

Marion B. Smith

STATUS AND SCHOLARSHIP IN THE HUMANITIES

DURING THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS much has been said and written about the position of the humanities in the modern university. In contrast, very little attention has been paid to the position of the professor in the humanities *vis-à-vis* his colleagues in other disciplines. In this country at least, if we can judge by the demands of professional faculties for additional courses in the humanities and by the increasingly numerous opportunities for employment open to arts graduates, the protagonists of humanistic studies have received a sympathetic hearing both inside and outside the university. On the other hand, comparative surveys of rank and salary demonstrate that while the prestige of the humanities as an academic discipline may have risen, the prestige of the teacher of the humanities has declined. Some part of the discrepancy in status between the humanities and other departments, as indicated by the rank and salary of staff members comparable in qualifications and experience, is accounted for by the pressure of external demand for personnel on the part of business and the professions. A larger part, perhaps, results from the Procrustean workings of administrative procedures for evaluating "merit". It is obvious that the individuals who make up the teaching staff of a university cannot be cast in a single mould if that university is to serve, effectively, the manifold educational purposes that are its concern. No single yardstick can measure accurately the worth of these individuals and their contributions to the work of the university. If we recognize that the humanities possess values peculiar to themselves, we must also grant to the professor in the humanities the opportunity to profess and pursue those values and not expect him to conform to the pattern of scholarly activity appropriate to some other discipline. Yet this perfectly reasonable desire is seldom fulfilled in the larger Canadian universities. In some of them, indeed, there is strong opposition to any suggestion that it should be fulfilled.

The problem is basically an administrative one. As our universities increase in size it becomes more difficult for the administrator to know the particular function

of each individual staff member, let alone evaluate his competence in performing it. In the hope of preserving at least the semblance of equity, therefore, administrators have tended to rely increasingly on uniform and seemingly objective criteria. Under such a system of evaluation, members of humanities departments are bound to suffer because their proper and characteristic contributions to the work of the university are not such as to lend themselves to objective evaluation.

The responsibility for this confusion of uniformity with equity cannot be laid at the doors of administrators alone, since administrative decisions on matters of increase and promotion are often based upon criteria formulated and approved by the faculty as a whole. Such formulations represent the views of the majority and, since in the larger universities members of humanities departments are in the minority, they are likely to reflect the values appropriate to the sciences and the professions.

But it is not the opposition between the sciences and the humanities alone that has created the anomalies in status between the disciplines, though it has done much to maintain them. The humanities themselves have failed to put their case effectively and all too often have let it go by default. Whatever the reasons for this ineptitude and inertia, it would seem that some humanists have either very little understanding of their own function in the university or else very little faith in its validity. They seem unwilling to assert their own academic identity, to uphold their own particular values if these differ in any way from the accepted pattern of values in other disciplines. Some of them give the impression of being too proud to fight. Instead, they wrap themselves in injured—as well as cloistered—virtue and slink out of any races for immortal garlands that cannot be won without dust and heat.

Once the humanities held the place of academic pre-eminence. They were not supplanted by promoters of rival disciplines who nursed a sense of inferiority, who were defensive, negative, or uncommitted; nor will their supporters succeed in restoring them to a position of equality until they have discarded such attitudes. Can you imagine the uproar which would ensue if the roles were again reversed, if the humanities attempted to dictate criteria of qualification and evaluation to the sciences and the professional schools? The scientists, particularly, are as aggressively as the humanists are defensively hypersensitive. In such an emotional climate neither reason nor the will of God is likely to prevail when the problem of disparity in status is raised in committee and faculty meetings.

What frequently happens when such questions do arise is that professors of the humanities allow themselves to be talked down by the vociferous majority or,

still worse, allow the opposition to dictate the premises of the argument. They attempt to cover up the ignominy of past defeats by paying lip-service to ideals which they do not believe to be valid and appropriate for the humanities, or by pretending that there is no real difference between themselves and others when those others imply that difference must mean inferiority. They may defend themselves against direct attack but plead guilty to implied charges by failing to take a stand on related issues. They may, for example, allow to pass unchallenged the suggestion to set up a special category outside faculty rank for those who "only want to teach". They may acquiesce in the contention that, for a French Professor, spending a year in France cannot be considered scholarly activity unless he can also present for approval a specific research project likely to eventuate in a publication. That no one can teach a foreign language effectively without occasional refreshment from primary sources would seem to be quite irrelevant to the purposes for which leaves of absence and grants in aid of scholarship are awarded. Yet these same "collaborationists", if they deserve the name of humanists at all, must realize that the primary concern of the humanities professor is teaching.

