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THE ACADEMIC'S DREAM

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Introduction

One day last week I found myself in the room of my prolific friend and colleague Frank Roskill. He was absent at a conference and I was looking for some exam papers, but on his desk there was a manuscript which caught my eye. It was entitled 'The Academic's Dream', it was very short, and in spite of myself I read it to the end. My immediate reaction was to dismiss such a trifle, but then I realised that he must mean to publish it - since everything he writes he publishes - and I further considered that any attempt on my part to dissuade him from publishing it was out of the question. Roskill is an engaging man, a man indeed of considerable charm, but I fear that he would regard any intervention of mine as sufficient reason for rushing into print. On the other hand to do nothing was equally impossible: the idea of such an article appearing so to speak unchaperoned in a respectable journal was grossly offensive to me. It struck me as opportunist, cynical, and disloyal - in fact as wholly deplorable. After a period of reflection therefore I resolved to anticipate him. I stole back into his room, copied the article, and now submit it to the public together with this monitory preface and the remarks contained in the succeeding commentary.

I should add that the question whether to divulge my colleague's name caused me great anguish: in the end I decided that nothing was to be gained by withholding it, because the mere appending of my own name would indirectly reveal his to anyone desirous of discovering it. But in any case, in matters such as this the interests of truth must prevail over considerations of charity.

THE ACADEMIC'S DREAM OR: ON THE MAKING OF MANY BOOKS, AND NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN

It has been a busy term. Knowing that I must publish or be damned, I have been building up a portfolio of articles. The problem of course is not in the writing - I try to get one done every Wednesday - but in finding a subject. I have had one or two false starts. For example, I came across what I thought was a certainty in a passage in Ruth. There are at least twenty interpretations of Ruth 2:7, but the more interpretations there are the more fruitful the ground: it means that no one really has any idea what's going on, so the possibilities are infinite. It occurred to me that the word *shibhtah* is used in the same form at Deut. 23:13 of performing the natural functions, and the word *bayith* is an obvious euphemism for where one performs them - indeed in modern Hebrew one of the expressions, rather charmingly, is 'house of the seat'. The foreman of the harvesters therefore was simply saying, in the sort of earthy way you would expect from a foreman of harvesters, "she's been working in the field all day, stopping only to go to the lavatory." I hesitated for a while to write it up, out of natural embarrassment at having such a thing above my name, but then I found an article in a current periodical entitled 'Eschatology and Scatology in Luther', which seemed to open up a new seam, so I went ahead. But I was just putting the finishing touches to this potboiler when I discovered, inevitably, a reference to an article written twenty years ago arguing the same thing. Whether the writer argued it on the same basis or not, I don't know. I was too irritated to look it up.

But this experience, and one or two others like it, made me ask myself how obscure or Rabelaisian it is necessary to be before you come up with something which no one has ever said before. So I decided that I must be systematic, and I undertook an analysis of the articles which fill the journals which fill the libraries. I identified four categories.

First, there is the sort of little study I've just been discussing: the latest conjecture on the same age-old crux, wholly lacking in interest or significance, but serving its purpose well enough - that of getting its author's name into print. The trouble is that there are so few gaps remaining in the fence which two thousand years have erected around the subject matter.

Hence the attraction of the second category, where the professional parasites labour at collecting and collating the thoughts of others. If there is one thing easier than providing the twenty first interpretation of Ruth 2:7, it is providing a synopsis of the first twenty. The great advocate F.E. Smith was once appearing before a hostile judge in a complicated commercial case. The judge interrupted him with the words, "Mr. Smith, you've been addressing me for three hours on this point, and I'm none the wiser." "No doubt, my Lord," replied Smith, "but you're certainly better informed." The distinction between wisdom and information is, fortunately, not one which is very widely appreciated.

To the third category belongs

*A young fellow called Septimus Clover,
Who bowled twenty-three wides in one over;
The first time this was done
By an archdeacon's son,
On a Friday in August at Dover.*

It is the category of the unusual combination. The traditional methods are not enough to ensure a place in the record-books or in the theological journals. You have to steal a march on your rivals by producing a hybrid out of your hat. It's like the advertisements for lawyers in the EEC. It's not enough to be an experienced lawyer. It's not even enough to be an experienced lawyer and speak three languages. You have to be an experienced lawyer and speak three languages, two of which are Danish and Greek. So of course the theologians who have been lawyers or historians or sociologists or computer scientists or criminals or feminists find their old pursuits a selling-point, and insist on their relevance and usefulness to theology far beyond the point at which such claims cease to be convincing.

Indeed some of them insist so much that they create for themselves the fourth category, the category of the new methodology. On this merrygoround the New Testament is programmed or emancipated or classified or emasculated, and all the while multitudes of grateful scholars trample each other in the rush to leap aboard.

When I had completed my analysis I determined that my portfolio should be a balanced one, with a number of shares in each class. And I began to prosper. But then, one night, I had a dream, or rather a nightmare. I dreamt that there was an official reaction against this glorious proliferation of nonsense, that legislation was passed insisting that all editors of journals attach a kind of health warning to everything they printed, in the form of a system of stars, to be interpreted as follows:

One star: this article has been written solely with the intention of adding another line to the author's list of publica-

tions . It is totally without significance, and there is no point in reading it.

