

CHAPTER I

First Visions

(FROM NEWPORT TO DES MOINES)

A People and Its Flag

IT WAS HERE, not too far south of Boston, on the East Coast, which still bears the mark of Europe so clearly, that Alexis de Tocqueville came ashore: Newport, Rhode Island. This well-kept Easton's Beach. These yachts. These Palladian mansions and painted wooden houses that remind me of the beach towns of Normandy. A naval museum. An athenaeum library. Bed-and-breakfasts with a picture of the owner displayed instead of a sign. Gorgeous trees. Tennis courts. A Georgian-style synagogue, exhibited as the oldest in the United States: with its well-polished pale wood, its fluted columns, its spotless black rattan chairs, its large candelabra, its plaque engraved with clear-cut letters in memory of Isaac Touro and the six or seven great spiritual leaders who succeeded him, its American flag standing next to the Torah scroll under glass; it seems to me, on the contrary, strangely modern.

And then, precisely, the flags: a riot of American flags, at crossroads, on building fronts, on car hoods, on pay phones, on the furniture displayed in the windows along Thames Street, on the boats tied to the dock and on the moorings with no boats, on beach umbrellas, on parasols, on bicycle saddlebags—everywhere, in every form, flapping in the wind or on stickers, an epidemic of flags that has spread throughout the city. There are also, as it happens, a lot of Japanese flags. A Japanese cultural festival is opening, with exhibitions of prints, sushi samples on the boardwalk, sumo wrestling in the street, barkers enticing passersby to come see these wonders, these monsters:

"Come on! Look at them—all white and powdered! Three hundred pounds! Legs like hams! So far they can't even walk! They needed three seats in the airplane! Step right up!" And, therefore, white flags with a red ball, symbol of the Land of the Rising Sun, hang from the balconies on this street of jewelers near the harbor where I'm searching for a restaurant, to have lunch. In the end, though, it's the American flag that dominates. One is struck by the omnipresence of the Star-Spangled Banner, even on the T-shirts of the kids who come to watch the sumo wrestlers as the little crowd cheers them on.

It's the flag of the American cavalry in westerns. It's the flag of Frank Capra movies. It's the fetish that is there, in the frame, every time the American president appears. It's the beloved flag, almost a living being, the use of which, I understand, is subject not just to rules but to an extremely precise code of flag behavior: don't get it dirty, don't copy it, don't tattoo it onto your body, never let it fall on the ground, never hang it upside down, don't insult it, don't burn it. On the other hand, if it gets too old, if it can no longer be used, if it can't be flown, then you must burn it; yes, instead of throwing it out or bundling it up, better to burn it than abandon it in the trash. It's the flag that was offended by Kid Rock at the Super Bowl, and it's the flag of Michael W. Smith in his song "There She Stands," written just after September 11, in which "she" is none other than "it," the flag, the American symbol that was targeted, defiled, attacked, scorned by the barbarians, but is always proudly unfurled.

It's a little strange, this obsession with the flag. It's incomprehensible for someone who, like me, comes from a country virtually without a flag—where the flag has, so to speak, disappeared; where you see it flying only in front of official buildings; and where any nostalgia and concern for it, any evocation of it, is a sign of an attachment to the past that has become almost ridiculous. Is this flag obsession a result of September 11? A response to that trauma whose violence we Europeans persist in underestimating but which, three years later, haunts American minds as much as ever? Should we reread those pages in Tocqueville on the good fortune of being sheltered by geography from violations of the nation's territorial space and come to see in this return to the flag a neurotic abreaction to the astonishment that the violation actually occurred? Or is it something else entirely? An older, more conflicted

relationship of America with itself and with its national existence? A difficulty in being a nation, more severe than in the flagless countries of old Europe, that produces this compensatory effect?

Leafed through the first few pages of *One Nation, After All*, which the author, the sociologist Alan Wolfe, gave me last night. Maybe the secret lies in this "after all." Maybe American patriotism is more complex, more painful, than it seems at first glance, and perhaps its apparent excessiveness comes from that. Or perhaps it has to do, as Tocqueville saw it, rather with a kind of "reflective patriotism" which, unlike the "instinctive love" that reigned during the regimes of times past, is forced to exaggerate when it comes to emblems and symbols. To be continued . . .

Tell Me What Your Prisons Are . . .

TOCQUEVILLE'S FIRST INTENTION was, we tend to forget, to investigate the American penal system. He went beyond that, of course. He analyzed the political system and American society in its entirety better than anyone. But as his notes, his journal, his letters to Kergorlay and others, and the very text of *Democracy in America* attest, it was with this business of prisons that everything began, and that's why I too, after Newport, asked to see the New York prison of Rikers Island, that city within a city on an island that is not shown on every map—a place few New Yorkers seem to take much notice of.

A meeting with Mark J. Cranston, of the New York City Department of Corrections, this Tuesday morning at 5:00 A.M. in Queens, at the entrance to a bridge that doesn't lead anywhere open to the public. Landscape of desolate shoreline in the foggy morning light. Electric barbed-wire fences. High walls. A checkpoint, as at the edge of a war zone, where the prison guards, almost all of them black, greet one another as they come on duty, and—heading in the opposite direction, packed into barred buses that look like school buses—the prisoners, also mainly black, or Hispanic, who are driven with chains on their feet to courthouses in the Bronx and Queens. A security badge along with my photo. Frisked. On the other side of the East River, in the fog, a white boat like a ghost ship, where, for lack of space, the least dangerous criminals are locked up. And very soon, clinging to New York (La Guardia

is so close that, at times, when the wind blows from a certain quarter, the noise from the planes makes you raise your voice or even stop talking), the ten prison buildings that make up this fortress, this enclave cut off from everything, this anti-utopian reservation.

