

Susan Manning

A Service of Appreciation and Thanksgiving

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‘Is *anything* central?’ asked the American poet John Ashbery. That question is the title of a chapter of Sue’s Ph.D. on ‘the nature of provincialism’. The challenge of such a topic is in knowing what *is* ‘provincial’, and how it is defined in relation to the ‘centre’, to *any* centre. Sue was well qualified to take on this large subject: as an undergraduate she had done a great deal of work on what Matthew Arnold called ‘our indispensable 18th century, extending this into a dissertation on Walter Scott. She had also attended most of the faculty’s lectures on American literature. Already deeply read in English Augustan literature, she found herself asking how the two *other* literary traditions in the English language – Scots and American – could be defined in relation to the ‘classical’ centre, and to London. What *is* the nature of provincialism? ‘Why [Sue asked] do nineteenth century Scottish and American literatures share characteristics of style, subject, and preoccupation which distinguish them from *English* writing of the same period?’ Her answer was ‘puritanism’, but this led on to the question of why puritanism should express itself so *differently* in Scotland and in America. Engaging with these questions took Sue to the Scottish enlightenment on the one hand, and to New England Calvinism on the other. Sue’s accounts of American and Scottish literary texts had a rare depth and resonance entirely her own.

Sue was an invaluable colleague. At her *own* centre lay good sense, and firmness of purpose. She was authoritative without insistence, and always thoughtful about what needed to be done. And she was an outstanding administrator. These qualities came together in the creation, at Cambridge, of a research qualification in American literature. Partly because of her own teaching, the paper in American literature became the most popular of all among finalists by a factor of at least two, attracting many of the most able candidates. Cambridge already had research degrees in Mediaeval and Renaissance literature, and it was Sue’s idea that there should be one in *American* literature as well. A careful and (as we thought) convincing case for the introduction of such a degree course was duly prepared. But there was powerful opposition from senior colleagues, in the

Faculty, to a post-graduate degree course apparently demanding no examinable prerequisites, such as learning a foreign language, or deciphering Elizabethan secretary hand. An American M.Phil., needing nothing of the kind, looked like being far too much fun. Sue confronted this opposition head-on. Politically canny, she familiarised herself, in detail, with all the equivalent research degrees in this country, and several in the United States, and could show that what was being proposed was no less rigorous than what was on offer elsewhere, and that Cambridge was well behind other universities in failing to offer such a qualification. The degree was approved.

My own closest professional association with Sue was in the planning and teaching for this M.Phil. The evolving syllabus came to reflect the kind of interest in American literature that was central to Sue's work: the provincial origins of American writing being held in constant tension with the English literature from which it derived. The most enjoyable teaching I ever experienced was in these American seminars shared with Sue. It is not easy to say what 'good teaching' is, as it comes in many forms, but Sue's was (as everyone here will know) exemplary. In a sense she didn't 'teach' at all, or as was said of Margaret Fuller, her aim was not 'to *teach* anything', but 'to call... out the thoughts of others'. She would listen for a time and then, with a word or two, change the current of discussion, or better, guide a student to change it. The consequence of this kind of attention was to discourage self-consciousness, promote participation, and to make learning a *pleasure*. Seminars with Sue came to seem not so much teaching vehicles as conversations, in which the prevailing tone was that of normal social intercourse. Her teaching was, I want to say, 'graceful', so fine that looking back on it now it's as though one had had the experience but missed the meaning.

When I was thinking how to speak of Sue on this occasion, the thought I kept returning to was how wonderfully *normal* she was. This may seem an odd thing to be remembered for, to have *achieved* indeed, but those employed in universities will have some sense of how rare a quality it can seem. As Andy Taylor has said:

Susan was a welcome blast of *normality*, able to combine a successful career with a life outside of the university that mattered just as much as her teaching and research. As a model for a well-balanced academic she could not be bettered.

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Sue's life was – to return to the word with which I started – ‘centred’, in a way that gave her an emotional and moral position to assess the meaning and value of what was *eccentric*, or provincial.

Her inaugural lecture in the Grierson chair asked pointedly: ‘Whatever Happened to Pleasure?’ She never forgot that all literature, however melancholy its subject, was originally written to give pleasure. Dr Johnson reminds us that ‘The only end of writing is to enable readers better to enjoy life, or better to endure it.’ As Sue put it:

...without pleasure there would be no Departments of English Literature because there would be no students, and no staff. ... The majority of the ten thousand or so annual applicants to study English literature at British universities have chosen the subject not because of its usefulness, or the transferable skills it offers, but because ... they feel that by attaching themselves to *any other business* they would be losers in point of *pleasure*, and this is what motivates their desire *to know*.

Pleasure is the golden thread, the *sine qua non*, that binds together all aspects of the reading and the study of literature – something that university departments ignore at their peril. Yet a friend and colleague of Sue's once asked me how it was possible to reconcile this conviction about pleasure with research into Puritanism, Calvinism, and the writings of New England divines – about as dour and dreary a way of passing the time as it is possible to imagine? One of the principal subjects of Sue's research, Nathaniel Hawthorne, worked with this same question all his life, and his almost compulsive reading in New England Calvinist theology supplied the material of his style, and of his art. Sue's scholarship took her in the same direction. Here is a passage from the conclusion of her dissertation:

St Augustine, as he wrote to *dispute* the absoluteness of Rome's claim to centrality, established the utter separateness of the Eternal City from the finite. Only the alienated provincial thinks of the centre as a place from which he is excluded, and to which he is peripheral. The centre is...not a place to go to, but a mode of being.

The self finds its own centre not within itself...or in a place beyond itself (Rome or London) but in the process of living. The *centre* is the ability to live beyond oneself, and the middle way...is not a compromise between the extremes of antinomian absolutism and Arminian relativism, but a commitment to the full range of experience through time. 'Faithful' living is the confident progression outwards from the self towards the other; it resists the Calvinist attraction towards the logical conclusion and the ineluctable certainty of 'arrival'. ...Scott and Hawthorne forged an idiom in which to speak non-provincially about the temporal provisionality of every life. Their writing emerges from the puritan-provincial rhetoric of distance to re-discover a position where mind and spirit are not at enmity within the self, and whose stylistic consequences are neither alienated imitation nor egocentric idiosyncrasy.

This is the young Sue, and it is critical writing of the highest order. We may hear behind it echoes of Forster's 'only connect', of Eliot's 'dissociation of sensibility', and of Henry James' determination to leave open all questions and to regard all answers as provisional. Sue's study of the theological rhetoric of puritanism gave her, what it had given to Hawthorne, not something to be resisted or espoused, but rather intellectual raw material to be worked with. In her work Sue showed us the way to the pleasure that arises from the unself-conscious possession of moral and spiritual integrity, of being oneself 'centred'. It was this pleasure that she dedicated her teaching life to passing on to her students, and indeed to her colleagues. A truly rare spirit.

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