THE ENGLISH MAJOR

LATELY, WHEN THE time of year comes for college sophomores to trundle off to the offices of their faculty advisers to declare their majors, it's not hard to predict what's going to happen. There will be more economics majors surely and more business majors too. What there almost certainly won't be are more English majors. The English major has been declining drastically over the past decades. In 1970, about 8 percent of students were English majors; by 2004 (the last date for which figures are available), it was 4 percent. By now it may be down to 2 or 3. It's distressing to me, and not just because I happen to be an English prof. I think that a lot of students are making a mistake—losing one of the greatest chances life offers. If I could, I'd yell over the transoms of my colleagues' offices in economics and business and all the other purportedly success-ensuring disciplines.

I'd tell the kids to drop what they were doing and get themselves over to the English department. I'd tell them to sign on before it was too late.

An English major, you see, is much more than thirty-two or

thirty-six credits including a course in Shakespeare, a course on writing before 1800, and a three-part survey of English and American lit. That's the outer form of the endeavor. It's what's inside that matters. It's the character forming—or (dare I say?) Soul-making—dimension of the pursuit that counts. And what is that precisely? Who is the English major in his ideal form? What does the English major have and what does he want and what does he in the long run hope to become?

The English major is, first of all, a reader. She's got a book pup-tented in front of her nose many hours a day; her Kindle glows softly late into the night. But there are readers and there are *readers*. There are people who read to anesthetize themselves—they read to induce a vivid, continuous, and risk-free daydream. They read for the same reason that people grab a glass of chardonnay—to put a light buzz on. The English major reads because as rich as the one life he has may be, one life is not enough. He reads not to see the world through the eyes of other people but effectively to *become* other people. What is it like to be John Milton, to be Jane Austen, to be Chinua Achebe? What is it like to be them at their best, at the top of their games? The English major wants the joy of seeing the world through the eyes of people who—let us admit it—are more sensitive, more articulate, shrewder, sharper, more alive than they themselves are. The experience of changing minds and hearts with Proust or James or Austen is one that is incomparably enriching. It makes you see that there is more to the world than you had ever imagined was possible. You see that life is bigger, sweeter, more tragic and intense—more alive with meaning than you had thought.

Real reading is *reincarnation*. There is no other way to put it. It is being born again into a higher form of consciousness than

we ourselves possess. When we walk the streets of Manhattan with Walt Whitman or contemplate our hopes for eternity with Emily Dickinson, we are reborn into more ample and generous minds. "Life piled on life / Were all too little," says Tennyson's Ulysses, and he is right. Given the ragged magnificence of the world, who would wish to live only once? The English major lives many times through the astounding transportive magic of words and the welcoming power of his receptive imagination. The economics major? In all probability he lives but once. If the English major has the wherewithal for it, the energy and the openness of heart, he lives not once but hundreds of times. Not all books are worth being reincarnated into, to be sure—but those that are win Keats's sweet phrase: "a joy forever."

The economics major lives in facts and graphs and diagrams and projections. Fair enough. Without these things, we are told (and perhaps in part believe) there would be no civilized world. But the English major lives elsewhere. Remember the tale of that hoary patriarchal fish that David Foster Wallace made famous? The ancient swimmer swishes his slow bulk by a group of young carp suspended in the shallows. "How's the water?" the ancient asks. The carp keep their poise, like figures in a child's mobile, but say not a word. The old fish gone, one carp turns to another and speaks the signal line, "What's water?"

The English major knows that the water we humans swim in is not any material entity. Our native habitat is language, words, and the English major swims through them with the old fin's enlivening awareness. But all of us, as the carp's remark suggests, live in a different relation to language. I'll put it a little tendentiously: Some of us speak, others are spoken. "Language speaks man," Heidegger famously said. To which I want to reply, Not all men, not all women: not by a long shot. Did lan-

guage speak Shakespeare? Did language speak Spenser? Not by a long shot. Milton, Chaucer, Woolf, Emerson? No, not even close.

What does it mean to be spoken by language? It means to be a vehicle for expression and not a shaper of words. It means to rely on clichés and preformulated expressions. It means to be a channeler, and what you channel is ad-speak and sports jargon and the latest in psychological babble. You sound not like a living man or a woman but like something much closer to a machine, trying to pass for human. You never know how you feel or what you want in life because the words at your disposal are someone else's words and don't represent who *you* are and what *you* want. You don't and can't know yourself. You don't and can't know the world.

The businessman rattles about excellence and leadership and partnering and productivity. The athlete clones away about the game plan and the coach and one play at a time and the inestimable blessing of having teammates who make it all possible. The politician proses about unity and opportunity and national greatness and what's in it for the middle class. When such people talk, they are not so much human beings as they are tape loops.

The essayist John Jeremiah Sullivan catches this sort of sensibility in its extreme form in an essay about reality TV shows. There, verbal channeling reaches an almost unimaginable degree of intensity: "big mouths spewing fantastic catchphrase fountains of impenetrable self-justification; spewing dark prayers calling on God to strike down those who would fuck with their money, their cash, and always knowing, always preaching. Using weird phrases that nobody uses except that everybody uses them now. Constantly talking about 'goals.'" "Fantastic

catchphrase fountains of impenetrable self-justification": Yeah, that's about it.

The English major at her best isn't used by language; she uses it. She bends it and tropes it and inflects it with irony and lets hyperbole bloom like a firework flower when the time's right. She knows that language isn't there merely to represent the world as it is, was, and shall be. Language is there to *interpret* the world—language lets her say how she feels and lets others know.

The English major believes in talk and writing and knows that any worthwhile event in life requires commentary and analysis in giant proportion. She believes that the uncommented-upon life is not worth living. Then, of course, there is the commentary upon the comments. There must be, as Eliot says, a thousand visions and revisions before the taking of the toast and tea—and a few after as well to accompany the capons and the sack.

But I sometimes think that the English major's most habitual feeling about the linguistic solution in which she swims isn't practical at all. What she feels about language most of the time is wonder and gratitude. For language is a stupendous gift. It's been bequeathed to us by all of the foregoing generations. And it is the creation of great souls like Shakespeare and Chaucer to be sure. But language is also the creation of salesmen and jive talkers, jocks and mountebanks, hookers and heroic warriors. We spend our lives, knowingly or not, trying to say something impeccably. We long to put the right words in the right order. (That, Coleridge said, is all that poetry really comes down to.) And when we do, we are on the lip of adding something to the language. We've perhaps made a contribution, however small, to what the critic R.P. Blackmur called the stock of available reality. And when we do, we've lived for a moment with the

immortals. Richard Poirier once called poetry the Olympics of Language—precisely so.

I love Wordsworth and Shakespeare and Donne. But I like it when a fellow pickup b-ball player points to a nervous guy skittering off to the bathroom just as the game's about to start: "He's taking a chicken pee." Yup—hit it on the head. I like it when in the incomparable "Juicy," Biggie Smalls describes coming up in life by letting us know that once "Birthdays was the worst days / Now we sip champagne when we thirs-tay." (And to advertise his new erotic ascent: "Honeys play me close like butter play toast.") Language, a great poem in and of itself, is all around us. We live in the lap of enormous wonder, but how rarely do most of us look up and smile in gratitude and pleasure? The English major does that all the time.

The English major: in love with language and in love with life—or at least hungry for as much life as he can hold. But there's something else, too. The English major immerses himself in books and revels in language for a purpose. You might even call it a high purpose, if you're disposed to such talk. (I sometimes am.) The English major wants to use what he knows about language and what he's learning from books as a way to confront the hardest of questions. He uses these things to try to figure out how to live. His life is an open-ended work in progress and it's never quite done, at least until he is. For to the English major the questions of life are never closed. There's always another book to read; there's always another perspective to add. He might think that he knows what's what as to love and marriage and the raising of children. But he's never quite sure. He takes tips from the wise and the almost wise that he confronts in books and sometimes (if he's stupendously lucky) in life. He measures them and sifts them and brings them to the

court of his own experience. (There is a creative reading as well as a creative writing, Emerson said.) He's always ready to change his mind. Darwin on nature—or Wordsworth? Freud on love, or Percy Bysshe Shelley? Blake on sex, or Arthur Schopenhauer? Or perhaps none of the above. He doesn't give up his view easily, but it's nonetheless always up for debate and open for change. He's an unfinished guy, she's an unfinished woman. Which can be embarrassing and discomfiting from time to time, when he's with the knowing ones, the certain ones: those who are, often in all too many ways, finished.

Love for language, hunger for life, openness and a quest for truth or truths: Those are the qualities of my English major in the ideal form. But of course now we're talking about more than a mere academic major. We're talking about a way of life. We're talking about a way of living that places inquiry into how to live in the world—what to be, how to act, how to move through time—at its center. What we're talking about is a path to becoming a human being, or at least a better sort of human being than one was at the start. An English major? To me an English major is someone who has decided, against all kinds of pious, prudent advice and all kinds of fears and resistances, to major, quite simply, in becoming a person. Once you've passed that particular course of study—or at least made some significant progress on your way—then maybe you're ready to take up something else.

MY FIRST INTELLECTUAL

DOUG MEYERS CAME to Medford High School with big plans for teaching his philosophy course. Together with a group of self-selected seniors, he was going to ponder the eternal questions: beauty, truth, free will, fate, that sort of thing. The class would start out reading *The Story of Philosophy*, by Will Durant, then go on to Plato's dialogues, some Aristotle, Leibniz (a particular favorite of Meyers's), maybe just a little bit of Kant, then into a discussion of Bertrand Russell's effort to clear the whole thing up with an injection of clean scientific logic. Meyers had just graduated from Harvard. All of his intellectual aspirations were intact.

On the first day of class, we saw a short, slight man with olive skin—we thought he might be Mexican—wearing a skinny tie and a moth-eaten legacy suit with a paper clip fastened to the left lapel. On his feet were Ivy League gunboat shoes, lace-ups designed in homage to the *Monitor* and the *Merrimack*. He had hunched shoulders, a droopy black mustache, and Valentino-type eyes, deep brown, sensuous, and penitential. Even when he strove for some dynamism, as he did that first day, explaining

his plans for the course, he still had a melancholy Castilian presence, the air of an instinctively comprehending reader of *Don Quixote*.

Having outlined the course, he turned away from us and began writing on the blackboard, in a script neater than any we would see from him again. It was a quotation from Nietzsche. He told us to get out our papers and pens and spend a couple of pages interpreting the quote "as a limbering-up exercise." I had never heard of Nietzsche. I had never read all the way through a book that was written for adults and that was not concerned exclusively with football.

