Gerald M. Reagan

James Thurber and Formal Education

The trouble with education is not *what General Littlefield thought was the main trouble with Ohio State. On the contrary, a humorist like James Thurber is what most institutions desperately need. It is arguable that one learns more by laughing with him than by going to school; though he himself would hardly have approved. School, like a great many other absurd things, is useful if only because it should remind us — by the contrast implicit in all humorous situations — of what life is really about and how we may relish it. Gerald Reagan once put together a number of selections from Thurber in order to add lightness to an educational conference — a noble endeavour — and the following is a shorter version of his presentation.*

Among noted critics of schools I doubt that James Thurber deserves more than passing mention. I do not believe that in his work one finds any deep or surprising truths about schools or schooling, even though I do think one finds some surprising and rewarding perspectives on a number of issues. But one does find in Thurber's recollections of his own formal schooling some perceptions of the trials and tribulations of a highly gifted, partially handicapped and moderately inept individual as he muddled through institutionalized education.

Before dealing with Thurber's recollections of his schooling, some of his reflections on this recollection process may be in order. In his preface to *My Life and Hard Times,* Thurber explained why he was setting down some memories of his early years, and also warned readers about what they should and should not expect.

> Benvenuto Cellini said that a man should be at least forty years old before he undertakes so fine an enterprise as that of setting down the story of his life. He said also that an autobiographer should have accomplished something of excellence. Nowadays nobody who has a typewriter pays any attention to the old master's quaint rules. I myself have accomplished nothing of excellence except a remarkable and, to some of my friends, unaccountable expertness in hitting empty ginger ale bottles with small rocks at a distance of thirty paces. Moreover, I am not yet forty years old. But the grim date moves toward me

> apace; my legs are beginning to go, things blur before my eyes, and the faces of the rose-lipped maids I knew in my twenties are misty as dreams.
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> At forty my faculties may have closed up like flowers at evening, leaving me unable to write my memoirs with a fitting and discreet inaccuracy or, having written them, unable to carry them to the publishers.

And Thurber also cautioned his readers about humorists in general and himself in particular.

> The notion that such persons are gay of heart and carefree is curiously untrue. They lead, as a matter of fact, an existence of jumpiness and apprehension. They sit on the edge of the chair of Literature. In the house of Life they have the feeling that they have never taken off their overcoats. Afraid of losing themselves in the larger flight of the two-volume novel, or even the one-volume novel, they stick to short accounts of their misadventures because they never get so deep into them but that they feel they can get out. This type of writing is not joyous form of self-expression but the manifestation of a twitchiness at once cosmic and mundane. Authors of such pieces have, nobody knows why, a genius for getting into minor difficulties: they walk into the wrong apartments, they drink furniture polish for stomach bitters, they drive their cars into prize tulip beds of haughty neighbors, they playfully slap gangsters, mistaking them for old school friends. To call such persons "humorists," a loose-fitting and ugly word, is to miss the nature of their dilemma and the dilemma of their nature.

Elementary school

Let us turn now to some of Thurber's recollections of time spent in schools, recollections which he has set before us " . . . with a fitting and discreet inaccuracy . . ."

In an essay in *The Middle-aged Man on the Flying Trapeze* Thurber described some of his experiences in the Sullivant Elementary School in Columbus.

> Sullivant was an ordinary public school, and yet it was not like any other I have ever known of. In seeking an adjective to describe the Sullivant School of my years — 1900 to 1908 — I can only think of "tough." Sullivant School was tough.
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> Most grammar-school baseball teams are made of boys in the seventh and eighth grades, or they were in my day, but with Sullivant it was different. Several of its best players were in the fourth grade, known to the teachers of the school as the Terrible Fourth.
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> In that grade you first encountered fractions and long division, and many pupils lodged there for years, like logs in a brook. Some of the more able baseball players had been in the fourth grade for seven or eight years. Then, too, there were a number of boys, most of them colored (about half of the pupils at Sullivant were colored), who had not been in the class past the normal time but were nevertheless deep in their teens. They had avoided starting to school — by eluding the truant officer — until they were ready to go into long pants, but he always got them in the end.

As Thurber remembered the team, that glorious nine defeated several high school teams and

> All of us boys were sure our team could have beaten Ohio State University that year, but they wouldn't play us; they were scared.

