"Prospectus"

Recognition of Emeriti

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by

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I am still in wonderment that Professor Genovese, who has my fond respect and collegial affection, should have invited me to deliver this Prospectus. His invitation read in part as follows: "Dear Allan, I need a favor from one who's not afraid to speak about the eternal verities. Would you deliver the Prospectus . . . ." and so on.

Well! As for speaking on the eternal verities, I have hardly the maturity for that, being but a three year old FERP, i.e., one still under the custody of the Faculty Early Retirement Program--hardly old enough to leave his mother. Worse, during the last three years of my FERPing around, the eternal verities have so happily lengthened my leash that I now tend to read the acronym F-E-R-P, FERP, to mean Feeling Every Ruddy Possibility. So this Prospectus will smack more of the levity that was Greece than of the gravity that was Rome. Pray that, on hearing what is to come, that the one who invited it, our Classicist Professor Genovese--surely one of the noblest Romans of them all--will, as in the words of Twelfth Night, sit "Like Patience on a monument / Smiling at grief."

Since on pausing before the eternal verities it would be churlish to neglect a greeting to Roman gravity as well as to Judaeo-Christian piety, let us barely for a moment indulge a bit of philosophy--and what Greek would have

objected to this?

The eternal verities such as truth, goodness and beauty evoke the deepest wonder. We call them absolutes, by which we mean that they cannot be measured by the mind that infers them. Now, wonder shows two faces, each so far above common sense as the heavens are above the earth. One face is absolutely awe-struck, uttering the grave tones of piety, tragedy and romance. The other face is convulsed in laughter and burbles absolute nonsense--that rarest of arts--after the manner of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. This face of wonder breaks into the wildest Dionysian merriment at the comical attempts of common sense to make absolute sense out of the mystery of the world.

Common sense claims itself to be a just measure. But in this it is, itself, quite madly mistaken. Common sense is the one sense that has no distinction whatsoever, whether that distinction be of an unselfconscious ecstatic vision such as William Blake's or of the sublime nonsense of Edward Lear's The Owl and the Pussycat who went to sea in beautiful pea green boat. Common sense cannot handle either of those nor can it resonate with wonder.

As we retire, then, what is it in each of us that can wish all of us a wonderful time--a time full of wonder? It is a sentiment that arises from an eternal verity within, from a holiness that sees and laughs at how ultimately one cannot have the truth but only be it, that rejoices in G. K. Chesterton's defense of nonsense with his deliciously subversive remark: "Religion has for centuries been trying to make man exult in the 'wonders of creation' but it has forgotten that a thing cannot be completely wonderful so long as it remains sensible."

End of philosophy. Enter the clowns.

Now that we live in an age of acronyms--they have been exploding like

popcorn since the early forties--we should for the sake of nonsense be grateful to the Administration, or whatever higher powers there ~~that~~ be, that they unwittingly conferred upon us so mad an acronym as FERP. This snippety piff of a sound, FERP, is, itself, quite lunatic given the weight and length of its solemn content--Faculty Early Retirement Program. This fribble of a phoneme, FERP, has no more rhetorical thump than Tennyson gave the earliest pipe of half-awakened birds. How marvelously the higher powers are wrapped in common sense! Heads ever mushed into the bottom line will hardly hear the music of the spheres nor brood on how a word, a name has power to lift the soul or to depress it. Acronyms need not be so deprived of all phonic fitness. Take the military F-U-B-A-R, FUBAR which stands for Fouled Up Beyond All Recognition or F-U-B-B, FUBB, Fouled Up Beyond Belief; or the Congressional G-W-I-B-I-T, GWIBIT, coined in 1943 by Representative Karl E. Mundt, GWIBIT, Guild of Washington Incompetent Bureaucratic Idea Throatcutters.

Consider our own FERPOID FUBAR. The designation Faculty Early Retirement Program, does not make clear whether it is a program to get rid of us as early as possible--an indigestible FERP today, a final burp tomorrow--or whether as some of the higher powers are wont to babble from the bottom line, "FERPs are retired, yet not really retired."

Why not have called us FARDS instead? F-A-R-D, FARD, Faculty Actual Retirement Deferred; unlike FERP the sound of FARD is no ephemeral blip. Euphonically, FARD packs due weight, it lingers trochaically, nostalgically; FARD makes a slow and dignified retreat. It draws an appropriate sigh: Old FARDS never die, they just fade away.

Let us not underestimate the power of these things. Perhaps the relatively short reign of the Hippies can be traced to their want of a potent acronym for their program: Trust No one Over Thirty. Look at it, T-N-O-O-T,

TNOOT! It's about as potent as FERP. But watch out for the grimlipped Yuppies already in hysteria over the proliferation of Gray Panthers. What if they buzzed up with something ballistical and explosive like S-A-O-S, SAOS, Shoot Anyone Over Sixty?