The day before, I'd sat in the office of Mrs. Olmstead, the senior guidance counselor, whose perfume conjured up the sound of Mantovani's string section, sentimental, lush, and all-enfolding. We talked about Massachusetts Bay Community College, Salem State Teachers College; we discussed my working for the city of Medford—perhaps I'd start by collecting barrels, then graduate in time to a desk job (my father had some modest connections). I mentioned joining the marines. (I might have made it in time for the Cambodia invasion.) Nothing was resolved.

As I was mumbling my way out the door, Mrs. Olmstead began talking about a new teacher who was coming to the school, "someone we're especially proud to have." He was scheduled to teach philosophy. I didn't know what philosophy was, but I associated it with airy speculation, empty nothing; it seemed an agreeable enough way of wasting time.

So there I was in a well-lit top-floor room, wearing, no doubt, some sharp back-to-school ensemble, pegged pants and sporty dice-in-the-back-alley shoes, mildly aching from two or three football-inflected injuries, and pondering the Nietzsche

quotation, which I could barely understand. I felt dumb as a rock, a sentiment with which I, at seventeen, had some prior experience. But by putting the quotation on the board, Meyers showed me that in at least one department his powers of comprehension were a few notches lower than mine. He had misunderstood Medford High School entirely. The appearances had taken him in. No doubt he'd strolled through the building on the day before students arrived; he'd seen desks, chalkboards, large windows that slid up and open with a cheering metallic gurgle, supply closets stocked full of paper and books, all the paraphernalia of education. He had seen those things and he'd believed that he was in a school, a place where people quested, by their lights and by fits and starts, for the truth, its elaborations and its antitheses.

But I had acquired a few facts that Meyers would not have been primed to receive at Harvard, or at prep school, or at any of the other places where he had filled his hours. Medford High School, whatever its appearances, was not a school. It was a place where you learned to do—or were punished for failing in—a variety of exercises. The content of these exercises didn't matter at all. What mattered was form—repetition and form. You filled in the blanks, conjugated, declined, diagrammed, defined, outlined, summarized, recapitulated, positioned, graphed. It did not matter what: English, geometry, biology, history, all were the same. The process treated your mind as though it was a body part capable of learning a number of protocols, simple choreographies, then repeating, repeating.

Our bodies themselves were well monitored. When the bell rang, we rose and filed into the corridor, stayed in line, spoke quietly if at all, entered the next class, were ordered to sit down, sit quietly, feet beneath the desk, all day long presided over by

teachers, a significant fraction of whom were going—at greater or lesser velocities, ending sometimes with a bang, sometimes with subdued, heart-emptying sobs—out of their minds. At least two that I can remember had been mastered by a peculiar form of speech: You couldn't say they were talking to themselves, but they were not clearly addressing anyone on the outside, either. Poetry, Mill said, is not heard but overheard. This was overheard, but no way close to poetry. This was the way souls in purgatory mutter and carry on. When these teachers were overwhelmed—it wasn't hard to do: We stole Miss McDougle's rank book; we locked her once, briefly, in the supply closet—they called for a submaster, Sal Todaro, or, more feared, Dan O'Mara, Dandy Dan, to restore order. The place was a shabby Gothic cathedral consecrated to Order, and maybe it was not without its mercies. If you'd done what you should have at Medford High, the transition into a factory, into an office, into the marines would be something you'd barely notice; it would be painless, sheer grease.

Before Meyers arrived, I never rebelled against the place, at least not openly. I didn't in part because I believed that Medford High was the only game there was. The factories where my father and uncles worked were extensions of the high school; the TV shows we watched were manufactured to fit the tastes for escape that such places form; the books we were assigned to read in class, *Ivanhoe*, *Silas Marner*, *The Good Earth*, of which I ingested about fifty pages each, could, as I saw it then (I've never had the wherewithal to check back into them), have been written by the English teachers, with their bland, babbling goodness and suppressed hysterias. Small bursts of light came

through in the Beethoven symphonies my father occasionally played at volume on our ancient stereo (the music sounded like it was coming in over a walkie-talkie) and the Motown tunes I heard on Boston's black radio station, WILD, but these sounds were not connected to any place or human possibility I knew about. So I checked out. I went low to the ground, despondent, suspicious, asleep in the outer self, barely conscious within.

This condition Doug Meyers changed. That now, however imperfectly, I can say what's on my mind, and that I know what kind of life I hope for, I owe not to him alone, of course, but to many. Doug Meyers pushed open the door to those others, though, other worlds, other minds. And pretty much on his own, Meyers taught me how to teach. I'm not sure if I've ever heard his sort of approach described before, but I think it's as good now as it was when I first encountered him almost thirty years ago.

For three months, Meyers did his best with Will Durant and *The Story of Philosophy*. We barely gave him an inch. Gubby Shea (Kevin Shea on his report cards and disciplinary citations) made enormous daisy chains out of the elastics he used to bind the advertising circulars he delivered in Jamaica Plain and Mattapan on Saturday mornings or sat, his body tight with concentrated energy, inking in all of the *o*'s in the textbook, a brilliant, futile parody of life at Medford High. Jeff Stanwick pried tufts of grass off the soles of his soccer cleats; Michael de Leo and John Aquino, wide receiver and quarterback for the Medford Mustangs (I blocked for them, sporadically), contemplated pass plays and the oncoming game with Newton, or Somerville, or Everett. Debbie Lauria was high school beautiful. Susan Rosenberg, the school's only hippie—she wore wire-rimmed glasses

and work boots—conversed with Meyers on subjects no one else cared about. She and Joseph Jones were about the only ones with anything to say.

Joseph was a hater. He hated communism, hated drugs, hated women's lib (as it was then called), hated Susan, hated Meyers. He was stumpy and strong with acne on his face so livid it looked like someone had sprayed it on that morning. He wore Sears Roebuck short-sleeved, stain-holding shirts that reeked of the night shift. Joseph called himself conservative, but he was only that because he hadn't yet encountered a recruiter from a brownshirt operation.

Meyers wrote him off from the start. He didn't try to convert Joseph or to understand his painful home life or to contact his suppressed inner self. By indulging Joseph a little, putting his blather into cogent form for him and us, Meyers might have "gotten a good discussion going"—every teacher's dream. Instead Meyers talked with serene intelligence to Susan and anyone else who cared to volunteer and treated Joseph with subtle, and occasionally not so subtle, derision.

For Meyers thought well of himself. He wouldn't pander. And we all wondered, if unspokenly, where this guy might have gotten his considerable lode of self-esteem. Teachers, as we could have told him, were losers, out-and-out. And this one in particular wasn't strong or tough or worldly. He wore ridiculous clothes, old formal suits and that weird paper clip in his lapel; he talked like a dictionary; his accent was overcultivated, queer, absurd. He was a compendium of odd mannerisms, starting with the way he swung his right hand from the wrist laterally as he spoke. Yet he thought highly of himself. And not much at all, it wasn't difficult to see, of us. Except for Susan, whom he addressed in affectionate tones, Meyers spoke to the class with

perpetual irony. He mocked us, and not always so genially, for never doing the reading, never knowing the answer, never having a thought in our heads. We were minor-league fools, his tone implied, for ignoring this chance to learn a little something before being fed live and whole to what was waiting. For our part, we sat back, let him wrangle with Joseph, and waited to see what would turn up.

One day in mid-December or so, Meyers walked in and told us to pass back our copies of *The Story of Philosophy.* Then he told us that he had some other books for us to read but that we'd have to pay for them ourselves. (Gubby Shea piped up immediately to say that this was fine with him, since he'd finished inking in the *o*'s of the Durant.) Meyers, it turned out, had asked no one's permission to do this; it just struck him as a good idea to try to get people who never picked up a book to do some reading by giving them work that might speak to their experience. At Medford High, this qualified as major educational innovation, real breakthrough thinking. And of course there were plenty of rules against using books that hadn't been approved by the school board, weren't purchased through public funding, and so on.

The books that Meyers picked were on a theme, though I had no idea of that at the time. *The Stranger, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego, Siddhartha*: The first three were about the oppressions of conformity (among other things), the last about the Buddha's serene, fierce rebellion against it. We were all weighed down by conformity, Meyers knew. And he also knew that we, his self-selected seniors, were oppressors in our own right, passing on the ways of the system to the weaker, homelier, duller kids. These were

revelations that emerged slowly for us as we talked not just about the high school and its day-to-day machinations but also about sports, sororities, circles of friends and families and what they closed out. We learned to use some unfamiliar language to talk about ourselves and so became, for a few moments at a time, strangers in our own lives, the subjects of new kinds of understanding and judgment.

I don't want to idealize this process. For the first few weeks, since virtually no one but Susan would read a book at home, we simply sat in a circle and read the pages aloud in turn. Periodically Meyers would ask a question, and usually, in the beginning, it was he who would answer it or decide finally to let it drop. One day, when we were reading *The Stranger*, Meyers asked us about solitude. What does it mean to be alone? Is it possible? What would it mean to be genuinely by oneself? Susan Rosenberg raised her hand, no doubt ready to treat us to a description of Zen meditation and its capacity to melt the ego beyond solitude into pure nothingness. But Meyers must have seen something ripple across Debbie Lauria's beautiful face. He gestured in her direction, though she hadn't volunteered.

Debbie was a high school princess, a sorority girl whose autobiography, I'd have guessed, would have translated into a graph peaking from prom to prom, with soft valleys of preparation in between. What Debbie did was run through a litany of defenses against being alone. She mentioned listening to the radio and talking on the phone, then playing the songs and conversations over in her mind, and myriad other strategies, ending, perceptively enough, with expectation, our habit of blocking out the present by waiting for things to happen in the future. But Debbie did not express herself with detachment. She said "I": "This is how I keep from being alone."

"And why," asked Meyers, "is it hard to be alone?"

"Because," Debbie answered, "I might start to think about things."

Debbie had been, up until that point, one of the Elect, predestined for all happiness; suddenly she had gone over to the terminally Lost. One of the great sources of grief for those who suffer inwardly is their belief that others exist who are perpetually and truly happy. From the ranks of the local happy few, Debbie had just checked out, leaving some effective hints about those she'd left behind.

The book that mattered to me wasn't *The Stranger*, which had gotten Debbie going, or Freud's book on the herd instinct (when I was writing my dissertation, a literary critical reading of Freud, my working text of *Group Psychology* was, somehow, the one that had belonged to Gubby Shea, with the *o*'s colored in to about page 20), but Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. It's a hard book for me to read now, with its pumped-up cartoon hero, Randall Patrick McMurphy. But at the time it was everything. I read it in a lather, running through it in about ten hours straight, then starting in again almost immediately.

