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The best brief description of conservatism that I know appeared in mid-century, in *National Review*—but not the *National Review* that you know or the century you live in. The author was "the greatest Victorian," Walter Bagehot, and here is the description:

The essence of Toryism is enjoyment. Talk of the ways of spreading a wholesome Conservatism throughout this country: give painful lectures, distribute weary tracts...; but as far as communicating and establishing your creed are concerned—try a little pleasure. The way to keep up old customs is, to enjoy old customs.... Over the "Cavalier" mind this world passes with a thrill of delight; there is an exultation in a daily event, zest in the "regular thing," joy at an old feast. Sir Walter Scott is an example of this. ("Mr. Macaulay")

Side by side with the conservative's awareness of human fallenness is his appreciation and delight in human creation. Both our fallenness and the goodness of creation are central to a conservative vision, but surely Bagehot is correct to see that enjoyment is what attracts others. It was William Buckley's huge enjoyment of life that drew many of us to conservatism in the 1960s and 1970s. Similarly it is the pallor of the academic ideology, ever seeking new instances of oppression, that sours many of today's students on the humanities.

My field is a humanistic one, English literature, and the task for conservatives is to suggest a positive alternative to the ideologies of deconstruction, feminism, and the new historicism that dominate literary interpretation. We can't fight something with nothing, and until we propose readings that are more imaginative, more intelligent, and more enjoyable than those of the academic left, their way of reading will continue to predominate.

One of our "founding documents," *God and Man at Yale* (1951), speaks prophetically of our situation in 1991: "I believe that if and when the menace of Communism is gone, other vital battles, at present subordinated, will emerge to the foreground. And the winner must have help from the classroom" (Foreword, p. xiii). At present, however, the *annus mirabilis* of 1989 hasn't hit the classroom. Most academics still seem to believe they can practice feminist and new historicist literary theory, even though their license for dialectical thinking is a couple of years out of date. The same goes for the larger mode of "multicultural" thinking about the entire curriculum: all one needs to do is posit an "other" outside the curriculum or list of standard authors, and a dialectical framework will allow one to show how that "other" is the victim of oppression and discrimination.

Have conservatives really given the academy an alternative? Not yet, perhaps, but we do have a recent victory that shows even more clearly the need for a coherent vision in the humanities. During the 1980s, the academic Left was so confident of its ascendancy over every aspect of intellectual life that it began using the term "politically correct" out of hubris. It turns out that they went a bridge too far, and many academics in the middle have responded with revulsion to "political correctness." "PC" has been the best thing to happen to conservatism in years: now that we have a name for it, we can oppose it. Listen to the cautious tone of David Jeffrey as he criticizes political conformity in the June 1988 *Christian Scholar's Re-*

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view: "Are we ready for a world in which, as in a recent major North American conference, a strong feminist paper by a reputable scholar can be dismissed by her fellow feminists for having 'incorrect political views'?" If he were writing today, Jeffrey would feel much more confident in criticizing those "fellow feminists" for their use of intimidation, guilt by association, and unsubstantiated charges. Why? Because the phenomenon has a name.

If Jeffrey is timid about political correctness, though, he is forthright about deconstruction. As in Ewa Thompson's brilliant essay in the Fall 1987 *Intercollegiate Review*, Jeffrey lays bare the theological foundations of deconstruction, showing the Faustian ambition of the deconstructionist to break free of his role as servant to the Word and become its master. Jeffrey and Thompson, together with the critiques of John Ellis (*Against Deconstruction*) and David Lehman (*Signs of the Times*), have helped conservatives find a voice to respond to deconstruction. But what positive word do we have to speak? Are we hoping to go back to the older humanism of the 1930s? The New Criticism of the 1950s? Were their foundations all that secure?

I think not. Two of the central preoccupations of conservatism have been to show how the human order is part of a cosmic order, as Werner Dannhauser has said, and to reconcile liberty with order. The liberal mind operates as if the mind were autonomous, self-created, and it sees order as a contradiction to liberty. The deficiencies of this mindset have laid liberalism open to the appeal of the New Age movement, which attempts to reconnect the human with the cosmic, and to the activism of radical ideologies, which substitute passionate commitment for the order of virtue and piety. To provide an alternative to academic liberalism and radicalism, conservatives must speak a new word as we return to our old preoccupations. I have a couple of suggestions along the way.

Liberty and order, with their suggestions of freedom and virtue, are at the core of conservatism. They are the source of the "enjoyment" described by Bagehot. In current literary interpretations, however, one hears very little about virtue and quite a lot

about power and "justice," understood in the dialectical categories with which we are all familiar. A better way of approaching literature though—better because truer to the text and because it relates to the purpose of education—is through the way of virtue as Alasdair MacIntyre has described it.

