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The Gilbert M. Simmons Library

Through the ninth grade, I used the Washington Junior High Library. It was not in the school building itself but was one of several portables on the school grounds. The noun *portable*, like the thing itself, is no longer extant, except in the memory of the very old, so for the illumination of the not-so-old I must conjure it into being. A portable was a small wooden building about the size of a one-room school. It was probably never portable but only provisional, a cheap and temporary annex to a structure with pretensions—especially pretensions to permanence. Washington and Bain schools, for examples, those solid blocks of masonry, lorded it over a cluster of attendant portables.

Perhaps these were a Depression-era makeshift, but they outlasted the Depression. In 1946, when the University of Wisconsin Extension burgeoned with ex-GI's, classes were held in the portables flanking Deming school. Each was heated by a coal-fired pot-belly stove, noisily stoked by the janitor during the class period. The rattling of the grates and the shoveling of ashes carried a burden of meaning, whether intended or fortuitous. For though the teachers held out to us the arcana of literature or medieval history, we as students were local and parochial. Almost without exception, we came from families which had never sent anyone to college. We were there by way of a historical fluke: the GI Bill and the diffuse prosperity of the time. The intrusions of the janitor—a man of our own ilk—reminded us that ivy-covered brick was not our appointed destiny.

This digression of mine, adducing the disparity between liberal education and the lower social orders, is worth pursuing, especially because the disparity is only apparent. I once met a literature scholar from Nigeria who spoke to me of a similar, though vastly more egregious, disjunction in his own education. There he was, a poor barefoot black boy in a jungle town—but bright and bookish, so he was selected to attend the elite local school, where white teachers especially imported from England taught exactly the curriculum they would

have taught in London or Manchester. The school was so integrated into the English system that final exams were sent to England to be graded. At school he studied English literature and European history, and at day's end he went home, keeping a sharp eye for poisonous snakes and even more lethal thugs. At home, a dirt-floor thatched hut, he spoke the local dialect with a family that could not imagine what occurred at school. "And what," he asked me, "was the poetry of Chaucer, a 14th century Englishman, supposed to do for me?" And after a pause, he answered his own question: "Just what it did for the English schoolboy: it opened up the world."

Yes, exactly and obviously, though this use of learning is virtually extinct in the halls of higher learning.

But let me return to the Washington library. For me, just becoming drawn to books, it was just right. It was small, intimate and altogether apart from both classroom discipline and the distractions of my peers. The library had that kind of intimacy fostered by those librarians—or at least one in particular, Miss Jensen, who took me in her care and in effect directed my reading. She was a tall, thin, blonde, whispery woman, and surely in some inchoate way I was in love with her. Young beauties force our love, and that's a rape; this doth but counsel, yet you cannot escape. She counseled me toward social history and historical novels. She discouraged detective or crime fiction, which ever since I have despised. Rafael Sabatini she thought would do me good, so I read everything available. Also Booth Tarkington and Edward Eggleston, the Hoosier schoolboy storyteller. And also Walter Scott, which was a struggle, possibly because the language was still remote, distant, like a foreign language, decipherable but without emotive force. Yet in *Ivanhoe* and *The Black Arrow* were adventures in Romanceland that called out to me.

And then there was social history. Miss Jensen may have regarded the past from a leftist or socialist perspective—not unlikely for someone brought up in a union town during the Depression. So she counseled me to read about the Industrial Revolution, about the age of canals, about the railroads, about the Tennessee Valley Authority. (Decades later, reading of the arrogance of a TVA grown secure and powerful, I felt betrayed. It was supposed to be a model of public enterprise serving public needs.) I read about the violence and injustice

essential to so-called Progress. The violence of local strikes, especially the organizational strike at Nash Motors in 1936, had impressed itself on my soul; now I learned that this was but a minor incident in a larger war. I read about the Pinkertons and about the Homestead strike, broken by the armies of Carnegie and Frick. (Decades later, visiting friends in Pittsburgh, we toured the Frick Gallery, a small, exquisite collection housed in a small rich building, a gift of Frick's daughter. But the name Frick still froze my heart, and I could smell the blood of workers on those paintings.)

Still guided by Miss Jensen, I steeped myself in accounts of the settlement of the Northwest Territories. (Decades later, reading Conrad Richter's novels about the settlement of Ohio, I said to myself, "I've already read even more juvenile celebrations of Manifest Destiny.") And I made acquaintance with what today is called environmental ethics. I read accounts of the fur trade and of market hunting, presented as sacrileges against Nature. I can still see those photographs of rail cars heaped with ducks for the Chicago market. Nonetheless, I purposed to become a fur trapper, looking forward to a whole winter alone in the Canadian north. (Now, six decades later, I know what most environmentalists never learn, that our care for Earth is either spiritual or is nothing but prudent exploitation.)