But that didn't happen right off. It was probably on the fifth day of reading the book out loud in class that a chance remark Meyers made caught my attention, or what there was of it then to catch. He said that prisons, hospitals, and schools were on a continuum, controlling institutions with many of the same protocols and objectives, and that Kesey, with his bitter portrait of the mental hospital, might be seen as commenting on all these places.

This idea, elementary as it was, smacked me with the force of revelation. Here was a writer who was not on the side of the teachers, who in fact detested them and their whole virtuous

apparatus. That the book was in part crude and ugly I knew even at the time: Blacks in it are twisted sadists, the women castrators or sweet whores. But it was the antiauthoritarian part that swept me in; here was someone who found words, gorgeous, graffiti-size, and apocalyptic, for what in me had been mere inchoate impulses, dumb groans of the spirit laboring away in its own darkness.

"You can't like that book anymore," said a well-meaning, department-broken professor of English I ran into after giving a lecture in California. "You used to be able to like it, but not anymore," he said, not smugly, not knowingly, but a little wistfully. I understood what he meant, but I couldn't share the genteel sentiment. That book pulled me out of where I was. So it wasn't angelic: If you'll consent only to being saved by an angel, you may have some time to wait.

During the period when we were reading Kesey aloud and discussing him, Doug Meyers started bringing things into class. Every Friday we got some music: I remember hearing Billie Holiday, Mozart, the Incredible String Band, the Velvet Underground. The selection standard was simple—things he liked that we probably would not have heard. He also showed us art books, read a poem from time to time, and brought in friends of his to explain themselves. Meyers loved the things he offered us, but he loved them in a quirky way: He seemed to look affectionately askance at everything he cared about. What love you could find in Medford culture, where you could find it, wasn't always so easy to distinguish from the mechanism of hunger and satiety.

A panel of Students for a Democratic Society members appeared one day to debate the Vietnam War with us. (Most of us

were in favor.) One February day, a group of black students burst into the room during class and announced that this was the anniversary of Malcolm X's death. Meyers looked up mildly from his place in the circle and asked the foremost of them, "And when was he born, Malcolm Little?" The young man, knew, or said he did, and gave a date. Meyers nodded and invited them to sit down and talk about politics. It was the first time I'd had an extended conversation about these things with black students, and more than a few followed. These discussions didn't stop the ongoing racial guerrilla war at Medford High, but they were something.

As time went on, word spread around the school that odd things were happening in Meyers's classroom. It was known that once, on a torpid winter day, he brought us all outside for a snowball fight. Joseph—no surprise—got it going by heaving a jagged ice chunk, caveman style, at Meyers. Meyers, who looked that day like a Mexican padre, with his long black coat and broad-brimmed black hat, responded by trying to pitch Joseph into a snowbank. Meyers was ill coordinated but determined. From where I stood, it looked as if Joseph was being attacked by a giant crow. When Joseph shook the snow off his parka and stepped up for retaliation, a bunch of us pelted him with snowballs.

As the weather warmed up, the class occasionally went outside to sit on the grass and hold discussions. This sometimes resulted in one or two of us nodding off, but Meyers didn't much care; he had most of us most of the time now. He sat cross-legged, wise-medicine-man-style, and swung his wrist and laughed, and we answered the questions he asked, because what he thought mattered probably did. It was a first,

this outdoors business; no one at Medford High would have imagined doing it.

One Thursday afternoon, just as we were wrapping up a discussion of Thoreau, Meyers gave us a solemn, mischievous look, the sort of expression shrewd old rabbis are supposed to be expert in delivering, and said, "There's been some doubt expressed about our going outside." Then he told a story. In the faculty cafeteria, with plenty of the other teachers milling around, Meyers had been approached by Dandy Dan O'Mara, the submaster, the disciplinarian. O'Mara had the sly bullying style of a hard Irish cop. He had a barroom face, red nose, watery eyes, the hands of someone who worked for a living. He was stepping up to put Meyers in his place.

O'Mara got rapidly to the point. What would happen, he'd asked Meyers, if everyone held class outside? Now, this was familiar stuff to us all. O'Mara's question came out of that grand conceptual bag that also contained lines like "Did you bring gum for everyone?" and "Would you like to share that note with the whole class?" O'Mara was trying to treat Meyers like a student, like one of us, and in front of his colleagues. At Medford High, there were two tribes, us and them. Meyers had defied the authorities; clearly he had become one of *them*, a student, of no use or interest whatever. But in fact Meyers was of no particular clan but his own, the tribe of rootless, free-speculating readers and talkers and writers who owe allegiance first to a pile of books that they've loved, and then, only secondly, to other things.

O'Mara did not know this. Nor did he know that Meyers, however diminutive, mild, and Mandarinly self-effacing, thought himself something of a big deal. So O'Mara would not have been prepared when Meyers drew an easy breath and did what

every high school kid would like to do when confronted with this sort of bullying. He didn't fight it, didn't stand on his dignity. He simply ran with it. What if everyone held class outside on sunny days? Suppose that happened? And from there, Meyers went on to draw a picture of life at Medford High School—a picture that had people outside on the vast lawn talking away about books and ideas and one thing and another, hanging out, being lazy and being absorbed, thinking hard from time to time, and reveling in the spring. It was Woodstock and Socrates' agora fused, and Meyers spun it out for us, just as he had for O'Mara. What if that happened, he asked us (and the submaster)? How tragic would it be?

This vision of the renovated school took a long time to unfold, and it had something like a musical form, ebbing and rising, threading back through major themes and secondary motifs. And in my mind's eye, I could see O'Mara wilting, growing too small for his wrinkled, sad clothes. He would soon know, as we did, that Meyers could produce plenty more of this (he was the most eloquent man I'd met) and that it was time to cut and run. What struck me about the performance (and I believed Meyers's rendition of it, word for word—he was unfailingly, often unflatteringly honest) was that it was done with words alone, nothing equivalent to the body blows Kesey's R.P. McMurphy specializes in.

We went outside whenever we chose to after that. It was very odd: I had been at Medford High for three years, and I had never seen O'Mara's side lose a round. I'd seen a kid from the city's preeminent street gang, the South Medford Bears, spit in a teacher's face, but soon enough the police wagon was there and the big boy was trussed and bawling and on the way to jail. After class was over on the day that Meyers told us the O'Mara

story, John Aquino, the quarterback of the football team and very little in line with the stereotype, said to me, "You know, Meyers can really be an asshole when he wants to be." In Medford, there were fifty intonations you could apply to the word *asshole*. Spun right, the word constituted high praise.

O'Mara was a broad target. America was in crisis then; people were assuming intense allegorical identities—pig, peacenik, hawk, dove. O'Mara had turned into an ugly monolith, at least in our eyes. In Asia, the Vietcong were making fools of his spiritual brethren, Johnson, Westmoreland, McNamara, and the rest. His sort was on the run. In the next few years it would get even worse for them. But Meyers, for his part, hadn't treated O'Mara as among the lost, even though he probably had it coming. Instead he'd invited him to a party, an outdoor extravaganza. At the time, O'Mara surely couldn't discern the invitation in Meyers's extended aria, but who knows what he might have seen later on as he turned it all over in his mind.

That year of teaching was the last for Doug Meyers. He got married, went to law school, and, I heard, eventually moved to Maine, where he could pursue a life a little akin to the one Thoreau, his longtime idol, managed to lead during his stay at Walden. I haven't seen Meyers in about twenty-five years. But I do carry around with me the strong sense that the party he invited us to, me and Carla and Gubby and Michael de Leo and Dandy Dan O'Mara (but not Joseph, no, not everyone, quite), is still a live possibility. Sometimes I even stumble on an installment of it, or help make one.

I had great teachers after Doug Meyers, some of the world's most famous in fact, but I never met his equal. What I liked most about him, I suppose, was that for all the minor miracle of

what he accomplished with us, he was no missionary: He served us but also himself. He got what he wanted out of Medford High, which was a chance to affront his spiritual enemies, though with some generosity, and to make younger people care about the sorts of things he cared about, to pull them out of their parents' orbit and into his. All good teaching entails some kidnapping; there's a touch of malice involved.

As well as some sorrow. Good teachers have many motivations, but I suspect that loneliness is often one of them. You need a small group, a coterie, to talk to; unable to find it in the larger world, you try to create it in the smaller sphere of a classroom. Meyers, who seemed at times a little lost in his life, a brilliant orphan, did something like that with us. (When he saw the material he had to work with on that first day, he must have been on the verge of stepping out the window.) Whatever his motives, part of what I admired about him was his streak of arrogance. His goodness had some edge to it.

It would be a mistake to believe that what Meyers taught about teaching was that always and until the end of time you should draw the chairs into a circle, read pop-cult marvels like *Cuckoo's Nest*, and apply them directly to the situation at hand. No, Meyers taught something else entirely. When I call him to mind in that long black padre coat, he reminds me of Groucho Marx in *Horse Feathers*, duck-walking at top throttle back and forth in front of a whole congress of professors, singing out his Marxian ditty with the gorgeous refrain, "Whatever it is, I'm against it!"

What Meyers taught—or at least what I gleaned from him—is that anything that's been successfully institutionalized, however rebellious it may seem or however virtuous, is stifling. What's called subversion only lasts for an instant in a school or

a hospital or a home; it's quickly swept up to become part of the protocol, an element in "the way we do things around here." At the time, Kesey and Camus collided well enough with the dead protocols of Medford High, but now, for all I know, they fit in fine—maybe alienation has become standard issue. What to do then? When Bacchus is ascendant, when all the world is a pop-cult blast, then maybe you become a high priest of Apollo, with his hard graces. Teachers, freelance spirit healers that they are or ought to be, make a diagnosis, pour out a cure or two, then see what happens. Or so Meyers did with us.

Such teaching incites friction. Many students, the successes in particular, resent it and respond with civil venom. And teachers, undercompensated as they usually are, often yearn for some adulation to balance the books. It's tough to be both broke and unloved.

"Whenever others agree with me," the sublime Oscar Wilde said, "I know that I must be wrong." When students love you from day one, when you succeed too fast, chances are that Wilde's dictum applies. And when the world does eventually come around to your way of thinking, maybe then it's time to deliver your premises a salutary whack: "Whatever it is," chants Groucho from the wings, "I'm against it."

This approach isn't without its costs. One pays for the kind of mental exhilaration that Meyers initiated. One pays in self-doubt and isolation, in the suspicion that what seems to be true resistance is merely a perverse substitute for genuine talent, a cheap way of having something to say. Meyers's path, so appealing in its first steps, separated me from my family and cut me loose from religion. It sent me adrift beyond the world bordered by TV and piety and common sense. One step down that

road followed another, and now I probably could not turn around if I wished to.

