

“All the trumpets sounded for him on the other side”

—PILGRIM’S PROGRESS

The Pilgrim

O. P. Kretzmann

What Goes On Here?

May, 1971

A few days ago I wrote in another place: The beginning of subversion is the corruption of words... Please note especially the nouns in that sentence: “subversion” and “corruption”... “Subversion” implies a complete overturning of things as they are, a revolution... “Corruption” reflects an inner rotting which may not be visible at all on the surface of life...

“A-ha,” I said in the tones of Sherlock Holmes at the end of a breathless chase, “this is what my son and his contemporaries have been doing to me these many months and years”... They have changed the meaning of words so that they are no longer simple, primary, and completely honest... Their meanings are now different from something I had thought to be true... In fact, they may come to mean exactly, or tangentially, the opposite of what they meant for Samuel Johnson or even John Milton... Now words are meant to confuse rather than to clarify...

A startling example of this careless misuse of words is the shoddy way in which the word “innocence” is used by my son’s generation... It seems to be their happy way, a heavensent way, of describing ignorance, stupidity, a limited horizon... Now, I know that the word “innocent” has been properly used in this meaning, but usually in a pastoral verse or a satiric description of Shakespeare’s Audrey in *As You Like It*... This is innocence and my son seems to know it... That it is, however, *not* an accurate description of the curious, shoddy optimism of an entire generation concerning the terror and horror of war must appear brutally evident... Lieutenant Galley cannot be explained away by the word “innocent”... This is a bad use of words...

It will be noted that my approval of my son’s program for a more relevant academic world in his February column was confined to that section of his proposals which were, I suppose, “innocent” in his use of the term... “Induce ecstasy”... “Have an epiphany or two”... “Play with the bureaucracy”... “Live 40-hour days”... “Laugh in class”... There is here an “innocence” almost equivalent to the ridiculous... And here, I maintain, we

THE CRESSET

come close to the conclusion of the matter...

We differ, his generation and mine, in our choices of the things we would call innocent... But their choices betray an overtone of contempt which I would want to eliminate from our life and thought... Briefly, we fail to understand each other because we relate only on the middle things... We do not hear the same tone in the highest things — the greatest triumphs of the human mind and heart...

“An epiphany or two” — here his heroes and mine must part company... Here we go different ways... What I consider the ultimate greatness, the calm defiance of momentary reality which he so jauntily proclaims at the end of his April column, is not to me “innocent” in the sense in which his prophets of the left understand it.... To me it is the highest wisdom, the most profound understanding of the ambiguities of life...

Perhaps this is what we have been discussing all this time under the rubric of “Education”.... Its ultimate purpose is the creation of a saintly innocence with none of the negative overtones which my son seems to hear on dark and lonely nights... This innocence is “saintly” because it implies a greater awareness of the lasting significance of the monosyllables whose meaning must come through loud and clear in any understanding of education... God, man, life, hope, faith, death...

In these monosyllables lies the truth of our life, and to know that truth boldly and honestly is finally education.... That this truth brings us to the paradoxes against which my son rebels (and dismisses as evidence of our lingering innocences) is evident... These paradoxes are the inevitable result of the differing logics of differing worlds... Domergue once said: “It is the theology of the renunciation of the world which has brought man’s mastery of the world”... It is the theology that taught the love of God which has saved love toward all men...

So, son, here we are... At the end of a long discussion we are still in the infantry of Arnold’s “ignorant armies” still clashing by night — a night which has grown darker in the one hundred years since Arnold saw his vision on the cliffs of Dover... Perhaps my basic misgiving about your generation is the haunting feeling that you deserve better, that you ought to see some early light in the surrounding gloom.... I hope that it will come to you and that it will not be late... Because to be late in our apocalyptic time, when innocence is not enough, is to be too late for the real divine

THE CRESSET

innocence by which we must live...

This divine innocence!... When you were very small, I would occasionally stop at your bed for the vesper prayer... Want to try it again?...

