Alfred Kern

## Humanities at the Hanoi Hilton

Gossip about the downtrodden humanities is modishly in season. The conversation at the right campus cocktail parties is on a par with whispered anecdotes about last season's fallen movie celebrity. "Oh, my dears, have you heard what's happened to the Humanities? Well, do freshen your drinks and pull up a chair while I tell you what I saw. No, just yesterday. I saw them. Yes, all of them. I was shopping at Bloomingdale's—no, they weren't in the store. On the sidewalk. And they looked dreadful. Shabby. No, they weren't even talking to each other. Just standing there. Staring in the window. The Humanities are down and out, quite down and very out. Isn't it too marvelously awful? What did I do? Just walked right past them. Wasn't that the kinder thing? But you do remember how they used to lord it over the rest of us? Practically came right out and said we were hopelessly uncultured. Expected us to read all of their stuff and never read a word of ours. Just talked to each other about themselves at parties. If you ask me, the Humanities have gotten what they deserve."

And yes a bit of that chortling does go on particularly among those who thought they had been snubbed as, alas, they often were. Indeed, even those with the credentials to join the club were apt to be snubbed. It was at the University of Virginia that T. S. Eliot asserted that no Jew would ever write a major American novel, an assertion that may have inspired Irwin Edman to write

about Eliot's arriving in London "to give his thanks at one old church and two old banks." Unfortunately, during most of my years as a professor of English, that cocktail shrew I was imitating made a better point than she knew. Secure and remote in their counting offices, tracking droplets of contrapuntal water imagery in poems where fires flame and water freezes, served weak tea by obsequious acolytes, the humanists were so absorbed in their Humanities that mere humanness too often got overlooked. After a novel of mine set in the modern trade union movement had been published, such a colleague said to me, "Now this new book you're working on, surely you're not going to write about lay-boor again, are you?"

The first discussion of literature I heard was by two immigrant uncles. Uncle Sol, my father's brother, worked as a salesman in a clothing store which I realized much later had not interested him in the least. My Uncle Siegel, Aunt Annie's husband, ran the meat counter in a grocery store. In heavy accents, the two uncles were discussing the relative merits of Romain Rolland and Tolstoy. Uncle Siegel maintained that the two writers were equals, and Uncle Sol (they must have had the discussion many times before) explained too patiently why Uncle Siegel didn't know what he was talking about. A small boy, certainly I didn't know what either had been talking about. But I never forgot the occasion. Voices were raised and fingers pointed. This discussion was The Stuff. This was what you were supposed to care and argue about, for my two immigrant uncles more important than the price of either veal chops or work trousers.

Only years later did I wonder where and when they had read the books and in what language. Recently when telling this same story to a poet acquaintance I said that that theirs had been the best discussion of literature I'd ever heard. Pleasantly enough, he pointed out that I

couldn't remember one word of what either had said. And that's true. But I do remember the occasion. What stuck was that passion, that sense of the importance of literature. Of that they had persuaded me, and I've never changed my mind. Years later, interviewing candidates who had more and better educations than I'd had, I was impressed by how much they knew about everything they had studied formally but saddened by how little they had read. In a conversation about books with either of my immigrant uncles, they would have been destroyed.

Uncle Sol died when I was very young. Later, when I was in high school, Uncle Siegel occasionally summoned me to ask for an explanation of some current change in American manners such as zoot suits or jitterbugging. He had the same noncommittal answer to every one of my explanations. Addressing me by my Hebrew name, he sighed and then said, "Well, Avrom, it's your America." His answer makes more sense if you read it with an accent. That's the way I wanted to respond—accent and all—when I read a recent alumni magazine of the college where I had studied and taught.

