

The Avant-Garde in The Classroom

There is a polarization developing today between the conservative and the *avant-garde* which reflects, as Harold Rosenberg says, "the deep division in modern culture."¹ It is a polarization of great moment where the study of the humanities is concerned; and it relates at many points to current confrontations between rebellious students and teachers newly committed to "professionalism"² and form. It has generated a controversy already involving numerous scholarly journals.³ We think that teachers in high school and college classrooms should perceive it as a component part of their reality. There are new projects to be defined for the young people in our classrooms today, new collaborations to be arranged, new choices to be made.

The *avant-garde* orientation we have in mind is best suggested by the argument of certain modern writers that the validity of literature depends on "the repeated invention of something new in form or content, this

new element being meant to be particularly appropriate to the stage the culture has reached."⁴ It follows from this that literary works of the past may have been appropriate for the time in which they were written but that they are "irrelevant" today. The conservative orientation may be exemplified by an address recently delivered by the British critic and teacher, F. R. Leavis, at a colloquium on 'English' at the University of Wales.⁵ Objecting to the infectious "blankness" among young people today and to the neglect of the literary tradition, he told his audience that it was "fatal to let the cultural inertness of the technological age spread and prevail till anything else is forgotten and incredible." And then: "What we have to look to, what we have to ensure and power, is the maintenance of cultural continuity by a body of the educated—of those who are conscious of the general need." As he has always been, Leavis is concerned with "relations between works, between the creative achievements of different authors, between different pasts, and between the past and the present." Today, as never before, this is a conservative position. It is the position of the teacher playing a role as "mis-

¹ "Educating Artists," *The New Yorker*, May 17, 1969, p. 120.

² See, e.g., Robert Brustein, "The Case for Professionalism," *The New Republic*, April 26, 1969.

³ Among others: *Daedalus*, Summer 1969, "The Future of the Humanities," *Encounter*, June and July, 1969; *College English*, May 1969; *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, May 1969,

⁴ John Weightman, "The Concept of the Avant-garde," *Encounter*, July 1969, p. 5.

⁵ F. R. Leavis, "'English'—Unrest and Continuity," reprinted in *The Times Literary Supplement*, May 29, 1969.

sionary," in G. Jon Roush's sense,⁶ "correcting the errors in his students' culture," behaving towards them "with a condescension born of frustration."

It is clear to everyone who thinks about it that the student dissidents among us (be they exponents of "student power" or "flower power") take a view close to that of the *avant-garde* spokesman. They are prone to treat the past—and all its works and norms—with mockery and scorn. Of course, as Herbert Blau and others have made clear, the so-called "counter culture" is not as discontinuous with the past as its participants believe. In their scorn of the "technological," their talk of "sincerity" and "spontaneity," their dread of "mind-forg'd manacles," their celebration of the instinctive life, they belong to a tradition which goes back at least as far as William Blake and includes writers as various as Baudelaire, Dostoevsky, Rimbaud, Nietzsche, Gide, Tolstoy, and Hesse. Blau, in fact, writes that when "the students, demanding relevance, are charged with being heedless of the past, the case is being misrepresented. What they are doing is choosing from the parallel and countervailing traditions in the available lore."⁷

Our point, however, is that young people in search of relevance do not admit this. They see discontinuities when they consider the past. They see themselves as a kind of Adamic generation, born into an entirely new world which, they are convinced, only they can understand. They

would respond favorably to Jean-Paul Sartre, for instance, when, in discussing reading, he says that "people of a same period and collectivity, who have lived through the same events, who have raised or avoided the same questions, have the same taste in their mouth; they have the same complicity, and there are the same corpses among them. That is why it is not necessary to write so much; there are **key-words**."⁸ Their "key-words" are, for our young people, a kind of secret language; but, ironically, the mass media, the **songs**, the frenetic publicizing have made it available to anyone who cares to listen. Teachers, it seems to us, ought to pay careful heed to its structures and meanings; teachers, of all **people**, need to understand.

Above all, however, they need to understand and confront the implicit challenge of the *avant-garde* idea to the idea of education. We are not as offended by the new *avant-garde* as is, for example, J. Mitchell Morse, writing in *College English*⁹—especially when he likens the would-be *avant-garde* students to fascists. "If we are to preserve the right to express different views," he says, "we must preserve and cultivate the rare ability to have different views—the ability to think independently. We must not accept rides from strangers: we must not take a trip to lotus-land on that yellow submarine the **LSD**. . . . We must learn the old half-lost techniques of reading, word by word, line by linear line. . . ." We do not be-

6 "What Will Become of the Past?" *Daedalus*, Summer 1969, p. 642.

7 "Relevance: The Shadow of a Magnitude," *Daedalus*, Summer 1969, p. 655.

8 *Literature and Existentialism (Qu'est-ce que la littérature?)*. New York: Citadel Press, 1965, p. 68.

