

HEINRICH BLUECHER - - - A Profile

by Eugenio Villicana

Forms of composition, the great ones and the lesser, and even the false ones, do not come into being out of the vacuum of somebody's mind. They are always a response to the way life is felt and conceived at any one time. And hence forms change and new ones appear. The "profile" if you think about it, is not unnaturally the form best suited for the quality of much of the public-private life of our time. There are a great number of people who lead or aspire to live a "profile" kind of life. And, luckily, there are a number of people who will not be caught in this form of journalism because, if they are, they will be "caught dead in it."

Heinrich Bluecher is this kind of a person. Anyone who knows anything about the power and usefulness of his teaching at Bard, which is what concerns me here, knows that his condition is an absolute independence of mind and character. He has never sought the printed page and he makes you come around to feel that he himself, with a kind of Socratic inevitability, will not put down a single word of his work. It is singularly inappropriate to try a profile on him: silence and anonymity are among the qualities of Lao-tze he knows how to speak about from the inside. He belongs to no institution and, unlike men of comparable mind known to me, he has known how not to become or be felt like an institution himself. It is this freedom that makes him the genuine revolutionary that he is; and it is this freedom, too, that makes you feel, upon first meeting him and with whatever degree of conscious recognition, that you are in the presence of a dangerous man.

A dangerous man—and we ought to use the phrase with full intention. It helps us to name a number of errors, misconceptions, notions, and half truths we are all likely to have about his work and which only time and experience can correct and deepen. It also helps name the power of concentration that makes his work a crucial experience to his students. There is the Common Course, which for the pressure, the astonishment, the huge sense of possibility inherent in the scope and complexity of its materials, is one of the most daring of courses I know. It is right I should speak of this course first, for it is here that every student encounters his teaching or, at any rate, his lecturing. And besides, his other

activities—the Senior Symposium, his advising, his participation in seminars other than his own, his lecturing, his role in College affairs—are the natural consequences and the final equilibrium of the concerns of the Common Course. When a man sees life under the aspect of a distinct and radical enough idea, all things become inter-related.

From the moment of its inception, some seven or eight years ago, when Heinrich Bluecher came to Bard to establish a new course for the whole college, the Common Course has been a constant effort to start in the student an experience and a sense of the various human disciplines in their independence and connection, the disciplines that make up the four majoring divisions of the college, its Faculty, and to which the student maintains a continuous relationship by way of his major study and the courses he must cluster about that center. This, quite simply, is the reason he is the one person who belongs to no division but to the college, why the course is required in the freshman year, and why it is staffed by at least one member from each division. And that is the explanation, too, of the long line of students at registration time before his place in the gymnasium; Heinrich Bluecher interviews each student and makes sure that each section has a representative variety of majors.

I speak of the course as a constant effort to maintain the disciplines distinct and yet interconnected because their tendency, as old as the Renaissance, I suppose, is the tendency of their increasing autonomy and separation and with that of an attempt by each to become dominant over the others. That is a general tendency powerful enough in itself, but it takes further force and complication, as anyone knows, from the impulse and need of every student to concentrate or exclude here and there.

It is not surprising, therefore, that each section should in fact become the drama or the arena, when subtlety gives way to zest and bias, of the conflicts and problems created by the disciplines seeking pre-eminence. Partisanship in a given section for social science or literature, science or philosophy, in the instructor or the student, is no accident, any more than it is an accident that such partisanship will beget its natural opposite in that same section;

such passion is part of the logic of the course. I do not know, of course, that anyone else, given this partisanship, would describe the course the way I have. But differences of description often have to do simply with the way one begins them, and they are of little account without the person one has in mind in the teaching of the course—his style, his feeling, his tone, the kind of context he makes for the course, his relation to it.