The lead article explains that the chairman of the classics department will be retiring, will not be replaced and that the college can no longer afford to offer classics as a major field. In addition, a departing member of the English department will not be replaced, and other changes (some long overdue irrespective of cost factors) are also to be made. These difficult decisions were wrought by an all-college committee meeting in the summer. Much was made of that because when a college committee sacrifices its members to meet in the summer, you know it's got to be important. Of course, the results reached by their sacrificially hard work had to be pretty much known before the first committee meeting. I've been involved with that sort of chicanery myself, the

pretense of something having been an entirely democratic decision is commonplace enough though one should strive to make the deception as classy as one can. The article wasn't written by a member of the committee but rather the director of public affairs—in plain talk by the chief public relations hack. But don't get me wrong; he did exactly what his job requires. I presume to paraphrase: sure, we have these problems but so, too, do other colleges and we are facing up (in the good old summer time at that) and be assured that with your continuing support and understanding [i.e., money] everything at the old alma mater was-is-will be hunky-dory. On the last page of the magazine, the inside cover, the president of the college has the last word. Here we get a series of mumbo jumbo generalizations about the matter that does no harm except to the English language. As Uncle Siegel would have said, "Vell, mein president, it's your America."

But I want to tell you about another America albeit remote from home shores, an America that had graver problems, problems so profound, so indifferent to solutions by gifts of money or PR-hackery that the humanities were affordable. No, let me revise that sentence. The situation was so grim, the reality so unyielding, the cruelty so dreadful, the evil so unimaginable as to be softened by my most earnest revisions. Then and there, the humanities were not only affordable but the instrument of survival itself.

But I must try to put it into language. Going on twenty years ago, I spent a year teaching at the United States Air Force Academy. The academic year was 1979-80, just four years after we had lost the war—our first lost war—in Vietnam. I was among those who had been opposed to our being there but not one of the fools who held those who fought responsible for serving, following orders, and trying to survive. I remind you that service-

men and women returning from Vietnam did not receive a hero's parade. I remind you further that we were yet to learn of Lyndon Johnson's comments to trustworthy political cronies that he didn't think anything positive could be achieved by our being there but didn't know how the hell to get out. Nixon's decision to hold up peace talks until his reelection had been safely won also remained years away from our knowing, and McNamara's confession of culpability written and then exploited as if the book expunged that culpability had yet to be visited upon us. I had begun to do some writing about the civilian experience with Vietnam and very much wanted that year at the Academy.

In those days, except for a few civilian visitors, the USAFA faculty was composed entirely of Air Force officers, most of whom had served in Vietnam. But, understandably enough I suppose, their talking about the war was rare to non-existent. As a distinguished visiting professor (I had to be distinguished for a full calendar year—even in the summer), I was privileged, if I chose, to take lunch in the Dean's Dining room. One day, I did hear some conversation about the war. I cannot remember now what prompted it, but all the fliers at table seemed to know about a certain Vietcong anti-aircraft emplacement. In conversation, that emplacement was personalized and referred to as "he." All agreed that whoever was manning those guns was good, very good, too good. He knew what he was doing. At some pause, I said, "So why didn't you take him out?"

And the lieutenant colonel who was head of the physics department said to the dean, "Shall I tell him, sir, or do you want to tell him?"

The dean nodded his permission.

"We weren't allowed to cross that line."

I didn't say anything. Then: "What do you mean?"

"What I said. We weren't allowed to cross that line."

"You weren't allowed to take him out?" I said.

"He was on the other side of that line."

All at table were now waiting for me to say something.

"So, what would you have done in our situation, Professor?"

I took a moment. Then: "I'd have handed in my dogtags."

There were smiles and heads nodded. Mine had been the old enlisted man's cliché. Then the speaker said to the dean, "I looked all over Saigon for the place to hand in my dogtags. Couldn't find it."

End of conversation. Only time all year any mention of war was made at table. Wasn't done. Not at Dean's table. Not at Officer's Club. Not at Enlisted Man's Club. Preferred talking about my war. One afternoon, two young second lieutenants, both flying officers, asked to enter my office. "Sir, we were told that you were in a B25 outfit."

"I was in an Airdrome Squadron. But we serviced B25s. B25D2s." I knew what was coming.

"That wasn't the one that had . . ."

"The cannon in the nose," I said. "No, the H was the 25 with the cannon."

"And is it true, sir . . ."

"Yes, it's true. There was a recoil. Like this." And I raised my hand, moved it in a slight downward path, showed them the recoil—but quick—and then landed the hand on the desk.

"You had the last good war, sir." And moving out the door, one said to the other, "See? I told you my dad said there was a recoil."

But no talk about Vietnam. Not then. Not yet.

