

On the Resignation of Ian Buruma

By Fred Bloom

I have been following the story of the resignation of Ian Buruma from his position as editor of the New York Review of Books. Apparently, he committed a mortal sin when he published this month an essay by Jian Ghomeshi, the disgraced Canadian radio personality, who was acquitted in March, 2016 of charges of sexual assault and choking in relation to three women. Buruma was interested in the men who are found not guilty in court on sexual charges, but who are convicted in social media nonetheless. There was such outrage that Buruma would allow space for this man to write his story that university presses were threatening to boycott the Review and, since they are the major advertisers which keep the magazine afloat, Buruma resigned to protect, and perhaps save, the magazine.

I read the essay, and found it to be a very honest expression of this man's feelings, including, I would say, genuine remorse, and acceptance of his own responsibility for his callous, to say the least, behavior. But, despite his assertion that he has gained a degree of "empathy" as the result of his ordeal, he at the same time reveals himself to be a pretty narcissistic person, at least in his dealings with women.

For him, seduction (if it can still be called that) and sex was essentially a kind of entertainment. And he is very open in his acknowledgement that it was also a form of competition with other men. He describes the envy and admiration that other men expressed to him when he was with a more beautiful, young, glamorous specimen than they had to show.

So, no different from the suit a man wears, the car he drives, or the pedigree of the dog he leads on a leash.

This is the well-known story of the objectification of women. But, it's also notable, that he fully recognizes, and recognizes that his admiring associates recognize, that his power to be leading his girl-of-the-moment on her invisible leash is derived from his celebrity status. Indeed, it is an emblem of his celebrity status. She, on her side, has at the same time been attracted to him, or she is taking pleasure in being with him, also, precisely because he is a celebrity. So, in that sense, she is aggrandizing herself by being with him. She also has him on a leash and is showing him off to the world as her catch. Although there is not a complete equivalency in this comparison, it does seem that she is also objectifying him, and using him for her own narcissistic gratification.

Surely narcissistic gratification is an element of being in love. A demonstration of that is Levin, in Anna Karenina, whose ego is so inflated by Kitty's confession of love for him, that he feels that the whole world, including even the lamppost on the street corner, admires and loves him. But Levin, at the same time has another feeling, which is lacking in poor Jian Ghomeshi, as it is in all men who engage in serial sexual adventures, and that is a sense of profound unworthiness. He sees Kitty as vastly more wonderful than what he deserves. He is humbled by the gratitude he feels for her acceptance of him.

The deepest sadness that one feels in reading the Ghomeshi essay is not for the degradation of women by men who exploit them for both sexual and ego gratification, or for men, who have their lives, or at least their "careers," which they almost equate with their lives, ruined by accusations of sexual brutality, coercion, violence, harassment, etc., all of which to any decent man are deeply abhorrent, repugnant, contemptible, and condemnable. The deepest sadness is when one realizes how unlikely it is that a man in our day would ever know what Levin knew, would ever find himself transported into that plane of existence in which another person becomes more to you than you are to yourself.

In that dimension, that plane of existence, sex is not entertainment. It is rather the manifestation in the flesh, the bodily manifestation, the embodiment, of Love- capital "L." The big love, that which is at the core of our existence and which is the essence and meaning of our being- which is our ultimate, and only real, fulfillment.

I am not saying that we should go back to the old Victorian morality. In any case, that would be impossible. I'm just saying that this is what we have all but



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This week a photo, above, by Alan Athearn, who writes: "This summer I have been following the family of osprey in the nest at the schooner dock." And a short essay, below, from McCabe Coolidge.

Heading down the peninsula toward St George, I pass a little sign pointing to a trail and I pull into a tiny parking lot for three cars.

As I step out of the car, I see a look alike for Wendall Berry; blue bib overalls, tall and lanky with white hair askew, legs splayed and neck bent over. I walk over and notice he is filling up a half gallon empty plastic jug with water coming out of a pipe. He holds the jug like a priest making an offering with the host. The pipe is one inch thick and his container fills up quickly.

"What are you going to do with this water, is it safe to drink, is that a spring?" I ask as he caps it and straightens up. "Safe? This is Wiley's Spring, been here since 1888- long before this road was here. Safe? I'm here because this is better water than my well and I'll go home and make a good cup of coffee with it."

He walks over to his old green Subaru in just a few long steps, holding the water as if it is precious; like the living water Jesus promises and he hears about at the white Congregational Church down the road. I wander over, straddle the pool of water on the ground, cupping my hands I take a long drink. Even before straightening up, I nod in agreement, wishing I had brought an empty vessel with me.

lost to the commercialization of sex.

So, now it has come to the point that we have to set down rules- like we do for any sport- no choking without prior consent, no threatening her with the loss of her career in the movies. Sex has become a sport in which it is necessary to play by the rules.

Did Ian Buruma deserve to lose his job over allowing a sexual abuser to have a place to open his heart- such as it is- to the reading public? Have we become so rabid that we can't also pity this poor guy, read about and take in his pitiful acquisition of (pseudo?)- empathy?

If so, if this is what is necessary to fight sexual abuse of women, if there can't be complexity, not-easily-reconcilable contradictions in our feelings, what has (somewhat blithely) been termed "nuance," in our response to this "issue," if our response can't include an acknowledgement that there can be sorrow, pity, and compassion for both the perpetrator and the victim of the crime, an acknowledgement that we all share in both the guilt and the suffering that human beings inflict on one another- and indeed it appears that there can't be that- that in the political battle you are either for us or against us- then that is perhaps the saddest, the most dreadful, loss to the commercialization of our culture that we are forced to endure.

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