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Confessions of a Lazy Idle Little Schemer

ROBERT SCHOLES

We want no lazy idle loafers here, lazy idle little schemers.

—James Joyce

AN OCCASION like this one seems to invite the recipient to preen and pontificate, to muse modestly on how one became the great person one is, and to advise others to follow in one's humble footsteps. Oh, I know the award is meaningful; I feel honored to be grouped with my illustrious predecessors, including Francis March, the first English professor in America; and I am duly grateful to the ADE for adding my name to those of my betters. But—and it is a large but—I also know how fatefully well the words of Father Dolan from *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* apply to me, personally and specifically. Let me count the ways. *Lazy*, bone lazy, induced to work only by fear at first and mere momentum after that. Too *lazy* to make the effort of stopping. That's me. *Idle*—this might be mere rhetorical redundancy on Father Dolan's part, but I read it as referring to a person who was born lazy, and could not help that, but might have accomplished things if only he hadn't chosen, willed himself, to be idle as well. Yes, guilty as charged. *Little*—well not in terms of the too, too solid flesh, perhaps, but in terms of real and permanent achievement, all too little indeed. *Schemer*? It is perhaps my saving grace, though not universally admired. But there you have it. It is what I see every time I chance to catch my face in the mirror—and I have not shaved for forty years to avoid just such encounters with the unspeakable.

I propose, then, to tell you some things about my career in the English profession, in a confessional mode, which is possible now, at the end of a career, though never during the making of that career. As a profession in a highly competitive and commodified society, we encourage what I have called hypocriticism—intellectual bluff and bluster, self-promotion and one-upmanship. We almost require young people to engage in these practices in order to gain a foothold among us. I ask you to keep this in mind as I recount some episodes from an academic life of lazy idle little scheming.

My undergraduate transcript at Yale is in front of me as I begin this account. Grades were on the hundred point scale, with 80 indicating the lowest possible grade of B, and 70 the lowest conceivable C. My grades in English (we need not mention the Ds in astronomy, geology, and Spanish on this occasion) run as follows: 80, 80, 80, 70, 80, 75, 75, 70, 80, 75, 75, 75, 70, 70. You will note the pattern of gentle decline from mediocrity to worse. At the bottom of the transcript there is a place to indicate performance on the comprehensive examination given by the English department. Superior is crossed out, High Pass is crossed out, and Pass is checked. I felt lucky to have achieved that, which I needed to graduate. I bring this evidence forward because I think it represents the real me, the essential lazy idle little schemer around which the persona you are honoring today was fashioned. That “loafer,” as Father Dolan would so eloquently have put it, has stayed with me, has always threatened to mutiny and take control of the careering ship and steer it cheerfully onto the rocks. This being has also served, however: served to make me both aware and skeptical of the schemes of all the other lazy idle little loafers among whom I have spent my life—my colleagues and my students, many of whom I observed around me as I accepted this award.

With that undergraduate record, of course, I had to scheme my way into graduate school. To accomplish that, I cleverly joined the navy and lost my high-frequency hearing bombarding North Korea, so as to proclaim myself a combat veteran and be mercifully

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admitted to Cornell—and have the GI Bill pay for it, too. My last year in the navy, spent overhauling destroyers in the Philadelphia Navy Yard, had prepared me to actually enjoy graduate school in comparison and had driven me to a level of effort that allowed me to return to my loafing ways at Cornell and still work harder than most of the other lazy idle little schemers around me. Thank you, Uncle Sam, for that. Then I schemed my way out of graduate school, too.

For that trick, I pleaded a state of intellectual development inadequate to produce a new critical interpretation of anything and so was given the recently acquired papers of James Joyce to catalog. That humble task kept me two levels underground for a year, working on a dissertation that gave me a good start in the profession and made me employable by the demon bibliographer of the University of Virginia, Fredson Bowers. Bowers got his department to hire me as an instructor to teach four courses a semester and soon became my landlord, raising the rent when he had me promoted to assistant professor.

Driving me onward, and mitigating my natural laziness during all this, was the fact that I had somehow schemed myself into having a wife and two small children; my father had died shortly before he would have gone bankrupt; my wife's family had no money either; and there was a very bright younger daughter to put through college. I was scheming on a tightrope with no net under me and mine. Concentrates the mind wonderfully, as Dr. Johnson used to say.

