

THE POINT OF IT

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That small word IT was recently used by Joseph Roach, our famous theater historian, as the title of his new book, referring to that indefinable something we usually call charisma. I use IT here to indicate not a striking personality but objects or tasks that exceptionally command our respect or our loyalty. One looks for IT as a justification for paying attention, either for a short or for the long term, a lifetime; IT denotes something that is worth one's while. IT is impossible to define, but you know it when you find it. And the nature of IT, of course, will vary according to who is looking, and at what stage of her life she is looking. The word serendipity has often been invoked in previous ITs, but my story will largely replace serendipity or chance with a strong kind of logic. One thing leads to another for a reason.

I was born in the wrong country, Britain. In November 1957 I boarded a transatlantic liner bound for Canada. In those days, you remember, we still crossed the Pond on its surface. That move was the beginning of a trajectory in which chance had very little chance. I was in charge. The sea journey is, of course, a classic rite of passage, and this was certainly true for me, twenty years old and setting off alone to recast my life. I remember best sailing up the St. Lawrence and seeing a landscape utterly different from the farmland of my home country. The narrow strip fields coming down to the river were the first occasion for my thinking about different patterns of inheritance, perhaps my first serious thought. I was the product of an expensive private school education, which had taught me nothing well other than Latin. I almost failed Geography, which asked us to color the colonies in pink, and never mentioned the partition of India. I was completely ignorant of world affairs. I was not stupid, but had been very protected. I had no such grim challenges or ordeals as did Geoffrey Hartman, Jeffrey Sammons, Walter Cahn, and Benjamin Harshav, nor childhood poverty as risen above by David Apter or Joseph LaPalombara. The War only affected me in that my father served in Africa and Italy, terrible campaigns about which he never spoke a single word, except to say that that was the best time of his life. In other words, I was fortunate without knowing it. Yet I was desolate – because lacking any sense of purpose, and surrounded by persons who still thought the purpose of young women was to multiply but not to go forth.

So here I was setting out to emigrate to Canada, alone, in the belief that I could escape from a class-bound society and terminal boredom by simply changing countries. I was idealistic in an empty-headed way. I really wanted to go to America, which I believed to be the country of equality. Silly me. But I had been persuaded by my parents that Canada would be more suitable, dear. I had no college education, for reasons which I might have mentioned last time, but had been trained in a secretarial school, and spent some time in a Dickensian office in Baring Brothers, the great old

merchant bank which subsequently went bankrupt at the hands of a renegade trader. With a letter of introduction from Barings in my purse I was quickly inserted into a modest job in a Toronto financial institution, and proceeded once more to become bored to death. I had not yet, evidently, changed my life at all.

Within six months I had another plan. I would go the University of Toronto for the higher education I had missed out on. By the end of the next year I had saved enough for one year's fees, with some help from the university bursar's office. I entered the English Department in the fall of 1958, and all of a sudden realized that this experience was what I was born for. I had found the first stage of IT. IT was learning new stuff—actually old stuff, some very old— from people who were serious about its value. I think it is *almost* true that from that time I was never bored again. One of my teachers was Norman Endicott, my future father-in-law, and I was impressed by the way his hands shook as he started his lectures. That revealed intensity. His passion was Sir Thomas Browne. I studied Milton with the great old scholar, A.S.P. Woodhouse, who acted out in a slithery voice how the serpent seduced Eve. I never missed a class and I took great notes. Another of my teachers, an Americanist, was reported to have said about me, “She makes one think it matters,” perhaps the greatest compliment I ever received. I shall restate that with the appropriate emphasis: She makes one think IT matters.”