The common room, dirty gray, where the people arrested during the night are assembled, seated on makeshift benches. A small cell, No. 14, where two prisoners (white—is that by chance?) have been isolated. A master dormitory, with clean sheets, where a sign indicates, as in Manhattan bars, that the zone is "smoke-free." A man, weirdly agitated, who, taking me for a health inspector, hurries toward me to complain about the mosquitoes. And before we arrive at the detention center proper, before the row of cells, all identical, like minuscule horse stalls, a labyrinth of corridors sliced with bars and opening onto the series of "social" areas they persist in showing me: a chapel; a mosque; a volleyball court from which a distant birdsong rises; a library, where everyone is free, they tell me, to consult law manuals; another room, finally, where there are three open boxes of letters, marked GRIEVANCE, LEGAL AID, and SOCIAL SERVICES. At first sight you'd think it is a dilapidated hospital, but one obsessed with hygiene: the enormous black female guard, her belt studded with keys, who is guiding me through this maze explains that the first thing to do when a delinquent arrives is to have him take a shower in order to disinfect him; later on she tells me—in the nice booming voice of a guard who has wound up, since there's no other choice, liking these prisoners—that the second urgent thing is to run a battery of psychological tests to identify the suicidal temperaments; prisoners call to her as we pass, insult her because they've been denied the use of the recreation room or the canteen, make farting noises at which she doesn't bat an eye, stop her sometimes to confide a wish to live or die; it's only when you look at them up close, obviously, that things become more complicated.

This man with shackled feet. This other one, handcuffs on his wrists and gloves over the handcuffs, because just last week he hid eight razor blades in his ass before throwing himself on a guard to cut his throat. These wild-animal glares, hard to endure. These prisoners for whom a secure system of serving hatches had to be invented, because they took advantage of the moment when their scrap of food was slid over to them

to bite the guard's hand. The little Hispanic man, hand on his ear, streaming blood, screaming that he should be taken to the infirmary, under the shouts of his black co-detainees—the guard tells me he has a "Rikers cut," a ritual gash made to the ear or face of an inmate by the big shots of the Latin Kings and the Bloods, the gangs that control the prison. The shouts, the *fuck yous*, the enraged banging on the metal doors in the maximum-security section. Farther on, at the end of the section, in one of the three "shower cells," which open onto the corridor, the spectacle of a bearded, naked giant jerking off in front of an impassive female guard, to whom he shouts in the voice of a madman, "Come and get me, bitch! Come on!" And then the cry of alarm my guard lets out when, dying of thirst, I bend toward a sink in the hallway: "No! Not there! Don't drink there!" Marking my surprise, she regains her composure. Excuses herself. Stammers out that it's all right, it's just the prisoners' sink, I could have drunk there. But her reflex says a lot about sanitary conditions in the jail. Rikers Island is actually a "jail," not a "prison." It accepts those who have been charged and await sentencing as well as those sentenced to less than a year. What would this be like if it were a real prison? How would these people be treated if they were hardened criminals?

On the way back with Mark Cranston, taking the bridge that leads to the normal world and noticing what I hadn't noticed when I arrived—namely, that from where I am and, most likely, from the volleyball court and the exercise yard and even certain cells, you can see, as if you were touching it, the Manhattan skyline—I can't dodge this question: Does the impression of having brushed with hell arise because Rikers is cut off or because it is so close to everything? And then another question occurs to me when Cranston, anxious about the impression his "house" has made, explains that the island used to be a huge garbage dump where the city's trash was unloaded: Prison or dumping ground? A kind of replacement, on the same site, of society's trash by its rejects? First impressions of the system. First briefing.

On Religion in General, and Baseball in Particular

LEAVING THE CITY behind. Yes, leaving New York, which I know too well. Fast, and through a driving rain. We are on the way to Coopers-

town, a miniature village in the central part of the state that has managed at least three times to be in the heart of high-tension zones in American history. It was the town of James Fenimore Cooper, and thus of the symbolic responsibility for the slaughter of the Indians. It lies in a region that, before the Civil War, fleeing slaves and their smugglers passed through. And last but not least, since this is the claim to fame to which it seems most attached, it is the world capital of baseball.

I spend the night in a wooden chalet that has been transformed into a bed-and-breakfast, with ceramic rabbits in the garden and a magazine in the bedroom that explains how to "live comfortably at thirty," how to be "older than seventy and still be in love," and "six ways to get your daily glass of milk." The house is run by two commanding women, mother and daughter, who wear identical bloodred canvas aprons and look the spitting image of Margaret Thatcher at two stages of her life. I spend time in the morning listening to these ladies tell me the history of their house. The building was actually created a century ago by an officer in the Civil War, but it has been renovated so as to hide all antique traces. "Are you interested in the bed-and-breakfast business, which is the passion of our existence?" one of them asks. "Is this your first experience? Did you like it? I'm glad you did, since there are as many bed-and-breakfasts as there are owners. Everyone puts their mark on it—it's an art, a religion. No, that's not the word, 'religion.' We don't make any difference here between religions—no more than we would with the Yankees and the Red Sox. Who won, by the way?" (She has turned toward a customer in shorts and undershirt who is sitting at the table next to mine. He shrugs as he wolfs down a huge slab of bacon.) "See, he doesn't know. That means it doesn't count. And you—what are you? Oh! Jewish. Oh! Atheist. That's okay. . . . Everyone does what they want. . . . In this business you have to like ninety-nine percent of your clients. . . ."

The breakfast was a little long. But now I'm in the immense museum, completely disproportionate to the dollhouses in the rest of the town, where this great national sport is honored, this sport that contributes to establishing people's identities and that has truly become part of their civic and patriotic religion, which is baseball: Isn't there, in the Hall of

Fame adjoining the museum, a plaque devoted to those champions who interrupted their careers to serve in American wars?

This is not a museum; it's a church. These are not rooms; they're chapels. The visitors themselves aren't really visitors but devotees, meditative and fervent. I hear one of them asking, in a low voice, if it's true that the greatest champions are buried here—beneath our feet, as if we were at Westminster Abbey or in the Imperial Crypt beneath the Kapuziner Church in Vienna. And every effort is made to sanctify Cooperstown itself, this cradle of the national religion, this new Nazareth, this simple little town that nothing prepared for its election and yet which was present at the birth of the thing. Consider the edifying history, told in the exhibition rooms and the brochures, of the scientific commission created at the beginning of the twentieth century by a former baseball player who became a millionaire and launched a nationwide contest on the theme "Send us your oldest baseball memory": he collected the testimony of an old engineer from Denver who in 1839, in Cooperstown, in front of the tailor's shop, saw Abner Doubleday, later a Northern general and a Civil War hero, the man who would fire the first shot against the Southerners, explain the game to passersby, set down the rules, and, in fact, baptize it.

