



Professor John Hampsey

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN HAMPSEY

Professor of English

John Hampsey teaches in the English Department.

MKH: Your book which was just published, Paranoia and Contentment: a personal essay on Western Thought (University of Virginia Press), investigates Western intellectual history from the Greeks to modern America.

Thomas Cahill, in his recent book Sailing the Wine-Dark Sea: Why the Greeks Matter, theorizes that it's from the Jewish tradition that we have received our values, but that it's from the Greeks that we've received our intellectual heritage. Do you agree? Why should we study the Greeks?

JH: Yes, I agree with Cahill. The word “good” in Hebrew is the word “tov,” which means pure or unalloyed. But its from Homer and the Greeks that the notion of “the good” as considering specific moral value or action, or the desire to do what is right, evolved. A good person can reason the right thing to do as in *The Iliad* when Hector must decide whether to fight Achilles (and surely die), or to go inside the palace walls to take care of his family. Hector even paranoically considers the unthinkable for the Heroic Age – asking for peace with the Greeks and offering to share with them all of Troy's wealth!

Of all of the intellectual influences on Western civilization, the Greeks are the least dogmatic. They don't preach a “right” way of life as much as question what the right way to live might be. The Greeks ask all the right questions: What does it mean to be a good citizen? What is a good city-state? What is worth dying for?

MKH: Where did the title and idea of your book, Paranoia and Contentment, come from?

JH: The idea came to me years ago when a friend commented that there was an element of paranoia in all of my writings (both fiction and non-fiction). So I decided to investigate the history of the term which literally means in Greek “beside (para) the mind (noia).”

I found that no one had written about the history of the concept. However what was more interesting to me was that the meaning of the word changed radically after Plato. Before Plato the term could actually be positive, that is one could go beside-the-mind in a creative and expansive way. After Plato it became purely negative as in beside-the-mind thinking that was unreasonable leading to fears and delusions and the loss of con-

tentment. This negative notion eventually evolved into the clinical psychological notions of paranoia that all are familiar with today.

Eventually, it became clear to me that some of the most influential individuals in Western culture (Abraham, Jesus, Blake, Kierkegaard, etc.) practiced beside-the-mind thinking that was creative, visionary, and expansive. So I coined a term for this – the paranoic. And for the negative paranoia, the kind driven by fears and delusions and the loss of contentment, I termed “the paranoidic.” Metaphorically I connected the paranoic to the open and dangerous contingency of the sea, and the paranoidic to the landed security promised by the culture of contentment.

A profound literary example of this would be Victor Frankenstein in Mary Shelley’s great novel who risks his world of contentment in Geneva – with wife and friends and church and career – to carry out his dangerous visionary work creating human flesh in his dark garret in Ingolstadt. Other historical examples would include Joan of Arc risking it all to follow her paranoic vision, Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane and Abraham’s willing sacrifice of Isaac. Unfortunately, however, it is paranoidic thinking which has so dominated Western thought and culture that paranoic thinking has become nearly lost to us.

Incidentally, my book is even written in a paranoic – combining traditional literary and philosophic analyses with memoir and fiction. Overall, my goal was to use paranoia as a cultural lens to reexamine “being.” In the process one actually confronts the possibility that paranoia may be preferable to the ruse of contentment.

MKH: Who is the intended audience for your book?

JH: My book isn’t intended for scholars; there are no footnotes. It’s intended for the generally educated reader who is interested in a fresh interpretation of Western culture. It’s also intended as a source book for any university course on Western civilization.

MKH: One of your book’s endorsers, Howard Zinn, describes the book as “eloquently written.” One passage that caught my eye was in Chapter Six, “Real prayer is madness and the call of the paranoic, experienced as petomai—I am flying—inside a moment, upon an air of uncertain hopes.”

JH: Amen. 

Interview conducted by Mary Kay Harrington, who directs the Writing Skills Program and teaches in the English Department.