I graduated first in my class, though tied with the formidable Margaret Atwood, who became a famous Canadian novelist. We also shared the honor of the Governor General's Gold Medal, but since I elected not to attend graduation mine had to be mailed to me. For years, until I tried to sell it, I thought it was real gold. I had been awarded a Commonwealth Scholarship to do graduate work in England, so here came another ocean liner, another rite of passage, followed by another professional epiphany. I had come to study the poetry of Sir Thomas Wyatt, the second great English poet, Chaucer being the first, and I had encountered him primarily as a love poet, author of the famous and haunting “They flee from me.” But then I entered the Rare Book Room of the old British Museum, and opened the holograph manuscript of his poetry; that is, a collection of his poems in his own hand. Wyatt was a courtier in the time of Henry VIII, and was nearly executed as a suspected lover of Ann Boleyn, the second wife, the Protestant queen. The astonishing closeness of Wyatt to me via this old, intensely real, palpable record of his thought sent me into a kind of ecstasy. I wanted to *know* more about Wyatt's possible affair with the queen, about his marriage, his diplomatic experience, and especially about what being in prison for suspected treason was like, how pliant was the law of treason to the whim of the reigning monarch. This experience has shaped all my subsequent work and thinking about the nature of literature and literary study. I had decided already, unconsciously, that literature means little unless you can place it in its time, its historical circumstances, and the life of its author. Without that information, you are just toying with the words on the page, and often trying to squeeze more juice out of very old oranges.

Thus I was already set athwart the mainstream of academic dogma, which in the early 1960's was still in the thrall of what we still refer to, ironically, as the New Criticism. I had discovered, or rediscovered, Historicism. New Criticism – of which, by the way, Deconstruction was a perverse offspring – declared that none of the things that most interested me – historical evidence, signs of authorial intention, the actual *voice* of a poet, the politics of life – were admissible in literary study. Instead, one was supposed to look for Irony and Unity – those two pale daughters of Aestheticism – and where they were not present to dismiss the work as not poetry, not valuable. History was not even allowed to do the laundry, and Politics was outside the Pale. The powerful influence of T.S. Eliot was still everywhere, and college teachers embraced the New Criticism not only as ideology but as a pedagogic short cut; one did not have to go to the library to prepare a class.

At the end of my two years in London (though few days were actually spent in the library, since for half of that time and for four days of every week, I had a colicky baby on my hands) I possessed an MA on Sir Thomas Wyatt and a job offer from Victoria College in the University of Toronto, to which I had simply sent one brief letter of inquiry. Those were the days. Victoria College was experimenting by hiring some young woman teachers. Amazingly, I was given the task of teaching “Spenser and Milton”, a year-long course that belonged to the mythic Northrop Frye, mythic in more senses than one, and then on leave. When I mentioned to him, seeking advice, that this was my assignment, Frye was incredulous, simply not believing that this famous course could have been temporarily handed to a girl sprout. This was not very encouraging. I managed to get through the year, but only by flying by the seat of my pants, which women in that era were not supposed to wear.

Those were the days of entrenched academic male chauvinism, so entrenched that it had not yet been recognized as a phenomenon. Betty Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique*, was published in 1963, the very year I began teaching. We new women faculty were not allowed to eat in the college dining hall, but had to lunch in one of the female student residences. Not until the college also hired a bunch of young men was that taboo set aside, during which revolt one of my elderly male colleagues was heard to say: “Do I have to have lunch cheek by jowl with some quivering female?” There were some amusing discussions as to whom the jowl belonged, and to whom the cheek. Meanwhile I wrote my PhD dissertation, on the rhetorical concept of Decorum, while frequently flouting decorum in my behavior.

This was a glorious time. Canada in the sixties had none of the political furor of its southern neighbor, but it was loosening up. It was then and there that I met Lee Patterson, one of those new young men, an American citizen, and the tallest man I had ever seen. Soon we became a scandal. Later we became husband and wife and a team, especially during election periods, for we were both engaged on behalf of the New Democratic Party, the third party founded by Tommy Douglas as a merger between the Left and the labor unions. When we began living together it was at the

height of a construction boom in Toronto, and apartment towers were thrusting up everywhere, largely without regulation. From our townhouse at the foot of one of those towers, fully inhabited but with a foot of water in the garage and none in the swimming pool, we built the first tenants' association of the city, which eventually grew into the Ontario Tenants' Association, which successfully persuaded the provincial government to alter the laws so as to give some protection against landlords. Although my previous husband had reversed my inherited conservatism by talking Marxist theory, it was the rent strike that made me truly a socialist.