It was in honor of this story that the year 1939, exactly a century later, was chosen for the inauguration of the museum. It's because of this story that, in a well-known article in *Natural History*, the paleontologist and baseball fan Stephen Jay Gould recalled that a long-ago exhibit at the museum noted that "in the hearts of those who love baseball" the Yankee general remains "the lad in the pasture where the game was invented." It's because of it, again, that the big stadium nearby—where, they say, some of the finest games in the country are played—is called Doubleday Field and bears on its front the fine, proud inscription BIRTH-PLACE OF BASEBALL. And what can one say, finally, of the commissioner of baseball, Bud Selig, who at Arlington a few years ago placed a wreath on the tomb of the Unknown Soldier and publicly remembered Abner Doubleday, that son of Cooperstown, also buried in the National Cemetery, officially proclaiming him on that day, before the eyes of America and the world, the pope of the national religion? That day not just the

town but the entire United States joined in a celebration that had the twofold merit of associating the national pastime with the traditional rural values that Fenimore Cooper's town embodies and also with the patriotic grandeur that the name Doubleday bears.

The only problem, Tim Wiles, the museum's director of research, tells me, is that Abner Doubleday, in the legendary year of 1839, wasn't in Cooperstown but at West Point; that the old engineer who was supposed to have played that first game with him was just five years old then; that the word *baseball* had already appeared in 1815, in a novel by Jane Austen, and in 1748, in a private letter found in England; that a baseball scholar, an eminent member of the Society for American Baseball Research, had just discovered, in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, an even older trace; that the Egyptians had, it seems, their own form of the game. The only problem, he says, is that we have always known—since 1939, in fact, since the museum's opening—that baseball is a sport of the people, and even if, like all sports of the people, it suffers from a lack of written archives, its origin is age-old. The only problem is that this history is a myth, and every year millions of men and women come, like me, to visit a town devoted entirely to the celebration of a myth.

The False as Will and Representation

TWO HYPOTHESES to work from. Either the visitors in question are ignoramus who believe, in good faith, that it's all true. Or, on the contrary, they are in the know; they are aware that the story doesn't hold water; but the subject excites them so much that they keep informed about the discoveries of the thousands of baseball scholars who form one of the most curious, yet also one of the most serious, learned societies in this country and who are all in full agreement about the falsity of the legend; they celebrate a myth without for a moment ignoring that it's a myth, and a hoax.

Here is another scene, which makes me lean toward the second hypothesis. I'm still in Cooperstown, but now I'm in the Farmers' Museum, which owns many artifacts and exhibits the crafts and traditions of rural American life. These brand-new nineteenth-century costumes.

This canoe that smells of green wood, from which a copy of an Indian knife is dangling. A tomahawk with its wooden handle freshly cut. A cardboard cow, warranted to be a faithful reproduction of the cows of that era. Dr. Jackson's office, his instrument case, his water pitcher, his stethoscope, his washbasin. The garden where the plants he must have cultivated at the time have been reinvented. A cemetery whose grave-stones are real but where no corpses are buried. Finally, women who, in their caps, their aprons, their unbleached cotton dresses, act like real farmers running actual businesses, whereas here again, everything is false. "What do you do for a living? I'm a nineteenth-century weaver at the Farmers' Museum in Cooperstown (or an herbalist, or a baker). Every day I put on my costume and go play my role." I'm sure the museum possesses relics, actual objects from the era, vestiges, but they prefer facsimiles. They want the new to simulate the old. The whole idea is not to preserve but to reconstitute a false truth and celebrate it as such. Defeat of the archive. Triumph of kitsch.

And then here's another case, even more extravagant. Far off, right in the middle of the reconstituted village, there is a tent where a crowd larger than the one in front of Dr. Jackson's office or the herbalist's garden is gathered. As we come near it, we see an empty zone beneath the tent surrounded by thick braided ropes, the kind used in museums. And in the middle a gypsum statue just over ten feet long, lying down, its ribs jutting out, one hand on its stomach, as if mummified. They call it the Cardiff Giant, and its history goes like this. The scene is Cardiff, New York, in 1869: workmen digging a well on a farm belonging to William C. "Stub" Newell unearth this mummified giant. Word spreads to Syracuse. Much discussion in the county about whether it's a fossil or a work of art. A consortium is created, which, leaning toward the fossil thesis and thinking it's the remains of a prehistoric man, exhibits the discovery, first in a tent on Newell's farm, then throughout the state, transporting it from town to town. Except there's a catch. The object has a strange look to it. Certain details—the toes, the penis—are too well preserved. Some witnesses, moreover, begin to gossip that they saw a wagon transporting a block of gypsum to a marble sculptor's place in Chicago, and then others saw the same wagon arrive here, loaded with a

large wooden crate. So the idea is first insinuated, then asserted, that the whole business is a fake—that the pores of the skin, for instance, were made by pounding the gypsum with a piece of wood studded with nails, and that Newell's friend George Hull, a cigar manufacturer from Binghamton, New York, buried this false mummy on Newell's farm. But how does the world react? The hoax giant is still exhibited, as if nothing had happened. P. T. Barnum, the great showman, tries to buy it and, furious at being refused, has a copy made, which he exhibits in New York City. During this time, the original false giant goes to the Pan-American Exhibition. It is bought in the early 1930s by a rich publisher from Iowa. Then, in 1939, by the New York State Historical Association. Finally, in 1948, it's transported to Cooperstown, where it has been on display ever since, after its truly national funeral. So today people come from all over the United States to admire the biggest, most famous, most official example of the fake.

To revere a counterfeit as if it were real. To prefer in a museum, even when one has a choice, recent artifacts over relics. To rewrite the history of an age-old pastime as if it were a national sport. What is at stake in each case is a relationship to time, and in particular to the past. As if, for this nation so eminently oriented toward its future, having a past can only be sustained by reappropriating it through well-calculated words and deeds. As if with all one's strength—including the strength and power of myth and forgery—one had to reassert the power of the present over the past. Or the opposite, which comes down to the same thing: as if the pain were having not enough past rather than too much; and as if people fell back on the theme of "Since we weren't there for the child's baptism, let's at least be there when the man's last words are spoken." I think back to the Hall of Fame in the Museum of Baseball. And I see that, in the end, the real blank space, the real unspoken thing, has to do with the absence of a word (*cricket*) and a fact (when all is said and done, the English origin, dating back to the first English colonists, of an American sport). Cancel the debt. Revoke "the name of the father." Self-generation of a culture that wants to be descended from its own handiwork and, accordingly, rewrites its great and small genealogies. An American neurosis?

They Shoot Cities, Don't They?

THAT A CITY could die: for a European, that is unthinkable. And yet . . .