And one of the stars of the team, a black boy named Floyd, he singled out for praise.

> Nobody knew — not even the Board of Education, which once tried to find out — whether Floyd was Floyd's first name or his last name. He apparently only had one. He didn't have any parents, and nobody, including himself, seemed to know where he lived. When teachers insisted that he must have another name to go with Floyd, he would grow sullen and ominous and they would cease questioning him, because he was a dangerous scholar in a schoolroom brawl . . .

But is was not just Floyd's athletic prowess that Thurber remembered. Floyd, Thurber said,

> . . . appointed himself my protector, and I needed one. If Floyd was known to be on your side, nobody in the school would dare be "after" you and chase you home. I was one of the ten or fifteen male pupils in Sullivant School who always, or almost always, knew their lessons, and I believe Floyd admired the mental prowess of a youngster who knew how many continents there were and whether or not the sun was inhabited.
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> . . . Word got around that Floyd would beat the tar out of anybody that messed around me. I wore glasses from the time I was eight and I knew my lessons, and both of those things were considered pretty terrible at Sullivant.

In another essay entitled "Back to the Grades" Thurber's imagination had him return to the fifth grade. Why one would, in his middle thirties, return to the fifth grade might appear perplexing, but Thurber gave a compelling explanation:

> I was thirty-four going on thirty-five when I returned to grammar school. My failure to grasp sentence-parsing, fractions, decimals, long division, and, especially, "problems," had after a quarter of a century begun to show up in my life and work. Although a family man of property, I discovered that I didn't understand taxation, gas-meter readings, endowment of straight-pay insurance policies, compound or simple interest, time-tables, bank balances, and electric-light bills. Nor could I get much meaning out of the books and articles which were being written all the time on economics and politics. Long stretches of Walter Lippman meant nothing to me. One evening after we had returned from a contract-bridge game, my wife said to me, earnestly: "You ought to go back to the fifth grade." I suggested just as earnestly that she, too, should start over again, beginning with the first grade (she is younger than I am), but we finally compromised on my going back to the fifth grade.

Thurber found in the school Miss Malloy, who had been his fifth grade teacher in 1905. And because he was late for school, Miss Malloy had him

> ... write, a hundred times, the lines beginning: "Lost, somewhere between sunrise and sunset, two golden hours." "Don't cramp your fingers; get a free and easy wrist motion," Miss Malloy said. "Aw," I said, and grinned. She told me to wipe the smile off my face. I wouldn't, and she made me learn "To a Water Fowl" by heart.

Some lessons for women, and some for men

Thurber commented also on the business of being a parent, and he appeared to recognize what a difficult business that is. He wrote fondly of his own parents, and commented on parents in general. In "A Preface to Dogs" we find the following:

> As soon as a wife presents her husband with a child, her capacity for worry becomes acuter: she hears more burglars, she smells more things burning, she begins to wonder, at the theatre or the dance, whether her husband left his service revolver in the nursery. This goes on for years and years. As the child grows older, the mother's original major fear — that the child was exchanged for some other infant at the hospital — gives way to even more magnificent doubts and suspicions: she suspects that the child is not bright, she doubts that it will be happy, she is sure that it will become mixed up with the wrong sort of people.
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> This insistence of parents on dedicating their lives to their children is carried on year after year in the face of all that dogs have done, and are doing, to prove how much happier the parent-child relationship can become, if managed without sentiment, worry, or dedication. Of course, the theory that dogs have a saner family life than humans is an old one, and it was in order to ascertain whether the notion is pure legend or whether it is based on observable fact that I have for four years made a careful study of the family life of dogs. My conclusions entirely support the theory that dogs have a saner family life than people.
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> ... the husband leaves on a woodchuck-hunting expedition just as soon as he can, which is very soon, and never comes back. He doesn't write, makes no provision for the care or maintenance of his family, and is not liable to prosecution because he doesn't. The wife doesn't care where he is, never wonders if he is thinking about her, and although she may start at the slightest footstep, doesn't do so because she is hoping against hope that it is he. No lady dog has ever been known to set her friends against her husband, or put detectives on his trail.

And while the lady dog may take a more responsible role in the upbringing of her young, she does not give her life over to that task.

