Disorder and Antidote

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Marion Montgomery is a poet and novelist as well as a critic and educator. The combination is not always a happy one. But, in the case of these two books, the artist's sense of life's complexity has worked in the critic and educator to produce a wariness of intellectual presumption seldom found in either profession. For all that, Montgomery, like most artists, displays little self-effacement; his personality is a force almost as substantial and positive in these books as his arguments. Thus, in Liberal Arts and Community, he appears in propria persona as the concerned rhetor speaking to several intelligent and troubled audiences (students, parents, professors). In the process he reveals himself to us, quite advertently, in all his paradoxical humanity: as avuncular visionary, serious jester, explicator of Aquinas and the propriety of using "ain't" and "ya'll." Similarly, in The Men I Have Chosen for Fathers, he is very much the Southern writer of his introductory chapter, defending the idea of the regional against charges of provincialism with all the aplomb of a cavalier fighting for his white plume. These deft self-representations strengthen appreciably our responsiveness to the serious matters at hand. And we often need strengthening, for Montgomery's subject in these works is no less than our modern disorder of mind and spirit. His vision is, confessedly, dark.

For many years a professor of English at the University of Georgia, Montgomery is also a Christian and moral philosopher. In Liberal Arts and Community these preoccupations mold his criticism of the academy, providing a compassionate if sometimes terrifying explication of its central difficulties. Chief among these, he argues, is the increasingly strained relationship between the academy and the world around it. Tellingly in these pages, Montgomery writes of the academy's role as mind to the corporate body he calls community, and of the troubling erosion, in our time, of community values. A firm believer in first principles, he locates the cause of this strain in our general acceptance of an unre-

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strained individualism, a situation the academy both reflects and has done much to create. Bending to the pressures of diverse methodologies and groups, Montgomery shows, the academy's old values have been lost in an explosion of competing ideologies, most of them openly hostile to the community the academy was intended to serve. As he similarly argues in The Men I Have Chosen for Fathers, family, home, town, and all the ceremonies that have traditionally given these human structures their sacramental quality, have been shunted aside, to be replaced in the academy by notions of reality upheld largely by rootless abstractions. The ideologues' dominance, and in the academy it is a strangling dominance of language, has consequently helped sunder us from our true sources of spiritual and intellectual nourishment. This, for Montgomery, is a logical outcome; for in his Christian, hierarchical concept of society, once the base (i.e., community), has been eroded, the way to the apex, God, becomes cloudy indeed.

What Montgomery's analysis reveals most convincingly is that the continuing assault from within the academy on its own proper function has brought about a deformation of language itself. The primary end of language, he writes, is to bind us in community. It can do so because it is by nature paradoxical: it allows us to bring the seeming disparities, the complex and often contradictory particularities of the world, into relationship; at the same time, it provides continuity among minds past, present and future. It is in the maintenance of this quality, and the coherence of tradition it ensures, that the academy finds its true purpose. "My continuing argument," he insists, "is that the academy has as its chief responsibility the stewardship of mind through words; its responsibility to words is paramount, since it is through words that we maintain a community beyond the circumstances of time and place."

That responsibility, Montgomery shows, has clearly been abrogated. With the new ideological (essentially gnostic) divisions between the proper means and ends of community in place, language has increasingly lost its paradoxical, reconciling quality, and therefore its binding function. In the absence of this function, the academy has, predictably, been plunged into chaos across the liberal arts spectrum. Rather than providing a well-defined center to and from which all points lead, it has broken up into a multiplicity of points revolving around a vacuum. (Recently, this mindless revolving has appeared under the guise of "pluralism" and "cultural diversity"). As a result students have turned away from the liberal arts in large numbers.

In this analysis of the situation, Montgomery gives voice to those of us in the academy who share his concerns and also underscores the commonly heard indictments of students themselves. For many of the latter, a college education, as opposed to the technical one students are often opting for when they enroll in the multiversity especially, has become simply a process of drift among untested contentions. They do not know why exactly, but in the very liberal arts courses from which they had expected so much, they feel cheated. Montgomery endorses the truth of this feeling, aware that, instead of "preparing the mind for the presence of our common heritage," these courses, in all too many cases, develop into occasions for the outright debunking of our heritage.

