

THE L-SHAPED MIND OF RONALD REAGAN: A PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY

Norman N. Holland

Abstract: For all his geniality, Ronald Reagan was a remarkably aggressive man, seeing combat and competition everywhere. Losers in these struggles surrender completely, becoming an aspect of the winner or simply disappearing. To win was to be validated. To be under was to be a loser or to disappear or to be feminized. Conversely, upward space was an important plus value. Struggle forms the horizontal bar of a kind of L-shape, and winning means moving up toward open space. Needing that upward space, he easily imagined new worlds.

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"`Damn it, Walsh,' I screamed, `you are a lousy damn strikebreaker!' There may be a worse insult in labor language, but I don't know it." So Ronald Reagan quoted himself in his autobiography at a 1958 labor negotiation--hardly the genial jokester we used to see.¹ Indeed, president-watchers like Hedrick Smith of the *New York Times* sometimes suggested that there were two Ronald Reagans.² One acted like a kindly father. The other cut schoolchildren's lunch programs. One loved nature. The other sabotaged environmental safeguards. One was devoutly Christian. The other played fast and loose with the facts. One trumpeted ideology, while the other adroitly practiced the art of the possible.

I can think of a more economical model for understanding the extraordinary personality that has so recently vacated the White House. We can unify his seeming inconsistencies by what the psychoanalyst Heinz Lichtenstein calls an "identity theme." Look for patterns that recur again and again in someone's behavior, says Lichtenstein, particularly in speech and writing.³ Think of these patterns as themes. Then you can read individual actions as variations on those themes. Just as the variations on a theme in music can be both new and different yet aspects of the same, so one can interpret sameness and difference in a human being, even what seems downright discordant, as variations on one personal unity. [183]

If I were looking at a writer as an identity theme and variations, I would concentrate on patterns in the words and works. I would expect that I could read old writings and new, continuing patterns and changing directions, early or late choices among the tools of the writer's trade, all as variations on those themes.

Applying this aesthetic technique to a politician presents problems, however. Writers write pretty much as they please, but the constraints of party and Constitution hem in a president. Even so, presidents use the tools available to them as composers use instruments, and one can read back past the instruments of power to the artist-politician playing those instruments. The evidence is compromised, but it is still evidence.

For a writer, the choices that best evidence identity are the writer's words. Given the teleprompter and the ghost writer, however, and, in Reagan's case, the elaborate cue cards prepared for him by his staff, few indeed are the words that one can be sure were his own. Some were, though. We have his 1965 autobiography, *Where's the Rest of Me?*, written "with Richard G. Hubler." I think we can safely assume that Reagan himself supplied the memories and anecdotes and phrasings, while the professional writer saw to the structure and organization. We have his press conferences and other impromptu interviews where aides may have given him the ideas, but the phrasings and the ad-libs were his own (at least in the early years of his presidency). And we have the occasional letter from his own hand or ad-lib interview.

To phrase identity themes, I think in psychoanalytic concepts, but I write in ordinary language. One can't describe so successful and self-satisfied a man as Ronald Reagan in the vocabulary of mental illness. Similarly, I have to put aside the question of the truth or falsity of what is being said and whether I approve or disapprove of it. I have to concentrate on how it is being said, on the words chosen. To formulate an identity theme, I read Reagan as if I were analyzing a sonnet or a novel. [184]

I listen with the third ear for what these statements yield about the style of the mind that made them. When I do that kind of analysis, I don't see two Reagans. I see one, but with paradoxes. I see an L-shaped mind.

The first thing I notice in the autobiography is how aggressively Ronald Reagan dealt with his reader. He dared you to take issue with him, as he dropped snide asides at such adversaries as Communists, liberals, bureaucrats, and people who don't like television, the movies, the armed forces, or athletics. He carried on a steady, aggressive banter, often imagining his reader as the aggressive one: "If the people back there will stop shouting . . ." "Here I run the risk of being howled down as a wild-eyed radical . . ." "You are right: it was wrong and I'm ashamed of myself" (38, 248, 211).

Here is how Reagan explained the appeal of drama: "Our lives have lost a certain amount of excitement since we quit having to knock over a mastodon for the family lunch or keep a sabertooth

tiger from having us for lunch." He went on to portray the Roman "sadistic bloodbaths" and finally Hollywood movies as fulfilling "that ancient need for struggle and blood" (295). Hollywood itself he described as a world of scene-stealing. He portrayed Errol Flynn, Lionel Barrymore, or Wallace Beery trying to edge into a better position in front of the camera or to wangle bigger roles. He took gleeful pride in his own efforts to top his competition, admitting, however, that in *Bedtime for Bonzo* he "fought a losing battle against a scene-stealer with a built-in edge--he was a chimpanzee" (95-96, 105, 100, 99-100, 217). Wherever Ronald Reagan looked, he saw aggressive competition, and this single-minded focus permeated the way Reagan conducted the business of the presidency. David Stockman in his memoir reported many occasions in which business got sidetracked while Reagan indulged in a spell of Carter-bashing or in which a compromise failed because of Reagan's quickness to retort to, say, Tip O'Neill.⁴ Asked why Qaddafi and other third world leaders saw the U.S. as the enemy, [185] Reagan's only guess was, "Because it's a little like climbing Mount Everest--because we're here."⁵ He was saying people normally view other people as something to be conquered, and Reagan himself cheerily volunteered to go one-on-one with Qaddafi.⁶

Aggression is the only possible response. "On defense, we don't determine the budget. The other side [the Soviet Union] does. You have no choice but to spend what you need."⁷ Escalation is automatic, because terrorists simply become more and more aggressive. "If somebody does this and gets away with it, and nothing happens to him, that encourages him to try even harder and do more."⁸

Reagan's own response to any kind of provocation was a knee-jerk hitting back, as in his astonishing claim that the Iran-Nicaragua mess was all the fault of an irresponsible press.⁹ On the fortieth anniversary of the dropping of the A-bomb, he retorted to Gorbachev's statement that that was "barbaric" by recalling how "barbaric" Stalin was to kill twenty million, the "to-the-death" resistance of the Japanese in "the greatest war in man's history," and the bomb's giving "the world a view of the threat of nuclear weapons" which has since acted as a deterrent.¹⁰

Among the many kinds of fighting in Reagan's autobiography, one stands out: football. As late as 1981, he described it as "the last thing left in civilization where two men can literally fling themselves at one another in combat and not be at war. It's a kind of clean hatred . . ." ¹¹ Reagan called it the crash "of body against body--and the bodies were getting bigger and bigger" (34).

