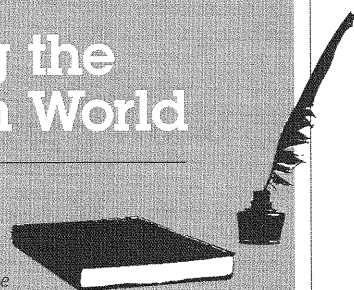


THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL *College of Arts and Sciences*

Teacher! Teacher! Professing the Humanities in a Postmodern World

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The E. Maynard Adams Lecture

PROGRAM IN THE HUMANITIES AND HUMAN VALUES

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It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.

Hear me out
for I too am concerned
and every man
who wants to die at peace in his bed
besides.

William Carlos Williams,
"Asphodel, That Greeny Flower"

In Robert Bolt's play *A Man for All Seasons* Sir Thomas More suggests to young and ambitious Richard Rich that he become a teacher: "You, your pupils, your friends, God. Not a bad public" (4). Alas, that's not the public Rich aims for, and he chooses the politics of the court, with dire consequences for Sir Thomas. Rich's decision reminds me of the take on an old joke in Muriel Barbery's *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*: "Those who can, do; those who can't[,] teach; those who can't teach[,] teach the teachers; and those who can't teach the teachers go into politics" (56).

MY LECTURE THIS AFTERNOON takes a look at those unlike Richard Rich who embrace the teaching profession, especially the teacher drawn to the Humanities. The Program in the Humanities and Human Values was founded on the premise that the Humanities are necessary for creating "a society fit for human beings."¹ The premise also carries the assumption that the professors in the Humanities value the act of teaching itself and would welcome an opportunity to engage a public other than the degree-seeking students they regularly serve or the colleagues they see at professional gatherings. In part, the Program strengthened faculty's belief that the lessons of the classroom continue to enrich lives after college, that the Humanities indeed have an important role in creating a healthy society. Professional advancement and monetary reward are not the attraction for faculty speaking in the Adventures in Ideas seminars. It is altogether fitting, therefore, following the occasion of the Program's thirtieth anniversary, that the E. Maynard Adams lecture ponders the Humanities professor.

You will forgive me if the English professor gets the bulk of my attention. It's the breed I know best, the breed that I have been studying for over fifty years now. I am one of them. And where better to take the temperature of the Humanities—some say the University—than the English Department?

Always attracted to the teaching profession, in junior high school I had been pleased to discover "English." Junior high had also provided my first men teachers, broadening

¹ Warren Nord reminds us of this manifesto from Maynard Adams in his essay "Philosophy, Civilization, and the Humanities: An Introduction to the Life and thought of E.M. Adams" (335).

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the gender possibilities for “teacher.” I would teach English, I declared. In my blue-collar General Motors town there was no college, therefore no professors. But there was great respect for the teaching profession. In the public schools, there were more than a few career teachers, assured of what they were doing, much like Frances Gray Patton’s “Terrible Miss Dove” in her novel *Good Morning, Miss Dove* (1954). These teachers might amuse us, but they also had our respect. Unlike most of the parents of my classmates, they had been to college. One day, Miss Turner, my Latin teacher, explained to the class the difference between an M.A. and a Ph.D. degree. She had the M.A., but didn’t even think to tell us that the Ph.D. was not a possibility for women of her generation (nor were the women of my generation encouraged to think so high). I, meanwhile, held firm to the goal of high school teaching, counting it, as I still do, a noble profession.

I identify with Kurt Vonnegut’s backward glance at his public school years in Depression-era Indianapolis. Vonnegut declares himself “raised right” by the teachers at James Whitcomb Riley School and at Shortridge High School. “Back then,” he wrote, “great public school teachers were local celebrities. Grateful former students, well into adult life, used to visit them, and tell them how they were doing. And I myself used to be a sentimental adult like that.” He declares: “The very best thing you can be in life is a teacher, provided that you are crazy in love with what you teach, and that your classes consist of eighteen students or fewer. Classes of eighteen students are a family, and feel and act like one” (29).

Graduating from high school with a “passionate preference” for teaching, I was fortunate in choosing the University of Michigan to pursue that ambition. The world that I discovered in Ann Arbor was immensely more varied and stimulating than this factory worker’s son could have dreamed. How green was my valley! Many of the state’s best chose Ann Arbor, and so did a sizeable contingent from out of state. Graduate students made up a third of the student body. In Michigan dorms in the 1950s, there was a graduate student adviser on each floor (in that era graduate students were permitted to choose dorm living, and a handful did). Several of those graduate students became my close friends and remain so to this day. From many directions, then, came challenges to many of my assumptions. Classes opened other horizons. I encountered the large-lecture format, a professor before me: a live Ph.D., the author of books! In addition to the lecture, I met the Teaching Assistant or

Instructor for recitation sections or labs. The graduate assistants were all younger than most of my high school teachers, but most of them were effective. The model was different in Freshman English, where the graduate student Teaching Fellow was the sole authority. So a cheer to Miss Hazel Batzer! My first paper came back with a grade of C-/D+. It had plenty of red ink on it, as did succeeding papers. In high school, I had become accustomed to seeing an A. It wasn't that my grammar was faulty, though I might have dangled a modifier on occasion. My besetting sin was "sentimentality." The happy ending is that I finally got the message and rejoiced in my B at the end of the term. Miss Batzer's class made me a better reader and a better writer.

