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Chapter 9

My Acculturation

Recovering from my first love turned out to be easier than one might have imagined. My sufferings were indeed intense, but they do not figure among my worst memories of college life. This distinction must be reserved for the dungeon of prerequisite courses of the undergraduate curriculum, with *History of the English Language* as its sunless interior and *Art In Western Civilization* in its lower depths .

Cyrus Yaw-Yawn ! Ah A tale may be spun about him. *Cyrus Yaw-Yawn* was a finished product of Philadelphia's Main Line, the local term used to designate a tract through the suburbs along the old colonial Post Road which , in the *main* , is populated by people descended from a long *line* - of people just like themselves. After he finished up teaching for the day, *Yaw-Yawn* always returned to the Main Line. Night after night for the last 45 years he'd endured the merciless scolding of his mother, an unrepentant harridan. Once in a while he was able to get away to Europe, ostensibly for the purpose of looking at Art Treasures . Several generations of *Yaw-Yawns* had squatted on fathomless tanks of money, and neither he nor his mother really needed to work. It would not surprise me to learn that *Cyrus Yaw-Yawn* became a professor of Art History primarily to hear himself talk. His mother's formidable energies had been channeled into the rearing of swans and sissies. Judging from the visible testimony of her works, she was very competent in her vocation.

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Cyrus Yaw-Yawn lived on the family estate, really a castle in egregious Victorian Gothic taste near Wayne, Pennsylvania. His taste for the refined products of Western Civilization had been acquired through daily habitation in rooms that looked like cast-off stage settings for *Das Nibelungenlied*. Whatever else he'd learned about Art came from staring at the Rossetti's in the Tate Gallery in London. He'd never actually tried his hand in any division of the visual arts for which he professed such devotion. From earliest childhood his appetite for spatiality had been nourished through sitting by the lake in the park on the family estate, feeding his mother's swans and watching the sunsets. He liked talking about them in class. The sunsets that is.

At first I was inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt by presuming that the way he dressed indicated the presence of genuine artistic talent. Later I realized that his mother dressed him up in the morning as well. He looked like an expensive Hallmark condolence card. More often than not he wore either a pale grey or pitch-black suit, shirts with stiff and abnormally high collars, ties favored by undertakers, and 14-carat gold ornaments including a tie-clasp, cuff-links and fillings in his front teeth that glinted light like a neurotic prism. He was fond of speaking to his classes with his right profile fixed in our direction: creamy-white, featureless, without a speck of stubble.

Yaw-Yawn's posture was equally strange. He managed to adjusted his body to the gravitational field in such a fashion as to almost totally avoid curves or oblique slants. Everything was either horizontal or vertical. The only limbs he ever bent were his thighs.

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His manner of sinking into a chair conjured up Duchamp's *Nude Descending A Staircase*. One felt an odd sort of embarrassment watching it: shins, trunk and arms stayed perpendicular at every stage. Certainly he must have unbent once in awhile in his own home.

He was a bore, beyond dispute. All the same, it would be mean-spirited of me to deny the side benefits of his course. For one thing I never had to worry about staying up late at night, knowing that I could always catch up on sleep in Art History. Other courses offered the same advantages. I could count on being able to recover an average of 1 hour or more of sleep every day that classes were in session. It became a bad habit, which may have been a contributing factor to my flunking so many subjects. In my defense I was only imitating my peers. As a teenager it was only to be expected that I would turn to my older schoolmates as role models.

Cyrus Yaw-Yawn never knew if we were awake or asleep. Since his gaze remained fixed on the side wall off to the left of the auditorium, parallel to the images of his slides on the screen, he almost never looked in our direction. When he did, the darkness guaranteed that he couldn't see most of us.

There were occasions when something would wake me up; then I would notice a few peculiarities. Waking up once during his discourse on the Mona Lisa, it dawned on me that the slide had been loaded into the projector upside down. Blissful in his ignorance, Dr. Yaw-Yawn talked non-stop, like a locomotive with no-one at the controls, identifying what he wrongly imagined to be

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its salient features with a black-board pointer. It wouldn't have been worth the trouble to apprise him of his error, given that the rest of the class was also asleep. When he began comparing the Mona Lisa to some lost pre-Raphaelite fantasy on the Virgin Mother, I dozed off once again.

Flunking Art in Western Civilization 4 times must have set some sort of record, even for Zelosophic U. Despite all the time we ended up spending in one another's company, it is unlikely that Cyrus Yaw-Yawn would have recognized me on the street: the grades he gave out were based exclusively on the final exam. Four times running I forgot the time and place where it was being held. The fifth time around a friend knocked on the door to my dorm room at 6 AM to get me out of bed . Breakfast was on me; I used the time to memorize some phrases by Ruskin - from *Stones of Venice* perhaps - or it may have been *Sesame and Lilies* .

One other event in connection with *Art In Western Civilization* is worthy of note, a dream that came to me while sleeping through one of Yaw-Yawn's lectures in the first term of my retake of my junior year.

Between sophomore and junior years there is a gap of an entire semester , during which I was committed to Peachtree asylum. This will be discussed in its proper time. Returning to college at seventeen, I was virtually an adult. The tedium of having to attend these required courses, (including a few more rounds of Art In Western Civilization) , was relieved by the presence of a sympathetic girl-friend. "Jane" is a nice name to call her. We'd struck it off at our first encounter. Jane was a pleasant

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girl, her most endearing trait a refreshing indifference to all things intellectual. It may not always have been love, but we liked each other. In retrospect she must have loved me, because she enrolled with me in my most boring subjects just to keep me company.

Art in Western Civilization was taught in a large auditorium on the ground floor of the Fine Arts Building, a grotesque structure from the turn of the century, since replaced in the 60's by a generic steel, glass and concrete box with patches of kindergarten-style colorations. Jane and I always sat together; she held my hand while I dozed off. When there was something going on that needed my attention, she gave my hand a tight squeeze and I snapped to attention.

On the day on which this dream came to me Yaw-Yawn was delivering his standard take on *chiaro-scuro*. I'd heard the first part of it 3 times running without being able to stay awake to the very end. His choice of metaphors may have been part of the problem. Year in and year out he compared the effects of *chiaro-scuro* to the experience of rolling onto the fluffy mattress of a soft bed, covered with silken eiderdowns and large pulchritudinous cushions. Bathed in the warm glow of (righteously earned) slumber one sinks into it gratitude, blissfully unaware of the solidly constructed carpentry underneath.

For Cyrus Yaw-Yawn this was *chiaro-scuro*: forgive my eyelids for sagging! Drifting off I found myself disappearing into the peacock feather stuffing of a fabulous Oriental divan. The penumbra of lingering consciousness combined the warmth of

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Jane's hand in mine with the tail-end of a disturbing reflection having to do with an inmate at Peachtree.

Patrick O'Neill was a victim of *melancholia religiosa* . He thought he was St. Francis of Assisi, and preached stirring sermons to the birds in the lawns and the cockroaches in the wards. In my dream the birds to whom Patrick was preaching were preaching to me. As is the way with dreams, the scene segued magically into the head of a goat.

