

*Edward A. Watson*

## THE UNIVERSITY AND THE DESTRUCTIVE ELEMENT IN THE LIBERAL SPIRIT

WHEN MATTHEW ARNOLD INVEIGHED in 1869 against the Liberal politicians and their implicit advocacy of “doing as one likes”, no one could have foretold that Liberalism, in all of its political and social ramifications, would prove to be the credo of the new Barbarians throughout the world in 1969. Life in Victorian England, so much unlike life in North America at the present time, suggested the overwhelming tendency towards self-fulfilment—so much so that a few men welcomed a step backward as a step towards the retention of sanity. The age of Queen Victoria, it is true, has long been sanctioned by the pages of history, but the lingering cancer of an uncontrolled liberalism eats away at a world in which the “unthinking” many—really the “thinking” many, since these ranks are more and more swelled by the new intelligentsia, the academic liberals—demand the right of unrestricted self-expression which amounts to “doing as one likes”. Despite repeated attempts to define its rationale accurately, Liberalism has always contained within it a destructive silent clause which when articulated amounts to the paradox of preserving life by destroying the spirit of life. In this sense, a more appropriate term would be not Liberalism, but the Liberal Spirit—not practice but the ideology, the philosophic idealism, that precedes practice. This idealistic demand for awakened consciences and social resurrection implies the presence of a death which permeates to the core of life and thus represents the antithetical force of the movement towards self-fulfilment. The unexamined life is not worth living; an unexamined Liberal Spirit contains the seeds of anarchy. What, then, of the pessimistic Arnoldian prophecy?

Now, if culture, which simply means trying to perfect oneself, and one’s mind as part of oneself, brings us light, and if light shows us that there is nothing so very

blessed in merely doing as one likes, that the worship of the mere freedom to do as one likes is worship of machinery, that the really blessed thing is to like what right reason ordains, and to follow her authority, then we have got a practical benefit out of culture. We have got a much wanted principle, a principle of authority, to counteract the tendency to anarchy which seems to be threatening us (*Culture and Anarchy*).

To Arnold, "doing as one likes" was a threat, an imminent reality; to us living in the world today, the reality is the thing; anarchy has enveloped us.

Upon what foundations rest this anarchic tendency? What are its humanistic goals? No single answer will suffice, for surely each one of the statesman, the politician, the churchman, the sociologist, the anthropologist, the economist, the political scientist, and the educationist has his own hold on the "truth". What is the "truth", for example, that is held by the teacher of English Literature?

Not so long ago, one of my colleagues remarked that teachers of Literature should confess freely to their students that we are all muddled and confused, that there are no *right* answers in English studies. An opinion, true; but an opinion, nevertheless, which suggests the Liberal Spirit at its best—the freedom of unrestricted self-expression both on the part of those who teach and those who learn. This freedom, which erases the boundaries of intellectual responsibility under the guise of honesty, is the freedom *without* responsibility that is so capably expressed by the students of today: Freedom without Responsibility; Might till Right is ready; Doing as one Likes: the tripartite peril of our academic institutions today.

One should not attempt to define either "freedom" or "responsibility", since both concepts mean different things to different people. Nevertheless, it is safe to assume that neither the few nor the many have the inviolable right to act merely by their will in matters connected with duty or obligation. Teachers should be the first to recognize this especially since the spirit of compromise is a way to knowledge rather than a sop to their consciences. This simple fact should never be denied. Responsibility may be manifested in a variety of ways, and it is always the teacher's duty to express his sense of responsibility by respecting first his subject and then his profession. Whether teachers of English studies are or are not confused is not the burning question. The issue at stake is the readiness on the part of far too many teachers to express this opinion in the false belief that they are actually meeting their students half-way, and that by so doing they eliminate the intellectual barriers that separate the "great unwashed" from the "academic élite". One suspects that such