Still, the image I most often hit on when I think about Meyers glows brightly enough. It's late spring, a gloomy dead day. He's brought in a record by the Incredible String Band. He's at the back of the room standing beside the beat-up phonograph. I dislike the record and open my book, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, which has not been assigned in any class, and disappear into it. Meyers cranks the music a little louder. I keep reading. But then, curious, I raise my head. The racket of the String Band floods in. And there in the back of the room, Meyers is dancing away. He's a so-so dancer at best, stiff and arrhythmic. Not until I saw Bob Dylan in concert did I ever see anyone dance as self-consciously. Yet it struck me that this was probably the first time anyone had ever danced in this building. The air was so heavy with gray institutional weight: I can't imagine that anyone but Meyers could have pulled it off.

But here he was, dancing away. It was like a few good new words coming into the language, some strokes of light rendered by a painter for the first time, though with an unsteady enough hand. Meyers had scored a benevolent victory over the place. (You could say he'd beaten Medford High at its own game, but really he'd shown it a new one.) He had a right to a little celebration.

THE PINK FLOYD NIGHT SCHOOL

"So, WHAT ARE you doing after graduation?"

In the spring of my last year in college I posed that question to at least a dozen fellow graduates-to-be at my little out-of-the-way school in Vermont. The answers they gave me were satisfying in the extreme: not very much, just kick back, hang out, look things over, take it slow. It was 1974. That's what you were supposed to say.

My classmates weren't, strictly speaking, telling the truth. They were, one might even say, lying outrageously. By graduation day, it was clear that most of my contemporaries would be trotting off to law school and graduate school and to cool and unusual internships in New York and San Francisco.

But I did take it slow. After graduation, I spent five years wandering around doing nothing—or getting as close to it as I could manage. I was a cab driver, an obsessed moviegoer, a wanderer in the mountains of Colorado, a teacher at a crazy grand hippie school in Vermont, the manager of a movie house (who didn't do much managing), a crewman on a ship, and a doorman at a disco.

The most memorable job of all, though, was a gig on the stage crew for a rock production company that worked Jersey City. We did our shows at Roosevelt Stadium, a grungy behemoth that could hold sixty thousand, counting seats on the grass. I humped amps out of the trucks and onto the stage; six or so hours later I humped them back. I did it for the Grateful Dead and Alice Cooper and the Allman Brothers and Crosby, Stills & Nash on the night that Richard Nixon resigned. But the most memorable night of that most memorable job was the night of Pink Floyd.

Pink Floyd demanded a certain quality of sound. They wanted their amps stacked high, not just onstage, where they were so broad and tall and forbidding that they looked like a barricade in the Paris Commune. They also wanted amp clusters at three highly elevated points around the stadium, and I spent the morning lugging huge blocks of wood and circuitry up and up and up the stairs of the decayed old bowl.

There was one other assignment: installing and inflating a parachute-like white silken canopy roof that Pink Floyd required over the stage. It took about six hours to get the thing up and in position. We were told that this was the first use of the canopy. Pink's guys had some blueprints, but those turned out not to be of much use. Eventually the roof did rise and inflate by means of a lot of spontaneous knot tying and strategic rope tangling.

Pink Floyd went on at about ten that night, but the amp clusters that we'd expended all that servile sweat to build didn't work—Jersey City being Jersey City, people had sat on them, kicked them, or cut the cords. So Pink made its noise, the towers stayed mute, the mob flicked on lighters at the end, and then we spent three hours breaking the amps down and loading the truck. We felt we'd wasted our time on the speakers up high on

the stadium steps, so we refused to go after them. After some sharp words, Pink's guys had to scramble up and retrieve them.

There was, for the record, almost always tension between the roadies and the stage crew. One time, at a show by (if memory serves) Queen, their five roadies got into a brawl with a dozen of our stage-crew guys; then the house security, mostly Jersey bikers and black-belt karate devotees, heard the noise and jumped in. The roadies held on for a while, but finally they saw it was a lost cause. One of them grabbed a case of champagne from the truck cab and opened a bottle and passed it around—all became drunk and happy.

Pink's road manager wanted the inflatable canopy brought down gently, then folded and packed securely in its wooden boxes. The problem was that the thing was full of helium and no one knew where the release valve was; we'd also secured it to the stage with so many knots of such foolish intricacy that their disentanglement would have given a gang of sailors pause. Everyone was tired. Those once intoxicated were no longer. It was four A.M. and time to go home.

An hour went into concocting strategies to get the floating pillowy roof down. It became a regular seminar. Then came Timmy our crew chief, who looked like a good-natured Viking captain and who defended the integrity of his stage crew at every turn, even going so far as to have screamed at Stevie Nicks, who was yelling at me for having dropped a guitar case, that he was the only one who had the right to holler at Edmundson. Faced with the Pink Floyd roof crisis, Timmy did what he always could be counted on to do in critical circumstances, which is to say, he did something.

Timmy walked softly to a corner of the stage, reached into his pocket, removed a buck knife, and with it began to saw one

of the ropes attaching the holy celestial roof to the earth. Three or four of us, his minions, did the same. "Hey, what are you doing?" wailed Pink's head roadie. "I'll smash your—" Only then did he realize that Timmy had a knife in his hand, and that most of the rest of us did, too. In the space of a few minutes, we sawed through the ropes.

There came a great sighing noise as the last thick cord broke apart. For a moment there was nothing; for another moment, more of the same.

Then the canopy rose into the air and began to float away, like a gorgeous cloud, white and soft. The sun at that moment burst above the horizon and the silk bloomed into a soft crimson tinge. Timmy started to laugh a big beer-bellied laugh. We all joined. Even Pink's guys did. We were like little kids on the last day of school. We stood on the naked stage, watching the silk roof go up and out, wafting over the Atlantic. Some of us waved.

"So, what are you doing after graduation?" Thirty-five years later, a college teacher, I ask my students the old question. They aren't inclined to dissimulate now. The culture is on their side when they tell me about law school and med school and higher degree s in journalism and business, or when they talk about a research grant in China or a well-paying gig teaching English in Japan.

I'm impressed, sure, but I'm worried about them too. Aren't they deciding too soon? Shouldn't they hang out a little, learn to take it slow? I can't help it. I flash on that canopy of white silk floating out into the void. I can see it as though it were still there. I want to point up to it. I'd like for all my students to see it, too.

FELLOW TEACHERS

A WORD TO THE NEW HUMANITIES PROFESSOR

WELCOME TO THE university—marvelous to have you here. Congratulations on your appointment to assistant professor! A position like yours is hard to get—but you know that. But perhaps what you don't know is this: Such a position is even harder to keep. You've already achieved a great deal and maybe you've done that by accepting no one's counsel but your own. If so, fine. But maybe a word of assistance and a word or two of warning might be helpful. So—if you like—listen.

If success is what you crave, if prosperity and esteem, tenure, preferment, and promotion are what you desire—and who does not?—then you might begin by studying your admissions-office brochure, the pictorial ad for your school. Whatever its overt designs, this book is also a manual for pedagogical success, a discreet academic version of *The Book of the Courtier.*

In these brochures, these ads, two photographic genres predominate. One genre is a version of romance; its subject is easy pleasure, the world as the readers wish it to be. Students are arrayed in a conversational garland, lounging on well-tended grass. The sun smiles down. They are talking freely, savoring

one another's company. If there are books on hand, they've been tossed carelessly aside. This is not about dialogue or dialectic, not about effort. These students are in the Bower of Bliss, intoxicated by each other's presences, relaxed, happy, stress-free.

The other sort of photograph is quite different. In this genre, which is a version of Futuristic Utopian, a group of students presses tightly in on a large, forbidding piece of electronic equipment. It is high-tech, high-powered, and, to you probably, completely mysterious. This picture is not about good times. Serious business is unfolding. A thrill of purposeful engagement rises from the page.

Generally missing from both sorts of pictures are intrusive adults, professorial types, who might inhibit the fun in the first kind of picture or undermine the students' pure self-motivation in the second. What is missing from both these sorts of photographs, to put it bluntly, is you, the professor. And in this there is a valuable lesson. Don't let it be lost.

Pleasure and high-powered training: The sweetly meandering discussion and the high-tech initiation, these are the things a student can now expect, in fact demand, from an American college. You, invisible, self-abnegating, ever agreeable, will provide these commodities. You will provide them or—more than likely—you will find yourself another line of work.

How does a contemporary humanities professor abet the pursuit of enjoyment?

First of all, he must contrive to present all course material in an agreeable manner. Reading assignments should be slight: For one semester, three or four "long" books, that is, books of more than 250 pages, will more than do. The instructor must understand that those students who actually read the books will for the most part do so glancingly. In high school they have

learned to budget their time, which means they have learned to skim, extracting "the main points." The teacher should not be surprised to see that those books that *have been* opened are streaked occasionally with highlighter. Those who have "read" an assigned novel will, in general, know who the main characters are and what, in broad terms, has come to pass.

But they will not at all object to being reminded of these things, and those who have decided not to crack the book will believe it to be the professor's responsibility—what else is she being paid for?—to tell them in amusing detail what went on inside. Some students believe it is up to the teacher to describe the book so appealingly (to advertise it, in short) that later in life, given leisure, they might have a look.

The summary and description should be carried on in a diverting way. There ought to be copious reference to analogous themes and plots in recent popular culture. Jokes ought to be offered at the expense of at least some of the characters, preferably all. The author, no matter how distinguished, should be referred to with no more veneration than attachés to the creator of a reasonably successful TV sitcom. In no event should the instructor hint that the author or the characters in the book are in any way superior to the students who have condescended to encounter them.

Students should be assured continually that by virtue of living later in time than the author, they naturally know a great deal more than he possibly could. Sometimes authors will anticipate, or dimly guess at, a piece of contemporary wisdom, in which case they are to be gently congratulated. Generally, authors whose works appeared more than two decades ago are caught up in errors endemic to their times and need to be brought up short. The teacher should give the students every chance to do

so. If this process can be effected with the aid of an up-to-date theoretical vocabulary, then all the better.

The proper atmosphere for an enjoyable classroom is relaxed and cool. The teacher should never get exercised about anything, under pain of being written off as a buffoon. Nor should she create an atmosphere of vital contention where students lose their composure, speak out, become passionate, express their deeper thoughts and fears, or do anything else that will, later on, cause them embarrassment. Embarrassment is the worst thing that can befall one; it must be avoided at whatever cost.

It is important here to distinguish being cool from being ironic. Cool is a state of superiority maintained at a consistent level. It is an attitude. Cool does not fluctuate. It is democratic and egalitarian in that it meets all phenomena with the same measure of blank detachment. It is programmatic and readily assumed.

