

HUMOR



A.B. Paulson

(c.1945-)

from “University Life” (1997)

Strether found himself, this time, strapped to a sturdy chair, with duct tape....it was the dead of night, and three tough guys in trench coats were conferring, getting ready to work him over.... He recognized these guys. Why, it was Bowers, the portly fellow formerly in psychology; and husky Fredson, who'd taught economics; and Milford, the little guy from biological sciences. All three had moved up last year to administration. Recent memos from the president's office now referred frankly to such positions as *Management*. They were whispering, discussing what sort of electrical device they could attach to Strether's genitals....

“Wait,” said Strether. “Is this about my teaching?”

“Why yes—partly,” said Bowers brightly, as if coaxing the right answer out of a dull sophomore.

“If it's about my style,” said Strether, “I've tried to make my sentences shorter.”

Bowers bent close to Strether's ear. “Frankly,” he said, “the word is that you're a bit behind the times.”

“Come on, smack him!”...

“Hold it,” said Mitford. “We're not a committee. We're an Implementation Team.”

Strether groaned, recognizing the inane logo of TQM—Total Quality Management. The university's new president, Lawrence Gelding, has hauled in this Trojan horse of corporate metaphors soon after his arrival—along with academic credentials so hazy (Microsoft, Madison Avenue, the Pentagon, Nike) that he might well be hiding out here in the Federal Witness Protection Program. Instantly, it seemed, gibberish like “The Student as Customer” began filtering down to departments from higher levels....

Mitford stared blankly at Strether for a long time, nodding mindlessly. Then he shook his head as if to clear it of some alien organism.

“Proceed,” said Fredson.

Bowers droned on, reciting information about Strether's performance in the classroom that must have taken information or surveillance cameras to collect: that, for example, he had required a composition class to rewrite awkward sentences from the Unabomber's “Manifesto,” and that he's suggested to students reading *The Sound and the Fury* that perhaps we should outlaw the internal combustion engine...

Strether guessed what was coming. That young woman must have filed a complaint.

“Employee objected,” Bowers went on, “to the new university television commercial.”

Strether had to sigh. Someone had spent a bundle hiring an ad agency to hype the university image as “state of the art.” The result was a thirty-second music video plugging the bachelor’s degree. 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 ajut, 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 down 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!*”...

Strether was straining at his duct tape, trying to glimpse his watch. It was about time for the AAUP, his union, to show up and rescue him. Maybe that young woman had never taken her complaint beyond his office....

Bowers, bleary-eyed, had come to the last two items on the list: first, Strether’s objections to a phrase in some memo—that “the university’s role is to prepare its graduates to be informed producers of goods and services”...

“How could he object to ‘goods and services’?” asked the economist, Fredson. “That’s the whole ball of wax. That’s the Gross National Product!”

“Maybe he’s some kind of nut,” suggested Bowers.

“Look, he’s not even listening,” said Mitford. “This was his chance to—to recant!”

Bowers waved his list. “There’s one more item, about ‘practicing the New Criticism’.”

“Give him another pill and let’s go home,” said Fredson.

Mitford forced a tablet into Strether’s mouth.

“What is that stuff?” asked Bowers.

“Rohypnol,” said Mitford. “Young men drug women with it, then they rape them.”

“Should he be hearing this?” said Bowers.

“That’s the beauty of it. They don’t remember anything afterwards.”

From the corridor sounded a loud clatter.

“Good heavens,” whispered Fredson. “Somebody’s coming.”

They snatched their trench coats and hurried out another door like Fugitive Poets.... They weren’t so bad, thought Strether, if you ignored the character issue....

Strether spat out the pill, spotted the wood rasp Mitford had thrown aside, and considered his escape. Nah, his union was coming! 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. Tramp-tramp, in they would tramp, singing the old Joe Hill song....

But out of the dark, instead, hobbled Strether’s gray-haired mother—dead now fifteen years—pushing a mop in a bucket. She glanced at him and said, “Sit up straight.”

“Help me, Mom,” he said. “I’m behind. Things are going too fast. I can’t keep up.”

“Things go fast because you’re drinking too much coffee.”

Could she be right?

“And another thing,” she said. “If it’s time to pee, go piss.”

Sure enough, that was his mom. He watched her wheel the mop into the darkness. She’d grown up on a farm, and her secret was knowing how to attend to the things at hand. This knack reminded him of the New Critics—who’d tried to just read the words. This was hopelessly old-fashioned now. Worse, you couldn’t find a reference in print these days to New Criticism without the term *ideology* hung about its neck like a dead chicken the dog brought home....

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