At the University of Virginia, I had the good fortune to spend my first two years being thoroughly exploited, each semester teaching two sections of a composition course that I thought conceived on the wrong lines and two of a survey of English literature that lacked interest and coherence. So I spent those years arguing with my boss in freshman comp, Robert Kellogg, from whom I learned immensely, and dreaming up better schemes for the sophomore literature course. Then an event happened that required me to put my schemes into action.

I applied for a job at Kenyon College, since I thought then, as I do now, that teaching in a good college is the most honest and rewarding way of life for an idle English teacher. Kenyon was interested and invited me to the campus, which led to the following comedy of errors. I took the train from Charlottesville to Gambier, Ohio, and with me I took some new anti-histamine pills, which were supposed to help me combat the allergies raging around and in me at that

season. Reading the label carelessly (lazy even there!), I saw that it said something about sleep and assumed that these pills might help me combat the sleepiness that seemed to accompany my reaction to the dusts and pollens so richly pullulating around me. The sleeper I got, the more pills I took, paying no attention to any admonitions about limiting consumption of these things to one every so many hours. I took one whenever I felt sleepy, which, of course, began to be a constant condition for me. Every time my hosts left me alone in a sitting position, I fell asleep—and sometimes, I fear, when they had not left me. But I loved the place, loved the way they knew who their students were and talked about them with real concern. I also knew, as I snoozed my way back to Virginia, that I must have come off as the laziest guy in town—a truth, of course, but not one that I wished to be so obvious under the circumstances. When I sent them my expense report—my first expense account!—being as poor as I was innocent, I put everything on it, including the half dollar I had spent playing a pinball machine in a station between trains. How innocent can a lazy idle little schemer be? Well, in this case, very. When the Guggenheim Foundation asked for a photograph to be submitted with the application I dutifully filled out, after my wily landlord had nominated me, I submitted one that showed me throwing a football. Did I get that Guggenheim? Well, no. That picture might have been better for a Rhodes scholarship, but you need grades for those. But back to the Kenyon adventure.

On my return from Gambier, I began to get letters from my advisers at Cornell, one of whom noted that, since I looked as if I was going to be “what they call a producer,” I should probably stay in a university to get the benefit of being this sort of critter. How does a lazy idle loafer become a producer? I became one because I was scared to death of turning into a large pumpkin with some little pumpkins to feed, and so began to crank out articles on anything I knew enough about to address plausibly. And because of some very good teachers at Cornell—W. R. Keast, William Sale, Arthur Mizener, Francis Minecka, M. H. Abrams, and R. S. Crane, then retired from Chicago—I knew enough about quite a few things. With respect to the Kenyon job, however, I also knew that it was very unlikely that Kenyon would wish to employ a person they had dragged around their lovely little campus like the Mad Hatter dragging the Dormouse around the tea table in *Alice in Wonderland*. At that point Virginia offered to make me an assistant professor if I would

withdraw from consideration at Kenyon, which I did with great magnanimity (scheming, scheming, scheming), cheerfully accepting a course reduction to a three-course load, with a further reduction for directing the sophomore literature course as well.

Directing that course was one of the best things that happened in my academic life. It led me to think seriously about the whole enterprise and to work with my colleagues to devise new courses that would be fun to teach and attractive to students. One of these new courses, which I worked out with Bob Kellogg, was a year-long course on the history of narrative from Homer to Joyce. A clever scheme that turned out to be an immense amount of work. Scheming, I have noticed, has a way of conflicting with idleness. In fact, the course was so much work that Kellogg and I couldn't get any other faculty members to teach it, confirming my feeling that they were, if anything, even lazier and idler than I, if not so scheming. But we learned a lot, Bob and I, and walked home from work together often, talking about the course and the understanding of narrative that we were gaining from teaching it. I also had wonderful students at Virginia: undergraduates like Henry Glassie, Henry Taylor, Malcolm Scully, and the Barney brothers—David and Stephen—and graduate students like Gerald Bruns. Even after forty years their names rise easily to the surface of this loafer's mind, and their images as well. From them, too, I learned much, as I did from William Faulkner, when he came to my honors seminar for a discussion of *Absalom, Absalom!*