The course has been conceived in five sections: myth, religion, science, philosophy and politics, and at first the relations among them may appear casual and bewildering to the student. Experience, education, nature, ritual, symbol, logos, faith, myth, belief, custom—these, among others, are the kind of words the student is confronted with throughout the course. More often than not it is the vocabulary of the course and the rate at which it comes to the student that alarms and dismays those who do not teach the course and, with more validity, those who do. What a large opportunity for imbalance, for a rampant piracy with words! Week after week, in context after context, the primitive and the sophisticated word comes to student and teacher alike. And indeed their potency is so great, their vibrations so disturbing that the course becomes a continuous demand upon precision. It is for this reason that Heinrich Bluecher has sometimes defined the function of his course as the endeavor to develop some precision in the use of root-words, some concrete awareness of the context in which they have their fullest and most genuine meaning, Montaigne, the Tao, this sermon of Buddha, Homer, that poem of Eliot. They are the words in the texture of everyday speech and it takes a great deal of time and effort to see and get anyone else to see the precision and the history of which the words are capable. Bluecher's own first struggle is with language, with English which is, after all foreign to him. But it is remarkable how, if you test out his use of "myth" or "logos", "belief", "dogma", "God", "will", each word turns out to have a very precise relation to a particular context or situation, and its use is neither vague nor exaggerated. "Language resists the philosopher," he has said, "and he is a man whose relation to the world is like the poet's: he's got to begin by making a language of

his own". He knows too that a word is also the history of the meanings it has had in the variety of its developing and changing contexts. With what joy and recognition he will express his admiration of the *Birth of Tragedy*, that utterly new face of the Greek, the young Nietzsche was able to see precisely because his training in Greek was that first-hand and that first-rate. And it is the same awareness of the depths at which a word may live that has never allowed him to forget Heidegger's capacity to recite the whole of the *Antigone* or to devote a year's seminar to the first book of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* to show the order of that language is the order of that world. "Classical", one student wrote in his notebook, "that which expresses only what is essential to itself. Free from the superfluous." And he added, "The classical, therefore, always a problem; how to know the essential from the superfluous."

Heinrich Bluecher is fond of describing his own seminar as a "Parliament of the disciplines." A parliament, but a parliament with the conditions of a laboratory, where ideas are tested out and words are dealt with for sanity and purity of substance. It is a small incident, but one whose importance we can't underestimate. One of his students once said to me: "I was in the habit of listening to the teacher only. He taught me how to listen to my own fellow-students. And what I learned about my words listening to them!" He had learned to listen to others and to himself. "We learned," said another, "when a thought is to be thought through, in all its beauty and consequence, and when a thought is to be made a cause for action." The pre-med, the dancer, the history and literature major, the painter and the economist are thus engaged in the common pursuit of learning their own language while developing a language common to them all. And, seen in this way, I suppose, it is just as true to describe the course as a difficult attempt to create a common core of culture, in conditions, American and modern, where a common core of culture is what no one can take for granted as being already there. It is an attempt the student continually has to make while at Bard and, we all hope, beyond that; it is an attempt to which the whole of Heinrich Bluecher's advising is devoted to. I do not know how many people at Bard know it, but I have to confess that only gradually and, I suspect partially, I have become aware of the hours which week after week Heinrich Bluecher devotes to this gifted freshman,

sophomore, junior or senior, in this or that division, who is reading with him philosophy or religion, history or art, discussing and writing out problems which may or may not directly involve the student's major. It is because this is his kind of advising that he is likely to know better than anyone else in what division and by what particular student the best work is being done at any one time. It is this fact that explains the conception and form of the Senior Symposium, that course which every senior may elect to take in his last year precisely that he may see comparatively in what relation his work stands with work in other disciplines. Each senior in the course is given a list of readings involving as oppositely as possible the problems of definition and relation his own work is pressuring him to confront; he writes about these readings, he reports on his own project. The rest of the faculty will learn of these activities either because Heinrich Bluecher will be asked by the student to be a guest member of his Senior Review—he is painting, music, literature, history—or because the Common Course staff will be informed that this exceptional senior will lecture to the freshmen on his project with a view to showing them where and with what kind of equilibrium of conception and expression they may expect to culminate their careers at Bard. This is how the Common Course immediately bears on his advising and how both establish their final purpose in the Senior Symposium.