I wanted to hear about the Vietnam experience without my asking. Would have preferred just listening at the club bar without the need to ask one question. I knew about the civilian experience of it. At my college as at most American colleges, if you supported the Vietnam war effort, you kept your mouth shut. But, as I said, I was among those in opposition to the war. Still I got into trouble despite my having been on the "right" side. We were at dinner. Our host taught in the French department, and his wife was also fluent in French. He had been a dentist who had traveled to France, fell in love with it, learned the language, gave up the dental practice, went back to graduate school, and was thrilled to be teaching at the college level. We liked them—each of them. That night, they had their customary interesting table among the guests being a visiting professor from Germany. And, of course, Vietnam was also discussed. Everyone agreed that we had no business there.

By that time, I had become uneasy with those discussions. The war was going badly for us (not that it had ever gone well), and while I had never wanted us there, neither did I want us to lose. Neither did I like the drift of the conversation that night, but I minded my manners. I minded my manners, that is, until the visitor from Germany took over. The problem with America wasn't just Vietnam, you see; it was many other things as well. And apparently feeling by then that he was among friends, he took off. Nothing in American history escaped his disapproval. Also he spoke in those tones of nasty confidence that could get you killed if spoken at a bar in a worker's neighborhood. When he paused for breath, I said, "If you want to talk about history, let's talk about yours. Shall we do that for an hour or so? How about just this century? How about just the last fifty years? Because you have a lot of goddamned nerve sitting there and telling us what sons of bitches we are and

always have been." And then, seeing the faces at table staring in shocked silence, I gave up. I'd lost an uncle and aunt and cousins to his kind of moral superiority, the last of my father's family who had never made it to America, and I wasn't going to sit there sharing food and wine with him. And if others were embarrassed by my behavior, I didn't give a damn. I arose, stood staring at him for a moment, threw my napkin on the table and walked out. I sat in the car until Carole came no more than a minute later, and if anything the more enraged. I didn't ask her how she'd managed her own leave taking. But then what could she have said? "Well, we've had a lovely time, my dears, but really must be going now." She got into the car without saying anything. I drove a couple of blocks, stopped, turned off the ignition key and said, "Honey, I figure you already know it, but I just want to say it's going to be one hell of a long time before anybody invites us to dinner." And the fury disappeared from her face and she burst into laughter, and we sat there hugging and laughing and then drove home. We weren't utterly destroyed socially, and there are those obligatory occasions, of course, but we were damaged a bit until so many years later that it no longer made a difference. Vietnam did that sort of thing, not so intensely but in some ways comparable to the Civil War. No, in addition to our own curiosity we had plenty of reasons for wanting our year at the Academy.

But at the Academy, nobody talked much about Vietnam at all. I was told that a former POW was located somewhere on the Academy base. I believe he was teaching or had some administrative job at the Academy prep school. But I couldn't bring myself to look him up. I couldn't find a way to say that I was a novelist who wanted to write a book about the civilian experience of Vietnam and was gathering all the material I could find about the war. I've sometimes quoted Auden's saying

that a writer is a person who cannot know what it is he's going to need to know, and so he needs to learn everything he can. I believe that about the writer's life, but I couldn't bring myself to use it—not with the Vietnam POWs.

Like you, I'd read and heard enough. These American men, the POWs, mostly fliers though not unlike ourselves, had been kept so long and suffered so cruelly that their experience escaped the war, became about itself, an experience not unlike Dachau or Buchenwald in its enormities; i.e., too stark and brutal for historical and artistic transformation. Their insistence upon survival, their clinging to humanness and the Divine years after they had reason to cling to either, has separated them from us, or so it should have separated them from us. The American POWs should belong now to some strange and evil Asian cult so alien to the American experience that they should be lost not only to us but their own repatriated selves. And yet, if they are different by the intimacy of their awful knowledge, the wonder is how intensely they belong.

And then Dave Burroughs, a former fighter pilot who had once taught at the Academy, returned and was sitting in my office. I'm not sure where Colonel Burroughs is now, but when I met him he was coordinator of social service agencies in a small Arizona town. As we talked in my office, I was astonished to learn he was ten years younger than I am. But like Senator John McCain when appearing on television, he had about him the strength of that extraordinary reserve; nothing I said or asked was going to upset him. And if it did, I wasn't going to know it.