Buffalo, a city that was once the glory of America, its showcase, where two presidents once lived (and where one was shot and another inaugurated), a city that on this late July afternoon—the anniversary, by the way, of Tocqueville's visit, in 1831—offers a landscape of desolation: long avenues without cars, stretching out to infinity; not a single good restaurant to dine in; few hotels; improvised gardens in place of buildings; deserted lots in place of gardens; trees that are dead or diseased; boarded-up office buildings, disintegrating or about to be torn down. Yes, a city where you can still find some of the finest specimens of urban architecture in America and some of the earliest skyscrapers is now reduced to destroying them, because an unoccupied building is a building that is breaking apart and, one day or another, will fall on your head. The library is on the verge of financial collapse. There are streets that seem not to have any running water or mail delivery. Even the main train station, which during the era of the steelworks was a major hub, is now only a shell, an enormous abandoned sugarloaf, with rusted metal signs, wind howling, crows flying around it, and, in big letters, THE NEW YORK CENTRAL RAILROAD, already half effaced.

Lackawanna, about ten miles south of Buffalo. The worst thing here is the factory. It was once a modern enterprise, and the region's heart. All that's left are cone-shaped mounds of coal or iron in lots overgrown with weeds. Extinguished chimneys. Blackened, unmoving freight cars. Warehouses with broken windows. And inside one of the warehouses, which I sneak into: sagging armchairs; shelves of twisted metal where files have been left; yellowed photographs of beaming employees, confident of the eternal greatness of their factory; crumpled copies of *The Buffalo News*; charred plastic gas masks; on one wall, an assembly of manometers, barometers, steam gauges, rubber thermometers eaten away by humidity; clocks—I count four—all stopped at the same hour. If I didn't know the history of Bethlehem Steel; if I didn't know that they closed this factory twenty years ago because of tragic but common-

place foreign competition; if I didn't know that the city itself still lives, with a tiny life indeed, but a life all the same; if I hadn't, for instance, read the story of those six Arab Americans who hid here after September 11, the ones the FBI arrested, I could almost believe in a natural catastrophe, a cataclysm—of the kind that leaves standing the calcified façades of those towns that had to be evacuated, with no time to carry anything away, because of an earthquake, a tsunami, a volcano.

Cleveland. Not so sad. Not so broken. A real will, above all, to revitalize the destroyed neighborhoods. At a meeting in a church at breakfast time, with Mort Mandell and Neighborhood Progress Inc., are gathered in great austerity a dozen or so men of means, with their slightly old-fashioned pearl-gray suits, white hair, and fine austere faces, successors to the Gunds, the Van Sweringens, the Jacobeses, those Protestant and Jewish philanthropists who flourished with the greatness of the city. With slides and diagrams at hand, they're thinking about how to rehabilitate the heart of this city which, even if they have deserted it, even if they went elsewhere to make their fortunes or their lives, remains their "little homeland." Here, too, deserted neighborhoods. Empty parking lots. Cars prowling along Euclid and Prospect, between East Fifth and East Sixth. Winos in municipal buildings. Empty or bricked-up churches, yet I keep being told about the renewal in America of evangelical faith and morality. A fire station with a sign, BUDGET CUTS ARE SUICIDE. A rotary planted with flowers that women feel sorry for and water since no one goes there anymore. And this detail, which didn't strike me in Buffalo: the absence of billboards on certain avenues. But on a wall next to a razed building, an inscription, in capital letters from the last century, reappearing the way wreckage washes up: ATTORNEY AT LAW. Farther on, in a vacant lot, on the last remaining wall of a vanished building, a sign from another time, preposterous witness to a previous life: THE HOTTEST JEANS ON TWO LEGS.

And finally Detroit, sublime Detroit, the city that during the war, because of its car and steel factories, called itself "the arsenal of democracy," but that once one has entered it—whether in the Brush Park area, north of downtown, or, worse, East Detroit—seems like an immense, deserted Babylon, a futuristic city whose inhabitants have fled: more burned or razed houses; collapsed façades and roofs that the next heavy

rain will carry away; trash heaps in former gardens; prowlers; dumpster divers; nature reasserting its rights; foxes, some nights; crack houses; closed schools; a liquor store ringed with barbed wire; the Fox Theatre intact, with its winged golden lions at the entrance; intact, too, the Wright houses and Orchestra Hall, where people walk decked in tuxedos into a doomsday environment; but the Book Cadillac Hotel and the Statler Hilton, those architectural wonders whose corbelled construction is museum quality, they are empty, and padlocked. At times you'd think it was a plague. At other times, Dresden or Sarajevo. An observer who knew nothing of the history of the city and the riots that, forty years ago, accelerated the exodus of the white population to the suburbs might think now that he was in a bombed metropolis. But no. It's just Detroit. It's just an American city whose inhabitants have left, forgetting to close the door behind them. It's just this experience, unique in the world, of a city that people have left as one leaves a spurned partner and that, little by little, has returned to chaos.

The mystery of these modern ruins. Enigma of an America about which I feel, at this stage of my journey, that a certain sentiment (essential to Europe's civility, consubstantial with Europe's urbanity) is perhaps on the verge of vanishing: a love of cities.

The Revenge of the Little Man

HE CAN'T MANAGE to say "stem cells" without tripping himself up. Stumbles over numbers and acronyms, beginning with that of the National Urban League, the black civil-rights defense organization to which he has been invited. He fumbles with unemployment rates and the number of primary school teachers in Ohio. He has, in his expression, in his eyes, which are set too close together, that faint look of panic that dyslexic children have when they think they're going to make a mistake and will be scolded for it but simply can't stop once they've started. He frowns with concern when he talks about the city's poor neighborhoods. Takes on a fake tough-guy look when he broaches the subject of Iraq. When he utters the word *America* or *army*, he stops short or, rather, stiffens as if at the sound of an invisible bugle.

I think about all that has been said about the ambivalence of his rela-

tionship with the earlier President Bush. I think about the discussion Alan Wolfe and I had the other evening about whether he started the war in Iraq in order to take revenge (Saddam humiliated my father, so I will humiliate Saddam) or in order to issue a huge Oedipal challenge (I'll do what he couldn't do—I'll obey another father, who is higher than my own, and who inspires me to actions he couldn't inspire in my father). The truth is that this man is something of a child. Whether he's dependent on his father, his mother, his wife, or God Almighty, he looks to me this morning like one of those humiliated children Georges Bernanos was so good at creating, showing that their hardness stemmed from their shyness and fear.