That struggle of male body against male body, equal against equal, gave reality to all experience. "Hardship" is a "morale-builder."¹² "My own test for the time when the Communists may call themselves a legitimate political party is that time when, in the USSR, an effective anti-Communist party wins an election" (201). "All of us have a behavior pattern shaped and molded by a lifetime of actions and reactions" (213). [186]

Fighting, struggle, or competition validates. One such reaction enabled radio announcer "Dutch" Reagan to read commercials effectively. Somebody criticized, and "I was mad, didn't give a damn,

and so I read that commercial freely, easily, and with a pretty good punch" (58). Garry Wills noted that, for Reagan, one kept one's own identity "by defining it, always, in terms of the alien." Threats to Reagan's Norman Rockwell image of America always came from outside, never from the subtle changes wrought from within--by the automobile, say, by movies, radio, or television, by the conglomeration of business, or by anticommunism itself.¹³

Ronald Reagan fought hard--as you may have noticed. In his autobiography, he confessed to a "shillelagh psyche" and "my kind of sputtering blast" (7, 256). As a boy, his favorite novels were King Arthur, Northern Trails, Frank Merriwell at Yale, Edgar Rice Burroughs (both his Tarzan and his John Carter novels about Mars), Horatio Alger, Sherlock Holmes, Mark Twain--all, I would say, aggressively, competitively male books.

And women? "It's much harder on them than it is on us --there's no way for them to fight back."¹⁵ Ronald Reagan once recommended the novels of Zane Grey for their traditional values, among them, "woman as helpmeet of man."¹⁵ Women are simply outside the male-male struggle. Indeed, in the autobiography, Ronald Reagan's way of saying his love for his daughter was to pretend she had won a victory: "that tiny queen who had taken us over." "She completely deboned me [a ham? --NNH] and wrapped me up as her personal possession" (243). Even love is defined in terms of aggressive competition: love is competition that isn't.

What happens to the male loser in these competitions? He joins the winner or he simply disappears. "'That ended the 'Affair Walsh'" (280), and indeed that is all we ever hear of the labor leader whom Reagan had insulted. Mostly, however, losers surrender gracefully, even lovingly, like the high school pal who yielded the girl they both wanted. "Disappear triangle, but add [187] one very wonderful friendship" (22). Thus he could ruminate about the anniversary of the Berlin Wall: "They started with wire, barbed wire instead of a wall . . . if we'd gone in there and knocked down that wire then, I don't think there'd be a wall today because I don't think they wanted to start a war over that."¹⁶

Reagan liked to tell the story of a black football player who was being harassed by a team "with no colored boys on its roster" (63). Burky, the black, used his hands (legitimately) until he beat his chief tormentor to his knees and off the field. The white player, who had been calling Burky a "black bastard," turned and came back, saying, "You're the whitest man I ever knew." Total victory, total surrender. Reagan, whose courtesy was legendary, would even submit himself to this kind of effacement. For example, he described the success of a rival actor: "Eddie Albert stole all the honors, and deservedly so" (87).

Somebody had to win, somebody had to lose, and losers disappear or become totally absorbed. This zero-sum philosophy gave his presidency its scrappy atmosphere. Given such a world view, long-term coexistence with a lethal adversary seemed scarcely viable. Rather, his administration was willing to risk bankruptcy or a guerilla war against the tiny countries south of us to prevent America's "losing."

Football--kid football, anyway--sometimes hinted at what this scarier outcome meant. The gang would pile on top of the unlucky boy who caught the ball. "I got frightened to the point of hysteria in the darkness under the mass of writhing, shouting bodies" (16). Reagan confessed to a lifelong tendency to claustrophobia.¹⁸ It bothered him, for example, when he had to make a submarine movie. He had to run the periscope up and spend his time "watching all the outside activity in the harbor" (290).

In general, constriction equals badness. Israel, Reagan once said, started out as tiny, but had become expansionist--threatening the freedom of others? Speaking of his career as [188] a lifeguard, he remarked how even rescue is a constriction. "People hate to be saved: almost every one of them later sought me out and angrily denounced me for dragging them to shore" (21). He would talk about Republican presidents being "handcuffed" because they confronted a Congress of the opposite party or of a bureaucracy as being "bound in" by red tape. ° On budget projections, "I have never believed that . . . we're frozen in."²¹ What was evil about progressive taxation "was that, once behind, it was well-nigh impossible to earn your way out" (245). Reagan went through a hard time with taxes after World War II and acquired a sense of taxes as constricting that made the tax cut, according to David Stockman, "one of the few things Ronald Reagan deeply wanted from his presidency."²²

Since being held down on the bottom was so negative a value, I have to wonder at his describing (in 1965), among his favorite horses, "my present mount, a dapple gray named Nancy D" (188; Mrs. Reagan's maiden name was Davis). I guess this is a clumsy attempt at humor, but behind it may be a key part of Reagan's psychology. Since women are excluded from the aggressive competition, they are not to be fought with on a level. Women are under. To be under is to be a woman. Is that the reason the ultimate negative in the Reagan cosmos is being confined to the bottom? Is that the reason "losing" destroys you utterly? Or am I considering too curiously--or too psychoanalytically?

Confinement is bad. Therefore space, particularly upward space, formed an important plus in Reagan's mind. "I have always liked space, the feeling of freedom, a broad range of friends, and variety" (6). Evil is being held down or back, and good equals freedom, particularly upward freedom. Reagan described proper social reforms as those that "lift people" or allow those "below the norm to get a foot on the ladder . . ." ²³ There is no such thing as a population explosion. Why? Because it would deny space: [189]

No, as a matter of fact the population explosion, if you look at the actual figures, has been vastly exaggerated--over-exaggerated. As a matter of fact, there are some pretty scientific and solid figures about how much space there still is in the world and how many more people [we] can have. ²⁴

There simply has to be enough space.

