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## And Now A Response

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## And Now A Response

By JOHN KENOWER

Mary Lou Conroy and Barb Haupt have written an editorial in this issue of *Exile* defining the spectre haunting the small college campus. I would like to dig up the same ghost, not to criticize their opinions, but to offer somewhat different conclusions from a somewhat different Denisonian. Let us first look more closely at the nature of this malady—the desire to be “tweedy” or “shoo.”

If our parents' generation was the “Lost Generation,” ours is the “Scared Generation.” I shall never forget the last words of advice my father gave me before I left for school my freshman year, for I think they might be a motto of our age. “Son,” Dad said, “be careful what you join. You never can tell how a group or movement will look to an investigating committee twenty years from now.” And this is the feeling of our generation, isn't it? We have seen the liberals and crusaders of the 30's smeared out of public life because of sincere but imprudent affiliations in their college days. We have been bombarded, in magazines, movies, and college courses, with portraits of American business in which the man who sheds his grey flannel suit is lost. We have looked upon an America that demands conformity of thought and action and have lacked the courage to be other than stereotypes. In short, we suffer from Shooous Desirus.

Why, though, should our generation be slaves to the group? What causes our worship of mediocrity? Why do we lack the courage, and often even the desire, to be abnormal?

I think it is because we are enormously pessimistic and insecure. We have never known a time when there were not “wars and rumors of war.” Every boy among us knows that he must “do his

stint” in the military, and none of us can escape the possibility that we may be engaged in a shooting war. Gone, in the world around is the happy optimism of “peace in our time,” and “day by day, in every way, I grow better and better.” Present, instead, is the terrible anesthetic of constant crisis, and the hopeless cry, not “where are we going?” but “can we change where we are going?”

Western civilization in our time has had its naive optimism in its ability to solve its own problems shattered by a world war that never really ended and gives no indication of ending except in renewed warfare. As our civilization has held out to us a future that, with our best efforts will be worse than the present and without our best efforts will be terminal, we have been moulded. Plunged in an insecure world, and apparently cut off from a secure or even meaningful future, we have fled to the security of being Shoo and have defended ourselves against the demands of originality and conscience with the sophistication of pessimism or indifference. The best of our energies and potentials are used to mummify us in mediocrity. Our generation is in the coma of Shooous Desirus because it can find nothing worth getting knocked about for.

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What is needed, then, to bring us out of our coma is something worth getting knocked about for. We need something that is of itself worthwhile, that is valuable enough to leave the security of “the group” for, or that is vital enough to be inescapable. We need some value that can command our commitment and dedication. Where is there something that is worth getting knocked about for?

Let us read Edmond Rostand's *Cyrano De Bergerac*, for here is the story of a man who found himself in an age that conformed, but who would himself bend to no one. Cyrano's answer to the death of Shooous Desirus was Individualism—his pride in himself and his own integrity to himself. I know of no greater or more moving appeal for individualism than the second act of Rostand's play. Cyrano's famous “No thank you” speech, which sums up his stand, ends with the five final dramatic lines:

“I am too proud to be a parasite,  
And if my nature wants the germ that grows,  
Towering to heaven like the mountain pine,  
Or like the oak, sheltering multitudes,  
I stand, not high it may be—but alone!”

Alone. Whatever else happened, Cyrano stood alone, his white plume unbowed to the world. Cyrano was eloquent in the cause of

Individualism as few men have been, and how stupid and senseless our cowering to mob opinion seems beside the unstained white plume of the man with the nose so suited to being raised. We look at Cyrano, and our cowardly conformity is unpalatable. We find that our lives, which have been totally dedicated to the nothing of normality, are exposed in all their shallowness and meaninglessness by one wholly dedicated to pride in himself as an individual. Cyrano was too proud to bow to the group, and we who are lost in the anonymity of "fitting in" find our lives bitterly hollow when confronted with Cyrano's white plume. How can we look at Cyrano and be content with Shooous Desirus?

But though Rostand brings home painfully the futility of our mode of life, he does not give us a desired goal. In the final act of the play, the hero, dying, said:

Philosopher and scientist,

Poet, musician, duelist—

He flew high; and fell back again

A pretty wit—whose like we lack—

A lover . . . . not like other men.

Here lies Hercule-Savinien

De Cyrano de Bergerac—

Who was all things—and all in vain!

Cyrano's life was lived for a purpose, and so he stands above the purposeless conformity to mediocrity. But his purpose was himself, and as he died he had but one achievement—himself. He who was talented above all men of his time found he "was all things—and all in vain!" Individualism—human life lived only for itself—has not the absurdity of excessive conformity, but it is, ironically, valueless beyond itself.

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If, then, Individualism presents a false remedy for Shooous Desirus, what is there that is worth bucking the crowd for? If Individualism cannot rightly make it worthwhile to stand against the currents of the time, what is there that is so valuable that we can—or must—seek it rather than the security of conformity?

God. I think that our student generation can become creative thinkers and significant individuals only as we discover that the universe is the creation of God, and that meaning and significance in the universe and in the lives of men come only as men realize that they are creatures of God and respond to Him properly as His creatures. We must discover for ourselves that value is essentially religious, and that human life must be lived in response to the Almighty.

Now, this is a value judgment, a confession of a point of faith. And if this is an improper value judgment, if the universe is not a creation of God whose only meaning lies in responding to Him, the solution I outline will in all probability be badly mistaken. But let us not assume that simply because the solution rests on a confession of faith it is false, for any solution rests on some leap of faith. Before we can prescribe a remedy, we must have some idea of what man, ultimately, is like, some image of his basic nature. And that idea of his basic nature is a value judgment, a non-objective leap of faith. Whether we decide that man is just a natural phenomenon, or is something more, or is something less, we make an unverifiable leap of faith. Recognizing, then, that some unprovable value judgment about man's essential nature is necessary, and recognizing that one judgment is that a man is a creature of God for whom there is meaning and significance only as he responds to God as His creature, let us examine my proposed treatment of Shooous Desirus.

Since our lives are suffocated by conformity, and since only meaning and purpose will permit us to shatter the stupor of Shooous Desirus, and since our lives have true meaning and significance only as we respond as creatures of God, how can we as students at Denison respond so as to become creative and significant? In other words, how does my abstract proposition relate practically to the problem of conformity on Denison's campus?

It relates in this way. Men cannot merely serve God in abstraction; they must serve him by doing something in particular. And the "something in particular" that is the proper activity of a Christian student is to be a student. As a student attending an institution that is trying to educate him, a Christian is committed to become educated—to learn, to learn to think, and to think. This is the significant student, one who has not merely reacted against, but has recovered from Shooous Desirus. Our generation does not need persons who are different just to be different, but it does need students who are honestly seeking to become educated, and who cannot abolish or seek to hide their departure from the mass. The Christian student is not a dogmatist seeking intellectual justification for a position, but a student who is convinced that he can serve God best by becoming well educated.

One final contention should be made, however. It might be argued that any dedication to education, not just a Christian dedication, would be sufficient to make students seek after education regardless of mass opinion. This is very true, of course, but it is not enough. First, there is the practical question of how to get

students dedicated to the truth—the question with which we started. But of greater importance is the recognition that education is not the Absolute of the universe. God is. So education as an end in itself, completely divorced from some basic commitment to God, is foolishness or idolatry. When critical education springs from the impulse to serve God, not only is there the motivation sufficient to bring about vital and significant education, but there is an ultimate purpose for education. Therefore I do not believe that the academic problem of surrender to the mass can be solved by “secular” means. The cure for Shoous Desirus is not merely theological, but it will not be found apart from God.