

Alain Finkielkraut: The Coming Undone of a Thoughtful Culture?

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Alain Finkielkraut is among contemporary France's more provocative thinkers, one whose thought has had a significant impact on philosophy in Quebec. Among his principal interests is his attempt to think through one of Western society's central problems: the loss of meaning. In his work *La défaite de la pensée*, Finkielkraut presents a critique of our contemporary lifeworld.¹ He argues that thought, and therefore its relevance or meaning, has "become undone" (*défaire*) or even defeated. It has been reduced to the eclectic *bouillon* of the "*tout culturel*" (all-cultural). The traditional view of the contemplative life associated with thought or thinking as a "higher" or "superior" life has been eclipsed by a view where everything comes under the domain of "culture." In effect, no distinctions can be made between the works of Shakespeare and McDonald's, rock music and the classical music of Mozart. All falls under the optic of "culture"—hence the term "the all-cultural." High culture—conceived as identical to thought and its traditional subjects of interest, including fine art, literature, music, philosophy, theology, science, etc.—is now to be viewed in a similar light as popular, or what used to be called vulgar (common) culture. The elitism associated with high culture has been subverted in such a way that everything of the human spirit, be it high or popular expressions thereof, is to be viewed on the same plane. For Finkielkraut, the categories of "high" and "low" are no longer relevant. Finkielkraut's book is an attempt to understand how we have come to such a point. He investigates certain trends in modern thinking which have culminated in a postmodern backlash against such elitist and hierarchical distinctions. Finkielkraut concludes his work with a critical assessment of the postmodern situation—namely, *malaise*. This *malaise* consists in our decision to limit or minimize reality to an all-encompassing vision of the "*tout culturel*" or all-cultural, which is somehow going to encourage the actualization of differences while magically quelling all fears and intolerance of such differences. This *malaise* is symptomatic of a deeper or higher loss of meaning (*sens*).

Though Finkielkraut offers his readers a brilliant analysis of the contemporary French, and more general Western, *Weltanschauung*, he offers little in terms of resolving the *malaise* that he sees as pervasive in Western society. The notable lack of response, however, prompts one to ask whether the problem is as serious as Finkielkraut would have us believe. Has thought really come undone? I maintain that the tension between "high" and "vulgar" culture has always existed and continues to exist. The tension is not a recent phenomenon and does not necessarily ensue from a postmodern backlash against modernity. Hence, the claim of the usurpation or the popularization (democratization) of "high" culture under the rubric of an all-encompassing culture (the all-cultural) is somewhat artificial. Moreover, I shall argue that the perceived defeat or the

coming undone of meaningful thought associated with the high life of culture is not so much a coming undone or an absolute defeat, but rather a transformation of what we understand thought to be. Thought is undergoing a redefinition of itself as it has undergone throughout history. What is coming undone is a certain kind of thinking—a kind of thought that can no longer make the claim to be absolutely authoritative merely because it is thoughtful.

I shall proceed by first presenting a critical summary of Finkielkraut's argument. I present the argument here not only as background for my own argument against Finkielkraut, but also as an introduction to his thought. Little is known about Finkielkraut in non-French-speaking circles, and this article is an attempt to introduce some of his thought to an English-speaking audience. The second part of this article is an attempt to come to terms with Finkielkraut by elaborating the argument outlined above.

Finkielkraut begins his work by invoking an image in one of Jean-Luc Godard's films, *Vivre sa vie*. The main character plays the role of a philosopher, and makes the distinction between the high life of thought and a lower form of life which is lived from day to day. The former was rooted in contemplation and was considered superior to the latter for it saw culture as a higher good intrinsically linked with the life of thought.