Irony is something different. To be ironic is to express skepticism about this or that outside phenomenon, and also—at times—about one's own powers of apprehension and judgment. Cool never undermines the self; it is directed outward. Irony can be self-subverting. It can demonstrate lack of self-esteem, and is therefore to be avoided.

Irony is also inconsistent, in that it relies on judgment. The ironist is more skeptical about some things than others and communicates as much. Irony, by virtue of being selective, is elitist. Irony can also hurt people's feelings. One must never be ironic in front of students because some of them will not understand the application of the irony. They will become confused and possibly offended. Irony can also make things unclear. One is bound as a professor to be as clear as possible at all times.

Satire—that is to say, protracted irony—is pure poison; no

customer-respecting professor should ever conceive of indulging in it.

Cool, on the other hand, is okay. Being cool is a sign of confidence. Being cool indicates that one has made all of the judgments that matter in life and made them correctly. Cool is consistent, steady, and reliable, where irony is uncertain, fluctuating, and insecure. Cool is irony that has become frozen over time.

The teacher should be friendly, though not overly intimate; she should be concerned but not intrusive. She should be in her office as many hours per week as possible. Office availability shows dedication and indicates that the student is getting a good value for his dollars. But the student almost never visits the office. One-on-one conversation can sometimes drift toward disturbing topics—why I'm desperate to transfer to the commerce school, although all of my favorite classes are in the arts; why my sorority has never had a black member; why I have to take these pills so as not to become disablingly depressed. Such topics can make the student uncomfortable. Comfort is all.

E-mail is the preferred form of communication. With e-mail, there is more control. The conversation is in no danger of jumping the rails. One can ask one's own businesslike questions; one can set the tone. The professor should answer e-mail communications within three hours' time. She should not refer the student to this or that book but answer personally, from her own knowledge, with the fewest necessary number of words.

The professor should continually make self-mocking references to her authority and her stock of learning. She should indicate that all the time she has spent acquiring her knowledge may have been wasted, given new developments, such as the

Internet, which have changed everything, making much of the past irrelevant. The professor should refer with a respect that stops tastefully short of sycophancy to the large stock of pop-culture knowledge that all of her students possess simply by virtue of having grown up with unparalleled access to TV, movies, and recorded music. She should compliment their remarkable "visual literacy" from time to time. She should use this term—which generally refers to such feats as identifying the TV shows parodied in a given *Simpsons* episode—in rebutting Philistines from outside the academy who claim that many students are now willfully nonliterate, don't read and don't want to.

In choosing what to teach, the professor should meet students halfway. He should realize that he has his culture, which may feature, let us say, the novels of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens; the poetry of Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman; the historical works of Frances Parkman and Edward Gibbon; the psychoanalysis of Freud; the social thought of Plato, Jefferson, Marx, and Arendt; and the jazz of Coltrane. But students have their culture, too. Insofar as he is in a position to do so, he should offer—it would be presumptuous to say "teach"—courses in the more demotic, vital, and diverse popular culture that the students endorse.

In doing so, it is important that he not be chauvinistic. He must take seriously the possibility that another's experience with Anne Rice might be as vitally nourishing as his own experience with Emily Dickinson. He must consider the possibility that Dickinson, with her difficulty, helps sustain an elitist high culture and that reading and teaching her reaffirms class divisions, while Rice, whose accounts of sadomasochistic and pedophilic bliss are available to all, moves us toward

equality. He must, in short, learn as much as possible from his students.

He must take very seriously (but never quite so far as to articulate) the central lesson that his students have to instill: that he is a service provider, not entirely unlike the dentist, the stockbroker (before online trading), and the man who comes to clean the pool. He must remember that he works for them, and that they, all things considered, are very indulgent bosses, but that he ought not to forget how the rolls are buttered and by whom.

As to grades, he should understand that students care nothing about them. They say this repeatedly, in e-mails, and in his office, when they come, so it must be so. But this established truth needs elaboration. Students do not care about grades as long as certain protocols are observed. The first of these protocols is what one might call the default standard. The default standard dictates that if a student comes periodically to class, does some self-determined quotient of the reading, and hands in a semblance of every assignment, the grade will be a B-plus. All other grades are A's.

This sort of grading, which may appear unjustifiably high to outsiders, is pedagogically useful in that it keeps the students happily engaged and does not discourage them (students now are easily discouraged). It also induces them to write positive course evaluations. Negative course evaluations can have an unfortunate effect on a professor's career. Negative course evaluations that include charges of, say, racism or sexism, no matter how imaginary, can have disastrous effects. It is best to follow the grading policies that have been laid down, informally, by the students. Pay lip service to administrators' calls for tightening

grades, but understand who, in this instance, the real policy makers are.

If you follow this advice, elaborating and extending it as you see the need, you will be likely to produce the right quotient of enjoyment to succeed as a current professor of humanities. But enjoyment production is only half of your job. For students are aware that college is also serious business. There is a time for relaxation, but there is also a time to set to work.

Besides creating pleasure, you must also help the student to acquire skills that he or she can turn to profit in the future. You are a facilitator—not a "sage on the stage" but a "guide on the side." You must teach—no, rather, you must help the students to acquire—skills in communication, critical thinking, technology, and teamwork. Without these skills, it is unlikely that anyone can be truly successful in tomorrow's high-stress, high-competition world. Without these skills, a person cannot call him- or herself truly educated.

As a communications facilitator, you will be compelled to work very hard. Your comments on all written products submitted by students must be copious. The students and their families are paying good money, and it is here that they want to see you earn it. It is important that your comments be clear, precise, and practical. Students need to know what they have to do in order to improve as communicators. Note every error; correct every mistake in grammar, spelling, and punctuation. When an argument is not well structured or when a sentence is ambiguous, show the student how to remedy the problem. Rewrite the relevant passages if need be.

You must understand that writing is a form of technology the function of which is to transfer information from one per-

son to another, or one site to another. Nothing must be lost in the transfer. It is not your function to comment on the ideas per se. Students' ideas are their own and they have a personal validity. You have no right to judge them. What you can judge is skill at expression and presentation. A paper arguing that Hamlet and Iago are actually brothers separated at birth may seem to you misguided. This fact is irrelevant. The issue for you to ponder is whether the essay is well written, presents its points lucidly, and is organized along coherent lines. To succeed in life, a person needs to know how to get his ideas across. You are instrumental in helping students to develop this capacity.

Lack of clarity that comes from technical inability is something that you must remedy. But there are other kinds of occlusion that you also need to help students avoid. Though a metaphor can sometimes make things more understandable, the general tendency of metaphor is to produce multiple meanings, and those meanings lead to imprecision, and accordingly to confusion. It is a good idea to help students purge their writing of metaphors, similes, and other potentially mystifying figures of speech. Poetic writing, which was once thought to enrich experience by unfolding more and more layers of meaning and possibility, is now understood to be counterproductive.

Like irony, metaphor can make matters confusing and cause people to feel uncomfortable. Metaphor and irony can make students feel stupid and, at a good college, where students have high SAT scores, no one can accurately be described as stupid. Metaphor, like irony, can contribute to self-esteem problems. But once one has realized that the purpose of writing is to convey information and not to unfold or discover the life of the inner self, or to create original visions of the world (we now

know that there is no such thing as originality), then problems associated with metaphor and other mannered forms of writing tend to disappear.

As everyone now realizes, the computer is the most significant invention in the history of humankind. Students who do not master its intricacies are destined for a life of shame, poverty, and neglect. Every course you teach should be computer oriented. Computers are excellent research tools, and so your students should do a lot of research. If you are studying a poem by Blake like "The Chimney Sweeper," which depicts the debasement and exploitation of young boys whose lot, it's been said, is not altogether unlike the lot of many children now living in American inner cities, you should charge your students with using the computer to compile as much interesting information about the poem as they can. They can find articles about chimney sweepers from 1790s newspapers; contemporary pictures and engravings that depict these unfortunate little creatures; critical articles that interpret the poem in a seemingly endless variety of equally valid and interesting ways; biographical information about Blake, with hints about events in his own boyhood that would have made chimney sweepers a special interest; portraits of the author at various stages of his life; maps of Blake's London. Together the class can create a Blake–Chimney Sweeper website: www.blakesweeper.edu.

Instead of spending class time wondering what the poem might mean, and what application it might have to present-day experience—activities that can produce only disagreement and are probably futile anyway since there is no truth about literary works, just interpretations—students can compile information about the poem. They can set the poem in its historical and critical context, showing first how the poem is the product of

the past and implicitly how it really has nothing to do with the enlightened present except as an artful curiosity; and second how, given the number of ideas about it already available, adding more thoughts would be superfluous.

Computers have made everything much easier in life, chiefly because you can buy anything you want using them and get it delivered almost immediately. But the Internet is also good because it erases the old puzzlement about the differences among wisdom, knowledge, and information. Everything that can be accessed online is equal to everything else. No piece of data is intrinsically more important or more profound than any other. Therefore, there really is no more wisdom; there is no more knowledge; there is only information. Nothing has to be taken as a challenge or an affront to what one currently knows and values. And that fact can be very freeing.

At one time, ill-natured people used to say that excessive use of certain kinds of technology, and uncritical celebration of it, could be bad for you. These people—many of whom belonged to something called the Frankfurt School, had to flee Hitler's Germany, and thus had developed a resentful attitude toward life—said that technology could make you someone who felt possessed with godlike powers. If you spent too much time manipulating objects, these people suggested, you could begin treating people as though they were objects, too.

They felt that technology gave you an abstract and utilitarian relation to life, and that instead of seeing rocks and flowers and trees, you began seeing foundation material, interior decor, and timber. They thought that technology could make you cold and unsympathetic to the living world. Another man, a philosopher who wrote earlier in this century and was taken to be very gifted but who discredited his work by becoming a Nazi,

talked about how technology could make one forget the strangeness of Being. Technology, as he saw it, tended to separate us from wonder and from questions like "Why is there something instead of nothing at all?" But things have changed. With the coming of the computer, most of us have stopped worrying about these issues and nothing really bad has happened. It seems clear that we did not need to be concerned about them and that the resentful men and women, probably because of their traumatic life experiences, had it wrong.

Another thing that students need to acquire are skills in group interaction. It is important that you break your students into groups as much as possible and let them engage in the uninhibited exchange of ideas, their ideas. As everyone now knows, the students have within them the answers to all questions that matter; they merely need a supportive and nonjudgmental environment for their thoughts to emerge. (Plato, it turns out, was right when he endorsed anamnesis, the view that we all knew the truth in a prior life but that, on being born, forget it, so that we need not so much to be informed as to be reminded. Or at least Plato was right about American students of the present.) It is important that you do not intrude on these discussions with your sophisticated terms and your experienced perspective. Keep in mind: Your views may be flawed. And the students, given time, will do productive work on their own.

