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ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE

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By J. WINFREE SMITH

Every St. John's student, or nearly every St. John's student, has not spent many days on this campus before he undergoes the experience of being and of feeling himself lost. His strongest opinions are challenged. He has difficulty finding reasons with which to defend them. Or, finding reasons, he soon becomes aware that those reasons themselves are but opinions. The very foundations of his thought and actions are threatened. He is lost.

The experience that I am describing is, of course, the beginning of education. Immature, unconsidered, often wrong opinions have to be opposed, corrected, sometimes destroyed if they are to be replaced by mature, considered and perhaps right opinions. But it appears to me that the student's sense of being lost goes deeper than that. It would be a wonderful thing if in each case it were simply a matter of replacing a wrong opinion with a right one, or even a less adequate one with a more adequate one. It would be indeed a wonderful thing if our teachers from Homer to John Dewey could, with the help of the various ways we have devised to listen to them, effect this transformation of opinions. It cannot be doubted that in large measure they do. The books that we read here and on which we base our curriculum are all so many glittering stars, of varying magnitude to be sure, in a firmament more glorious than the one we see with our eyes. By their light we see things that we never saw before. But behind their light there is darkness. They answer some questions that they raise, but there are many more that they do not answer. Together I suppose they raise nearly all of the major questions that have confronted men. We place an extremely heavy demand upon the St. John's student when we ask him in the space of four years to deal responsibly with the major questions that have presented themselves to the human race over thousands of years. That he gets lost is no cause for wonder.

Moreover, these stars often appear as different and mutually exclusive worlds or parts of worlds. Probably none of them has a claim to be a whole world. Probably not all of them together can claim to be a whole world. For, no doubt, there is something that each of them singly leaves out and that all of them together leave out. But there are some which have a better claim than others to being whole worlds. The world of Plato and Aristotle (which with some qualifications is the same world), the world of the Bible and the tradition that depends on it, the world of Thomas Hobbes, the world of Immanuel Kant, and perhaps others, have such a better claim. These worlds have a greater comprehensiveness

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in relation to the range of problems with which they deal and reach a greater depth in the handling of these problems. Sometimes the student decides to make himself at home in one of them. A man does not like to remain in the uncomfortable state of having no home. But the home, in order to be a home, must satisfy. A man must be able to find in it meaning for his existence; for the thinking man this means that he must be able to find meaning for the whole of existence; since the thinking man makes the problems of the whole of existence his own problems. The St. John's student seldom chooses to make his home in, say, Gilbert's treatise on the magnet, however informative it may be with respect to its own particular subject.

Unhappily, however, when the student has made his home in one of these splendid worlds and is surveying the wonderful order and harmony of his possessions, there is inevitably someone who is taking a pickaxe to the foundations. Or perhaps a flood comes and sweeps the whole thing away. When that happens, the student may salvage a few planks and cling to them to save himself from drowning; but a few planks tossed on an uncertain sea are no home. Once more, the student is in the position of not knowing where he is; he is lost.

So far, this sense of being lost, however painful it may be, has been described only in terms of the growing knowledge of one's own ignorance or as the perplexity that is a part of the process of learning. But I believe that this sense of being lost is more than that and that it is intimately connected with the time in which we live. The first half of the twentieth century has seen not only destruction of human life on a larger scale than ever before, but also destruction of human traditions, human morality, human beliefs. Destruction of human traditions, change of human morality, correction of human belief can, of course, be made in the name of reason. But the destruction that has been taking place has not been made in the name of reason. It is partly the result of circumstances but also partly the result of a deliberate choice of certain men in the nineteenth century to take their stand not on reason, and certainly not on faith, but on nothing. This point of view has touched our own souls so that we are not only lost but despair of seeing any meaning in "finding" or "being found."

To you who are now leaving St. John's let me, then, first recommend "conservatism" as an intellectual and moral attitude. Lest my use of this word be misunderstood let me hasten to say that I do not mean to recommend that which is happening among college youth on so many campuses, namely a withdrawal from free discussion of controversial political and economic issues for fear of the accusation of communism. I should hope and expect that you would always have minds free from such fear; free to consider without prejudice, among other things, the argument against capitalism to see what there is of truth or falsity in it.