a motive springs from an inaccurate conception of what it means to be liberal, a misconception which underlines the hypocritical and destructive aspect of the Liberal Spirit. For if to be silent means guilt, the lack of silence, no matter how egoistic, means concern, and if not total concern, at least sympathy, or so "liberal" professors would now have us believe. This lack of responsibility is manifestly part of the increasing belief that the university is a sterile wasteland habituated by people who ". . . are here as on a darkling plain/Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,/Where ignorant armies clash by night." It appears that this belief has so permeated our thinking that a silent majority merely moves nonchalantly through the paces of being teachers or of being students. The situation, however, holds for society at large, for this "silent majority" may be found throughout the continent, far and near: the majority of students at Berkeley who wish to go on with the job of learning instead of demonstrating; the majority of teachers at Columbia who wish to go on with the job of teaching instead of vacating their offices and classrooms; the majority of administrators at Sir George Williams or of graduate students at Wisconsin who wish to carry out the job of governing or pursuing research instead of vacating administration buildings or laboratories; the majority of workers who wish to go on working instead of striking; the majority of Negroes in California, Detroit, or New Jersey who wish to begin the job of building instead of destroying: these are the various majorities whose silence make them accomplices in encouraging the march of progress of the freewheeling Liberal Spirit.

Why are they silent? Is their silence a silence of fear or a silence of faith? Surely we do not believe that "Might till Right is ready" is a suitable philosophy. For the tens who destroy, who demand without concession, there are the thousands who, instead of sitting in passive complicity, possess the right *and* the might to persuade the noisy minority to the ways of reason. The far more substantial dilemma appears to be the relative convictions of the few and the many, those who strive for a complete change of the university and the society which it reflects, and those who believe that changes are necessary but are unable to articulate that belief. In a sense, our campuses are composed of three types of students: the "extremists" and the "activists", whom Dr. Claude Bissell addresses, and the politically and academically non-committed whose conservatism is flagrantly apathetic. Each of these groups manifests its individualistic tendencies by creating essential priorities which do not counter-balance each other but widen the gaps in communication.

If the extremists indeed believe in the total corruption of society and its values, then there is no hope for amelioration short of destruction and chaos.

Such a chaos and such a destruction is the only logical outcome of a way of thinking which denies the possibility of mankind's improvement. And the fact that these extremists, these fanatics, represent society's future makes it a dismal tomorrow for all of us. Any priority that maintains destruction rather than reconstruction as its major reason for being emanates from a barbaric spirit which really has no centre of organization. Such a group is best represented in Europe by a splintered faction of the March 22nd Movement (22 *Mars*) in France, and the militant "academic" faction of the Black Panther movement in Berkeley. The following news item, available from Reuters, UPI, and AP dispatches, confirms the anti-humanistic consequences of the extremist position:

TOKYO—Molotov cocktails rained down on 6,000 police who launched a fresh onslaught on the embattled Tokyo University hall today to dislodge a band of diehard rebel students.

Nine thousand riot police tried to take the building from the dissidents Saturday but gave up after a 10-hour battle in which the students hurled acid, firebombs and rocks at the invaders and fought with giant slingshots and staves.

Police managed to drive the rebels from two buildings they had seized, and arrested at least 311, several of them women. Many youths were led away battered and bleeding. . . .

The battle began at dawn, when police charged onto the campus, closed by leftwing extremists last July. The police carried metal shields and tear gas launchers. . . .

On the other hand, the second campus group, that of the student activists, though in the minority, is a homogeneous body brought together by ideological sympathies. The priorities established here are not anti-organizational but are based upon the conviction that the university needs to be updated and that since students *are* the university they should be given the opportunity to shape the policies that govern. In a sense, the essence of the activist position is meaningful dialogue, even if at times activist leaders maintain that "the administration" should be responsible for keeping the buildings and streets of the university community clean. The activist, however, runs the risk of jeopardizing his position, since his aims are oftentimes confused with those of the extremist. The attempt to distinguish aims results in an unfortunate flurry of "positions" which are almost always voiced through student newspapers as the representative voice of the many. It is here that the Liberal Spirit assumes its cancerous potentialities; practical and reasonable objectives are soon

displaced by individualist and freedom platitudes that are misconceived and misunderstood.

