only by forcible population transfer, by ethnic cleansing.

This implication of Serbian aggrandizement was evident to the elites of neighboring republics. The Yugoslav republics each began demanding states of their own, and as they did so, the ethnic minorities in each began to wonder: Who will protect us now? This was the question my Serb soldier now asked himself. As Croatia moved toward full independence in 1990, he saw the Serbs being dismissed from the local police station by the new Croatian government. The prospect of ethnic justice came into view, and however much the Croatian nationalists denied it, they did intend to demote the Serbs in Croatia from the status of a founding nationality of a federal republic into an ethnic minority subject to ethnic majority rule. Didn’t the new Croatia call itself, in its new constitution, the state of the Croatian people? Where did that leave the people who lived in Croatia but were not Croats?

This dawning realization is the turning point in the whole story. Interethnic accommodation anywhere depends on an equilibrium of forces. An ethnic minority can live in peace with an
began to appear, and they told him: Tito is dead; the Croats are taking power; you've nobody but us to protect you. Soon, he was working for the warlords, spending his nights in an abandoned farmhouse trading shots with people he once called friends. In the space of three years, he had been delivered back four hundred years to the late feudal world before the European nation-state began. In three years, he had been delivered from civilization—from interethnic tolerance and accommodation—to the Hobbesian world of interethnic war.

Now, note the causative order: first the collapse of the overarching state, then Hobbesian fear, and only then nationalist paranoia, followed by warfare. Disintegration of the state comes first, nationalist paranoia comes next, national sentiment on the ground, among common people, is a secondary consequence of political disintegration, a response to the collapse of state order and the interethnic accommodation that it made possible. Nationalism creates communities of fear, groups held together by the conviction that their security depends on sticking together. People become “nationalistic” when they are afraid; when the only answer to the question “Who will protect me now?” becomes “my own people.”

What I’ve tried to do here is tell a story that connects the top and the bottom—the elite and the people—in a common narrative. But a major puzzle remains. If Hobbesian fear explains why neighbors turn into enemies, what explains that earlier shift in which identities that were once permeable begin to be sealed off? How did people begin to think of themselves as Serbs and Croats to the exclusion of all else? For nearly fifty years, being a Serb or being a Croat took second place to being a Yugoslav; sometimes it took third or fourth place to being a worker or a mother, or any of the other identities that constitute the range of our belonging.
Nationalism denies that multiple belonging is possible. It insists on the primacy of national belonging over all other allegiances. But how does it do this? Here we need to take a theoretical detour and think more carefully about difference itself, to ask how difference, which is always comparative and relational, can change with such suddenness.

III

The transformation of brothers into enemies has puzzled the human imagination at least since Genesis. For Genesis begins the story of mankind not with a murder between strangers, but between brothers. It is precisely because the difference between them is so slight that the roots of the crime remain so mysterious. One brother is a keeper of sheep; the other a tiller of the ground. Both make sacrifices to the Lord: one finds favor; the other does not. We are not told why God’s blessing should be so partial. God merely informs the disappointed brother that he must be content with his lot and not contest the inscrutable partiality of Providence.

Again, for reasons unknown, the older brother refuses to submit to God’s judgment. Consumed by rage at God’s injustice and envy toward his younger brother’s unaccountable good fortune, he lures that brother into a field. There, with his bare hands, or with weapons unspecified, he takes his brother’s life. God, needless to say, is watching. When challenged, Cain denies the crime—and also denies his human kinship:

“Am I my brother’s keeper?”

Significantly, Cain is not destroyed for his crime, but marked as an outcast and banished east of Eden. There he becomes a founder of nations, and since his authority began with a murder, crime and countercrime unfold in the dire downward logic of revenge. “If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy and seven fold.” It is this logic that so disgusts God that he decides to flood the world and save only Noah and his flock.

In her fine study, the biblical scholar Regina Schwartz identifies what is so truly mysterious about the story: the scarcity of God’s mercy. Why can’t he bless both Cain and Abel? Why must one be chosen and the other excluded? Why, when both are the same, must one be cast out? This, she argues, is the logic of monotheistic systems of belief. Scarcity, she writes, is “encoded in the Bible as a principle of Oneness (one land, one people, one nation) and in monotheistic thinking (one Deity), it becomes a demand of exclusive allegiance that threatens with the violence of exclusion.” One nation under God: the exclusionary drives of nationalism seem to derive—though how exactly we do not know—from this idea that only one people can be chosen, only one brother can find favor, while all the others must languish under the mark of Cain. What’s more, election and violence go hand in hand because the self-righteousness of election is always shadowed by the terror that one might just as well have been visited with the mark of Cain. Better to visit the mark of Cain on others, lest it be stamped on your own brow.

