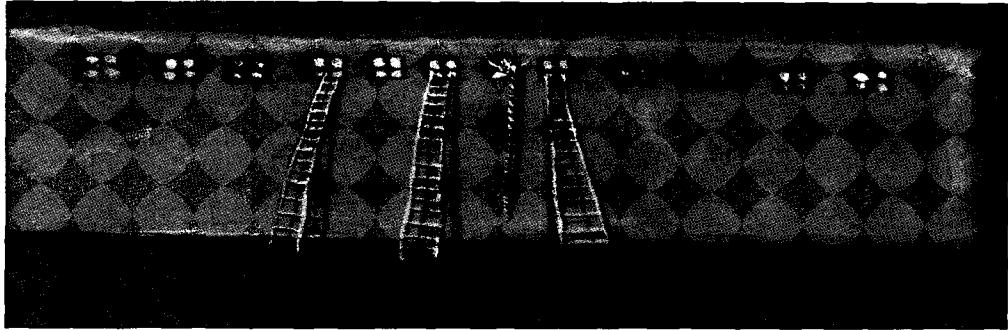


Parietals Then and Now

by Herb London



Anna Myreck-Wodnicki

As a Columbia University undergraduate in 1956, I resided in Hartley Hall, a stately building on the Morningside campus. During my orientation week I was introduced to my floor counselor who said in an unambiguous way that hijinks would not be permitted on his watch. He highlighted one rule which could never be disobeyed: women were not permitted in what was then an all-male dorm unless it was during designated hours on the weekend. When visitation was allowed, women had to sign in and a book had to keep one's dorm room door open. Closed doors were considered a violation of the dormitory department code and subject to penalty. Of course a few clever students used matchbooks as a door wedge, but they were the exception.

While there were those who balked at the rules and occasionally adolescent men were rowdy—I readily admit to infractions—there was not any doubt about the university's expectation. In fact, the freshmen student guide said Columbia is a place where the “whole man” is developed—including mind and character. In those days character development was taken seriously.

When I played on the basketball team, my coach, Lou Rossini, insisted that we wear ties and jackets when traveling to other schools. On one occasion when we played against the University of Maine and temperatures plummeted to minus ten degrees on the streets of Bangor, I wore a turtleneck and a blazer. Rossini, noticing my attire, said, “If you want to play at Columbia you'll follow a gentleman's code of conduct. I expect all players to wear shirts and ties even if the temperature is 50 below zero.” I got the message.

Columbia was not alone in assuming the role of *in loco parentis*. It was believed by administrators at the time that student department was an essential part of the university experience. Many students resented these regulations, choosing to exercise their freedom by renting apartments off-campus or joining fraternities and living in frat houses in the hope that the vigilance of student regulations could not easily be maintained.

At the University of Pennsylvania, the student handbook of 1961 noted that it is a “privilege being a University of Pennsylvania student” which “carries with it certain responsibilities.” When a student lives up to these responsibilities, “he brings credit not only to himself, his family and his friends but also to

his University. The converse is true when a student fails to meet these responsibilities.”

In every handbook I read during this period in the early 60's, before the maelstrom of student discontent, the concept of enforcement was predicated on self-discipline. Universities set down the regulations for responsible behavior and students were expected to meet them. An emphasis was placed on order, propriety, and decorum with specific censure of intoxication and bad manners.

Dorm regulations were universally applied. Specified visiting hours for “escorted women” were posted, and in most instances fraternity houses were obliged to adhere to similar rules. If women were visiting men off-campus, it was expected they would receive *permission from their parents*.

It is instructive that social regulations for men and women were written separately. Women were asked to reflect on the question of whether an individual act might adversely affect “the reputation of the university” and whether this act reflects poorly on all women students. It was customary for women's residences to have their own governing body. The large majority of cases in the early 60's dealt with the violation of drinking regulations and an occasional problem with curfews which were routinely 11:00 P.M. for first-semester freshmen (a word now in disuse) and midnight for other students. If there was no evidence of infractions, a curfew of 1:00 A.M. would be considered for the weekend.

Casual attire was prohibited in all academic buildings, laboratories, libraries, and administrative buildings. In one student document after another women were expected to be “ladylike” and men “gentlemanly.” Although rarely elaborated on, the intention was clear. Women were chaperoned at parties and men were expected to be well-mannered, especially in the presence of women.

In addition to academic violations such as cheating and plagiarism, which automatically resulted in expulsion, students culpable of flagrant violation of parietals would face suspension. On one matter the university in the 1960's was confident: it had an unequivocal standard of correct student behavior.

Sic fugit. From 1972 to 1992, I was a dean at New York University. During that period I not only observed an incremental but continual alteration in parietals at my home institution and at other institutions across the country. While there are several exceptions to my generalization, Grove City College

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comes to mind, in most instances the student code of conduct based on a standard of correct behavior surrendered to a standard of "correct" thinking.