In other words, my reading was a curious mixture of the dismal (as in the apt term *dismal science*) and the romantic. I learned that the past is a

tale of woe—and the locus of exotic adventure. Mirror and magic lantern.

Or so Memory, that oft suborned witness, now testifies.

When I went to High School, the portable, both as architecture and as metaphor, faded from consciousness. Now the architecture was all solid, monumental, self-important, and resolutely pseudo-Classical. The High School, right downtown, was in alliance with the courthouse, the natural history museum, and the post office, each building forming one side of Civic Center Park. Each building was a block of gray, concrete slabs—“cast stone,” in the lingo of pretension. With the exception of the post office, each affected columns, replete with Corinthian or Dorian or Ionic capital, together with at least the suggestion of entablature. The museum and the courthouse were approached by *flights*—how apt the word!—of steps that seemed like prolegomena soaring toward the hieratic mystifications within. And why not, being temples of a civic religion?

To be sure, the architecture was quite formulaic, quite without imagination. Like so many churches and capitols, so many banks and even private houses, our civic buildings honor the past by making copies. No, not copies but suggestive sketches in cast stone. Sometimes these sketches are extravagant and grand—the state capitol in Madison, for example, or any number of pseudo-Gothic churches. Usually, however, these buildings are scaled down and cost conscious evocations of the glories of the past. So too the Kenosha buildings. Mendicant classical, yes, but exactly what meaning do they beg from their models? The usual answer is power. Hence the word *Fascist* has attached itself to *pseudo-Classical*. Altogether plausible. (After the war I saw a sequence of pictures of an Allied soldier climbing up the facade of Berlin’s Brandenburg Gate and setting a dynamite charge on the swastika there, blasting it neatly off the monument. But he missed the point: it is the architecture itself that speaks of power—even now, for the monument still stands, speaking the same message it spoke in Bismarck’s time.)

But I think that Civic Center Park and its four flanking buildings speak more of graciousness and quiet civic virtue than of power. Yes, there is power on the north, the courthouse and its attendant jail in the back. But

there is the school to the south and the museum to the west—learning and the wonders of the natural world. And to the east, that most benign and serviceable agency of government, the post office. As for the park itself, it has no playground, no patriotic statues, no band stand, and no speakers' platform. Just trees (including a bur oak that must be 300, maybe 400, years old) and benches. This park speaks of nothing but quiet contemplation.

But let me turn to the little jewel of pseudo-Classicism, the Gilbert M. Simmons Library. It is not part of the ensemble of civic buildings but—still downtown—stands at the center of its own park, a manicured forest maintained for one sole purpose: to be looked at. When I was a familiar of that little woodland—our town's Sacred Grove—great elms made a dense, dank shade. Now, of course, the elms are gone and the oaks, maples, and ashes are trying to close up the canopy.

The building itself is small and rigorously symmetrical. Or, better, it is complete; it would be impossible to add to it without destroying its integrity, its wholeness. Jazz, skyscrapers, comic strips, and the grid pattern of city streets are sometimes instanced as defining American forms because they are never complete, always in process. Just add stories (to skyscrapers or comic strips) or streets or melodic variations, and the process might go on forever. Growth itself is our national religion, our Infinite and our Eternal, as though entropy and the laws of thermodynamics were merely social constructs. This library, then, is not quite in the American spirit, and therefore I am surprised that it has not been expanded, upwards or sideways, as though to thumb its nose at the principle of "Enough!"

One enters at the center, up the mandatory stairs, between the prescribed columns (all in the sternly ordained "cast stone") and into a shallow vestibule with one narrow wing to the right and ditto to the left. No more gray concrete: this is all in cream-colored marble (at once cold and, I always thought, sweating, clammy). Its real opulence, however, lies in its uselessness; though not particularly beautiful, it yet suggests the self-sufficiency of beauty. The building was built at the turn of the century, a memorial to the dead scion of the Simmons bed factory. Only some twenty years later was the vestibule made "useful." It was inscribed with the names of Kenosha veterans of the Great War—a

modest compromise with the claims of utility.