In 1971, in order to give Lee more space at Victoria College, I offered myself to York University, a brand new university recently constructed in a bleak northern suburb of Toronto. They took me in as an associate professor of English. And here comes one of the few bits of serendipity in this story, which has hitherto had the strict logic of character. I had to design a graduate course for myself to teach. Since Spenser and Milton were both owned by entrenched faculty, I decided to learn something new, and worked up a course on Andrew Marvell. This was the poet of whom T.S. Eliot had declared that only three or four of his poems were of any value. To my delight, I discovered that, in addition to those three or four well known poems, Marvell had written a bunch of trenchant satires of the Restoration Court and the policies of Charles II, a bunch of letters to his parliamentary constituents in Hull, and five amazing satiric, urgent pamphlets, which had never been given a modern edition. The most influential of these was entitled *An Account of the Growth of Popery and Arbitrary Government*. Thus I learned that the "field" that New Criticism defined for us was much too small. Literary study was not all about poetry, and best of all, there was a lot more work to be done. We didn't have to keep arguing about the same all-too-well known poems. To understand the *Growth of Popery and Arbitrary Government* one had to learn about the Second and Third Dutch Wars, the king's long financial duel with his parliament, the struggles between left, right and middle on the religious spectrum, and the heavy restraints on the press.

The book on Marvell and his whole career that grew out of my course drew me to the attention of American academics; more importantly, it led eventually and logically to what I regard as my most useful work, the Yale edition of the *Prose Works of Andrew Marvell*, for which I assembled a great team of co-editors, two English, one Canadian, and one American (me). It also led eventually and logically to the book that I wrote when I first retired, under the generous auspices of a Mellon Emeritus Fellowship. *The Long Parliament of Charles II* rewrote the history of parliament after the return of the Stuarts to the throne of England, the same parliament in which Marvell had served as MP for Hull for nearly twenty years. I say rewrote, because that parliament had been previously described by historians of a royalist cast of thought, who deplored the stubborn parliamentarians who resisted the king's endless demands for more money, given what he spent it on. I took the side of the House of Commons. This task taught me to do archival research. MPs wrote diaries and letters which could

be accessed in the original manuscripts in the British Library. I found this seemingly tedious business exciting, because once again I had the real past, the IT, in my hands.

But I am getting ahead of myself. Chronologically, I am still at York University, surrounded by snow covered fields, blizzard blinded roads, and people from Australia. And my beloved husband is getting restless at the University of Toronto, which all must acknowledge was a much better place to be than York. In 1977 Lee got an invitation to be a visiting professor at Johns Hopkins University – I guess their medievalist was on leave – an invitation hedged by emphatic remarks to the effect that it would never lead to anything permanent! Of course it did, such was his charm, and in order to support his move back to the U.S. I was asked to apply to the University of Maryland in College Park. They too accepted me, warmly or at least gamely. This meant another emigration – the one I had intended all along. I still thought I was going to the country of equality and Common Sense in the sense of Thomas Payne. I had not yet learned the bad truths about America’s intervention in Viet Nam or its other anti-communist antics. But I was enough of a socialist to be shattered by the Reagan presidency and the birth of trickle-down theory.

So here I am now, at the University of Maryland, College Park. I moved as a Full Professor, and when I attended my first meeting of that rank I was the only woman in the room. They promptly asked me to make the coffee – until the youngest and most alert offered to do it. But I had a truly lovely time at Maryland. I loved the students; I loved the climate (despite the way an hour’s commute became two hours and a half in winter); I liked the proximity to Washington, which allowed me to work in the Folger Library; and when the female Provost, Shirley Strum Kenny, who loathed me, reluctantly made me Chairman for three years, I loved that too. Because the job was a little distracting from my then premier project, a history of the reception of Virgil’s *Eclogues* in Europe, I put Virgil on hold and quickly put together a much less scholarly book, *Censorship and Interpretation*. The argument was that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries “literature” often served as a privileged medium by which critiques of the government could be published, the ready-made defense being that it was “only” literature. This task generated in me a life-long sensitivity to modern censorship in other countries. Salman Rushdie’s first line of defense in the storm caused by *The Satanic Verses* was that the book was “only” a novel. Ironically, *Censorship and Interpretation*, written or compiled in about six months as a stopgap, remains the book for which I am primarily known.

