

## My year away

ONE of the oddities of all religions is how its high priests manage to persuade the faithful that they, the priests, are indispensable. Without them to interpret the word of whatever god or gods are worshipped, faith is impossible and all is lost. The faithful need them, they are vital, the priests insist, to intercede on their behalf and interpret the word. Much the same occurs in the arts.

The critics and academics have long persuaded the faithful that they, the critics and academics, are equally indispensable. They long ago convinced us that without them and their arcane and fruitful insight, we simply would not know what works, what paintings, novels, poems, music was true, quite extraordinarily and exciting art, the real thing. And we would not know what was, to be blunt, nothing but sad and worthless tat. That squiggle, that mess of paint, that longwinded, boring novel, that pretentious piece of verse? It's art! That other squiggle, that other longwinded, boring novel, that other pretentious piece of verse? Please. Please! Well, let's be kind: E for effort, but art? Art it ain't. And be thankful, imply the critics and academics, that we are here to guide you.

Donald and David, who proudly used their own faeces in their paintings? Both geniuses of a remarkable kind! You disagree? Well . . .

That faint, dismissive sniff silently conveys that an uncouth oik like you really can't be expected to discern what to the critic and academic is very clear indeed. Who else but Donald and David would conceive of creating a kind of brutal, uncompromising, authentic beauty with their own shit? Quite extraordinary! All right, then, if not uncouth, still young and raw and still untutored, and someone with a lot to learn. And we, the critics and academics more than just imply, will be only to pleased to tutor you. In time you'll learn, you'll learn.

. . .

Well, I did learn a lot at college, but I doubt it was what academia was hoping to teach me. The British artists Donald and David, Aaro Korhonen, the deaf Finnish composer who used snippets of 'found sound' to 'build' music and who 'felt' pitch, the Armenian writing group Oghi Skhtor Yev Ashora, who extolled quintessence of identity (and exiled themselves to New York), all and many more were revered by the men and women at the liberal arts college I attended in New Hampshire.

At first, as a shy and diffident eighteen-year-old, I was more than inclined to join in the reverence, if only not to allow myself to be marked down as a dullard and a philistine. Like every other young woman and man, I wanted to belong. I sat through incomprehensible theatre pieces, concerts and poetry readings, and got none

of it. For almost two years I agonised over my own lack of taste and sensibility. This was art! This was true, real living art! So why did I not appreciate it? Why did I not comprehend its intentions as (it seemed) every other student in my faculty as well as all the faculty staff comprehended them? At times, as only a young man and woman can, I despaired.

...

Towards the end of my second year at college I developed jaundice and had to return home to recuperate. Then, at the end of summer, my father, who had long been ill, died and my mother asked me to I take a year out from my course to keep her company. I agreed. My mother and I got on well, we laughed at the same things, and I had lost my appetite for studying. I found myself a job stacking shelves in a local superstore, and that Christmas I told my mother I felt more than inclined not to return to college the following fall. She would hear none of it.

‘Your father was very, very keen that you should get a degree. He never had the chance to go to college, and I’m sure he would have done well and so was he. He always regretted it.’

My father had, in fact, done well for himself and his family, although not in an academic sense. He had built up a timber merchant’s business and then bought local land, and though we were not wealthy, we lived comfortably. I told my mother she shouldn’t be ashamed of his lack of a college education.

‘Oh, don’t be silly, I’m not at all ashamed of him, what makes you think that? But I know that he had a good mind and I’m sure would have benefited from a college course. That’s why he was so keen you should go.’ She paused. ‘Please, don’t give up, Thomas. For his sake. Think about it.’

I did think about it and eventually resolved to see out my course, if not for my sake, then for my mother’s and my dead father’s. I decided to carry on at college and take my degree. That was the plan. It didn’t pan out like that at all.

...

An invitation to see the faculty dean of was not one to be refused. The college prided itself on its liberalism and would not dream of summoning a student to see the department dean, but that invitation was nonetheless a summons, and I knew why she wanted to see me. I had become something of a square peg on a round hole.

I was back at the beginning of the fall semester, and because of my year out, a little older than the others in my class. A year older might not seem much, but it was. They were different. I was different. There were just as many among them who planned for a life in literature, to write the great American novel, to wow the world with their sensibility and talent. But my year stacking shelves at Shaw’s had taught

me a lot. I knew that most of them would not even start that novel. Most, if not all, would, within ten years, be working in marketing, local journalism, management or would be teaching or engaged in some kind of activism. The world of American literature would have to bide its time a little more before welcoming its latest sensation. When I had first arrived almost three years ago, their self-confident zeal was intimidating and I shrank into a corner, content merely to be impressed by such boys and girls of the world. Now? Now they were a joke, bad caricatures of what they thought they were.

...

I might well have matured a little in my year away, but I had not matured enough. I had not yet learned the virtue of a diplomatic silence, that not every thought you have need be articulated. That if you felt a man or woman was a fool, you did not necessarily have to make your feeling clear to them. That was my undoing.

In my first two years in class I had not said a great deal. Partly it was because I had nothing to say. Partly it was that same intimidation, the fearful awe I then felt that others had insight into what Emily Dickinson meant when butterflies renounced their drams and seraphs swung their snowy hats. Now? Now I sensed that they were merely parroting what they had elsewhere read as the faithful parrot the holy truths at worship. This was the gospel, but now I was, if not an atheist, most certainly agnostic.