No surprise, when it came time to meet an adviser to plan the junior year, I declared myself "English major." I was fortunate to land in the seminar required for majors that was taught by poet-critic Radcliffe Squires. He took a special interest in my work, and midsemester asked about my professional plans. Informed that I was preparing to teach high school English, he advised that I think about college teaching and the Ph.D. What a grand idea, I thought, and quickly crossed that Rubicon. By now, I had a fair idea of what a Ph.D. was and what a professor was. My future having been released from requirements in the School of Education, I began studying French in the spring semester to prepare for the two languages required for the Ph.D., and I was also free to add more literature classes to the major.

The requirements for the Ph.D. at Michigan were much as they were in Chapel Hill when I arrived here in 1962, much as they were everywhere. Coverage of all periods of English and American literature was the standard. The M.A. degree was there to assist in providing that coverage. With the M.A. earned and permission to proceed secured, one received a list of works one might "reasonably" be expected to know for the comprehensive written examinations. There were no items on the list for the Medieval Period. Instead, we faced a year with medievalist John Revel Reinhard, infamous for failing graduate students. We had a semester of Old English as well and a year-long philological course. Professor Reinhard and the writtens safely behind, French and German reading proficiency certified, finally we were cleared for the seminars and a dissertation. Today's graduate students would find the program draconian.

In the required course on Methods of Bibliography and Research, I sat before Professor Warner G. Rice. He called the Ph.D. "the ticket of admission to whatever it is that you are being admitted to." What did Mr. Rice, the imposing and long-reigning

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chairman of the Department, mean? What was he suggesting about the University, about the discipline? Mr. Rice would have ample time to ponder what it was that we were being admitted to, for he would live to age 97. His obituary carries this sentence: "The future of English studies in America was one of his passions, a topic he was still discussing the last week of his life" (*Ann Arbor News*, February 4, 1997). His prognosis would not have been optimistic. I had a chance to talk briefly with Mr. Rice (he was always "Mr." Rice) in 1988 when I had returned to Ann Arbor for an anniversary celebration of the Graduate School. He shook his head sadly as he reflected on the disruptions that had come with the protests over the Vietnam War and with the "teach-ins"—a kind of teaching alien to his sensibility.

But even in the 1950s, his assessment was not sanguine. Like T.S. Eliot, he had studied at Harvard with Irving Babbitt and was influenced by Babbitt's New Humanism. Irving Babbitt may not now be even a name for the majority of graduate students in English. But in the 1950s, we read Babbitt and Paul Elmer More and understood something of their "classicist" beliefs. For them, the proper goal of Humanist studies "in a quantitative age" is "to produce men of quality" (Matthews, 31). Throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century, to the delight of a large national audience, iconoclast H. L. Mencken found the New Humanists an easy target for ridicule. Mr. Rice would soon have another reason for concern. In 1938 Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren published *Understanding Poetry*, which would eventually lead to the dominance of formalism in criticism and in the classroom. Babbitt and More and their disciples could not prevail against these forces. "Your ticket of admission to whatever it is you are being admitted to." Did Mr. Rice sense even more cataclysmic changes to the profession?

For us in that Methods course, the discipline "English" seemed defined and stable. We had been shaped by the New Criticism. I hasten to add that the art of close reading did not mean that history, literary history, biography were now irrelevant.²

² H.R. Stoneback, having reaffirmed the importance of Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Poetry*, declared, "If we have come perilously close to forgetting how to teach Close Reading, if a generation or two of students and teachers have never learned the art of Close Reading, this loss might most accurately be attributed to the over-zealous reaction against the New Criticism that set in sometime around the late 60s and still flourishes in provincial English departments" (24).

Graduate students talked about the various perils along the way to the Ph.D., but no one was calling for radical change to the philosophy of the degree. The years following World War II through the 1950s have been called the Golden Age of college teaching. The G.I. bill had opened the gates wide, and college enrollments had swelled. The democratization of the American college had begun. By and large, the new clientele had serious purpose. With swelling enrollments, there were jobs to be had! Why should we not be hopeful, optimistic? The romantic part of my soul took pleasure (and still does) that what was the College of Arts and Sciences in most places was called at Michigan “The College of Literature, Science, and the Arts.” “Literature” was not only in the name of my college, but in first place—a certification of the importance of literature for a humane education.

What I didn’t know then was the struggle of “English” to find a place in the academy at all. The discipline came into being only at the start of the nineteenth century. Literature in English as a serious course of study was suspect on both sides of the ocean. Plato, the academy knew, had abolished the poets from his republic. The best argument for the discipline was linguistic. That could be exact, could be “scientific.” As for literature, it would be studied as history; Wordsworth would seem a desirable endpoint. American writing need not concern the new departments at all. We were well into the twentieth century before American literature gained a place at the table. (Nowadays we sometimes hear murmurs that the Americanists are taking over.)³ Reading Gerald Graff’s 2007 *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*, one is left with the inescapable conclusion that English was born in paranoia and continues to be shaped by it.