It is that kind of freedom that is the true meaning of "liberalism." Such liberalism is not incompatible with the sort of conservatism about which I am speaking.

What I mean is that it is an obligation of reason to "conserve" opinions, morality, traditions, institutions. This, of course, is not an unlimited obligation. It is limited by the prior obligation of reason to consider, criticize and examine opinions, morality, traditions, institutions. But while it is fulfilling its prior obligation, it must "conserve" the things that it is considering, criticizing and examining. Otherwise, it will have nothing to consider, criticize and examine; and since the arguments of reason are so often inconclusive, reason, if it follows my advice, will always continue to do quite a bit of "conserving."

The second thing that I would like to recommend to you is something for which I had to do considerable arguing in my last freshman seminar, and that's "madness." It is well known that everybody at St. John's is mad. I hope that you will all continue to be a little bit mad. I say, "a little bit," because, as I think I should warn you, society won't allow you to be more than a little bit mad. Without madness you will never rise above the level of the accepted and the commonplace.

This madness is, of course, the second kind of love that Plato speaks of in the "Phaedrus." It is the kind of love without which philosophy would be impossible. What I am recommending, then, is a kind of love—that is to say—a passion. We often hear it said that it is the mark of an educated man to be able to transcend the passions, to examine things dispassionately; and that is undoubtedly true. And yet there is a kind of dispassionateness, a kind of cold detachment that is as unphilosophic as the slavery of the mind to lust or ambition. I hope that you will always be *in love* with the truth. And by "the truth" I don't mean necessarily anything abstract and far distant.

I may illustrate my meaning from an old movie called "The Gold Rush." In that movie Charlie Chaplin and another comedian run out of food in the Klondike. The other man, if I remember correctly, begins to see Charlie Chaplin as a chicken. Now, obviously, he loves Charlie Chaplin, but it is a love that is on the level with lust or ambition, a black horse love, if you will, which would do violence to the object of the love. If he had loved Charlie Chaplin for what Charlie Chaplin is rather than what he saw him as, then he would have had what I mean by the love of the truth. By the love of the truth I mean the love of Charlie Chaplin for what he is or the love of any man for what he is, or the love of a tree or a star for what it is.

The third thing that I have to recommend is something closely akin to the preceding, something about which I once gave a lecture, and that's "wonder." Wonder has the same sort of respect for its object as the love that I was talking about. Wonder wants to keep its object the way

it is. Wonder approaches its object with awe. Wonder does not want to put its object to base uses. But the main point about wonder is that it contains the recognition that, no matter how much is seen in a thing or in a word, there is always more to be seen. Wonder preserves the mystery of things at the same time that it stirs us to explore the mystery. Modern mathematics and mathematical physics sometimes tempt us to forget that there is anything other than what's contained in their symbols and equations. Wonder is a reminder that the symbol is not the thing and that there's much more in the thing than in the symbol. May I invite you, then, to cultivate wonder?

It appears that the life that I have in mind for you is the philosophic life. I should have to admit that that is the case. For in some ways I am speaking to you not in my own person but in the person of St. John's College, and it seems to me that insofar as St. John's College stands for any kind of life, it stands for the philosophic life, where the adjective "philosophic" is to be interpreted in the broadest sense. By that I only mean that St. John's College is devoted to the end of leading young men (and hereafter young women also) to understanding and, if it may be, knowledge.

I do *not* mean that St. John's is devoted to the promulgation of any particular philosophic doctrines, whether they be those of Plato or Leibniz or Hegel or John Dewey. Indeed, both the age in which we live and the principle to which we adhere make it impossible for us to take for granted any philosophy or philosophic system. Every philosophy is only a more or less coherent body of opinions which has first to be understood and then to take its chances in whatever tests our all too inadequate discussions may put it to. The enterprise is always governed by the hope of adding to our understanding or our knowledge. And when I say that I have the philosophic life in mind for you, all that I mean is that I hope that you will continue, insofar as your several occupations may allow, to serve the ends for which this College exists, i.e. to seek understanding and knowledge.

It is often charged against us that we are in an ivory tower. I should admit it; only I should not admit that it is a charge. It would be a charge only if we were under the illusion that we have none of the political responsibility about which Mr. Kieffer was speaking to you on Saturday. We are responsible for the world in which we live. And this is true, by the way, even if the world has become a kind of Frankenstein over which reason has no control. Still, the ivory tower as such is good because understanding and knowledge are themselves sweet. I hope that, no matter how burdened you may be with the responsibility of the world, you will keep something of the ivory tower in your lives.

