

# Weaker Vessels

by Robert Bruce (September 2017)



*A Young Soldier*, Theodor Rombouts, 1624, made into a meme

Who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God's image; but he who destroys a good book, kills reason itself, kills the image of God, as it were, in the eye. Many a man lives

a burden to the earth; but a good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life. Milton, *Areopagitica* (1644)

This essay examines the idea of tolerance in our advanced industrial society. The conclusion reached is that the realization of the objective of tolerance would call for intolerance toward prevailing policies, attitudes, opinions, and the extension of tolerance to policies, attitudes, and opinions which are outlawed or suppressed. In other words, today tolerance appears again as what it was in its origins, at the beginning of the modern period—a partisan goal, a subversive liberating notion and practice. Conversely, what is proclaimed and practiced as tolerance today is, in many of its most effective manifestations, serving the cause of oppression.—[Herbert Marcuse, \*Repressive Tolerance\*, 1965.](#)

When looking through the who's who of the opinion-forming Left, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Conrad is out of date. In the 21st century, political creeds are not rooted in private resentments—they *are* personal resentments and nowhere is this more apparent than in what Douglas Murray has called the “weirdo sexual obsession trans gender identify cis activist,”<sup>1</sup> an unwieldy neologism which nevertheless does a lot of good work summing up the likes of Jack Monroe. Apparently one of the most influential anti-poverty campaigners (is anyone pro-poverty?) in Britain, I would never have heard of this feted cheap-food-cum-LGBT-rights campaigner had a twitter spat with James Delingpole not given her an irresistible halo of transgender martyrdom, and captivated my interest. Of all the dark tea parties of the soul that float through cyberspace, this has been, by far, the most intriguing to me and, in her now-infamous Channel 4 interview with obscure sociology lecturer Julia Long, she more than paid back

the interest. In 1971, Chomsky needed Foucault to look tamely bourgeois and in this exchange when confronted with Monroe, a cliché-ridden post-Marxist feminist with comfortable shoes and a brutal crewcut duly came out looking like Seneca. Having taken exception to the “Parliamentary Women and Equalities Committees” recommendation that “self-identification” be taken as the basis for gender assignment, Long pointed to the case of Christopher Hambrook who had exploited Canada’s liberal regime of self-declaration to carry out [a string of sex attacks](#) in a women’s refuge.

Rising to the occasion, Monroe was resolute. “We can all pull cases out where we can say this has happened and that has happened but those cases are very, very rare, and to try and deny services to women on the basis that those women are trans women is abhorrent. I was raped by a cis man and again by a lesbian woman . . . I don’t use either of those experiences to try and deny cis straight men or gay women access to rape crisis services.”

Long: “The kind of language that Jack is using there is really illustrative of the heart of this problem where even terms like male and female are becoming meaningless.”

Monroe: “But who are you to decide who is a man and who is a woman?”

To the last, Long could only reply with a grin. Lot of it about.

This is bad, very bad—but there is worse and it says much for the semi-literate poverty of the modern Left that at the time of this clash of the titans she was afforded generous column inches by broadsheets like the *New Statesman* which had once attracted the finest pens (Monroe is most definitely a step down from Christopher Hitchens). The reward for this inclusivity? Let these solipsisms published in the [New Statesman](#) under the title *Being Non-Binary I’m Not a Girl Any More But I’m Not a Boy Either* speak for themselves.

Three days before the Mail-Guido-Twitter triumvirate, I

had come out as transgender. Non-binary transgender to be precise. It was National Coming Out Day, I was on my way from a 1000-mile round trip from Southend to Glasgow via Manchester and back again to talk about austerity at the Scottish Green Party Conference, and I was tired of my closet full of Underworks binders and denial. I typed the words, saved the tweet as a draft, and tried to call my dad. He didn't answer, so I texted him instead before I lost my nerve. "How are things?" He asked. "Ok. I'm about to come out as transgender. I hope we can talk about it sometime." He replied three minutes later, three minutes I'm not ashamed to admit I spent gripping my phone so hard, that the small crack in the screen now splits from top to bottom. "Of course you can talk to me. It matters not one jot how are you express yourself. Unless you become a Tory then you can fuck off :-)." I breathed out, reassured him via Arneurin Bevan that no attempt at "ethical or social seduction" would make me join the Conservative Party, and I came out to the world with the prod of a finger.

To ask what "reassuring him via Arneurin Bevan" actually means or what the word "triumvirate" is doing in the sentence is almost beside the point. The more profound question is what a prestigious journal of the Left is doing printing it and countless other dreary confessionals as if they were searing epiphanies. Is the bohemian middle class left so starved of talent that these streams of consciousness pass as high art? As anyone who reads the *Statesman* or the *Guardian* will know the answer is a resounding yes, and the reason is not difficult to locate. When the thoughts are crude so is the language, and it is a tribute to the grotesque Dianification of our culture that even these dreary vapourings are freighted with immense cultural resonance. Much of this doubtless can be blamed on progress.