Finkielkraut's main thesis plays upon the distinction between the culture of thought and the culture of the everyday. He maintains that the life of thought intrinsically connected with a higher, more contemplative culture has been usurped by everyday popular culture. The result of this blurred distinction is malaise. What is fascinating about this insight is not so much the effect of the aforementioned reduction, namely, that we are currently experiencing cultural malaise, for we all would concede this fact to some degree.² More fascinating for Finkielkraut is the tenacity with which we try to keep thought from transcending the cultural life of the everyday. We wish to keep thought rooted on the level of the common, accessible to all for all. If the thought of high culture is allowed to rear its ugly head once again, the result will be that of elitism and democratic injustice, for only highly specialized individuals can appreciate and move with ease in such high circles of culture. Art, literature, political thought, science, etc., become once again the domain of the privileged few. Ironically, Finkielkraut describes us as literally "jumping" out of the culture of the popular everyday not in order to rise to a higher level of culture and thought but to preserve the status quo by preventing such a possible ascent to a higher culture—a status quo where everything cultural is reduced to the lowest common denominator. The new criteria by which we judge all that falls under the cultural optic are no longer rooted in the categories of thought but in feelings.

[W]e live at the hour of feelings: No longer is there neither truth nor lie, neither stereotype nor invention, neither beauty

nor ugliness, but an infinite palette of pleasures, different and equal. A democracy which entails access of all to culture unfortunately defines itself by the right of each individual to have a culture of his/her choice....³

Rather than asking what one thinks about a certain cultural object such as a piece of music or a painting, we ask how one feels about that object. Implicit in this paradigm shift is an aestheticization in which personal taste becomes primary. When all is reduced to matters of taste or feeling, no objective or communal categories of judgment can exist. All becomes workable and valid within the cultural sphere, for *de gustibus non disputandum est*.⁴

This view of an egalitarian culture provides a space in which all forms of cultural expression are free to actualize themselves. The artist or writer is not confined by the academy or by certain determining standards or expectations to produce a work of a specific kind. With no over-arching categories of judgment like "good art" or "bad art," a certain freedom is created for self-expression to come to full articulation. Art and culture become uninhibited, thereby becoming all that they can be.

With this opening of a free space for potential self-expression, however, there is a solipsistic turn into the individual ego. The ultimate criteria of judgment are determined by what appeals to one's individual feelings. If one accepts Finkielkraut's analysis of the current cultural landscape as that of malaise rooted in a solipsism of feeling, certain challenges arise for the postmodern "feeler." Though Finkielkraut himself does not fully articulate the areas that need to be addressed by advocates of a democratic, postmodern culture of feelings, I see three vital areas that need to be examined, areas which ultimately reveal deficiencies in the culture of democratic feeling. First, how do we communicate our feelings in such a manner that another person will understand or feel what we are feeling if each individual only feels what s/he feels? In other words, how do we account for intersubjective experience of feelings, for we must admit that our feelings are not only our own as evidenced by common experiences of praise or disgust for certain cultural phenomena? Moreover, how do we account for affectivity in that individuals's choices are influenced and sometimes determined by those of (an)other individual(s)? For example, why is one singer felt to be more popular than another *en masse*? Wherein lie and what is the nature of the *Übergänge*, to use the Kantian expression, which facilitate common discourse? Certainly, thought is not the condition of the possibility thereof. Second, there is an ethical implication to our aesthetic feelings, for there comes a time and a place where the freedom of one is usurped, sometimes violently, by another. If all is a matter of relative taste (choice) and all different viewpoints are to be equally expressible, what is to prevent the legitimate expression of hatred of one race for another? When does pornography stop being erotic, and

when does it become a menace to young children who may be potential victims of paedophiles? Not all (differing) positions can co-exist, for they also entail the annihilation of other, more fundamental, differences such as those of race, sex, etc. Finally, how do feelings really operate? Are they merely instinctual or impulsive? Are we like the members of the Nietzschean herd responding blindly to exterior forces? Is there a rationality to our feelings? These questions and many more remain unanswered by Finkelkraut in the turn to democratic and uninhibited self-expression within the framework of culture. It seems that when the preservation of our freedom and the implication therein of the unlimitedness of our individual differences comes into play, we are automatically struck by the need for limits and a hierarchy of values, including cultural ones. This is why, for Finkelkraut, the reduction of everything to a matter of different tastes such that all is of equal value, and where thought is no longer relevant, results in malaise.

