Small but Standing Tall: Harold Gray’s Little Orphan Annie and the pre-New Deal American Ideal

[Note: The text below is, as it were, an op-ed piece by a superannuated Gray-inspired curmudgeon.]

Are you a conservative?

If your answer to this question is “Yes,” then arguably you should not be a conservative – you’re unqualified. But if your answer is “No,” then you may want to think about becoming one.

OK, what’s the catch?

What else could it be except that a good case can be made for conservatism being something other than what our contemporaries, conservatives included, think it is? But how could there be a difference? Don’t conservatives, in the spirit of Edmund Burke, at least try to conserve traditional valuations? And if conservatism doesn’t consist in conserving, what is it?

First, let’s ask Miss Nomer, a literary hackette at least as overworked as her famous cousin Madame Malaprop, what’s not the catch.

Then let’s ask an 88 year old, red-headed orphan girl with a dog named Sandy what the catch is.
Stemming as it obviously does from the Latin word for “free,” “liberal” is clearly one of Miss Nomer’s prize confections, though not her pièce de résistance. A political ethos whose logical endgame is to legislate, regulate and court-order the life of citizens until all that’s not obligatory is forbidden can be called many things, but the stuff of freedom it is not. And though she knows full well that liberals certainly spend freely, Miss Nomer is quick to cackle that liberality is the virtue of freely giving out of one’s own substance, not the flinging of largesse culled by coercion from others. Indeed, warmed by a mid-morning tumbler or two of spirituous liquor, she is wont to stare balefully at her pay stub and mutter wetly about slaves in Ancient Rome or the ante-bellum South whose wages at shipyards and the like were appropriated by their masters — minus, of course, a pittance left for them to live on, or to try to. The only thing left, she wheezes between clenched, gin-soaked teeth, is to “get the snake.” (A quaint phrase coined, not by her, but by workers of an older day. Living in a company town, they and their families shopped perforce at the company stores, lived in company houses, went to company doctors, etc., with the result that their Saturday pay envelope could contain no pay! Rather, it might have a chit saying how much they owed the company for their week’s work. “Load sixteen tons and what do you get?”)

Why then are some of Miss Nomer’s fruitiest snorts — and, on pay day, her most hair-raising maledictions — reserved for “conservative,” a term that her rancid heart prizes even above “liberal” as the paragon of her art?

Is it because, whether they be paleo or neo, today’s conservatives acquiesce, nay glory, in being called “cons”? An indelicate French term for the most intimate part of the female anatomy, it is widely used in the additional sense of “dim-witted,” which meaning could be said to be self-validated in the case of those dumb enough to call themselves “cons.” Hey, insulting you is your enemies’ job, not yours! No misnomer here!

Or does Miss Nomer’s disdain stem from pique that conservatives, again flouting her by eschewing misnomer, like the “stand-patters” of a century ago do in fact strive to conserve?
Or instead is it political, stemming from the particular traditions that today’s conservatives are committed to conserving? For we live in age that has seen, not only the triumph, but the enshrinement of the Progressive program of the 1910s; of the New Deal agenda of the 1930s-40s; of the Great Society’s wish list of the 1960s; of myriad accretions to the same; and of the vast expansion of governmental authority that has come in response to every war and security threat since Woodrow Wilson’s day. Is it really conservative to acquiesce in conserving a century’s triumphs of big government liberalism, albeit on the plea that your functionaries can do it at a little less cost? Small wonder that Miss Nomer fumes that the only real choice facing the taxpayer is having bites taken out of you by big, voracious, spotted hyenas or by a rival pack of the striped variety, slightly smaller beasts with marginally smaller teeth and smaller stomachs to fill.

In the proverbial nutshell: in American politics, triumphant liberalism has become the very soul of the political traditions that conservatives, as they are traditionalists, are committed to conserving! Even from the right, the only real cavils concern how the triumphant liberal status quo can be administered less noxiously or kept from expanding even more aggressively. The tired rhetorical ritual of denouncing “Big Government” is enacted at whiles to show that one has not forgotten the ancient faith, but without result beyond the soothing effect of ritual itself. No one even dreams of rolling back the New Deal and re-learning how to “Keep cool with Coolidge,” of going back to a day and an ethos when the pre-liberal mindset was so much taken for granted it was hardly seen as an “-ism” at all. (Unless it was “Americanism,” a term which, in the lexicon of today’s rhetoric, would express something between know-nothing parochialism and hate speech.)