That said, watch out. This shy man is shrewd, too. This child is a cunning child. He's clever enough to call the president of the National Urban League, Marc Morial, by his first name, and to begin his speech, just after a prayer, with praise for the Detroit Pistons, the local basketball team. He has the talent to tell joke after joke and, like a good comedian warming up a difficult audience, to be the first to laugh, noisily, at his own wisecrack. He has the intelligence to call the two important black leaders who are sitting in the front row, Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, by their first names, too, so as to defuse their hostility. He does this also, after admitting that his party must earn the vote of African Americans, by saying to Reverend Jackson, "You don't need to nod your head so hard at that, Jesse," and to Reverend Sharpton, "It's hard to run for office, isn't it, Al?" Everyone in the audience remembers the battle Sharpton has just lost for nomination by the Democratic Party.

Detroit is a city where Bush has, as he knows, "a lot of work to do" to win the hearts of a community that four years ago voted 94 percent for Al Gore. He is in enemy territory. The two thousand people present came to see the man but don't share his ideology. Yet the trick is working. His riffs on the American dream and on small business; his audacity in attacking the power of bureaucracy and Washington, as if he hasn't been in the White House for four years; his vision of America as a blue-chip corporation in which all citizens are shareholders and that wants everyone to get only richer; his talk about Sudan, finally, and about the genocide (though he does not use the word, he says that he will do what he can, if he is elected, to see that the rulers of Khartoum bring an end

to the slaughter)—all of this ends up working. Nerve and naïveté. Tactical cleverness along with a certain candor. A delegate, as we are leaving, in the crush of radio and television teams that are asking the opinions of the attendees, says: "The son of a bitch—he got us..." Another one: "That was good, the part about Sudan!" That's what strikes me, too, of course. But, even stranger, it's also that look of a resourceful little boy, a bit mischievous, who has to work hard to be a candidate and a president.

I picture him, in his native Texas, as a difficult youth, an average student, rowdy, worrying his parents no end. I imagine him—like Sidney Blumenthal described him to me in Washington the other day—at Phillips Academy, and then at Yale, trailed by the reputation of a well-connected boy and snubbed by the rich sons of East Coast families who find him useful but a little country-bumpkinish. I see him then, quite clearly, as a provincial narcissist and a frustrated dilettante, a bad businessman, an overgrown daddy's boy whom the family manages to save from each of his semifailures. When was this pattern reversed? And how? Under whose influence, or under what influence, did the metamorphosis come about for the lover of backfiring cars and drinking bouts with his buddies, for the failure, the nice guy, the man no one for a long time would have thought had a chance of becoming anything at all? How did this man become a formidable machine capable of winning the most difficult competition in America and, when it comes down to it, on the planet? There are men—Bill Clinton, for example—you feel were born to be president. Others—John Kennedy—who were formed, trained, for the office. He is the opposite: born to lose; raised above all not to win. And, for this change of direction, this late-blooming grace that hasn't even had time to imprint itself on his face, no one has any real explanation—except him, when he talks about "grace," actually. And being "born again." Who knows?

A Jewish Model for Arab Americans

HOW CAN ONE be an Arab—I mean, Arab and American? How can one in post-9/11 America remain loyal to one's Muslim faith and not be taken for a bad citizen? For the inhabitants of Dearborn, Michigan, a

few miles west of Detroit, the question doesn't even arise. This town is a little special, of course. Its McDonald's, for instance, is halal. A supermarket is called Al Jazeera. There are mosques. I spot an old Ford with one of those personalized license plates that Americans love; it reads TALIBAN. And I quickly find that around River Rouge—the old Ford factory, parts of which are now reduced, like the Bethlehem Steel plant in Lackawanna, to rusted steel carcasses, useless pipes, empty silos, and half-destroyed warehouses in the middle of which trees are growing—conversations switch easily from Arabic to English and back. But all the people I meet, all the businessmen, politicians, community leaders, when I ask them how, in these times of al-Qaeda, these two interlinked identities can be combined, reply that actually everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds. The question of twofold allegiance that is poisoning the debate in France is not an issue here. Ahmed, wearing a turban like a Sikh, who sells utterly American sodas on Warren Avenue, says, "Of course there were problems; of course there was a backlash; of course the FBI agents came here to look for terrorists; but they didn't find any; we are exemplary American citizens, and they couldn't find any." Nasser M. Beydoun is a high-spirited young businessman, married to a Frenchwoman; it takes me a while to pick up that when he says "we," he doesn't mean "we Arabs" but "we Americans"; he tells me, in the large conference room of the American Arab Chamber of Commerce, of which he is a board member, "I was against the war in Iraq, but less for them, the Arabs, than for us, the Americans, this great nation with its fine culture, this exemplary democracy that's preparing a fate for itself as an occupying power." And then there's Abed Hammoud of the Arab American Political Action Committee, a small organization whose role, he tells me, is to interview, review, and eventually endorse candidates at all levels of local or national power. When Bush wrote him, in 2000, a beautiful page-and-a-half personal letter beginning with "Dear Abed"; when Kerry asked him what procedure he should follow to gain the support of the Arabs in Detroit and he sent Kerry a copy of the letter to inspire him; when, last January, he organized a series of telephone interviews for Kerry and for Wesley Clark and a representative of Howard Dean; when he had one of his teams follow around a candidate for the Illinois legislature and be present at all

his appearances and press conferences, even the smallest ones; when he finished off, this very morning, the information letter he sends to all his members—in all this, do I know what his example is? The Jews, obviously. The incredible success story that is the power of the Jewish community. What they succeeded in creating, this power they knew how to buy, to earn with the sweat of their brows, this path they made that led them to bring together all influences. "How can one not be inspired by that?" he asks. "We are fifty years late, I'll grant that; today they are ten times stronger than us; but you'll see, we'll get there; one day we'll be equal." I'm not saying this discourse is deprived of dubious undertones. Perhaps this restraint is purely tactical and the idea is still, in the end, to do not just as well as but better than a Jewish community that is identified, without its being said, as the very face of the enemy. And I felt in Beydoun also a strong reticence about Israel, whose existence he is careful not to question, but where it is "out of the question" for him to travel as long as the "Palestinian resistance" hasn't been granted its rights by the "occupation." But finally, the fact still remains. We are far from Islamberg, tucked away near the Catskills, that fundamentalist phalanstery I discovered during my investigation into the death of Daniel Pearl, where the terrorist ideologue Ali Shah Gilani is venerated. And we are even farther from those French suburbs where they shit on the flag and hiss at the national anthem, and where hatred for the country that has taken them in is equaled only by an anti-Semitism eager to shift into action. Fine American lesson. Admirable image of democracy at work—that is, of integration and compromise. There are 115,000 Arab Americans in the Detroit metropolitan area. There are about 1.2 million scattered through Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, and the rest of America. And despite Iraq, despite Bush, despite the hawks of the so-called clash of civilizations, these two traits dominate: the American dream, neither more nor less alive than in all the generations of Irish, Polish, German, or Italian immigrants who came before them; and, linked to that, a passion, an obsession, a mimetic rivalry, with a Jewish community that is regarded as an example and, at bottom, an obscure object of desire—a yearning to be, if I may say so, parodying the famous motto of French Jews before the Dreyfus affair, as happy as the Jews in America.