I remember from undergraduate days that classmates in the sterner disciplines

³ Richard Ruland’s *The Rediscovery of American Literature* provides a valuable history of American literature’s path to secure authority in English studies. Ruland points out that “*American Literature*, the only scholarly quarterly in the country devoted wholly to work in the national literature,” did not exist until 1929 (278). When in 1970 Dougal MacMillan’s *English at Chapel Hill* was published, MacMillan included Professor Raymond Adams’s 1946 MLA paper celebrating “the fiftieth anniversary of specialized work in American literature at the University of North Carolina,” a Master’s thesis on William Cullen Bryant (48). Adams identified 1920 as marking the true beginnings of organized graduate work in American literature at the University of North Carolina.

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looked at English as an “easy” major. Kurt Vonnegut once opined that you shouldn’t look for “the best and brightest” in the English Department or the School of Education: look instead in the Physics Department, or try Math. A colleague in the Medical School told me that among undergraduate Humanities majors, the students she admires are in Classics; they study Greek and Latin: “the few, the proud.” In the 1950s, the graduate student choosing to specialize in American or contemporary literature might find a senior professor looking slightly askance.

Latent paranoia in literature departments would have plenty of opportunity to re-surface. As the “settled” 1950s neared an end, the profession “English” began feeling more tremors, as did all the foreign language departments. In 1959 scientist and novelist C. P. Snow published *The Two Cultures: Science and Literature*, a fierce attack on traditional literary culture. For Snow, “literary culture” was not only ignorant of basic science, but passive about social improvement. Worse, Snow judged that “the literary sensibility of our time brought Auschwitz nearer” (Trilling, 154). Perhaps Snow was recollecting that in 1940 in the *New Republic*, poet Archibald MacLeish had charged that the writers of his generation had infused the younger generation with cynicism and distrust of America, making it “defenseless against Fascist aggression” (Brucoli, 80). If literature could not be trusted, Snow argued that science knows how to work cooperatively and with dispatch—the brighter beacon for producing a better world. F. R. Leavis, advocate of “the great tradition” approach to literature, responded with vehemence for the Humanities. The debate had gone public, where it would increasingly be played. Lionel Trilling, celebrator of the “liberal imagination,” cited excesses from both Snow and Leavis, but he acquiesced that the professors of literature had succeeded in producing a cynical generation, and declared that “a bitter line of hostility to civilization” characterizes modern literature (3).

IN THE 1960S the Modern Language Association led a massive effort to give English some scientific precision. The goal was to produce definitive texts of the works of the major American writers. The National Endowment for the Humanities poured vast sums into the project. In 1968 in the *New York Review of Books* Edmund Wilson, one of the ablest critics of the era, mocked the project as a colossal waste of money that had done nothing to advance the cause of the Humanities.

Then the Vietnam War released the pent-up dissatisfactions of the new

generation. In the streets, the students protested the politicians; in the halls of the academy they protested the faculty's obeisance to the establishment. That generation also spawned "The Silent Majority" that in the 1970s would take umbrage at campus militants. Much of their criticism was leveled at the Arts and Humanities. If faculty could view the Snow-Leavis controversy with a measure of detachment, they could not overlook the challenges that the student protests posed. And they could not overlook the central dramas of the 1960s—the Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam.

IN THE 70S pushes turned into shoves. The climax came after the Kent State Massacre on May 4, 1970, in which four unarmed students were gunned down by the Ohio National Guard, on campus to keep order following national protests over the bombing of Cambodia. The UNC campus, like most, erupted. Disorder and intimidation of faculty could not match that playing out at Harvard, Yale, Cornell, Wisconsin, Berkeley, but it was threatening enough. The school term here and elsewhere was declared over, though final exams lay ahead. Universities and colleges faced angry demands to play direct roles in transforming society. Their role in doing this would accelerate.

Following the withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam in 1973, literature departments could now wage the cultural wars in earnest. The groundwork had been laid by 1966 across the ocean where Jacques Derrida's poststructuralism had taken on the structuralists and the structuralist anthropologists. His poststructuralism early impacted the Yale faculty, and Yale took the lead in promoting the new theories from France.

Most dazzling was Deconstruction, a challenge to the referentiality of all language. Literature had become suspect. Graduate students began writing about "texts" rather than about novels, plays, poems, short stories. Papers and dissertations were larded with a jargon not seen before. Some attention to literary theory became mandatory for graduate students, but only a few undergraduates were attracted to it. Few outside the academy were much impressed. Deconstruction had, however, great star power, none brighter than Yale's Paul de Man. Then in 1986 a graduate student uncovered de Man's pro-Nazi writings from his years in Belgium, including the declaration that removal of Europe's Jews to Madagascar would do little damage to European literature (Kernan, 198). De Man had died in 1983, but his legacy was now badly tarnished. Words could indeed carry messages. Deconstruction did not

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then disappear, but it would not define literature departments. Graduate students could also ponder structuralism, Marxism, reader-response criticism, feminism, queer theory, post-colonialism. New Historicism, with its emphasis on the social, political, economic dimensions of a literary work, suited the era's goal of social change.⁴ Some graduate students side-stepped by opting for composition studies, a new departmental major that became promising for obtaining a job in an era of sparse openings.