But of course answers are not really the point. The point is learning to work together and to get along. High grades should go to the people who cooperate best, no matter what you, with your biases, might think about the eventual product. In the future, it may be very important to be able to please and even placate the group. Learning how to submit your so-called indi-

viduality to a collective may be a good professional skill and could be a good survival skill as well.

Pleasure and training: These are the things that you offer, and the more modestly and unobtrusively you do so, the better. If you do your job well, you will get the appreciation you deserve. Students in coming years will write you letters about their prosperity and happiness and about how much you did to facilitate them. They will thank you for your patience and your ability to convey important skills. They will praise your powers of communication. They will say that they never could have done it without you, and you will feel both grateful and exalted.

But the road will not always be smooth. Sometimes you will encounter a student who offers a particular challenge, and you must be ready for it. This is the sort of student who comes to college with mistaken expectations. Perhaps he has spent some time reading about Socrates, who asked annoying, self-important questions about everything; or perhaps in high school he had a teacher who encouraged her students to ask about what bearing the things they were reading might have on their lives.

This student comes to college expecting more of the Socrates business. He doesn't care all that much about skills and wants to know whether you think his ideas are true or not. He doesn't write all that badly, but often he sinks into needless ambiguity and confusion. He talks a lot in class. One time, a colleague of yours sees him in the library with a book open. He is laughing his head off. Another time he is seen reading the newspaper and crying. Why, your colleague asks, would anyone read the front page of a newspaper and weep?

This student works hard; in fact he works too hard. He's in your office all the time asking bothersome questions wanting to

know the names of fresh books to read, as though the syllabus isn't enough. He writes stories and other things that are not assigned. He plays in a band.

He is also cynical. He laughs at you and others when you talk about cultivating skills that will land good jobs. He mocks the whole idea of training. He says that most of the Internet looks like an electronic shopping mall to him. He says that he has no idea what he wants to do in life; he's uncertain what way of living is the best. He's confused about what goodness really is, who possesses it, and how it might be acquired. He'll be happy to talk about job skills, he says, but only after he's got these questions answered, or at least is on the way to answering them. Though he often says abrupt and potentially embarrassing things to them, many of the other students seem to like him.

It's important to use patience when dealing with such students. They are a challenge, certainly, but they can also be very rewarding. Guiding them from their current confusions onto a better path can provide one of the strongest professional satisfactions there is.

One of the difficulties in doing so, one must confess, is the kind of feelings these students can provoke in you, the teacher. They often bring on a very powerful nostalgia. They take you back to a time before graduate school when you too perhaps thought that certain great works of art and reflection could guide you to a new sort of self. They make you recall when you thought that it might be worthwhile to try to become more like this or that hero or thinker you encountered in a book. These students take you back to a very impassioned time, to be sure. But it was also a turbulent and unproductive time. You know better now, and with your guidance so will this wayward, gifted student. This student needs you. He needs your wisdom and expe-

rience. He needs you to put him on one of the straighter, more satisfying roads.

Despite his apparent confidence, and even occasional bursts of what appears to be joy, this is really a troubled individual. Deep in his heart he does not want to be as he is. On some level he wants to change. For to be someone who sits in the library, in public, reading a common everyday newspaper with tears flowing down his cheeks, what kind of life is that? What kind of future could such behavior, uncorrected, ever prepare him for?

AGAINST READINGS

If I could make one wish for the members of my profession—college and university professors of literature—I would wish that for one year, two, three, or five, we give up readings. By a reading, I mean the application of an analytical vocabulary—Marx's, Freud's, Foucault's, Derrida's, or whoever's—to describe and (usually) judge a work of literary art. I wish that we'd declare a moratorium on readings; I wish that we'd give readings a rest.

This wish will strike most academic literary critics and perhaps others as well as—let me put it politely—counterintuitive. Readings, many think, are what we do. Readings are what literary criticism is all about. They are the bread and butter of the profession. Through readings we write our books; through readings we teach our students. And if there were no more readings, what would we have left to do? Wouldn't we have to close our classroom doors, shut down our office computers, and go home? The end of readings, presumably, would mean the end of our profession.

So let me try to explain what I have in mind. For it seems to

me that if we kicked our addiction to readings, our profession would actually be stronger and more influential, our teaching would improve, and there would be more good books of literary criticism to be written and accordingly more to be read.

In my view—a view informed by, among others, William Blake, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Matthew Arnold—the best way to think of a literary education is as a great second chance. We all get socialized once. We spend the first years of our lives learning the usages of our families, our neighborhoods, our religions, our schools, and our nations. We come to an understanding of what's expected: We come to see what the world takes to be good and bad, right and wrong. We figure out ways to square the ethics of our church with the ethics of our neighborhood—they aren't always the same, but one reason that religions survive and thrive is that they can enter into productive commerce with the values present in other spheres of life. Kids go to primary school so that they can learn their ABCs and math facts, certainly. But they also go to be socialized: They go to acquire a set of more or less public values. Then it's up to them (and their parents) to square those values with the home truths they've acquired in their families. Socialization isn't a simple process, but when it works well, it can produce individuals who thrive in themselves and either do no harm to others or make a genuine contribution to society at large.

But primary socialization doesn't work for everyone. There are always people—how many it's tough to know, but surely a minority—who don't see their own natures fully reflected in the values that they're supposed to inherit or assume. They feel out of joint with their times. The gay kid who grows up in a family that thinks homosexuality is a sin. The young guy with a potent individualist streak who can't bear the drippy collectivism

foisted on him by his ex-hippie parents and his purportedly progressive school. The girl who is supposed to be a chip off the old legal block and sit someday on the Supreme Court but only wants to draw and paint; the guy destined (in his mom's heart) for Princeton who's born to be a carpenter and has no real worldly ambitions, no matter how often he's upbraided.

To be young is often to know—or to sense—what others have in mind for you and not to like it. But what is harder for a person who has gone unhappily through the first rites of passage into the tribe is to know how to replace the values she's had imposed on her with something better. She's learned a lot of socially sanctioned languages, and still none of them are hers. But are there any that truly might be? Is there something she might be or do in the world that's truly in keeping with the insistent but often speechless self that presses forward internally?

This, I think, is where literature can come in—as can all of the other arts and in some measure the sciences, too. By venturing into what Arnold called "the best that has been known and thought," a young person has the chance to discover new vital possibilities. Such a person sees that there are other ways of looking at the world and other ways of being in the world than the ones that she's inherited from her family and culture. She sees, with Emily Dickinson, that a complex, often frayed, often humorous dialogue with God *must* be at the center of her life; she sees with Charles Dickens that humane decency is the highest of human values and understands that her happiness will come from shrewdly serving others; she likes the sound of Blake and—I don't know—forms a better rock band than the ones we've been hearing for the last decade and more; he seconds Johnson and Burke and becomes a conservative, in his way twice wiser than NPR-addicted, Prius-proselytizing Mom and Dad.

In short, the student reads and feels that sensation that Emerson describes so well at the beginning of "Self-Reliance": "In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty." The truth of what we're best fit to do is latent in all of us, Emerson suggests, and I think this to be right. But it's also true that we, and society, too, have plenty of tricks for keeping that most important kind of knowledge out of reach. Society seems to have a vested interest in telling us what we should do and be. But often its interpretation of us—fed through teachers and guidance officers and priests and ministers and even through our loving parents—is simply wrong. When we feel—as Longinus said we will in the presence of the sublime—that we have created what in fact we've only heard, then it's time to hearken with particular attention and see how this startling utterance might be beckoning us to think, or speak, or even to live differently.

Everyone who teaches literature has probably had at least one such golden moment. I mean the moment where, reading casually or reading intently, being lazy or being responsive, one is shocked into recognition. "Yes," one says, "that's the way it really is." Then, often, a rather antinomian utterance comes: "They say it's not so, but I know it is. I always have."

One of my own such moments occurred reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*—something I've mentioned before, but that seems to me well worth elaborating on. It didn't really figure: That shouldn't have been *the* book (as it was at least for a little while) for a white, Irish Catholic kid growing up outside of Boston. What Malcolm had to say about race resonated with me: There was a low-grade race war in my school at the time, and he changed my thoughts about it pretty directly. In sum, I

began to see how scary it must be to be black in America, to be in real danger much of the time from white officials and white cops and white kids (kids not altogether unlike me and my pals).

But what really struck me in that book, oddly enough, was Malcolm's hunger for learning. By now nearly everyone knows the story of how Malcolm, in prison, found himself unfit for the arguments that proliferated in the prison yard (or at least one quadrant of it) and took in all subjects under the moon and sun: race, sex, politics, history. He had opinions, but he couldn't back them up. He had almost no facts in his mental files. The answer was simple: He needed to start reading. So he loaded his cell with meaty works from the prison library. But of course smart as the then Malcolm Little was, he hadn't much formal education and the books were loaded with words he didn't understand, placed like land mines in every paragraph. He looked them up in the dictionary, but there were simply too many of them. In the process of running around in the dictionary, he'd forget what the paragraph at hand was supposed to be about.

But this didn't induce him to give up. Instead, Malcolm sat down with a dictionary and a notebook and began copying down the dictionary—starting maybe with *aardvark*—and moving on down the line. It took a while and it wasn't the most scintillating of pastimes, but when it was over, Malcolm Little could read.

And he read ferociously. The whole world of thought came into being for him: history, philosophy, literature, science. He vowed then that he would be a reader for the rest of his life, a learner; and in time he would vow to use his book-won knowledge, along with a considerable quotient of street smarts, to help himself through life and to do what he could for his people. In the beginning, doing what he could for black people meant

bedeviling the white man; in time, it meant doing his part to serve all of humanity.

I was thrilled to read this. It turned out that I—despite being about as impatient with formal schooling as Malcolm was—had some intellectual aspirations, too. I was curious about things, after my fashion. Malcolm was black, I was white: Still, my seventeen-year-old self saw him as someone I could, in certain regards, try to emulate. I could read to satisfy my thirst for knowledge; I could use what I learned to make my life a little better, and maybe help some other people along the way. It was an unlikely conversion experience, maybe, but ultimately that's what it was.

I suspect that virtually everyone who teaches literature has had such an experience, and maybe more than one. They've read Emerson or Orwell or Derrida or Woolf and have been moved to change the way they do what they do—or they've chosen another way of life altogether. And even if they don't change, they've had the chance to have their fundamental values challenged. Sometimes a true literary education appears to leave a student where he was at the beginning. But that state is only apparent. Confronted by the best that's been thought and said, he's come to reconsider his values and views. What was once flat dogma turns into lively commitment and conviction.

