Portrait of a Scholar

by Samuel Hux (November 2018)

Young Scholar in His Study: Melancholy, Pieter Codde, 1630

“Let us now praise famous men,” wrote Joshua Ben Sira in the first verse, chapter 44, of his *Ecclesiasticus* in the Apocrypha (long before James Agee wrote and Walker Evans photographed their book of that title in 1941). In the ninth verse Ben Sira added in sad compensation, “And some there be, which have no memorial . . . ” I do not wish that to be, I will not allow it to be, the fate of my dear old friend Bob Ryley. Robert M. Ryley is probably not a name to conjure with—except for people blessed to have known him, as I did for over forty years. Those years ended more than a decade ago, but I cannot cease thinking about him and missing him intensely. But before a little memorial we need a context—which I will supply, as the Bard said, “by indirections to find directions out.”

When I was a graduate student at an eastern university, my faculty advisor, advised by me that I’d be spending the summer in Kentucky where I had then some familial connections and aware that my financial connections were not plentiful, offered to inquire of a friend at the University of Louisville if a summer instructorship was available. It was. I arrived at U of L a week before classes began to meet with the friend and the departmental chair who, after a hearty welcome, said we should visit the president of the university himself. Coffee, a nice chat; and then the president asked the chair for details of my teaching schedule and salary, which the chair provided. To which the president responded as my jaw dropped: “That’s compensation for a temporary instructorship, right? What if we call this young man a Visiting Lecturer? That would up his salary by roughly a thousand, I think. Well that’s what we’ll do.” *What a wonderful profession*, I thought; *What an honorable way of going about things!* Such was my introduction to the academy beyond studentship. Little did I know.

A few years later Bob Ryley and I were young instructors at one of the flagship colleges of The City University of New York which at the time had four levels of rank for possessors of the PhD. (Instructor, Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, Professor) instead of the normal three (Assistant, Associate, "Full")—a fact which made CUNY less than fully competitive on the job market since fresh Ph.D.s could start at professorial rank elsewhere and would not have to join the bottleneck of young docs waiting for promotion. Well, our department had an answer: retire the Instructor rank by firing all the instructors. *Bang!*

Luckily, Ryley and I and two others were unemployed for only months (I can't recall the fates of seven or eight others), for an expanding CUNY was opening new colleges, the one to which we went housed in temporary quarters. One needed a certain hardiness if one wished or temperamentally needed to remain in New York City—even if not, now obviously, in an honorable profession. Or maybe our new college would be different, for the president, a University of Chicago PhD in philosophy who came to us not from an academic career but service in the National Conference of Christians and Jews had big ideas. Dumont F. Kenny, at that time nobody looked more presidential (google him) and whom we respectfully called DFK, aware of bells that rung, wished to create a special college, a small "Ivy" school he planned with a touch of U. of Chicago to it, a residential college in a vast municipal university of subway campuses. He lasted no more than four years, to be replaced by an old-line CUNY administrative hack who announced to us (amazing to me that he knew anything at all about traditional classical education!) that "The trivium and quadrivium, ladies and gentlemen, is not where it's at."

It was not that a residential campus-to-be was not available

for DFK's vision. Fort Totten on Long Island Sound in the borough of Queens was being decommissioned by the Army, which was willing to sell it dirt-cheap to the city of New York. Perfect. Architecturally ready-made. But the city administration with the agreement of the board of higher education had other plans. Connect the new college to urban development, which meant a decade of campusless temporary housing in banal office buildings before creation of an architecturally banal edifice which could pass for practically anything but an institution of learning.

By the time that campus appeared, DFK was long gone, as well as, I'm happy to say, the dope who knew where things were not at. But by that time DFK's vision was but a curricular memory, while the dope's hope of curricular banality (thought of as relevant and practical) was ascending if not immediately ascendant: university as home of "professional education" (read *vocational training*) with just enough requirements in traditional disciplines to give half-credence to the advertised claim that this all was "under the umbrella of the arts and sciences" (not golf-umbrella size!), with just enough majors in dwindling arts and science disciplines to lend some intellectual respectability.