It is not hard to estimate what energy this supposes, energy for collaboration, continuity, disinterestedness. It is not long before everyone working with him realizes that his passion for ideas, for their importance is a passion for the individual men who conceived. The topics of the Common Course are education, myth, religion, art, science and politics, but they are apprehended through a succession of great figures, paradigms, Bluecher will say, models and pictures of human creativeness, even when this human creativeness depends upon the divine: Adams, Montaigne, Laotze, Buddha, Abraham, Job, Jesus, Homer, Socrates, Heraclitus. It was Ted Weiss, I believe, who first pointed out to me what a crucial place anecdote and legend have in Heinrich Bluecher's teaching and lecturing: anecdote and legend, for their power to stir intuition and "stir the senses of the imagination". "No less sober a person than Aristotle", Bluecher once began, "spoke of the power of truth and legends". And this opened upon Zarathustra's legendary birth as the only

language whereby to penetrate below traditions to a wholly strange and alien and remote beginning. Few of us will forget the anecdote about Max Weber giving his last lecture on politics to his students in Berlin as the key to what a political vocation means at any time or place; few of us will forget his saying of Bertolt Brecht's poem on Laotze's going into exile and the story that went with it.

This passion for men, for the anecdote, the legend is another expression of Heinrich Bluecher's passion for speaking. Rather than write books or articles, he prefers to speak to people, simply because he prefers persons to objects. And it is this concern for the particular that most intimately and seriously expresses the movement of his mind as he develops an argument. He concentrates all of the powers of his intellect on the preparation of his lectures, while yet believing in spontaneous delivery. He develops his subject anew for each new Common Course audience, without notes, thinking it through, drawing on a huge scope of knowledge, for comparison and contrasts, for example and illustration, and in a language that is vivid and racy, slangy even. Some of us will miss the presence of the text at his lectures, but if we miss it it is only because he does not show his workmanship, how he got from that page in front of him to the statement he may be making about it. It is the convention of European lecturing not to show your workmanship, just your hand; besides, we ought to observe, no philosopher ever makes a quotation. But there are other reasons for his manner. I remember that when I first heard him lecture, my first feeling of his importance for Bard was, here we had a European, a man who could read Valéry not as a Frenchman, Eliot an Englishman, Rilke as a German, but as poets involved in one central fate.

Mr. Liang could explain better than I can why it is the Berliner alone of the Germans that can encompass Europe as a single circumstance, and why as a consequence of this he can be open to all ideas, all works of art, all writing. Heinrich Bluecher is pre-eminently a Berliner; he belongs to that exceptional moment in the life of that European city which brought together with as much skepticism as enthusiasm the broken nationalities of Europe, the broken divisions of culture expressed by that growing separation among the disciplines of which I spoke earlier. I remember a party when speaking with Ralph Ellison about the life of the

negro in London and Paris, he went on to speak of their life in the Berlin of the twenties. Such was the force of the memory that before any of us could respond, Heinrich was toasting, "all the colors".

Most of us would agree, I believe, that Berlin was what Pantisocracy and Brook Farm have attempted to be in an even further past. What is remarkable about Heinrich Bluecher is precisely the friendship and intelligence he creates, the naturalness with which we sense connection of his moral and intellectual virtues. At a time when Bohemia is no longer capable of generating intellectual community, when the idea of community is in fact repellant to us because it turns out to be a matter of congresses, panels, round-tables, a personal relation of the kind he creates is all the more rare and valuable. His catholicity of culture, a catholicity that is radically distinct from amateurishness discloses the concentration it implies not only in Heinrich Bluecher's ability to think below the conventional categories separating the sciences from the arts, say, but in his genius for friendship. He is the one man at Bard who will be invited by his colleague to a seminar in history or to another's seminar in psychology; he is the one man to whom younger faculty can look for comprehension and discreet assistance. The intelligence of the man is an unfailing reassurance; and a reassurance because it goes with a capacity to disagree, ironically, most of the time, but always with manners.

I have said my first impression of Heinrich Bluecher was of his presence at Bard as a European, a Berliner. I must say I still think this, but with a difference. He is a man who knows his Manhattan as few of us know it, its piers, its parks, its restaurants, its galleries, its markets. He is a Berliner in love with an American city. A good many of us know his love of his new country through his passion for Faulkner, whose work he is able to understand in ways which native Americans cannot easily achieve. His own relation to *A Fable* involves his own relation to the First War and Germany, a relation in which most of us cannot participate; and this may be inevitable. But how easily we can share in his love of Faulkner because he is literature and not psychology, literature and not morality, literature and not sociology, even as we can easily share in his impatience with all professional critics who undertake to foreshorten Faulkner's work to suit some preconceived formula, degenerating into an aesthete's self-regard.