Departments debated. Where was the cutting edge? What, indeed, was being cut? Where, if anywhere, was the author in the text? At Yale, Maynard Mack and Cleanth Brooks were among those who saw the turn to theory as bad for literature. Elsewhere, renowned critics Kenneth Burke, William Empson, and Wyndham Lewis were among those not in lock-step with the new direction. They had numerous allies. For several years, *The New York Times* mocked the fare of papers being presented at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association, citing titles that suggested the trivial or the obscene. In the 1980s William Bennett, chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities and later U.S. Secretary of Education, was a relentless critic of the Humanities, and argued that the Humanities should reclaim the legacy of the "Great Books." Lynne Cheney, his successor at the NEH, diagnosed the ailments in her 1988 report *Humanities in America*, and placed the blame for the ills with the professoriate. In the Introduction to his 1994 book *Reclaiming Literature*, William A. Glasser wrote: "Teachers are now challenged to reclaim each literary work from the current profusion, and accompanying confusion, of the critical camps surrounding it." A merry time to be a professor indeed.

THE COMIC AND THE SATIRIC have long been part of the vast literature featuring teachers. Increasingly, post-1950s English professors have become targets of good-natured laughter. The journey through the history of English we have just traversed requires that we give a nod to David Lodge and his clever novels *Changing Places* (1975), *Small World* (1984), and *Nice Work* (1988). They describe life on the fast-track of highly paid stars hired to bring distinction to their departments. The stars were often on leave, often abroad for a conference or on the lecture circuit.

⁴ "Literary Criticism for the Twenty-First Century" is the Special Topic in the October 2010 issue of *PMLA*.

Duke's Stanley Fish was the happy model for Lodge's Professor Morris Zapp of Euphoria State. Lodge's latest novel, *Deaf Sentence* (2008), portrays a linguistics professor, forced into retirement because of hearing loss. The impairment leads into a series of richly comic personal and professional dilemmas.

In addition to fictional portrayals, we now have a sizeable number of recent memoirs by English professors. Not surprisingly, I have been drawn to that genre. I read about lives in some ways similar to my own, and sometimes quite different—a fruitful way of contemplating where I have been and where the profession has gone. One such memoir was written with a keen sense of urgency, and I would identify it as essential reading for any college or university president, chancellor, provost, or arts and science dean. Published in 1999 by Yale University Press, *In Plato's Cave* recounts the academic career of Alvin Kernan, narrated, he tells us, “not for its own sake but as a human register of shifts in academic life” (xviii).

THE TRAJECTORY OF HIS CAREER is not one anyone would have foretold for Alvin Kernan, though his is a thoroughly American tale. A native of Saratoga, Wyoming, young Kernan entered the navy as World War II began. After the war he returned home with no very clear direction for his life other than a vague idea of taking some courses at the University in Laramie. Instead, the G.I. Bill took him to Columbia University and Williams College. B.A. from Williams secured, he decided (without much thought, he confesses) that he would become a professor of literature—a valid way to seek truth, he believed, as well as a jump in social class. Securing a B.Litt at Oxford before beginning graduate study at Yale would seem ideal for both goals. That he would also work his way up the ladder to professorship at Yale, what many judged the best department in the country, and then a deanship at Princeton might seem a perfect Horatio Alger story. But the reality was quite different.

Kernan takes us inside two famed departments, providing quite specific views of their faculties and their students. We get to savor the rigors of the Yale graduate program in the 1950s, imagine ourselves in a seminar with imposing Harold Bloom. Veterans like Kernan were sometimes married, as Kernan was when he entered the program, and had to supplement their incomes by teaching at nearby colleges serving a blue-collar population. Mainly, the courses they got were freshman composition, for many the bane of the apprenticeship that would follow the Ph.D. Those fortunate

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enough to get appointed to the junior faculty at Yale would know that chances for promotion were not high: the Ivies typically hired more junior faculty than they intended to tenure. That faculty would be paid a minimal salary. Supporting a family on it could be difficult. The Ivies were accustomed to faculty that came from wealth. Those who did not get tenure might then make their way to a Williams or another strong New England college, carrying the burden that they didn't make it at Yale. Those who did get tenure sometimes realized that only a lucky break separated them from those who had departed, perhaps that good review of the book in the right journal just in time.⁵ Kernan not only received tenure and soon a professorship, he also became Yale's first associate provost.

Ahead for those classmates who got tenure and those who found positions elsewhere would be the dizzying changes earlier described—and more besides. Kernan's listing will seem familiar. Rampant grade inflation and pass/fail options (part of the Vietnam legacy) resulted in reduced student effort and lower faculty expectations. With the Internet, plagiarism became ever more tempting. The electronic revolution altered what and how students read. The future of the printed book became uncertain.