Led, as ever, by my laziness, I schemed for a year off and got one, in the Humanities Institute at the University of Wisconsin, where I idly spent my mornings jotting down all those things Bob Kellogg and I had discussed and my lunch hours chatting with people vastly more learned than me, like Marshall Clagett, Germaine Brée, Stanley Rosen, and Alain Renoir. I idled my afternoons away, reading Proust, doing homework for the course in Greek that I was auditing—in the nick of time to check all the passages discussing Greek narrative in the narrative book (scheming, scheming, scheming)—and, when the good weather arrived, sailing on Lake Mendota. Then I sent the manuscript of the book to Kellogg, so that he could do the hard parts. I would have cheerfully stayed at Wisconsin, if anyone there had wanted me to, enjoying the beer and brownies served to young people by Helen White, but no one there shared my enthusiasm for this prospect.

With a good friend from graduate school, Carl Klaus, I then schemed to be interviewed at Iowa, where John Gerber was building a formidable English department. They offered me tenure (the thing all lazy idle little schemers dream of), and I cheerfully demanded that Virginia meet the offer. Well, my crafty landlord and department chair, Fredson Bowers, called my bluff, so I went, with some reluctance, to Iowa City, where I spent, by accident, as it were, six of the best years of my academic life and met two of the people who have already won this award, from whom I learned broadly and deeply about academic administration, about teaching, and even about life. These people were John Gerber, still the best and most humane leader of an English department I have ever seen, and Jix Lloyd-Jones, who devised a new course, English Semester, that enabled me to team teach with him and, at various times, with Carl Klaus, Miriam Gilbert, and Gayatri Spivak. Jix taught me the most precious thing—how to shut up in the classroom and let students work their way through the interesting questions—but I never learned to do it as well as he did it. Others taught me other things.

But these were the sixties and out in the world things were going on that forced me to question deeply the usefulness of what I was doing. After the shootings at Kent State, when the university closed down, our English Semester students of that year borrowed a church so as to put on—off campus—their planned performance of Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan*. I have seldom been as moved in a theater. What I learned from those students was that the gift we had to give them was not so much the history of English and American literature as literariness itself: the ability to use our language at the highest possible level, as writers, readers, speakers, and listeners, along with a conviction that literary texts spoke to our condition, in bad times as well as good. I then saw, for the first time, I believe, English teaching from kindergarten to graduate school as a seamless project. This has made a difference in my life. Some years later, this view was confirmed by my participation as an MLA representative in the English Coalition summer conference, in which teachers from all levels conferred and interacted for three weeks in isolation together up a creek in Maryland—survivors all—and reached a common understanding of our goals. One of those attending that retreat was Wayne Booth, the object of one of my first scheming critiques—a correction of his reading of Joyce's *Portrait*, as it happens—and, of course,

one of the people in this profession I have most admired and learned from.

At Iowa, I also learned some things from extraordinary graduate students: some things about film from Dudley Andrew, some things about feminism from Susan Gubar, and some things about science fiction from Eric Rabkin. Eric and I finally collaborated on a book about science fiction, for which he, of course, wrote the hard parts. During those Iowa years I was also invited to a conference in Urbino on the “semiotics of fiction,” by Tzvetan Todorov, who had actually read *The Nature of Narrative*. This sent me on a hasty attempt to find out what semiotics might be, which led me to discover I needed to know about something called structuralism, too. On my way to Urbino, via Paris, I picked up a book I thought would be helpful—*Critique et Vérité*, by Roland Barthes—the only book of his I could find at the time. As some of you may know, this is not exactly the most famous book by Barthes. In fact it was left untranslated until very recently.

Reading that book I felt as if I had walked into an argument that was none of my business and of which I understood almost nothing. So this is structuralism, I thought. The conference in Urbino was scary but a lot of fun, and I really liked Todorov, who has remained a friend to this day. I also learned that I had better find out about structuralism quickly. With that in mind, I looked for the book that would give me the information I needed. The book, alas, did not exist, so I ended up having to write the damn thing myself. No sooner had I done so, as it happened, than Jonathan Culler produced a better one. If only he had been a bit quicker off the mark, he could have saved this idle schemer a lot of trouble. Those were the palmy days when, if you just understood a little French, you could easily seem smarter than those around you—a situation that appealed greatly to me and a number of other little schemers.