You will have noticed by now that though I was caustic about the elevation of Irony as a literary value I keep referring to it as a fact of life. The irony of Lee Patterson’s move to Johns Hopkins was that, although the University of Maryland looked up the road to it in humility and envy, it was not a pleasant place to teach. Dominated by a vast hospital and medical school, it consisted of a small collection of small departments of humanities mostly staffed by famous or up-and-coming faculty, who mostly taught graduate courses, with a very small and depressed undergraduate population,

mostly taught by other people. Self-esteem was the ethos, advanced thought the endeavor, elitism taken for granted. During the visiting year on which I had accompanied Lee to Hopkins, I was asked, as a trailing spouse, to teach a couple of courses way outside my competence (e.g. the Romantic poets), and housed in a back corridor along with some assistant professors who had no hope of tenure. Never mind. I ended up writing articles on Keats and Wordsworth which made their way into the literature, the former being a challenge to my now dear friend Geoffrey Hartman's reading of Keats's "Ode to Autumn." In 1979 I was a Full Professor at Maryland, and any temporary humiliation was forgotten.

At Maryland I also published *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice*, a challenge to the orthodox view that Shakespeare despised the lower classes of his society, a belief which was akin to the conviction of some extremely weird people that the real man called William Shakespeare, given his lower-class standing and modest formal education, could never have written those plays. Somebody else must have done it, the most frequently promoted candidates being Sir Francis Bacon and Edward de Vere, the 17th earl of Oxford. My book did not challenge that long-lived lunacy, but simply showed how often Shakespeare writes his commoners into sympathetic positions. This book was rather popular with young teachers, and bits of it were frequently reprinted. I now don't believe a word of it.

Still no serendipity, but instead inevitability. By the mid 1980's Lee Patterson was growing uncomfortable at Johns Hopkins. Conveniently our good friend Stanley Fish had moved to Duke University, to take on the role of rebuilding the English Department, as Fredric Jameson was constructing the Literature Department. The unusual Provost, Phillip Griffiths, a world-class mathematician but whom I remember most by his blue blue eyes, had fastened on a brilliant strategy of growing the humanities at a fraction of the cost of growing the sciences. So Duke became a topic in the media. This was the era of megamobility among the small group of academics who had registered as stars in the empyrean. Another way of putting this is that people deemed a catch (like Stanley Fish) could be lured by big salary increases to change their locations, from which they would quickly move to still other munificent locations. Lee and I were drawn by Stanley to Duke, and for quite a few years were engaged and liberated by its air of free enterprise. Unfortunately not all new ideas and their proponents were compatible. I entered the world of Theory as sponsored by Jameson's Marxist department, but I couldn't bring myself to accept the imperial designs of the new Queer studies people, such as the late Eve Sedgwick. I still doubt the value of making one's sexual predilection a field of study, and I certainly disapproved of Sedgwick's showing the undergraduates movies which featured fist fucking.

At Duke I absorbed a little more Marxism to the extent of an unfinished article on E.P. Thompson in his duel with Althusser; but the mode didn't really suit me. Instead, I went back in chronological time and, with the grace of a year-long Mellon fellowship at the National Humanities Institute, wrote a seemingly old-fashioned

book called *Reading Holinshed's Chronicles*. *Holinshed's Chronicles*, as they are usually referred to, are a bulky history of England, Scotland and Ireland from virtually the beginning of time to the end of the sixteenth century. I say seemingly old-fashioned, for once again I was taking on an orthodoxy. The *Chronicles* were disrespected by modern historians of history-writing – historiography, that is – and scorned as an undigested mass of material with no clear sense of direction, no structure, no *grand recit*. *Au contraire*, I stressed the immense value of Holinshed's materials, which were indeed a composite of all sorts of things, but not a hodge podge. They had a leaning, one that I liked. One example of a well-judged inclusion was the complete transcript of a trial for treason under Mary I, the trial of Sir Nicholas Throckmorton, who, unbelievably, was exonerated by the jury, who were promptly thrown in prison. Had it not been for Holinshed's capacious ideas of history, his generous habits of collection, and quite possibly his own liberal sentiments, we would never have known of this trial, and I would never have been able to reprint it in a small paperback edition for pedagogic purposes. Think back to Sir Thomas Wyatt and you can see a slim red thread linking that moment and this. Writing this book required me to get up to speed on not only the legal climate of the Tudor period, but also the gyrations of religion under Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary (the Catholic queen), and Elizabeth the Protestant. Religious difference was the primary form that politics took in the sixteenth century.