But the story of Cain and Abel is not just about the baffling scarcity of God’s mercy and the human conviction—or terror—that God’s mercy, if mysteriously granted, can also just as mysteriously be withheld. It is also, at the simplest level, about brothers—about the paradox that brothers can hate each other more passionately than strangers can; that the emotions stirred up within commonality are more violent than those aroused by pure and radical difference. In a few short verses of Genesis, two
persons of the same blood end up not recognizing each other as the same flesh. The story of Cain seems to say, at its simplest, that there are no wars more savage than civil wars, no hatreds more intractable than those between the closest kin.

IV

TOWARD THE END of the First World War, in a mood of melancholy misanthropy, Sigmund Freud began to turn his attention to the phenomenon of group aggression, and in particular, to a paradox that he had observed in his clinical practice. In 1917, in the course of an essay titled "The Taboo of Virginity," he observed in passing that "it is precisely the minor differences in people who are otherwise alike that form the basis of feelings of strangeness and hostility between them." He went on that "it would be tempting to pursue this idea and to derive from this 'narcissism of minor differences' the hostility which in every human relation we see fighting against feelings of fellowship and overpowering the commandment that all men should love one another."

The common elements humans share seem less essential to their perceptions of their own identities than the marginal "minor" elements that divide them. What Marx called "species being"—our identity as members of the human race—counts for relatively little. Men share a common genetic inheritance with women, down to a chromosome or two, and yet it is difference rather than commonality that has always been salient, so much so that undeniably common features—such as mental capacity—have been construed as unequal, notwithstanding all evidence to the contrary. What was puzzling to Freud is why this differentiation process should be accompanied by such large amounts of anxiety. Why is it that men's identities depend on the constitution of woman as an object, not merely of desire, but of fear? "Perhaps this dread is based on the fact that woman is different from man," Freud wrote, "forever incomprehensible and mysterious, strange and therefore apparently hostile. The man is afraid of being weakened by the woman, infected with her femininity and of then showing himself incapable." Strange and therefore hostile—why is it that minor difference should be strange and therefore threatening?

When Freud returned to the "narcissism of minor differences" five years later, in "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego," his analysis had shifted from sexual to group differences. Even in intimate groups, he wrote, "friendship, marriage, the relations between parents and children"—emotions of hostility and suspicion competed with feelings of human kinship. Here too "species identity" and even long-standing emotional bonds are never sufficient to entirely overcome feelings of hostility. The same phenomenon was observable between societies and nations. The closer the relation between human groups, the more hostile they were likely to be toward each other:

Of two neighboring towns each is the other's most jealous rival; every little canton looks down upon the others with contempt. Closely related races keep one another at arm's length; the South German cannot endure the North German, the Englishman casts every kind of aspersion upon the Scot, the Spaniard despises the Portuguese. We are no longer astonished that greater differences should lead to an almost insuperable repugnance, such as the Gallic people feel for the German, the Aryan for the Semite and the white races for the colored.
As he broadened his analysis to include national and racial difference, Freud seemed to muddy the distinction between major and minor difference. It seems an error to suppose that some human differences, say race or gender, are intrinsically more important than others, like class or national identity. Gender and racial difference are certainly minor relative to the overwhelming genetic commonality that unites men and women and persons of different races, but they become major when used as markers of power and status. No human difference matters much until it becomes a privilege, until it becomes the basis for oppression. Power is the vector that turns minor into major.

Moreover, what looks like a minor difference when seen from the outside may feel like a major difference when seen from the inside. What Freud’s distinction, for all its imprecision, helps us to see is that the level of hostility and intolerance between groups bears no relation to the size of their cultural, historical, or physical differences as measured by a dispassionate outside observer. Indeed, the smaller these differences may seem to outsiders, the larger they may loom in insiders’ mutual self-definitions.

For Freud such antagonistic self-definition was connected to “narcissism”:

In the undisguised antipathies and aversion which people feel towards strangers with whom they have to do we may recognize the expression of self-love—of narcissism. This self-love works for the preservation of the individual, and behaves as though the occurrence of any divergence from his own particular lines of development involved a criticism of them and a demand for their alteration.

Freud’s analysis focuses our attention on the paradoxical relation between narcissism and aggression. It is precisely because the differences between groups are minor that they must be expressed aggressively. The less substantial the differences between two groups, the more they both struggle to portray those differences as absolute. Moreover, the aggression that is required to hold a group together is not only directed outward at another group, but directed inward at eliminating the differences that distinguish individual from group. Individuals, Freud is saying, pay a psychic price for group belonging. They must turn the aggressive desire to conform against their own individuality. In order to dissolve his identity in Serbdom, for example, the foot soldier must repress his own individuality and his memory of common ties with former Croatian friends. He must do a certain violence to himself to make the mask of hatred fit.