Montgomery's tone, despite the gravity of this charge, is far from rancorous. He does not, after the manner of such writers as Allan Bloom and, more recently, Charles Sykes, view the academy from a historical or sociological perspective, or, except for a generous nod to Dorothy Sayers's "The Lost Tools of
Learning,” offer a program for restructuring the educational system. His work is a meditation on the ethic, rather than the evolution or specific content, of education. Not surprisingly, his solution to our current dilemma envisions the renewal of a Christian ethic as the basis on which a revivified academic community might be built. Thus, reminding educators of the seriousness of their calling, he writes that “the proper end of formal education is to establish in the individual person virtuous habits of thought,” and “to bring the mind to an intellectual encounter with the truth of things.” Virtue and truth are paramount because “community comes into existence through the encounter of mind with any other thing when the mind’s action is governed by piety.”

Piety, truth, virtue: these are hardly the favored terms of current discourse on education, and they will strike some readers as outrageously old-fangled. But Montgomery’s insistence on this language emphasizes the degree to which we have moved away from any very satisfactory definitions of community or education, and to which we have abandoned our responsibility to that beleaguered person, the student. The development of the student remains a chief concern for Montgomery, who sees that in our excessive emphasis on individual rights, originality of thought (more often for the sake of the originality than the thought), and blind materialism, we in the academy have come close to ensuring the eventual deracination of human personality. Personality after all is nourished by connectedness, and as Montgomery’s analysis implies, the new language of the academy is, rather, one of power or, as he defines it, “love severed.” In Liberal Arts and Community he presents an alternative to that language and all the chaos it engenders, fully aware that his alternative must eventually be confronted — if, that is, our society is to survive at all. Of that he is not, with good reason, altogether sure. The hope he holds out for both academy and community is, however, built upon a certain recognition: that chaos is not a permanently endurable condition and that the natural and inextinguishable yearning of the human heart is for a human and spiritual order that alone can supply the heart’s proper food.

The sources of Montgomery’s concern for order, as well as many other ideas in Liberal Arts and Community, can be found in The Men I Have Chosen for Fathers, a collection of essays exploring some of the central works and ideas of Flannery O’Connor, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Frost, Ezra Pound, Richard Weaver, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and Eric Voegelin. The title comes from a line in one of Montgomery’s poems and indicates well the feeling of psychic distance and close-ness he experiences, almost simultaneously at times, in the presence of these writers he has designated “fathers.” We are to take the term in more than a figurative sense. Fathers are to be admired and imitated, rebelled against and reconciled with; and in the course of these essays, Montgomery sometimes manages to enact all four stages. He also deeply impresses upon us a sense of the courage of these people, a courage more poignant in many cases because of the indifference, even hostility, that has greeted their work.

Montgomery speaks of these writers from within his own Southern tradition, and where he cannot—as in the case of Solzhenitsyn, for instance—place them there on the basis of birth or particular interests, he has drawn them in through tradition’s truest ground, common values. These writer-fathers share at least one concern above all others: the establishment of a just order that will allow one to lead the complete life. Montgomery conceives of their approaches to the idea of order in terms of counterpoint
(represented by Pound) and complementary pairs (e.g., Solzhenitsyn and Voegelin). Thus, there is a resonance set up among all the writers, and the book holds together as a colloquy of voices whose individual intonations—poetic, religious, philosophic—provide for not only thematic continuity but also some of the same stylistic variety Montgomery achieves with his addresses to different audiences in *Liberal Arts and Community*. As in that work, Montgomery's artistry here is almost as compelling as his criticism.

The concern for order among these writers is closely related to their participation in the regional. Regionalism is sometimes taken as a synonym for provincialism: Montgomery draws a sharp distinction between the two. The regional or local he calls "the world adjacent" to the writer's eye, which is to say, that rich body of people, things, places of which the regional writer seeks an intimate knowledge in order that he might reveal through them universal qualities, reaching beyond time if not place. Montgomery takes his definition of provincialism from Allen Tate; it is "that state of mind in which regional men lose their origin in the past and its continuity into the present, and begin every day as if there had been no yesterday." By this definition, the most provincial of moderns are our cosmopolites, for whom "yesterday" is a prison because it points to boundaries that interfere with the exercise of an illusory "freedom." For them, most of what was was wrong. As we discover in this work, the past, or at least that part of it incarnated in our much-derided tradition, is in fact the shape of order as it is visible to us so far; its locus, as Montgomery demonstrates, is the regional.