This process took some time, just slowly enough that you didn't know it was happening until you realized it had happened. Not everyone wanted to major in English, French, Philosophy, History, Math, Music, Physics, Chemistry, Political Science, Economics, and/or so on. So why not accommodate those who preferred something more "career-oriented"? After all, if we have Math and Economics, why not Accounting as well? Then why not Marketing? Chemistry often interests those planning a pre-Med program, but what about those who don't see themselves committing to such a distant

degree and think of Nursing instead, or Physician's Assistant? After a few years—such is the "creativity" of faculty and administrators who think that higher education should be more career-oriented-vocational, even if all are not as rhetorically honest as the one who said in open meeting "What's all this literature stuff for anyway?"—the traditional disciplines in an officially "liberal arts college" (because of the famous umbrella) are a distinct minority in the curricular offerings. DFK turns over in his grave.

Such is where I, along with Bob Ryley, spent the bulk of my academic career, without considering leaving for greener pastures because I knew that that was what was happening elsewhere (even elsewheres with better reputations) in the world of "higher" education. And I do not really regret it—even though I have not revealed the half of it.

Why no regrets? I liked being paid for talking about books and ideas, and where else could that happen? I briefly considered freelance literary and philosophic journalism, but already having stood on an unemployment line I reconsidered. I cannot say that I remained "for the sake of the kids." I was always amused, in a condescending sort of way, by those profs who said they were inspired by the opportunity "to shape young minds" and enthused about the "student-centered university." For it seemed to me that the self-selected mentors would have to have well-shaped minds themselves and that was not the case more often than not with the student-centered university mentors (S.C.U.M. for short), who really thought that shaping young minds was not a matter of inviting the young to join in what the English philosopher Michael Oakeshott called "the great conversation" which is western culture, but rather a matter of "raising student self-esteem"—which in practice amounted to raising student grades, so that in a couple of

disciplines, at least, that meant the expected grade was A and the low grade B. In such an atmosphere serious subjects were not for liberal learning but rather were obstacles to overcome on the way to the degree. I remember well at the last graduation ceremony I attended before retirement, one of the commencement speakers—an academic himself—congratulating the seniors on the fact that they could now forget English composition, history, and chemistry and such things at long last!

No regrets? Well, I overstate the case to a small rhetorical degree, for I admit that I grew to appreciate the comedy created by so many academic comedians, and that retarded my resolve to leave it all behind for reasons that H.L. Mencken would have understood: when asked why people went to zoos Mencken replied, "That's where the animals are." But the major reason I hesitated to retire was that while the college was getting full of mere upwardly-mobile careerists and S.C.U.M., there were just enough ("We happy few") colleagues in what I called "the college within the college," colleagues who were true to the life of the mind without once giving in to the rampant trivialization and who were a delight to know—and none truer or more delightful than Bob Ryley.

Ryley and I—as I have noted—were founding faculty at our new CUNY college, both members of the English department. Actually, for years I straddled two disciplines—English and Philosophy—until, when Ryley took retirement as soon as it was actuarially possible, I found the English department with him gone an alien place, and eventually removed my body entirely to the Philosophy department.

Robert Ryley was accounted a marvelous teacher, popular with

and respected by students (perhaps because, ironically, he didn't wish to shape their young minds or enhance their self-esteem, but only wished to invite them to the great conversation). Not only popular and respected: some students were *devoted* to him. Among those who attended the memorial service after his death was an African student, not an English major, long graduated. Of the electives, Ryley taught most often *Eighteenth Century, The Comic Vision,* and *Understanding Poetry.* Although the latter was not a creative writing course he required the students to write a formal poem, usually a sonnet, not for the asinine notion that "We are all poets, look deep enough," but for the purpose of instilling respect for an art beyond the reach of most of us, an elite art if you will, ruling out the notion that your, our, every utterance deserves public acclaim: so much was Ryley was committed to truth, so little concerned with instilling unearned self-esteem.