> For six weeks — but only six weeks — she looks after them religiously, feeds them (they come clothed). washes their ears, fights off cats, old women, and wasps that come nosing around, makes the bed, and rescues the puppies when they crawl under the floor boards of the barn or get lost in an old boot. She does all these things, however, without fuss, without that loud and elaborate show of solicitude and alarm which a woman displays in rendering some exaggerated service to her child.
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> At the end of six weeks, the mother dog ceases to lie awake at night harking for ominous sounds; the next morning she snarls at the puppies after breakfast, and

> routs them all out of the house. "This is forever," she informs them, succinctly. "I have my own life to live, automobiles to chase, grocery boys' shoes to snap at, rabbits to pursue. I can't be washing and feeding a lot of big six-week-old dogs any longer. That phase is definitely over." The family life is thus terminated, and the mother dismisses the children from her mind — frequently as many as eleven at one time — as easily as she did her husband. She is now free to devote herself to her career and to the novel and astonishing things of life.

There may be some who react negatively to what seem to be standard sexual stereotypes in Thurber's writing. He does talk about the role of the wife and mother and that of the husband, father and breadwinner. But it may be worth noting that if Thurber was a sexist, his sexism was quite different from that being battled in our society today. Thurber appeared to think that it was obvious that females were superior to males in almost every way. This is discussed explicitly in the "'The Ladies of Orlon."

> Nature and I have long felt that the hope of mankind is womankind, that the physically creative sex must eventually dominate the physically destructive sex if we are to survive on this planet. The simplest things last longest, the microbe outlives the mastodon, and the female's simple gift of creativity happily lacks the ornaments and handicaps of male artifice, pretension, power, and balderdash.

> Men and women — the former because they think the Devil is after them, the latter merely to hold their own — make the revolving doors of our office buildings whirl at a dangerous and terrifying rate of speed as they rush lickety-split to their lunches, return hellbent to their desks, and fling themselves recklessly homeward at twilight to their separate sorrows. It is the men who are the casualties of this pell-mell, the men who are caught in the doors and flung to the floors, and it is the women who pick them up, or at least it is the women who pick *me* up.

> The male, continuously preoccupied with his own devices and his own mythical destiny, polysyllabically boasting of his power and purpose, seems blithely unconscious of the conspiracy of Nature and women to do him in. He does not seem to know that he is doomed to go out like a light unless he abandons the weapons and the blueprints of annihilation. Woman says little about it, but she does not intend to be annihilated by Man, even if she has to get rid of him first to save herself. This is not going to be as difficult for her to face as one might think, for her ancient dependence on the male began slowly to turn into disdain about A.D. 135, according to Dr. Rudolph Horch, who makes the astounding statement that the female's sexual interest in her mate has decreased seventeen and two-tenths per cent since September, 1929. The female has greater viability than the male, Dr. Horch reminds us, and the male knows this when he puts his mind to it, which he naturally does not like to do.

> It may come down, in the end, to a highly dramatic sex crisis. Man is forever discovering some new and magnificent miracle weapon or miracle drug, and it is possible that he may soon stumble upon an undreamed-of mineral, of which there will be just enough in the world to create a drug that could cure everybody of everything or to manufacture a bomb capable of blowing the planet into fragments the size of Cuba. The ultimate struggle for possession of the precious material would divide men and women into two warring camps. I

have the confidence to believe that the creative females would defeat the destructive males and gain control of the miracle substance.

Some twenty years ago, a gloomy scientist reported, "Man's day is done." Women's day, on the other hand, is, by every sign and token just beginning. It couldn't happen to a nicer sex.

Learning to be illiterate

To return to matters more directly educational, in "Come Across with the Facts."

"Do you believe that education in our time and nation is going to improve?" lovely women often ask me at cocktail parties.

"No, ma'am," I always reply, politely, "I think it is going to hell."

Thurber goes on to talk about the semi-literate letters he receives from high school students. Most of these letters, he notes, make specific requests which come close to asking him to write term papers for the students. But at cocktail parties, Thurber noted, schools have their defenders as well as attackers.

I could tell from Mrs. Quibble's expression that she was seeking for a single sentence with which to destroy me for my subversive attitude toward American education. She found it at last.

"The trouble with you is, you just don't like no children," she said coldly.

"You are wrong, madam," I said icily. "I *do* like no children."

And this is followed by an Editor's Note which comments:

Mr. Thurber does like children but he thinks nothing of abusing truth to point up a grammatical outrage.