9 "Social Relevance, Literary Judgment," *College English*, May 1969, p. 609.

lieve that the call of the lotus-eaters or the "return of the repressed" are half so serious as the challenge to continuities. Whether we conceive education to be a process of transmission, of enculturation, or of initiation into ways of conceptualizing made possible by the academic disciplines, our business is with relationships and continuities. But how can we validate a concern with "different pasts" and the relation between past and present to young people who believe there is only now?

And what a now! Walter Ong, also writing in *Daedalus*,¹⁰ quotes a fragment from a poem by Adrian Henri—"an initiation poem, a quest for identity, a do-it-yourself puberty rite," entitled *Me*:

Bela Bartok Henri Rousseau
Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns
Lukas Cranach Shostakovich
Kropotkin Ringo George and John

If this suggests our students' "state of mind" or the contents of their consciousness, we cannot help but see the complexity of their world, its similarity to the Labyrinth. Looking, listening to the "key-words" and the cross-talk and the music, watching some of them play with witchcraft and some with the / *Ching*, we may discover clues. It may be possible, after all, to wean them from the now, to offer an "expansion of consciousness" at least as stimulating as that provided by drugs.

But if we are to do that, we have to respect their dissidence. We have written before, like tens of others, about the traumas of this difficult time. We have talked of the despera-

tion which comes from the sense of powerlessness, the horror of the brutal war, the depredations of the draft, the dismay in the face of a society willing to spend billions on multiple-warhead missiles while people starve and children go untaught. Our dislike of disruption and obscenity and violence does not keep us from *caring* about what young people feel; nor does it prevent us from sharing many of their views. In fact, it seems to us that a teacher of the humanities *to-day*—a teacher who wants to be *relevant*—must be attuned to the feelings of outrage, to the surging protest among our youth.

This does not mean that teaching, in order to be relevant, must be confined to topical issues. Like Leo Marx,¹¹ we are convinced that "relevance is the capacity of the scholar and the teacher to bring his deepest human convictions into his work." To be irrelevant is to act like the "missionary" Roush describes. It is to teach coldly, abstractly, or by rote. It is to teach as if one were the bearer of a Higher Wisdom or some absolute, bodiless Truth. It is to teach without being personally present to the students in one's classroom. If one is authentically, consciously *there*, one can risk pushing back the horizons, extending the world of the now.

The perceived idealism of our dissident young can serve as beginning. Discussing the inadequacies of American individualism, Clarence J. Karier makes the point that "It is not deprivation but affluence which allows one the luxury of taking ideals seriously. The real test of values seemingly occurs in the period of affluence when one can choose his world, *rath-*

10 Walter J. Ong, "Crisis and Understanding in the Humanities," *Daedalus*, Summer 1969, p. 629.

11 *Daedalus*, Summer 1969, p. 717.

er than in great periods of shortages when one must struggle to **survive**. . . . A younger generation, innocent of those survival values of self-seeking materialism, can be expected to repeatedly challenge the hypocrisy of American **life**.¹² This is a generation highly sensitized to the broken promises, sharply aware of the fact that the Enlightenment faith in intelligence and the benefactions of science has been exposed. After all, they live with talk of an ABM system; they know about the concentration camps and Hiroshima; they see scientific expertise applied in space travel and set aside when people starve. Moreover, they have daily experience with double standards and the disintegration of presumably stable norms: they recall the horrors at the Democratic convention in Chicago, the shotguns in Berkeley, the raids at Stony Brook; and they go on demonstrating, shouting, smoking pot.

Is there any point in acting as if there *were* a stable, humane, **self-consistent** world? Too frequently, teachers feel called upon to do battle with the doubt and fragmentation *by means of* the humanities; too frequently they talk as if they themselves exist in some vast harmonious domain, transcending crisis and formlessness, even transcending change. It is as if they were saying, like Captain Vere in Herman Melville's "Billy Budd **Foretopman**," "Forms, measured forms are everything." (Captain Vere, we sometimes forget, was reputed to have said that before he died, in retrospective justification for hanging Billy **Budd**.) Even as we recognize the **centrality** of form and

forming in human life, the necessity of form for sense-making and for defending against nothingness, we still have to be wary of using "measured forms" restrictively. Captain Vere was identifying them with the Mutiny Act, a "law and order" edict needed for the conduct of an inhuman war. In order to comply with it, a ship's officer had to put aside compassion, to "strive against scruples that may tend to enervate **decision**."¹³

Challenging his drumhead court for refusing to condemn a "fellow-creature innocent before God, and whom we feel to be so," Captain Vere resembles certain teachers of the humanities in their conscientious struggle against disorder, obscenity, nudity, the *avant-garde*. He recognizes that the officers' decision is a natural one, an emotional one. "But do these buttons that we wear attest that our allegiance is to Nature? No, to the King. Though the ocean, which is inviolate Nature primeval, though this be the element where we move and have our being as sailors, yet as the King's officers lies our duty in a sphere correspondingly natural?" It is not difficult to substitute the counter culture (Trilling's "second **environment**"), or the youth culture, or the *avant-garde* for the ocean surrounding Vere and his ship. It is not difficult to substitute the "establishment," or society, or tradition for the King. There are many teachers who would say, with Vere, that they function as they do "at command." There are many who would say: "For that law and the rigour of it, we are not responsible. Our vowed responsibility is in this:

12 "*Humanitas* and the Triumph of the Machine," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, April 1969, pp. 12-13.

