

LA PAGLIA

For the last year, this column has taken a look at some of the candidates for president in the 2008 election. Are there more stepping into it? It's likely, yes. But for now we're taking a detour and profiling, in the next few issues, people whose writing has cut through the political debate with sparkling clarity whose words, illuminated on computer screens in dark dens across America, are leaking into the mainstream media and whose thinking may be helping to pave a third way in American politics.

Camille Paglia has been kicking the politically correct in the shins for the last 17 years. She's one of those people who move through the American landscape of ideas wildly famous and larger than life among the intellectually hungry, yet never seen on television or spoken of in the great universities. Until now, Paglia's influence has been limited to those who happened upon her. But that may be about to change.

The author of the 1990 book *Sexual Personae* ("a radical reappraisal of the human condition," according to the *Times Literary Supplement* and "an enormous sensation of a book," according to Harold Bloom), Paglia just returned from a six-year sabbatical to her column on Salon.com—and some of her first pronouncements have appeared as links on the Drudge Report like lightning bolts shot down from the heavens. There was "Paglia: 'Man is too weak to permanently affect nature'" on April 11, just after a big report on climate change, and "Paglia: 'Throughout most of human history men have been armed, but with swords, not guns'" on April 22, just after the massacre at Virginia Tech.

She labored in obscurity through the '70s and '80s and then, after the publication of *Sexual Personae*, began tearing through the '90s, gathering up thousands of fans, many of them libertarian or semi-right-leaning recent college graduates who'd had their fill of political correctness. One of them was Rod Dreher, who wrote for *National Review* and the *New York Post* and is now a conservative columnist with the *Dallas Morning News*. "One thing that was endearing about Camille is she always made the right enemies," says Dreher, who first came upon Paglia when, in his 20s, he saw an altar to her in the home of an acquaintance (a real altar, he

says, with candles burning). He says he thinks conservatives find the most resonance with Paglia's classicism, and her criticism that literary theory and gender theory fail in the narrowness of their approach by not considering the history of the West going back to ancient Rome and Greece. But though Paglia is a self-described pro-prostitution lesbian feminist, she's not found as many fans on the left. "Everyone I knew in journalism couldn't stand her," says Dreher. "They thought she was a stalking horse for the right."

