

by FRED INGLIS

*Loneliness as a Way of Life*

by Thomas Dumm

Harvard University Press 208pp \$23.95

ISBN 978-0-674-03113-5

published September 2008

In 1992 Anthony Giddens published *The Transformation of Intimacy*, in which he avowedly turned to the language of the agony column and the therapist in order to evaluate the vast changes which had come over the ordinary domestic life of the feelings. Despite snobbish murmurs from the common room at King's, the thing was a triumph of both delicacy and enlightenment.

Such a venture demands the gifts of the novelist as well as those of a journalist of genius. No wonder that not many professors have a shot at it, however much it is their clear intellectual duty to do so.

Thomas Dumm has both the nerve and the breeziness of disposition to attempt the transfiguration of his own, utterly unlooked-for bereavement into an essay on the condition of America. At least, he doesn't say 'America', he says 'we'; but it is a condition of America just now that its people still suppose themselves to be the future, and therefore type and token of how the whole world is and will be.

So he begins (rather than ends) with the assumption of our universal loneliness, which he finds presaged in a powerful selection of all-American writers and movie-makers plus Shakespeare – Miller, Melville, Emerson, Stanley Cavell, Wim Wenders (naturalised by making *Paris, Texas*). The shocking and premature loss of his wife to cancer and the terrible loneliness which ensued give him permission to generalise his condition to the experience of modernity.

Once decided upon such a drastic move, he has a long tradition to invoke, from the Talmud to the camps of totalitarianism as theorised so laboriously by Hannah Arendt. In this invocation Dumm appears as likeable, literate, conscientiously liberal – the text is sprinkled with references to George Bush's catastrophic presidency by way of tying together private and public worlds – and living a life of utter desolation. But more than that, there is plenty to

him: qualities of character that are bracing, tough, even jolly and comradely in tone and reference. This is not a man to palter with. But he still doesn't know what he is trying to do. To find out, he has pretty well to set down whatever comes into his head.

So there is not much argument in the book, still less a nod to rationality. Rather, it is a work of unremitting mournfulness and a flatly didactic manner. Do not, however, be put off by this. For in the examples of the prison-house of loneliness in which Dumm incarcerates himself, there are beautiful essay notes on the American tragedy of the salesman's death, on Cordelia's refusal of her father's pleading vanity, on W E B du Bois describing the death of his son, on the lonely hero of *Moby Dick*, left at the end calmly sailing to perdition on his coffin and an empty ocean.

Melville's haunting image, however, gives the lie to something false in Dumm's will-to-unhappiness which a cheerful European may point at and use to unlock his claustrophobic cell and let him out. Ishmael, in the mighty novel, is himself full of cheer as well as mischievous and very funny. My intuition is that Dumm also is in truth a gregarious and witty man, a powerful teacher and popular figure at Amherst, surely one of the prettiest and least plausible places in which to feel lost and homeless.

Dumm's literary and film criticism, however, leads us through the usual gerunds of the therapist's grammar – being, having, loving, grieving – but he has forgotten the fifty-year-old warning posted by Philip Rieff against the triumph of the therapeutic. Tender in his evocation of assorted solitudes, he seeks their reparation only in the dire abstractions of a murmuring confessor. Moreover, although he mentions her, he fails to notice the difference between Joan Didion's lament for her dead husband in *The Year of Magical Thinking* and his own pious discovery, with the help of Freud at his worst, that "there is a regression of libido into the ego, brought about by the ego identification as a way of coping with the loss of the loved object". What on earth can one do with this sort of stuff, if one is trying to find a kind of solace? Dumm is much given to rhetorical questions, but they are too blank to be much help. Questions are the whole point of thought. He needs to make his a damn sight sharper.

Instead of Dumm's lapse into cloudy gibberish, Didion by contrast candidly admits she was off her head for a year, while bringing her gifts as stony novelist and dry-mouthed political journalist to dramatise that experience. No dreary invocations of 'coping' for her, nor

anything of Judith Butler (to whom Dumm then turns so improbably for help – doesn't he know how lethally Martha Nussbaum beat her up? ), whose preposterous aria depended on by Dumm was contributed in her usual mixture of the demotic and the impenetrable to the revolting and sentimental chorus sung by the American intelligentsia at Ground Zero.

One's conclusion has to be, at the end of this desperate but also unforgettable book, that Dumm was suborned on his way to writing a loving masterpiece by the wrong, the fashionable reading list of the contemporary campus. Quite right to pick Shakespeare and co., of course, but not the dismal laments at human dividedness and the incurability of paradox which he takes too readily from Michel Foucault, Emmanuel Levinas, the always lowering Giorgio Agamben, and further back from that old gasbag Thoreau.

One is just about to say to him, as he moves to a conclusion, "Pull yourself together – for goodness' sake, for the sake of your children, for the sake of good old life" ("I'm not a pair of curtains"), when he does just that. The medicine he needed might have come from D H Lawrence, but he doesn't mention him. Writing about Fenimore Cooper, Lawrence said of America, "... the love, the democracy, the floundering into lust, is a sort of by-play. The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer. It has never yet melted."

Dumm finds his way out through a journey to Ethiopia during one of its many local wars, prowling the vast remnants of the vanished empire, finding that the noble monuments of written literature re-enact the company of friends whom he had lost. The true subject of this arresting book – or so I am impertinent enough to claim – is the soul of America as it is to be found in the grim details of one very tough egg's harsh bereavement, and the tremendous politics which surround him, now being re-played in the election.

The help he has in this is the help we all can find in a great nation's great literature. But if Lawrence is right, the soul of that nation is hard and isolate and unmelted. Dumm's own soul sounds at times a bit like that. Perhaps his ordinary unhappiness as well as the busyness of ordinary life prevents him seeing further.