The principal question that he sets out to answer in his book, however, is that of the origin of our current malaise and the democratic sentiment underpinning it. One might be tempted to think that the contemporary situation, postmodernity, comes about as a reaction to modernity. One could further ask, what are the modern trends to which postmodernity has sought an alternative? What form do these alternatives take within the culture of postmodernity, where everything is conceived within the panoply of the all-cultural? However, these questions are misleading, for they imply that postmodernity is more a reaction to, as opposed to an extension of, a conflict already existent in modernity, namely, the tension between unity and diversity.

In fact, Finkelkraut reads modernity as marking the emergence of the "nation" and "nationalism" as we know it today. He casts modernity in a more historico-political framework. Postmodernity is not so much a reaction to any unifying or totalizing vision of modernity as an extension of the inherent tension in modern, national thinking, that is, a tension between unity and plurality. What distinguishes modernity from postmodernity, then, is not so much the postmodern insistence on difference as opposed to the modern emphasis on unity as the postmodern minimizing of thought to the unified and democratic discourse of the all-cultural.

Let us first examine Finkelkraut's analysis of modern nationalism further. He credits Herder and his development of the notion of a *Volksgeist* with providing the seed for modern nationalism. Renaissance thinkers generally communicated in one language, Latin. In so doing, culture was more universally accessible as thought was expressed in a universal tongue. With the introduction and acceptance of the use of national tongues within the domain of culture and with the advent of Herder's notion of the "[common] spirit of the folk," a once more accessible culture came to be viewed more as "my" culture than a universal culture. It was "my" culture because it existed in my particular tongue.⁵ Con-

comitant with the historical vision of an idealized unity, like the one implied in Hegel's *Rechtsphilosophie*, was a move in literature and social science to recognize that which was unique to a specific culture, such as German culture. In support of this, Finkelkraut mentions Goethe as one who in his poetry invoked a strong sense of pluralism insofar as his work was devoted to topics particularly German, Italian, etc. We can also think of Montesquieu's analyses of various cultures. A tension between unity and multiplicity (difference), therefore, was already existent in modernity and is not a phenomenon exclusive to postmodernity.

The effects of nationalist thinking came to the fore in the first half of this century when movements such as Fascism, Sovietism, and National Socialism wrought violence and destruction throughout most of Europe. Merely to claim that postmodernity wishes to maintain the impossibility of a metanarrative is only one side of the picture. What postmodern thinking wants to prevent is the totalizing visions of the aforementioned ideologies exercising brutal violence to achieve their ends, as evidenced by Auschwitz and the various bombing blitzes of both world wars. Preserving difference is thus seen as a way of combating the possibility of such absolutist ideologies from taking root. This is why the postmodernist calls for many communities of difference—a pluriculturalist vision. One supreme and pure culture dominating another is what is to be avoided.

Finkelkraut exposes a contradiction in the logic of postmodern discourse. First, the claim was that postmodernity was less about difference than being focused on minimization to the level of the all-cultural. The claim is that postmodern thinking sees difference as primary. Ironically, postmodernity sees difference as preventative of an absolutist ideology, yet in order to preserve difference, to ensure that one difference or viewpoint does not control or dominate minority viewpoints, a democratic principle has to come into play. All points of view are of equal importance. In this way, the democratization of difference is meant to ensure equity or a sense of "justice"—a justice that many thinkers, like Lyotard and Derrida, have discussed in their recent writings.