By extrapolating a little from Freud, it becomes possible to think of nationalism as a kind of narcissism. A nationalist takes the neutral facts about a people—their language, habitat, culture, tradition, and history—and turns these facts into a narrative, whose purpose is to illuminate the self-consciousness of a group, to enable them to think of themselves as a nation with a claim to self-determination. A nationalist, in other words, takes “minor differences”—indifferent in themselves—and transforms them into major differences. For this purpose, traditions are invented, a glorious past is gilded and refurbished for public consumption, and a people who might not have thought of themselves as a people at all suddenly begin to dream of themselves as a nation. Viewing nationalism as a kind of narcissism reveals the projective and self-regarding quality of the nationalistic discourse. Nationalism is a distorting mirror in which believers see their simple ethnic, religious, or territorial attributes transformed into glorious attributes and qualities. Though Freud does not explain exactly how this happens, the systematic overvaluation of the self results in systematic devaluation of strangers and outsiders. In
this way narcissistic self-regard depends upon and in turn exacerbates intolerance.

Again, the facts of difference themselves are neutral; there is nothing genetically coded about the antagonisms between ethnicities, races, and genders. Differences of language, tradition, and history may be a matter of relative insignificance if there is some form of political settlement between ethnic groups, some overarching state that guarantees that all can go about their business without fearing for their security. In conditions of peace, considerable blurring of ethnic boundaries may occur. People center their identities on their individuality, rather than on their ethnicity. They become husbands or wives, lovers or friends first, and members of a group second.

But since identity is relational, any activation of group pride in one group is bound to activate it in another. Initially, the narcissist competition between groups may take comparatively innocent forms, so long as there is a state to guarantee security for both. Processions, marches, speeches that have no provocative intent but the awakening of group pride may set in train emulative display by the other side. Once these displays of group pride begin to include claims to territory, demands for self-determination, revisiting of old grievances and hurts, the cycle of narcissism begins to pass beyond emulation into antagonism.

The particular property of the narcissist gaze is that it glances up at the Other only to confirm its difference. Then it looks down again and turns its gaze upon itself. It does not engage with the Other in any real sense. Narcissist anxiety expresses itself chiefly in passive self-absorption. A narcissist is uninterested in others except to the extent that they reflect back upon himself. What is different is rejected if it fails to confirm the narcissist in his self-opinion.

In the original Greek myth, Narcissus is the archetype of passive absorption. He wastes away, staring at his own reflection in the water, oblivious to the world. Freud does not explain why the same self-absorbed figure can suddenly come awake from his daze and attack those who break into his reverie. But in connecting self-absorption to a capacity for aggression, Freud does help us to detect a connection between narcissism and nationalist intolerance. Intolerant people are actively uninterested in learning about those they purport to despise. Freud helps us to see this form of closed-mindedness as a narcissistic defense and intolerance as a self-referential system in which a narcissist uses the external world only to confirm his essential beliefs. It is the narcissistic investment in intolerance that makes it so uniquely unresponsive to rational argument. In that Serbian bunker, I heard reservists say that they disliked breathing the same air as Croatsians, disliked being in the same room with them. There was some threatening uncleanness about them. And this from men who only two years before had not even thought that the air they breathed belonged to one group or the other.

V

But we are getting ahead of ourselves, for this kind of narcissistic imperviousness occurs only late in the process when two groups are already redescribing each other as enemies. In the first stages, there is rather ambivalence, conflict within identity itself, feelings of difference fighting against feelings of recognition—the very process under way when the Serbian soldier told me that really, the Serbs and the Croats were all the same. It is not a sense of radical difference that leads to conflict with others, but
the refusal to admit a moment of recognition. Violence must be done to the self before it can be done to others. Living tissue of connection and recognition must be cauterized before a neighbor is reinvented as an enemy.

No such violence to the self is necessary if one assumes that national identities are givens, archaic entities that require only an infusion of fear to stir them into life. In The Clash of Civilizations, Samuel Huntington is not surprised by the violence that overtook Yugoslavia. It is liberal “secular myopia,” he argues, to think that ethnic difference is minor. Ethnicity is built upon religious or confessional differences, Catholic versus Orthodox. “Millennia of human history have shown that religion is not a ‘small difference,’ ” he asserts, “but possibly the most profound difference that can exist between people. The frequency, intensity and violence of fault line wars are greatly enhanced by beliefs in different gods.”