As his yen for upward space emerges, I begin to see Reagan's world as an L-shaped structure. Struggle against equals forms the horizontal bar of the L. A victory in that struggle is a step up the vertical of the L. A defeat zeroes you off the L entirely. Along the horizontal bar of the L, he was the practical politician slugging it out to win. Up and down the vertical bar, he was finding or losing space.

This vertical dimension mattered as much in Reagan's psyche as the fight between equals on the same level. Again and again in his autobiography, he showed a keen sense of hierarchy, referring repeatedly, for example, to the ranks of the people around him when he was in the Army, corporate ranks in the business world, the ranks of movies, A and B, or the ranks of various actors in terms of the weight they carried with the studios, as in his often-quoted self-description: "I became the Errol Flynn of the Bs" (81). Frankly elitist, he admired in the autobiography walking sticks, thoroughbred horses, fine wines, cavalry uniforms, and full-dress balls (215, 216, 196, 218, 205, 210). Costume, both as actor and football player, was always important to Reagan, and Stockman noted that he insisted on everybody wearing morning coats for his inauguration.²⁵ Reagan's favorite pastime, riding a horse around his ranch, put him "above" things. According to Stockman, Reagan was "a sectarian champion of the privileged" until he came to believe in supply-side economics.²⁶

In these hierarchies, kindly men who are higher up play key roles. There was his football idol in college ("I'm a sucker [190] for hero worship"), the kindly station manager who ignored his own crippling arthritis to take on the troubles of his junior staff, a businessman who gave the young lifesaver advice, his agent who got him started in Hollywood, Pat O'Brien who helped him get the part of the Gipper, George Murphy, the hooper-turned-actor who preceded Reagan into conservative politics, and many others (88, 43, 92, 98-99, 46, 179).

He called the Screen Actors Guild that "damned noble organization," noble because "Its underlying strength came from these big names who could bargain as they pleased; they could put real power behind . . . the little fellow who has never been protected and can't do anything for himself" (131-133, 232). Similarly, MCA, the entertainment giant, had a "pattern of employee relations, which had always been generous and enlightened" (287). General Electric was "a vast corporation, but as human as the corner grocer" (257). As Garry Wills noted, Reagan contrived "to think of [business] as an individual rather than a social activity."²⁷ These big, benign beings give "the blessing of a helping hand" (35).

One should not take this religious idiom casually, for topmost among these benevolent superiors, of course, is God. "God has a plan for each one of us," he repeatedly said.²⁸ He saw a "divine purpose" in the placing of North and South America.²⁹ "I believe very deeply in something I was raised to believe in by my mother. I now seem to have her faith that there is a divine plan, and that while we may not be able to see the reason for something at the time, things do happen for a reason and for the best."³⁰ He wrote in the autobiography about courting his second wife, "The truth

is, I did everything wrong, . . . everything which could have lost her if Someone up there hadn't been looking after me" (236). Evidently Divine Providence extends even to actors' romances.

Reaganologists say he was even more religious in private than in public, and some give evidence that he believed at least at one time in UFOs and timed his inauguration as Governor of [191] California by astrology.³¹ As of 1965, he counted an astrological columnist among his friends and said in the autobiography: "Every morning Nancy and I turn to see what he has to say about people of our respective birth signs" (249).

An interviewer asked him, "Do you really believe somebody is listening up there?" and Reagan replied, "Oh my! If I didn't believe that, I'd be scared to death."³² In that "scared," I hear another reason for Reagan's religiosity. In so aggressive a world as his, one needs a protective deity. Nations must cleave to that sustaining male figure:

If you look back at the fall of any empire, any great civilization, it has been preceded by their forsaking their gods. And for a country that started as ours has, with the belief that we are a nation under God, I have sensed that . . . under the guise of the First Amendment, things of that kind--we have strayed from that. And I don't want us to be another great civilization that began its decline by forsaking its god.³³

A reporter's questions elicited Reagan's belief even in a God who decrees Armageddon:

. . . [not as a principle] just some philosophical discussions with people who are interested in the same things. And that is the prophecies down the years, the biblical prophecies of what would portend the coming of Armageddon and so forth. And the fact that a number of theologians for the last decade or more have believed that this was true, that the prophecies are coming together that portend that.³⁴

The vertical bar of the L, extending down from God, seems to have been as important to Reagan's psyche as the [192] horizontal. Like the horizontal struggle, vertical rising made things real, and to separate oneself from that higher Benevolence risks disaster. Hence, Reagan felt himself thoroughly embedded in a hierarchy that extended down from God to the people at the bottom of the ladder like the Great Chain of Being of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. "I have never had any trouble reconciling spiritual and scientific versions of Creation. God's miracles are to be found in nature itself: The wind and waves, the wood that becomes a tree--all of these are explained biologically, but behind them is the hand of God."³⁵

Almost like a medieval man, he held that the physical things of this world can figure forth spiritual meanings. Several quite lyrical pages of the autobiography tell how the fragile objects he discovered as a child in an old attic and in a neighbor's jewelry shop became "gateways to the mysterious" (the religious note is again characteristic of Reagan). They were symbols "of the mysterious landlord who owned this, our home" (11). If I were doing literary criticism I would read

that landlord as a symbol for a cosmic Landlord. Reagan himself described this moment as a release into space, from a dusty attic to "my first scent of wind on peaks, pine needles in the rain, and visions of sunrise on the desert."