Then, in 1968, Mark Spilka came to visit Iowa, muttering something about my joining him at Brown. Those were also the days when there were no efficient hearing aids to mitigate my deafness, and Mark has always been one of the worst mumblers in this profession. I wasn't sure what he was saying, but I nodded agreement, and the next thing I knew I was at Brown, missing my friends at Iowa, and mourning the wife who had put up with me and sustained me during all those early years of idle scheming. Ultimately, however, I found a new family and discovered that I had bumbled my way into a place that was just right for me,

being very much a college where teachers knew and cared about their students and yet a university that believed in giving lazy idlers time to scheme and dream.

At Brown, among other things, I schemed my way into an experiment in using a new computer system called hypertext to teach a course in poetry and was allowed two graduate assistants to do the heavy lifting. One of these, Jim Catano, quickly mastered the technical side of the experiment and then helped me get up to speed on digital matters—where I have more or less remained. The other, Nancy Comley, proved to be the best classroom teacher I had seen since Jix Lloyd-Jones. Our collaboration there and our common interest in good courses and good teaching led to a number of textbooks that are still keeping us busy and also to a book on Hemingway, for which Nancy, of course, wrote the hard parts. When we schemed up a thing called *Text Book*, however, that had some really hard parts, Nancy and I found someone else to write them: Greg Ulmer, who had been my first graduate student in comparative literature at Brown. Nancy, I can assure you, has a healthy dose of idle little schemer in her makeup, too.

I had many good teachers myself, including those I have already mentioned at Cornell, and earlier, at Yale, Professors Pottle, Sewell, Nangle, Noyes, Hilles, Mack, Welleck, and Kubler. I also learned a great deal from the high school teachers who worked with me on a project called Pacesetter English: Alice Kawazoe, Jenny Krugman, Ellen Greenblatt, Steve Green, and others. I have had too many good students—both graduate and undergraduate—at Brown for me to begin naming them. But I want to say, as clearly as I can, that my real pride and hope for the future of this profession lie not in anything that I have written but in those students, in what they have learned and how they will teach. If I have done anything to make me worthy of this honor, it is that I have triumphed over my own laziness and scheming often enough to help my students become the people that they are. I'm proud of them all, of course, those who have entered on other careers and other professions as well as those who have chosen the same path as this lazy idle little schemer. You will understand, I hope, if I close these remarks by speaking directly to them. I hope, dear friends, fellow loafers and schemers, that you find in this profession the joy and satisfaction that I have found in it and obtain the rewards from it that you so richly deserve. You have the torch—carry it on, carry it on.

â€” Lazy idle little loafer! cried the prefect of studies. Broke my glasses! An old schoolboy trick! Out with your hand this moment! Stephen closed his eyes and held out in the air his trembling hand with the palm upwards. He felt the prefect of studies touch it for a moment at the fingers to straighten it and then the swish of the sleeve of the soutane as the pandybat was lifted to strike. A hot burning stinging tingling blow like the loud crack of a broken stick made his trembling hand crumple together like a leaf in the fire: and at the sound and the pain scalding tears were driven into his e Myles Crawford began on the Independent. Funny the way those newspaper men veer about when they get wind of a new opening. Weather-cocks. Hot and cold in the same breath. Wouldnâ€™t know which to believe. One story good till you hear the next. Go for one another baldheaded in the papers and then all blows over. Hailfellow well met the next moment.â€” Lazy idle little schemer. â€”Foot and mouth disease! the editor cried in scornful invective. Great nationalist meeting in Borris-in-Ossory. All balls! Bulldosing the public! Give them something with a bite in it. Put us all into it, damn its soul. Lazy Idle Schemers. 83 likes. A 4 piece Rock band from Westmeath featuring Patrick Kelleghan on Lead vocals/ Guitar, Anthony Dowdall on Guitar, Shane...â€” alright folks, acoustic gig in the crossbar tomorrow night, fri 19th, with paddy k and JP, come on down!!! Lazy Idle Schemers. April 10, 2013 â€” Listen up Facebook people! we are playin saturday april 13th in Arthurs on thomas street(thats in Dublin!) the show will start around 8ish. So if youre feeling lucky COME ON DOWN!! Lazy Idle Schemers. November 6, 2012 â€” acoustic jam in danny's tomorrow night. Lazy Idle Schemers. October 15, 2012 â€” anybody up for a sing song in danny byrne's on wednesday night the 17th. Lazy Idle Schemers. September 25, 2012 â€” booom new songs are up and s