One of the biggest fibs told in the modern world by one liberal generation to its successor is that they are quite right to think outside the box, to be unorthodox, that they must always challenge. It is not just worthwhile and progressive, but a duty: don't accept unthinkingly! If only. Those that liberal generation condemns as reactionary are, at least and in a sense, a little more honest. The one instruction it gives its young is quite straightforward: do as we do! Do as we say! Question nothing! And to hell with new ideas! Those who regard themselves as more liberal and on the side of the angels purport to find that attitude abhorrent. In practice they do no different. They are equally as autocratic, but try to be more gentle when they instruct. The velvet glove, though, hides a fist.

The liberal dilemma is that in time the unorthodox positions they once championed become today's orthodox credo, the shibboleths of their liberal tribe, and woe betide anyone now inclined to think outside the box and challenge those shibboleths. Thus with liberals, so with priests, who were and still are resolved to persecute and destroy those who do not agree with them. And thus with liberals, so with the art's critics and academics - well, after a fashion.

The arts' critics and academics cherish enmity. If they are unable to slap each other on the back, agree and laud their peers' intellect, they are equally as pleased to

hate. That's all fine and dandy, of course, and let's raise a glass to hate, but for some of us, well, for me, there is a catch. Implicit in that war is the conviction that if you are not with them, you are agin them, and those agin them will be destroyed. Those agin them must be destroyed as apostates of the true faith. And that is where my big mouth led me.

Looking back I should have seen it all coming. In class I was more than outspoken. When we were yet again presented with the received wisdom, the doctrine, some convoluted exegesis of a poem, a novel, and again reminded of the dicta of literary theorists on the impossibility of meaning, the death of significance, the crisis of language, I could not keep my mouth shut. Often I reminded the class, well, I reminded the staff member taking the class, of William of Ockham's sage advice to keep it short, sweet and simple. My reminders and other interventions, though, became increasingly unwelcome. Wisdom does not care to be challenged.

...

I entered the dean's outer office just before 1pm. Susie at her desk, the dean's doorkeeper, asked me to wait and disappeared into the dean's office. When she came out again moments later, she did not say a thing. She did not even look at me. That disconcerted me and I felt a pit in my stomach. A minute or two later, Susie put on her coat and left, presumably to go to lunch. Over the next ten minutes several members of the English department arrived. One or two gave a brief nod. Finally, the last to enter the dean's office, returned and invited me in.

'Ah, there you are, Thomas. Keeping well?'

I was sure the dean did not want to meet me, in the company of these staff, because she was keen to hear how well I was keeping.

'We all know each other, so I don't believe we need any introductions, although you might not yet have met Angela because she only arrived a few weeks ago to replace dear old Simon and deals with the foundation classes.'

Angela looked up at me from her corner of the room and gave me a brief, though bleak, smile.

'In fact, Angela, need not necessarily be here, but I thought it might help her to settle in with us if she became acquainted with our protocols and saw how important it is to the integrity of this faculty that protocol is observed at all times.'

Protocol, integrity, it was not looking good.

'Paul tells me, Thomas,' I looked over at Paul but he did not look at me, 'that in this past year you have developed into a lively contributor to class discussions. That is, of course, always welcome, always. But Paul also tells me, and Linda, Rutherford,

Bradley, Mary and Robyn agree, that you are apt to express yourself too forcibly, that you make your points with a verve some might regard as excessive, and this has upset many in your class.’

‘I didn’t think –,’

‘No, Thomas, not quite yet, you’ll get your chance to speak but, please not quite yet. This faculty, indeed this college, prides itself on its inclusivity, that we are a broad church, that we must exist as a broad church if we are to do justice to the principle of real education. That is vital. Vital.’

The rest of the group murmured in agreement.

‘Vital. There can be no other way.’

The dean paused.

‘But there are other considerations in this matter, considerations which might be tangential, but nevertheless do impinge on it to a valid degree. It might seem to us today to be something of an old-fashioned notion, but – well, I am no longer the youngest though I’m sure you will all know what I mean – at heart it’s a question of manners.’

The dean waved her hand in deprecation.

‘Oh, it does seem a quaint word, doesn’t it, but it represents an eternal principle, that we treat each other with dignity and respect, especially if we disagree with the other. And, Thomas, from what I hear, this is something you haven’t been doing. And it has become a real concern.’

‘I didn’t –,’

‘No, please, we’ll hear from you in a minute.’

She paused again.

Were this a religious ceremony I have not doubt the officiating priest or rabbi or imam would now bless the congregation with a monstrance, lead a chant from the Psalms, intone a passage from the Torah or Koran, anything to reinforce in the faithful the conviction of who was God and how insignificant they were in his presence.

I knew then that my time was up. I knew then that the invitation to meet the faculty dean was an invitation to attend my execution. What irritated me most about the whole performance was how fake it all was. Certainly, I had not minced my words and had always spoken from the heart, but it was not that which had been my oft-repeated sin. What irritated me most was that all of them, the dean and her chorus,

also knew that my sin was not a failure of character, a disregard for the norms of civilised society. It was my increasing apostasy, and nowhere are apostates welcome.

...

My mother was not as disappointed as I expected her to be when I rang and told her that I had been invited to continue my education elsewhere. She laughed.

‘Doesn’t surprise me, Thomas, it really doesn’t if I’m honest. You always were your father’s son.’

‘But you said he wanted me to go to college.’

‘He did, but I’m sure he would also have wanted you to be honest with yourself. When are you coming home?’

The odd thing was that I still liked reading. I still enjoyed poetry and fiction. What I didn’t enjoy at all was much of the bullshit that went with it.