For example, the Harvard *Handbook for Students* for 1996-97 states that all students are expected to "behave in a mature and responsible manner." But mature and responsible have less to do with behavior today and more to do with a way of thinking. Most of the section on "conduct" deals with complaints of discrimination, harassment of several kinds—sexual, racial, gay and lesbian—and resolving differences.

Clearly, unwanted sexual behavior in colleges and universities should be thwarted, but verbal suggestions in an environment in which hormones are coruscating through adolescent bodies are not easily deterred. Similarly, a mere charge of discrimination is often sufficient to initiate a hearing or complaint procedure whether or not the evidence justifies such investigation. Discrimination now exists in the eye of the beholder.

While I could not locate one student handbook of the early 60's that made specific reference to homosexuals, almost every contemporary student guide makes specific reference to this subgroup. The language invariably notes that principles of respect and toleration must be honored. Conspicuously absent from these declarations is respect or tolerance for orthodox religious groups which do not countenance homosexual behavior.

Several handbooks also assume that gay (the word "homosexual" rarely appears in these guidebooks) students have been subject to harassment by members of the student community even though evidence is not in print to substantiate this claim. Several student codes indicate that students must be *especially cognizant* of abuse leveled at lesbians and gays.

Implicit in these statements is a belief that students enter the university with crude sexual stereotypes, racial antipathy, and an aversion to homosexuals, and that it is incumbent on university officials to change these assumptions. It is not coincidental that at several elite colleges students are obliged to engage in an orientation session that deals primarily with student prejudice and ways to overcome it. After observing these sessions in which unwary students are obliged to admit harboring prejudicial feelings, several commentators have described this psychological intimidation as "reeducation." One colleague describes colleges engaged in this training as "the University of Peking in the United States."

Current orientation sessions involve another curious ideological entrapment. At such meetings 17-year-olds are often asked whether they are sexually confused. If they answer affirmatively, members of the Mattachine Society or the Gay and Lesbian Alliance are asked to counsel these students. The fact many 17-year-olds are confused about their sexuality is no reason to believe they are potential homosexuals. Yet legitimacy exists for gays and lesbians to engage in active recruitment, notwithstanding the general lack of any heterosexual counseling service on campus. It is also the case that since males can select their roommates, homosexuals may live together even though heterosexuals cannot. At some colleges recognition of this condition has led to separate dormitory floors being designated for homosexuals only.

For a typical first-year student inexperienced in the ways of the world, this orientation to university life is jarring. If the university maintains the status of *in loco parentis*, then it is substituting its own code of ideological adaptation for a traditional parental code most students imbibed from childhood. The

university says implicitly, and increasingly explicitly, that everything you have learned about right and wrong must be relearned using the university's ideological litmus test.

As one might suppose, confusion is often the result of this culture clash. Several years ago, a young man residing in a university dorm told me the following story. A young woman with a "crush" on him visited his dorm room late at night. She proceeded to beseech him for sexual favors in a most direct way. The young man, from a traditional home, was perplexed. If he allowed himself to be seduced, he would violate his religious convictions; if he rejected this woman's overtures, he feared being mocked by his peers. Torn between tradition and peer group pressure, he sought counsel.

A psychology professor told him to do what feels best, let your instinct be your guide. I said let your conscience be your guide, which in the present scheme of things is a retrograde point of view. In the end I do not know how this student resolved his dilemma, but I do know he was distraught over the incident.

For those students who assume religion is communal observance, there are many problems on campus. Theme dorms (a euphemism for ethnic or racial segregation) are countenanced on many campuses, but religious segregation is usually frowned on. The assumption is that religion is a matter of personal inclination, while racial and ethnic affiliation are performed communally.

It is obvious that the early 60's and the present are worlds apart. Rules based on civility and morality have retreated before an ideological steamroller. Students are now in the position of having their thoughts manipulated and any traditionalist stance ridiculed. A so-called code of conduct is actually a code of conformist thinking.

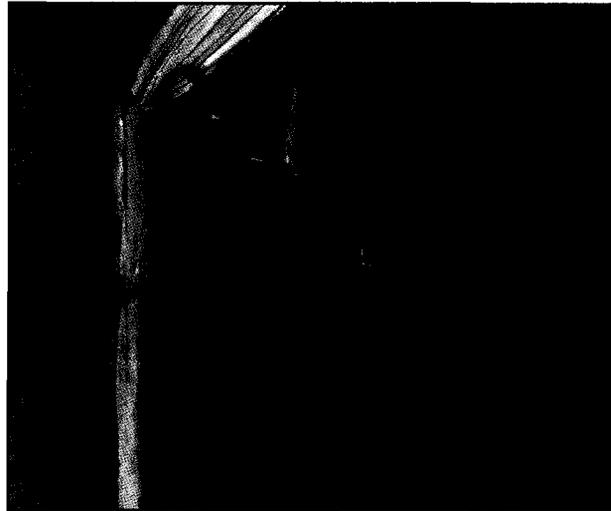
Admittedly, the era in the early 60's demanded conformity as well. But this was the conformity of deportment, a way for gentlemen and ladies to behave in polite and refined company. Of course even the mention of deportment has a quaint ring to it. Now students and faculty members address one another by their first names, use the "f" word routinely as an adjective for everything from tests to institutional food, and generally dress as if they are unmade beds.