The Left Lane

ON THE ROAD again. The highway. The great Interstate 94, that leads to Chicago, which we must reach before tonight. Distance. Space. These centimeters on the map, so deceptive to a European. This sense of space and thus of time passing, which is the real sixth sense one has to acquire when traveling in America. And then this legalism, too, this extraordinary sense of the law and the rules, which shapes people's conduct in general and that of motorists in particular. No excessive speeding, for instance. No screaming matches from car to car, as we have in France. No way, either, even on the outskirts of Battle Creek, where the traffic is at a complete standstill, to persuade Tim, the young man who is driving, to try to make up a little time by using the breakdown lane. Or this other detail, perhaps even more bothersome, which says a lot about the anthropology of American automobile customs: in Europe the point of having a road with several lanes is to reserve one for slow cars, so that the fast ones, the ones in a hurry, which often happen to be the prettiest and most expensive cars, can drive as fast as they like in the lane reserved for them. Here that is not the case. Both lanes are being used at the same speeds. Quick and slow, big and little, and thus, whether you like it or not, rich and poor, powerful and weak—all use their lane of choice interchangeably. If you're late, try to blow your horn at the asshole who's blocking your way and who, in France, would comply and move over. You can shout "Get out of the way, moron, and let me pass!" all you like. That would make him give way in France. Here, not only will he not give way, not only will he keep going at his imperturbable pace, sure of his right of way, but you'll see through his window, if you finally manage to pass him, his indignant, alarmed, incredulous look: "Hey! Big and little, we're all in this together! This is an automobile democracy!" A real lesson, in the field, in equality of conditions, where we French flaunt our social distinctions, our privileges. And a real example, once again, of the perspicacity of Tocqueville, who, more than a century before the birth of the highway, noted that "the first and liveliest of the passions inspired by equality of status" is "the love of equality itself." There we are.

Another incident, mid-afternoon, no less Tocquevillean: seized by a strong need to piss and tired of Starbucks, McDonald's, and Pizza Hut, where there are almost always signs telling you the name of the guy who "cleaned this bathroom with pride" and the name of the "supervisor" whom you should call "for comments and compliments," I ask Tim to let me off at the edge of a quiet field bathed in sunlight. Scarcely have I begun when I hear behind me the roar of an engine followed by a screeching of brakes. I turn around. It's a police car.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm getting some fresh air."

"Getting fresh air is forbidden."

"Okay, I'm taking a piss."

"Taking a piss is forbidden, too."

"So, what on earth is allowed?"

"Nothing: it is forbidden to stop on highways, to hang around, to dawdle, and to piss."

"I didn't know—"

"I don't give a damn what you know. Keep moving."

"I'm French—"

"I couldn't care less if you're French—the law's the same for everyone. Keep moving."

"I wrote a book on Daniel Pearl."

"Daniel who?"

"And a book on the forgotten wars."

"What kind of wars?"

"I'm writing about following the path of Tocqueville—"

And suddenly, as the name Tocqueville is uttered, a sort of miracle occurs! The cop's face goes from suspicious to curious to almost friendly.

"Tocqueville—really? Alexis de Tocqueville?"

After I tell him yes, Alexis, I'm following in the footsteps of this great compatriot who, 170 years ago, must have passed somewhere near here, this temperamental guy, red with rage, who for all I know is getting ready to book me for inappropriate behavior, for sexual display on a

public highway, or, in any case, for "loitering with intent," looks at me with sudden affability and begins to ask me what, in my opinion, continues to be valid in Tocqueville's analysis.

Three conclusions to be drawn here. First, this "loitering with intent," which shows how paranoid American society after 9/11 has become. (Didn't I read the other day a story about a twenty-four-year-old Pakistani, Ansar Mahmood, who in the fall of 2001 was surprised as he was lingering near a water-treatment facility on the Hudson and was held in custody for almost three years before being deported?) Second, this command to "keep moving," which I had already noticed in the airports, and at the office in Washington where I went to get press badges, and in front of my hotel, which had the misfortune of being opposite the White House, and then again in New York, in front of the Ground Zero barricades: Paranoia again? Security obsession? Or a much deeper anxiety, ingrained in the American ethos, when faced with the very idea that movement can stop? And third, despite all that, the extraordinary image of this ordinary Michigan cop, a little stubborn, whose face lit up at the mere mention of this French friend of his country—what better reply to those who keep telling us that America is a country of backward cowboys and uneducated people? And what a magnificent challenge to those who want to use Francophobia as the last word these days in our transatlantic relations!

Chicago Transfer

"OH, NO," RICHARD DALEY, the mayor of Chicago, exclaimed yesterday evening during the inauguration of Millennium Park, which will be the pride of his city. "You aren't going to write us up, like all the visitors who are in a hurry and greedy for the sensational, as just the homeland of Chicago gangs, are you?" Daley, standing, somewhat tipsy, flushed in a slightly too tight tuxedo, boasted about this other Chicago, the real one, the one that, through his father's willpower and then his own, through the talent of Daniel Hudson Burnham and then of Edward H. Bennett, the city's architects, its landscapers, its Hausmanns; and thanks also to the simple decision to open up the city onto the lake and let the light in, has become this magical, beautiful city, perhaps the most

beautiful city in the United States, whose apotheosis he is now celebrating along with two thousand handpicked guests. Mayor Daley is right. And I like the passion he shows as he talks about his taste for urbanism itself, his obsessions with ecology and art, his crusade for "green roofs," hanging gardens, lakeside towers, and also for Frank Lloyd Wright and Mies van der Rohe. I like the idea of the other artists (Anish Kapoor and Frank Gehry, Jaume Plensa and Kathryn Gustafson) he has managed to attract for this park, with the help of the successors to the old magnates of steel, chewing gum, and sausages who made the city's first fortunes—with the help and money of all these new philanthropists parading past him in their evening gowns, their tuxedos, their face-lifts.