But if you would like to hark back to an older ethos – nay, see it in action – then look into the time scope of what was once one of the newspapers’ most wildly popular sections. (During the newspaper strike of July 1945 New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia read the latest installments over the radio to his eager constituents.) The reference is of course to the tiny windows into the souls of our grandparents and great-grandparents that their day called ‘the funnies,’ no matter how tragic or violent they might be --
a conspicuous success of Miss Nomer’s early or ‘blue’ period. Perusing handsome, well annotated volumes of re-prints, you can follow from its beginning the career of a ruggedly individualistic red-headed orphan girl whose gutsiness (or, more tritely, ‘spunk’) has passed into legend. She is of course Harold Gray’s Little Orphan Annie, whose philosophy of self-reliance and disdain for governmental and other do-gooders (derided in some quarters then as ‘goo-goos’) mark her as a die-hard opponent of the New Deal before it happened, during its establishment, and, as a veritable ‘last ditcher,’ after it triumphed.¹

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After a stint in a Dickensian orphanage that only makes her stronger, Annie famously finds a home with two-fisted self-made zillionaire Daddy Warbucks. But alas, Warbucks is better at making money than keeping it. For example, in one episode (begins 6/1/31) we find him dead broke and stone blind, but through hard work, guts, and an eye (sorry) for the main chance, he rebuilds his fortune anew. Moreover, he is almost as good at losing Annie as he is at losing fortunes. When, as frequently happens, his far-flung business interests call him to exotic but lawless parts of the world, he makes provisions for Annie’s care that inevitably fall through, forcing her and her dog Sandy to take to the roads and make their way as best they can.

But though often down and out, does she ever declare defeat and surrender herself to social workers? Or seek food kitchens? Or indeed seek freebies of any kind from any one? (We should remember that there was once a stigma attached to accepting ‘charity’.) Not on your life. To the extent that she must rely on the kindness of others – and she always finds a way to repay their kindness in kind -- it is from others whose friendship she has earned, and who prop her up only long enough for her to find a way to stand on her own feet. For example, early in the strip she is taken in for a time by a farm family called the

Silos (begins 2/2/25) and later by a kindly old couple called the Futiles (begins 8/31/32). (No surprise that the latter are a rough embodiment of what Theodore Roosevelt, whom Gray greatly admired, called the ‘weak good.’ Throughout the strip, Gray shows a John Bunyanesque penchant for names that proclaim. Annie’s wanderings are a ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’ in more senses than one.)

If there is a social safety net in Gray’s strip, it consists in a web of what Aristotle called ‘friendships of virtue.’ Bonds are formed with others who share and admire your qualities, and who for this reason will freely lend not only moral but, when needed, tangible support. For the latter is a significant part of the ancient ideal of friendship; ‘Friends’ things are in common’ as the Greek proverb had it. Unlike common friends, for whom material need acts on friendship like a solvent, in Gray’s strip good if plain folk take a quiet if unobtrusive joy in rising to the level of this older ideal.

Friends’ support for Annie is always like a quick boost from a fellow climber. It is in a way deserved, for it is sparked by respect for the gallant struggles of a little girl who is dead game even if, at present, down and out. If she (and Gray) had a motto, it could well be the old chestnut ‘It’s a great life if you don’t weaken.’

And, very importantly, in the strip the assistance of friends knows how to be discreet and thus respectful. Always unsolicited - for to ask for help (‘charity’) is to imply that one is, pathetically, at the end of one’s powers and wits – it is often given behind the scenes lest the recipient, Annie, be aware and so hurt or offended.

As for the government, it is typically portrayed as worlds removed from being, not only a desirable, but even a possible source of ‘entitlement’ or ‘security.’ People being what they are, democracy is what it is. The voice of the sovereign ‘pee-pul,’ fanned to a gale by venal and demagogic politicians like Claude Claptrap, mistrusts, resents and would level down successful citizens such as Warbucks et hoc
The self-reliant simply ignore it as much as possible. This includes the police, who at times smilingly admire from the sidelines those who are resourceful enough to handle their own affairs without outside interference from the law.

When, in a revealing Sunday page (1/8/28), bigger, older bullies drive Annie away from the newsstand where she is earning a small living selling papers, does she yell for the police? For social workers? Appeal for help to passers-by? Like blazes! Rather, she lures the bullies into pursuing her through a narrow opening in a board fence where they can only emerge one at a time. (The ruse might bring to mind the low narrow entrance to the ‘safe room’ of a medieval castle, especially since at the top of this Sunday page Annie and her dog Sandy are shown in armor, defiantly defending their castle against all comers.) As the biggest bully pushes himself through the fence, Annie proceeds to settle his hash with a length of two-by-four vigorously applied to the skull. “Huh! Think they can ruin my business and get away with it, eh? An’ they tell you to forgive and forget – huh! ! Not while I’ve got my health – if you’re too proud or scared to fight for what’s yours yuh don’t deserve to have anything.”

“No while I’ve got my health” – that is, no quitting, no passive acceptance of unjust treatment unless fate has put you physically hors de combat. (By the bye, the words “too proud . . . to fight” would have immediately reminded a contemporary audience of Woodrow Wilson’s use of the same words in reaction to the Lusitania sinking. It is a sentiment that had no more appeal to Annie’s creator than it did to Theodore Roosevelt, Wilson’s arch-critic and antipode.)