Much of his love for America will irritate him, annoy him, exasperate him, but that is only because it is a love that knows discriminations. All of us are lucky to know the way he loves America; he loves Bard, and he loves it because he knows better than anyone else, perhaps, the degree to which Bard is, as he says "the exception".

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Heinrich Bluecher is a Professor of Philosophy at Bard and the author, Eugenio Villicana, Assistant Professor of Literature. This is the first in a series of profiles by Mr. Villicana.

Intellectual

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edy was himself an attempted suicide. And this little known side of Dreiser's life is prominently featured in Matthiessen's work.

After publication of *Sister Carrie* in 1900, and its scandalous treatment at the hands of publishers and critics, Dreiser left for New York where he hoped things would be different. They were. But only for the worse. His work on newspapers and periodicals proved unrewarding artistically and emotionally (not to mention financially). He was cornered by "the most dreadful and inhibiting and destroying of all forms of poverty . . . poverty of mind." Dreiser was a victim of neurasthenia. "For that period I endured all the pains, all dreads, all the agonies of one whose mind is under a cloud." His mounting grief, genteel starvation, literary failure, and marital difficulties, carried Dreiser to the docks of the Hudson River. But at the moment when he contemplated jumping into the water, a comic-relief intrusion restored his equilibrium, and enabled Dreiser to continue the battle for what Matthiessen termed "the large, truthful lines of life." As Dreiser tells it: "I have fought a battle for the right to live and for the present, musing with stilled nerves and a serene gaze, I am the victor."

For Matthiessen, his biographer, no such comic-relief took place, nor would it have deterred him from the path of suicide if it had. For his sense of frustration was not simply personal, but public—rooted in a world that had, through the grinding processes of The Cold War, bifurcated Christianity and Socialism, moral sense from material achievement. His final tragic words tell the story of the incompatibility of a sensitive, rational man with an insensitive, irrational social order.

I am exhausted. I have been subject to so many severe depressions during the past few years that I can no longer believe that I can continue to be of use to my profession and my friends. I hope that my friends will be able to believe that I still love them in spite of this desperate act. . . . How much the state of the world has to do with my state of mind I do not know. But as a Christian and a socialist believing in international peace, I find myself terribly oppressed by the present tensions.

Clearly there are a number of ways in which to interpret the alternative paths taken by Dreiser and Matthiessen. We might say with the Freudian that Dreiser was never really suicidal so much as he was exhibitionistic, and that Matthiessen's depressions were truer to known suicidal patterns. We might take a Durkheimian view and point to Dreiser's endless involvement with society, in the form of women, writers, publishers and people; while Matthiessen's anomic personality was intensified by the loss of his close friends, his status as a bachelor, and his disaffection from Harvard (which Matty maintained carried on a discriminatory policy towards scholars with radical opinions after World War Two).

I rather suspect that a fuller answer is to be found in the objective conditions of their respective realities. Dreiser's reality was intrinsically optimistic. America in the *fin de siècle* was William James' "great, big fat world" incarnate. There was an affluence of domestic radicalism that spanned the world of ideas: Debs in politics, Darrow in law, Chapman, Garland, Sinclair and London in the field of literature, Veblen in pure economics and Myers in muck-raking economics. This was, after all, Dreiser's world. It remained a world of involvement in which there were things to do—the International Labor Defense Organization needed support, the American Writers' League needed a president, etc.

Matthiessen, grown to intellectual maturity in the "proletarian thirties", was no less captivated by the image of the involved intellectual. He had little trouble, in these early years, to identify with the Soviet Union as "a social experiment . . . a liberal movement promising to achieve a better world." These words of Dreiser, quite similar to those uttered by John Dewey in *Characters and Events*, gave concrete direction to Matthiessen's sense of practice. This is not to say that in literary criticism he fell victim to the blandishments of