Gathered around the goat was a crowd of villagers in some part of rural India dressed in colorful dhotis and saris. The goat, our guru, stood erect on his hind feet. Somehow I knew that it was speaking Gujurati, a language of which in my waking life I don't understand a single word. The goat was very learned, so it behooved me to stand quietly at attention. One could tell when the goat was becoming excited by the way it shook its head from side to side and wagged its beard. Evidently, also, the goat was cross-eyed, for when its beard moved, the eyes mechanically followed it in its pendulation. After its head came to rest the eyes didn't stop rolling. Although its words were directed to all and sundry, I could tell from the direction in which its front hooves were pointing that there was some particular message it wished to convey to me. Then I realized that its hooves were pointing at my left hand. To my amazement I saw a magic ring materialize on the middle finger. When the ring was twisted to the right, a shaft of blinding light sped out from the goat's hooves. I began reeling backwards through eons of time.

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Now I was in Egypt, now in Sumer, now in ancient China. In each civilization I asked the same question: "What is knowledge?" Invariably the wise men took me to a library to show me their 500 sacred books, or 500 clay tablets, or 500 papyrus scrolls, or 500 engraved pillars, or 500 lotus leaves. Wherever some sort of writing existed, the scholars of that civilization pointed with pride to their 500 learned treatises.

A further twist of the ring brought me to the Neolithic age, where I was taken in charge by prehistoric tribes. By and large their traditions were oral, though some had developed the art of cave painting. Even in that distant age, the learned witch doctors prided themselves on their knowledge of the 500 noble epics. It was the same with hominids, scarcely distinguishable from the primates, their speech little more than a sequence of guttural utterances.

I assumed that this codified knowledge would develop through the ages, that between the 500 noble epics of the cavemen and the 500 treatises of the Renaissance there would be an advancement as great, if not greater than their separation in time. Seeking verification I now twisted the magic ring to the left to begin the slow ascent of the ladder of history. Revisiting each civilization I examined the contents of its books. To my bafflement, no change whatsoever occurred in the content of learning from one age to the next. Only its outward form was modified. Students in ancient China took classes in *Art in Chinese Civilization*. Students in Vedic India studied *History of the Sanskrit Language*. *Comparative Religion* differed only in form,

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I woke Jane and we left the auditorium. We went downtown to get some dinner, then walked back to the university, where we continued to walk and sit around until 3 in the morning. The regulations against bringing a girl-friend up to one's room were strictly enforced in those days and I didn't want to risk expulsion. We parted at the downstairs entrance and made arrangements to meet the next day.

A few weeks later Jane brought about the loss of my virginity . We needn't go into the details, which in any case aren't relevant to this story.

Well, maybe they are . Not that it matters very much.

In fact it matters quite a bit , only this may not the right place to bring it up . You've been promised a full account of the ordeal of the years of failing *History of the English Language* , a commitment I take very seriously. The personal stuff can come later.

No: that just isn't right. I've had time to do a little thinking about it. Get on, I'm saying to myself, with the tale and have done with it! Besides, what's more appropriate as a preface to *History of the English Language* than the spice and sugar of an old-fashioned deflowering yarn? Okay; but it'll have to be brief.

It was in the early spring of '51. Jane had taken me on a stroll through Cobb's Creek Park, a park on the extreme Western flank of Philadelphia with a decided resemblance to the Forest of Arden. Without warning she dragged me into the bushes. Before one can say " Muhammed ibn-Musa al-Khwarizmi " it was all over.

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This is an obvious oversimplification, you and I know that, though not by much. She'd told me right out over breakfast that morning that she intended to make a man out of me. I wasn't keen on the notion, but she did persuade me to continue our discussion over a walk in the park. The slippery slope down always begins with a single step.

Furthermore, to state that Jane dragged me into the bushes is to lean too heavily on well-worn metaphor. In fact she neither pushed nor pulled me. After announcing that she was tired of arguing with me, she began pulling off her clothes. If I refused to come in with her under the trees she said, where there was something she wanted to show me, she would start yelling and have us both arrested for indecent exposure. Once concealed from public view she presented me with an offer impossible to refuse.

I timed the event with a stopwatch: about two minutes from entrance to exit. So commonplace are the origins of empires and dynasties! In the brief interlude before and after orgasm a highly complex chain of reflections passed through my mind, the gist of which has been summarized below:

" World opinion maintains a virtual consensus to the effect that my Being is on the verge of a transformation of incalculable magnitude. This arouses my curiosity and I feel compelled to ask: does the crossing of this Rubicon really induce some irreversible alteration in my intrinsic nature? Does my essence undergo any real change? Are we not in fact dealing with an ad hoc distinction, as when governments saturate a narrow strip of land with mines,

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border guards and customs check-points, calling it a national boundary ?

"What am I engaged in? Had I not felt that it was time to do something of this sort, it would not have been all that difficult to resist temptation. But am I really doing anything? Will some afterglow stemming from this act hover about me to signal to my peers my long delayed initiation into adulthood? Or will I need to boast on every occasion about this proof of masculinity, citing date, place and circumstances ad infinitum ?

"I caress Jane's tits; in the act of caressing her tits I observe myself doing so. The epidermal contact excites her more than it does me, though naturally I feel a bit of excitement as well. I have no doubt that my eyes reproduce the frightening gleam in hers. Will that gleam remain with me forever as mute evidence of my spiritual fall? Will it disappear when the tit is no longer there? In what ways do my glazed-over eyes, the puckering about my lips, the hyperventilation, the muscular movements and the blood pounding in my temples, different from the same symptoms when I lay on my cot, dreamed of Felicia, and jerked off ?

"Bathed in Jane's stale breath and sweat, spent, I hold and release ,like the escapement of a watch , the slow trickle of sperm from my loins and into hers. I have the greatest difficulty in imagining any essential difference between this moment, and those times when I invoked the image of Felicia and invented all the rest . Were I to speak honestly, those experiences were more intense, more erotic, more ecstatic, more dreadful, more deliciously horrible.

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How different love is from gratified lust! " (This reflection was stored away for later meditation.):

" My conclusion is that virginity ,and the lose thereof, do not refer to anything real, but are mere social fictions , contrived to guarantee the propagation of the species , in opposition to one's instinctive revulsion at the mere thought of doing any such thing."

The Meditation and the Act. Coextensive, coeval, coeternal. It's impossible in recollection to invoke one without the other.

The one inconsistency in my entire college transcript is the D I received for my first term in *History of the English Language 3R¹*. The normal undergraduate English requirement at Zelosophic U. comprises one term of English Composition, another on Writing A Research Paper, then a year of history . Acting on recommendations from Mathematics, the Division of Arts and Humanities excepted me from the first year of the English requirement. Despite this it took 8 repeats of *History of the English Language 3R²* spread out over 9 years to get a passing grade, so that I could graduate from Zelosophic with a B.Sc. in 1957. Had English insisted on my fulfilling all its prerequisites , I would still be there.

So why did I pick up a D, that is to say, the minimal passing grade, for English 3R¹ ? It's just not possible that Dr. Phillip Grimbulge made a mistake. Alongside the grade in my college transcript ¹ Grimbulge has penciled in a comment to the effect that I deserved an F. This shows that my performance wasn't any better

¹Consult the Appendix after I get around to it.