Except . . . except that there is also the city conjured by James T. Farrell. There is, despite Daley's protests, the Chicago of junkies, bums, whores, freaks, and hoodlums portrayed by Nelson Algren (and Otto Preminger). There is—still on the subject of Nelson Algren—an astounding story that says a lot about the propensity of the city's inhabitants to forget its shadowy side: on Evergreen Street one can still see the apartment where Algren lived; after Algren's death the street was christened Nelson Algren Street before being quickly, almost immediately, rechristened Evergreen Street after formal protests by residents who did not think the novelist of the dregs of society was worthy of such commemoration.

There is this other part of the city, about which no one wants to speak, but which I took time this morning to explore a little: Chinatown; the neighborhood of the insane, released en masse decades ago; the slums on Sacramento Avenue; the division between Lawndale and La Villita, "The Little Village," mostly black on one side and mostly Hispanic on the other; there is this other city, where the signs are in Spanish, where you can eat only tortillas and tacos, where the supermarket is called La Ilusión and the butcher is Aguas Calientes. There is this other city, where the Latin Kings gang is still, after thirty years, waging its long war against the Two Sixers gang.

"Two Sixers," I am told, not without scorn, by the young Hispanic who is guiding me down Broadway to the famous Green Mill, half jazz club, half cocktail lounge, where, it is said, Al Capone was a regular. "Just 'Two Sixers.' Two and six. Like Twenty-sixth Street. Isn't that to-

tally stupid—to call yourself the name of the street where you were born? We don't give a damn. We're the biggest gang in the city, with branches all over the country. The only problem is when the bastards come taunt us or try to pick up one of our girls right in front of us. We don't put up with that, and there can be fighting."

And there was a lot of fighting. Gunfire near the Pilsen neighborhood. A punitive expedition against two blacks who, eight days before, had disrupted a Latin Kings wedding. Another member of the Latin Kings had discovered on the Internet that the Two Sixers had made fun of the famous crown, the gang's symbol. Another incident: a member of the Two Sixers who saw, with his own eyes, a Latin King mimicking the victory sign that, in principle, is the rally sign of the Sixers. And yet another settling of accounts, linked to a matter of unpaid rent. The result of all this shows at the courthouse on California Avenue, where I have a meeting this morning with Judge Paul B. Biebel: forty-five men, mostly black and Hispanic, arrested overnight. That's a lot, forty-five. It's too many for the handsome courtrooms whose coffered ceilings go back to the days of Mafia capos and a different kind of crime. And it's so much too much that they have to be assembled elsewhere, in a basement room, where they get processed by videoconference: "Do you speak English? Name? Age? Occupation?" And the procession on the video of the faces of these small-time juvenile delinquents, shabby and blank-looking, most of them with no home or job, who seem to have stepped out of the pages of one of the city's native sons, Richard Wright. One monitor for the families, also packed in, but within waiting rooms with bulletproof glass, and another monitor for the judges, who yawn as they listen to these meager, frightened narratives in which the same stories keep emerging, of drug addiction, unemployment, mentally retarded people who never should have left the institution, two-time losers.

The big shots of crime are merry. Thinking the city had become dangerous for their beloved children, they emigrated to the fashionable suburbs, where they live a perfectly bourgeois life as elegant, almost respectable followers of law and order. Perhaps—God knows—a few of them even present, last night, at the inauguration of Millennium Park.

The God of Willow Creek

THE BANKS IN America look like churches. But here is a church that looks like a bank. It has the coldness of a bank. Its futuristic, somber architecture. No cross, no stained-glass windows, no religious symbols at all. It is ten o'clock in the morning. The faithful are beginning to pour in. Or perhaps one should say "the public." Video screens light up pretty much everywhere. A curtain rises to the side of the stage, revealing a picture window that opens onto a landscape of lakes and greenery. And now the bank begins to resemble a congress.

On the stage a man and a child in shorts, under a tent, discuss the origin of the world, eating popcorn.

A female rock singer is thunderously applauded, her shouts repeated in chorus by the five thousand people present: "I'm here to meet with you. . . . Come and meet with me. . . . Drive me into your arms. . . ."

Another man, in jeans and sneakers, jumps onto the stage: "Let's speak to our Creator." Then, to heaven, his hands cupping his mouth: "Yes, Creator, talk to us!" This, too, is repeated by the audience.

And then the same man turns back to the congregation, his voice scarcely able to rise above the noise of the guitars and drums: "Lee Strobel! Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Lee Strobel, who's coming back to us from California with his new book! On *The New York Times* bestseller list! TV celebrity! Give him a big round of applause, ladies and gentlemen!"

At which point Lee Strobel arrives, a man about fifty years old with a sales-rep smile on a plump face, also wearing jeans and sneakers, and a nylon jacket—and between the two men, in this place of faith and prayer, this dialogue:

"My goodness! Our minister has changed his hairdo!"

"Bingo! You got that right! Barbra Streisand sent me her hairstylist!"

"And what have you come to talk to us about today?"

"I hesitated between 'Saving Your Marriage,' 'Rediscovering Your Self-Esteem,' and the 'Fit for Him' program that teaches you how to lose weight through faith. But I finally decided in favor of the subject of my last book: *God Proven by Science and Scholars*."

A few gags. A quotation from the Epistle to the Romans. Then the lights go down. Now, on the main screen, sound effects blaring, a video begins, titled *In the Heart of DNA*, which shows a camera zooming inside a cell, exploring it, getting lost, encountering a thousand obstacles. Then interviews with "former atheists" who have a whole string of academic titles explaining how at the end of this maze, à la *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, there is God.

"The problem is Darwin," Lee Strobel says, in a tone that makes him sound as if he's advertising a product rather than preaching a sermon. "That's the subject of my book: if Darwin is right, then life develops all on its own and God is out of a job. Do you want God to be out of a job?"

The faithful murmur no, they don't want God to be out of a job.

"It's like the miracle of bacteria—take one atom away from bacteria and it's no longer bacteria. Isn't that proof that God exists? Isn't that proof that the Bible tells the truth? That, too, is demonstrated in my book."