But it is hardly “secular myopia” to point out that in the Balkans, at least fifty years of official secularism by the Communist regime together with the more effective secularization made possible by economic modernization had substantially eroded the hold of organized religion. Certainly, priests and relics figure in the nationalist revival in both Serbia and Croatia, but again at the worm’s-eye level, the salient process is the emptying-out of the symbolic vessels of religious difference. True, some ethnic paramilitaries went to war wearing Orthodox or Catholic crosses as personal jewelry. True, the gunners on each side made a particular point of targeting the churches, minarets, mosques, and burial grounds of the other side. But what is striking is the inauthenticity, shallowness, and fraudulence of their religious convictions. The militiamen I talked to said they were defending their families; they never once said they were defending their faith. Huntington takes the violence in the Balkans as proof that religious differences were “major” and fundamental. The argument could be stood on its head: It was precisely because the religious differences were fading away that they triggered such an exaggerated defense. It was not because religion triggered deep feelings, but because it triggered inauthentic ones, that it helped to unleash such a tumult of violent self-righteousness.

These are the sorts of paradoxes that make the tragedy puzzling, even to those who lived through it. Nearly everyone—with the exception of a minority of nationalist true believers—expresses surprise at the astonishing rapidity with which fifty years of ethnic coexistence was destroyed, perhaps forever. Groups of survivors huddle in the ruins of what was once a common life and ask themselves, How did we bring the roof down upon ourselves? At its most basic, the surprise is metaphysical: If we are all human beings, they seem to be saying, how did we do this to each other?

Needless to say, one needn’t take their surprise at face value. When expressed to foreigners, surprise is an easy pledge of allegiance to the family of man, and it need not rule out banal bestiality toward the family next door. There is a little verse by G. K. Chesterton that refers to “the villas and chapels where / I learned with little labour / The way to love my fellow man / And hate my next door neighbour.” Abstract humanism can happily coexist with loathing for actual human beings. To think well of oneself, at least in this century, it is necessary to believe in moral universals; to protect oneself, on the other hand, it may be necessary to hate and to legitimize this hatred with intense forms of moral particularism. The conflict between the particular and the universal is usually resolved by deciding that, while all human beings deserve equal moral consideration, really, one’s neighbors do not deserve to be called human beings at all. Long before a shot was fired in
Yugoslavia, the media of both Croatia and Serbia were readying their populations to think of the other side as vermin, insects, dogs, and other noisome creatures. Again, however, dehumanization requires an especially assiduous creation of narcissistic fictions. Croats and Serbs look the same, walk on two legs, share unmistakable human attributes. How does the fantasy of dehumanization overcome the evidence of common humanity? Once the killing has started, dehumanization is easily accomplished: the fact that the other side has killed your own defines them as nonhuman and then legitimizes nonhuman behavior on your part. The puzzle comes earlier: How is dehumanization achieved before the shooting starts? It is fear that turns minor difference into major, that makes the gulf between ethnicities into a distinction between species, between human and inhuman. And not just fear, but guilt as well. For if you have shared a common life with another group and then suddenly begin to fear them, because they suddenly have power over you, you have to overcome the weight of happy memory; you have to project onto them the blame for destroying a common life.

The narcissism of minor difference may not explain why communities of fear begin to loathe each other. It is not an explanatory theory. It is only a phrase, with a certain heuristic usefulness. Its virtue is that it doesn’t take ethnic antagonism as a given; it doesn’t accept differing histories or origins as a fate that dictates bloody outcomes. It draws our attention to the projective and fantastic quality of ethnic identities, to their particular inauthenticity. It suggests that it is precisely their inauthenticity that triggers violent reactions of defense. It also helps us to notice their dynamic nature. Ethnicity is sometimes described as if it were skin, a fate that cannot be changed. In fact, what is essential about ethnicity is its plasticity. It is not a skin, but a mask, constantly repainted.

The most useful element of Freud’s idea is the perception that as external differences between groups diminish, symbolic differences become more salient. As less and less distinguishes you from anybody else, the more important it becomes to wear the differentiating mask. Croats and Serbs drove the same cars; they worked in the same German factories as gastarbeiers; they longed to build the same folkloric Swiss chalets on the outskirts of town and raise the same vegetables in the same back gardens. Modernization—to use a big, ugly word—has drawn their styles of life together. They probably have more in common with each other than their peasant grandparents had, especially since their grandparents were believers, and belief might well have been a real source of division. But the grandsons haven’t gone to church for years. Modernity—the real life they have been living since 1960 at least—has been steadily reducing the differences between them. Nonetheless, nationalism has turned the imagined differences between them into an abyss, which can be filled only with gunfire. On both sides of the barricades, young men fight to maintain ethnic difference, both dressed in the same international uniform: the tight-fitting combat fatigues, designer shades, and headbands popularized by Sylvester Stallone’s Rambo.