This democratization of difference, or the equality and justice called for by postmodern thinking within the frameworks of different cultural enterprises like philosophy, art, and science, in a way mimics the tension of modernity represented by thinkers like Goethe, Montesquieu, and Herder. A unifying base is required to ensure that one point of view does not annihilate another, that the majority does not destroy the minority voice. That unifying base is the democratic equality inherent in the very differences themselves: all different points of view are equally valid—unity and difference once again coincide in postmodern thought.⁶

What modernity lacked, as postmodern thought has shown by deconstructing the American Federalist thinkers as slave owners and racists, is the

democratic commitment to the equal validity of all points of view, be they those of slaves or high-spirited liberals. Hegel ultimately had no room for personal conscience in his vision of the ethical state. Kant never conceived of women participating in political or philosophical processes. Finkelkraut sees this popular democratic principle of postmodernity as essential to the thinking of difference. In the equalization of all differences, people become free to actualize their individuality without fear of penalty. Like modernity, postmodernity seeks to liberate and enlighten the individual.⁷

What effect has this all-preservative view of difference had on thought and culture? Besides undermining the role of thought as the life of a higher culture, and reducing all thought and culture to one basic level of the all-cultural, postmodern, democratic difference has resulted in what Finkelkraut calls a "tolerance against humanism" and a kind of indifference to difference. In order to understand what he means by a "tolerance against humanism," we must keep in mind that Renaissance humanism not only drew inspiration from the ancient vision of "man as the measure of all things," but also from then-contemporary social and political events, namely, the discovery of new lands, races, and cultures. The question of what it was to be human came to the fore in the Renaissance, especially given that new Oriental and Native (South) American cultures and races, although seemingly human, did not share the same values and cultural norms as those of Renaissance Europeans. We need only think here of the debates concerning the South American Indians and the nature of their unbaptized souls (that is, if they even had souls) which occurred in the courts of Rome, Spain, and Paris. Renaissance humanism tried to account genuinely for such differences by either leaving them differentialized and variegated (Montesquieu) or regarding them as ultimately unified and transcended (Herder⁸ and later Hegel).

Postmodern thought, in its attempt to move away from the totalitarianism of ethnocentrism, especially given the outcome of the Nazi purification agenda, has moved to a model where all cultures are of equal value. However, in doing so, postmodernity does violence to the very uniqueness and irreplaceability of any individual culture, for the very difference implicit in the culture is such that it desires to be preserved essentially. In order to do so, it cannot be considered equal to other cultures. Rather, it seeks to be recognized as unique, and in being recognized as unique, the struggle becomes the reconciliation of its uniqueness with that which seeks to make it common or popular, namely, other cultures. Postmodernity, in espousing a popular, democratic view of difference, has therefore created a distance or gap of communication between unique cultures and the very source of their uniqueness insofar as different cultures feel the need to minimize the particularity of their respective cultures, which may seem strange, violent, and unacceptable to other cultures, in order to give credence to the postmodern call for an equivocality of difference.

Let us give a concrete example of this so-called "equivocality of difference" and focus on the current debate surrounding certain African cultures and genital mutilation. The removal of the clitoris or the foreskin may seem barbaric, especially when done with no anaesthetics. African cultures, which find themselves transplanted into various other cultures in postmodern Western societies, are being encouraged to stop the practice for health, safety, and humanitarian reasons. The uniqueness of certain African cultures incarnated in particular rites of passage is becoming challenged despite the postmodern plea for tolerance of differences. It appears that the very differences of cultures and races that forced the Renaissance to rethink the nature of humanity are now reduced to a universal, ethical norm as espoused by a postmodern sense of equity and justice. Hence Finkelkraut's claim that postmodern culture results in a tolerance against humanism, that is, an intolerance of radical difference which is inherent in each particular culture. Difference not only is to be acknowledged as "different," but it also wishes to play itself out in its own radical particularity. Other individuals or cultures may deem these differences violent, unhealthy, or barbaric, but who are we to judge if it truly is a matter of individual taste or feeling?⁹