Two key features of the medieval conception of a quest need to be recalled. The first is that without some at least partly determinate conception of the final *telos* there could not be any beginning to a quest.... It is in looking for a conception of *the good* which will enable us to order other goods ... that we initially define the kind of life which is a quest for the good. But secondly it is clear the medieval conception of a quest is not at all that of a search for something adequately characterised, as miners search for gold or geologists for oil. It is in the course of the quest and only through encountering and coping with the various particular harms, dangers, temptations, and distractions which provide any quest with its episodes and incidents that the goal of the quest is finally to be understood. A quest is always an education both as to the character of that which is sought and in self-knowledge. (*After Virtue*, 203-4)

MacIntyre goes on to say that "virtues" are the practices that are found to be necessary to sustain the person on the quest. The enjoyment that students derive from looking at quest literature, given this framework, is astonishing. What they discover is that English literature is not a series of dialectical power plays, of rich over poor, white over black, male over female, but rather a search for meaning and purpose, in which characters learn virtue in the process of a rather difficult life—or rather, plot. The students readily see the connection of literature with their own lives, and their papers reflect it. They discover as well that English literature is not primarily about the way a "hegemony" maintains its "power structure," but that it's mainly about failure. *Caedmon's Hymn*, the first poem in our language, is given to a monk who is a failure at story telling. The Redcrosse knight, in Book One of the *Faerie Queene*, fails time and again to be true to his quest, and only after fully confronting his deficiencies

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can he succeed against the dragon. The greatest of English epics, *Paradise Lost*, is the story of a magnificent defeat of a man and a woman, transformed into a victory. The most memorable literature of the eighteenth century is forged in the consciousness of failure, whether of Johnson's preoccupation with his failure to use his talent wisely, or Gray's "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College," or Burke's apocalyptic vision of the failure of Christian civilization.

When students encounter this approach to literature, an approach that attempts to serve the text and listen to the text rather than "master" it, they are often subdued. It affects them personally. More important, it challenges them to a higher form of life, for they see that the human order is indeed related to the cosmic order. The relation of the two orders depends upon an analogy between the human imagination (and its products) and the world, an analogy which is deeply theological. If there is no underlying *logos*, originating ultimately from the God who created the world and the human imagination, why should the creations of human beings have any essential connection either to the world or to each other? Why shouldn't writing be the announcement of death, as Derrida has said, rather than the representation of life? If language is really a self-contained system, or code, whose individual utterances are based entirely on conventional and arbitrary signs, how can we expect language to lead us to "truth"? Surely it can lead us only to some form of "play" at best, or the power struggles of the committed activist at worst. The record of deconstructionist guru Paul de Man on behalf of Nazism, and of de Man's supporters in concocting incredible defenses for him, has tarnished deconstruction on ethical grounds. But you can't fight an ethic without a metaphysic, as Alan Jacobs has said in another trenchant analysis of deconstruction (*Christian Scholar's Review*, July 1987), and if there is no metaphysical basis for the relation of man to man, and man to cosmos, then I have been teaching my students falsehood rather than fiction.

There is another benefit from the approach to quest literature that MacIntyre's book suggests: the students actually learn something they hadn't already known beforehand. Ideological approaches are immensely clever, but because they serve closed systems, they cannot go beyond permutations on their predetermined truths. By contrast, what my students learn from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, say, has to do with the importance of "keeping troth," as a brilliant student of mine pointed out to me. She saw that the text specifically parallels the Green Knight's faithful presentation of the boar's head and Gawain's temptation to break troth in order to save his skin. She saw further into the text than I did, and she was able to open up an entirely new area of knowledge of this tale.

In this approach to learning, knowledge is neither acquired for its own sake, nor for the sake of our political causes. It is acquired with reference to its purpose, namely to complete our human nature, "to repair the ruins of our first parents," as Milton said. To be sure, I don't believe knowledge can justify a person; but it may play a role in sanctifying him. This approach differs widely from most liberal descriptions of learning today, which are long on the rhetoric of inquiry and tongue-tied on the subject of truth and virtue.

In their hearts, students may not know that conservatives are right, but they know the ideological approaches to the humanities are wrong. They are tired of being bullied by politically correct professors and administrators and counselors. They are weary of being told that all texts mean virtually the same thing—or nothing at all. In the naive freshman who thinks he is coming to college to become more "well-rounded and see a wider horizon" is more latent wisdom than in the professor who regards the distinction between teaching and proselytizing as no more than a polite fiction. We need to build for students an alternative structure where they can encounter the living spirits of our tradition in all their severe virtue and hilarity. If we build it, they will come.