

Being a reflective survey of literary,
political, and diverse other endeavors
to delineate the species

Notes Toward the Definition of an Intellectual

John Martin

An intellectual, the current joke has it, is anyone who can listen to the *William Tell* Overture without thinking of the Lone Ranger—which should be a snap, after all, for a creature who somehow manages to live life with both a high brow and a pointy head. Yet whatever his dexterity, the intellectual is probably harder to define, gravely or lightly, than any other human variety on earth.

Most dictionaries provide three standard, and inordinately unstimulating definitions: (1) a person with intellectual interests (2) a person who does intellectual work (3) a member of the intelligentsia (which, incidentally, defines nothing, since “intelligentsia,” despite its overtones of coffeehouse dialectics, simply means intellectuals considered collectively). The OED, on the other hand, makes the intellectual sound at least vaguely interesting: “a person possessing or supposed to possess superior powers of intellect.” Yet that most incandescent of all word-candlers, Fowler, provides little light and less excitement: “An intellectual person is one in whom the part played by the mind as distinguished from the emotions and perceptions is greater than in the average man.”

Dullness aside, if all these definitions are alive and operative, we would seem to be talking about large numbers of people with little in common. If an intellectual is anyone who does intellectual work or who has intellectual interests, the door is open to everyone from grant-chasers and tax analysts to Fritz Lang devotees and readers of *Opera News*. If it's also meant to apply to those with superior powers of intellect, we won't be facing any additional crush, it's true, but all the same, superior-powers types like chessmaster Bobby Fischer and memory expert Jerry Lucas would make passing strange intellectuals. And if, as in the Fowler view, it is simply a term to describe anyone in whom the thought-to-emotion ratio is greater than in the average man, then it's time for some foundation commercials about how

many babies out of ten may grow up to be intellectuals unless you send your dollars now.

There is one other available yardstick, as it happens, except that it would seem to apply only to the more baroque intellectual. It's that famous near-definition by F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Crack Up*, and one must never forget it: “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.” One must never forget it, but those of us who aren't particularly adroit at mental juggling must always wonder if it wouldn't be a lot wiser to hold two opposed ideas in the mind only long enough to choose one.

Anyway, if serious definitions leave us wondering, there are always serious distinctions, as, for example, Jacques Barzun's in *The House of Intellect*: “an intelligent, but not intellectual, dog or child; an intellectual, but not intelligent, blue-stocking or university professor.” True enough, no doubt, except that it raises the problem of the unintelligent intellectual, which unfortunately is at once a contradiction in terms and a living reality. Clifton Fadiman has provided a somewhat less disconcerting analysis. Fadiman distinguishes between highbrows (appreciators), ideologues (one-idea thinkers), eggheads (mythical creatures who exist only in the minds of anti-intellectuals), and the “true” intellectual, or thinker, persuasively illustrated by Bernard Shaw in his reply to the question of what books he would take along to a desert island: “Some blank notebooks.”

Somehow, though, Olympian originality and genuine intellect aren't necessarily one and the same. Wall Street, to take an obvious example, abounds in daring and inventive thinkers whose taste seems permanently moored within the safe limits of the Boston Pops and the Longines Symphonette. Well, then, is a true intellectual simply an original thinker with informed taste? Not at all. From King Ludwig of Bavaria to Andy Warhol, too many original thinkers with informed taste have seemed closer to the street-corner crank than to the Socratic man of learning. Indeed, sometimes one even has one's

(continued on p. 35)

JOHN MARTIN, who has never refused on principle to associate with intellectuals, teaches English at the New York Business School.



John Hite

(from page 26)

doubts about Shaw: There's something about an intellectual who sounds too intellectual that creates the uncomfortable sensation of a saint bragging about grace. We may believe he's on the side of the angels, but why does he have to talk so much?

Perhaps it's this reaction against the too-intellectual intellectual that accounts for the condescending note sounded by so many who would normally be considered friends of the human mind. The OED lists only four entries for "intellectual" between 1652 and 1898—two neutral and two negative. The less ungenerous is Byron's 1813 journal entry: "Canning is to be here—Frere and Sharpe—perhaps Gifford. I wish I may be well enough to listen to these intellectuals." But far from merely indulging in a patronizing chortle, the *London Daily News* of November 30, 1898, clucks almost audibly between the lines: "the so-called intellectuals of Constantinople, who were engaged in discussion while the Turks were taking possession of the city."

Whether or not 1898 was the year when the tomato-throwing began in earnest, it's a short step from "so-called intellectuals" to calling intellectuals things like egghead, pointyhead, longhead, and wizard, let alone impudent and effete. What is at least mildly surprising to discover is that some of the more Bolshevik-sounding anti-intellectual expletives have come from members of the intellectual upper classes. "I have never called myself an intellectual," Bertrand Russell once wrote to a correspondent, "and no one has ever dared to call me one in my presence. I think an intellectual may be defined as a person who pretends to have more intellect than he has." Ambrose Bierce wasunkinder still in *The Devil's Dictionary*: "Fool, n. A person who pervades the domain of intellectual speculation." And Ezra Pound had only the tersest of sneers for the intellectual who didn't meet his own exacting standards: "thinkist."

Fortunately, not all talented sneerers are quite so joyless when they attack the devil intellectual and all his pomps. If it did nothing for defining "intellectual," a British parody of some years back twitted the overintellectualized BBC Third Programme with ratiocinative perfection: Bertrand Russell reading the first 500 decimal places of π , followed by twenty minutes of silent

meditation led by Mr. T.S. Eliot, followed by Bertrand Russell reading the next 500 decimal places of π . It is not known whether anyone dared put it on in the presence of Bertrand Russell, but surely it had it all over the usual sneer for warming the cockles of the mind.

Part of the problem with defining the intellectual, of course, is that normally the definers are themselves intellectuals and therefore not able to see their mirror-images with the clear eyes of the uninitiated. One of the more refreshing entries from a disinterested source is credited to the proprietor of a well-known delicatessen on New York's Upper West Side. This observant soul reportedly identifies his intellectual customers simply as "those guys that carry around those magazines without any pictures on the cover."

That may bring us no closer to the one all-embracing definition, but at least it helps fill out what might make a police-artist composite. Somewhere in sands of the desert, a shape with lion body and the head of a man is slouching toward Weimar to be born. He has intellectual interests, does intellectual work, hangs out in an intelligentsia-approved coffee shop, is fond of taking blank notebooks to desert islands, often simultaneously holds two opposed ideas in his mind just to show he still can, loves π readings and the *William Tell* Overture, and carries, under one gnarled and Whitmanesque arm, magazines with nonpictorial covers. Sneer at your own risk, all you haters of the true and the beautiful.

Obviously, a single definition is impossible for anything as various as the numerous earthly possessors of efficient minds and active curiosities, whose I.Q. range may roughly coincide, but whose tastes, biases, and angles of approach almost never do. All of which brings us to a related, and indeed far more important, consideration. G.K. Chesterton was once asked this slight variation on the question put to Shaw: "What single book would you choose if you were to be cast on a desert island?" His speed-of-light answer: "Thomas's *Guide to Practical Shipbuilding*." Whether or not that makes Chesterton an intellectual, it almost certainly establishes him as a wise man. Perhaps all the difficulty is simply that the two aren't synonymous.