

## NOTES FROM UNDERGRADUATE UNDERGROUND

When I arrived for Freshman Orientation Week at Columbia, I was wearing a two-tone mocha and grey ribbed sweater which I had purchased from my summer job savings as a messenger boy, and which I fancied would be the key to popularity. Like Akaky Akakievich in Gogol's story, "The Overcoat," I thought this garment would change my life magically for the better. I had very little sense of men's fashion at the time, but it did not take me long to realize, walking around campus, that I had somehow misjudged the sweater's appeal: it was hopelessly suburban, the opposite of cool.

I planned to live at home and commute to the Upper West Side from Brooklyn, but during that first Freshman Orientation Week we were all expected to live in the dorms. We were also expected to wear blue beanies, a demeaning detail, I thought, perhaps because it reminded me too much of a yarmulke, a skullcap. Like Jude the Obscure I was hungry for knowledge, excited to start partaking of the intellectual feast I imagined college to be, but I also had an outsider's testy defensiveness, which masked an acute sense of social inferiority. Based on three things: 1) I was poor, a scholarship boy, beholden to the institution's largesse; 2) I was Jewish, and I knew that until recently Columbia had had quota restrictions for admitting Jews; and 3) I was from Brooklyn, which was not the glittering international brand it has since become but a laughable outer borough punchline.

I had the suspicion Columbia would be populated by young gentlemen who were polished, polite, wealthier and better mannered than I, and would consequently look down on me. I anticipated having to use my brain, which I'd sharpened like a shiv in the Brooklyn ghetto of my youth, for advancement and upward mobility, as well as revenge on any gentiles who treated me snootily. What I did not understand until much later was that I was part of an admissions year, Class of '64, which constituted a sort of experiment: "Dudley's Folly," it came to be called, after the Dean of Admissions David Dudley, who had decided to admit applicants largely on the basis of their scholarly promise, grades and test scores, resulting in a class disproportionately represented by smart boys, many Jewish, from New York City. Of course, Dean Dudley was soon relieved of his post when it was discovered what he had wrought, but in the meantime, I need not have concerned myself quite as much as I did with being an outsider.

My paranoid sense that Columbia was a finishing school for gentlemen found reinforcement when we freshmen were obliged to take a speech test in the opening weeks. I went to the lab, read aloud, and was told, "Mr. Lopate, you have regionalisms."

Of course I got regionalisms, whataya expect! But the comment made me sufficiently self-conscious that I began mumbling to disguise my Brooklyn accent, until one day a young woman I was trying to impress asked me innocently if I was Czechoslovakian.

Eager to find a girlfriend, I was socially at a disadvantage, being only sixteen, having skipped a year of high school thanks to a rapid advance program for the intellectually gifted. On top of that, girls mature earlier than boys at that age, so the Barnard first year students were looking to date upperclassmen, not boys younger than them. I was too proud to hang out in high school playgrounds. I went to a few dances at the student center, awkward affairs, being too shy to ask anyone to dance more than once.

So my objective switched to finding male friends. I loved literature, but did not think myself clever or profound enough to become a writer, so I declared a pre-law major. In sessions I attended for pre-law majors, however, I felt no connection with the other boys. I began to hear about freshmen who had an interest in literature, movies, art, jazz, classical music, all passions of mine. I tried sitting in on dormitory bull sessions to find my people, but it wasn't easy, because I still had only a few hours to spend on campus before taking the long subway ride home.

Though it happened more than fifty years ago, I still remember the experience vividly. What is hard to put into words is the precise texture of navigating this confused, transitional period into social acceptance: trying to pick up random cues, frequenting dull departmental teas to fill up on sugared biscuits, hanging around those who turned out to be a waste of time, inserting what I hoped to be pertinent remarks that would make someone take notice. In high school I had been a star—class valedictorian, voted most likely to succeed, editor of the literary magazine—and suddenly I was invisible, a nobody. I didn't mind being anonymous for a while, it was what every New Yorker knows how to do, but I did resent being dismissed. For instance, I was drawn to the upperclassmen, my dream was to earn their respect, or at least tolerance. One time I found myself in the doorway of some juniors who were discussing classical music. I was listening at the time compulsively to Bach and Bartok, and I ventured the opinion that Bartok's string quartets were really nice. "Nice? *Nice?*" one of them pounced. "You call Bartok *nice?*" I learned never to use that word as an affirmative.