Details, fragile in this world of horizontal struggle, point upward to stronger beings and larger spaces. Reagan easily imagined, therefore, miraculous new worlds. One early experience of a transfigured world came when he discovered as a boy that he was severely nearsighted. "When I picked up my mother's glasses, the miracle of seeing was beyond believing" (19). After a severe illness, "The ambulance ride home made quite an impression on me. I couldn't get enough of looking at the world as it went by, and even the most ordinary, everyday things seemed strangely beautiful" (195). After his return from World War II, he spoke repeatedly of the veterans' hope for "an ideal world" or "a world suddenly reformed" (138- 140). This harks back to a favorite story of his boyhood, which told how [193] young Dick Falkner, by applying Christ's teachings, reformed a whole town into a Christian utopia. "All my reading left an abiding belief in the triumph of good over evil."³⁶

"Triumph" in aggression leads to a "new world," for example in theater and movies (which, remember, come from Roman bloodbaths): "We've kept a little stardust in our mundane lives by identifying with make-believe characters in make-believe adventures in the house of illusion--the theater" (295). Someone else might think of Hollywood as entertainment, escape, or a business, but Reagan stressed its quality of "make-believe" and "illusion," "true magic," "miracle-making," the creation of new worlds, which he then could read figurally (29, 120, 295).

His job as a sports announcer was to create a world, that is, to tell a football game so the radio audience could see it through his eyes. In fact, he made these games up from the terse one-line statements of the wireless operator, and on one famous occasion when the telegraph line failed, announcer Reagan had to make up plays out of whole cloth until the line was fixed (66). In the columns he wrote in those years he customarily treated sports as an allegory for life, Wills reports, in the manner of Bill Stern or Grantland Rice.³⁷ Later, as an actor, he created a reality from the bare bones of a script. "There has been no time," comments Wills, "since he was hired by the radio station in 1933 . . . when Reagan has not been earning his living by the public use of his voice."³⁸ I would add, making a world by his voice.

In the autobiography, Reagan singled out exactly this kind of activity as his important work during World War II. He was assigned to a movie-making outfit right in Hollywood. Among their jobs was creating a set, a miniature of Tokyo and Japan. Then they would photograph it and even splice their footage with real battle movies so that pilots could see exactly how some Japanese city or some section of the Japanese coast would look at just the angle and altitude and time of day and weather conditions that they would fly in over it. "Here was the true magic of motion picture making, the climax of miracle-making [194] that had made Hollywood the film capital of the world," Reagan recalled. "My voice, as briefing officer, would be heard above the sound of the plane motors.

I would usually open with lines [note the theatrical metaphor] such as "Gentlemen, you are approaching the coast of Honshu on a course of three hundred degrees. You are now twenty miles offshore . . ." (118-119).

Reagan's "new world" theme relates to such policies as his extraordinary clinging to the "Star Wars" defense. Given his need to fight, of course, disarmament is not nearly as attractive a possibility as the "new world" he imagined "Star Wars" would create. The Strategic Defense Initiative comes from above, it's heavenly and cosmic, it's vast, it goes out into space, it echoes a movie, and it would be pure good against the pure evil of communism. Unlike negotiation or disarmament, it would work precisely because aggression had become real. "We are researching for something that could make it, as I say, virtually impossible for these missiles to reach their targets."³⁹ The missiles have to be fired, there has to be the aggressive act, and then "Star Wars" will be real.

As president, Reagan identified himself with blessing conferring, cosmos-making males, from the deity on down. He drew his authority from them. "Every morning when I wake up," he told a group of high school students, "I thank God for having given me the opportunity to serve."⁴⁰ He surveyed from above the new world he hoped to create, as in the astonishing final statement in the debate with Walter Mondale when he recalled driving along the California coast and imagining someone opening a time capsule. "Will we do the things that we know must be done and know that one day down in history 100 years, or perhaps before, someone will say: Thank God for those people back in the 1980's, for preserving our freedom, for saving for us this blessed planet called earth with all its grandeur and its beauty."⁴¹

Reagan cast himself as just such a cosmic godfather, even to a point where the very benevolence undid his own ideological [195] plans. David Stockman complained that Reagan "proved to be too kind, gentle, and sentimental" for the hard political decisions. "He always went for hard-luck stories. He [saw] the plight of real people before anything else. Despite his right-wing image, his ideology and philosophy always [took] a back seat when he learn[ed] that some individual human being might be hurt."⁴² It was the plight of the individual Iranian hostages (played on by his advisers), that led Reagan to sell arms to Iran.

So far, I have been deriving the pattern of Reagan's mind from Reagan's language. I think we can also develop it by looking at various patterns of his conduct. They, in turn, shed further light on the L-shaped structure.

For example, an L with its vertical and horizontal bars can image Reagan's leadership style. Although he was an elected and highly political president, he acted like the head of a large corporation. He delegated, putting himself above practical realities and the conflicts of the real world, taking naps and frequent vacations. The President was to devote himself to the big vision of a new world. Details and facts were for others lower down on the hierarchy. As the Iran-contra hearings so dramatically revealed, the President simply wished. Aides took over the doing. GOT THIS FAR

Repeatedly Reagan described his administrative style as letting his subordinates argue out all sides of a question, "and the debate rages," and then "I make the decisions."⁴³ The cabinet officers were to do all the fighting at the lower level, and then he would come in at the top and make the decision. People had to be free to struggle, and then everybody was to be forgiven after the fight. As Reagan used to say of Tip O'Neill, we fight up until six o'clock, but then we are friends, with, of course, Reagan at a somewhat higher level up the vertical of the L toward benevolent superiority.

And so here you have this debate going. And, yes, there will be disagreement. But finally, on the basis [196] of the information that has come out of the debate, I make a decision. In that decision then there's got to be some who were on the wrong side and some on the right side. But the very next . . . meeting it may change. And so far it hasn't inhibited them."⁴⁴

In other words, as in his earlier imaginings of conflict between males, there are no losers. It is only the press that makes it appear that someone has won and someone has lost. That is what is so bad about leaks. "But when you . . . read, 'Well . . . So-and-So was a loser in this. He was opposed to this.' And then it makes it sound like this is all some kind of feuding. It isn't. It's what I have asked for."⁴⁵ In Stockman's account, however, and surely this was no surprise, the ambitious men around the President thought of themselves entirely as winners and losers.