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in 3R¹ than it would be in all the repeats of 3R². Nor was the course material any easier, that is to say, any less dull, in the first term than it was in the second.

I have a nasty suspicion that Mathematics had put pressure on Grimbulge to pass me that one time. Had I flunked there would have been 3 F's on the report card of the first term of my Freshman year, which would have meant automatic expulsion from Zelosophic U. Grimbulge was never my friend, no more at this time than at any other. Passing me then kicked off 9 more years of misery. Had my college career been terminated at that point, I might, like the illiterate *shammas* in the old fable, be a bank president by now. ²

After having to recycle, under duress, 11 centuries of English language and literature for 9 years, it comes as no surprise that my picture of what really happened in history should differ considerably from the standard textbook model :

*Aleph Cantor's History of the English
Language:
From Stonehenge to The Rolling Stones*

*Long long ago in impenetrable prehistory, at the time
of the coming together of those ancient cultures that forged*

²Somerset Maugham obviously swiped the plot from a Jewish acquaintance for his version in "Quartet".

the foundations of what, for want of a better term one may call our civilization:

There was a tribe known as *Druids* . Calling them a tribe misses the point. The Druids were a cabal of priests, something like the Cohens of Israel or the Brahmans of India. The Druids who came to the British Isles were missionaries of the religion of *Mithraism* , a cult centered on the worship of the sacred bull.

Through the application of glottochronology, Grimm's shifts and other crypto-scientific techniques, Comparative Linguistics has show that the Druids, together with most Europeans, much of the Middle East and most of Asia, spoke a common tongue dubbed *Indo-European* . Because the Druids needed to guard the secrets of the priesthood from the ignorant masses ³ , they invented an esoteric language whose name is lost to us, but which among the cognoscenti was referred to as their *Cultish Bullshit* ; Bullshit for short. Since Bullshit was designed as a dead language from the beginning, it underwent no change for many hundreds of years.

Claudius ⁴ unloaded the Romans on the hapless yet fortunately sparse population of England in 51 B.C.E. Suddenly all the inhabitants of the domains formerly commanded by the Druids needed to disguise their intentions from the invaders. The Druids therefore opened up Hedge Schools for the teaching of Cultish Bullshit. The name of this language was somewhat exotic to the

³The question of whether they were ignorant *because* the priests guarded their knowledge will not be broached here.

⁴no relation to Hamlet's uncle. cf. Robert Graves

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Romans, who mispronounced it as "Celtish British ". Thus originated, and terminated, the first phase of the development of the English language.

Well! The Romans came, saw, conquered , and, in C.E. 400, left , for which I don't blame them one little bit. The more unmanageable Druids were pushed into Scotland, from whence they spread out into Ireland, Wales, the Isle of Man and Brittany. Those deemed capable of domestication were gathered together in an abandoned Roman fortress nick-named "Lug'an dump'em " - Lugdunum in Latin and today's London. As its name implies, they were lugged and dumped in this place, which quickly became a prison . How to escape pre-occupied the best minds of England for 13 centuries, and helps explain their invention of the locomotive. The early inhabitants of London already spoke a rich mixture of Cultish Bullshit and Latin. These later diversified into the two principal dialects of the British language, Oxonian and Cockney , the former a corrupted form of Latin, the latter spoken to this day by radicals who refuse to speak the language of the conqueror.

So thoroughly steeped was the British populace in brutish ignorance that a thousand years passed during which nobody ever bothered to write anything down. This lamentable situation might well have persisted into our own times had not the slave trade in the 17th century laid the foundations for a Leisure Class dedicated to Learning and the Finer Things of Life.

Along came the Vikings. They brought in their train a second-rate poet, Cynewulf. Churning out Icelandic sagas in Greater Scandinavia poor Cynewulf had nearly starved to death .

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In England he had a captive audience. Lacking anything better, the London intelligentsia stoically endured his innumerable recitations of a very long poem he'd entitled *Beowulf*. Almost all of *Beowulf*, the only literature available to England's Celts, Angles, Saxons, Picts and Danes for 600 years, has mercifully been lost.

These Nordic peoples radically transformed Cultish Bullshit. Indeed one might say that Cultish Bullshit was uprooted, pummeled, refashioned and reshaped by the bracing tidal waves from the North. They did this by eradicating it altogether. The few remaining Druids now found themselves forced to earn their bread by wandering the countryside, laden with hermetic writings which no-one (themselves included) could decipher. Yet this gave them an aura of inscrutability which they used to sell their services as astrologers, magicians, alchemists and bards to courts out in the boonies. The more opportunistic ones became Catholic priests. Later they became Anglicans. Only a few Druid words remain in modern English: the word "druid" itself for example, and "shillelagh", "hibernate", "estaffod", etc.

The Anglo-Saxons introduced important words like "fuck", "cunt", "shit" and others, which have been basic English for over a thousand years but rarely show up in dictionaries. This fundamental word-hoarde, and *Beowulf*. That's about it. Yet it cannot be denied that the incorporation of England into the mighty Viking Empire would ultimately prove to be of inestimable benefit for the future of civilization. Instead of a hermetic society of bards speaking Cultish Bullshit among

themselves, the denizens of London could now communicate with the far-flung satrapies of the Viking hegemony.

The Vikings were not enamored of *belles-lettres* . They were too busy plundering, raping, riding the whale-road, drinking, boasting, and so forth, to cultivate a refined taste for the arts. Only one other literary document of merit, written before the arrival of their distant cousins, the Normans, has come to light : *Piers Ploughman* , an insufferable diatribe in doggerel, in which a farmer, too lazy to bring in the crops himself, loafs about in the meadows all the live-long day bad-mouthing his neighbors for their alleged sins.

In the 11th century the Normans waded in from across the Channel, submerging England in a sea of blood. This new attempt to connect England to the Continent was as futile as all others, before or since. They subjugated all the Anglo-Saxons except Thomas à Becket. They tried, but failed, to impose the French language by force. It would have been a disaster for world civilization had they succeeded, because ever since the Encyclopedists standardized the French language in the 18th century nobody knows how to speak it correctly anymore.

They also tried to impose on these sturdy yeoman peasants the insidious French doctrine of *Art For Arts' Sake* . Here also they failed. Ideological conformity to such foreign fancies would have made impossible such intrinsically English inventions as the banal utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham, the pitiless logic of Adam Smith, the fatuous futility of Hume, the equally fatuous solipsism of Berkeley, the academic fatalism of Malthus, the trite moralisms

of Alexander Pope, the sanctimony of Oliver Goldsmith, the atrocious taste of pre-Raphaelite painting, the dreariness of Thomas Hardy, Behaviorism, Analytic Philosophy, the atavistic jingoism of Winston Churchill, and most of the music of Sir Edward Elgar ⁵, Vaughan Williams, and Benjamin Britten.