Monroe is that cheapest of latter day belletrist the blogger,

armed by technology with the ability to ejaculate her inner journeys into eternity and the more one looks at her output, the more one is reminded of Trilling's "irritable mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas." This is the personal, passed off as political—and, as the key commodity in this degenerate virtual world is an emoting touchy-feely sincerity of the heart, 140 characters is more than enough to carry it off especially when, as is usually the case with excessively self-absorbed people, there is very little to reveal.

The results needless to say have an impact beyond the aesthetic, shocking though the latter is. Civil society (it requires very little etiological probing to see this is literally true) rests on the ability and inclination to separate private feeling from public duties but, when debates in the academy and public square are reduced to contests of emoting, and words are reduced to weapons, the tendency to experience every uncomfortable idea as a wounding attack is inevitable. Small wonder the growth of that ubiquitous feature of college life, "the safe space," and the fragility of trendy pop intellectuals.

Savour, if you will, the twitter aftershocks of the interview and remind yourself that this is one of the most influential voices on the falafel-chickpea Left.

I wouldn't have accepted the Channel 4 "debate" if I'd known I'd be reduced to defending myself as "not automatically a rapist coz trans."

—jack monroe (@MxJackMonroe) January 14, 2016.

Julia Long in the green room when the next news segment came on: "Oh look pregnant women, ooh that's transphobic." I didn't react.

—jack monroe (@MxJackMonroe) January 14, 2016.

I wasn't paid but Ch4 told Long they'd "sort her something out" after. Match her fee with a donation to @stonewalluk in my name, thanks.

–jack monroe (@MxJackMonroe) January 14, 2016.

Channel 4 had two feminists taking part in tonight's debate. It's just my feminism includes ALL women. As it should. <https://t.co/9gmI52jZ8k>

–jack monroe (@MxJackMonroe) January 15, 2016.

Most of us could probably break wind with more eloquence than this and if Monroe, transfigured almost involuntarily by gushing opinion formers from brittle and disturbed individual into Left-wing heroine has an excuse, rather less charity need be extended to the egregious Laura Penny who, like most professional victims, has led a rather pampered life. The product of an expensive education, her brand of Left-wing identity politics is little more than a hook on which to hang her meticulously catalogued neuroses, whilst her cheap literary fame bears ineloquent testimony to similar navel gazing obsessions. Cybersexism, Sex, Gender and Power on the Internet, Bitch Doctrine, Meat Market; Female Flesh—the very titles could have been dreamt up by an oversexed teenager, and this is no accident. Like so many in the snowflake generation she never had to grow up—and, in a debate with David Starkey her adolescent sensitivity cost her dearly.

Until this epic raspberry, she had been able to mask her lack of substance with risqué and juvenile manners. Scheduled to appear in a debate on generational inequality with the Tory policy guru David Willetts and take his side in the battle of ideas, she peremptorily announced in her opening sally that this was beneath her dignity and launched into an ad hominem tirade, trotting off the usual Michael Moore checklist of vested interests and conspiracies and mocking the genteel

mannered Tory until his ordeal was up. Willetts a gentle man with a [Vulcan-like disposition](#) took it in his stride and proceeded to debate three inferior minds under an indulgent chair. Penny lost little from this display of bad manners—but a more worldly person might have realised that this kind of luck never lasts, and was bound to go awry with the feted Tudor historian. Willetts nickname is two brains but his ego is feeble in comparison. With Starkey they are evenly matched and both are jealous Gods. Hubris was already beating its wings when Wellington College arranged the face-off.

First a declaration of personal interest. As an undergraduate one of the few joys at the London School of Economics (a thoroughly detestable institution) that could compete with Bacchus was trying to catch beautiful thoughts in mid-air at Professor Starkey's grandly titled seminar "The History of European Ideas since 1700." So few top-flight academics descend to lecture these days, that this was in itself a genuine public service and no one did it better—his occasional TV appearances not yet at any rate a major distraction from a life of the mind he made every effort to impart. I remember one lecture on Hegel listened to by all of us in rapt silence, hanging on every word, daring to hope we might understand it all. We didn't, but it was good to feel the hope and after you have almost understood Hegel the wit of a social justice warrior holds no terrors. For all his marketable bile, most of us in that small class remember him as a very kind and solicitous tutor so unearned calumnies rankle. Since those heady days Starkey has escaped the niche tedium of the British monarchy and unleashed himself as the rudest man in Britain and general scourge of liberal opinion. With a prejudice for all occasions, and ticking all the privilege boxes bar heterosexuality, this was the kind of big game any Left-wing feminist should love to hunt and, in a (very British) debate on Britishness, Penny brought along a tiny dagger. Having remarked in in the run-up to the event that Rochdale's notorious child grooming gangs 'had their values in trenched