A further trouble is that this kind of management style, at least for a modern American president, does not lead to the free choices Reagan envisions--at least if George Reedy, one of the most astute observers we have had of that office, is correct. There can be no real debate among cabinet officers and other high-ranking presidential aides, because everything is said for the ears of the President.⁴⁶ In Reagan's ears (and his administration, as I read it), facts became true by how well they fitted the L-shaped pattern. David Stockman described how the then Secretary of the Treasury "had outsmarted us by speaking to the President in language the President understood: the folksy Reader's Digest anecdote."⁴⁷ Reagan's advisers (and we and TV and security) would put Reagan atop the L and then present issues to him so they fitted his ideology or, more deeply, his psychological identity.⁴⁸ That was what decided the supposed debate.

The two directions of an L image not only Reagan's management style but also his style in campaigns. By casting himself as the benevolent superior, he built successful campaigns against Pat Brown in California and Jimmy Carter around the [197] issue of "failed leadership."⁴⁹ Indeed, at the end of the 1986 midterm election he was still campaigning against the Carter presidency for wishy-washiness. In shaping the smashing victory of 1984, he could actually be someone many Americans visualize as a benevolent, even god-like, superior--the President. It may be this capacity to be the benevolent deity that kept Reagan's political appeal from rubbing off onto his associates (or their sleaze rubbing off onto him).

One of Reagan's great strengths as a campaigner was his ability to get "spontaneously" angry

and then return to being that kindly superior.⁵⁰ He moved easily from competing--battling, really--with someone on his own level to being the benevolent leader whose kindness included all the willing souls. It is said that he won the 1980 New Hampshire primary at that moment when, during a skirmish about who would debate whom, he simply motioned to the seated George Bush and, as if Bush were a boy, said, "George, stand up." Reagan gave a "commanding impression,"⁵¹ incidentally drawing on a line from an old movie, *State of the Union*: "I'm paying for this microphone." He moved easily from horizontal combat to vertical superiority. An even more famous example of this tactic came during the television debates in the 1980 campaign. After Carter criticized, with his usual factual accuracy, Reagan's stand on national health insurance, Reagan sighed sadly, "There you go again." As Lou Cannon, the dean of Reaganology, described it, Reagan was "like an uncle rebuking a none-too-favorite nephew who was known to tell tall tales."⁵² The phrase has since become part of our campaign legends, a political version of the "scene stealing" among actors that Reagan so enjoyed recounting. Reagan had deflected the debate from the facts--the relative merits of two medical plans--to "leadership." Which candidate can dominate the other? Reagan established a struggle between equals, and by winning it could feel himself in the superior position.

Once there, Reagan felt like one of the benevolent fathers who creates a new world from above. He could take a father-[198]-knows-best attitude toward the concerns of others below. One of his responses to the nuclear freeze movement was: "I would also ask them to consider that no matter how sincere and well intentioned, only in this position do you have all the facts necessary to base decisions upon action [sic!], and therefore I would ask their trust and confidence."⁵³ He could paternalistically reply at a press conference, for example: "If I thought that there was something involved in this that the American people needed to know . . . then I would be frank with the American people and tell them."⁵⁴ Because he himself trusted superiors simply for their sincerity and good will, it was hard for Reagan to understand how those who disagreed with him could acknowledge his sincerity and good will but still not trust him.

Because he himself was motivated by allegiance to a higher authority, he did not understand the economic motives of others. Hence he could easily believe that voluntarism could deal with the nation's social problems. If I am altruistic, why can't you be? Similarly, he distrusted actions based on loyalty to a group--mere humans--instead of loyalty to a higher force. "At a profound level of instinct, Reagan [was] repelled by the idea of stable economic alliances based on the confessed interests of the members," wrote Wills.⁵⁶

Because he himself did not seek small profits, he was blind to the economic motivation of business people, and his administration was plagued both by actual criminal convictions and a general aura of corruption. Similarly, because he himself was not attuned to internal power plays, his administration suffered from palace intrigues with the sordid expulsion of this or that loser. Reagan could not control these power struggles because he simply couldn't see them. He was not moved by petty gains. Why should anyone else be?

Somehow, in all this he managed to take literally the legal fiction of the corporation. He perceived business as individual rather than institutional, and he could therefore see big business [199] as a benevolent parent but not big government. "Incapable of recognizing anything good about government," wrote Wills, "he [was] literally blind to the possibility that businessmen may be anything but high-minded when they lend their services to government."⁵⁷ A civil servant who simply is paid to work for the government is contaminated, but a tycoon's links to corporations or banks are no disqualification at all to public service. These ties authorize and liberate. By contrast, "govment" constricts.

Reagan with his claustrophobia prized "freedom," but a rather special kind. One should be free to struggle against someone else in the spheres of economics and foreign policy, but not free in the sphere of personal life, social custom, or civil rights. Why? Because freedom equals either the freedom to struggle along the horizontal bar of the L or the freedom to obey the fatherly or godlike person at the top.

A hierarchy of the elect was basic to Reagan's political imagination. Furthermore, as in a traditional Christian system, "In His will is my peace." The very definition of freedom is obedience to that divinely justified hierarchy. Hence, when Reagan contrasted America with Russia, he saw "proper, religious freedom and even belief in religion and in a God, as contrasted to their own antireligious position, their own refusal to believe in individual rights, and so forth."⁵⁸ Both the societies he envisions are top-down, but one is good and one is bad. At the top of one are God and giant, kindly corporations, while at the top of the other are constricting bureaucrats. One restricts struggle between equals, one encourages it. When he talked of Communism, it was about "freedom"-just the one word.

I just think that it is impossible, and history reveals this, for any form of government to completely deny freedom to people and have that go on interminably. There eventually comes an end to it, and I think the things we're seeing not only in Poland but the reports that are beginning to come out of Russia [200] itself about the younger generation and its resistance to longtime government controls is an indication that communism is an aberration--it's not a normal way of living for human beings, and I think we are seeing the first beginning cracks, the beginning of the end.⁵⁹

A new world again.