If this is so, one cannot assume that rising real incomes, modernization, homogenization, secularization, the gradual leveling-up of regions of backwardness can be counted on to reduce ethnic friction and intolerance. Indeed, although perhaps only as a transitional phenomenon, modernization may exacerbate relations between ethnic groups and lead to an increase in intolerance. Modernization gives them spoils to fight over, and if modernization raises all incomes but does not reduce economic disparities between ethnic groups, it may exacerbate their competition. Even when modernization benefits all groups, it may still send them scurrying back toward the ghetto of fantasized identities. Reduc-
tion of "objective" difference between competing groups does not necessarily, and by itself, lead to a reduction in "subjective" suspicion. Indeed, as groups converge "objectively," their mutual intolerance may grow. This helps to explain why nationalist revivals are not confined to poor or peripheral states and why growing prosperity does not buy off nationalist discontent.

Globalism scours away distinctiveness at the surface of our identities and forces us back into ever more assertive defense of the inner differences—language, mentality, myth, and fantasy—that escape the surface scouring. As it brings us closer together, makes us all neighbors, destroys the old boundaries of identity marked out by national or regional consumption styles, we react by clinging to the margins of difference that remain. For fifty years, Yugoslavs spoke a common language, Serbo-Croatian, with a Cyrillic and a Latin orthography and minor regional variations in dialect, spelling, and pronunciation. In the descent into war, this common linguistic inheritance was fractured: Zagreb and Belgrade linguists began insisting that they spoke two languages, not one, and set out to purify each of its derivations from the other. Now, on the rare occasions when Zagreb and Belgrade intellectuals meet, they often prefer to speak in English.

Nationalism on this reading is not what Huntington would wish us to see: an eruption of ancient historical rivalries and antagonisms. It is a modern language game, invented to respond, as Ernest Gellner once said, to the uprootings of modernity. It meets these challenges to old identities by transforming identity into narcissism. It is a rhetoric that takes the facts of difference and turns them into a narrative justifying political self-determination. In the process of providing legitimacy for a political project—the attainment of statehood—it glorifies identity. It turns neighbors into strangers and the permeable boundaries of identity into impassable frontiers.

This is not to say that nationalism is always and everywhere a politics of fantasy. Just because the identity it validates may be a dubious concoction of invented traditions and modern paranoia does not mean that the identity in question is not really threatened. Nationalism does address the central problem of interethnic relations—inequalities of power—and insists that human beings cannot be at home with themselves unless they have self-determination. Moreover, nationalist language understands that people want to speak for themselves, rather than being spoken for. Where ethnic minorities have been subjected to genuine tyranny, where language and culture have been genuinely suppressed, national revivals, even nationalist uprisings, are both inevitable and justified.

The problem with nationalism is not the desire for self-determination itself, but the particular epistemological illusion that you can be at home, you can be understood, only among people like yourself. What is wrong with nationalism is not the desire to be master in your own house, but the conviction that only people like yourself deserve to be in the house.

This impulse is also driving the ethnic fragmentation observable in secure nation-states. Ethnic groups once content to accept assimilation on the terms dictated by the majority culture will no longer allow themselves to be spoken for. No one wants his voice to be taken for granted; no one wants her preferences aggregated into those of others. Blacks will not let themselves be spoken for by whites; women speak in their own voice; in Canada and Australia aboriginal groups demand the right to speak for themselves. Again, there is a good deal of alarm about these tendencies, much anxious talk about the ethnic fragmentation of multiethnic societies, particularly among the old elites who used to take for granted their right to speak and act on behalf of these minorities. Instead of fragmentation, we should think of this process as
democratization: the fearful, yet positive logic of empowerment. The problem, however, is just who is being empowered—the individuals in these groups, or merely their spokesmen and leaders. Empowerment that *individuates*, that allows individual members of minority groups to articulate their own experience and secure respect from the majority, is one thing; empowerment that simply consolidates the hold of the group on the individual and that locks individuals in victimhood is another.

The problem with nationalism abroad and identity politics at home is *autism*, to use Hans Magnus Enzensberger's useful word: the pathology of groups so enclosed in their own circle of self-righteous victimhood, or so locked into their own myths or rituals of violence, that they can't listen, can't hear, can't learn from anybody outside themselves. What both nationalist consciousness abroad and some forms of ethnic consciousness at home have in common is the proposition that listening to strangers is worthless, since no one can actually understand you but your own group. What is denied is the possibility of empathy: that human understanding is capable of penetrating the bell jars of separate identities. But social peace anywhere depends for its survival on just such an epistemological act of faith: when it comes to political understanding, difference is always minor, comprehension is always possible. Once this conviction—this basic faith in the possibility of human communication as such—is lost, then politics becomes nothing more than an exercise in ethnic brokering, in buying off discontent with patronage and various forms of positive discrimination. When a polity is broken up into ethnic clans who communicate only with each other in the language of collective threats and ultimata, it is on the brink of civil war. What prevents such a breakdown is not just trust but the kind of individualism that can survive only in conditions of trust: when individuals feel sufficiently free of fear that they do not need to depend exclusively on their ethnic, religious, or tribal groups to secure their basic interests.