If I were to speak to you in my own person I should have to talk not about the philosophic life but about the Christian life, because from my

point of view the Christian life is *the only life*; and if the philosophic life is to have worth, it must find its worth in relation to the Christian life. I should speak again of the sense of being lost, of the sense of futility which is not just part of the pain of learning, but belongs to the mood of our time; and I should say that it is the consequence of man's alienation from God. I should invite you to base your lives not finally on reason, but on faith, and on reason only insofar as reason serves faith. I should speak to you of the mighty acts of God, of the creation of the world, of the giving of the law, of the coming of Jesus Christ, of the promises of the Gospel.

In saying these things I should be saying only what I think is true. But I would have to say them only in my own person because they are not things that are agreed upon between us. From the point of view of St. John's College, the Christian religion may be all that it claims to be, that is to say, the one revelation exclusive of all others. It may be the only secure world in which man may make his home. But on those questions St. John's College cannot and does not pronounce. The Christian religion like, for example, one of its major rivals, the Platonic philosophy, has to take its chances in argument. The very great service that St. John's College can do for a Christian, and I think has done for me, is to bring the Christian to a clearer understanding of what Christianity is. That is an immense service, for most people who today call themselves Christians for failing to understand why confuse it with something that it is not—with, say philosophy or (a thing which should not be mentioned in the same breath) the American way of life. The Christian way of life is certainly not the American way of life. But if St. John's College assists Christians or non-Christians to such understandings, that only means that its purpose, our common purpose, upon which we all agree, is understanding and knowledge, if that may be. And so I am speaking to you not as a Christian minister, but as a tutor of St. John's College who, because he is, or would like to be, a Christian, is particularly concerned to call Christianity to your attention. I hope that you feel that it has been good for you to be here. If we who have been your teachers have done you any good, we are glad. And if we have done you any harm, we hope that you will forgive us.

REMARKS ON HAMLET AND ARISTOTLE'S POETICS

By JOHN R. GARLAND, 1950

These are excerpts from the introduction to Mr. Garland's senior thesis, submitted in candidacy for the degree of bachelor of arts.

The relation of the dramatic art to the realm of human experience is unique among the problems which arise out of speculation about "art and nature." In a painting, for instance, we ask whether the beauty which an object causes or persuades the artist to portray, belongs to the object or to the mind of the artist. But in a play, the same question may be raised not only about aesthetic elements such as verse or spectacle but also about the dramatic form itself. For it is difficult to decide whether a play weaves events and intentions into the same patterns that experience does, and if so, whether those patterns are the character of experience or simply a small part of it or perhaps both. . . .

The dramatic art, which itself is a search for the beautiful as well as for the good, cannot be considered as really imitative unless there is something in human experience which passes judgment upon the actions of men. If there are no external tragic and comic judgments which impress themselves upon experience, then they must be created by the dramatist himself. His task would then be to seek truth as well as to imitate it.

Aristotle said that the whole phenomenon of poetry was caused by the natural pleasure and ability held by men in learning through imitation. Let us accept this as at least a partial answer to the question we have just considered and move on to some of the other statements which Aristotle makes about the specific form of the drama. For the *Poetics*, though primarily a formal treatise, used the source and purpose of Greek drama to point out general rules and justify a rigid dramatic formula; and these subordinate concerns, I think, suggest one aspect which unlike the whole problem does not immediately involve the general question of truth and knowledge.

Much of what Aristotle says in the *Poetics* applies not only to the view of the poet but also to the understanding of human nature itself. For whether or not the dramatic art is a true mirror of nature, nevertheless, it reflects much of the attitude with which the mind faces experience and translates itself into the acts of the will. The psychology of action, then, is connected with what seems at first to be the contrived image of the drama; and this form is also the pattern by which we try to arrange the remembered events of our own past. Aristotle says that man is, among other things, naturally imitative; and from this it may be said that he has a dramatic viewpoint by which he imitates both in mind and in action either his fellow creatures or an idealized concept of himself.