13 "Billy Budd, Foretopman," in *Four Short Novels*. New York: Bantam Books, p. 260.

That however pitilessly that law may operate, we nevertheless adhere to it and administer it."

And the "law" for them, like the "measured forms," is identified with an **objective** structure they conceive as **heritage**—or literature, or the history of art. Appalled by ambiguity and mounting chaos, often ashamed of their interest in new forms and their compassion for the young, they oppose the *avant-garde* on principle with a conception of predetermined forms. The consequence is to make even the idea of *humanitas* repressive; because *humanitas* becomes **rigidified**, unitary, excluding all but the "classic" mode of being human, invalidating even the identity-quest.

We believe this approach should change; we believe it can be changed by the teacher willing "to bring his deepest human convictions into his work." We believe it can be changed by the teacher willing to make a humanities classroom a place for participation and collaboration at once. Walter Ong writes of "**anthropologizing**" the study of the **humanities—centering** them "on man rather than on **schemata**."¹⁴ Agreeing with this proposal, we should like to supplement it with the notion of linking the study of the humanities to the quest for personal identity, to each individual's search for a *persona* appropriate to what he thinks of as the now. Ong's other seminal idea of a "**synchronic present**" is useful here:

Paradoxically, absorption of the past is what has given the present its own identity. Because we have access to so much history, this is the first age that has undertaken a con-

But once knowledge of the past achieved a certain size or density, the present began to take on a distinctive face of its own. It now is seen to differ from the past, but does so in terms out of the **past**.¹⁵

We define the present in terms of our knowledge of the past, and the present becomes the moment "where all ages ... meet." If this is the case, a young person in search of a contemporary *persona* can achieve an understanding of the here and now only by moving outward from that here and now to the past.

Our proposal, then, in this day of polarization, is to make our initial concern in the humanities classroom the art forms described as *avant-garde*, since this is what so many young people conceive to be peculiarly theirs. We take a risk when we do this, because we are liable to appear imitative, second-rate, even "phoney" when we enter the domain where the young have staked their claims. This will be less likely to happen, however, if we have created a participatory situation, if we work as collaborators with our students in the critical activities we undertake and in the pursuit of meanings significant to ourselves as well as them. Harold Rosenberg, talking about the problematic character of the very concept of art, not to speak of the *avant-garde*, says:

The basic substance of art has become the protracted discourse in words and materials echoed back and forth from artist to artist, work to work, art movement to art movement, on all aspects of con-

place of creation and of the individual in it.¹⁶

He believes that the student-artist needs to be brought into this discourse "without which the history of modern painting and sculpture appears a gratuitous parade of fashions." We believe that every student of the humanities ought to be brought into such a conversation as he seeks to define his situation and, by that means, to create himself.

The struggle of the student today, it seems to us, is much like that of the *avant-garde* painter or writer, continually creating himself as relevant and new. But the student may not be as aware as the artist is that the creation of new forms arises out of an intense consciousness of a tradition and an intense desire to make one's own authentic use of what has been bequeathed to him. Only as the artist *appropriates* the relevant past can he transform it by adding something of his own that is vital and alive. Every work of art of high quality or real expressiveness affects the perspective in which works of the past are viewed. The emergence of the Impressionist painters altered Turner's position in the history of art forms; the rise of Abstract Expressionism changed the significance of Monet. Dylan Thomas, Sylvia **Plath**, Henry Miller, William Burroughs, and other explorers of the dark ambiguous places gave Baudelaire a changed place in the tradition of western poetry; the contemporary rebellion against "technological man" has shed new light on Blake and Dostoevski

and given them a reincarnation in the present day. Engaging with a study of the humanities, appropriating what he finds in his contemporary way, the student recreates the past as he creates himself; and, as he does so, he gives his present form.

Seeking an appropriate, authentic idiom, a mode of being in the world, he can only begin with his own *situation*; and this is why we think that humanities study should begin with the *avant-garde*. Experiencing Plath, Burroughs, **Pinter**, **Beckett**, Genet, Butor, Grass, and others, the student may be enabled to confront the situation of being alive in a silent universe, confronting what is felt as "**meaninglessness**," moved to create his own forms. It is in response to such confrontation and to the exigencies of choice that one engages in sense-making and in the pursuit of form. Collaborating in that pursuit, the teacher can make possible a movement outward to the **past**—for the sake of the student's present, in the interests of his choosing himself. The "measured forms" must not restrict. The meanings must not be made a bar to lotusland or a substitute for unrest, for rebellion, for dissent.

The polarization we have spoken of will continue to advance; divisions will deepen; rebellion and repression will increase. In the humanities classroom we can serve the human cause if we are willing to work with students as human beings, diverse and restless exemplars of the *avant-garde*. Confronting past and present in their changing relationships, we can still free individuals to go in search of form.

¹⁶ Rosenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 123.