The humanist has no quarrel with the scientist's insistence that the first duty of a university professor in the sciences is to engage in research, nor with that of the member of a professional faculty that his first duty is to train future members of his profession. But he should be ready to defend, and defend vigorously, his own conviction that the first duty of the humanities professor is to enlighten the mind, to awaken understanding, to cultivate wisdom, to disseminate—in the literal sense of the word—the values of his subject. This is his productive scholarship, the end towards which his scholarly activities should be predominantly, though not necessarily exclusively, directed.

Like research, scholarly teaching must be based upon sound scholarship and nourished by continuing scholarship. The humanist is likely to spend more time than the scientist in acquainting himself with the opinions and discoveries of others and with the ways in which these opinions and discoveries have affected the human condition. The scientist is likely to spend more time than the humanist in exploring new areas of fact and thought. Neither activity, in its appropriate frame of reference, is inferior to the other and both, though not necessarily in the same ways, can be equally productive. It is this equality in diversity which the scientist is unwilling to accept. He is certain that *his* definition of scholarly activity holds good for all academic disciplines. In this he is wrong. Not only is the appropriate emphasis different in the humanities, the concept itself is less easy to define.

In what way or ways, then, should the humanities professor be expected to

demonstrate his scholarship? How can he best make a contribution to knowledge? Opportunities for the kind of research which is likely to add *significantly* to the body of factual information in his subject are rare. Publication in the humanities, therefore, usually takes the form of creative writing or criticism. Though it may be the most effective form in which a particular scholar can communicate the values of his subject, creative writing is not often regarded as scholarship in the strictly academic sense of the word. Besides, it demands talents with which comparatively few scholars are endowed. Since knowledge in the humanities is not cumulative, and is not systematized and compartmented as it is in the sciences, sound critical scholarship must be based upon extensive reading in a number of related areas followed by thorough analysis, evaluation, and selection of materials—all this as a preliminary to the prolonged travail of writing and rewriting. Worthwhile publication of this sort is not to be expected from the immature or narrowly specialized scholar. For these among other reasons, the humanist may be expected to begin publishing significant critical scholarship at about the age when, among scholars in mathematics and the sciences, the creative period is expected to end.

Because they are expected to conform to the patterns appropriate to other disciplines, junior members of humanities departments are often pushed into engaging in unproductive, pseudo-scholarly activities. Because the outlets for publication in the humanities are severely limited in number and in scope, and sometimes because the results of these hasty and immature investigations of minutiae are not worth publishing, the articles to which these activities give birth seldom get into print. If they do, they are usually directed to a small coterie of specialists who may find the results interesting and informative. These scholarly investigations may have followed the approved pattern of scientific research, but because of the nature of their subject matter they cannot be expected to achieve the same ends. They are unlikely to prove anything, and still less likely to contribute in any way whatever toward improving the lot of the human race or toward giving any single individual a greater understanding of himself or other human beings or the meaning of life. Yet it is precisely this kind of wisdom that studies in the humanities are expected to provide and that scholars in the humanities have prided themselves on bestowing.

If the professor of humanities sincerely believes that it is his business to awaken the mind, to nurture understanding, and to confer wisdom by disseminating "the best that has been thought and said", why does he listen without protest to such poppycock as the contention that the right true ends of scholarship in the humanities are best served by articles on "The Evidence for the Greek Kalends as the Publication

Date of Virgil's Fourth Georgic", or "The Importance of Double Summer Time in the Structure of Christopher Fry's *The Dark is Light Enough*"?

Perhaps a case may be made for the place of the investigation of trivia in the training of graduate students, but it should have a very small place in the scholarly program of a professor in the humanities. The training of scholars in his particular specialty is a very small part of his work. A very large part of it is or ought to be adding to the number and the quality of educated men and women.

For that task all the knowledge that he can acquire inside and outside the boundaries of his specialty and even of his discipline will prove little enough, and none of it will be irrelevant. The lecture-hall, the seminar-room, and the professor's office are his outlets for publications quite as much as the learned journals in his subject. There he communicates his store of learning directly, as an individual speaking to individuals—the oldest and still one of the most effective means of publication. Comparatively few works of pure "scholarship" in the humanities have done much to change the world, and comparatively few of our present-day professors in the humanities can be expected to add to their number. On the other hand, very few such professors have not changed—it is to be hoped for the better—the mental attitudes of a fair number of students. This is not the kind of productive scholarship that can be recorded in a *curriculum vitae*, but the fact that it cannot be counted and measured does not make it less important to the university, the community, and humanity in general, than those kinds of scholarship which can be recorded, counted, and measured. To insist that only the recordable and countable are worthy of academic recognition is to sell short the values for which a university stands.