But I think that the experience of change is at the heart of literary education. How does it come about? For me, it had a long foreground to be sure, but most immediately I was guided by a teacher. He told me that I—I in particular—might get something worth keeping out of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. And I suspect that's how many of us teachers found the books that have made us who we are. Teachers who've been inspired

by great works have been moved to pass the gift on. "What we have loved, others will love," says Wordsworth, addressing his friend Coleridge in *The Prelude*—"and we will teach them how."

I think that the highest objective for someone trying to provide a literary education to students is to make such moments of transformation possible. Teachers set the scene for secular conversion. These conversions may be large scale—like the one that Whitman seems to have undergone when he read Emerson's "The Poet" and realized that though Emerson could not himself become the American poet prophesied in the essay, he, Walt Whitman, actually could. But the changes that literary art rings can be relatively minor, too. Reading a book may make a person more receptive to beauty than he otherwise would have been; might make him more sensitive to injustice; more prone to be self-reliant. Granted, books can have negative effects, too. One has read *Don Quixote*; one has read *Madame Bovary*. The Don is led astray by reading airy books about chivalry—he becomes a knight (and all too often an absurd one) in a post-chivalric time. Everyone who takes off to become a hero in a trash TV show, a cheap movie, or a shoddy book is a sad descendant of Don Quixote. Emma Bovary's fictive life concentrates the lives of all too many people, men and women both, who have drawn their view of love from wish-fulfilling novels. They expect more out of erotic life than erotic life can generally deliver: They turn their erotic lives into their spiritual lives—and that too often ends in failure and disillusionment.

But a prerequisite for sharing literary art with young people should be the belief that overall, its influence can be salutary; it can aid in growth. No one would teach history, after all, if he believed that all, or most, forms of historical knowledge were

destructive deceptions; one would not teach music if one felt, as Plato did, that most of it disrupts the harmony of the soul.

I said that transformation was the highest goal of literary education. The best purpose of all art is to inspire, said Emerson, and that seems right to me. But that does not mean that literary study can't have other beneficial effects. It can help people learn to read more sensitively; help them learn to express themselves; it can teach them more about the world at large. But the proper business of teaching is change—for the teacher (who is herself a work in progress) and (preeminently) for the student.

Nor do I think that everyone who picks up a book must seek the sublime moment of unexpected but inevitable connection. People read for diversion, for relaxation, to inform themselves, to stave off anxiety in airplanes when the flight attendant is out of wine and beer. A book can make a good doorstop and a fine paperweight—there's no end of uses for a book. But if you're going to take a book into a room where the objective is to educate people—education being from the Latin *educere*, meaning "lead out of," and then presumably toward something—then you should consider using the book to help lead those who want to go out from their own lives into another, if only a few steps.

If this is what you want to do, then readings will only get in your way. When you launch, say, a Marxist reading of William Blake, you effectively use Marx as a tool of analysis and judgment. To the degree that Blake anticipates Marx, Blake is prescient and to be praised. Thus the Marxist reading approves of Blake for his hatred of injustice, his polemic against imperialism, his suspicion of the gentry, his critique of bourgeois art as practiced by the likes of Sir Joshua Reynolds. But Blake, being Blake, also diverges from Marx. He is, presumably, too committed to something akin to liberal individualism; he doesn't

understand the revolutionary potential latent in the proletariat; he is, perhaps, an idealist who believes that liberation of consciousness matters more than—or at least must precede—material liberation; he has no clear theory of class conflict. Thus Blake, admirable as he may be, needs to be read with skepticism; he requires a corrective, and the name of that corrective is Karl Marx. Just so, the corrective could also be called Jacques Derrida (who would illuminate Blake the logocentrist); Foucault (who would demonstrate Blake's immersion in and implicit endorsement of an imprisoning society); Kristeva (who would be attuned to Blake's imperfections on the score of gender politics); and so on down the line. The current sophisticated critic would be unlikely to pick one master to illuminate the work at hand—he would mix and match as the occasion required. But to enact a reading means to submit one text to the terms of another; to allow one text to interrogate another—then often to try, sentence, and summarily execute it.

The problem with the Marxist reading of Blake is that it robs us of some splendid opportunities. We never take the time to arrive at a Blakean reading of Blake, and we never get to ask whether Blake's vision might be true—by which I mean, following William James, whether it's good in the way of belief. The moment when the student in the classroom or the reader perusing the work can pause and say: "Yes, that's how it is; Blake's got it exactly right," disappears. There's no chance for the instant that Emerson and Longinus evoke, when one feels that he's written what he's only read, uttered what he's only heard.

Nor—it's worth pointing out—does Marx get much real opportunity here either. He's assumed to be a superior figure: There are in fact any number of Marxist readings of Blake out there; I know of no Blakean readings of Marx. But the student

who has heard the teacher unfold a Marxist reading of a work probably doesn't get to study Marx per se. He never gets to have a potential moment of revelation reading *The Manifesto* or *The Grundrisse*. Marx too disappears from the scene, becoming part of a technological apparatus for processing other works. No one asks: Is what Marx is saying true? Is Foucault on to something? Is what Derrida believes actually the case? They're simply applied like paint to the side of a barn; the paint can go on roughly or it can go on adroitly, with subtle variations of mood and texture. But paint is what it is.

It should be clear here that my objection isn't to theoretical texts per se. If a fellow professor thinks that Marx or Foucault or Kristeva provides a contribution to the best that has been thought and said, then by all means read and study the text. (I've studied these writers with students and not without profit.) But the teacher who studies, say, Foucault probably needs to ask what kind of life Foucault commends. Is it one outside of all institutions? Is it one that rebels against all authority? Can that life be in any way compatible with life as a professor or a student? These are questions that are rarely asked about what are conceived of as the more radical thinkers of the era. It is not difficult to guess why this is so.

I've said that the teacher's job is to offer a Blakean reading of Blake, or an Eliotic reading of Eliot, and that's a remark that can't help but raise questions. The standard for the kind of interpretation I have in mind is actually rather straightforward. When a teacher admires an author enough to teach his work, then it stands to reason that the teacher's initial objective ought to be framing a reading that the author would approve. The teacher, to begin with, represents the author: He analyzes the text sympathetically, he treats the words with care and caution and

with due respect. He works hard with the students to develop a vision of what the world is and how to live that rises from the author's work and that, ultimately, the author, were he present in the room, would endorse. Northrop Frye does something very much like this in his book on Blake, *Fearful Symmetry*; George Orwell achieves something similar in his famous essay on Dickens. In both cases, the critic's objective is to read the author with humane sensitivity, then synthesize a view of life that's based on that reading. Schopenhauer tells us that all major artists ask and in their fashion answer a single commanding question: "What is life?" The critic works to show how the author frames that query and how he answers it. Critics are necessary for this work because the answers that most artists give to major questions are indirect. Artists move forward through intuition and inference: They feel their way to their sense of things. The critic, at his best, makes explicit what is implicit in the work.

This kind of criticism is itself something of an art, not a science. You cannot tell that you have compounded a valid reading of Dickens any more than that you have compounded a valid novel or a valid play. When others find your Dickensian endorsement of Dickens to be of use to them, humanly, intellectually, spiritually, then your endorsement is a success. The desire to turn the art of reading into a science is part of what draws the profession to the application of sterile concepts.

Perhaps an analogy will be helpful. Let us say that a friend of ours has been seriously ill, or gone through a bad divorce, or has fallen wildly, unexpectedly in love. The friend tells us all about it, from beginning to end, with all the sensitivity she can muster. The story is long and complex and laced with nuance. We listen patiently and take it in. Later on we're faced with explaining this situation to a third person, a mutual friend of us both.

Our confiding friend, our first one, wants this to happen: She wants her friends to know the story. How do we proceed? Surely we proceed as sensitively and humanely as possible. We honor our first friend's way of understanding the illness or the love affair. If we are a good friend, we tell the story such that, were the first friend there in the room, she would nod with gratitude.

We may not believe the first friend's entire sense of the story. We may have a different idea of what happened and why. But we honor our first friend by keeping true to her insofar as we can. We do not, say, begin with a Freudian or Marxist reinterpretation of what it is she has told us. If we do, we are no friend at all. We have not given someone we care about due consideration.

Just so, we need to befriend the texts that we choose to teach. They too are the testaments of human beings who have lived and suffered in the world. They too deserve honor and respect. If you have a friend whose every significant utterance you need to translate into another idiom—whose two is not the real two, as Emerson says—then that is a friend you need to jettison. That is simply to say that you do not need to keep company with someone you take to be a liar. If there are texts that you cannot befriend, then leave them to the worms of time—or to the kinder ministrations of others.

In a once famous essay, "Against Interpretation," Susan Sontag denounced interpretation and called for an "erotics of art." She wanted immersion in the text, pleasure, the drowning of self-consciousness. She sought ecstatic immediacy. To be against readings, as I am, is not to be against interpretation. Interpretation entails the work, often difficult, often pleasurable, of parsing the complexities of meaning a given text offers. It means being alert to connotation; it means reading for tone; it means being able to make what is implicit in a piece of writing clearly

explicit. Interpretation is necessary if we are to decide what vision of the world the text endorses.

To be against readings is also not to be against criticism. Once the author's vision of what Wallace Stevens calls "how to live, what to do" is made manifest, it's necessary to question it. In time, I learned to ask whether Malcolm X's views about Jews and women were conducive to a good life for anyone. His sense of race relations, early and late in the book, also needed some examination and some skeptical questioning. But this sort of questioning needs to occur once the author's vision is set forth in a comprehensive, clear, sympathetic manner. Criticism is getting into skeptical dialogue with the text. Mounting a conventional academic reading—applying an alternative set of terms—means closing off the dialogue before it has a chance to begin.

You may find that after you've listened to your friend's story about her love affair or divorce that you can't buy everything she says. Her vision is self-idealizing or skewed. Then, as a friend, you need to bring your reservations forward and discuss them with her. So it is with the text: The teacher and students inquire into it, and often too they answer on its behalf. But it all begins with a simple gesture. It all begins by befriending the text.

That gesture of befriending should have a public as well as a classroom dimension. The books that we professors of literature tend now to write are admirable in many ways. They are full of learning, hard work, honesty, and intelligence that sometimes in its way touches on brilliance. But they are also, at least in my judgment, usually unreadable. They are composed as performances. They are meant to show, and often to show off, the prowess of the author. They could not conceivably be meant to provide spiritual or intellectual nourishment. No one could read a representative instance of such writing and decide, based on it,

to change her life. Our books are not written from love but from need.