Reagan's L-shaped pattern for freedom matched one of the classic patterns of American conservatism (as described by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.). Schlesinger divided government control into two spheres: one, economic things like taxes, antitrust measures, tariffs, monetary policy, market regulation, or limitations on corporate power; the other, social issues like civil liberties, policies on crime, drugs, the environment, or sexual matters. American liberals are likely to favor economic

restrictions but social freedoms. Conservatives like Reagan are likely to say people (or corporations) have to be free to struggle and compete in an economic sense, but on social issues and matters of civil liberty the citizens ought simply to obey duly constituted authority: religions, schools, the police, parents, all of whom Reagan's administration vigorously backed. The difference between Reagan and the liberals was not freedom vs. *no* freedom, as Reagan liked to imply, but the areas to be left free and those to be controlled.

Indeed he said he himself shifted from liberal to conservative when he no longer saw government as having one benevolent, coaching individual like FDR at the top and began seeing "govment" as swollen bureaucrats enlarging their own power by constricting and classifying those they were supposed to benefit and free. "As a matter of fact, what they've created [modern liberals] is a kind of bondage in which the people are made subservient to the Government that is handing out the largesse. And the only people who prosper from them [rules? laws?] is that large bureaucracy that administers them."⁶⁰ [201]

Reagan contrasted conservatives and liberals the same way, that is, with the same one-sided idea of freedom. "The conservatives believe the collective responsibility of the qualified men in a community should decide its course. The liberals believe in remote and massive strong-arming from afar, usually Washington, D.C." (297). Again, both are L-shaped, strong-man-at-the-top governments, but one is good, one bad. Goodness or badness depends, not on the structure, but on the males at the top. A distant, bad man constricts people at the bottom. A good, nearby man at the top frees them.

This was, so to speak, Reagan's style of freedom, one of several styles or themes within the general L-shaped pattern. In campaigning, he battled so as to establish himself as the leader, the dominator, really. In management, he delegated to subordinates who were to fight out the issues among themselves. In governing the public, in getting the government off our backs, he cheerfully restricted knowledge, conduct, privacy, or civil liberties for ordinary citizens, while retaining economic liberties for large corporations. Most remarkable, however, was Reagan's cognitive style. It, too, answers to an L-shaped model.

That is, having established himself partway up or at the top of the L, Reagan was able to--and he felt justified in--dominating the issues, the perceptions of the public, and even the very facts. As we have seen, Reagan did not deal in concepts, which were, so to speak, above him. Instead, he understood issues by identifying with the higher-up and looking down on details. He had, at least in college, a photographic memory. Rather than develop ideas for his courses, he was able to remember and disgorge huge quantities of textbook material. In the same way, as a politician, he was able to learn from the 5 x 8 cards his aides supplied him with, memorizing and repeating the material, creating a world with his voice.

I have already cited David Stockman's complaint that Reagan would sentimentally bend his principles in response to individual hard-luck stories. As Lou Cannon commented, he had [202] to please this crowd, he had to answer this reporter.⁶¹ In the same vein, Stockman lamented, "Reagan's body of knowledge [was] primarily impressionistic: he register[ed] anecdotes rather than concepts."⁶² So far as federal finances were concerned, "The President did not think in terms of more than one year at a time. He looked only at the current year's deficit numbers and wrote them off as attributable to the recession."⁶³ Similarly, in thinking about reducing the number of federal employees, Reagan would always recall an anecdote about how they had saved money in California by switching to double-wide file cabinets. "I would hear the filing cabinet story many times over the next four years. It was the single lens through which the President viewed the federal budget. I would try many times to dissuade him from that point of view, never with success."⁶⁴

This anecdotal approach to concepts became further weakened because often the anecdotes were themselves misremembered or even fabricated. Reagan recalled episodes from old movies as though they were actual events. (He slid into his world-making mode.) By repeating them as though they were true, he made them act like real facts, as when he took over Clint Eastwood's "Make my day," or defended Star Wars with, "The Force is with us."⁶⁵ After calling Qaddafi "this mad dog of the Middle East," he remarked, "You know, I've never used the term 'mad dog' before, but I saw one of you [reporters using it on television tonight, and I thought it sounded good."⁶⁶

When Reagan dealt in concepts at all, he tended to treat them as simple opposites: Communist, "free world"; Republican, Democrat; growth, no-growth; spenders, savers; White House, Congress; liberals, conservatives; we, them. They were like two football teams--part of his struggle theme. Sometimes he would deal with a concept by a simple reversal. "I copied out of an article the other day, and the author of the article uttered a very great truth. 'Nations do not distrust each other because they are armed. They arm themselves because they distrust each other.'" Or his often-repeated statement that you cannot take the drugs [203] away from the customer, you have to take the customer away from the drugs. Just say no.

These simple reversals, the anecdotes, the old movies, all created a pervasive air of unreality, and Reagan was much criticized for playing fast and loose with facts. As a spokesman for Tip O'Neill said, "Reagan is like a hovercraft gliding across reality without ever touching it."⁶⁷ The image is exactly right. He was above the facts in his L-shaped mind.

He was also demonstrating a well-known psychological truth. All of us perceive and understand the world in terms of a "cognitive style." We see things in characteristic ways, derived, ultimately, from our personalities. Sidney Blumenthal commented that the crucial thing about Reagan was not that he missed facts, but that he had a world view in which facts in themselves were not important. "Facts don't make his beliefs true. His beliefs give life to the facts, which are parables tailored to have a moral."⁶⁹ Facts were only the pawns in the strategy of his vision.

Facts, I think, became facts as they fitted his L-shaped mind. Events were validated by struggle at the lower level or, in the "new world" context, because they expressed the benevolence and creative power of a superior being at the top of the L. Reagan himself moved up and down the vertical bar of that L, adopting different relations to reality at different levels.

Often at press conferences he would occupy the bottom level and play the child. "Now I'm glad you asked me because now, just like the children, I've told you the truth." "My keeper says I have to go in." "I must have the worst aimed finger in the world. That's because momma taught me not to point." He simply obeyed: "It's traditional, when the man in the aisle tells us the time is up, I can't take any more [questions]."⁷⁰ He introduced the sports world's "handlers" to politics.

If one has this kind of childlike naivete, one is free to see reality as figuring some higher or realer truth. One can see new worlds. "You can approach a fresh notion with the delight of a [204] child snatching up a bright new dime. Preconceived ideas and pear-shaped prejudices [of others!] appear crystal clear to the ingenuous" (140).