Bob Ryley began his academic life as an undergraduate at Colby College in Maine, did graduate work first at the University of Massachusetts and finally at the University of Minnesota where he earned his doctorate. At some point along the way (I recall it being after Colby) he spent an enlistment in the United States Air Force, serving in the Far East. Something we had in common, a source of camaraderie: academics too young for World War II but yet veterans had long been a sub-minority.

Bob wrote like an angel—a very witty angel. He was a first-rate literary critic graced with scholarly curiosity, and he practiced (God bless him) a criticism now considered passé at the higher academic elevations: about one clever interpretive method he observed so commonsensically and belletristically that "The trouble with such interpretations. . . is that they usually seem irrelevant to one's experience of the work." Our

first head of English, an internationally respected Shakespeare scholar, thought one of Ryley's pieces the best essay he'd ever read. Well . . . let's not get carried away; Ryley's excellence does not need a boost of exaggeration.

His major projects were a critical biography of the 18th century theologian (and Alexander Pope's literary executor) William Warburton, and a critical edition of the poems of Kenneth Fearing. But he also wrote on the metaphysical poets, on Jonathan Swift, on Edmund Burke, especially the aesthetics, and on detective fiction—which fascinated him, but about which he never considered creating a course on the aesthetics of detection or somesuch, so out of touch with the swinging revolution of higher ed he was. But the detective novel is what led him to Fearing, who had written the murder novel-cum-film *The Big Clock.* He also compiled a selection from the letters of the almost forgotten novelist Margery Latimer, Fearing's lover. He also wrote—unpublished except by his department—the most perceptive and useful and entertaining and hilarious guide to grammar, style and usage I have ever read (sample sentence fragment: "Eager to welcome her guests, the Queen roller-skating into the royal ballroom.")—which of course is no recommendation to publishers of educational aides.

Compared to some publication lists in academic vitae Ryley's production may seem relatively modest, but that to me is a meaningless comparison. His work was always free of false notes, always provocative and free of academic jargon, always instructive without the reader feeling he or she is being "lectured to," and—*shall I say it?*—always right. This wasn't a matter of my always agreeing with him. I might say of one pal, "Howie has a bug about such-and-such," or of another, "I gotta tell Jimbo he ought to reconsider that," but I never felt

compelled to question strongly Bob’s quiet authority.

I don’t think he ever wrote on beer, but he should have: what he didn’t know about it isn’t worth knowing. He could have said, along with one Gilbert and Sullivan character, “What I don’t know isn’t knowledge.” He also knew something about bourbon, instructed by that giant of the Southern Renaissance, the poet and man of letters Allen Tate (one of our shared enthusiasms), who was a pal of Ryley’s at the University of Minnesota. Do not misunderstand me: Bob was *not* a heavy drinker. He was simply a foreigner to prudishness who had a proper appreciation of God’s gift to thirsty humankind. (And that gift not to be compromised by being mingled with others. An eccentricity I noticed over the years that we lunched together in a Greek diner when the campus-less college had no dining facility: Bob would order two hamburgers which he ate with no liquid accompaniment, a beer or coffee only after.) In any case, my major point, he was not merely bookish.

