

ANALYSIS

“University Life” (1997)



A. B. Paulson

(c.1945-)

“University Life” satirizes English departments in the late 20th century, the commercial degradation of language and the corporate model that is displacing the traditional university. Strether is a professor of American literature, named after Lambert Strether, the hero of *The Ambassadors* (1903) by Henry James. This current Strether wears “John Lennon anarchist glasses,” identifying him with the pastoral ideals of the counterculture in conflict with the corporate university. At the same time, he wears the Harris tweed of a traditional literary scholar. Though countercultural himself, he is stigmatized as a conservative by liberal colleagues because he is trying to conserve literary values. The story fuses at least four major aesthetic traditions: (1) complex humor blending tones like Twain and O’Connor; (2) experimental renewal of language like Stein and Hemingway; (3) allegorical Expressionist form and holistic vision like Faulkner; (4) conspiratorial plotline like Pynchon, but transcendent rather than paranoid.

Strether passes out in the faculty cafeteria, slumping into his garden salad, as close as he comes to “getting back to the garden” in the countercultural sense of John Lennon. A female colleague responds to his collapse by suggesting that Campus Security should be called, as if despite his plight Strether the conservative is still a threat. With discretion, Feminism is not mentioned in the story. Strether passing out establishes a plausible basis for Expressionism, placing the story in the tradition of dream allegory that extends from the Middle Ages. Like his collapsed academic discipline, Strether has reached the end of his tether—and perhaps of his tenure. He has committed free speech. He objected to a new television commercial approved by the Administration that purports to represent university life:

“In it a gang of ethnically diverse young people leapt onto tables in the library as heavy-metal rock music hammered in the background. Hips adnut, feet set wide, the energetic kids thrust fists toward the light fixtures, then catapulted into space, morphing in midair to land as junior-executive types with briefcases. Evidently they had also had training in the martial arts, because they delivered whirlwind kicks and karate chops to a bunch of gray-haired professors who filed past wearing academic regalia. The old fogeys were sent sprawling, shelves of books cascaded on their bald heads, and the message (or was it the University Mission Statement?) rotated in 3-D across the screen: ‘Get a degree—and *Totally Kick Ass!*’”

In *The Ambassadors* Strether is a modest literary fellow who travels to Paris from provincial Woollett, Massachusetts to fetch home the wayward son of the woman he hopes to marry, but then he embraces the high culture of Europe himself and remains in Paris. In Paulson's story, this poor Strether cannot free himself from constraints. He is not honored with an endowed chair, he is strapped to a chair with duct tape in the carpentry shop of his university, in Buildings and Grounds, the place where real creative work is done and grounds are maintained according to traditional standards, in contrast to the English Department. This workplace is close to nature—where Strether clings to his chair with a firm grip on reality. Carpentry was the occupation of Christ and was William Faulkner's metaphor for writing well. Strether cannot free himself by writing well, he is constrained from writing at all. He is about to get "worked over" for crimes against political correctness by three agents of the Administration in trench coats like thugs out of film noir, where the authorities are corrupt.

Strether seems driven to the verge of revolution, having required a composition class to improve the terrorist Unabomber's manifesto, an attack on technology. Inspired by a collection of essays by Southern agrarians called *I'll Take My Stand* (1930), Strether "didn't even like the *idea* of progress." For him the book's "critique of industrialism struck a high anarchist note." His resistance to oppressive government, his anarchism, is likewise agrarian and pastoral. His mother grew up on a farm. "She knew how to attend to the things at hand. This knack reminded him of the New Critics—who'd tried to just read the words." The New Critics, beginning with Pound and Eliot and Marianne Moore, analyzed literature objectively, in contrast to the bias of Feminists and later Politically Correct critics. The Administration accuses Strether of being "behind the times" by practicing New Criticism. The Political Correctness of Feminists serves the corporate university by enforcing conformity and suppression of speech.

Students have changed in a PC corporate environment. Most are too much in a hurry and are missing the essence of life: "They seemed to prefer ideas *about* the text—*information*, they called it, the shorter the better—not the text itself. You hoped they were learning how to read." The pastoral motif is conveyed by allusions to Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). In that novel, the "idiot" Benjy is innocent primal nature abused by the dominant adult, his brother Jason the capitalistic secular rationalist who destroys the Compson family. This is an age of Jasons.

Postmodern professors now compete with pop culture. Many teach pop culture instead of classics, and as a result, roles have been reversed by behavioral conditioning: "Professors must unconsciously respond to the bright looks on student faces in the same way that experimental rats adjusted their behavior for the reward of food pellets." Professor Mitford, for example: "Everybody looks down bored, unless the professor takes a step *toward the door*. Then they reward him by looking *really* interested." The class reflexes the professor all the way out of the classroom and into the hall, where he occasionally opens the door and shouts in a few words, then slams it shut. The dean relieves Mitford of teaching duties and promotes him to a post in the Administration.