This book came out in 1994 and it won a prize from a historians' organization, which totally made my day. Such acceptance allowed me, who increasingly had ambitions to become a proper historian, or at least to forge a better bond between historical and literary methods, to quietly sever myself from the little poetry enthusiast who had entered the British Library in 1963. Or at least grow out of her. Meanwhile our discomforts at Duke had magnified. The moment of "let a hundred flowers bloom", the mission of Phillip Griffiths, had passed, and Phillip went back to Mathematics and the Princeton Institute of Advanced Study. Stanley Fish himself moved on, leaving his fish pond decidedly ruffled. He subsequently found that the Duke experiment had as many critics in the outside world as it had admirers. Bigger and better jobs since then have eluded him.

But there was a bigger and better job available for my husband and myself. When Lee and I received an invitation from Dick Brodhead to move from Duke to Yale, (another irony, he is now President at Duke), we didn't hesitate. We felt we were moving to a proper university, one where senior faculty could not bargain or bludgeon their way out of teaching undergraduates, where respect for the teaching mission could be relied upon, and there was, after all, a truly great library. And here I was able to carry out a new ambition, which was to write a history of liberalism, starting in the early modern period with Milton, Marvell, Algernon Sidney and John Locke, and ending, with John Adams, in America in the eighteenth century. *Early Modern Liberalism* came out from Cambridge in 1997, and actually made it into a later paperback. Once more I had found what I was meant to do. This was a very different definition

of IT than I could have grasped when I entered the University of Toronto at the age of twenty one. It was the closest I had yet come to writing something useful, related in spirit to the work in political philosophy of John Rawls, but less purely theoretical, more tied to the historical circumstances in which abstract ideals were conceived out of manifest injustice or actual oppression. In other words, I was dealing with ideas chronologically, causally connecting their rise to the lives of those who formulated them, and then connecting them forward in a sequence of influence. It was no coincidence that Locke wrote his *Two Treatises on Government* as a result of his work for the radical Whig nobleman, the earl of Shaftesbury, nor that Locke's *On Government*, which carefully theorized the right of rebellion in unbearable circumstances, became a mantra for the American revolutionists. *Early Modern Liberalism* was perhaps my favorite book, but it had absolutely no effect in the academy, sunk, leaving scarcely a ripple, by remarks by certain historians, that "liberalism" as a term could not be used until the nineteenth century. That kind of lexical positivism has always driven me crazy.

So now you find me at Yale, in 1994 and thereafter. These last almost twenty years now might be seen as the end of an intellectual trajectory, if not a slowing down, a flattening out. Halfway through I retired, though of course I didn't retire, I merely stopped receiving a paycheck. I was received into the Koerner Center, and promptly wrote three more books. My excuse for this obsessive productivity was that, since I had been given, or lent, a beautiful spacious office, I had to do something worthy of it. I kept on teaching, a little bit every year. My excuse for that was that I needed the money. Behind the idealist, evidently, lurked a grubby little realist. But I have also just finished offering a seminar to a group of alumni and alumnae, a seminar on Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which was more of a social service than a source of income.

This all sounds like a smooth and entirely voluntarist trajectory. Yet behind it lurks a dark and possibly, for me, final truth. About five years after I arrived at Yale, at the turn of the new century, I began to doubt the point of IT, of humanities programs here and elsewhere. It is all very well to open the minds of students to unworldly values when there are jobs available for them later. But in today's market, what is the real use of a Yale degree in English literature? And at \$50,000 a pop? This skepticism was accompanied by distaste for some of the practitioners, for the posturing and position-taking of people in literature departments for the last two decades. The arrival of stardom in the humanities poisoned the well. It created envy. It diminished the already diminished value of teaching in an academic career. Even to write an Intellectual Trajectory essay, for me, smacks of egoism and self-congratulation, though the others I have read are modest to a fault. Our lucky scientists and doctors, mathematicians and musicologists, are, I imagine, free of such doubts as to whether what they do is of any use to anybody.