He lived an intensely intellectual life, along with his beloved wife Alison of the staff of the New York Public Library, creator of manic-hilarious sayings such as (my favorite) “So you can take my love and shove it up your heart.” At the memorial dinner for Bob, Alison gave each guest-mourner a copy of *The Collected Poems of Weldon Kees,* appropriate gesture, as if Bob even from the other side were sharing his impeccable taste. “He is sadly missed. His spirit was rare.” That line is from Kees’s poem “Obituary,” about “Boris . . . the fatalist parrot” whose “cage is empty,” who “No longer screams warnings” to “astonished churchgoers” and others—and I know that Ryley would be mightily amused to be likened to a bird. “Boris is dead. The porch is a tomb. / And a black wreath decorates the door”—an obit which is all the sadder for being funny. Thirty years ago or more I was happy

to hear that Bob admired, as I did, the poetry of the Australian A.D. Hope, but he told me (I knew nothing about it) that I had to read Hope's writings on prosody as well. Hope, the author of the magisterial "Ode on the Death of Pius the Twelfth" (with the lovely lines "Who could have guessed in summer's green concealed / The leaf's resolve to die?"), which poem has for me private associations because of "I was in Amherst when this great pope died/ . . . Amherst in Massachusetts in the Fall"—roughly about the same time that Bob was at U.Mass. (Amherst).

The next to last time I saw Ryley I was telling him how disappointed I was with a TV lecture by Garry Wills, whose earlier work I thought so profound. Yes, he responded, like Wills's study of Jefferson and the Scottish Enlightenment—which was precisely the book I had in mind. When his son Alex became a Philosophy major, Bob would talk to a common pal the Philosophy chair about books beyond the requirements Alex should get. Not that he didn't already know, for Bob was extremely sophisticated philosophically: this was just another way of his always being engaged. I remember a faculty meeting back during the "revolution," heady activist days when people said it was urgent that "things get done," that "we can't get hung up on philosophical distinctions." Some asinine resolution was to be voted on which would announce to an eager world that "the college faculty" thinks such and such about the political situation. Ryley protested: "No majority can decide by vote what this or that individual member *thinks!* That's epistemologically impossible!" There was an odd cadence to his speech, a charming hesitation which students would lovingly try to imitate. I like to think, I'm sure it was true, that they did so because they assumed that hesitant cadence signified *Man-at-Thought.*

Who better to teach a course on comedy? The only *predictable* thing about his sense of humor was that it would *not* be. It might be for his own private delight, as when during the Iraqi invasion he started a rumor that at my advanced age I was trying to re-enlist in the army. It might be intentionally and parodistically sophomoric, as when he autographed an offprint of an essay thus: "To S. Hux, whose constant intellectual constipation contributed so much to the errors of this essay. R. Ryley." It might be atmospherically sophisticated, subtle, as in his best jokes. Now obviously a punch-line has to be a surprise, but Bob's punch-lines were, if you will, meta-surprises. It's a shame I can't share a couple of them, but propriety suggests they perhaps should not be committed to paper or to the internet. And they might not work the same way anyway, for a part of the effect was in the delivery and demeanor: devil lurking behind choirboy façade. But jokes *per se* were the least manifestation of his antic disposition. Years ago I gave a lecture on a figure I called "the psychopathic saint" or "holy sinner"—the character in history and literature who sins, even violently, as a paradoxical way of striving for salvation through a challenge to the Almighty, and so on. I then received in the mail a clipping of a sports page headline about a high-school football game, "Christ the King Wallops Holy Spirit," enclosed with a letter which read "Dear Reverend Hux—Does this mean that our blessed savior is a holy sinner? Please answer. Yours, Perplexed."

The humor might be . . .well . . . elaborate, as in the last "con" he played upon me. A few weeks after the Boston Red Sox beat out the New York Yankees for the American League pennant and won the 2004 World Series, I received in the mail from (return address) "The Gracious Winners of America Inc." a questionnaire and application. If I answered about fifty humiliating questions I could be accepted for conversion from Yankee to Red Sox fan. So, I bowed, scraped, groveled, ate

crow, and returned the application to “Gracious Winners.” A week or so later the form was sent back to me, stamped “Application Rejected: known associate of James Como.” (Como being the embodied definition of Yankee diehard—but also Bob’s and my long-time friend and colleague. . . and now, also, a @NERIconoclast