Much has been lost in the last 25 years. Charles Eliot, the erstwhile president of Harvard, once said, "The reason there is so much intelligence at the university is freshmen bring so much in and as seniors take so little out." Unfortunately, what students bring in today is not what they take out. It is not merely the abandonment of deportment rules, albeit they are more important than contemporary students assume, but the brainwashing in relativism, multiculturalism, and the critique of religion and tradition.

The university is still a surrogate parent, but not one who worries about the emotional well-being of progeny. Rather the university is a self-designated revolutionary changing the rules that promote social order, while fostering confusion and undermining a moral sensibility. It was not easy adjusting to life in the academy several decades ago. Nevertheless, a student knew what was expected, was told how to behave, and recognized a standard of gentlemanly behavior. That world is now lost and, at least for me, lamented. In the interest of truth-in-advertising, most universities should say to incoming students, "Welcome to the brave new world where truth is relative, everything you've learned before must be forgotten, and sensitivity training awaits you." 

Good Manners, Good Literature

by Richard Wilbur



Anna Myeek-Wodecki

For this very welcome and unexpected award, I thank The Ingersoll Foundation and all concerned. When I was in high school, there were certain books that I carried around in order to impress people with my literariness. One was the *Collected Poems* of Hart Crane, whom I didn't altogether understand, but whose words made me dizzy. Another was a slender book of James Joyce's poems; the poems inside it were melodious, conventional, and easy to understand, but the book's cover gave other people the impression that I was reading an author both difficult and scandalous. A third book that I carried with me like a sword or attribute was T.S. Eliot's *Collected Poems* of 1935. The book was physically delectable; it was bound in blue, and its pages were crisp and creamy like hearts of lettuce; it was a kind of transcendental sandwich, and though I didn't understand all the poems in it, I did consume them. It seems to me that the books I used for purposes of ostentation were in fact well-chosen, for I was truly drawn to them, and when I was through showing off by their means, I went on to know them better and better. What I first loved in Eliot was his mastery of tone and of changes of tone, his power to marshal various voices, and his ability, in such a poem as "Sweeney Among the Nightingales," to take a form suggestive of light verse and be savagely serious in it. I still admire all those things, though for me Eliot has come to be above all the poet of that great poem of spiritual struggle, "Ash Wednesday." It is an especial honor to receive a prize which bears his name.

Because I am generally accounted a formalist poet, I should like to say something this afternoon about form and order and the making of order. The other day, a man I didn't know came up to me and said, "I saw your latest poem in the *New Yorker*. What a pleasure to read iambic pentameter again!" I thanked him, and was glad to have met a reader who, after several decades of free verse ascendancy, could still recognize a meter. At the same time I hoped that he did not, as some do, nostalgically confuse formal poetry with conservatism, law and order,

Richard Wilbur was the recipient of The Ingersoll Foundation's 1996 T.S. Eliot Award for Creative Writing, for which this was his acceptance speech.

and the old-fashioned virtues and verities. The fact is that iambic pentameter is in itself meaningless, and belongs to no age or party; it is simply an instrument, like a No. 2 pencil, and as such can be used either well or badly.

In life, of course, there are many forms which are meaningful in themselves and of great value. I think, for instance, of good manners. Some of my college students of the 1960's, believing themselves to be naturally good and loving, rejected good manners along with certain other things, such as attractive dress and correct grammar, which they believed to be artificial. That was a sad mistake. Manners are no more coercive than a dance step is coercive, and indeed they are liberating: seating ladies and opening doors for people, and writing thank-you notes to grandmother, are acts of compliance with a code, but they also facilitate social dealings and the growth and expression of true kindness. The forms of religion can also be benignly enabling. Eleanor Clark, when living in Italy, found herself drawn toward the Roman Church, and she asked an Italian Catholic friend how she could best find out whether Catholicism was for her. The friend said, "Go to Mass. Kneel when the others kneel. Do and say what the others do and say. Ultimately you will have a Catholic experience." Similarly T.S. Eliot, at one stage of his religious quest, reversed St. Paul by valuing the letter above the spirit. On the American stage, we are familiar with so-called "studio" acting, in which the actor creates the role by going deep into this own subjectivity; but there is another kind of theater in which performances are shaped externally by the director in accordance with his knowledge of the play. I am told that Herman Shumlin would sometimes address an actor in such terms as these: "Take two steps forward, raise your eyebrows, hold out your hands, and say the line." That may sound brutal, but Edmund Burke would understand and approve, and I am sure that many actors have learned by such means what their characters were feeling.

So, there are forms and outward disciplines which may be enhancing and enlarging. The world is also full, as we know, of dismal routines and of oppressions large and small. People who, like me, visited the Soviet Union in the pre-Gorbachev days, may not have encountered the gulags, but they did encounter