VI

FREUD HIMSELF made the connection between nationalism, narcissism, and intolerance in his 1929 essay *Civilization and Its Discontents*. There he observes that "it is always possible to bring together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness." Freud then went on to observe sardonically that his own people, the Jews, had "rendered the most useful service to the civilizations of the countries that have been their hosts," by providing them with a convenient target for all their suppressed hostilities. Freud's remarks about narcissism and intolerance were written on the eve of Hitler's coming to power. The following decade saw Freud himself and his family driven into exile. It cannot be accidental that it was an Austrian Jew who had such deep intuitions about narcissism and minor difference. No group identified more deeply with German *Kultur* than the Jews; no national minority was more successfully assimilated. None of this saved Freud or Austrian Jewry. No matter how assiduously they assimilated, no matter how carefully they eliminated the differences that separated them from their fellow citizens, the simple fact of being Jewish remained; that simple, surely minor fact (minor, that is, to the many Jews for whom it was a vestigial identity, one among many) Hitler turned into a major "biological" barrier between two races and cultures. As assimilation eliminated major elements of difference, minor vestiges acquired an increasingly neurotic salience among those, like Hitler, whose identities were threatened by Jewish assimilation. (It should be
noted that while assimilation threatened anti-Semites, it also deceived the Jews, for it led them to confuse cultural and political assimilation. They were accepted in the concert halls, in the universities, and in professional circles. They failed to realize that cultural belonging did not confer political belonging. In a remarkably short time Hitler succeeded in redescribing assimilation as pollution; once this was done, the absolute separation of Aryan and Jew was easily conceived as an act of purification. The language of purity and cleansing, so full of echoes today, is perhaps the most dangerous of all languages of narcissism. The distinction between cleanliness and dirt becomes the distinction between the human and the nonhuman, between the valued and the despised. The trajectory that begins with the narcissism of minor difference can end with utter moral abjection.

Let us pause here and draw some implications from what Freud is arguing. If intolerance and narcissism are connected, one immediate and practical conclusion might be this: We are likely to be more tolerant toward other identities only if we learn to like our own a little less. Breaking down stetsotypical images of others is likely to work only if we also break down the fantastic elements in our own self-regard. The root of intolerance lies in our tendency to overvalue our own identities; by overvalue, I mean we insist that we have nothing in common, nothing to share. At the heart of this insistence lurks the fantasy of purity, of boundaries that can never be crossed.

VII

Genetic research shows that there are no significant variations in the distribution of intelligence, of cognitive or moral ability, among racial, ethnic, or gender groups. The significant variations are among individuals within these groups. The paradox of intolerance is that it customarily fixes on the group differences as salient and ignores individual difference. Indeed, in most forms of intolerance, the individuality of the person who is despised is all but ignored. Intolerant people are uninterested in the individuals who compose despised groups; in fact, they hardly see "them" as individuals at all. What matters is the constitution of a primal opposition between "them" and "us." Individuality only complicates the picture, indeed makes prejudice more difficult to sustain, since it is at the individual level that empathy often subverts the primal group opposition. Intolerance, from this perspective, is a willed refusal to focus on individual difference, and a perverse insistence that individual identity be subsumed in the group. If intolerant groups are unable to perceive those they despise as individuals, it may be because intolerant groups are unable or unwilling to perceive themselves as such, either. The narcissism of minor difference is thus a leap into collective fantasy that enables threatened or anxious individuals to avoid the burden of thinking for themselves or even of thinking of themselves as individuals. Toleration depends, critically, on being able to individualize oneself and others, to be able to "see" oneself and others—or to put it another way, to be able to focus on "major" differences, which is individual, and to relativize "minor" differences, which is collective. What made that night in the Serbian farmhouse seem so suffocating was that ethnic war had nearly suffused out these men's capacities to reason and reflect as individuals. I say "nearly" because in their confusion, one could sense them struggling to open up a space between what they felt and what the nationalist scripts told them to say.
It may sound smug to talk about the Serbian reservists in this way, to suggest that they are in the grip of murderous fictions to which I and people like me are immune. In fact, what was most disturbing, in retrospect, about that night in the farmhouse is how difficult it was to defend, at least to those men, the nonmurderous fictions upon which my political convictions depend. For liberal beliefs depend on fictions no less than nationalistic ones. Behind those “self-evident” liberal truths—that all human beings are equal, that their persons should be inviolable, and that they have enforceable rights by the simple fact of being human beings—lies a fiction that the men in the farmhouse would have thought fatuous in the extreme: that human difference is minor, that we are brothers and sisters under the skin.