Kernan had taken the Princeton appointment with misgivings. Was it really wise to leave Yale? Shouldn't he take Yale's generous counter-offer? But having been wearied while provost from confrontations with an angry and privileged student body, concerned about increasing involvement of federal regulations in higher education, and dubious about developments in the English profession, he hoped the change would help him escape his malaise. It didn't, of course. The new Princeton dean found himself embroiled with graduate students demanding the right to approve the courses being offered by a department. He faced numerous unpleasant encounters with students unhappy about some perceived injustice or problems with some student presenting work not his own. Dean Kernan could not avoid the "blood feud" between the department of Near Eastern studies and the department of East Asia studies. One term as dean sufficed, and Kernan returned to being a professor of English. But he

⁵ Wallace Stegner's novel *Crossing to Safety* (1987) gives a memorable depiction of the struggles of young Ph.D.s in the Depression era to obtain tenure. The account is based on Stegner's early struggles in the academy, but the novel provides much besides. It is my favorite academic novel.

was something of a loner in the Princeton department.⁶ He wrote his books and met his classes, but felt isolated. Although he felt no antipathy toward younger colleagues, he declared the sense of a “break in the continuity of generations” to be “particularly deep in literary studies, where what the older generation had written was no longer considered useful, where professional disagreements were exacerbated by the tensions of gender, race, and class, where the search for truth had largely been replaced by teaching and publication as careerism and political action” (294). Exhausted from fighting losing battles, Kernan exited the professoriate, finding a happier life as senior adviser for the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.⁷

⁶ Harsh critiques of Princeton—of any major college or university—are not new, in any period. I commend to your attention the portrait of Princeton by poet John Peale Bishop, a classmate of F. Scott Fitzgerald. Bishop summarizes the entering class of 1913: “Despite the fact that the entrance requirements of Princeton are as high as those of any university in the country, the average boy at entrance is little better than literate” (396). When in the junior year they chose their majors: “History and Economics gather the fairest crowds, with English and the Romance languages holding those who hope for an easy two years or who believe that Princeton can best be appreciated by following beautiful letters. Science, mathematics and the ancient languages keep only small and serious groups” (397). The faculty is made up mainly of “pedants and prudes” with “a few wise and gracious individuals, who are more than pedagogues and—on occasion—less than scholars” (399).

⁷ Like Kernan, Joseph Blotner was also a veteran of World War II and a product of the middle class. His college career at Drew University had been interrupted by the war, and he would spend the last eight months of the war in a German prison. Back in the States, he had no career plan, but leaned toward radio. A dean urged him to think of a career in English. With B.A. and now a wife, he faced graduate school with a sense of urgency. Blotner shares those struggles as well as the struggles to find a secure place in the profession. He did that through diligence, hard work, and the good fortune of bonding with William Faulkner while Faulkner was a visiting writer-in-residence at the University of Virginia and he an assistant professor with a chairman who was not sympathetic. Blotner became Faulkner’s authorized biographer and world-famous. He would hold professorships at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and at the University of Michigan. Although his academic work had all been in private institutions (M.A., Northwestern; Ph.D., Penn), his entire teaching career (unlike Kernan’s) had been in state schools. His memoir, *An Unexpected Life* (2005), depicts a grateful man. He escaped Kernan’s professional malaise by avoiding administration when in younger years that option presented itself, but even more by keeping his focus on his research and his writing. At the end of his career, he confessed that while teaching still offered rewards, “what I liked best was writing books and traveling to give lectures and attend conferences” (243).

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OF THE SEVERAL ACADEMIC MEMOIRS I might put next to Kernan's, I have chosen Reynolds Price's *Ardent Spirits: Leaving Home, Coming Back* (2009). Price also looks back over a long career. Like Kernan, he considers the state of education and the discipline of English from the post-World War II years through the century. But his title underscores the tonal difference, and makes clear that his purpose is different from Kernan's. Price's narrative highlights "ardent spirits" who have enriched his life. Many, but not all, of those ardent spirits are teachers. Though Price is as honest as Kernan in sharing the realities of the profession, his memoir describes a much more satisfying career, one consistently nourished by his teaching.

A precocious child, Price was early drawn to art, to storytelling, to music. Inspired by an exceptional English teacher, in tenth grade he decided that he wanted to be a writer of fiction and a poet, but also a teacher of literature. Duke University proved the right place for him to prepare for both goals. Indicative of this was the extraordinary encouragement he received from Eudora Welty during a visit she made to Duke. William Blackburn, who taught courses in the writing of prose narrative,⁸ selected Price's story for her to read. She called it "thoroughly professional," and asked if she might show it to her agent, Diarmuid Russell. Could an undergraduate aspiring writer hope for more? Stellar at Duke, Price received a coveted Oxford Fellowship to Merton College along with his bachelor's degree.

More than half of *Ardent Spirits* deals with Price's Oxford experience, which included his first travels to the continent (Rome especially touched him, demanding subsequent visits). Expectations and procedures in the British university are vastly different from those of the American university. Despite some floundering, Price mastered them in good time. Many of the faculty became lasting friends, and Price provides memorable sketches of them as well as of numerous other friends and acquaintances, a large portion of them from the arts. Price was better prepared than Kernan to make the adjustment to the British educational system, but few Americans fresh from college would have the cultural readiness that Price had. A bachelor, Price was also freer and younger than war veteran Kernan when he entered Oxford. College had sheltered him from the draft. Kernan, married at the end of his first term at Oxford, would become a father before he left England. He completed his B.Litt in the

⁸ Blackburn rejected the term "creative writing." He insisted that all writing is creative.

prescribed two years, but received an embarrassing “Third.” That would be disastrous for an Englishman, but in America having an Oxford degree was credential enough. Price, having become deeply immersed in research for his thesis on Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*, successfully petitioned the Rhodes scholarship committee for permission to extend the fellowship for a third year; he did so arguing that he hoped to pursue next the D.Phil at Oxford. With his thesis completed and examinations passed at the end of the third year, Price had also celebrated his first professional publication and had other fiction in progress. The “Coming Back” in the memoir’s subtitle takes us to the other part of Price’s career goal: teaching.