All that lay in the future. It appears that the Anglo-Saxon dough needed only a pinch of French yeast to make it bloat. Not only did the common man ⁶ begin thinking for himself, he began preaching, prophesying, proselytizing, promulgating, promoting, pandering and pontificating in this new hybrid demotic. Furthermore, he began writing it all down.

If one combines the underlying Indo-European vocabulary with the shreds of Latin left over from the Roman Empire, the overload of Norman French, and the odious burden of Latinisms falsified by Oxford humanists during the Renaissance, one discovers that English is 75% of a Romance language. The rest is German, Oxonian Greekisms, scientific and technological Graeco-Latinisms, borrowed words like calico and tomahawk, neologisms of prominent schizophrenics, and journalistic monstrosities, mostly American, like "finalize", "microwavable", "moisturize", "jawbone" used as a verb, and the use of "impact" as a verb to describe any sort of influence or encounter .

In the age of Hengest and Horsa English had a Germanic grammar. Modern English has no grammar whatsoever. ⁷

⁵The cello concerto excepted.

⁶An idea which the English fancy they've invented

⁷Proven by Noam Chomsky and Morris Halle. See " The Sound Patterns of English", Harper&Row, 1968

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By the 14th century it was possible to distinguish between Old English, Low English, Very Low English, Very Old Low English, Middling English, High to Middling English, High Falutin' English, and Sweet and Sour English. The literary remains of Low English are *Beowulf* and *Piers Plowman* ; Chaucer , Richard II (under the pen name of Gower) and the Pearl Poet represent Middling English. After that, everybody wrote in the Standard High to Middling English invented by Shakespeare until Milton transmuted it to Sweet and Sour English. Then language stayed fixed for 200 years, until the apotheosis of Post-Modern English, that is to say, American. Today's college students speak Neo-Post-Modern English, which can only be understood after watching 6000 hours of television.

It is commonly maintained that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* lay undiscovered in a private library for centuries, sewn into the binding of the *Isagoge of Porphyry*. When the contents of the library were consumed in a fire, it alone remained. No one can expect me to believe that. It is scarcely credible that such a damnable bit of heresy could survive the destruction of so much orthodox writ. Any self-respecting Archbishop of Canterbury would have burned it at the stake along with its author. To me it's obvious what happened: the works of the so-called Pearl Poet were written by Chatterton as schoolboy exercises in alliterative style.

Dr. Phillip Grimbulge had memorized long passages from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which he used to recite aloud in what he claimed was an authentic Northwest Midlands Middle English accent. The recollection of it still chills me to the bone. In

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consequence I never could read more than 5 lines of it at a time, and only know the story from the plot summaries. My impression is it's a thrilling yarn, although the plot is appear to be as barbarous as the sound of Grimbulge's grating gutturals.

One gets the impression that English civilization underwent no significant change from the Beowulf of the 8th century to the Pearl Poet on the 14th. This leads me to wonder why undergraduates are required to study the relics from half a millennium's history of some primitive tribe, when so much else was going on in Italy, France, Baghdad, Toledo, Cathay, Timbuktu and elsewhere.

Besides the works of the Pearl Poet, the remnants of Middling English literature boil down to Piers Plowman, Chaucer, Richard II (under the pen name of Gower), the morality play Everyman, *Sumer is acumen in* , and *Pilgrims Progress* , another one of those long polemics in which some lazy peasant tells his betters to go to Hell.

In terms of his influence on English letters, Chaucer comes to the fore as the first English poet worthy of mention. He proved to the world that the English language was capable of something better than tax records and bad translations from more civilized languages.

In fact *The Canterbury Tales* started out as a translation of Boccaccio's *Decameron* . Part way through the commission Chaucer recognized that it just wouldn't fly. Feudal England was simply too barbaric to assimilate the frank sensuality, sophisticated cynicism, and jaded sophistry of the *Quattrocento* . He

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thereupon sat down and wrote his own Decameron, full of fetishes and feathers and clubs and glass beads and other things that barbarians like and understand. The result was the *Canterbury Tales*, rich and gory with bloodlust, pilgrimages of flagellants, ghoulish anti-Semitism, crude pornography, savage myths and primitive superstitions: the stock and trade of the darkness in which medieval England was steeped. It is a pity that *The Canterbury Tales* was not immediately translated into Italian. Contact with the raw, cannibalistic barbarity of England might have exercised a stimulating effect on the Italian Peninsula, then rapidly sinking into decrepit mannerism.

The four to six Civil Wars commonly grouped together as the Great Rebellion, setting 5 nations, 6 religions, a dozen armies and an incalculable number of experiments in government in conflict for 75 years, should be understood as a last ditch effort to rescue the English from civilization. The gnawing inanition which has gradually but irreversibly been developing ever since is abundantly reflected in its literature.

After Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, one finds a displaced population of bad writers anxious to jump onto the Chaucerian bandwagon, hacks like Robert Greene, John Lyly, John Nashe, Thomas Dekker, Christopher Marlowe, John Skelton, Silas Marner, Macrobius and the Earl of Chesterfield, to name but a few. Robert Greene is famous for his manual on the art of poaching rabbits from the estates of rich barons. John Lyly has earned some renown for his euphuistic style. He is the first writer in English to

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combine the art of saying nothing with being a bore, and is considered the father of an enduring school dedicated to that end.

It should not be denied that Robert Greene's *Art of Cony-Catching* is an interesting work. It takes its place among all the standard manuals for guerrilla warfare, those of Che Guevara, Nyugen Giap, Mao Tse Tung and others. The essay is actually written in a code that wasn't decipherable until Marxist-Leninist criticism showed the way. The word "cony" literally means "rabbit". Despite all professorial attempts at interpretation, it should be understood as such. For the con-artist read "dispossessed serf". When Greene talks about the "mark", or victim, substitute "feudal baron". Under this system of interpretation the essay becomes intelligible after a dozen re-readings. One is otherwise at a loss to understand what he's talking about, or even why he wrote it.

We bypass Sir Phillip Sidney, not because he doesn't have anything to say but because I was able to get away with doing so for 9 years, and proceed immediately to the great William Shakespeare.

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A deluge of ink the magnitude of the Biblical flood has been disgorged over whether the author of Shakespeare's writings was really Shakespeare himself, another person with the same name, Francis Bacon, the Earl of Oxford, the Duke of Gloucester, or Sir Walter Raleigh. Has anyone ever considered the possibility that, even as all of his plots were cribbed from other writers, his name was stolen as well?

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Dr. Phillip Grimbulge stated on more than one occasion that Shakespeare had been fined for poaching rabbits from a neighboring estate in Stratford-on-Avon. He surely could not have been right on this matter. Anyone who studies the laws of Elizabeth knows that the penalties for the confiscation of the fixed or moveable assets of one's neighbors went far beyond fines. Commonly, felons had their hands cut off, their ears cropped, their noses slit, their eyes put out. On occasion they were hanged till almost dead, then burned at the stake until almost dead, then tied to four horses and torn apart until almost dead. Whatever remained was left on a dunghill to sleep it off. In the rare instances of judicial clemency they were merely branded and mutilated, then shipped off to the colonies as slaves.