A second effect of postmodern thinking is an indifference to difference, where difference is understood in a more negative light. Here, Finkelkraut refers to injustice and inequality. Postmodernity has ensured that the individual has a priority over the collective society. Human collectives are no longer understood in a universalized sense insofar as they attribute or assign a certain unchanging value to the individual. The individual is not absolutely determined by the state. The collective state is understood more as an association of independent persons rather than as an overarching unity. This postmodern reversal of the modern role of both state and individual did not eliminate social hierarchies, however. We still have established orders, but what it did manage to do was change the way we perceive inequality. By saying that there is no inherent difference in the nature of the rich and the poor, the master and the slave, the individualistic society remains indifferent to the nature of people.¹⁰ In Levinasian language, the other is reduced to the same. Two problems arise. First, if both the poor person and the wealthy person are the same, their economic status does not necessarily affect their person. In effect, the poor person is all that s/he can be *de natura*. Economic possibilities which may afford better education and health care will not significantly change the person's nature, for we are all the same. No one is unequal to another. Ultimately, in this view of natural equality, we ironically become blind to the fact that there is inherent inequality which affects and inhibits people's natures from developing. Possibilities become limited unless we address certain ethical, economic, social, and political concerns. We become indifferent to the real economic, social, and humanitarian differences which need to be corrected in order to ensure that all people are indeed equal *de*

natura et de facto. In essence, we become desensitized, even blind, to real difference, for we assume that we are all equal in the first place—a utopian dream.

Second, difference becomes accidental and loses its essentiality. If it is true that human relations are associations of independent persons and all persons are naturally equal, then differences are only accidental features of our being. Race, culture, tradition, social environment, etc., are not essential to our humanity. If difference is not essential and our equal humanity exists, the question for postmodernity is not so much what is the nature of difference and how do we preserve it, but what is the nature of our common humanity which underlies difference and facilitates a communication in and with our associations of independent persons? We fall back upon the Renaissance for answers, but even postmodernists decry its implicit “white imperialist” humanism. There is a moral concern (namely, justice) in the postmodern discussion of difference, yet it is tacit and unarticulated. Why is it tacit? Because an articulation of moral standards could be viewed as the construction of a grand-narrative or a subversion of the very possibility of difference.

Finkelkraut very subtly sketches his view of that “common humanity” which underlies difference, that nature of equality amidst difference, the nature of the “all” of the all-cultural. There are three general qualities that characterize the tacit, postmodern “narrative of unity”: adolescence, fragmentation, and consumerism. Because we no longer distinguish certain types of cultural activities, like thought, as being on a superior plane to the activities of everyday life, we have accepted the lowest common denominator of judgment (namely, feelings), and hence have become adolescent in our tastes and sensibilities. Feelings are regarded as more basic, for they are often ambiguous, unclear, and non-distinct. We feel that the scribbles of a three year old are just as artistic as the paintings of a Rembrandt. Each has its own criteria of judgment. The sign of our adolescence is made clear in popular culture where the emphasis is on a market created for teenagers and those consumers under twenty-six years of age, a very particularized market. Reality is seen through the optic of the adolescent marketing schemes of large corporations. If we look at fashion, female models reach their prime before age twenty-five and go to great lengths to keep their pre-pubescent look. Furthermore, our culture is adolescent insofar as its level of discursivity has been slowly eroded by popular culture. Big rock concerts and the way rock stars or media stars talk have become the new subjects and standards of conversation. Such stars have become our new heroes, even icons. Finkelkraut views most of popular media as very limited in that it assumes that people have a very low intelligence threshold: “... it is the very universe of discourse which is replaced by the vibrations of the dance.”¹¹ Moreover, the media image of eternal youth is closely tied with a society of mass consumerism. Finkelkraut argues that the culture of the all-cultural is dominated by the need to be distracted. Technology has afforded us a great amount of idle time and we

need to feel that we are useful. The culture of consumerism, where one is truly different by wearing apparel that brazenly displays popular names like Armani, Nike, or Versace, is a sign of true distinction. We buy difference by the labels we attach to ourselves. Difference, in our consumer-driven society, has become a commodity—a true accident. The difference of the individual *qua* his or her own existence as person is overshadowed by the ability to own and sportily wear a pair of designer jeans.