Near the end of his second year at Oxford, Price had been invited to be an instructor in a new freshman composition program at Duke, a three-year appointment, with no expectation of renewal. Ah, freshman composition: the task that English departments cannot escape. Even at selective Duke, it was thought necessary to provide such instruction. The new plan to fulfill the “service” obligation aimed to introduce students to a distinguished senior faculty in a large lecture. The senior professor was to provide an overview of the literary work that everyone would read. The students then found their place in one of the sections assigned to nine instructors. In the sections, the instructors would explore the reading in more depth, then assign a topic for a 500-word essay. Private 20-minute conferences with each student for each of the required ten essays written in the term would follow. In the conference, the instructor read and discussed the quality of the writing, eventually assigning a grade and justifying it to the student. It was, I remind you, an age of uninflated grading. Each instructor had two sections to teach. Eager to try teaching, Price quickly accepted Duke’s offer. No surprise, he usually took more pleasure in his third class: Representative British Authors, required of all majors. He nevertheless acknowledges enjoying the discovery that “just post-adolescent Americans could be taught the writing of clear and intelligent prose” (341).

Meanwhile, Price was also teaching himself to write prose fiction. Writing was always his primary task. If at Oxford research had compromised his writing, would teaching now compromise that goal? The dilemma is one that haunts creative writing teachers everywhere. It mirrors, of course, the balancing act required of the literature professor, especially in the research university. I suspect that the conflict is keener for teachers of creative writing. They practice an art that aims for the ages, what Milton

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called "a life beyond life." Biographies, memoirs, letters let us know how much angst they sometimes battle. No case is more telling than that of Walter Van Tilburg Clark, an acclaimed Random House author. You likely remember Clark as the author of *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1940). He also published two other novels and several frequently-anthologized stories, all in the 1940s. Teaching had been in Clark's blood from the start. He had taught for ten years at Cazenovia High School in New York before he became an author, writing his most famous novel there. Like Price, he wanted to teach and to write. He would do both until his death in 1971, but he published almost nothing after 1950. While teaching creative writing in various programs (the University of Nevada, Reno; San Francisco State; the University of Iowa), he wrote constantly but mainly tossed it aside. Had he been more of a careerist, he certainly would have accepted Iowa's offer to remain on the faculty. During the last nine years of his life he was writer-in-residence at the University of Nevada. To the end, he could not bear to think of himself as "a teacher of writing who could not write" (Benson, 176).

For Price, balancing a dual career would come more easily. As an instructor, he held to teaching his three courses on a Tuesday-Thursday schedule. He was exhausted on those days, but the space for his writing on the other days was carefully guarded. You know the rest. By the end of the third year of his contract, not only had Price seen several stories published, but his first novel, *A Long and Happy Life* (1960), was also before the world. When Arvin Turner, the new chairman at Duke, informed the nine instructors that they could have a fourth year while they looked for new positions, Price visited Turner to ask if he might postpone his fourth year since he had one more year at Oxford to work on the D.Litt., explaining that since he wished to teach literature, a doctorate was necessary. Turner replied that if Price kept writing fiction as he had been doing, he saw no reason that he would need a doctorate to teach at Duke.

Decades later, the James B. Duke Professor writes during the fall semester and teaches in the spring semester, a perfect balance for the realization of his youthful aspirations.⁹ Late in his long and happy career at Duke, he writes about the demands

⁹The balance between writing and teaching does not usually come so nicely. Wallace Stegner had a lengthy career directing the writing program at Stanford and was acknowledged by many to be an excellent director and teacher. But he could not escape the politics of the department and the

of his early teaching: "I loved exploring poems and novels I had long admired with students to whom they were as foreign as Tibetan sacred texts, and what a sense of reward I got from struggling to guide a number of my students into the writing of clear and accurate American English prose (though I'll have to confess that the teaching of writing became increasingly unlikeable as the years passed, and students came to us from widely spread American high schools that had essentially abandoned any such instruction)" (369). Writing would remain Price's "chief vocation" even as he counted teaching "surely my love." He acknowledges that much of that love for teaching came from the many fine teachers he had known from grade school on.