Which is what happened to Shakespeare! Since his original name is not in the history books, let's call him "John X". After being arrested for the poaching incident, X was shipped off to the West Indies in 1580. There he toiled on a plantation for 12 years.

His *master's* name was William Shakespeare. Before settling down Shakespeare had circumnavigated the globe as a pirate and free-booter.

Like many a lonely sailors on the endless ocean voyages of the day, he was a voracious reader: from the 16th century until well into the 19th, most of the written matter being churned out by Grub Street hacks was tailored to the market of sea-farers desperate for any kind of reading matter. In this way William Shakespeare absorbed Plutarch, Beowulf, the Holinshed Chronicles, Chaucer, Boccaccio, Froissart and other writers from whom all the plots of the plays of

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his indentured serf would later be stolen. Sitting around the hearth every evening after the day's labors, Shakespeare passed along his erudition to the illiterate John X. Then, realizing that X was quick-witted, he also taught him how to read and write so he could keep the books of the plantation.

In 1592, John X escaped. Before making his way back to England he spent some time as guest of the Danish court at Elsinore. It was only to be expected that X would adopt the name *William Shakespeare* when he arrived in England in the guise of a distinguished gentleman just returned from the colonies. This theory has the advantage of being more plausible, than all the others, yet more imaginative.

Shakespeare is a very great writer. I'm no expert but I know great writing when I see it. You will hear people say that Shakespeare is the greatest writer of all time. Maybe, maybe not. He may also be considered one of the worst, if not the worst writer in the canon of English letters.

Ben Jonson maintained that his friend Will would have done well to cross out a thousand lines or so. Hypocritical like all writers, Ben shows his insincerity when he attempts to soften the blow by dubbing him the "sweet swan of Avon". Swans do not have a reputation for sweetness.

So what if Jonson's poetry is better crafted? Apart from *Volpone*, how many productions of his plays have there been over the last 3 centuries? Yet one cannot deny Jonson's point: it's all too easy to find those thousand lines. Then one can start looking for the second thousand.

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For reasons of space and time, this critique of Shakespeare will limit itself to his so-called sense of humor. Shakespeare was hardly the Bernard Shaw of his day. The following bit of raillery from *King Lear* may well be the low point in all Shakespearean comedy:

Fool : Cry to it , nuncle, as the cockney did to the eels, when she put'em in the paste alive; she knapped'em on the coxcombs and cried "Down, wantons down!" 'Twas her brother that, in pure kindness to his horse, buttered his hay.

The humor would not be much improved by suggesting that it may have been the cockney's cousin or granddaughter who buttered the horse's hay. Substituting lard for butter might have elicited a chuckle from the groundlings. All of which is beside the point, for one gathers that the real cream of the jest consists in imagining a maid wacking an eel on the gonads! Even Freud wouldn't have been able to get a laugh with that one.

Who can deny that the opening lines of *Julius Caesar* were better placed in the last act of *Richard III* ? :

Marullus : You sir, what are you?

Second Commoner : Truly sir, in respect of a fine workman I am but, as you would say, a cobbler.

Marullus : But what trade art thou? Answer me directly.

Second Commoner : A trade, sir, that I hope I may use with a safe conscience; which is, indeed , sir, a mender of bad soles.

Marullus : What trade, thou knave? Thou naughty knave, what trade?

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Second Commoner : *Nay, I beseech you, sir, be not out with me; yet if you be out, I can mend you.*

Marullus : *What meanest thou by that? Mend me, thou saucy fellow?*

Second Commoner : *Why sir, cobble you .*

Flavius : *Thou art a cobbler, art thou?*

This scene is compatible only with the hypothesis that Marullus is stone deaf. Whatever humor is to be found in it consists in his cupping his hand around his ear and saying "Eyh? " . The Establishment aren't that dense, not even in ancient Rome. The commoner states he's a cobbler three times before Flavius intervenes and asks him if he's a cobbler. One sees that the roles of the comic and the straight man are reversed. The cobbler is really the straight man, whereas Marullus cocking his ears four times and saying "Eyh?" is really the comic. One expects better of a high-school talent show.

Then, Shakespeare's manipulation of the so-called "comic relief", which presumably heightens the ultimate impact of the impending doom, can be awkward . Tell me now, if this "comic relief" from *Hamlet* doesn't belong in Dr. Weakbladder's report on the neuroses of Frank Kriegle? :

Hamlet : *Ay sir, to be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand.*

Polonius : *That's very true, my lord.*

Hamlet : *For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a God kissing carrion - Have you a daughter?*

Polonius : *I have , my lord.*

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Hamlet : *Let her not walk i'the sun: conception is a blessing; but not as your daughter may conceive. Friend, look to't .*

The simplest way to interpret this interchange is to assume that Hamlet had overheard Polonius and the royal couple discussing how Ophelia can be made to serendipitously appear, unaccompanied, in the light of the "son". Yet all the deeper levels are full of sick jokes.

Shakespeare somehow believed that his audience would be tickled pink by the striking comparison between the spontaneous generation of maggots from the carcass of a dead dog, and the conduct of nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine dishonest rogues. Then they would certainly start rolling in the aisles with the thought of Ophelia engendering hoards of vermin by walking unattended in the "son -light" - get it?

Then again, Hamlet's remarks may carry the implication that it is Polonius himself who is feasting on his daughter like vermin on a piece of dead meat. Or that the whole court of Denmark is greedily sating its gluttony on the dead carcass of old King Hamlet. As per usual, Will doesn't let pass the opportunity to introduce a whiff of pornography. Imagine it : a vagina chock full of worms!

Macbeth has one truly great moment of comic relief, the porter's drunken monologue, as he goes to answer the knocking at the door of Macbeth's castle on the morning of Duncan's murder. Everything else is just bad writing that comes off as comic: the scene in which Macbeth wanders around the battlefield boasting of his not being "of woman born" can send an audience into stitches.

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It must be reluctantly admitted that *Othello* is a good ride. Apart from the character of Rodrigo, whom he was ill-advised to put into the play in the first place, the cranky technique of comic relief is avoided, which is all to the good. No doubt some sort of comedy is intended by the ridiculous yarns Othello concocted to woo the fair Desdemona. If nothing else they show us what a simpleton she is. The only other bit of humor in *Othello* is the famous line, "*Welcome to Cyprus, Goats and Monkeys* " - Shakespeare's anticipation of Darwin by 250 years.

College educated audiences are too polite to laugh at anything in a Shakespearean play they suspect the author might not have intended to be funny; also to emit forced gurgling guffaws at his presumably intentional jokes, if only to mask their desire to yawn. But the devotees of *great literature* are too opinionated to recognize the obvious truth, namely that Shakespeare's so-called comedies are more depressing than his tragedies.

A case in point: the comic wit of *Twelfth Night* can only be understood with the help of a dozen commentaries, by which time one is too exhausted to laugh. The following excerpt says it all:

Sir Andrew Aguecheek : *By my troth, the fool hath an excellent breast. I had rather than forty shillings I had such a leg, and so sweet a breath to sing, as the fool has. In sooth, thou wast in very gracious fooling last night, when thou spoke of Piggogromitus of the Vapians passing the equinoctial of Queubus: 'twas very good, 'i'faith. I sent thee sixpence for thy leman; hadst it?*

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Clown : I did impeticos thy gratillity, for Malvolio's nose is no whipstock; my lady has a white hand, and the Myrmidons are no bottle-ale houses.....

