

Joseph Warren Bishop, Jr.

R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr.†

Envy not the life of the professor, he who when at the vestibule of his career is possessed of amusing colleagues, abundant libraries, a regimen vouchsafed for living the good life, that is to say: contemplating the virtues, acquiring knowledge, inflicting oneself upon impressionable youth. For two illuminating decades or more I have lived within shouting distance of a major college campus, and I have seen the *corpus delicti*: a growing number of enthusiastic professors aging rapidly into melancholy husks bored by learning, outwitted by youth, and bewildered by the passage of time. But then there are the rarities: the professor who lives for ideas to the very end! Each fall he enters the classroom with high hopes for his students and the expectation that at year's end he and his charges will depart wiser and better prepared for grasping life, preferably by the neck.

Such a rarity was Joseph W. Bishop, Jr., whose writings I read with relish in *Commentary* and with pride when I finally landed him in my own magazine. It is an unhappy spectacle to witness the campus sage of yesterday, once full of brag and bounce, decay into an embittered philistine or a rancorous radical. Joe was not a party to this process, though he had seen it corrode others and he was painfully familiar with the anti-intellectualism that in recent decades had crept into some sectors of university life.

Joe was a splendid gentleman, unfailingly devoted to reason, to freedom, and to the civilized values. He relished ideas and the defense of principle. Teaching and the university were central to him. He had departed the world of public affairs and high salaries for the ivy halls, and in his talks of university life one could perceive the sympathy he had for it, sympathy characteristic of the academic who really loves the university and knows its priceless value. Yet teaching was not sufficient to exhaust his intellectual energies. He also wrote, and he did so with the gusto and elegance that only the best critics of ideas possess.

From his essays and reviews it is apparent that *au fond* Joe was a critic of ideas. The species is so rare that it now passes through the world unnoticed, like a black-footed ferret disporting unobserved among the

† Syndicated columnist, editor of THE AMERICAN SPECTATOR, and author of THE LIBERAL CRACK-UP.

prairie dogs. Some probably viewed Joe's writing as the work of a polemicist or a publicist, but to read it over again is to see that it is not polemics but rather ideas and principles that absorbed him, and always engaged a critical mind. This should come as no surprise, for he particularly admired another American devoted to the same remorseless enterprise, H.L. Mencken. In fact, Joe has been compared with Mencken and properly so. Both were civilized individualists.

Like Mencken's, Joe's thought was relentlessly analytical, attentive to evidence, and governed by reason. His correspondence was often peppered with such pejorative references as "kooks," "wimps," and "crazies;" but the tone was usually playful and good natured. None of his targets was ever in danger of suffering violence or cruelty beyond the lash of his prose. Moreover, though he loved ideas, their rarified vapors never made him solemn, self-righteous, or contemptuous. Pedantry was not in him. In fact pedantry amused him as much as it amused Pope and Swift and as with them he derided it. This perplexed egghead poseurs, leaving them unsure as to precisely how intelligent Joe might be. Last winter just before his fatal heart attack he requested that I send him more bad books for review: "I always find it much more fun to review bad books than good ones." I sent him *The Blood of Abraham*, by former President Jimmy Carter. Joe would have had a ball, and our grateful subscribers might have made me editor-in-chief for life.

Joe had a sure sense of the absurd and the superficial. His sentences were fluent, his timing perfect. When he was ready to expose a fraud or a feeble idea he did so in a short burst of bracing prose, and the judgment seemed irrefutable. He relished the music of our language. Last February he wrote me of his only visit with Mencken.

I traveled up to Baltimore and had lunch and a blissful afternoon with the great man. For once, I listened more than I talked. I remember his describing the suit worn by a visiting Englishman on a broiling hot day in Baltimore as 'made out of a material like collision matting.' This was a throw-away line, since I have never encountered it in any of his writings.

He and Mencken, of course, were basically liberals of the pristine sort, unscathed by radicalism or frenzy. Joe was no ideologue. He thought things out free of the lures to power or to conform. I have always been fetched by this kind of writer. His dignity is genuine, the idealism reasonable, the thought stimulating, albeit occasionally dangerous. I once asked him to essay the life and doings of the late Senator McCarthy. Joe turned in a withering assault on the man. *The American Spectator* is not the kind of magazine whose readers all see such assaults as sources of grace,

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and the outcry was fierce and horrifying. Joe, naturally, stuck to his guns, his rebuttals to the critics being, if possible, even more fierce and horrifying than those of his critics.

“I dislike the corruption of the word ‘liberal,’” Joe pronounced in his last review for us, “which my 1929 Webster defines as ‘broadminded; not bigoted’ and also as ‘not bound by established forms in political or religious philosophy; independent in opinion,’ . . . but . . . my resistance seems hopeless.” The review was exemplary Bishop. Here he was reviewing a somewhat shoddy book about “liberals” suffering through the dark of the “conservative” 1950s. With precision he defined his terms, with wit he scorned ultraism and sham on both sides. The piece was learned and amusing. Joseph Bishop enjoyed his work to the very end. We should all be so lucky.