

Not Even a Damn?

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Bruce I. Petrie

"My dear, I don't give a damn."

"Surely, Quirkley, you remember that phrase, one of the immortal expressions in modern American literature. So emphatic. So confident. So final. So American. Of course, it's no match for 'We don't give a button; we don't give a fig', but, after all, those phrases were coined by an Englishman and thus it's not a fair comparison. I'm sorry it twiddles you so, Quirkley, but for this subject only, I'm adopting the American classic. I just don't give a damn."

"Oh come, Fidley, you must give at least a damn. After all, giving a damn isn't conceding much. That phrase didn't even bother Scarlett. She was certain that after returning to Tara she could figure out how to win Rhett back. After all, 'tomorrow is another day.' As to *that* phrase, she didn't know, of course, being American, that she was quoting Cervantes. To choose 'not giving a damn' may be emphatic, but it was just a diversionary maneuver by Rhett. And Scarlett knew it even if Rhett didn't." With that, Quirkley relit his pipe, stirred the fire, settled back down, and, smiling to himself, prepared to counter whatever Fidley had to offer.

Fidley, hands in pockets, his gown drawn back, had been gazing across the greensward, past the Gothic grayness of the chapel, thinking how much Spring rains added to academia. They lent a certain haziness, a beckoning translucency that made one eager to see ahead to things one wouldn't bother about on a clear day. After all, wasn't that what academic learning was all about: searching for partly obscured answers?

He did enjoy jousting with Quirkley even if the subject had become shopworn, especially since today's particular mystery, after 400 years, had generated plenty of new evidence that, in turn, generated renewed scholarly comment, essays, investigation and, inevitably, disputation. He actually had used, "I don't give a damn," mostly to pull Quirkley's chain. Being a slang expression it had the extra value of rankling Quirkley further.

"But, my good Quirkley, don't you see that pure ideas and expression, without the corrupting effect of the reader's bias about the author, is what you're after; that otherwise the idea will escape you in a welter of speculation about what the author meant, what his own bias was. You run the risk of the Humpty Dumpty effect - the words mean what the user wants them to mean, no more and no less. Well, that just won't do, especially when the expressions you are examining are exemplary, perhaps even sublime. A great thought has its own personality, it has integrity apart from the thinker. And if the thought is mundane, all the more reason not to care either a damn or a fig as to who voiced it.

"You can see, despite that awful pipe of yours, that I am gazing in the direction of the chapel. Its classic lines are obscured by the rain. If I were an architectural buff I would care about the identity of the architect. But the structure's magnificent beauty is nonetheless apparent. I can see it despite the mist. Without the mist, I could tell whether it was the creation of Christopher Wren or Inigo Jones. But, who cares? It is a paean to God. The sensitive mind understands that quickly, without interrupting his bliss with

troubling mental disputation about whether the flying buttresses were characteristic of Wren or Jones."

Fidley retrieved his hands from his pockets, his gown slid back to its authoritative majesty and he picked up his teacup and sat down, not troubling even to glance at Quirkley.

Quirkley was ready and quickly pounced, "Ah, my good friend, I'm afraid you've torpedoed yourself. You conditioned that otherwise thoughtful illustration on your not being an architectural buff. But you *are* a professor of English literature, a teacher of some very promising young human beings for whose understanding of your field you are heavily responsible. Upon your erudition rests their very future as human beings. You are obliged to give them all the information that you are able to command about English literature and those divine creatures who conceived it. It is not enough to tell your students what you *accept*, you must tell them also what you *don't accept* and good reasons *why* you don't accept it. To deprive them of a fair chance to disagree with you, to hide behind that "*damn*" that you so glibly refuse to give, is to violate your duty as a teacher, your solemn oath as a Don of this great university.

"Spare me that unctuous nonsense, Quirkley. If I were to spend the time it would take to debate every conundrum that could be discerned in the vast material that I must cover to meet even minimum requirements, I couldn't finish a third of it. At least 35 plays and 154 sonnets are attributed to the mystery man himself, and that's only one author. There are, after all, a few others who deserve mention."

"To be consistent, Fidley, you must *not* mean that *they* deserve mention. After all, what possible difference could it make to even notice their identity. That Chaucer's *works* need to be mentioned, I agree. But let's just give Chaucer himself a number, the same for Bums and Dickens.

Of what possible importance is it that Dickens spent a miserable youth in the same manner as the young David Copperfield; that his father went to debtor's prison a la Mr. Micawber? Bums' greatness came from his insistence on using the rural Scots dialect which, as a farmer's son, he knew, rather than switching to fine English as Sir Walter Scott recommended. Of course, it is so insignificant even to deserve notice that the upstart Kagan, I think it's Donald Kagan or something like that, who's written a new account of the Peloponnesian War, tendentious to say the least, is known to be so conservative as to be enamored of Ronald Reagan and Otto von Bismarck. Is that bias of no account in considering the many differences between Thucydides' account and Kagan's account? I suppose the mere fact that the composer of the world's greatest symphonies was deaf is of no account in evaluating the music.