This is a fiction in the sense that it requires a self-conscious screening-out of certain empirical realities in the name of moral convention. For example, when defendants appear in a courtroom, judge and jury are supposed to ignore their visible identities—as men, women, black, white, rich, poor—and construe them as if they were simple, equal units of one indivisible humanity. All liberal institutions depend for their continuance on this complex and historically novel thought experiment. It is complex because it is so abstract: we are asked to deny plain facts and look beneath them to some elementary essence we all supposedly have in common. And it is historically novel: no human society has ever tried so assiduously to ignore difference in favor of commonality, and even we have begun to do it only in this century.

This historically novel process of abstraction makes a major statement about identity. It says: We are first and foremost juridical subjects, first and foremost citizens, equally entitled to a range of practices and protections; all differences are minor, and if they confer advantage, should be strenuously opposed. Needless to say, our “minor” differences do continue to confer advantage and disadvantage, and juridical and social equality remain far apart. But we are formally committed—and the institutions of our society depend for their legitimacy on this commitment—to the notion that difference should not matter. Without this process of abstraction and the institutions that practice it, we would be a tribal society.

In order to seize the singularity of the way we live, it is worth looking back at how we arrived at this sustaining fiction. The first steps toward imagining this abstract, rights-bearing creature occurred during the wars of religion in the sixteenth century. The problem was simple and drastically modern: Now that the confessional unity of Christendom had been broken, now that human beings no longer shared common religious doctrine, how could they be persuaded to trust each other and to live together in peace? How could they be persuaded to cease persecuting each other in the name of ultimate truth? The breakup of Christendom gave enormous impetus to the attempt to understand the basis of social unity. Once difference—in this case of a religious kind—had fissured the unity of a polity, what could possibly hold it together? The answer came slowly: economic interest and a commitment by each to certain prudential rules necessary to the preservation of all. From Hobbes through Locke and Adam Smith, the theory of society as an order of free individuals uniting to guarantee each other security, liberty, and prosperity began to take shape. The important, and often overlooked, point of this story is that these liberal theorists radically simplified the starting assumptions, simply took it for granted that the only conceivable free individuals were white, propertied Christian males. In this specific sense, the
theory was a fiction, since it invented a community, not by reference to the actual populations of the time—which included women, children, nonwhites, and non-Christians—but by a process of tacit, unexamined exclusion. Initially, the only difference liberal theory sought to include was confessional. Even here, though, the range of acceptable difference was narrow indeed. Locke, for example, thought it inconceivable that political society could hold together if there were atheists or Muslims in the population. How could such persons, he asked, be counted on to observe the oaths that most men swore upon their Bibles? The doctrine of toleration that he elaborated in the 1690s thus applied only to Christian believers, to those who started with the shared premise of Christian revelation, however much they might subsequently disagree about doctrine.

Similarly, when the Founding Fathers of the new American republic set out to conceive a new state, they worked with equally constrained assumptions about difference. They restricted their community to white, propertied Christian males, and this in a society that included slaves. Such blindness is often held against the Founding Fathers and especially against that slaveholding liberal, Thomas Jefferson. Blindness it certainly was, and yet perhaps a necessary blindness. The liberal fiction might never have been conceived had it been required to include everyone: women, blacks, the propertyless, non-Christians, and adolescents. The liberal thought experiment would have been abandoned as a preposterous and even dangerous flight of fancy had political community been obliged to encompass all the observable human differences of late eighteenth-century society. Had liberal theorists not been able to take for granted the stabilizing impact of common ethnic, religious, and sexual origins in the composition of their polity, they would never have believed that such polities could cohere as systems of individual rights and interests. The civic compact they envisaged was conceivable only in the context of these shared assumptions.

We in the late twentieth century are the heirs of a universalizing language—one that speaks of all human beings enjoying the same rights—that was never intended to include all human beings. To argue that liberalism is a form of organized hypocrisy is to miss the point. Without such imaginative hypocrisy, it might never have imagined a society of equal individuals at all. And so the Founding Fathers did not dwell on the potential divisiveness of enshrining the rights of the individual. Rather, they assumed that each individual would be so embedded in the homogeneous group identity of similar class, race, and gender that no threat to social coherence could arise from the individualizing bias of rights language.

Once the liberal experiment began, however, its language of rights was picked up by every one of the groups who had been excluded from its terms. Again, instead of our dismissing liberalism as a system of hypocrisy, it is worth emphasizing the dynamic impact of the charge of hypocrisy upon liberalism itself. For once its terms entered the moral language, these terms could be turned, with scathing effect, on liberalism itself. Once the language of rights was enshrined in the American Constitution and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, it enjoyed a career that would have astonished its creators. Almost immediately, Mary Wollstonecraft raised the obvious question of how the word Man could be meant to apply to only half of the human race and how membership in the political community could be legitimately denied to creatures whose differences, in terms of reason, emotion, and moral intuition, were so decidedly minor. The argument over whether women should be included
within the liberal polity raged throughout the nineteenth century and was finally settled—in favor of inclusion—after World War I.