I asked Colonel Burroughs if he was acquainted with the Academy's program of survival training, a program of simulation that prepares the cadets for their own possible capture.

"There's no way to simulate it. There's no preparation for jail. Or torture." He talked slowly, almost as if he wished to spare me some consternation or embarrassment. "The so called corny stuff," he said.

I had no impulse to interrupt his pauses with questions.

"I found myself praying," he said, "and you think about home." A moment or two of silence. Then: "Best training for it is the Humanities. Not the pretend POW camp. Books. Plays. Poems. Philosophy. The big ideas. The persistence of values. The real lifesaving stuff."

Many of those captured remained in prison from five to nearly eight years with about half that time in solitary confinement. Forbidden to communicate, tortured for attempting to do so, they used a simple but laborious method to reach each other. They reduced the alphabet to twenty-five letters, the letter "k" being omitted and substituted for by another letter. The letters were arranged in a five-by-five square so that the first taps indicated the location of the line and the second taps specified the letter. Colonel John Reynolds ordered his men to tap out whatever they knew about history. Day by day and month by month, as they could, both painstakingly and in pain, they did so, and Reynolds somehow contrived to write it down. Starved, injured, ill and beaten, they wrote history, made their own book to recreate a human past, their work on that book being less psychotherapy or a responsible commander's way to maintain military morale than the need to create the book—that need both felt and known, an act to transform and mitigate the absurd brutality of their condition. The very making of this book is itself history, a history written in solitude and pain and deprivation so unspeakable that ironically but gloriously the human possibility is exalted.

Jeremiah Denton, another of the POWs drawn to politics and former senator from Alabama, was the

American compelled to participate in the television interview from Hanoi. While he was saying whatever he had been forced to say, he blinked his eyes in Morse code to spell out t-o-r-t-u-r-e. As a prisoner, Jeremiah Denton wrote poetry for his fellow prisoners—Christmas and Easter poems. With no intention to compare quality, one of them—for contrast—sent me back to Yeats's "The Second Coming." The lines I sought seemed to characterize the national psyche during the worst of the Vietnam years:

> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
> The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
> The best lack all conviction, while the worst
> Are full of passionate intensity.

What must impress us about the POWs, Jeremiah Denton's struggle to make poetry while stretched across the rack, is their will to hold the center. They dared not lose convictions. Fliers, engineers, technologists, broken in body with numbers soon to die, they used the Humanities—twenty centuries of mind and spirit—to live.

What we learned (and must learn again) from the POWs, a message they have spoken in the clearest of simple language, is both the reason and the way. The solutions in which the medicines are suspended are the medicines. To college presidents telling us that students must now be thought of as customers, that maintaining the classics as a major field is a frivolity no longer affordable, that the Humanities must be cut and compressed if the institutions are to survive, I remind you that the Humanities are the instruments of survival.

By now, most people may remember James Stockdale as the bumbling and ineffective vice presidential

candidate for Ross Perot. From my perspective, Perot's admiration of Stockdale is the wisest decision he ever made. In "The World of Epictetus," Vice Admiral James Bond Stockdale, perhaps the most articulate of the former POWs writes:

> For me, the golden doors were labeled history and the classics. The historical perspective which enabled a man to take himself away from all the agitation, not necessarily to see a rosy lining, but to see the real nature of the situation he faced, was truly a thing of value. . . . Education in the classics teaches you that all organizations since the beginning of time have used the power of guilt; that cycles are repetitive; and that this is the way of the world. . . . And I believe a good classical education and an understanding of history can best determine the rules you should live by.

The Humanities are too precious to be spent in intramural committee meetings and much too precious to be wasted by college professors and their presidents no matter how cleverly the paid justifiers gloss the betrayals. What I learned anew from the POWs, what from time to time we must all learn anew, is that the humanistic tradition is both the milk and the honey. They prove the great notion; that what must be saved is also what will save us. Otherwise, Yeats's great beast, ever stirring in our deserts, will do more than slouch toward Bethlehem. It will arrive and devour. ❑