Strether parallels himself to Vladimir Nabokov, a writer known for his dedication to art for art's sake. His article on Nabokov is rejected by the anti-aesthetic Politically Correct establishment. The same three goons who are harassing him once tried to intimidate the wife of Nabokov on behalf of the Coca Cola corporation, demanding that her husband capitalize the word *coke* in his novel *Lolita*. She drives them off by firing a pistol. Subsequently, however, rumors of a Nabokov mafia suggest that even the great aesthete eventually got corrupted by commerce.

The tyranny of commerce is illustrated by the appropriation of common words and the degradation of the great in advertising, a technique in the tradition of Modernism, especially as in "The Waste Land" (1922) by Eliot. Strether sustains his soul with incantations based on brand names solely for their aesthetic qualities apart from products, redeeming words from abuse like Gertrude Stein and Hemingway. Many professors sell out to the corporate PC university by moving up into Administration for higher salaries, as represented by Milford and two other colleagues who turned into the three goons now discussing what sort of electrical device they could attach to Strether's genitals. All the sex abusers here are male, otherwise the story would be reduced to a single focus on Feminist terrorism. Strether is already in shock. He dissociates into the esoteric abstraction characteristic of professors, into "zones of circuitry so microscopic they were

untouchable.” Paralyzed by his own integrity, he pleads with his captors that he has tried to conform to the new regime by making his sentences shorter.

The PC goons are so worried about hurting themselves, they hesitate to smack their enemies directly. Instead, they impose totalitarian conformity as enforcers from the office of Total Quality Management. The president of the PC University is named “Gelding.” Strether is figuratively castrated by his fear of complaints, in particular from one young woman, a victimized freshman with her head wrapped in gauze pads and duct tape, the tape suggesting that she has been constrained and abused like him. He compares her to the young heroine in Drieser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900) whose arrested development is evinced by her inability to read literature. The many literary allusions in the story reveal to most readers examples of literary classics they have missed in their PC “educations.”

When the student comes to Strether’s office, she tells him she took his advice and invested in something that would endure. Strether was referring to enduring values in literature. The student reveals her concept of enduring value when she tells him she met a guy at the 7-Eleven and let him operate on her face in his bathroom. She unwraps her bandages: “Running up from the bridge of her nose through her eyebrows were knotted tendrils of flesh where the skin had been gathered, snipped, and woven into braided welts. They snaked into her hairline, which had been shaved.... ‘It’s a Klingon look.... So it’ll last. I mean, *Star Trek* has been on, like since you were a kid, probably’.” After that conversation she drops out of school. Strether tries to contact her, but she is lost in space.

The PC goons indict Strether and offer him a chance to “recant,” as if conducting a religious Inquisition, or a Communist Party trial. He remains silent and they force a Rohypnol tablet into his mouth, the infamous rape drug. Afterward, he will not remember what happened to him. Fortunately, the Politically Correct puritans get frightened off. Strether spits out the pill and says in a spirit of Forgive them, Lord, they know not what they do, “They weren’t so bad...if you ignored the character issue.”

Yet he remains constrained. The faculty union is supposed to protect his rights. Surely they will come to his rescue. “He pictured his colleagues from the English Department as they would march in wearing overalls. Behold!—as Walt Whitman would say—heroic men and women with sleeves rolled up over bulging biceps. Welding goggles set back at jaunty angles, they would carry lunch boxes and fetch up ball-peen hammers to horrify despots. Farmers, mechanics, rowdies, and scholars, arms draped over the sweat and brawn of their companions’ shoulders, “all singing an old Joe Hill union song.”

This fantasy of salvation by the union is displaced by the ghost of his mother: “‘Help me, Mom,’ he said.... Things are going too fast’.” Despite his resistance, he has compromised himself. “He was no better than the next consumer, always considering something else—not the thing, the test, of the moment.” This epiphany renews his dedication and gives him an experience of simple things with enduring value, a transcendental moment comparable to those in Henry David Thoreau.

The fiction of A. B. Paulson offers a unique combination of humor and allegorical Expressionism. He is more holistic and enjoyable to read than his mentor John Barth. Unlike the *New Yorker* Expressionist Donald Barthelme, Paulson is well informed by American literary history, cultural traditions and archetypal symbolism. His fiction is more coherent, significant, and funny.

Michael Hollister (2013)