Through another set of great doors and one comes into the rotunda. But now we're in the library proper, where the building and its function come together, or perhaps in conflict. The rotunda might also be an end in itself or an object of contemplation, like the park or the vestibule, but in fact it is a busy place, librarians checking books in and out, readers using the card catalog. This is not the place for dawdling or contemplation, for gaping at the mosaics of the dome above. But to the left—the entire east wing—is the reading room, a serious place, quiet except for an audible hush, the subliminal hum of people thinking. The decor itself suggested, maybe even induced, a rejection of the world in favor of the image of that world in books. The tables were ponderous, immovable. (They looked more massive than they were; the tops seemed to be four inches thick but only the visible edges were so thick.) The dark oak sucked up the available light, hence only the white paper on the tables reflected light and compelled attention. As for the light itself, it entered from on high. The reading room was two stories high, and way up there, just below the ceiling, were the windows, admitting light but denying a view of the outside. The most direct connection with the outside was by way of the white paper. (This separation of outside from inside was already implicit in the exterior, which revealed nothing of its function. It might be a bank or an insurance office or a mausoleum.)

More than decor, the human furnishings defined the place. Always

present was a coterie of men, the natives of the place. To me they looked old and a bit unkempt. Their breathing was audible, their mumbling inaudible, no doubt their private conversation with the texts before them. Weird. I have never visited the reading room of the British Museum but I have seen pictures of its cavernous interior and I have a mental picture of its most famous habitue sitting there day after day, groaning from the boils on his buttocks, while inside that great hairy head a whole world was being concocted. I imagine that the men in the Simmons library, each at his own level, were doing what Karl Marx was doing. And—still in my imagination—each was enjoying that peculiar intensity associated with the making of a verbal simulacrum of the world.

I used the “main library” (as it was called) throughout high school, “researching” school projects and of course attending to my own reading. I used the reading room occasionally, especially for its wonderful maps, rolled up like window shades: one drew the shades to open a window on the world. But mainly, I haunted the book stacks, the entire west wing. (Without Miss Jensen, I was perforce learning to browse.) The west wing was all utilitarian, architecture notwithstanding. I do not remember whether there was any cream-colored marble to match the floor and wainscoting in the reading room, and it would hardly matter anyway, for the entire wing, floor to ceiling, was all metal shelves on metal mesh floors that rang dully under one’s shoes: industrial furnishings in the pseudo-Classical shell.

In my first two years of college—at the local “extensions” of the University of Wisconsin—I used the library for writing. Did I do no writing in high school? I must have done so, but I have no memory of it. And though I read prodigiously, I never asked of a text, “How is it put together? And how might I imitate its structure and style?” In other words, It was mindless reading, useful but not fully conscious, its lessons absorbed without my knowledge. In college I became a writer, which is to say that the things I read I treated as models, perhaps good models, perhaps cautionary examples—and I had to decide which. And I began writing in the light of my reading. In other words, I joined the company of Karl Marx and the local geezers in the reading room.

It's hard to imagine what Mr Zalmon Simmons, founder of the Simmons bed factory, had in mind when he endowed the library. Of course he wanted to erect a monument to his dead son Gilbert. But why a library? Why not a Great Pyramid? Or a Colosus of Rhodes? Or an Ozymandias statue ["look on my works, ye mighty, and despair"]? Better yet, why not a line of luxury beds which would carry the son's name into boudoirs the world over? The same might be asked of Carnegie and Mellon and Rockefeller and all the other warlords of industry: Why make books freely available to everyone—even to workers, for chrissake!—together with buildings and grounds of some intrinsic aesthetic interest?

Here were men who consecrated their lives to money and power, or rather, to the acquisition of money and power. Unless their reputations cruelly malign them, none of them devoted any intellectual energy toward an inquiry into the proper uses of power. The entire conversation of mankind is preoccupied with such vital questions as "What is justice?" and "How should I live my life?" The outside and the inside, the public and the private: all politics hangs from the first question and all consciousness from the second. The conversation of mankind fills the libraries these men endowed, but none of it mattered to them. Their intelligence was altogether instrumental, the means to achieve ends they never examined—making them living proofs of Hume's famous dictum: "Reason is the slave of the passions." And their attitude toward their fellow humans was similarly instrumental, humans figuring as resources on a par with land and capital. They would have been nonplussed at the suggestion that the most important product of a factory is the worker, that a fulfilled and virtuous worker is the measure of industrial quality. Yet they equipped libraries with the luminous works of John Ruskin and William Morris and Patrick Geddes and Lewis Mumford, among many others, who proposed exactly that inspiring standard of quality.

