

Encounter

MICHAEL YOUNG

The Rise of the Meritocracy

Extracts from a Ph.D. thesis submitted to
the London School of Economics
in 2033 A.D.

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WILLIAM H. WHYTE JR.

The City Eviscerated

GERD RUGE

Conversations in Moscow

LIONEL TRILLING

The Last Lover

Vladimir Nabokov's "Lolita"

HENRY REED

The Auction Sale

FRANK NORMAN

A Bit About Slang

RICHARD LOWENTHAL

Tito's Gamble

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Henry Reed

The Auction Sale

Within the great grey flapping tent
The damp crowd stood or stamped about;
And some came in, and some went out
To drink the moist November air;
None fainted, though a few looked spent
And eyed some empty unbought chair.
It was getting on. And all had meant
Not to go home with empty hands
But full of gain, at little cost,
Of mirror, vase, or vinaigrette.
Yet often, after certain sales,
Some looked relieved that they had lost,
Others, at having won, upset.
Two men from London sat apart,
Both from the rest and each from each,
One man in grey and one in brown.
And each ignored the other's face,
And both ignored the endless stream
Of bed and bedside cabinet,
Gazing intent upon the floor,
And they were strangers in that place.

Two other men, competing now,
Locals, whom everybody knew,
In shilling genially strove
For some small thing in ormolu.
Neither was eager; one looked down
Blankly at eighty-four, and then
Rallied again at eighty-eight,
And took it off at four pounds ten.
The loser grimly shook his fist,
But friendly, there was nothing meant.
Little gained was little missed,
And there was smiling in the tent.

Henry Reed

The auctioneer paused to drink,
 And wiped his lips and looked about,
 Engaged in whispered colloquy
 The clerk, who frowned and seemed to think,
 And murmured: "Why not do it next?"
 The auctioneer, though full of doubt,
 Unacquiescent, rather vexed,
 At last agreed, and at his sign
 Two ministrants came softly forth
 And lifted in an ashen shroud
 Something extremely carefully packed,
 Which might have been some sort of frame,
 And was a picture-frame in fact.
 They steadied it gently and with care,
 And held it covered, standing there.

The auctioneer again looked round
 And smiled uneasily at friends,
 And said: "Well, friends, I have to say
 Something I have not said to-day:
There's a reserve upon this number.
 It is a picture which though unsigned
 Is thought to be of the superior kind,
 So I am sure you gentlemen will not mind
 If I tell you at once before we start
 That what I have been asked to say
 Is, as I have said, to say:
There's a reserve upon this number."
 There was a rustle in that place,
 And some awoke as though from slumber.
 Anxious disturbance fluttered there;
 And as if summoned to begin,
 Those who had stepped outside for air
 Retrieved themselves and stepped back in.

The ministrants, two local boys,
 Experienced in this sort of work,
 And careful not to make too much noise,
 Reached forward to unhook the shroud
 Which slowly opening fell away
 And on the public gaze released
 The prospect of a great gold frame
 That through the reluctant leaden air
 Flashed a mature unsullied grace
 Into the faces of the crowd.
 And there was silence in that place.

*Effulgent in the Paduan air,
 Ardent to yield the Venus lay
 Naked upon the sunwarmed earth.
 Bronze and bright and crisp her hair,
 By the right hand of Mars caressed,
 Who sunk beside her on his knee,
 His mouth towards her mouth inclined,
 His left hand near her silken breast.
 Flowers about them sprang and twined,*

*Accomplished Cupids leaped and sported,
And three, with dimpled arms enlaced
And brimming gaze of stifled mirth,
Looked wisely on at Mars's nape,
While others played with horns and pikes,
Or smaller objects of like shape.*

And there was silence in the tent.
They gazed in silence; silently
The wind dropped down, no longer shook
The flapping sides and gaping holes.
And some moved back, and others went
Closer, to get a better look.

*In ritual, amorous delay,
Venus deposed her sheltering hand
Where her bright belly's aureate day
Melted to dusk about her groin;
And, as from words that Mars had said
Into that hidden, subtle ear,
She turned away her shining head.*

The auctioneer cleared his throat,
And said: "I am sure I'm right in feeling
You will not feel it at all unfair
For what when all is said and done
Is a work of very artistic painting
And not to be classed with common lumber
And anyway extremely rare,
You will not feel it at all unfair
If I mention again before proceeding,
There's a reserve upon this number."
Someone was heard to say with meaning:
"What, did I hear him say *reserve*?"
(Meaning, of course, a different meaning.)
This was a man from Sturminster,
Renowned for a quiet sense of fun,
And there was laughter in that place,
Though, not, of course, from everyone.

*A calm and gentle mile away,
Among the trees a river ran
Boated with blue and scarlet sails;
A towered auburn city stood
Beyond them on the burnished heights,
And afar off and over all
The azure day for mile on mile
Unrolled towards the Dolomites.*

The auctioneer said:
"I very much fear I have to say
I'm afraid we cannot look all day.
The reserve is seven hundred pounds.
Will anyone offer me seven fifty?
Seven thirty? Twenty-five?"

Henry Reed

Thank you, sir. Seven twenty-five."
 It was the man in brown who nodded,
 Soon to be joined by him in grey.
 The bidding started quietly.
 No one from locally joined in.
 Left to the men from London way,
 The auctioneer took proper pride,
 And knew the proper way to guide
 By pause, by silence, and by tapping,
 The bidding towards a proper price.
 And each of the two with unmoved face
 Would nod and pause and nod and wait.
 And there was tension in that place.