Price would not toward the end of his career suffer the malaise that Kernan experienced, though he understands that angst. He shares concern over a general decline in the national culture. He is saddened by "enslavement" to a kind of music that leaves the young "ignorant of the culture's greatest treasures" (216). He regrets the easy mores of social life that over-occupy student lives and keep them from the books and art that nourishes. (He reminds us that in the 1950s drinking on the Duke campus could lead to expulsion.) He scorns a grade inflation that makes honest assessment of work difficult. He judges that Critical Theory proved "a widespread disaster that presently blights most fields" (142). Not for a moment, however, does he depict the pre-Vietnam academy as without serious fault. There were no blacks on campus when he first started teaching. His first students on west campus were male; he taught women on the east campus. Sometimes the senior professor of those freshman lecture courses was a disaster, no inducement at all to make the students wish to major in English! Finally, however, Price's book is not about failure, but about

jealousies that success is heir to. He much preferred the writing life. When William Styron turned down an offer to teach at Stanford, Stegner wrote him: "I would be the first to think that what you're writing is a hell of a lot more important than what you might be saying to Stanford students" (Fradkin 157). Fradkin's biography of Stegner, like Jackson J. Benson's *Wallace Stegner: His Life and Work* (1996), provides good entry into the inner workings of English departments, especially as they relate to creative writing programs. Stegner knew the American university intimately. See also *The Selected Letters of Wallace Stegner*, ed. Page Stegner (2007). Letters regarding "Stanford: 1945-1971" are packaged on pages 295-322.

the ardent spirits who shaped him as writer, teacher, and friend.¹⁰

"Creative writing teacher" would be too limiting a designation to identify Professor Price: he regularly teaches the work of Milton and courses in the Gospel narratives. But Price's career allows me to accent another trend in English departments, the proliferation and expansion of creative writing programs. In 1950, if you wanted to become a successful novelist or poet you didn't go to Harvard or Yale; you went to Iowa or Stanford. Elsewhere, possibilities were modest. But campuses usually had students writing poems or stories, looking to publish them in the campus literary magazine. Some students had larger ambitions, and departments began to feel an obligation to meet them. MFA programs multiplied. And so did opportunities for undergraduates with the yen to write. That meant hiring more creative writing teachers. Creative writing teachers do not enter their departments in the way that their colleagues do. They do not usually attend the Modern Language Association convention to be interviewed. Usually, they do not have the Ph.D., have never studied Anglo-Saxon. Obviously, the cultures and politics of departments shift with the arrival of the new colleagues.

IT BECOMES TEMPTING TO PONDER the reasons that departments have welcomed such expansion. The rise of creative writing happened in the context of the other dramas of the profession. While debates occur about the decline of "literature" and while graduate students write dissertations about

¹⁰ For a look inside the liberal arts college near the end of the twentieth century, see P.F. Kluge's *Alma Mater: A College Homecoming*. Like Price, Kluge is an alumnus of the institution where he trained, a popular teacher in its English Department, and a successful novelist. Kenyon College is especially famous for its English department, and the boast is that undergraduates at Kenyon write poetry the way that they play football at Ohio State. When John Crowe Ransom joined the Kenyon department in 1937, some outstanding talent followed. Randall Jarrell, Robert Lowell, Peter Taylor, E. L. Doctorow, and James Wright earned Kenyon degrees. Kluge portrays the college in the decades after the great flourishing of the New Criticism. He freely shares faculty reaction to the changes in the profession at large. Perry Lentz, his colleague and former chair of the department, declared: "I've seen more cutting edges come and go than—what's an assemblage of cutting edges?—a Cuisinart" (81). Like Price, Kluge is a loving critic of the profession and of his alma mater.

“texts,” the creative writing teachers continue to write novels, short stories, poems, plays. Their students are doing the same. If the infusion of literary theory and its specialized vocabularies befuddle the public, the public can still love “English.” Novels, stories, poetry—these still resonate with the larger public. They enjoy the readings by the creative writing teachers. The community and the campus eagerly await and then attend the lectures and readings of distinguished visiting writers, as on this campus the Thomas Wolfe Lectureship and the Morgan Writer-in-Residence program demonstrate. In my view, creative writing has provided a useful ballast for the modern English department.

OTHER “PROGRAMS” WITHIN HUMANITIES departments in the postmodern era have proliferated—theory studies, post-colonial studies, material culture studies, disability studies, literature and public policy, eco-criticism, to name a few. But a deep recession has put a brake to “add-on” strategies. Costs for college educations have risen far beyond other costs. Numerous pundits are asking if the public is getting good measure for the dollars. Online study becomes increasingly seen as the economical approach. Some “experts” argue that it provides superior instruction. Administrators are tempted. Does it matter if the teacher becomes a faceless entity? Others argue that the academy is sacrificing education for training.

It is wise to keep in mind that while educating, the Humanities are also training. The Humanities train students to consider alternate points of view, to weigh arguments, to defend a position in light of the evidence. They seek to train students to use effective language—in writing and in speaking. But they do more. They teach students to “appreciate” skillful art and to look for what is “good” and enduring. They help them to understand the role of ambiguity, of nuance, in an art form and how that form aims to tell “truth.” An education in the Humanities, ideally, is advanced training in being human.