Like Gray, who was an accomplished boxer, Annie has not only the punch but the heart of a fighter. An implicit believer in final causes, she acts on the assumption that if we have two feet, they are for us

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2 In one of the strips most famous episodes (March 3 – September 5, 1935), the humanitarian Warbucks is striving to keep a transformative invention (Eonite) from falling disastrously into evil hands and to make it, through his own private efforts, available for the great good of all. But inventor and invention both perish in ashes owing to a riotous mob. For the ‘pee-pul’ have been deliberately goaded into a resentful rage by a venal and narcissistic politician, himself the catspaw of a power-hungry rogue capitalist. The saga of Eli Eon and his invention, pitting Warbucks and his friends against the likes of Claude Claptrap, J. Gordon Slugg and, not least, the public, develops and showcases many of the strip’s most characteristic themes. In The Complete Little Orphan Annie it is found in volume 6.
to stand on. Like her many friend and reciprocal (self) helper Jack Boot, she scorns the “petty cruelty of professional uplifters and officious busybodies.” When he comes into money, he will use it to found a “home for other little people like Annie – a real home.” That is, one much unlike the callous state run aid factories Annie has hitherto suffered in and escaped from.

Do Annie and her friends prize her self-reliance more than safety and security? Or do they, and Gray, think that relying on yourself is the best way to be secure in the long run? Can you really expect others, even if they should be well-intentioned, and no matter how cozy a salary they draw for helping you, to care about your life more than you do?

America from the New Deal on does not do much to refute Sallust’s glum dictum that “Few desire freedom, most are content with fair masters.” To which Gray and Annie effectively retort: Nuts! If we think of the famous fable of the dog and the wolf in La Fontaine, we can see that Annie, like many Americans of Gray’s day, consistently and emphatically sides with the wolf. Better to be free and independent, even if sometimes famished and often insecure (“rien d’assuré”), then to be regularly fed by a master but always to obey, to wear a collar and to be on a leash.

Even in the funny papers life is often far from funny. But Gray’s gospel is that in the long run you fare best by standing tall, and on your own feet.

In Annie this holds not only for the usual vicissitudes of life – the ‘ordinary fortunes of war,’ so to speak – but even in the face of the most crushing reverses. And so, in a sequence noted above, the once rich as Croesus magnate Warbucks, though reduced to blindness and destitution, staggers but does not fall. Though devastated he is not crushed. With Annie’s help and his own grit he sets out to rebuild his life, going forward as best he can with hope or without it.

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3 For example, the orphanage run by the choleric Miss Asthma, Annie’s ‘home’ at the strip’s opening, and the County Farm run by the sadistic Mrs. Durance and her family (begins 9/8/36).
In a later day this attitude will show itself in the spirit of Churchillian defiance when England, alone and almost unarmed after Dunkirk, awaits Nazi invasion. There will be no surrender, or even negotiations. These are simply out of the question. If they come, “Take one with you.”

In a later tale it will be the quiet but ever-deepening resolve of two very ordinary Hobbits going alone into the horror of Mordor – hope and despair become simply irrelevant, for the task is theirs and it must be done.

In fine, Gray’s gospel would have it that heroic resistance to life’s setbacks is not just the job of a handful of famous heroes. Rather, it is part of the everyday task, perhaps even the everyday duty, of ordinary people. At one level it is a terrifying message: you want me to do this? At another, it may seem needless: why strain to be heroic if we can outsource our solutions? Why not let social engineering mitigate our misfortunes (though perhaps by leveling our fortunes)? But at the deepest level Gray speaks to his audience with the profoundest respect, for he takes for granted that we are not perpetual minors, of necessity the ward of some social collective, but that we and no others are fit to be entrusted with final responsibility for the only life we will ever have. For Gray, as for Milton, we are created free to fall but sufficient to stand.

At one point in the strip Annie has a chance to settle down into a loving home and, so far as can be foreseen, bring her adventures to an end (9/27 – 10/3/36). Instead, the episode gives us a ‘road-ending’ characteristic of the Chaplin films of the day. But whereas the Little Tramp has typically failed to find the happiness and security of a home, the Little Redhead deliberately gives both a fond farewell. The road is its own vocation and its own reward. On it you find, not adventure merely, but the scope for your powers that bestows a joy on life that is all the greater for being earned. As she tramps the long miles to the next big town she confides her feelings to her dog: “Th’ smells, noises, millions o’ folks – havin’ to think quicker and move faster than th’ next guy, if y’uh s’pect to eat reg’lar – whatever it is, it sure puts
snap and ginger into us, eh, Sandy?” The reply, an enthusiastic “Arf,” can be taken as Gray’s last word on the subject.

Child though she is, Annie has much in her of the “man in the arena” of Theodore Roosevelt’s famous speech, “striving valiantly” though with a face often “marred by dust and sweat and blood.” Though kin she has none – she doesn’t even have a last name – friends she has in plenty, winning them wherever she goes. Though small in body, her spirit stands tall. And wherever her roads takes her, she meets what fortune throws at her half-way and head-on.

So then, would you like to pay a visit to a once (and future?) America where, along with so much else, you can still see a non-liberal conservatism in its natural habitat? If so, then, as the old saying goes, “I’ll see you in the funny papers.” The old ones, of course!