in the foothills of the Punjab', she had some low hanging fruit. If for her Britishness "was about the taste of fish and chips on Brighton beach, Doctor Who and drinking tea, for my colleague Professor Starkey it was about playing xenophobia and racial prejudice for laughs." Bracing stuff, but not enough to disrupt the event. This was nominally a debate of ideas and, as for all born pedagogues, this was sacred; only when Penny threw in a petty smear did it start to go south. As conspiracy theory, Starkey's American second home never had legs. He did indeed have one and he paid his taxes in the UK, to which must be added this is hardly evidence of the riches of Croesus. As a celebrity TV historian Starkey does not do too badly but, if push came to shove, I could doubtless snap up a bargain and, even if one suspects Starkey can afford better than Detroit, this is hardly to the point. Ideas are free. A milder man might have left it there but this was asking too much of the gnome-like sage. She reaped what she sowed. What happened next is better watched than dissected, but suffice to say he had hoarded his vengeance. The sorry scene can be viewed on [YouTube](#).

Having apparently haggled over money for a debate hosted by the cash-strapped Thomas Paine Society, Penny had been guilty of some "mean and grasping" behaviour of her own, and the valiant feminist soon cowered under a finger jabbing lavender onslaught. "I came from the bottom! I will not be lectured by a jumped up public school girl. I will not have it!"<sup>2</sup> Veni vidi vici. After this there was nothing left of her. Whimpering and simpering about the terrors of having a finger pointed at her<sup>3</sup> and, forcing back the tears, she had gone from Left-wing heroine to weeping goth.

It was a pathetic display but there were more indignities waiting. In closing remarks, she attempted to extract a feeble revenge and was interrupted by barracking, even from the redoubtable communist feminist Claire Fox who shouted "you are a disgrace to women and the Left" an incendiary remark that bought



forward the most English of responses. In a scene no one would have had the imagination to invent, she was rescued by a vicar who brought the proceedings to a close (to those of you who can make it through the clip, the other man who gets on stage and shoots a malevolent stare at Penny is Starkey's incensed gentleman companion). Got to hurt. But was it exceptional?

Not a bit of it—compared to Yale students leaping into paroxysms of rage and grief at an email on Halloween costumes she breathed valour, and whilst few of us can look at Shrieking Girl without smiling, underneath it all is something less than amusing. In 2017, the closing of the American mind has come home to roost, and even soggy liberals like Jonathan Haidt are sounding the alarm.

Something strange is happening at America's colleges and universities. A movement is arising, undirected and driven largely by students, to scrub campuses clean of words, ideas, and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense. Last December, Jeannie Suk wrote in an online article for *The New Yorker* about law students asking her fellow professors at Harvard not to teach rape law—or, in one case, even use the word violate (as in “that violates the law”) lest it cause students distress. This new climate is slowly being institutionalized, and is affecting what can be said in the classroom, even as a basis for discussion. During the 2014–15 school year, for instance, the deans and department chairs at the ten University of California system schools were presented by administrators at faculty leader-training sessions with examples of microaggressions. The list of offensive statements included: “America is the land of opportunity” and “I believe the most qualified person should get the job.”—‘The Coddling of the American Mind,’ Haidt & Lukianoff, [The Atlantic](#), September, 2015.

Where does this leave us? In the very modish [book](#) *Contingency Irony and Solidarity*, the radical philosopher Richard Rorty

(with self-defeatingly liberal Jewish intelligence) hinted that Americans might just abandon truth for solidarity; students in 2017 don't need to read Derrida any longer to get this. They just follow their feelings and, in an age of collapsed generations, it is a depressing fact that so much of this should be indulged by the grown-ups.

The faculty professor, creepily "down" with the kids and sharing every traumatising hate noun with his sensitive illiterates is now a staple of prestigious colleges and, when one considers the long-term effects of this rite of passage in our hyper-credentialed societies, the prognosis for the Free World can only be a gloomy one. No other age in human history has been so obsessed with the benefits of higher education but, looked out over the long run, an overabundance of graduates is a bigger danger to a healthy society than an oversupply of the poor.

In Britain, where the extreme Left seized control of the Labour party at the exact moment they wrote off the working class, we can see this clearly enough and it is difficult (barring Khmer Rouge thoroughness) to see what can be done about it. Most self-consciously, modern conservatives are tone deaf to the kind of soft anti-capitalist insights previous generations took for granted. Faced with the obvious truth that the Left won the cultural arguments and the Right the economic ones, they respond with an indifferent shrug. Indiscriminate ersatz sensations and calculating avarice—is this not the essence of liberal capitalism? Daniel Bell, by conscious design an old fashion social democrat in politics and a conservative in culture, saw the danger clearly enough and his meditations on the cultural contradictions of capitalism have stood the test of time better than any piece of post-war prophecy. An acute and far-sighted observer of the counter-culture, he saw the psychic masturbation that would emerge from the ruins of high culture and his accounts of both the botched will-to-power driving modern art and the plunge

into eastern frenzies are crisper than Bloom's later elegy, but even he fell short of Auden.