Two stars: this article contains nothing original: it is simply a resume of other people's articles in a certain area. As all the articles in question fall into the one star category, there is no point in reading it.

Three stars: the content of this article is original, in the sense that no one else has ever thought to write anything quite like it. There are, however, good reasons for this, so there is no point in reading it.

Four stars: this article proposes an entirely new approach to the subject. If enough people read it, it is quite likely to start a new school. It would therefore be very unwise for anyone to read it.

Five stars: this article is worth reading. (Articles in this category are published biennially in five journals, one for each of the main branches of academic theology.)

I woke in a cold sweat, feeling that my career was in ruins. But I soon cheered up. It was only a dream - and I had the material for another article.

Commentary

Now it occurred to me when I was first reading this effusion that its author was engaging in deliberate irony, but the idea I soon dismissed. I agree of course that it could be taken ironically, and no doubt Roskill assumed that it would be so taken by whatever editor he had in mind - otherwise he could never have hoped to have it published - but it sounded to me too much like a confession: I know the way the man's mind works. He had simply told the truth about himself, hoping that the world would be fooled into thinking him a profound and virtuous critic of human weakness. And it is sad and shocking that any academic theologian should be guided by any other motive than that of promoting the greater glory of God. I doubt that he is representative, in fact I know him not to be; I have a greater faith in the decency and probity of my profession. Nevertheless, it may be of value to set down here by way of antidote what I take to be the cardinal virtues of academic theology, in both teaching and research.

These are honesty, simplicity, and sensitivity, or - with a mnemonic in mind - sincerity, simplicity, and sensitivity. I long ago had a card prettily engraved with these three words and mounted on my desk in case I should ever lose sight of my goal. But almost more important than this trinity itself is the fact that its members are not all of equal importance.

The essential, indispensable quality, which must always be placed first, is sincerity or honesty, or if you like truth. You must always mean what you say, you must want to say it, you must think it both true and significant, and you must intend it as a contribution to scholarship, that is as a help to others in their search for truth (and not as a means of furthering your own career). To paraphrase Wittgenstein, you must say only what you cannot help saying. And you must not say anything you have not felt: it must be your voice and yours alone. In all this there is something of the *imitatio Christi*. Whenever you utter you should be in a position to preface your remark with his: "You have heard that it was said of old . . . but I say to you . . ."

The second quality is simplicity. Everything you write or say must be transparent: nothing unnecessary must be allowed to stand between your thoughts and your audience. And this is not simply a matter of words, of using Anglo-Saxon mono-

syllables wherever possible, of avoiding cumbersome subordinate clauses. It is also a question of style in a much wider sense. Roskill for example is playing an elaborate game with his audience - or might be. Even now I am not quite sure. The first rule of irony to my mind is to give warning signals so that people know that you are being ironical. Otherwise you are likely to confuse, and that cannot be your intention. Nevertheless there are occasions when simplicity must be sacrificed: there are thoughts which cannot be directly communicated in straightforward language. Again we are challenged by the *imitatio Christi*. The parables of Jesus are in one sense simplicity itself: uncomplicated vignettes from everyday life, involving sheep and coins and vineyards. But in another sense they are the most difficult and demanding forms in literature, precisely because they deal with the incommunicable. You cannot decode the parables - that would be to paint the god Mars in the armour which made him invisible. In other words, there are times when sincerity, honesty, truth must prevail over simplicity.

And thirdly, sensitivity. I read a review recently of the *magnum opus* of another of my colleagues. It was an eloquent and entertaining review, and I enjoyed it vastly, but it was conspicuously lacking in charity. It took the form of a deliciously biting satire which came close to personal abuse. It was in a word vicious, and had I been its subject I should never have written another word. And it occurred to me after I had read it through for the third time, that this sort of thing is really indefensible. It cannot be necessary in order to indicate a book's shortcomings to indulge in vituperation. Indeed it may be almost more effective to damn with faint praise. Sensitivity to the feelings of one's colleagues should be one of scholarship's virtues, and the *odium theologicum* should be as far as possible suppressed. This applies of course not only in the world of scholarship: so often in the church one sees the revolutionary preacher repelling more people than he attracts. And yet - once more the *imitatio Christi* confronts us: not peace but a sword, woe to you hypocrites, the scandal inseparable from the message. In other words, there are occasions when sensitivity too must give way to sincerity, when one must be prepared to give offence in the interests of truth: if something is wrong, one must say so: if it is misleading, insincere, dangerous, one must denounce it: if it is demonic, one must unmask it.

It is in conformity with this self-imposed academic code of honour that I have acted in relation to Roskill's article. Or specifically, it is in accordance with the last stated proviso within that code that I have seen my primary responsibility as being to the truth. I may have lost a friend, but let no one doubt my sincerity.

Polonius Buchstaber