It must be remembered that the activist group is extremely capable of contemplating the relevance of the problems it envisages and faces in the university. The increasing changes that have been made in the structure of our universities today are testimony to the lucidity and consistency of activist involvement. Nevertheless, it is when the issues become confused that the extremist leaders emerge, dialogue ends, and the destructive forces take over. The violence that accompanies many student revolts is due primarily to the shrinking away of the articulate activist group and the correspondingly increased aggressiveness of the inarticulate but openly destructive extremist few. Nine thousand riot police could not dislodge one hundred and fifty students from the halls of Tokyo U!

It is safe to assume that the committed activist would rather contemplate the possibilities of persuasion than the necessity of power. Here, the activist exhibits the type of intellectual responsibility worthy of admiration, for persuasion involves not only the art of logical reasoning but also the rhetorical means of identification with goals, ideals, things, and people. The demands of destructive power, on the other hand, leave no room for identification, personal or otherwise. The irony of the situation is that the rhetoric of extremism, which is based upon "self-expression" and "self-identity", and rooted in lawlessness and destruction, is a sure means of obliterating identity. It is an obliteration, in fact, of the entire ideals of the university as a place for individualism. What kind of university, then, makes it possible for the anarchistic few? The answer appears to be the non-committed many, both students and faculty.

This silent majority of non-committed students and teachers seems to thrive upon both the failures and the successes of the two active minorities. It is difficult to discover whether, in fact, the noncommitted student remains noncommitted because of pure selfishness or because of the feeling that his own life is without purpose. The fact seems to be that it is his lack of involvement—his complacency—which gives rise to academic values that are below standard and out of keeping with the need for "relevance". The paradox of the situation is that it is the activist who speaks, while the "straight" student plods on mechanically towards Commencement Day. He is neither Liberal nor Conservative; he is the grade-hog who does his duty, who matriculates and departs no wiser for the experience. He has his corresponding "type" in the conservative professor who, in keeping with the times, mouths his "liberal" platitudes for the sake of being sympathetic with the new campus

hero, the dedicated activist. And since the "egg-head" (no longer a pejorative epithet) and the activist are one, the "liberal" teacher, goaded by a false conception of the Liberal Spirit, forsakes his own beliefs and his own responsibilities to be "one of the few faculty members who sees things the way we see it". Hence, down with Pope and his rhyming couplets and up with Ferlinghetti and his contemporaries. If it is *contemporary*, it is relevant.

Since one of the students' demands is centred around the need to update an outmoded curriculum, the plea for relevance is both necessary and reasonable. It must be maintained, however, that certain disciplines are more prone to the charge of irrelevant course content than others. The fact still remains that the university, by virtue of its being a centre of higher education, is committed in many ways to an historical approach to the whole matter of free inquiry. This does not mean that contemporary affairs should be slighted in favour of the past. In fact, the past has to be used constructively to question, to examine, and to solve the problems of the present. The charge of irrelevance, then, may be inaccurate in the true academic sense but accurate to the extent that the relevance of a given subject-matter is not clearly established in the classroom. So soon does the question of relevance become a question of the ability of teachers that it is impossible to make sweeping generalizations about curricula.

Now, it is quite clear that great literature can never in fact be irrelevant. It is also true that the failure to impart the essential worth of a piece of literature may result in the evaluation of that work as being remote from our lives. The study of literature involves us in the testing of our lives now, and the inter-relationship between our lives and life as it has been lived in other places and at other times. From one point of view, Milton's theodicy in *Paradise Lost* is not of extreme importance; whether or not he justifies the ways of God to man is equally unimportant. *Paradise Lost* is relevant in so far as it tells us something about a particular seventeenth-century sensibility and the concomitant concerns with such problems as faith, doubt, nature, grace, sin, myth, and belief, and the imaginative rendering of these values in concrete poetic form. Do we have similar beliefs today? If not, why not? What *are* our beliefs? How do we articulate our beliefs? The startling truth appears to be a disorganized attempt to break with the past based on the belief that anything past is an anomaly. Surely, Hawthorne is as powerful an allegorist as Bunyan; surely, his stories that deal with the rites of initiation, for example, are more competently and imaginatively handled than Salinger's. While I

do not wish to disparage Salinger, I do wish to emphasize the fact that relevance and the past are not mutually exclusive or antithetical.