I was a passionate blues fan, and an upperclassman, one of the college's leading literary figures, informed me that my beloved Bessie Smith "lacked wisdom," compared to, say, his favorite, Brecht-Weill's songs in *Threepenny Opera*. This time I knew the guy was full of shit, and I held my ground. Impossible to overestimate what a battleground taste formation was in those days—how much it was deemed the true test of possessing a self. Nowadays I might shrug and say *de gustibus*, but then, matters of taste

were serious business. And Columbia specialized in turning out poseurs—still does, probably—who would insert one-upping references from medieval literature to Ramakrishna to esoteric pop culture every other sentence.

Eventually my Nietzschean will to power found outlets: I started a jazz club and a film club, Filmmakers of Columbia, which showed 16mm prints of art movies in McMillan (now Miller) Auditorium. The jazz club was ill-defined, mainly a pretext for like-minded buffs to get together and listen to records. We also hosted a showing of rare jazz films, borrowing 16 mm prints from a collector, and attracting a downtown audience that included the poets Ted Joans and Leroi Jones. It included *St. Louis Woman* with Bessie Smith and *Jammin' the Blues* with Lester Young and Billie Holiday.

The jazz club also gave me an opportunity to leave home. I was desperate to escape my quarreling parents and their miserable life together. One of my jazz buddies resided in a two-room suite in the New Hall dorm. He and his roommate shared one room, and the other room had been left vacant for the occasional visiting high school athletes the school wanted to recruit, or for alumni nostalgically returning. My friend let me stay in that room for free. I arranged the closet so that my clothes could hide behind the wooden panel that the sliding doors did not disclose, and slept on top of the covers to leave no mark of my presence. Even so, from time to time a beefy football player would knock on the door and say he had been directed to this room number, at which point I would have to scoop up my books, toothbrush and alarm clock, and seek a floor to sleep on from another dorm acquaintance.

To come up with living expenses, I took three part-time jobs: washing dishes in Johnson Hall (I was the pair of hands grabbing dirty plates from the conveyer belt and bashing them against the slop pail) for which I got free meals; sitting at the front desk of the student center on weekends, checking that no one would enter without a jacket and tie; and working in Butler Library, where I shelved books in the stacks, tracking down items on call slips that arrived via pneumatic tubes. The best part about the library job was that I would invariably find intriguing books near the one I had been delegated to locate, and would browse in them until the next request came through.

By sophomore year, I was able to cobble together enough money to pay the rent for a room in a railroad flat on West 106<sup>th</sup> Street, which I shared with four other roommates. I have to say that place was pretty depressing: located in the middle of a long hallway, my room was dark as a monk's cell, except for a narrow window which looked out on a garbage-laden courtyard, and one bare light-bulb hanging noose-like from the ceiling. Working three jobs while taking five courses a semester left me exhausted. I had been negligent taking care of myself, and lost so much weight that I

looked like a walking Egon Schiele drawing. On top of that, an anguish had been building inside me, composed of adolescent pessimism, sexual frustration (I was still a virgin) and revulsion at the gap between upholding the pretense of a winner in the midst of interior turmoil, which prompted me to try to kill myself. I have written elsewhere about that suicide attempt, and have no desire to revisit it now. Suffice to say that after I was released from two weeks in the isolation ward at St. Luke's Hospital, across the street from Columbia, I felt an extraordinary ballast to get on with the business of living. My parents, horrified at my narrow scrape, opted to give me a monthly allowance which would let me quit my jobs and study full-time. They had so little money to begin with that I've no idea how they managed this, but I was not about to question it.