At a somewhat higher level of the L, Reagan acted as though he was in a reality which was itself illusory--theater. At his midnight inauguration as Governor of California, he looked over at the ex-tapdancer George Murphy, who had become a senator, and laughed, "Well, here we are on the late show again."⁷¹ Asked what kind of a governor he would be, he quipped, "I don't know. I've never played a governor."⁷² At this level, reality is all play--show business--and it was at this level that Reagan was wittiest and most charming.

At this intermediate level, Reagan was an actor accepting direction, an announcer reading a script, or a patient following doctor's orders. Many Reaganologists commented on how passive he could be, as when heM allowed himself to be tutored for public appearances by his aides or, after the cancer on his nose was removed: "Now I'm told that I must not expose myself to the "73 sun anymore."⁷³ He would be ruled by those with superior knowledge. Reality was a struggle, like a football game, but he was a team player who obeyed the coach's commands, even though, on the field, the responsibility for winning the fight became his.

At the highest level, Reagan ended the passivity. Identified with benevolent, blessing-conferring, world-making fathers, he himself created the reality. He looked down from above on a world of particulars. He could control, delegate, or dominate these details, and it was in this mode that he pulled facts (or pseudo-facts) into his vision. His image of America was what Wills termed "emotional history," factless, only a kind of "imagined Huck Finney," a world of "original sinlessness." It was, like his whole life, professional pretense, and the perfection of the pretense was that he did not know it was pretense. He had willed his own innocence, concluded Wills.⁷⁴ Reagan did not question what was above, concepts. He admired and accepted. [205] Then immediate experience--anecdotes, stories, personal details --were all swept up into his beliefs.

For his whole life, from his football career (sports being justified as an allegory of life), through radio announcing, acting, and hosting on television, and finally in politics, Reagan was entirely concerned with symbolic activities. The war work and the movies and the made-up sports commentary did not cause Ronald Reagan's creative relation to reality. Just the opposite. Reagan brought from childhood a special L-shaped mental structure that led him to perceive his work for the radio station or Hollywood or the Air Force as important just because it was the symbolic creation of a world. And so his presidency.

He said several times in his autobiography that he was no good at reading a script whether for a part as an actor or for a political speech. "The words make sense, but the lines don't sound as if they are coming from a real live character" (79). Reagan had to be able to bring the prepared speech into the rivalry and competition of the horizontal bar of the L, as when he was competing for attention with other actors or engaged in the give and take of an election. Alternatively, he had to have the material in his own mind as though he were looking down on a world beneath him as its master. He had to speak the script as if he were creating it as he went. "The secret of announcing is to make reading sound like talking. I am still [1965] not good at a first reading of a script" (56).

In effect, when he made a speech real, Reagan duplicated his own complicated relation to reality, a relation, I believe, not without ambivalence. In his work with the Army Air Force, he was standing over the Japanese landscape. Yet after the war, as of 1949, he developed a fear of flying, the match to his claustrophobic fear of being held down. He gave no clue why--only a supernatural reason: "A long time back a small voice had whispered in my ear that all my flying time had been used up" (206). Also, during a spell of lethargy on his discharge from the army, he spent two months building two model boats. "I had [206] never built any such things before nor have I since, but then it seemed exactly the right thing to do." Again, the bird's eye view, here taken at a moment of stress or letdown after stress. He described it as "proper therapy" (140).

I believe Ronald Reagan felt anxious when he was underneath the struggle. He felt good and confident and reassured when he looked down on reality from above, but that could also be a little scary. Flying, one matches God. Reagan was most comfortable when he was halfway up that vertical bar of the L--when he was someone to be directed or coached by benevolent teachers who were themselves the owners of reality--like the group of millionaires that launched Reagan into conservative politics in California. Or like God. When I discuss Reagan's anxieties, however, I am addressing the more traditional concerns of this kind of psychoanalytic study.

This L-shaped picture lets me, for example, accept Reagan's nervous challenge to analyze the one dream he described in the autobiography "and say what this Freudian delirium meant." During a pneumonia that was almost fatal, "I seemed to see a street lamp and a lonely patch of sidewalk. Humphrey Bogart appeared, and we played an interminable street scene exchanging and wearing innumerable trenchcoats, and trying to say lines to each other, always with a furtive air of danger in

the surrounding darkness" (195). The darkness, the lonely sidewalk, the furtive air of danger, all suggest to me Reagan's view of reality as a hazardous, challenging place. The challenge intensified with the presence of Bogart, famous for playing strong, dangerous men. Reagan referred to him elsewhere in *Where's the Rest of Me?* as an actor who succeeded easily after World War II in making a comeback into the movies with their reconstituted audiences, a transition Reagan himself found personally and professionally difficult.

Bogart, I think, represented in the dream a worrisome rival, and their following a script was Reagan's imagining him in exactly L-shaped terms. He would struggle with his rival but [207] within a frame, here the patch of sidewalk, in which costume is key, like a football game or the game of making a movie. Which man will win in this contest, and which will be absorbed into the other? Surely the mortally ill Reagan must have feared he would lose and disappear. The "innumerable" and "interminable" phrase his wish to live through the fear and danger of aggressive competition.

Although I want to avoid psychiatric or psychoanalytic jargon, I can guess at the childhood pattern behind the L-shaped mind. Reagan recounted several memories of his hard-drinking father, a struggling shoe salesman. In the very first memory he recalled from early infancy, "I remember him bending his face down to kiss me, and he needed a shave."⁷⁵ The father was the benevolent superior, but with a rasp.

In another early memory, the father was again the benevolent superior. "Once he caught me fighting in the schoolyard, surrounded by a circle of eggheads. He stopped the fight, tongue-lashed the crowd--then lifted me a foot in the air with the flat side of his boot. 'Not because you were fighting,' he said, 'but because you weren't winning.' That was my first sample of adult injustice. I had been winning" (8). The adult Ronald Reagan recalled his father as doing exactly the most unjust things. Since the boy's fighting was validating his very self, stopping the fight stifled a proper rivalry between equals, not only for young Ronald but for the crowd. A supposedly benevolent superior, the father "lifted" his son but wrongly. He prevented his winning and rising on his own.