Evidently, these thugs recommended for others what they themselves disdained. But who are the "others" they had in mind? Their workers? The instruments of Simmons' self-aggrandizement worked twelve-hour days for \$1.75. (In 1912, my father was one of those workers. They went on strike and won \$1.90, though

still no concessions to their humanity.) Surely the libraries were not endowed to serve the likes of Great Karl. And yet—and here's the heart of the matter—a public library is indifferent to money and power. I do not mean, of course, that scholars and artists are indifferent to money. To be sure, for every Karl Marx there are legions of scholars hard at work demonstrating the supernal rightness of exploiters and predators. Yes, of course, the universities and think tanks, all endowed and owned by big money, are servants of the ruling class. And yes, the geezers in the reading room were probably learning nothing more revolutionary than how to refinish old furniture. And yet, after all such disclaimers, it remains that humane learning and the arts presume to transcend money and power, presume to offer satisfactions—like understanding, insight, exaltation of the spirit—unsympathetic to money and power.

And so the conundrum at the heart of philanthropy still nags. Quite apart from Mr Zalmon Simmons' intentions, with all its contradictions, it is the deep meaning of his gift that teases my curiosity. The contradictions, so obvious, appall but do not explain. Simmons et al were single-minded exemplars of individualism. Selfishness, personal aggrandizement—or, in the bloodless euphemism of classical economics, "utility maximization"—was their jealous god. The common good had no part in the design of their lives—except, at the end, to endow libraries and concert halls. These men exploited, brutalized, and even murdered their workers; and they bent to

their will the political system. Al Capone's soup kitchens were not more absurd.

The old Greeks, I think, were not so confused. They owned slaves and justified the practice. However, they did not regard slaves as inferior beings but as Fortune's derelicts. These were enslaved in order that others might be free, and for the Greeks such freedom was itself a stern and dangerous vocation: a man must be as noble in action, as high-minded in sentiment, and as discerning in judgment as art and philosophy could teach. With some reason we associate classical Athens with lived philosophy.

When John Calhoun defended slavery with essentially the same argument, he finessed the cruel injustice that the Greeks frankly confronted. Calhoun argued that Providence had created a race ideally suited to perform the dehumanizing labors that make possible (for others, of course) the full flowering of human potential. Clearly, blacks would not know what to do with noble sentiments or with apprehension like a god's. Hence they could be justly regarded as capital goods.

Calhoun's view, I think, is mainstream dogma. Of course, institutional slavery now finds no defenders but the general view is that an unseen hand—Providence or Nature—assigns people to their proper destinies. People deserve their condition, and that condition, whatever it is, conduces to the health of the human species. Even before Darwin—but already instructed by Adam Smith and David Ricardo—Herbert Spencer explained, with theological overtones, this happy view of de facto slavery:

The poverty of the incapable, the distresses that come upon the imprudent, the starvation of the idle, and those shoulderings aside of the weak by the strong, which leave so many "in shallows and in miseries," are the decrees of a large, far-seeing benevolence.

But Calhoun (if not Spencer) still envisioned a free man as a refined being, one shaped and inspired by the best in the conversation of mankind. The southern gentleman, supported by slaves, was ideally a man of honor and intellectual discrimination: the image of Robert E. Lee carrying a copy of Marcus Aurelius'

Meditations is probably historically accurate and certainly instructive.

And here, I think, is a clue to the meaning of modern philanthropy. No use asking why Zalmon Simmons didn't build a Great Pyramid or an Ozymandias statue, for that is exactly what he did build. In his view, we might reasonably infer, literature and philosophy and art and music are nothing but high-falutin consumer goods. Learning is not—as it was for the old Greeks—honor's compass, with all the danger and self-sacrifice that honor demands. It is an entertainment, a social grace, a solitary pleasure, a status symbol, hence a weapon of class warfare. There is no danger in a library, neither for the user nor the philanthropist who paid for it. If this is true—and it may be true for me, for Miss Jensen, and even for you, dear reader—then it is a terrible and depressing truth.

To open a book secure in the knowledge that it doesn't matter, that one's life will not be affected, that the self will emerge unscathed—that is a form of deprivation. Rilke, in his most famous poem, "An Archaic Torso of Apollo," maintained that the encounter with beauty is fearful. "There is no mineral grain of [beauty] but weighs its witness: 'You must change your life.'" Mr Zalmon Simmons would recognize this as literary hype. Indeed, this realist, were he endowed with a fair portion of wit, might have inscribed on his library: "LOOK ON MY GIFT ... AND DESPAIR."