Meanwhile, I had been taking a full complement of courses, trying to clear away some of the (to me) tedious requirements such as Math and Science to indulge my love of literature. Columbia's celebrated Humanities course suited me perfectly: a romp from Homer to Greek tragedy, the Bible, Saint Augustine, Cervantes, Rabelais, Goethe and so on, though I didn't see the point of Montaigne's essays, which now I venerate. What did I know? to quote Montaigne. I gobbled up those courses that focused on one, two or three authors: Shakespeare; Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky; Nietzsche, Freud and William James; Richardson, Fielding and Smollett; Diderot and Sterne. I was especially enamored of foreign authors, a problem since I had declared myself an English major. What I liked to do best was dabble: like many would-be creative writers, I lacked the rigor of genuine scholars. I wanted to float like a bee, sucking at the honey of whatever looked inviting. The reckoning came when I met with my advisor, Quentin Anderson, to get him to approve my schedule. Professor Anderson was a formidable presence: wide-shouldered and rotund, given in class (so I heard) to intimidating silences when students seemed insufficiently prepared, a specialist in Melville's *Moby-Dick*, it was impossible for me not to associate him with a fusion of the whale and Captain Ahab. Scanning my proposed schedule with a gloomy frown, he wondered why I had not included any of the required English three-year sequence courses, which went from Beowulf and the medieval miracle plays through the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, the Metaphysical Poets, the Augustan writers, the Romantic era up to the Modern...I could not admit that they'd looked dull to me, so I simply said I was more excited about the specific courses I had listed, which happened to be offered by the French Department, the Russian Department and the Philosophy Department.

"Mr. Lopate," he said, "graduate schools will not look friendly on your chances if you fail to take the sequence courses." That one adverb, "friendly," decided the

whole course of my future life. Screw them! I thought to myself. Then I won't go to graduate school. I opted instead for a double minor: English and Art History. I would take courses with literary giants like Lionel Trilling, F. W. Dupee and Eric Bentley, and the great art historian Meyer Schapiro, graduate in the prescribed four years and get on with my life as a penniless freelance writer. I was proud of myself for having stood up to the Man's threat as befit a tough kid from Brooklyn. In retrospect, I realize it would have benefited me to have followed Anderson's advice and taken those sequence courses. As a consequence, I have embarrassing gaps in my education: to my shame, I have never read *Beowulf* or *The Faerie Queen*.

Columbia had not yet gone co-ed, and I was also interested in taking courses at Barnard, its sister school, to meet girls. You had to petition an assistant dean in Hamilton Hall for permission to do so. He seemed dubious, suggesting that the Barnard courses might not be as rigorous as the Columbia offerings, and implying there was something unmanly or frou-frou about my request. How was I to explain that my intentions were strictly heterosexual? He reluctantly signed my card.

By then, I had located and embedded myself in the literary crowd at Columbia. At the time, I worshipped at the shrine of the Best Friend, craving a soul-mate with whom I could share all my secrets, doubts, enthusiasms. I was lucky to find a pair. Mitch Hall was a poet, tall with blonde curly hair, a golden boy, handsome as a Greek god, and extraordinarily kind and thoughtful. I was fascinated by his desire to be and do good. Myself, I was going through that typically adolescent fascination with evil, demonism, the Spanish Inquisition, Luis Bunuel and all things perverse, as a way to assert my resentment against the established powers. I think I had a crush on Mitch, in that brief period of sexual confusion when I might have gone gay, and I punished him for my crush by puncturing his idealistic balloon whenever possible. Perhaps he enjoyed that, too, in a masochistic way. He generously invited me to his mother's home in suburban Long Island, where I got a taste of domestic comfort and normalcy, so different from the disordered, angry atmosphere of my own family. I wrote a story about a virtuous young man harassed by his acquaintances, "The Saint at the Crossroads," which I made into a film, casting Mitch of course as the saint: it was my way both to mock and honor him.