This former journalist—who in another book tells how his marriage nearly foundered when his wife became a Christian and was then salvaged when he converted, too—finds ways to quote himself eight times in one hour. So when the time for book signing arrives, several hundred of us are waiting quietly in line in the cafeteria, between airport-security cordons, to have him scribble "Hi, Matt!" or "Hi, Doug!" for us, accompanied by a promotional smile.

"French?" he asks me, looking slightly put off, when my turn comes. "French, yes. And atheist."

Then this reply, as though he has changed his mind: "Oh! That's okay. . . . In that case, say the atheist's prayer—that works for the French, too."

He closes his eyes, puts his left hand on his heart while continuing to scrawl an almost illegible "Hi, Berniel!" with his right, and says, "God, if you are there, show yourself." That's the atheist's prayer."

Lee Strobel is not the pastor of Willow Creek. Because the holder of that title happens to be away, Strobel is just filling in. But the scenario, I am told by a couple, my neighbors in line, is always the same. The other churches are dying because they're churches of yes-men who come there

without knowing why. Not us. We're a living church. Our ministers are of our time, just as Christ was of his time. And we make it a point of honor to have a useful religion: prayer channels, sharing and discussing visions, organizing telephone services transmitted to brothers and sisters in distress, mowing old people's lawns, feeding the neighbors' dog when they're on vacation, cleaning the toilets at Starbucks. . . . "There's a lot for a Christian to do!"

Inspired by a former member of the Baptist church on the Avenue du Maine in Paris, deliberately "nondenominational" and, because of this, using every marketing technique to target a maximum number of customers—sorry—potential faithful, the Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois, draws 17,500 worshippers every weekend and has 10,000 affiliated churches dotting the country. Power? Political influence and aim? That remains to be seen. What is obvious is the power of a religion whose secret is, perhaps, simply to get rid of the distance, the transcendence, and the remoteness of the divine that are at the heart of European theologies. A present God this time; a God who is there, behind the door or the curtain, and asks only to show himself; a God without mystery; a good-guy God, almost a human being, a good American, someone who loves you one by one, listens to you if you talk to him, answers if you ask him to—God, the friend who has your best interests at heart.

The Sense of the Tragic, Knoxville Style

THEY GIVE ME, at the Hotel Fort Des Moines, the room that's reserved, eight days from now, for John Kerry.

I write down this detail because it's the first thing the receptionist tells me as I'm registering.

Better than that, they've taken care to display on my night table, next to a framed photo of the candidate playing the guitar, a plate of cheese wrapped in cellophane identical to the one that will be served to him on the evening of his arrival and, in another frame, a copy of the fax sent by his press secretary detailing his minibar preferences: "Mixed nuts; chocolate chip cookies; diet soda (preferably Diet Coke in the can); bottled water; plain M&M's (no peanuts); regular Doritos."

The craze for the relic, this time. A taste for preservation and for the museum, taken to the nth degree. No longer, as in Cooperstown, the artificial as opposed to the authentic. Nor is it as in Dearborn, where, the other day, I visited Henry Ford's Americana museum: everything that has existed will, one day or another, end up in a museum; even if it's under the heading "fake," we might as well make a museum of everything right away. But, even more striking, more extravagant: yes, everything is becoming a relic; a mere plate of cheese is becoming a museum piece, but the museum piece is a plate of cheese that has not been eaten yet, or even served—it's a kind of antemuseum, a prerelic, an extension into the realm of memory of what has not yet taken place.

Tour of Des Moines, this city with such an odd name, "Of the Monks." Lost in the middle of nowhere, without charm, it must have been, during the time of the French, a great stopping place.

A quick visit to the Iowa State Fair, which opened this morning and which, with its life-size cow made of butter, its prize for the fattest fowl, its giant hot dogs, seems to be a festival of American kitsch.

But my real aim, what I came here for, is Knoxville, twenty miles east, where what the *The Des Moines Register* (which, it must be said, doesn't skimp on adjectives for the Iowa State Fair) calls "the greatest car race in the world," the Knoxville Nationals, is beginning its forty-fourth running.

WELCOME TO KNOXVILLE, says a little road sign. Right next to it, on another, larger sign, are written the names of all the churches in town, most of them evangelical. Then, at the end of a complex of warehouses that contain the drivers' pits along with pizzerias and stands selling hamburgers, T-shirts, and French fries, is another Hall of Fame, where spectators are lining up; this is, in effect, another church, where the names of the greatest drivers—A. J. Foyt, Jr., Mario Andretti, Karl Kinser—are venerated. And then, finally, the oval track, surrounded by stands full to the brim but surprisingly quiet: five or six thousand people are there, mostly white, wearing shorts, cowboy hats or hunters' caps, and plaid shirts. It's a while before I realize that they're so quiet, so far from the European image of wild crowds of fans, because . . . they're praying.

Taking a closer look, I see that the drivers, too, are praying. There are about a hundred of them in the central part of the oval, gathered in

groups in which one can make out, despite the distance, a sort of subtle hierarchy of allegiances and merits. They have embraced their families. Exchanged a few last words with their managers. Thanked the "dirt crews," those paid volunteers who came from all over the country for the honor of riding around the track in their pickup trucks several hours before the race in order to pack down the sacred ground and give it good traction. The race drivers are getting ready to climb into their cars, built to their size and almost molded to their bodies; topped with the two air-foils that are meant to keep them on the ground; heads in helmets, helmets attached to the seats, so that the drivers, however often they roll over, will still be one with their machines. Perhaps, at that instant, the most superstitious among them have one final thought for the martyr Mark Wilson, who died in a crash here in 2001. And so they pray.

When, after the final parade, the contest actually begins; when, after they've turned and turned again around the track like Achilles and Hector before the ramparts of Troy, the heroes really speed up in earnest, in bunches of eight or ten, in a deafening, hellish roar; when the real champions detach themselves and, with the crowd holding its breath, confront one another in a swift and violent duel that never lasts more than a few dozen seconds, the match takes on the feeling of a joust, an ordeal, an epic and merciless tournament. And then one senses that it is death that's leading the dance—one senses that the drivers are taking all the risks and that the spectators, excited but still silent, deep down, both dread and hope for an accident. Theater of cruelty. Waiting, as in duels or at public executions, for the moment of first blood. This ferocity, this violence, which had been commonplace in American society but which has been on the whole eliminated over the centuries and to which it yields nowadays only through marginal ceremonies like this one. Knoxville, or the memory of the accursed share of the American past.