MAYNARD ADAMS was ever a hopeful and optimistic man. He judged the American university to be the great hope of our society. Without it, we would enter a very dark age. For him, the Humanities were not window dressing, but necessary if

Teacher!
Teacher!
*Professing the
Humanities in
a Postmodern
World*

we are to have a “society fit for human beings.”¹¹ Much in current American culture would concern him: underperformance at every level of education, rampant illiteracy, increasing economic disparity, the low level of much public discourse, intolerance on many fronts. The society’s record since he left us in 2003 is not good. But were he with us now, he would not despair. He would urge the Humanities onward, dare I say upward. Chalk it up to his Baptist roots.¹²

I suspect that most teachers in the Humanities share some of that evangelical zeal. I am reminded of Ernest Hemingway’s statement about the writing life in his Nobel Prize Acceptance Statement: “if he is a good enough writer he must face eternity, or the lack of it, each day” (134). The teacher shares something of that isolation each time he or she enters the classroom, judging himself/herself afterwards on the outcome of the day’s challenge. As Hemingway’s metaphor from the Nobel statement indicates, for the writer at his lonely task, sometimes “Grace happens.” I am going to let a work of fiction make the case. It happens to William Stoner, English teacher at fledgling University of Missouri, in John Williams’s novel *Stoner* (1965). Stoner had entered the University as a freshman in 1910, intending to take a degree in agriculture and then return to the farm to help his father. But he becomes intrigued by the power of words and decides to major in English, proceeding to the Ph.D. and then an instructorship, all at Missouri. Not much good happens to Stoner after he gets the instructorship. He finds himself in an unhappy marriage and the target of the enmity of a long-reigning chairman, who refuses support for the scholarship that Stoner yearns to do, punishes him with teaching assignments that are meant to break him, and blocks all promotion. Stoner’s ability to endure, yea prevail, comes from the self-assurance that, after initial floundering, he discovered in the classroom. Williams

¹¹ Although Adams would never join Irving Babbitt in his attacks on the Romantics, especially Jean-Jacques Rousseau as the supreme arch-enemy, his goal for the Humanities is not dissimilar to that of Babbitt. For Babbitt’s “to produce men of quality,” let us, embracing Adams’s democratic instinct, substitute “to produce men and women of quality.” That is indeed a society fit for human beings.

¹² I met and appreciated Maynard Adams soon after I arrived on this campus. In succeeding years, I heard him speak on several occasions. He never wrote a memoir, but Glenn Blackburn’s biography of him provides much of the flavor and vision of the founder of The Program in the Humanities and Human Values. Blackburn calls Adams a “frontier thinker” (352).

describes the transformation:

But during the weeks when Edith was in St. Louis, when he lectured, he now and then found himself so lost in his subject that he became forgetful of his inadequacy, of himself, and even of the students before him. Now and then he became so caught by his enthusiasm that he stuttered, gesticulated, and ignored the lecture notes that usually guided his talks. At first he was disturbed by his outbursts, as if he presumed too familiarly upon his subject, and he apologized to his students; but when they began coming up to him after class, and when in their papers they began to show hints of imagination and the revelation of a tentative love, he was encouraged to do what he had never been taught to do.

The love of literature, of language, of the mystery of the mind and heart showing themselves in the minute, strange, and unexpected combinations of letters and words, in the blackest and coldest print—the love which he had hidden as if it were illicit and dangerous, he began to display, tentatively at first, and then boldly, and then proudly. (112-13)

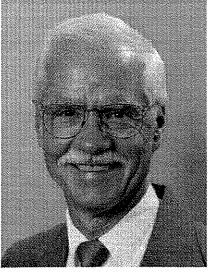
When Stoner is dying of cancer years later, his promotion is rushed through, and the department hosts a party in his honor. Called to speak, flatly, weakly, Stoner says: “I have taught at this University for nearly forty years. I do not know what I would have done if I had not been a teacher. If I had not taught, I might have—” He paused, as if distracted. Then he said with finality, ‘I want to thank you for letting me teach’” (266).

There you have it: the very audience that Sir Thomas More in *A Man for All Seasons* defined for the teacher.

And now I thank you for your concern for the problems and the promise of the Humanities and for considering with me this afternoon the teachers who have marched and will march under its banner.

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has served as associate dean of the Graduate School and as Acting Director of the Center for the Study of the American South. He has held positions in numerous professional organizations, including presidency of The Thomas Wolfe Society. His research has focused on the American West, the American South, and on the works of Ernest Hemingway. His most recent book (2009) is *Reading Hemingway's Men Without Women*. He is also author of *Hemingway's Nick Adams*, which received The Mayflower Prize from the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association, 1982, and *Ernest Hemingway: A Study of the Short Fiction*, 1989. He authored books on Vardis Fisher, William Ernest Henley, and Frederick Manfred. His several edited books include *The Companion to Southern Literature and Southern Writers: A New Biographical Dictionary*, which received the Jules and Frances Landry Award, 2006.

THE ADAMS LECTURE was created to honor E. M. Adams (1919-2003), who was Kenan Professor of Philosophy at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Professor Adams served as chair of the Department of Philosophy, as Chair of the Faculty, and received the University's Thomas Jefferson Award. He played a pivotal role in creating the Program in the Humanities and Human Values and chaired its Advisory Board for its first seven years. Professor Adams was one of America's most visionary philosophers. He wrote or edited twelve books, including *A Society Fit for Human Beings*. Much of his scholarly work addressed the importance of the humanities in understanding and improving the human condition. Through the Adams Lectureship, the Humanities Program hopes to nurture a greater appreciation of the humanities and human values. The Adams Lecture is supported by the Roger M. and May Belle Penn Jones Fund.

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