It may have been funny in its own time, yet it's not the sort of thing that wears well. *Much Ado About Nothing* is only funny if you feel like slitting your fiancée's throat in a church. Only a Nazi can find any humor in *The Merchant of Venice* . Were it not so painfully close to real life, the scene in *Midsummer's Night's Dream* in which Titania falls in love with the head of an ass would really be funny . Shakespearean humor is generally based on things which are either too horribly real, or on late Renaissance fashions in vulgarity which faded away after neo-Platonism lost its appeal. He's obsessed with cuckoldry. I doubt that yelling "horns! " in a crowded theater always got a laugh, even in Shakespeare's time. He loves to play crude practical jokes on innocent, even amiable people like Malvolio, Falstaff, Titania, Caliban, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Othello, Shylock and others. At the heart of his most brilliant creations one is always conscious of the kernel of banality that inspired them. Shakespeare's genius consists precisely in his ability to assemble all this mediocrity together in a way that no-one has ever since been able to imitate, let alone fathom.

Although William Shakespeare was the brightest star in the Elizabethan Zodiac, the times themselves were of historical importance in their own right. In the two millennia prior to the

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reign of Queen Elizabeth England had steadfastly pursued a foreign policy combining isolationism with respect to most of the planet, with a Monroe Doctrine relative to all its nearest neighbors; most Anglo-Saxon offshoots still practice some version of this tradition. It devastated France in the Hundred Years War, Scotland in the Three Hundred Years War, and Ireland in the Thousand Years War. In the 1680's it tried to invade Holland, but the Dutch returned the favor. It subdued Wales via the Tudor connivance, and Scotland through a steady erosion of the Balance of Payments.

Yet when the news reached England that Richard The Lion-Hearted was being held prisoner in Austria the immediate reaction was, *Where's Austria?* When Blondel explained that it was on the Continent people looked at him in bewilderment: *What's a Continent?*

Up until very recently the English believed that there were no continents, only islands. To the southwest of France lay an even smaller island known as Rome, then further to the east another one named Jerusalem. The former was reviled as a haven for Papists, while the latter was frequently confused with the Kingdom of Prester John. These quaint beliefs are reflected in the immortal lines of Coleridge which Diggory Dribone made us memorize: "Water, water, everywhere, Nor any drop to drink!"

Queen Elizabeth changed all this. Queen Elizabeth was 3 centuries ahead of her time. In fact Queen Elizabeth was the first Victorian. Her maidenly purity was (if nothing else) proverbial, her appetite for empire building insatiable, her tender heart

devoted to the execution of grandiose programs of poor relief. Execution is the right word for it.

She was the first English monarch to bring over the Germans: it was she who encouraged Frederick the Elector Palatine to spend his sophomore year as an exchange student at Oxford.⁸ She was in the most literal sense the daughter of the Reformation. Her father had slapped together the Church of England with some stale dogmas and a pot of glue. Then he tried to make the divinity of kings hereditary. He might have succeeded, had not the Pope prevailed upon God to see to it that His stork would carry Henry no viable males. Nor did Elizabeth carry any males, or anybody else for that matter. Thereupon the race of god-kings died out in one generation. The mortality of the succeeding line was demonstrated by a null experiment on Charles I.

Near the end of the 16th century the hallowed isolationism of England was irrevocably shattered by the Spanish Armada. American schoolchildren are taught not to be upset by the fact that the wreckage of the Armada was dispersed around all the coastlines of England. Our smug satisfaction at that misfortune comes through being taught that Phillip II of Spain was an unspeakably wicked man. Being so evil everything he attempted had to end in disaster. I doubt that there is an English, Belgian or Dutch history book in existence that doesn't let its readers know that Phillip II was Satan Incarnate. English historians hope in way to make Queen Elizabeth look marginally better. Three centuries of

⁸Just because a gang of Papists tried to mug her, the Thirty Years War should not be held against her.

such schoolhouse indoctrination have given the Americans an instinctive distrust of all peoples south of the border.

Yet the real Queen Elizabeth needs quite a lot of whitewash to come off better than some inoffensive Habsburg. She was a parricide, killing her father from disappointment because she wasn't a boy. She didn't do too well by her other relatives either. Under her rule England became a bee-hive, with exploited workers, drones like William Shakespeare, Francis Bacon, Osric and the Earl of Essex, and herself as Queen Bee. The workers were shipped off to be massacred in Ireland. The drones who flirted with her at court were called courtiers. After sucking the juice out of them, she had them executed. Only Sir Walter Raleigh survived, to await disposal in the coming regime.

She prolonged the Norman Conquest by starting the British Empire. As a result, millions of peoples around the globe are marked for life by having to read Macauley in the original. She turned all England into a textbook for Karl Marx. She sent Sir Walter Raleigh to Virginia to begin the extermination of the buffalo.

On the positive side, she saw to it that Shakespeare wasn't executed for heresy or treason. This may explain the frequency of his bad jokes. Official censors being for the most part, dumb oafs, he had to give them something to laugh at.

Forget about Milton. Most people do. The next millstone (sic!) in the development of the English language is the famous dictionary of Samuel Johnson. This tour-de-force creates a great

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deal of confusion in the study of the history of the language. In fact the dictionary turns it into a pseudo-science. It has been established by recent scholarship that most of the definitions in his dictionary were invented by Johnson off the top of his head. It is very dangerous to entrust any serious work to a frustrated writer. Having despaired in making his mark in any of the conventional literary genre , poetry, novels, theater, biography or criticism, the learned doctor used the genre of lexicography as a vehicle for self-expression.

This proved to be a catastrophe of limitless proportions, because his neologisms standardized the meanings of words.

Consequently everything written before his time had to be reinterpreted in the light of his dictionary. Thanks to Johnson no one knows today what Shakespeare, Cynewulf, Chaucer, or even that lazy farmer Langland, were really saying. In fact, the study of English literature before Johnson is really a waste of time. Nor is it terribly interesting after him either.

Later James Boswell published his biography of Johnson. As biography it's worthless, though it makes for good autobiography. It is impossible to imagine that a man of Johnson's stupendous erudition could be the simpleton Boswell makes him out to be. One has no trouble describing Boswell in these terms. The real Johnson can be glimpsed in his own "Life of Richard Savage". It is all the more to be pitied that Richard Savage didn't get around to writing a life of Boswell.

It is at about this time that the English language becomes self-conscious, that is to as embarrassed of its appearance as

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French had already been for a millenium. Boswell tells us all about it. Samuel Johnson was the dominant force, that is to say principal bore, in all the "literary salons" that were springing up all over London. These were notorious congregatings of writers, painters, duchesses, defrocked ministers, embezzling politicians and so forth. They sat around all day long, making facetious and spiteful puns and showing off their knowledge of Greek.