The final mark of the all-cultural is fragmentation. While we wish to be considered eclectic in that we do many different things, eat many different types of ethnic foods, and listen to a plethora of variegated music, in a sense none of this is our own. We are artificially cosmopolitan. This fragmentation or eclecticism associated with postmodern culture has contributed to an undermining of self-identity. The subjectivity that modern thinkers claimed to have snatched away from scholastic dogmatism has once again been lost by postmodern thinkers, for subjective identity becomes a matter of being different—a difference determined by external sources like culture, which includes popular media, consumer firms, and a minimized view of thought and discussion. In short, these three qualities of consumerism, fragmentation, and adolescence signify a malaise.¹²

What Finkelkraut has announced is not the end of thinking or art, but the loss of the meaning of thought. People will continue to “think” and produce art, but in a gravely diminished form. Thought, it seems, is of no value, although it may continue to exist within the framework of the all-cultural. We no longer have a place to welcome works of high culture insofar as the distinction between entertainment (low) and culture (high) has been erased. In other words, we no longer know what to do with a Shakespeare, a Rembrandt, or a Puccini. There exists no space where these works of culture and thought can have a sense or meaning (*sens*) as truly different. In the past, we could distinguish expressions of high culture as meaningful in that they communicated a communal, prototypical experience of the human condition. Works of high art, theology, music, philosophy, etc., helped one articulate one’s individual experiences in that one could point to a painting in order to communicate what one experienced. There was a common reference point through which one could discuss meaningful events. One could employ Plato or Nietzsche to express one’s sentiments and others could identify with others through the common heritage we had in the form of the *positum* of high culture. Meaning, through the high culture affiliated with thought, was transmissible and communicable. If meaning is truly relative and all different meanings are of equal value, how can meaning (as expressed by thought) truly stand out as “my own” when it is no different from any other? Meaning may be articulated differently, but its value is universally the same. Meaning is robbed of its uniqueness, which is its essential ability to stand out

from the common while concomitantly facilitating some kind of relational, communal discourse through its very objectivity in the world.

What is most troubling is Finkelkraut's insight concerning hate: The legacy of high culture has come to be despised as elitist and representative of injustice of the masters over the slaves. This hatred for elitist culture is itself cultural, that is, part of the popular democratic attitude underlying the all-cultural. In such an environment, thought loses all sense. In not admitting the possibility of a higher standard of judgment and a "higher" form of the conveyance of meaning, we inevitably will "feel" things on the lowest common denominator. The problem is that the lowest common denominator cannot possibly cover all possible expressions of meaning. We cannot understand a work of Veronese through the more common eyes of a Keith Haring, for Veronese is an exception to the general rule. The lifeworlds and contexts of both artists must be viewed from very different perspectives. The lowest common denominator of feelings will not cover the alterity implicit in postmodern difference, especially if we view the life of thought as different. In order to ensure that all differences are equally and "justly" treated, we have lost the very meaning implicit in the difference we seek to preserve. Difference is not allowed to stand out and merely coexists with other differences, thereby rendering the all-cultural flat. It is this democratic reduction to flatness that typifies the current sense of malaise.

What is valid about Finkelkraut's critique is his general analysis of the subversion of a higher culture intimately linked with thought. One can see this depreciation of thought and high culture in the attitudes of what popular culture calls the "X" Generation. Art and thought are confined to mere self-expression, and such articulations of the self come by way of deconstruction and deprecating great works of the past in the fields of art, literature, and philosophy. The masters of old are irrelevant and have no ultimate meaning, for culture is ultimately rooted in an individualistic enterprise *sans règles*. Meaning becomes "my" meaning and is not permitted by the justice of egalitarian democracy to transcend itself into a more unifying discourse, for that may lapse into some kind of totalizing ideology.