Perhaps that is why another early memory reversed the earlier roles of father and son. Jack had passed out on the front porch. "I bent over him, smelling the sharp odor of whiskey" (7). Again the benevolence from above, but this time the son's, and again the rasp, still the father's. Later, as a successful actor, he set up his aging, unemployed, invalided father in California as the person who took care of his son's fan mail (89). He made [208] his father into just the kind of benevolent elder so important for his own psychic life.

Jack Reagan, his son said, "rebelled against the universe." By contrast, Nelle Reagan "was a natural practical do-gooder," precisely the benevolent superior whom the adult Ronald Reagan emulated (9). But the do-gooder can also be the rescuer who constricts and restrains. Robert Dallek, in his study of Reagan's political knack, noticed how Reagan in the early chapters of the autobiography described her again and again in rescue situations.

Perhaps--and I offer this only as a speculation--perhaps Ronald Reagan's L-shaped process of converting horizontal struggle to vertical benevolence represented psychologically a fusing of his feisty, hard-drinking father into his benevolent, rescuing mother. Curiously, Reagan ad libbed something very like that in a tiny episode dutifully transcribed by the *New York Times* at a press conference at the California ranch. A dog was frightening a reporter's child, and the President reassured the tot: "He won't, really won't hurt you. She's a good dog. She's a mother herself."⁷⁷

Finally, this reading of Reagan's psyche enables me to attempt a bit of reader-response criticism. In the autobiography Reagan recalled seeing Robert Sherriff's 1929 play about World War 1, *Journey's End*. In typical Reagan idiom, he told how "war-weary, young but bitterly old Captain Stanhope carried me into a new world. For two and a half hours I was in that dugout on the Western front--but in some strange way, I was also on stage. More than anything in life I wanted to speak his lines to the young replacement officer who misunderstands and sees callousness in his effort to hide grief. That deep silence, the slow coming to his feet, then the almost whispered, 'My God, so that's it! You think I don't care! You bloody little swine, you think I don't care--the only one who knew--who really understood.' He was, of course, referring to the death that day of the beloved older officer" (29). Reagan's response shows the themes we have [209] become familiar with: the new world; the wish to be in a role, speaking lines; the feeling of being the higher-up directing those actually in the battle. Stanhope took the place of the "beloved older officer," now dead, just as Reagan rose closer and closer to the top of the L, taking, perhaps, the place of his abrasive and misguided father in a wiser, kindlier, more motherly way. As he saw it, anyway.

An altogether different kind of reader-response was the letter Reagan wrote to Nixon after hearing John Kennedy's acceptance speech at the 1960 Democratic Convention. He heard in it "a frightening call to arms," and concluded:

One last thought--shouldn't someone tag Mr. Kennedy's bold new imaginative program with its proper age? Under the tousled boyish haircut is still old Karl Marx--first launched a century ago. There is nothing new in the idea of a government being big brother to us all. Hitler called his "state socialism" and way before him it was "benevolent monarchy."⁷⁸

Like the moment Reagan admired in *Journey's End* in which the younger officer became the older, he read Kennedy in terms of combat and the benevolent superior. He made the younger man the same as the older philosopher or dictator or king.

The dream, the early memory, and the two reader responses all confirm the picture of a man who believes in aggression between equals leading to benevolence at the top of a hierarchy. There were not two Reagans, just one, but L-shaped. The seeming paradoxes of Ronald Reagan make consistent pieces of one personality structure.

When he looked at the world, he saw horizontal struggle beneath a vertical governance. Benevolent superiors should guide the person governed to a victory or triumph (as a director does

actors, a station manager announcers, a coach players, a president aides). A good L-shaped world involves winning fights [210] against equals, and winning such a fight entitles a man to rise and become a benevolent superior being who then frees the individuals beneath into a new world where they too can fight, win, and rise. In a bad L-shaped world, selfish superiors (communists, bureaucrats) constrict those beneath them by boxing them into classes instead of treating them as competing individuals.

He believed religiously in a God who plans for individuals, administratively in delegation to competing subordinates, economically in minimally regulated competition, and politically in government by a benevolent elite. He could love nature's spaces but resist protecting them with rules. He could be kind to individuals but resist legislation on behalf of classes. He could be scrappy to opponents, but suddenly turn passive (as Reagan's America would lurch from impulsive aggressions to helplessness). He could permit economic liberties but restrict sexual or social freedoms. He could preach as devout conservative ideologue (the vertical) but fight as a pragmatic, effective, and very tough politician (the horizontal).

It was often said during the Reagan years that we were seeing a not-overly-bright actor manipulated like a puppet by rich and brilliant conservative machiavels. I do not think so. I see the L-shaped pattern permeating the policies of 1980-1988. I believe Reagan can fairly claim to have put his personal stamp on eight years of American and world history. If anyone was manipulating, it must have been Reagan himself. Since he would assent only to what fit his L-shaped mind, he found and used others whose minds matched his, or they found him. Then he set himself above the fray and had those others work the levers by which his new world was voted in and carried out.

Yet this very claim of an L-shaped mind for Ronald Reagan pins me to the essential paradox of psychohistory. Just as Reagan saw the world in L-shaped terms, so I see Reagan through my N- or H-shaped mind, through, if you will, my [211] countertransference. I can no more step outside of my mind than Ronald Reagan could step outside his.

Let me acknowledge, then, that Reagan's single-minded eagerness to fight, the win-or-disappear mind set, the unreality of his administrative style, his eagerness to submerge my civil liberties in a religious obedience--all these set my teeth on edge and churned my gastric juices for eight long years. I cannot read his identity "objectively."

But then, I cannot read anything "objectively," if by that we mean "independently of my cognitive style." Neither can you. This reading of Ronald Reagan is very much my reading, a function of my identity, as your reading of this essay will be a function of yours. The most we can ask of each other is that we play by the rules of the history game, while granting that each of us will do that from a particular personal set of values--an identity. Psychoanalysis may take away our illusions about objectivity, but it points us toward another, realer truth: honest discussion.

NOTES

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