*And still within the Paduan field,
 The silent summer scene stood by,
 The sails, the hill-tops, and the sky,
 And the bright warmth of Venus' glance
 That had for centuries caught the eye
 Of whosoever looked that way,
 And now caught theirs, on this far day.*

Two people only did not look.
 They were the men so calmly nodding,
 Intently staring at the floor;
 Though one of them, the one in brown,
 Would sometimes slowly lift his gaze
 And stare up towards the canvas roof,
 Whereat a few men standing near
 Inquiring eyes would also raise
 To try to see what he was seeing.
 The bidding mounted steadily
 With silent nod or murmured yes
 And passed the fifteen hundred mark,
 And well beyond, and far beyond,
 A nodding strife without success,
 Till suddenly, with one soft word,
 Something unusual occurred.

The auctioneer had asked politely,
 With querying look and quiet smile:
 "Come then, may I say two thousand?"
 There was the customary pause,
 When suddenly with one soft word,
 Another voice was strangely heard
 To join in, saying plainly: "Yes."
 Not their voices, but a third.
 Everyone turned in some surprise
 To look, and see, and recognise
 A young man who some time ago
 Had taken a farm out Stalbridge way,
 A very pleasant young man, but quiet,
 Though always a friendly word to say,
 Though no one in the dealing line,

But quiet and rather unsuccessful,
And often seen about the place
At outings or on market-day,
And very polite and inoffensive,
And quiet, as anyone would tell you,
But not from round here in any case.

The auctioneer, in some surprise,
Said: "Please, sir, did I hear you say
Yes to two thousand? Is that bid?
Twenty hundred am I bid?"
The two were silent, and the third,
The young man, answered plainly: "Yes.
Yes. Two thousand. Yes, I did."
Meaning that he had said that word.
"Ah, yes. Yes, thank you, sir," concurred
The auctioneer, surprised, but glad
To know that he had rightly heard,
And added: "Well, then, I may proceed.
I am bid two thousand for this picture.
Any advance upon that sum?
Any advance upon two thousand?
May I say two thousand twenty?
Twenty? Thirty? Thank you, sir.
May I say forty? Thank you, sir.
Fifty? You, sir? Thank you, sir."

And now instead of two, the three
Competed in the bargaining.
There was amazement in that place,
But still it gave, as someone said,
A sort of interest to the thing.
The young man nodded with the others,
And it was seen his nice young face,
Had lost its flush and now was white,
And those who stood quite near to him
Said (later, of course, they did not speak
While the bidding was going on)
That on his brow were beads of sweat,
Which as he nodded in acceptance
Would, one or two, fall down his cheek.

And in the tightening atmosphere
Naked upon the sunwarmed earth
Pauses were made and eyebrows raised,
Answered at last by further nods,
Ardent to yield the nods resumed
Venus upon the sunwarmed nods
Abandoned Cupids danced and nodded
His mouth towards her bid four thousand
Four thousand, any advance upon,
And still beyond four thousand fifty
Unrolled towards the nodding sun.

Henry Reed

But it was seen, and very quickly,
 That after four thousand twenty-five,
 The man from over Stalbridge way
 Did not respond, and from that point
 He kept his silent gaze averted,
 To show he would not speak again.
 And it was seen his sweating face,
 Which had been white, was glowing red,
 And had a look almost of pain.

*Oh hand of Venus, hand of Mars,
 Oh ardent mouth, oh burnished height,
 Oh blue and scarlet gentle sails,
 Oh Cupids smiling in the dance,
 Oh unforgotten, living glance,
 Oh river, hill and flowering plain,
 Oh ever-living dying light.*

And had a look almost of pain.
 The rest was quickly done. The bids
 Advanced at slowly slackening pace
 Up to four thousand sixty-five.
 And at this point the man in grey
 Declined his gaze upon the floor
 And kept it there, as though to say
 That he would bid no more that day.
 It was quite clear he had not won,
 This man in grey, though anyone
 Practised to read the human face
 Might on his losing mouth descry
 What could no doubt be termed a smile.
 While on the face of him in brown
 A like expertness might discern
 Something that could be termed a frown.

There was a little faint applause.

The auctioneer sighed with joy,
 The customary formalities
 Were quickly over, and the strangers
 Nodding a brief good-bye departed.
 Venus and Mars were carefully veiled.
 The auctioneer went on and proffered
 Cupboard, table, chair and tray.
 Bids of a modest kind were offered,
 The traffic of a normal day.
 A little later it was seen
 The young man too had slipped away.
 Which was, of course, to be expected.
 Possibly there was nothing else
 There at the sale to take his fancy.
 Or possibly he even might
 Be feeling ashamed at intervening,

Though possibly not, for after all,
He had certainly been within his right.

At all events, a hour later,
Along the Stalbridge Road a child
Saw the young man and told her mother,
Though not in fact till some days after,
That she had seen him in the dusk,
Not walking on the road at all,
But striding beneath the sodden trees;
And as she neared she saw that he
Had no covering on his head,
And did not seem to see her pass,
But went on, through the soaking grass,
Crying: that was what she said.

Bitterly, she later added.

Crying bitterly, she said.