How are we to understand the recent shortening of our own FERPISH life-span virtually by half? Is it an assault upon our gene-pool from hostile higher powers or from some congenital defect of our own? It is not easy to suspend the view that the assault is from the higher powers, but then I am of a shock troop mentality. So, in an effort toward collegial fairness, I researched the congenital defect hypothesis. It was rough go until I hit upon the S-W-A-G, SWAG methodology. SWAG is a respectable acronym listed in Paul Dickson's A Connoisseur's Collection of Old, New, Weird and Wonderful, Useful and Outlandish WORDS. SWAG stands for Scientific Wild-Assed Guess. Some of our greatest scientists claim to have succeeded with it.

This SWAG erupted on consulting Will Cuppy's A Short History of Man which begins with a romp through pre-history. I was startled by a suspicious analogy between FERP Man and Piltdown Man. What if FERP Man has begun a genetic backslide into the mists of the Primeval Dream? Note these comparisons. For instance, 1) FERPS are known to have little to do; 2) From their original and mature abstractions FERPS make cruder communications for the sake of toddlers within range; 3) FERPS wonder how their grasp has slipped its reach and 4) They are spared the uses of power and the corruptions of control.

Now hear Cuppy: "The Piltdown Man . . . or Barmy Ned . . . was a great help because he left crude flint instruments. These were used for making even cruder flint instruments. The Piltdown man had little to do. He had aspidistras, delphiniums and sinus trouble. The Piltdown Man was already

aiming at the stars and missing them. The manubrium indicates self-control but very little to control." There is more but I think you see what I mean. Still, I am not convinced and as a member of the Religious Studies Department it can hardly be thought strange that I continue to blame the higher powers.

Perhaps the way to take these things in stride is best seen in the attitude shown by a FERP of the advanced age of five years. As he waddled toward Personnel oblivious of my following him, his legendary elan, a spirit that neither slumbers nor sleeps, announced itself as he began to play games with Wordsworth by mumbling to himself:

And whilst in FERPISH thought I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
Comes floating toward my inward eye
The damsel of sweet FERPITUDE,
And then my heart with rapture fills
And joins the dancing daffodils.

When I caught up with him he asked,

"Do you know Edward Lear's The Jumblies?"

"Yes," I said, "love it!"

"You know," he went on, "if Lear had been one of us, he probably would have called the poem The Ferpies. Substitute about eight words and you've got it." It goes:

The Ferpies

They went to sea in a sieve, they did;
In a sieve they went to sea;
In spite of all their friends could say,

On a winter's morn, on a stormy day,
In a sieve they went to sea
And when the sieve turned round and round
And everyone cried "You'll be drowned!"
They called aloud, "Our sieve ain't big,
But we don't care a button; we don't care a fig--
In a sieve we'll go to sea!"
Far and few, far and few
Are the lands where the Ferpies live
Their heads are free and their hands are true
And they went to sea in a sieve.

The water it soon came in, it did;
The water it soon came in.
So, to keep them dry, they wrapped their feet
In a pinky paper all folded neat;
And they fastened it down with a pin.
And they passed the night in a crockery jar;
And each of them said, "How wise we are!
Though the sky be dark, and the voyage be long,
Yet we never can think we were rash or wrong,
While round in our sieve we spin."

They sailed to the Western Sea, they did--
To a land all covered with trees;
And they bought an owl, and a useful cart,
And a pound of rice, and a cranberry tart,
And a hive of silvery bees;

And they bought a pig, and some green jackdaws,
And a lovely monkey with lollipop paws,
And seventeen bags of edelweiss tea,
And forty bottles of ring-bo-ree,
And no end of Stilton cheese.

And in twenty years they all came back--
In twenty years or more;
And everyone said "How tall they've grown!
For they've been to the Social Security Zone
And the hills of the PERS wild shore."
And they drank their health, and gave them a feast
Of dumplings made of beautiful yeast;
And everyone said, "If we only live,
We, too, will go to sea in a sieve,
To the hills of the PERS wild shore."
Far and few, far and few,
Are the lands where the Ferpies live.
Their heads are free, and their hands are true;
And they went to sea in a sieve.

Not two hours had passed when I ran into another venerable FERP who shyly showed me the last few lines of his culminating work, A Ferpish Eschatology: The Faith of the Ferp in Final Things. He had modeled the whole thing on the manner of Longfellow's Hiawatha with its wistful trochaic meter and very last stanza, the only glimpse of it he let me take. It reads:

So departed all the Ferpies,

Each one some dear grind's beloved,

In the glamour of their sunset

Toward the purple mists of Ferpland

Toward a respite from the barking

Of school pups, peers and poohbahs

To the Kingdom of Ferplandia

And the laughter of Hereafter.