Reason will be replaced by Revelation. Instead of Rational Law, objective truths perceptible to any who will undergo the necessary intellectual discipline, Knowledge will degenerate into a riot of subjective visions . . . whole cosmogonies will be created out of some forgotten personal resentment, complete epics written in private languages, the daubs of schoolchildren ranked above the greatest masterpieces. Idealism will be replaced by Materialism. Life after death will be an eternal dinner party where all the guests are 20 years old. Justice will be replaced by Pity as the cardinal human virtue and all fear of retribution will vanish . . . the *New Aristocracy* will consist exclusively of hermits, bums and permanent invalids. The Rough Diamond, the Consumptive Whore, the bandit who is good to his mother, the epileptic girl who has a way with animals will be the heroes and heroines of the New Age while the general, the statesman, and the philosopher will become the butt of every farce and satire.

In Britain, it is still a slightly sacrilegious thing to say, but this could have been put on Diana's tombstone. It is the clearest anticipation of our degenerate culture you will ever find, and it is fitting that someone who paraded her narcissism as public service and coveted the grotesque status of "people's princess" should have worked so hard on keeping the poor in their place. Only the rich can really afford to be idiots; for the rest, standards matter if only to provide a spur and a target to aim for. A certain egalitarianism is implicit in all this and, if you doubted it for a second, ask yourself who has gained from the ephemeral intellectual fads of postmodernism if not the spoiled brats who can keep up with these falling dominoes. Behind the times? Do another degree, waste another year. Do a PhD when you're 30—better still, never leave college. It's a depressing spectacle of infantilisation and Penny epitomises the kind of shallow

depths that emerge from this mental slumming. Like Foucault who collapsed the examined life into a botched and perverted will-to-power, she ended up with dreary sexual micro politics without the benefit of lycée sophistication (Foucault at least had talents to squander).

Under late Capitalism, love has become like everything else: a prize to be won, an object to be attained, a commodity to be hoarded, until it loses value or can be traded up for a better bargain.

This piece of earnest teenage kitsch was enough to make the *New York Times* swoon but most of us are bound to ask, did we really have to hear this kind of dirge again? Is there really someone with an IQ above 40 who finds this fresh? To the second question, the answer is unquestionably yes. Safe spaces are the new frontier for already enfeebled minds and, when all you have to do is release the inner Goth, why not abandon the contemplative life and grasp something near to hand? *I emote therefore I am*—this is the new motto of our postmodern end times.

## **On Growing Up**

I was actually alerted to the growing obsession with castrated non-binary language by my 12 year old niece (I should add in parenthesis that I moved on from safe spaces a while back: my youngest niece of 7 already knows what they are) and it is a symptom of how deep the rot has spread that young children now view the problem with worldly irony. In Pokémon chat rooms, the kids trigger each other incessantly over the fluidity of gender identity and one prepubescent boy at least [looked into the abyss](#). I have doctored the swearwords but none of the punchlines.

I sexually identify as an Attack Helicopter. Ever since I was born I dreamed of soaring over the oilfields dropping hot sticky loads on disgusting foreigners. People say to

me that a person being a helicopter is Impossible and I'm f.....g retarded but I don't care, I'm beautiful. I'm having a plastic surgeon install rotary blades, 30 mm cannons and AMG-114 Hellfire missiles on my body. From now on I want you guys to call me "Apache" and respect my right to kill from above and kill needlessly. If you can't accept me you're a heliphobe and need to check your vehicle privilege. Thank you for being so understanding. SourceHelicopterboy, posted 23.02.17 on my niece's Pokémon discussion thread.

Children are hope.

1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3XxcaUsw0GI>. I think I am reasonably faithful to the formulae.

2 Note for Americans- in the UK this means private. If any if you are wondering why- I really don't know.

3 In her initial follow up in the Independent she described being subjected to a violent attack. The film was not yet publicly available and she was forced to clarify she had not actually been touched.

4 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=70qgNcktbSA> Abandon all hope. It should be said in fairness Shrieking Girl was not actually the worst - she just had the voice that travels.

5  
<http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2017/06/does-working-class-need-ask-its-labour-party-back>.

6 E.P Thompson's vulgar epithet suits the New Left better than 19<sup>th</sup> century Methodism. The famous phrase occurs in "The Making of the English Working Class," beloved of pinko American historian Howard Zinn.

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**Robert Bruce** is a low ranking and over-credentialled functionary of the British welfare state.

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