First women, then the propertyless. The gradual enfranchisement of the working class and the abolition of property requirements for electoral participation occupied most of the political history of the nineteenth century. Again, as with women, the argument against their inclusion was that political community could not survive if class difference was incorporated and enfranchised, that stability and coherence depended on restricting difference, and so preventing its capacity to mobilize and therefore to destabilize. Again, as with women, the conclusive rejoinder was that political community could not survive unless difference was incorporated and enfranchised.

Incorporation had the effect of disaggregating difference, that is, of separating individual from group, giving individuals a conception of themselves as rights-bearing creatures with personal claims upon the state, and upon occasion, claims against the groups and collectivities—like unions—that had fought for their incorporation. As individuals gained political rights, the hold of collective identities like class and gender began to weaken. In this way, the incorporation of individuals into the liberal state acted to diminish the power of these forms of difference to define identity and divide society.

The next battle, and it has only begun since 1945, has been the incorporation and enfranchisement of racial difference. In the rhetoric of domestic civil rights and in anticolonial struggle for self-determination, the moral claim has been that a liberal language of universal human rights cannot, without contradiction, exclude any racial group. From Mahatma Gandhi, trained in the traditions of English common law, to Martin Luther King, raised in the language of radical Christian egalitarianism, leaders educated within but excluded from liberal society simply demanded what it could not logically refuse—that its moral terms apply to them as well.

The liberal ideal may be four hundred years old, but it is only within the last forty years, since the civic emancipation of nonwhite peoples, that we have actually begun the experiment in earnest—establishing a polity based on equal rights with the full incorporation of all available human differences. This is not to say that multiethnic, multicultural societies have not existed in the past—they have—but they have not been rights-based democracies. They have not been premised on a civic model of inclusion, on the idea that what holds a society together is not common religion, race, ethnicity, language, or culture, but common normative attachment to the rule of law and to the idea that we are all rights-bearing equals.

One effect of the explosion of ethnic war in the 1990s is to awaken liberal societies to the full magnitude of the task they have set themselves, to awaken them to the realization that for the first time in four centuries, they will actually have to live up to their starting premises or sunder into civil war. Whereas civic order traditionally depended on a variety of exclusions, now everyone is included, and the question of whether a genuinely “civic” order of individuals can flourish without depending on majority domination—in culture, language, religion, and morals—has acquired new urgency. Between 1945 and 1989, liberal society derived a great deal of its social cohesion from the existence of an external enemy. No longer. Now we have only Locke and Jefferson, and the words they left for us to live by.

Only now are we actually beginning to live by the words we purport to believe. First religion, then class and property, then gender, then race, and now age have all been progressively out-
lawed as grounds for withholding membership in liberal society. As we enter the era of the multicultural, multiethnic society we are constantly obliged to confront the liberal fiction: Do we treat X as a rights-bearing equal or as a member of a group? We know what we must do. Our moral language no longer allows us any excuses.

To be sure, none of us lives up to the ideal. Yet without this fiction—that human similarity is primary and difference is secondary—we are sunk. To ignore differences for purposes of political deliberation, moral behavior, and the rule of law is not to lie. But it does require us to see beneath the skin, a process that commits us to a unique daily exercise of the moral imagination. And this exercise of the imagination—this choice to focus on identity rather than difference—is what sustains liberal institutions.

This fiction also sustains a particular epistemology, which is at the root of tolerance as a social practice. The essential task in teaching “toleration” is to help people see themselves as individuals, and then to see others as such; that is, to make problematic that untaught, unexamined fusion of personal and group identity on which nationalist intolerance depends. For nationalist intolerance requires a process of abstraction in which actual, real individuals in all their specificity are depersonalized and turned into carriers of hated group characteristics.

To return to my starting point: Intolerance is a form of divided consciousness in which abstract, conceptual, ideological hatred vanquishes concrete, real, and individual moments of identification. My Serbian friend is at the edge of recognizing his enemies as individuals, only to succumb to the nationalist fantasy of their radical otherness. There is a consciousness, an anguish, an uncertainty, which could be fanned into something decent and human, if only he could read a newspaper or listen to a television broad-

cast that didn’t poison him with hate and lies. If he had access to a public discourse—a newspaper, radio, television broadcast, political speech—that addressed him as a rational individual, he might have a chance of becoming one himself. To the degree that individuals can ever learn to think for themselves—and so become true individuals—they can free themselves, one by one, from the deadly dynamic of the narcissism of minor difference. In that sense, the function of liberal society is not merely to teach the noble fiction of human universality, but to create individuals, sufficiently robust in their own identity, to live by that fiction.
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*Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience*

Michael Ignatieff

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