Thurber, I think, would not have expected schools to be in the vanguard of social reform. Nor would he have been likely to hold schools responsible for the folly of mankind. He was fond however of the mother tongue, and attacks direct or indirect which led to slovenly language disturbed him. In an essay entitled "The New Vocabularianism" we find him defending teenagers but attacking the linguistic sins of adults, especially politicians.

One such phrase, Calculated Risk, has been going great guns among the politicians and statesmen. It was used repeatedly by an adult guest on an American radio discussion panel made up of juveniles. (I am glad and eager to announce that we have millions of teenagers in America more interested in using their minds than in brandishing knives or bicycle chains.) Finally, one youth interrupted the adult to say "I don't know what you mean by Calculated Risk." The grown-up was as bewildered as if the youngster had said "I don't know whom you mean by Harry Truman." This particular Calculated Risk was being applied to the Russo-American plan of exchange students, and the adult guest floundered a bit in trying to explain what he meant.

> Now I have made some study of the smoke-screen phrases of the political terminologists, and they have to be described rather than defined. Calculated Risk, then, goes like this. "We have every hope and assurance that the plan will be successful, but if it doesn't work we knew all the time it wouldn't, and said so."

This "new vocabularianism", to Thurber, represented a major and difficult problem.

> The brain of our species is, as we know, made up largely of potassium, phosphorus, propaganda and politics, with the result that how not to understand what should be clearer is becoming easier and easier for all of us. Sanity, soundness, and sincerity, of which gleams and stains can still be found in the human brain under powerful microscopes, flourish only in a culture of clarification, which is now becoming harder and harder to detect with the naked eye.

A fuller attack on the decline of clear expression is found in "The Psychosemanticist Will See You Now, Mr. Thurber." Thurber began.

> I believe there are no scientific investigators that actually call themselves psychosemanticists, but is is surely time for these highly specialized therapeuticians to set up offices. They must not be carelessly confused with psychosomaticists, who study the effects of mental weather upon the ramparts of the body. The psychosemanticists will specialize in the havoc wrought by verbal artillery upon the fortress of reason. Their job will be to cope with the psychic trauma caused by linguistic meaninglessness, to prevent the language from degenerating into gibberish, and to save the sanity of persons threatened by the onset of pollysyllabic monstrositis.

The higher education of a humorist

I have not yet mentioned Thurber's comments on his own college education at Ohio State University, and it is these comments which are, without doubt, the most widely known today.

> Ohio State was a land grant university and therefore two years of military drill was compulsory. We drilled with old Springfield rifles and studied the tactics of the Civil War even though the World War was going on at the time. At 11 o'clock each morning thousands of freshmen and sophomores used to deploy over the campus, moodily creeping up on the old chemistry building. It was good training for the kind of warfare that was waged at Shiloh but it had no connection with what was going on in Europe. Some people used to think there was German money behind it, but they didn't dare say so or they would have been thrown in jail as German spies. It was a period of muddy thought and marked, I believe, the decline of higher education in the Middle West.
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> As a soldier I was never any good at all. Most of the cadets were glumly indifferent soldiers, but I was no good at all. Once General Littlefield, who was commandant of the cadet corps, popped up in front of me during regimental drill and snapped, "You are the main trouble with this university!" I think he meant that my type was the main trouble with the university but he may have meant me individually.

I was mediocre at drill, certainly — that is, until my senior year. By that time I had drilled longer than anybody else in the Western Conference, having failed at military at the end of each preceding year so that I had to do it all over again. I was the only senior still in uniform. The uniform which, when new, had made me look like an interurban railway conductor, now that it had become faded away and too tight made me look like Bert Williams in his bellboy act. This had a definitely bad effect on my morale. Even so, I had become by sheer practice little short of wonderful at squad maneuvers.

One day General Littlefield picked our company out of the whole regiment and tried to get it mixed up by putting it through one movement after another as fast as we could execute them: squads right, squads left, squads on right into line, squads right about, squads left front into line, etc. In about three minutes one hundred and nine men were marching in one direction and I was marching away from them at an angle of forty degrees, all alone. "Company, halt!" shouted General Littlefield. "That man is the only man who has it right." I was made a corporal for my achievement.

Thurber detested physical education.