I would like to point out two shortcomings of Finkelkraut's analysis. First, Finkelkraut does not discuss what the life of high culture and the life of thought are, although we do have an intuitive sense of what he means. The curious thing is that even high culture is guilty of executing the very same reduction of its more vulgar cousin, the all-cultural of postmodernity. High culture has had tendencies to reduce things to its own (democratic and) popular whims. Think of the canon of great Western literature. Why do we read Plato as standard and not Xenophon? Why Descartes and not Pascal? Why Galileo and not Bruno? Even within high culture there are those figures who have been marginalized although their insights are no less valid than their more appreciated counterparts. High culture can be fickle, and it can be just as obscure and adolescent as popular

culture. Witness the petty political debates of academe. The writings of mediaeval and Renaissance philosophy are full of barbs and childish criticisms of each other, whether it be Henry of Ghent chiding Giles of Rome or Erasmus mocking the scholastic pedants. One needs only a bit of education to see that these great thinkers of high culture could be just as silly and prone to "feelings" as those of a more vulgar culture.

Second, I wonder whether Finkelkraut has gone too far in his analysis. Have we truly reached an absolute loss of meaning? Perhaps Finkelkraut has only managed to present a brief moment in the history of thought which needs not necessarily be the last moment. Perhaps the moment Finkelkraut describes need not be so homogeneously absolute as he leads us to believe. History shows us that while both high and vulgar culture have coexisted, their coexistence has never been one of neat distinctions. They have always existed in conflict where one may dominate another at any given time. Did not Socrates condemn the Sophists and some of the poets for their vulgarity? Let us call to mind Aristophanes's *The Clouds*, where Socrates is presented as daft and far-removed from reality. Did not Protagoras and Gorgias find Socrates and the philosophers much too impractical? One could go on providing countless examples. Perhaps the loss of meaning of high culture which Finkelkraut exposes is merely a stage in the playing out of an age-old tension. The history of thought or high culture is full of debate between what is considered proper to high culture and what is improper or vulgar. There is no need to sound the alarms, for the sirens have been sounding since the beginning of recorded history. Rather, what we should do is take seriously Finkelkraut's challenge and try to find a place where both the legacy of high culture and the culture of the everyday can coexist without violence, without hate. We must remember that popular culture has always influenced high culture and vice versa. The vulgar poets have influenced the philosophers and vice versa. Painters like Arcimboldo and Van Gogh were influenced by the everyday culture of the farmers with whom they interacted. There is a symbiotic relationship between the life of high culture (thought) and the life of everyday culture. Both are distinct but deeply related. It is the very tension between these two very different and coexisting *Weltanschauungen* of the life of thought and the life of the all-cultural that feeds both in order that they may become what they are. One employs the other as a sounding board against which ideas are constantly criticized, rebuked, and even accepted, thereby resulting in new ideas or increased tensions. This tension is necessary so that the differences inherent in both ways of thinking and acting may be allowed to flourish. Take the French Impressionists: if they had not been forbidden to present their "vulgar" art by the "custodians" of the Parisian Academy, we would never have had the Impressionist salons which allowed French Impressionism to dominate the greater part of modern painting. In essence, we challenge Finkelkraut's initial distinction between the life of thought and the life of everyday culture; the

distinction is too radical. We wonder what would have happened if Finkelkraut had meditated on the nature of their interrelation and what the consequences of such an interrelation would mean for postmodern thinking.