We must never forget that today's student is attempting to grapple with the problems that have been handed down to him by his ancestors. His approach to some of these problems is nevertheless quite often haphazard and disorganized because of his inability to recognize their true nature. The study of poetry and the writing of poetry today make it sufficiently clear that literary values have undergone rapid deterioration because of this ignorance. For each Lowell, Roethke, Nemerov, Levertov, Wilbur, and Hughes, there are thousands of scribblers whose lack of knowledge of poetic techniques and values are cloaked by a liberal wantonness which passes as poetry. Aware of the licenses taken by such poets as Whitman, Pound, Eliot, and Williams, the contemporary poetaster seeks his approbation in the past without being aware that those poets were conscious of the power of form and that they experimented within the control of form. In the final analysis, much of contemporary poetry is rubbish; faked emotions contained in faked forms. Sad and pessimistic as it may seem, it may be suggested that it is the Liberal Spirit that has contributed to the demise of poetry in the last three decades. Let us consider, as one example, the poet's conception of free verse.

Poetry is the melody of thought, the music of the heart's passion and the rhythm of life combined in the harmony of disciplined expression. Emotion without technique is analogous to a river without banks, for once emotion is dissociated from its source or its medium, its passion is the passion of ego-mania. As Kenneth Burke observed many years ago, in "The Poetic Process", "pure emotion leads to barbarism in art; and the extreme of pure beauty, or means conceived exclusively as end", leads to virtuosity or decoration. "And", Burke continues, "in that fluctuating region between pure emotion and pure decoration, humanity and craftsmanship, utterance and performance, lies the field of art, the evocation of emotion by mechanism."

There is, technically, no such thing as free verse. The entire conception of such a thing is posited upon the assumption that rhythmical lines, varying in length, contain their own metrical pattern which corresponds to the emotional stresses made by the speaker. Since there is no fixed metrical pattern to speak of, the verse is said to be "free". Yet, if each line of poetry carries a certain emotional stress or impact, it follows that the succeeding lines ought to be of a stress which continues the crescendo or decrescendo either through a formal grammatical structure or through an imaginative structure which is built upon the arhythmical patterns. The two parallel structures, grammatical

and imaginative, impose a form which is so rigid and, in a sense, so mechanical, that the freedom of the verse is only visual. Many of today's poets, however, assume that it is what is said rather than how a thing is said that is of the ultimate importance. This may be true, but good poetry can never be formless; it is good poetry when what is said is said in a way that evokes the necessary emotional response from the audience. Good art does not remain in a vacuum. The artist's recognition of form is his kinship with his audience and the integrity with which he re-individuates his moods into a formal imaginative medium. Emotion without technique is the irresponsible egomania of a world gone mad. This egomania exhibits itself in a variety of ways, and its influence may be seen as operative in the technically flaccid poetry of our contemporaries. The Liberal Spirit, with its implicit denial of restriction and form, permeates the study of literature to such an extent that all of its sacred bulls are handed up in sacrifice to the notion of freedom.

The subject of poetry has been touched upon only to point out some of the far-reaching implications of a spirit that is destructive to the values that have contributed to the university's place in society. The university cannot long remain the abiding abode of sanity if the New Liberal is allowed to speak and act (poetry is both speech and act) without regard for the decent and noble. The astonishing impact of the "new poetry" on university campuses, for example, is merely an indication of the ways in which older values are trampled underfoot. Beat poetry achieved its best hours during the late 1950s primarily because the new voices seemed to question the increasing acquisitiveness of Western society. Ginsberg, Corso, Jones, Orlovski, and others inveighed against a society that was out of step with their own creativity. (I recall Gregory Corso's saying: "Don't you dig it? You are all a bunch of damn squares. I'm laying it on you, an' Jesus Christ was the cat who laid it on them all!"). They became the hip minority who read their poetry in coffee-houses and universities and sparked a response in the undergraduate community which was more appreciative of the possibilities of identification than of the power of the poetry they heard. These mute hipsters saw the beat poet as the prophet, the wiseman who opened his heart and sang of the terror of being. It was not a long step from the poetry readings to the poet-in-residence. Once the poet had been taken out of the coffee house and admitted into the classroom, the revolution was destructively implanted and a radical literary inbreeding assumed gigantic proportions.