Regionalism, then, becomes a vehicle for assessing the various approaches to order under discussion. Ezra Pound acts as counterpoint, for example, because, despite his lip-service to the local, he is in fact an anti-regionalist who represents order as deriving from an act of the individual will, a curiously Romantic formulation for a poet who culminated so long and so eloquently against Romanticism. His vision of the orderly society, called Diocese in the *Cantos*, is therefore, even against his own best intentions, abstract in concept and utopian in form. Under such conditions, as the history of our century has taught us, "order" can only be imposed upon, not grow from, the life of a people, and the word comes to denote, in reality, disorder in disguise. The work of Solzhenitsyn and of Voegelin, on the other hand, orients us toward order because it explicates the proper "intellectual and spiritual deportment toward reality" that recognizes, as the first condition of understanding humanity, "man's finitude," his incompleteness. Indeed, it is our incompleteness struggling toward completion that gives order its developing form in history, and that is the true subject of what Tate has called "the regional consciousness." Such recognition flies in the face of much that is currently taught and believed about man, but it is in fact our greatest good. It is the lack within ourselves that makes community necessary and possible, and that must, if we are to recognize it as a positive, as more than a condition of suffering, eventually awaken us to the limitations of all utopian ideals. Our incompleteness is, finally, a spiritual state propelling us toward greater ends.

For Montgomery, the ground of order, like that of knowledge, lies always beyond the self, in those particularities which are themselves emblems of greater things. These, in turn, hold within themselves a past which is our past also. We all begin, then, as regional men, though we can flee that heritage. In both *Liberal Arts and Community* and *The Men I Have Chosen for Fathers*, Marion Montgomery explores a crucial triad of interests—personality, community, transcendence— the correct understanding of
which clarifies and enriches the concept of order in a manner we seldom find beyond the work of his own intellectual fathers. Happily, these books are themselves critical and artistic models of the order the author seeks.

The Pursuit of Truth


In this book Professor Alasdair MacIntyre publishes the Gifford lectures that he delivered in 1988. Taking the lectures themselves as his theme, he asks whether or not it is really possible, in the current intellectual and academic environment, to deliver lectures such as Adam Gifford envisioned. In his will, Gifford stipulated that the lectures should be concerned with natural theology, which Gifford took to be the foundation of ethics, treating it "as a strictly natural science." MacIntyre's theme, then, is whether we can any longer engage in serious inquiry about topics like natural theology and ethics, and if we can, what form such inquiry must take. It is not moral philosophy itself so much as its setting which concerns the author. Can we, in our contemporary academic institutions, debate moral matters in such a way that we discover and further the truth?

In MacIntyre's estimation, most contemporary academic debate about moral questions—including therein philosophical, historical, literary, anthropological, and sociological debates—is sterile, being marked by a persistent inability to reach agreement on any substantive issue. For every question there are a number of opposing answers and the arguments never seem to pass beyond them. The reason for this lack of progress is not simply the number of opposing views on given issues. Beneath the conflicting positions lie much more fundamental differences. Participants in contemporary debates bring to them radically different understandings of what it means to engage in rational inquiry and to enter into debate. What are the starting points, what serves as an argument or a proof, how particular arguments are to be weighed, what counts, in the case of conflicts, as victory or defeat? The present-day answers to these questions are so various and so opposed that MacIntyre thinks we can justifiably talk about different "rationalities," each of which has its own version of what constitutes rational inquiry, especially moral inquiry. Disagreements at this level undermine the possibility of substantive debate, and yet, because these differences are largely unacknowledged or simply ignored, we witness ceaseless disputes in which all claim victory on their own terms while no one admits defeat.

A plurality of "rationalities" would have been wholly inconceivable for Adam Gifford, and his contemporaries. They shared the notion of a single, unitary rationality which all educated persons anywhere would share, a rationality which was epitomized in the Ninth Edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica (1875 ff.). This was an autonomous, enlightened rationality, freed from myth, superstition, dogma, and tradition. Its history was one of steady progress and the Ninth Edition marked the highest point yet reached (it was more than a tool of reference). The goal of this progress was a universal and unified scientific understanding of the universe, and to this goal the Gifford Lectures would contribute in the area of natural theology. Thus "encyclopaedia," as MacIntyre terms this view, was not bound to the past, nor did