Carte blanche

Paul A. SCOTT

It is a pleasure to be asked to write a *carte blanche.* When Edward VIII abdicated as British monarch in 1936, he gave a radio broadcast to the nation and Empire, in which he began: "At last I am able to have a few words of my own," and I feel a little of the same. The irony of the former King's words is that they were largely written by another — Winston Churchill — but these *propos* are of my own.

Over the past decade or so, in both North America and Europe, the graduate student has evolved into a multi-tasker. During the pursuit of a doctoral degree, they are typically expected to teach, research, present at conferences, perhaps organize a graduate conference, network, work, and publish to a degree and combination never seen before, all of which almost fulfills the requirements of a Nietzschean *übermensch.* Added to this is the stress of applying for positions towards the end of the degree; I found conferences a wonderful forum for trading horror stories with other sympathetic graduate students. Often, we would find ourselves dreaming of generations past. And we were not the only ones. One professor I particularly admired, who had the ability to make poetry sooth, seize, and sing to freshmen, started off his speech at his retirement luncheon with the words: "At last I am getting out. The halcyon days of the academy are over, and I pity graduate students coming into the system today." It is easy to sympathize with such sentiments. Although my advisor spent seven years completing his dissertation and was warned not to think about publishing until he was in his mid-30s, as his views needed to mature, today, this would spell certain death to a prospective career, mature or otherwise. However, like my friends' visceral reaction to my proposed move to America, I firmly believe such attitudes must be resisted. It is certain that things have changed over the past few decades within the college and university educational systems, yet we should not lose sight of the positive aspects to this as well. The more intensive graduate studies' programs and the activities that students are expected to participate in means that there is less of a gulf between faculty and graduate students, and more importantly, between the transition from graduate

research and teaching to the assistant professor position. There is no doubt that contemporary graduate students are better prepared and equipped to deal with the rigors of today's academy.

I began looking for a teaching position in the United States shortly before the atrocities of September 11, 2001. In the following months, particularly when I was interviewed by several institutions at the MLA Convention held in New Orleans, several friends back in the United Kingdom thought I was courageous to be looking to locate across the Atlantic at such an uncertain, and apparently unsafe, period. It is an attitude that is understandable to a degree, but which I believe is ultimately self-defeating. I have visited Belfast during the Troubles as well as Jerusalem during one recent terror campaign, and the best defense against fear is normality. It was in Israel in March 1996, just before the terminal examination of my B.A. degree, that I experienced something that changed my priorities in life. It was not so much what happened to me as what did not take place. One morning I slept in and missed my regular bus into central Jerusalem. I was awoken by the building shaking violently, and the very specific sound of an explosion. Then, an unearthly silence. It is this short period of total stillness that I remember the most vividly, as if nature had been stunned by human barbarity. The number 8 bus had been suicide-bombed instantly killing twenty-eight people on board. Had my alarm or body clock been more accurate, I would have been on that very bus. When I sat my finals two months later, they somehow did not seem so terrifying or decisive as before. Many people in war-torn situations, such as the Blitz or more recent conflicts, simply get on with their lives. Ignoring adversity can be as potent a weapon as combating it head on. Refusal comes in many forms.

It has therefore been interesting to move to the States with the current international situation †the war of terror, the war in Iraq, enhanced security — ever present in the background. My arrival having been delayed due to the prolongation of the visa process, as part of the stricter security screening procedures, I arrived in early January in Lawrence just in time for the beginning of the Spring Semester at the University of Kansas. Moving anywhere mid-year can be unsettling, and I would like to offer some of my observations on differences between the American and British academies. Having recently completed my doctoral dissertation, I am still very much close, both in time and in spirit, to being a graduate student, and this area particularly interests me. It is probably not an understatement to note that undertaking graduate studies in the UK at this moment in time involves being rather rich or rather insane (eccentricity being an

unspoken pre-requisite to study in some schools). Around 15% of graduate students working within the humanities receive the traditionally prestigious Arts and Humanities' Research Board (AHRB) scholarship. This used to be awarded solely to individual research projects, but there is a significant trend for faculty members or departments to submit a proposal for a specific project which is then awarded funding for a three-year dissertation. Upon receiving a favorable decision, the department then recruits a graduate student (usually external) to undertake this particular dissertation topic. I consider this a depressing development. While on paper it may seem an efficient method for departments to attract researchers, the ultimate consequence is that individual endeavor is harnessed. Given that a public body has funded a very detailed project, there is little scope for the recipient of such an award to deviate away from the original emphasis, and that can never be a positive effect. The primary difference I have noticed between graduate students in the UK and in the USA, is that students in the States tend to be much less isolated than their British-based counterparts. Doctoral students do not take classes or examinations in the UK, and even master's degrees can be entirely done by research. Feelings of isolation, compounded by poverty, and the prospect of facing a barren job market, results in widespread malaise and angst among my compatriots, and with good reason.

One great benefit of teaching in the American system is the greater freedom to teach works and courses of my choice. Typically in the UK, a faculty member inherits courses whose entire set texts and evaluation component has been decided by a committee, an arrangement which inevitably results in courses being handed down with little change over the years. I found with some amusement that I was teaching an identical syllabus of an introduction to literature course in 2000 to what I had myself studied eight years earlier as a freshman. A grade for participation is becoming increasingly common in the UK, but is by no means universal. I find students in the US are much more responsive and prepared to engage more in class than their British counterparts, and having a participation grade makes a tangible difference. My decision to accept the offer of a post in Lawrence essentially came down to one thing. The crucial question I asked myself, was whether I could be happy here? The answer was affirmative, and it has been proved right so far.

In short, my manifesto is one of hope in the face of new challenges. It is easy to fall into the category of a professional prophet of doom, harking back to structures in place in an arcadian past, or to a life where pressures appeared to be less intensive. However, simply because things

are so markedly different today does not necessarily mean they are tougher or worse. Life seems to move at a faster pace, but if one takes a step back, then it is exposed for the illusion it really is. Due to advances in technology, it is information that is dominant today, not knowledge, and I believe the two things are not identical. Technological progress has resulted in the streamlining of education, which in turn has led educational systems to categorized and evaluated all too often on a business-type model. Yet, all has not changed as much as we might be tempted to imagine, for although the Internet has speeded up the way we research and communicate, it has not constituted in itself a major advance in global civilization. The most influential inventions of the past few centuries are not the telephone or the computer, but rather the printing press and railway travel. Everything else has been as a result of the change in our mindsets that these two innovations produced. It is easy to become caught up in the apparent speed of the technological age, and feel trapped by the waxing tide, and lose sight of the fact that the essential constituents of the academic sphere have not evolved as much as we might believe. Like the bus not taken, I believe we should look to the future, not dwell on, or in, the past.

Dr. Paul A. Scott, Assistant Professor
University of Kansas