At the end of Christopher Marlowe's tragedy, *Dr. Faustus*, the black magician cries aloud in terror as the fiends arrive to drag him down to hell, "I'll burn my books." To no avail. In the last act of Shakespeare's romance *The Tempest*, the white magician

Prospero, anticipating his own retirement, leaving the safe island for the real world of Milan, vows to drown his magic book[s]. When I began contemplating retirement, I gave away, mostly to graduate students, about half of my books, especially those consisting of literary criticism, as distinct from the primary texts. Two years ago, I gave away the rest, primary texts and all, including books of my own writing. I haven't missed them. Yet, and here is the final real world irony, I kept on writing. What an inconsistency, or even hypocrisy, is that? Will the new books serve the good spirits like Ariel, the spirits of rescue and repair? Will they keep the devils from the door? I gravely doubt it. But this is my version of fantasy baseball.

So that's my story. It is no way near as grand as that of David Apter, who created this series, and whose work is the perfect example of *applied or applicable*, *real-world knowledge*, that to which I increasingly aspired and shall always envy. The nearest I got to it, and I haven't mentioned it before, because it is still in the hands of the Yale Press and I still have no contract, is my book on *The International Novel*, which is also the one case of extreme serendipity I have encountered. So I will end by talking about that. A colleague, Ian Shapiro, asked me to design a course for seniors in the International Studies major, hoping for something to balance the predominantly social scientific, economic and legal emphases of the program. He kept on asking. So I sketched out a plan for considering internationalism as a fact or a goal of modern life by way of reading novels – certainly a novel approach. The result was a course which was successful enough to survive for another year the restructuring and renaming of that major to reflect the now preferred term – Globalization. And when Ian pushed his plea, he added, with a bit of a smirk, that I might get a nice little book out of it. I did.

The book is a modest introduction, via the practice of novel reading, to two of the knottiest ideas of our time: nationalism and internationalism. As of course you know, since the end of the nineteenth century world leaders and the people they organize have struggled to define what a nation is, where boundaries should be drawn and redrawn, what are the rights and wrongs of territorialism, why peoples should not be displaced and why they sometimes should be, or at least have been. The stories of these struggles cannot be intelligently understood unless one is better informed about both history and geography – and geopolitics – than are many young people in the United States today. At least, this was true of the seniors in International Studies who took my course; and if true of them, just think of the others.

So it happened that institutional duty opened up for me a wide, wide world of which for far too long I had taken no serious cognizance. I became acquainted with countries some of which I had never previously located on a map, such as Bosnia and Somalia. By chance, again, the novels I found were technically extremely diverse, making it possible to show students, some of whom had never *studied* fiction before, how novels can engage us where social scientific discourse or statistics may not. This humanization of the long and often terrible tale of the evolution of nations and then nation states out of old empires, made the dark parts darker but somehow more bear-

able. That the story of each country was completely different taught us the pointlessness of generalization. Both the course and the book began with E.M. Forster's *Passage to India*, another classic rite of passage, written shortly before Indian Independence, and it ended with Khaled Hosseini's chronicle of modern Afghanistan, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, published in 2007. This novel follows Afghanistan from the departure of the Soviets to the American invasion, and it is a terrible indictment of American foreign policy, which there, as always, has been entirely self-interested.

As I look back on my intellectual trajectory now, at least for this exercise, I remember with shame my childish idealism about America and compare it with where we are now. Instead of challenging the restrictively pale sisters, Irony and Unity, one must now face the giant brothers, Ignorance and Rapacity. Evidence about the runaway growth of inequality in America is constantly presented in the *New York Times*. What then is, or has been, the point of IT? To my undergraduates I have often said, if I could do IT all over again, if I had known then what I know now, I would have been a doctor.