My other best friend was Jonathan Cott, a brilliant, tortured, dark-haired, Kafkaesque figure. He like, Mitch, attracted women by the dozen (I observed him carefully, hoping to pick up tips). All his professors, like Susan Sontag and Frederick Dupee, were intrigued by Jonathan and wanted to know him outside of school. He would soon be writing profiles of Bob Dylan and Jean-Luc Godard for *Rolling Stone*. He was

drawn to the artistic cutting edge—Stockhausen and Boulez in music, Beckett and Nabokov in literature. Almost out of perversity, I elected to be indifferent to the Next New Thing, diving instead into the Eighteenth Century. It launched me on a lifetime of evading the trendy, which is stupidly limiting in its own way, but helped to define my identity, like all chosen limitations. Jonathan lived with his mother and brother in a swanky Park Avenue apartment, with a maid who whipped up chocolate cake for us when he arrived. I am not really sure what Jonathan saw in me, though perhaps he envied my sardonic, grounded sense of realism, or idealized my ghetto background. He once said the problem with growing up on Park Avenue was that there was no way for children such as he had been to play on the block, as I had in my Brooklyn neighborhood. (He left out the part about trying to avoid getting beaten up by bigger boys.)

The fourth member of our literary set, the poet Ron Padgett, was then fashioning himself as a cowboy aesthete from Oklahoma. Ron, who has gone on to a distinguished career in poetry, was more a cordial acquaintance than a best friend, and perhaps for that reason, he was the only one I have stayed on good terms with for the rest of my life.

Mitch, Ron and Jonathan assumed the editorship of *Columbia Review* in their junior year, and published their downtown poet friends, themselves and me. Their aim was to put out a slender, exclusive publication with a coherent avant-garde perspective, largely influenced by their charismatic professor, Kenneth Koch, and the New York School of Poetry. But as it happened, the journal's business manager, Robert Kolodny, was alarmed by two poems, one a witty sestina about taking a dump and another by Ted Berrigan with the f-word in it, and brought the proofs to the Dean of Student Activities, Calvin Lee. Lee, nonplussed, took it his superior, the college's Dean Truman, who also didn't know what to do, so he showed it to the Provost, his eminence Jacques Barzun, who pronounced both poems "utter trash." The editors were called in to Dean Truman's office and offered two options: either remove the poems or retain them, and be ejected from school. My friends chose instead to resign from the magazine in protest, and we began hawking a mimeo version of the issue, the Censored Review, for a quarter apiece in front of Hamilton Hall. When the call went out for those interested in staffing a reorganized *Columbia Review*, I decided to join—to work from within the system, as they say. Elections were held, and I managed to beat out Robert Kolodny and be chosen as Editor. I invited back my friends as contributors, while also opening the pages to those campus writers who had been rejected by the previous coterie. The magazine doubled in size from 32 to 64 pages, and then in the second issue doubled again to 128 pages. We were able to secure an expanded budget from the university, which either felt guilty for having censored the earlier issue, or embarrassed by the bad publicity it had caused.

I was thus adapting to the university's power structure and well on my way to becoming a Big Man on Campus. I had even begun dating and having sex. The downside was that I was also becoming cocky, something of an asshole: though I had vowed to be more considerate to younger boys when I became an upperclassman, there were slippages: years later, a friend recounted how I had crushed a sophomore with one remark and he'd walked away shattered, while I hadn't even taken notice. At the same time as working to rise up the ranks, I needed to retain a semblance of outsider credibility. I tried out for Colloquium in my junior year, the honor seminar for supposedly the best students, who were drawn from all departments (many pre-med students got in). Jonathan was selected, but I did not pass the interview. One of the interviewers, a French professor named Bert Leefmans, asked me what I thought of Jean Giraudoux, and I dismissed him as a lightweight, only later to discover, idly glancing through the library card catalogue, that Leefmans had written extensively on Giraudoux. The following year I did get accepted, having minded my p's and q's in the interview.