"You don't seem to realize, Fidley, that we're not speaking of some minor figure of only passing importance like Marlborough or Lord Nelson. We are speaking of the greatest of all Englishmen, greater than Isaac Newton, greater than Charles Darwin, greater than Geoffrey Chaucer. We are speaking of a man whom Harold Bloom, the respected literary critic, albeit American, has characterized as none less than the *inventor of humans*, the creator of human personality. "And surely, Fidley, to rely on a phrase from a popular American novel to support your own indifference to the greatest Englishman of all time is adding insult to injury. I must admit that the geography we

booted away to the Americans was a significant part of the empire we lost, but, thanks to the very Englishman you denigrate, we had a substitute empire in reserve. Thanks to that same Englishman the second British empire is one of such splendor that it has spread much further than the first and, I venture, will finally become universal - except for the French, of course."

"I am not denigrating anyone, Quirkley. I quite readily admit that the author, whoever he was, demonstrated the highest form of genius. And I take some pride that the language he so embellished is becoming the lingua franca of the world. It is, indeed, a form of empire with the power and potential far beyond what we ever accomplished with our navy and the likes of our East India Company. But I can enjoy the plays and sonnets without knowing for certain who wrote them - even if it was not an Englishman."

"That the author was not an Englishman, Fidley, is not an issue; nor is the ability to *enjoy* the plays and sonnets an issue. But, without knowing something about the author you cannot fully *understand* them. I'm not talking about admiration or scorn. I'm talking about understanding. Upon whom would you rely to fully understand the monarchy, the rich, powerful and famous; one who moves in those circles? Or one who has virtually no association with them?

"Let me try this on you, Fidley:

*'Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea,
But sad mortality o'ersways their power,
How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,
Whose action is no stronger than a flower?
O, how shall summer's honey breath hold out
Against the wrackful siege of batt'ring days,
When rocks impregnable are not so stout,
Nor gates of steel so strong, but Time decays?
O fearful meditation: Where, alack,
Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest lie hid?
Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back,
Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?
O none, unless this miracle have might,
That in black ink my love may still shine bright.'*

"Yes, of course," said Fidley, "it's Sonnet 65, but I..."

"And" Quirkley broke in, "a prominent professor at Columbia, Kristin Linklater, says that applying the facts of Oxford's life to those words helps lead to truth. She also asserts that in order to properly act in Shakespeare's plays, a professional actor must know as much as possible about the personal, professional, psychological, political and philosophical attributes of the author and his social environment."

"You do see, Quirkley, do you not, that you are relying once again on an American academician - that is at least as hypocritical as my reliance on an American novelist."

"Touché, Fidley, but Bloom's scholarship is rather more impressive than Margaret Mitchell's. Let us assume for the moment that Bloom has not overstated by very much that Shakespeare invented humans in that he defined personality; that his characters did not merely unfold, that is, merely reveal what everyone already knew about human nature, but that they actually developed new personality traits as the plot continued. If that is Shakespeare's putative accomplishment surely it is one so great that no *thinking* person can ignore his identity.

"To say otherwise is to ignore the vast differences in humanity, or to assert that differences don't exist, that the plaudits passed out with such fanfare and attention are simply puffing and have no substance. That notion would strike at the very existence and purpose of this and every other university. We are built on the idea that some humans can reach higher than others and that when they do they are entitled to special awards, not only for themselves but to inspire others to stretch further. That's the whole idea behind giving credit where credit is due."

Fidley, who had reached for a rather nasty pipe of his own, allowed quietly, "I take your point, Quirkley. You do recall that Chaucer is entitled to credit for that insight about credit?"

"I do, Fidley, 'To dear-bought wisdom give the credit due/ And think for once a woman tells you true.'"

Fidley had returned to the window and was again gazing across the greensward, "I say, old chap, the rain has stopped. Shall we pop over and get a bite? I dare say the Stratford man and the Oxford man will still be around tomorrow - along with the other pretenders. Perhaps overnight someone will come up with the smoking gun. If that happens, you'll be satisfied and I will be relieved."

Quirkley, who was fumbling in his vest pocket in the hopes of refilling his pipe, mumbled, "Oh, all right, Fidley, I'll take your retreat as close to a capitulation, which will help me digest my lunch." Rather liking that bit of repartee, Quirkley lurched out of his chair, "A good idea for a change, Fidley, I'm in the mood for a bowl of soup."

Black as locomotives against the bright green lawn and soft gray buildings polished by the rain, the two ambled toward the dining hall, puffs of smoke from the well-stoked pipes marking their trail.

Fidley broke the silence, "I say, Quirkley, do you mind if we re-visit a subject I raised with you four or five weeks ago - rather awkward, but important. I have word from the University Press people that they're going to publish my book. I do think it's rather good, nothing else quite like it. I've even coined a few words in the process. I'm hoping to reach a market rather broader than academia, not a best seller list certainly, but the attention of serious lay readers - the sort who would be impressed, frankly, with an endorsement from a scholar of your standing. In short, a jacket blurb from you would be of immense value. You know me as well or better than anyone else and if I'm not being too bold, too immodest, I think some biographical information about my accomplishments . . . well, it would let the market know the book has some real substance behind it."

Not wanting to appear reticent to honor his friend's request, Quirkley fumbled with his pipe for a moment, "Why yes, Fidelity, I agree that some comments about your personal achievements would help. Of course, of course, I'd be honored you can't expect such a book to sell itself - prospective buyers will want to know something about the author."

- Read by Ethan B. Stanley

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