After Johnson the language stabilizes: both its first and its second derivatives go into a decline. It is remarkable but true that, apart from oddities like "Finnegans Wake", "Naked Lunch" or the novels of Henry James, nothing in modern literature would have been unintelligible to Coleridge or Jefferson. The names of modern inventions such as 'telephone', 'diode', 'electroencephalogram' would have caused few problems to these scholars of Latin and Greek.

This stagnation is the result of Johnson's dictionary, which explained for the first time to speakers of English the meanings of the words they were using. Before then no-one knew what anyone else was saying, or cared for that matter. But after the publication of his dictionary, people started using it to win disputes against others too poor to own a copy. Now anyone who didn't know the official definitions of words was punished with 20 whacks of Johnson's dictionary across the arse. Noah Webster brought the Johnsonian Inquisition to the New World. In our own day the Oxford dictionary has made people so afraid to open their mouths that they do so only on formal occasions.

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In the 19th century these descendants of the Vikings returned to the whale-road, striking terror into the heart of the world. Literature was cultivated by the stay-at-homes, those persons too pusillanimous to investigate these new opportunities for rape and pillage. Incapable of enriching the language with their own lusty creations, this breed of school-masters codified all that had already been written, established a "canon of literature", proscribed all the rest, lay the cornerstone of a system of education insidiously designed for the brain-washing of captive nations, (their own included) , and studied Greek. What decent talents remained among them committed suicide, disappeared into opium paradises, experienced premature senility or came down with tuberculosis of the logos. Shelley evaporated off the coast of Italy. Byron opted for sin. Keats got out while the going was good. Blake emigrated to the Island on the Moon. And so on.

Along came the linguists to tell us about morphemes, phonemes, allomorphs, homonyms, homophones, sibilants, glottals, fricatives, etc., etc.... That final bastion of originality, dialect, gave way to this academic battering ram. The goal of modern public education is to force everyone to speak the same way. For over a century the basic criteria for educated speech have been : total phonemic neutrality, proper morphemic enunciation, Oxonian vocabulary, Germanic grammar, Norman-French syntax, and Graeco- Latin rhetoric. It is very difficult to keep all these things going in one's head at the same time, and those who are successful at it are rightly dubbed authorities.

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Dr. Elijah Prout, my professor for *History of the English Language* in my junior year, imagined himself among this tiny colloquy of experts . At least once a week he would tell his class, " *I's gonna get you to speak right, so you don't make no mistakes* ". Invariably, he would laugh at his own joke. Alas! The moment the learned Prout, sexagenarian many a year, opened his mouth, he revealed a command of basic English every bit the level of his silly joke. He let us know that he expected to be paid for his sagacity by saying: "*I seek no eleemosynary object.* " Apart from his being the only person I have ever heard using the word 'eleemosynary' in conversation , he used it incorrectly. One may perhaps characterize certain intentions as 'eleemosynary' . Objects are things: one can hardly accuse a door or a salt-shaker of being eleemosynary, No doubt he was using the word 'object' in its archaic meaning of 'purpose', which would still be incorrect since one doesn't seek a charitable purpose, one either has it or one doesn't. If one seeks a purpose it cannot yet be qualified by any object.

And my bowels are still twisted by Prout's *delectation* before his *ensamples* from Matthew Arnold, nor am I inclined to make *common cause* with him in *conspuating* those *reprobate scribes* who *besmear the tongue* !

His English was so awful he couldn't have made himself understood to a bus driver. I often wondered how he managed to get to his home, out on the West Chester pike near Broomall, when he closed up shop for the night. His private manner of speaking was not merely out of date, but was composed of a goulash of old-

fashioned words, neologisms, bygone scholarly jargons and phrases coined by the daily newspapers.

The numerous essays we had to write for his class were corrected with '*diligency*' and '*assiduity*' , but also without mercy relative to this personal system of schizoid linguistics. There was a pathological frenzy visible in the nervous working of his red pencil on my weekly assignments. What ended up being returned to me looked like the bloodied back of a '*flogged dragoman*' !

Sometimes he got the meanings of words mixed up, like the time he informed me that my *coiffure* was *too horrendic* for his classrooms. He meant my manner of dress. As gently as possible I suggested that he may have intended to use the word *toilette* . Naturally he became very angry and barked that people are never allowed to use a word like that when he was *in situ* . After that I kept my mouth shut, accepting the F's I received from him as *inexorable* .

Prout nurtured a private animosity against me. As a matter of fact, all of my professors of *History of the English Language* had something against me: Elijah Prout, Phillip Grimbulge, Diggory Dribone, Tobit Stump, Athanasius Claw. I seem to see them all, whetting axes in the woodsheds adjacent to their suburban homes , thinking of me and chuckling. Each and every one of them was born before the invention of the automobile, none of them had the talent to write so much as a popular song lyric, yet all claimed to understand Shakespeare better than he did himself. They all hated me. I think they began to hate me from the first day of class.

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As the vaguest of generalizations it can be asserted that mathematicians are bound to encounter difficulties in any literature course. The canker of mathematics is that it is too precise, while the canker of literary scholarship is its inherent fuzzy-mindedness. It astounded me that people I considered intelligent managed to get A's in *History of the English Language* . Naturally, they possessed modalities of intelligence quite different from mine. They figured out a way to cry when Tobit Stump read to them from Shakespeare, whereas I was unable to keep from laughing. And they could laugh, too, when Diggory Dribone told his stale joke about the "*parsleymonious man who never sent lettuce*", when I could not restrain a yawn.

After Dribone instructed us to "*eschew all Americanisms*" , the whole class, myself excepted, started talking Oxonian; I began speaking Cockney. Athanasius Claw ordered us to revere *The Vicar of Wakefield* . People I'd imagined were very smart suddenly owned up to a great love for *The Vicar of Wakefield* . Nothing will ever convince me that a beatnik like Oliver Goldsmith wrote that damn thing. History is very plain on this matter: Samuel Johnson wrote it to cover Goldsmith's rent.

I had the effrontery to tell Claw that in my opinion *The Vicar of Wakefield* was the worst novel I'd ever read. A sharp intake of breath; then Claw bravely tried to show his support for academic freedom by asking me what I didn't like about it. I called it a "*snide study in sentimental sanctimony*". To me it was steeped in an atmosphere of piety that Oliver Goldsmith, the Jack Kerouac of the 18th century, could not have taken seriously. His own way of

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life reveals him as a man of far nobler character than any of the sentiments expressed in this novel. When he asked me for the evidence for this, I pointed out that instead of milking his patients dry like any other respectable doctor, Goldsmith hung out in coffee houses all day long. This was followed with my theory of Johnson's authorship, supported by citations, plausible inferences and internal textual evidence. Claw mumbled something to the effect that I had some interesting ideas, even as he was entering an F beside my name into his grade book.

Scientific minds want to juggle hypotheses, question dogmas, invent and carry out experiments. The activity of 'thinking' in the sciences isn't the same as in the humanities, where it is more of a form of directed dreaming akin to hypnosis. The ideal of the cultivated mentality to which the University aspires, lies somewhere between an opium trance and the stupor induced by reading books of medical statistics for 3 hours.