I don't even like to think about it. They wouldn't let you play games or join in the exercises with your glasses on and I couldn't see with mine off. I bumped into professors, horizontal bars, agricultural students, and swinging iron rings. Not being able to see, I could take it but I couldn't dish it out.

Thurber's poor eyesight led to an even greater problem in a botany class.

I passed all the other courses that I took at my university, but I could never pass botany. This was because all botany students had to spend several hours a week in a laboratory looking through a microscope at plant cells, and I could never see through a microscope. I never once saw a cell through a microscope. This used to enrage my instructor. He would wander around the laboratory pleased with the progress all the students were making in drawing the involved and, so I am told, interesting structure of flower cells, until he came to me. I would just be standing there. "I can't see anything," I would say. He would begin patiently enough, explaining how anybody can see through a microscope, but he would always end up in a fury, claiming that I could too see through a microscope but just pretended that I couldn't.

Both Thurber and the professor persisted. The second time Thurber took the botany class the professor was determined to succeed.

"We'll try it," the professor said to me, grimly, "with every adjustment of the microscope known to man. As God is my witness, I'll arrange this glass so that you see cells through it or I'll give up teaching." . . . So we tried it with every adjustment of the microscope known to man. With only one of them did I see anything but blackness or the familiar lacteal opacity, and that time I saw, to my pleasure and amazement, a variegated constellation of flecks, specks, and dots. These I hastily drew. The instructor, noting my activity, came back from an adjoining desk, a smile on his lips and his eyebrows high in hope. He looked at my cell drawing. "What's that?" he demanded, with the hint of a squeal in his voice. "That's what I saw," I said. "You didn't, you didn't, you *didn't!*" he screamed, losing control of his temper instantly, and he bent over and squinted into the microscope. His head snapped up. "That's your eye!" he shouted. "You've fixed the lens so that it reflects! You've drawn your eye!"

My favorite episode in "University Days," and the one I suspect is best remembered, has to do with the dull tackle from the football team in an economics class. My readers probably all remember this well, but I am going to indulge myself anyway.

> At that time Ohio State University had one of the best football teams in the country, and Bolenciecwcz was one of its outstanding stars. In order to be eligible to play it was necessary for him to keep up in his studies, a very difficult matter, for while he was not dumber than an ox he was not any smarter.

Thurber reported that most faculty members were lenient, and none more so than Professor Bassum of the economic department. But even Professor Bassum was challenged.

> One day when we were on the subject of transportation and distribution, it came Bolenciecwcz's turn to answer a question. "Name one means of transportation," the professor said to him. No light came into the big tackle's eyes."Just any means of transportation," said the professor. Bolenciecwcz sat staring at him. "That is," pursued the professor, "any medium, agency, or method of going from one place to another." Bolenciecwcz had the look of a man who is being led into a trap. "You may choose among steam, horse-drawn, or electrically propelled vehicles," said the instructor. "I might suggest the one which we commonly take in making long journeys across the land." There was a profound silence in which everybody stirred uneasily, including Bolenciecwcz and Mr. Bassum. Mr. Bassum abruptly broke this silence in an amazing manner. "Choo-choo-choo," he said, in a low voice, and turned instantly scarlet. He glanced appealing around the room. All of us, of course, shared Mr. Bassum's desire that Bolenciecwcz should stay abreast of the class in economics, for the Illinois game, one of the hardest and most important of the season, was only a week off. "Toot, toot, too-tooooo!" some student with a deep voice moaned, and we all looked encouragingly at Bolenciecwcz. Somebody else gave a fine imitation of a locomotive letting off steam. Mr. Bassum himself rounded off the little show. "Ding, dong, ding dong," he said hopefully. Bolenciecwcz was staring at the floor now, trying to think, his great brow furrowed, his huge hands rubbing together, his face red.
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> "How did you come to college this year, Mr. Bolenciecwcz?" asked the professor, "Chuffa, chuffa, chuffa, chuffa."
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> "M'father sent me," said the football player.
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> "What on?" asked Bassum.
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> "I git an 'lowance," said the tackle, in a low, husky voice, obviously embarrassed.
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> "No, no," said Bassum. "Name a means of transportation. What did you *ride* here on?"
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> "Train," said Bolenciecwcz.
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> "Quite right," said the professor. "Now, Mr. Nugent will you tell us —"