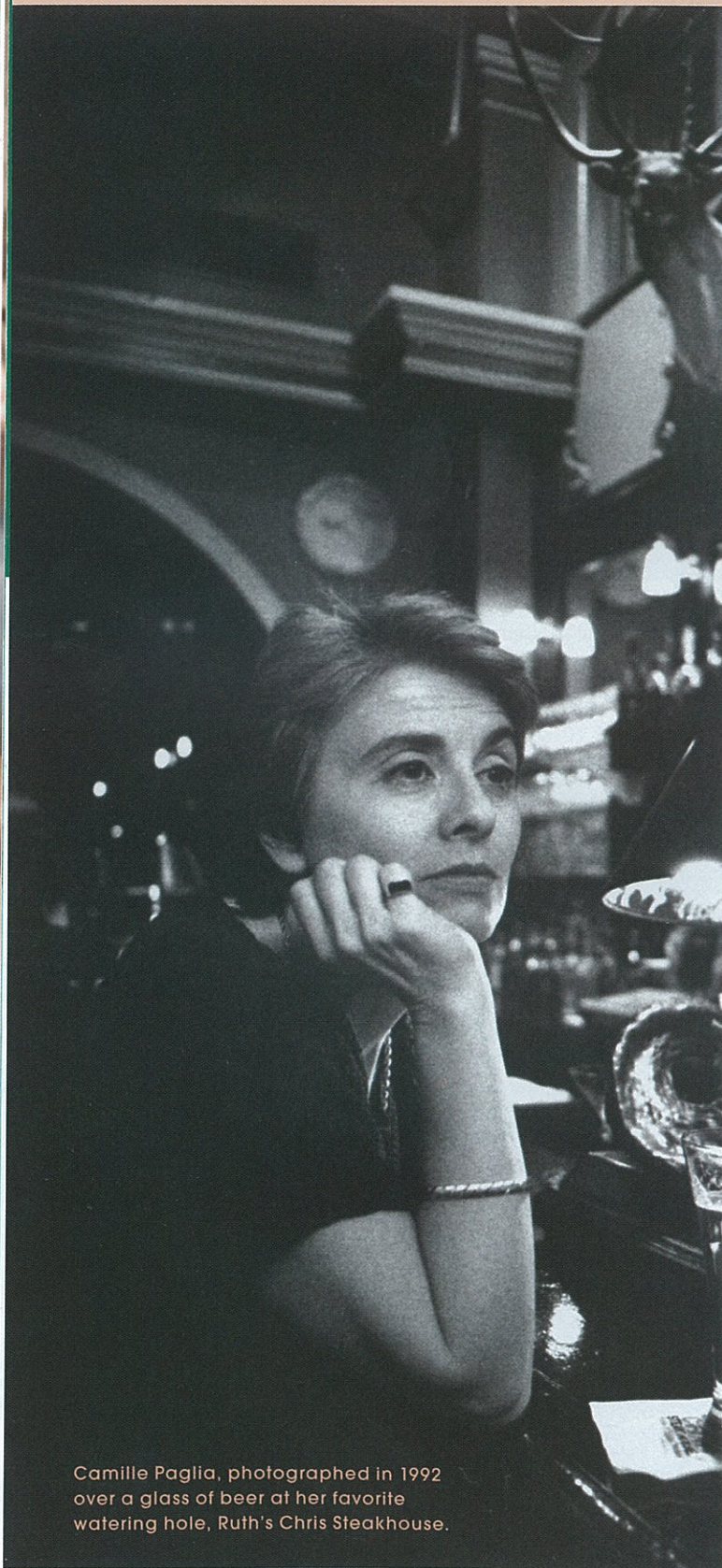
Christopher Lydon is one exception. A longtime political journalist and the founder of Open Source Media in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Lydon recently interviewed Paglia on his radio show, and in his blog recalled seeing her speak at MIT in 1991. He talks about that speech as a "cultural storm" and turning point, a great event in his life and the lives of so many others. "I was moved by it," he said by telephone. "I'll never forget the campus cops listening as intently as the audience." In that speech, Paglia announced, "I am the Sixties come back to haunt the present." And then she went on to talk about the "propaganda and hysteria about date rape," and to denounce the feminist professors who taught that every beautiful image in advertising and media was a secret subjugation of women. The entire speech was a takedown of the academic establishment and the political correctness that had eroded real learning, Paglia felt, about history and gender in particular. "I'm going to be as painful as possible, until Gloria Steinem screams!" she told the audience that night.

"ONE THING THAT WAS ENDEARING ABOUT CAMILLE IS SHE ALWAYS MADE THE RIGHT ENEMIES..."

What Paglia said likely pained Gloria Steinem, but it caught hold with listeners, because Camille was saying things that no one else dared. It was her fearlessness that made her so fascinating. This, and her mixing of high and low culture. Of classicism with disco, of Catholicism with her seriously firm beliefs in astrology. In one breath, she's talking with great gusto about her love for right-wing talk radio, Rush Limbaugh in particular, and in the next she's hailing Madonna's "Vogue" video as the greatest thing produced in fine arts worldwide in the latter decades of the 20th century. With Paglia, popular culture is lifted up and history illuminated when they are set alongside one another. And you begin to realize she's right: All of it's important. All of it. There can be no separation between high and low if one wants to have a full understanding of what is.

Paglia is a professor at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. It's a small school, not prestigious, but that's not to say that she hasn't had any effect—the last eight to ten years have seen a turning of the winds against political correctness and its sometimes ridiculous strictures. And the National Organization for Women, which once had to be quoted in any newspaper article having to do with women's rights, is now seldom heard from. Paglia told *Reason* magazine in 1995: "One of the things I'm most proud of, since I came on the scene five years ago, is that I have managed finally to get it fully established to the media that one can be a feminist—and fully uphold the great progressive principles of the feminist movement of the last 200 years—without being part of NOW or even approving of NOW." But it's not just gender. Many think Paglia helped sink one of the most promising Democratic presidential candidates in the last election with just a few ripe adjectives. Asked by Salon what she thought of Gen. Wesley Clark, Paglia called him a "phony" and an android, and the much quoted "slick, boudoir, salon military type." After that interview, Peggy Noonan observed in a January 27, 2004 column in the *Wall Street Journal*, Clark's military colleagues began to come out of the woodwork and malign him in the press.

With her return to a monthly column on Salon.com, where her every word will be splashed across the sites where the curious lurk, Paglia is about to become a much bigger part of the debate. Watch for the coming storm. ●



Camille Paglia, photographed in 1992 over a glass of beer at her favorite watering hole, Ruth's Chris Steakhouse.

Getty/Mario Ruiz