One isn't expected to judge Chaucer, Lyly, Shakespeare, Goldsmith, Hardy, and all the rest. One isn't even expected to read them : that's already been done for you. What one learns to do, (and my aptitudes in that respect are notoriously weak), is to affect an attitude of cultivation, channeling all one's reactions into some fashionable aesthetic, until the mind's eye, drugged and bloodshot, goes into free-float through Cynewulffian vistas, Miltonian Elysiums, Hardy-esque dungeons, Coleridgean opium dreams. One's resolution becomes hued over with the pale cast of Shakespeare. One's speech will bleat Wordsworthy lambs, and over one's term papers there will shine the crepuscular effulgence

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of Tennyson. As one's critical faculties fade away to virtual extinction, one's ability to extemporize meaningless chit-chat is amplified a thousand-fold.

The abilities of the weak, broad mind as described by Pierre Duhem in the passages cited at the beginning of this memoir, come into their own, while those of the strong, narrow mind flounder in the abyss. In the arena of literary scholarship all qualities of intellect normally considered virtues become vices. The mind which forms hypotheses, frames theories, dissects arguments, sets up experiments and reaches conclusions must give way to the mind that exhales vapors, equivocates fantasies, bogs down in quandaries and drowns in paradoxes. One cannot train or develop such a mind, no more than one can train or develop a club foot. You either have it or you don't.

A warning to critics who may decide at some future date to review this book. Reading about my shameful performance in *History of the English Language* should make it clear that I won't be able to understand a word of your review. Nor should you feel guilty if you want to say bad things about me, because I won't know enough to be offended by them.

I won't even recognize when I'm being praised. Don't expect me to send you a review of your review. I'm as little able to critique reviews about books as I am able to critique the books themselves. This should not be taken as a put-down of literary critics. Anyone whose gray matter is configured in a fashion so utterly different from mine deserves my respect.

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I don't take credit for my inadequacies. I'm well aware that I'm something of a clod. Despite having come this far in the writing of my autobiography, it's obvious that I don't have a literary mind. The sum total of all that I learned from the 9 Years War with *History of the English Language* can be put into this nutshell.

I will never like *The Vicar of Wakefield*. I will always get *Pilgrim's Progress* mixed up with *Piers Plowman*. The very title of a Hardy novel puts me to asleep. I will never accept the way the dictionary defines words. Passages in Shakespeare that make others laugh make me cry; yet I can roar with laughter over scenes normally considered the *ne plus ultra* of tragedy. *Finnegan's Wake* was fun to read, yet I remain baffled by Charles Lamb's *Dissertation on a Roast Pig*. To my warped taste, Edgar Allan Poe is funny, Lewis Carroll horrible. The only writers in the literary canon of English I can really enjoy are the Pearl Poet⁹, Cyril Tourneur, Richard Crashaw, George Crabbe, William Blake, Thomas Lovell Beddoes, Emily Bronte, James Joyce and Raymond Chandler. My favorite author, virtually unknown to most of the literate world, is *Matthew Rambly* (1590-1648).

Rambly fore-shadowed the novel a century before reaching its definitive shape at the hands of Fielding, Richardson, Goldsmith and Sterne. His notions of structure and form were far in advance of his time, one might argue they were in advance of all

⁹that is to say, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in its Classic Comics formulation.

time. Even the *nouveau roman* looks outdated which set against some of his bolder experiments .

Although Alain Robbe-Grillet and Phillipe Sollers claim to write novels with no content, Rambly wrote narratives with negative content. After you finish one of his books you know less than you did before you started, a real accomplishment for a writer.

To make Diggory Dribone's explications of Shakespeare more bearable, I tried sitting in his classes with a Rambly novel concealed in a loose-leaf binder. One day he caught me at it. Before I realized what was happening he'd snatched the book out of my hands. If I recall correctly it was Rambly's masterpiece: *The Cozened Midwife* . A mere glance at the author's name evoked a wince of disgust . Reaching his desk he threw the book into the trash basket. Then he asked to talk to me privately after class.

Seated together after the room emptied out, Dribone informed me that in the judgment of educated people, (among whom he would like to believe I belonged), Matthew Rambly was the worst novelist in the English language unlucky enough to have found a publisher - perhaps in any language. Why? I asked : was he worse than Rudyard Kipling? Much worse. Was he worse than T.S. Eliot? Dribone stared at me in a state of shock; my slur on the venerated name of Eliot demonstrated my total incapacity for humanistic cultivation. Didn't I realize that Shakespeare refused to allow Rambly into his house in Stratford-on-Avon?

This revelation immediately opened my eyes to what had previously escaped me: the 400-year neglect of Matthew Rambly's works was the result of a smear campaign mounted by Shakespeare

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against his only significant rival. Dribone's comment had the effect of stiffening my resolve; I assured him that I intended to seek out and devour any work of Rambly's still extant and available. Critics and scholars spit on Rambly, I went on, without taking the trouble to read him. He knew more about sex than Havelock Ellis and was a better stylist than Walter Pater.

Even the educated public only supports authors who tell them what they want to hear, but the really good writers are those who tell them what they don't want to hear. Hacks like Chaucer and Shakespeare continue to be read because they developed the knack of telling people what they already believed in such a manner as to make it appear that they were receiving extraordinary insights. Writers, like the speakers at political rallies, become famous by telling their audiences what they already know. The posterity of the allegedly 'great' writers balances precariously on their time-transcending ability to make trite commonplaces sound like profound and original ideas.

My enthusiasm began to get the better of me. Dribone must have thought me a fanatic. Raising my voice I reiterated that the Ramblys of this world never have a chance, precisely because they attempt to communicate genuinely new ideas. Rambly's novels present a challenge, even today. He was well worth studying and I was determined to rectify the historical injustice done to his name.

Dribone listened carefully to everything I said. To my great surprise he admitted to a certain sympathy for my views. What appeared to be disturbing me was nothing more than the basic dilemma faced by teachers everywhere. In a relaxed tone that let

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me know he bore no ill-will towards me, he told me that he'd had a long career. He knew all about the hostility aroused in his students whenever he tried to put new ideas into their heads. Being myself a student he didn't expect me to appreciate, the cross professors had to bear. but he was generously prepared to forgive me. For that very reason it was a mystery to him that I could have so much sympathy for Matthew Rambly, a rightly despised pornographer of the 17th century, and yet be unable to empathize with a flesh-and-blood teacher like himself , bowed low by so many "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" !

My face broke out into a broad smile. Then and there I promised to show more appreciation for him in the future. We shook hands and I got up to leave. Just before reaching the door, he called me back . Dribone felt it was only right to apologize for the F that he'd already entered into the record . He sincerely regretted not having the energy to walk down the corridor to the departmental office and go through the bothersome process of altering it.

In fairness to my English teachers, I don't read. Apart from science fiction paperbacks and other pulp it's unlikely that I read more than one non-technical book a year from cover to cover. C.P. Snow was quite right about the Two Cultures: look at his own novels for example. I don't pretend to be able to write a novel myself. Autobiography is daunting enough. To tell the truth, honesty compels me to admit that anyone who's come this far has probably realized that half the time I don't know what the hell I'm talking about.

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