It is true that reverent lip-service is still paid to these values, but in many universities, Canadian as well as American, lip-service is the only recognition paid them. As yet, not even our scholars have been able to make an effective protest against this loss of vision. Most of them appear to have given up trying. Why is this so? Have the pressures of our society destroyed our faith? Have we come to worship the idols of the marketplace so blindly that we believe things are more important than thoughts? Or, conversely, have we been Madison-Avenued into the conviction that the shadow of prestige, of good public relations, is a more pressing concern of the modern university than the substance of scholarly education? The professor in the humanities who believes in the worth and dignity of scholarly teaching finds himself caught between conflicting pressures. Every year, it seems, he is expected to do more teaching, or at least to teach larger numbers of students. And every year pressures to publish, to give lectures to groups outside the university,

to serve on committees, divert more and more of the time which must be given to study, review, and preparation if his teaching is to remain scholarly. Refusal to yield to these pressures leaves him open to charges of idleness and cuts him off from all hope of advancement in his profession. If he devotes such time as he can spare from other duties to a major work of scholarship, he is no better off. The ten-year book has become a byword as an excuse for laziness or incompetence. Yet, in the humanities, ten years is not an unduly long gestation period for a sound, thorough, and scholarly book.

If there is an answer to the problem it is not to be found in playing the game according to other people's rules in the hope that our virtue will eventually be rewarded. That course can bring us only continuing frustration, for the rules were drawn up to suit the requirements of a league in which we cannot compete with any prospect of winning. Still worse, it condemns to gradual decay and eventual death the values we profess to sustain. There is precedent for it. The classics have only recently drawn back from the brink of total disaster to which their preoccupation with dryasdust scholarship had led them. History, with its glorification of the "scientific historian", has been led up the same garden path and is only beginning to wonder whether it has not, perhaps, gone off-course. In the academic world, literature, as Arnold foresaw, is the last stronghold of non-material values, and its foundations are none too firm. Like Eden, it is left to "their defence who hold it", and it is high time to issue a rallying call to the troops.

Teachers in the humanities must insist on the respect due to honest scholarship whatever form it may take, and to the honest scholar whatever form of scholarship he chooses to engage in. Whether he publishes the ways of having life more abundantly is what matters, not whether he publishes in the classroom, or the seminar, or the tutorial, or the learned periodical, or the popular magazine, or on radio or television. So long as he does what his hand finds to do with all his light as well as with all his might, there is not one but many an acceptable and scholarly way in which the searcher after the true, the good, and the beautiful may let his light shine before men.

The humanities must also insist on determining their own criteria for evaluating members of the academic staff in their own departments. Since these criteria are not likely to be of the sort that lend themselves to statistical compilation, they cannot be applied without relying upon the judgment of the colleagues of the individual whose case for increase or promotion is under consideration. The risk of injustice will be less if that judgment is accepted than if the decision is left to those who know little or nothing about the man and his work.

To continue to regard the conscientious and scholarly teacher as a second-class academic citizen and to reward the teacher who acquires "merit" at the expense of his teaching is to undermine both good teaching and good scholarship. The scholars of the next generation will not come from the ranks of the badly taught. Yet in spite of these obvious truths the scales are loaded, in today's academic marketplace, against the staff member who devotes more than the irreducible minimum of his time to scholarly preparation for teaching.

However little predisposed to over-value prestige and monetary success the humanities professor may be, he is a human being with human weaknesses. Constant under-valuation of his services, repeated accusations or implications of incapacity, laziness, dilettantism, and lack of ambition—however little justified—eventually destroy a man's faith in himself and his work and thereby his effectiveness as a teacher and scholar. If he is one of the "bright young men" he will, like "many fine minds" of which Francis Fergusson speaks in his Preface to *The Human Image in Dramatic Literature*,

see that it is "sunder" to preserve an ironic silence about the perennial life and meaning of literature, and serve it in some way which may be more easily recognized and evaluated.

If he is less "bright" and less young he may wonder, with the "defeated" of Bertrand Russell's essay "On Being Modern Minded",

what is the use of an . . . opinion which can never hope to conquer the . . . agencies of publicity?

. . . To be pointed out, admired, mentioned frequently in the press, and offered . . . ways of earning large sums of money is highly agreeable; and when all this is open to a man he finds it difficult to go on doing the work that he himself thinks best and is inclined to subordinate his judgment to the general opinion.

Are our humanities departments to be staffed solely with those who are "sound", in Fergusson's sense, or "defeated", in Russell's? If they are, what will be the result for the humanities. and what, indeed, for our universities?