Given that this tension between the life of thought and the more vulgar life is more or less a constant, can we affirm that the life of thought has been completely reduced to a life of "feelings"? We think not. Most people can still tell the difference between Mozart and Jewel. Moreover, there are still many artists, scientists, writers, and philosophers still devoted to promoting a life of genuine thought. It is not fair to say that we all judge food by McDonald's standards. The fact is that there are elements of the everyday that coexist with those more exceptional things of life. Larry Flynt coexists with Maya Angelou, and they are not judged on the same register of the all-cultural. What has come undone is less thought itself than the authority associated with a certain type of thought. Thought is no longer conceived in monolithic terms whereby a certain type of reason, namely systematic reason (modern epistemology), grants accessibility to universal truths. There are a myriad of ways to reason about reality. We live in a world where the simple fact that people are scientists, doctors, or writers does not guarantee they are speaking the truth. Their authority is open to question. We can challenge the doctor's diagnosis as we can challenge the poet's perspective on reality. Herein, perhaps, lies the source of malaise. With the breakdown of authority associated with the thought of modernity, we have begun to question too much, so much so that our natural disposition toward thought is not belief in its credibility but an automatic doubt as to its truth. We have become doubters or cynics and have forsaken belief. If everything becomes questionable because the nature of authority has been challenged, one begins to doubt the validity of the insights of the poet, artist, writer, scientist, physicist, etc. Our question is this: Is the automatic doubt or cynicism resulting from the breakdown of the authority associated with the life of thought responsible, in part, for the fragmentation, consumerism, and adolescence typical of Finkelkraut's malaise?

I believe that Finkelkraut himself answers this question. He fatalistically concludes his work with the following statement: "And life concomitant with thought gently cedes its place to the terrible and derisive face-to-face [encounter] with the fanatic and the zombie."¹³ He underscores the fatalism—the very notion that thought has come undone almost *semper et ubique*—implicit in his own thoughtful critique. It is as if we are condemned to a minimalist life of the all-cultural. This fatalism is a profound resignation marked by a disparaging cynicism. What is lacking is any mention of the human capacity to transcend the situation—to will an alternative despite the present state of affairs. Do we have to roll over and play dead? We really do not see why one could not actualize the capacity of the human subject and his/her community to find meaning or sense within the perceived limits of human existence. Indeed, all great thinkers, past

and present, have somehow transcended a limit despite the threats, warnings, and proclamations of those individuals, both common and higher thinkers, in order to think something other, new, or different. Was not Freud laughed at by his medical contemporaries and mocked by the man on the street as perverse? If what Finkelkraut says is true, and we have reached a limit or end to the sense/meaning of thought, we would say that this end is only a stage. We are never absolutely finished or complete as people as long as we continue to live. Though thought may be coming undone in Finkelkraut's eyes, there is nothing to prevent us from trying to salvage or even think anew the questions of culture and thinking—a challenge that has been the legacy of every generation before us postmoderns. We are not doomed insofar as our veritable existence in the world opens up to numerous possibilities for meaning despite the universalized claims of a democratically popular or moral vision of postmodernity. This openness is guaranteed in the ex-static nature of our being where we can transcend the everyday culture of mediocrity, and have been doing so throughout history. Moreover, we are free to think otherwise despite what postmodernity preaches. And the fact is, people do.

Finkelkraut speaks in broad culturo-historical terms much in the vein of a Straussian. He does not bring the problem to the subjective level at which the human subject is intimately bound within an enfleshed or bodily community. He is much too objective in his analysis and forgets the human or personal element in his equation. Both the community and the individual have meaning or sense not only within the world of thought, but also within the corporeal and personal realms. Thought is incarnated in both the subject and the community of subjects and objects. The potential for thought to take on a new meaning is possible, especially if we take seriously Lyotard's call to actualize differences. We are not fated to be zombies, for we can personally choose to resist this end. We are challenged to redress the crisis of the loss of meaning as something precisely unique and different. *Vere sapere differentiam aude!*¹⁴

Notes

1. Alain Finkelkraut, *La défaite de la pensée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987). All translations are my own.
2. *Ibid.*, 11–12.
3. *Ibid.*, 156–7.

4. *Ibid.*, 157.

5. *Ibid.*, 16.

6. *Ibid.*, 149–150.

7. *Ibid.*, 156.

8. Though Herder speaks of a national genius, he does concede that even the particularity implicit in such a nationalistic vision is transcended by a more universal vision of *Geist*.

9. Finkelkraut, *La défaite de la pensée*, 136–7.

10. *Ibid.*, 140–1.

11. *Ibid.*, 179.

12. *Ibid.*, 158.

13. *Ibid.*, 183.

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