Colloquium was presided over by two professors, the great literary critic F. W. Dupee and a philosophy professor, Richard Kuhns. I was still combative with authority figures, even Dupee, whom I would later think the world of. We were assigned Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew*, a book I loved, in which the mischievous protagonist, a scamp and freeloader, satirizes everyone in French café society. For my first critical paper, instead of writing a sober analysis I did an imitation of Rameau's Nephew, sending up everyone in the class, including my esteemed professors. Dupee did not take kindly to being caricatured. Thus I preserved my honor as an outsider, through being provocative and offensive. In all my courses, I kept looking for ways to subvert the writing assignment by appropriating it for my creative ends. I took contrarian positions, used ironic voices. In part this was because my freshman papers had been earnest, well-researched, colorless affairs and received B grades. Then I figured out that the professor was probably bored stiff having to read through a mountain of undergraduate themes and would appreciate a little spice or sass. The strategy worked, up to a point: in the process I may have said some really idiotic things. On a final exam for Trilling's Modern Literature course, I tried to justify my dislike of Hemingway—an important writer, I know, but at the time he threatened me, seeming the quintessence of a macho bully. Recently I learned that Trilling's diaries revealed his admiration for Hemingway and his wish that he could be more like Big Papa. But Trilling or his grader let me get away with it. I wrote a paper for Meyer Shapiro's class in which I argued that Degas' three paintings of ballet class showed his increasing feminist awareness. (Imagine, Degas a feminist!) Shapiro pointed

out that I had gotten the chronology of the three paintings wrong, thereby undercutting my whole argument, but gave me an A anyway, I guess because he liked the spunky prose style. Other professors were less impressed. In moral philosophy class, where I met my future wife, I argued for the existence of the Devil, and she defended my paper (God help her), which ended up getting a B-minus or a C.

I revered an art professor, Howard McPhee Davis, and followed him from seminar to seminar, even taking his graduate course on Giotto. My paper for him was the highly suspect “Facial Expression in Giotto,” in which I applied film theory about juxtaposition of shots and the Kuleshov experiment to argue that Giotto’s blank facial portraits were really more dynamic than they first appeared. Totally cockamamie premise. Davis liked me and advocated for my nomination when the time came to dole out various post-graduate awards, like the Kellett Fellowship to Cambridge. It was no go. He confessed to me that “certain faculty members” were dead set against me getting anything. Apparently my irreverent manner had rubbed them the wrong way. Or maybe it was my refusal to take those English sequence courses. They were perfectly right to hold such indiscretions against me.

I had loved Columbia with three-quarters of my heart, but the other fourth remained antagonistic and resistant. I could not afford to let my guard down completely in what still felt to me like the enemy camp. My oppositional stance was more subjective than ideologically coherent. I protested against the censorship of the literary magazine, I advocated for women to be allowed in the dorms. When I graduated, in 1964, we were still a few years away from the '68 rebellion, but Columbia was already showing signs of becoming a bad neighbor and gobbling up Morningside Heights as it would, later, Manhattanville. We were invited to sing the school song, which stuck in my craw:

Oh who owns New York, who owns New York, who owns New York,  
The people say  
Who owns New York, oh who owns New York,  
C-O-L-U-M-B-I-A

By my senior year, already married and living at the upper end of Manhattan Island, I would sometimes stroll into Inwood Park and be confronted across the river with the big “C” painted on a boulder near Baker Field (where I’d once sold hot dogs at a Columbia football game), and I would think cynically of that imperialistic song and pray it would not come true.

In short order, when I graduated and marched with fellow seniors on College Walk, I felt very fond of my Alma Mater, minus its stodgy conservative side as represented then by its anti-women President Grayson Kirk, its greedy land-grabbing and its smug self-satisfaction. I had arrived at the university with a chip on my shoulder, and I left with a chip on my shoulder. In between, I got a great education.