Afraid to speak out against the faker who had now become his colleague and whom the students admired, the university professor either joined the



band-wagon and dug up his mouldy verse for lunch-hour poetry sessions, or left himself vulnerable to being the conservative idealist who was not with it because his eyes and his sensibilities were attuned to a past that was dead. Paradoxically, and ironically, the conservative professor and the "grade hog" joined hands in mutual passivity, while the hip student, the poet-guru and his newly acquired liberal colleague formed the other faction. One type of professor taught the old stuff, wrote the "academic paper" and sought out the "scholarly journals"; the other type wrote poems, one-act plays, and short stories, and sought out the poetry magazines. And if ever this creative effort were rejected, that was the opportunity to begin a new magazine where all the new, unsung lyricists could be heard. Five cents a word or ten cents a line, and the abstruse argument that one poem was as good as an article on Blake received almost unquestionable approbation because, after all, it was contemporary and, therefore, more relevant. The competition became more acerbic, the liberal more intolerant, and the division more costly. For every student enrolled in a course on the Augustans, there were five taking Contemporary Poetry, or Contemporary British and American Literature, or Literature between World Wars, and so on. Enveloped by the present, the new graduate and the new professor of English lost vital contact with the past, and the dead remained in Westminster Abbey in silent peace. Little or no compromise was deemed essential.

All of us in the university run the risk of being cajoled into compromises. Yet if we do not speak out against wantonness, then we too are guilty of irresponsibility. It must not be concluded that the present is synonymous with irrelevance. Not at all. But to insist upon order is to appeal, in one sense, to the wisdom of the past, disordered as it may seem; in another sense, it is to be true to the spirit of something much bigger than individual will, something positive, that ineffable but real thing we call Life. To speak of the Liberal Spirit is not to deny the values of liberalism. We cannot isolate a spirit; therefore, to trap it into conclusive proof or disproof is impossible. It is impossible to say with certainty, "See; that is what the Liberal Spirit has done"; but we can say that the Liberal Spirit manifests itself in such a thorough-going fashion that in many disciplines the conflict between the values of the past and the values of the present is not used imaginatively and optimistically to thrust the university back into its place of leadership. Easy as it is to muddy the sense of history as something that connotes the staid, the musty, and the respectable, such a connotation loses sight of the creativity and excitement that characterize the recovery of the past. For the historical com-

prises the art of creative forgetting as well as the act of creative recollection. We must avoid the sick subjectivity of reminiscence as well as the hypersensitivity of Now-ness, and it is here that we need all of the skills of pedagogic compromise.

If the social scientists' Theory of Progress is to be accepted as the notion of history being the development of civilization from the flint-axe to the electric can-opener, then we must accept creative responsibility as the spirit of daring which moves man. "Might until Right is ready" is the barbaric yawp of the newly-emancipated liberal who is doomed to his false conception of self and purpose. There may be no "right answers" in English studies, but there are right ways to explore the vital issues presented in literature. As a teacher of literature, I *must* conclude that in poetry thought is not pure; it works in alliance with the feeling and the will, and thought, feeling, and will must seek the appropriate medium which order sanctions. The degree of assurance with which serious poetry can be written depends upon the prevailing state of certainty or skepticism about ultimate issues, not solely upon the skeptical. Value is something we develop, and its development is the index of both individual and collective integrity. The values espoused by the Liberal Spirit suggest that freedom of will is the only ultimate truth. This spirit is destructive; it is the tendency to anarchy which surrounds us. And if we live by opinion, we must never forget that it is by experience that our opinions are tested.

## THE MIND AND MATTER OF HER GOING

*Matthew Corrigan*

Upon the hour of her death the wind  
 Bullied the earth, as though some male  
 Animal would avenge the cold blunt fact  
 Of the thing. The fallen thing.  
 Trees that gave no protection against the April  
 Cold swayed and bent in mock crucifixion.  
 Snow spume shattered the windows. The sky  
 Was a dark soiled canvas  
 Battering above the circus of our loss.  
 Lear had seen nothing more terrible  
 Than this. Her physical going  
 From the blue child's eye of the world.