Consider the most vivid form of memory as corresponding to what Aristotle called the highest form of drama, tragedy. Most definite is our memory of those states of mind and those circumstances of experience which are adaptable to the unities of plot. We most easily remember those events which are connected in a necessary relation of cause and effect and which are understood in terms of complication, discovery, peripety and the unraveling or solution of a problem. There is also that natural tendency to idealize ourselves above reality by selecting the most significant actions of our own memory or by comparing or even identifying ourselves with great men or fictitious idols encountered in the past. And finally, how often do we prefer to regard failure and wickedness as caused by errors in judgment rather than by some malice or lack of virtue.

This relation of the *Poetics* to psychology is not essential to the Aristotelian view of Greek tragedy. What relevance it has stems more from the implications of poetry as an imitative art. For even as the imitation of Aristotle assumes the existence of truth and beauty in its object, so does the tragic formula reflect primarily a dramatic quality of experience. . . . What was most important to Aristotle was the possibility that a good poet could find in the extreme episodic nature of experience the actions which approximate tragic dimensions and reveal the highest nobility of man. That this is more than a possibility is, in the broadest view, the most significant message of the *Poetics*.

Aristotle's conception of tragedy, though it may be thought to exaggerate and universalize from nature, nevertheless justifies its clear objective picture by assuming a harmony between poetry and experience. Through its emotional medium of pity and fear is seen a communication between the rationality of the mind and that of nature. The tragic hero by an error of judgment falls just short of this overwhelming natural justice and his flaw is made hard like marble by a relentless pride which carries him through tragic discovery, peripety and downfall and defies fate and the gods even in defeat and in recognition of their power. It is superfluous to call him dramatic since he is known only through a tragic situation which defines who he is and in this way gives him his very nobility.

To find a dramatic viewpoint inherent in human nature and apart from that which is given to men by tragic experience it will be more profitable to look beyond Aristotle to another age in literature and philosophy. For the dramatic nature of the Greek heroes is too buried in the dominance of plot to show forth clearly by itself. But another period with a different underlying philosophy would yield a new basis for the peculiar judgment that the dramatic art passes upon men by means of plot. The world of Shakespeare and Bacon, for instance, presents a different picture of man in relation to nature and in so doing offers a literature in which we may find examples of characters whose dramatic

viewpoint stands out in contrast to the situations in which they are depicted.

Francis Bacon did not believe that the world was as rational as Aristotle held it to be. He was more inclined to say that nature and reason were two separate entities, which though connected in some ways were not as intimate as the Ancient and Scholastic philosophers depicted them in their logical systems of metaphysics. He is noted primarily for the *Novum Organum* and the doctrine that the inductive method was the true way to the understanding of nature. But in separating reason he also separated man or a part of him from the world of nature and thus contributed in a large degree to the philosophical basis of the literature written by his contemporaries.

Concerning the nature of the human mind, Bacon remarks:

* "The sense which takes everything simply as it is makes a better mental condition and estate than those imaginations and wanderings of the mind. For it is the nature of the human mind, even in the gravest wits, the moment it receives an impression of anything, to sally forth and spring forward and expect to find everything else in harmony with it: if it be an impression of good, then it is prone to indefinite hope; if of evil, to fear."

This reflects a fear that the mind will always overreach nature and place man in a permanent disharmony with the world around him. Bacon was concerned almost as much with the waywardness of the intellect as he was with the security and truth to be achieved by the inductive method. Throughout the *Novum Organum* we sense his conviction that reason habitually lies about nature and that its activities like those of the will are subject to desire and sin. . . .

Shakespeare's art is much more conscious of the creative sense of the word and the tendency of the dramatist to alter experience rather than to find something inherently dramatic in it. But he felt this tendency not only in poets but also, as Bacon did, in human nature itself. Hence the scope of his drama does not reach up to heaven and the gods but contains itself within the world of men, within the state, and always within the strict bounds of nature. The plays rest partly upon the Christian doctrine insofar as they deal with the sin spoken of in scripture. But Shakespeare is more than a Christian poet; for he is concerned not only with the Commandments from heaven but also with the more dramatic search for some pattern of justice in nature or that part of nature over which men believe they have control.

* *Meditationes Sacrae*, the short essay entitled "Of Earthly Hope" (Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire).