I think that it is possible to write books and essays on behalf of literature that will demonstrate its powers of renovation and inquire into the limits of those powers. Such books can and should be inspiring not only to members of the profession but to educated (or self-educated) and curious members of the general public who are willing to do some hard intellectual work. As a profession, our standing in and impact upon society beyond our classrooms now is minuscule. Yet we are copiously stocked with superb talent: Some of the best young minds in America continue to be drawn to the graduate study of literature. But unless we professors change our ways and stop seeking respectability and institutional standing at the expense of genuine human impact, we are destined, as Tennyson has it, to rust unburnished, never to shine in use.

One must admit that it's possible to develop too exalted a sense of the transforming powers of literature and the other arts. What worked for me and you may not have a universal application. It's probable that most people will be relatively content to live within the ethical and conceptual world that their parents and their society pass on to them. Edmund Burke and Samuel Johnson thought of common-sense opinion as a great repository of wisdom stored through the ages, augmented and revised through experience, trial and error, until it became in time the treasure of humanity. Perhaps the conservative sages were right. But there will always be individuals who cannot live entirely by the standard dispensation and who require something better—or at least something else. This group may be small (though I think it larger than most imagine), but its members need what great writing can bring them very badly indeed. We

professors of literature hold the key to the warehouse where the loaves lie fresh and steaming while outside people hunger for them, sometimes dangerously. We ought to do all we can to open the doors and dispense the bread: We should see how far it'll go.

NARCISSUS REGARDS HIS BOOK/ THE COMMON READER NOW

WHO IS THE common reader now? I do not think that there is any way to evade a simple answer to this question. Common readers—which is to say the great majority of people who continue to read—read for one purpose and one purpose only. They read for pleasure. They read to be entertained. They read to be diverted, assuaged, comforted, and tickled.

The evidence for this phenomenon is not far to seek. Check out the best-seller lists, even in the exalted *New York Times*. See what Oprah's reading. Glance at the Amazon top one hundred. Look around on the airplane. The common reader—by which I don't mean the figure evoked by Doctor Johnson and Virginia Woolf, but the person toting a book on the train or loading one into his iPod or Kindle or whatever—the contemporary common reader reads for pleasure, and easy pleasure at that. Reading, where it exists at all, has largely become a relatively unprofitable wing of the diversion industry.

Life in America now is all too often one of two things. Often it is work. People work very hard indeed—often it takes two

incomes to support a family, and few are the full-time professional jobs that currently require only forty hours a week. And when life is not work, what is it? When life isn't work, it is play. That's not hard to understand. People are tired, stressed, drained: They want to kick back a little. That something done in the rare off-hours should be strenuous seems rather unfair. Frost talked about making his vocation and his avocation one, and about his work being play for mortal stakes: For that sort of thing, assuming it was ever possible, there is no longer the time.

But it's not only the division of experience between hard labor and empty leisure that now makes reading for something like mortal stakes a very remote possibility. Not all that long ago—fifteen years, not much more—students paraded through the campuses and through the quads, chanting variations on a theme: Hey-hey, ho-ho, they jingled, Western culture's got to go. The marches and the chants and the general skepticism about something called the canon seemed to some an affront to all civilized values.

But maybe not. Maybe this was a moment of real inquiry on the kids' part. What was this thing called Western culture? Who created it? Who sanctioned it? Most important—what was so valuable about it? Why did it matter to study a poem by Blake, or to ponder a Picasso or comprehend the poetry latent in the religions of the world?

I'm not sure that the teachers and scholars ever offered a very good answer to those implied queries. The conservatives, protected by tenure, immersed in the minutiae of their fields, slammed the windows closed and cranked the radiators when the parade passed by. They went on with what they were doing. Those who concurred with the students brought mikes and drums themselves and joined the march. They were much in

demand in the media—figures of great interest. The *Post* was calling; the *Times* was on the other line. Was it true? Were the professors actually repudiating the works that they had purportedly been retained to preserve?

It was true—and there was more, the rebels yelled. They thought they would have the microphones in their hands all day and all of the night. They imagined that teaching Milton with an earring in one ear would never cease to fascinate the world.

But it did. The media—most inconstant of lovers—came and the media went, and the academy was left with its cultural authority in tatters. How could it be otherwise? The news outlets sell one thing above all others, and that is not so much the news as it is newness. What one buys when one buys a daily paper, what one purchases when one purchases a magazine, is the hypothesis that what is going on right now is amazing, unprecedented, stunning. Or at least worthy of intense concentration. What has happened in the past is of correspondingly less interest. In fact, it may barely be of any interest at all. Those who represented the claims of the past should never have imagined that the apostles of newness would give them a fair hearing or a fair rendering, either.

Now the people who were kids when the Western canon went on trial and received summary justice are working the levers of culture. They are the editors and the reviewers and the arts feature writers and the ones who interview the novelists and the poets—to the degree that anyone interviews the poets. Though the arts interest them, though they read this and they read that—there is one thing that makes them very nervous indeed about what they do. They are not comfortable with—errrr—judgments of quality. They are not at ease with "the whole

evaluation thing." They may sense that Blake's *Songs* are in some manner more valuable, more worth pondering, more worth preserving than *The Simpsons*. They may *sense* as much. But they do not have the terminology to explain why. They never heard the arguments. The professors who should have been providing them when the No More Western Culture marches were going on never made a significant peep. They never quoted Matthew Arnold on the best that's been thought and said—that would have been embarrassing. They never quoted Emerson on the right use of reading—that might have been silly. (It's to inspire.) They never told their students how Wordsworth saved Mill's life by restoring to him his ability to feel. They never showed why difficult pleasure might be superior to easy ones. They never even cited Wilde on the value of pure and simple literary pleasure.

The academy failed and continues to fail to answer the question of value, or to echo the best of the existing answers. But entertainment culture suffers no such difficulty. Its rationale is simple, clear, and potent. The products of the culture industry are good because they make you feel good. They produce immediate and readily perceptible pleasure. Beat that, Alfred, Lord Tennyson. Touch it if you can, Emily Dickinson.

So the arbiters of culture—the academy's former students—went the logical way. They said: If it makes you feel good, it must be. If Stephen King and John Grisham bring pleasure, why, then let us applaud them. Let's give them awards, let's break down the walls of the old clubs and colleges and give them entry forthwith. The only really important question to pose about a novel by Stephen King, we now know, is whether it offers a vintage draught of the Stephen King experience. Does it deliver the spine-shaking chills of great King efforts past? Is the may-

hem cranked to the desirable degree? Do homebody sadists and ordinary everyday masochists get what they want and need from the product?

What's not asked in the review and the interview and the profile is whether a King book is worth writing or worth the reading. It seems that no one anymore has the wherewithal to say that reading a King novel is a major waste of human time. No chance. If people want to read it, if they get pleasure from it, then it must be good. What other standard is there?

Media now do not seek to shape taste. They do not try to educate the public. And this is so in part because no one seems to know what literary and cultural education would consist of. What does make a book great anyway? And public media do not try to shape taste for another reason: It annoys the readers. They feel insulted, condescended to—they feel dumb. And no one, now, will pay you for making him feel dumb. Public entertainment generally works in just the opposite way—by making the consumer feel like a genius. No, even the most august publications and broadcasts no longer attempt to shape taste. They merely seek to reflect it. They hold the cultural mirror up to the reader—what the reader likes, the writer and the editor like. They hold the mirror up to the reader and—what else can he do?—the reader falls in love. The common reader today is someone who has fallen in love—with himself.

Freud tells us that people tend to love after two patterns—we are narcissistic lovers or we are anaclitic lovers. We either love versions of ourselves or we love others based on idealized imagoes from childhood. What Freud does not say, but may be true nonetheless, is that a culture can draw people away from anaclitic or idealizing love in the direction of love of self. Our culture, which revolves around the imperial prerogatives

and consumer pleasures of self, seems to have done precisely that.

Narcissus in his current post-Freudian guise looks into the book review and finds it good. Narcissus peers into Amazon's top one hundred, and lo, he feels the love. Nothing insults him; nothing pulls him away from that gorgeous smooth watery image below. The editor sells it to him cheap; the professor who might want to intervene—coming on like that Miltonic voice does to Eve gazing lovingly on herself in the pool: "What thou seest / What there thou seest . . . is thyself," it says—the professor has other things to do.

The intervening voice in Milton (and in Ovid, Milton's original in this) is a source of influence. Is it possible that in the world now there are people who might suffer not from an anxiety that they might be influenced but rather from an anxiety that they might never be? Perhaps not everyone loves himself with complete conviction and full abandon. Maybe there remain those who look into the shimmering flattering glass of current culture and do not quite like what they see. Maybe life isn't working for them as well as it is supposed to for all in this immeasurably rich and unprecedentedly free country.

Reading in pursuit of influence—that I think is the desired thing. It takes a strange mixture of humility and confidence to do as much. For suppose one reads anxious about *not being influenced*. To do so is to admit that one is imperfect, searching, unfinished. It's difficult to do when one is young, at least at present: Some of the oldest individuals I meet lately are under the age of twenty-one. It is difficult to do when one is in middle age: for that is the time of commitments. One has a husband or a wife, a family and job, and—who knows?—a career. Having second thoughts then looks like a form of weakness: It makes everyone

around you insecure. One must stand steady and sometimes one must pretend. And in old age—early or late—how can one still be a work in progress? That's the time, surely, to have assumed one's permanent form. That's the time to have balanced accounts, gained traction, become the proper statue to commemorate one's proper life.

Of his attempts at works of art, one writer observed: Finished? They are never finished. At a certain point someone comes and takes them away. (At a certain point, something comes and takes us away—where, we do not know.) We too are never truly finished. What Narcissus wanted was completion, wholeness: He wanted to *be* that image in the water and have done with it. There would be no more time, no more change, no more revision. To be willing to be influenced, even up to the last, is tantamount to declaring that we'll never be perfect, never see as gods see—even that we don't know who and what we are, why (if for any reason) we are here, and where we'll go.

The desire to be influenced is always bound up with some measure of self-dislike, or at least with a dose of discontent. While the current culture tells us to love ourselves as we are—or as we will be after we've acquired the proper products and services—the true common reader does not find himself adequate at all. He looks in the mirror of his own consciousness and he is anything but pleased. *That* is not what he had in mind at all. That is not what *she* was dreaming of.

But where is this common reader—this impossible, possible man or woman who is both confident and humble, both ready to change and skeptical of all easy remedies? *That* common reader is in our classrooms, in our offices, before the pages of our prose and poems, watching and wondering and hoping to be brought, by our best ministrations and our love, into being.

THE UNCOOLNESS OF GOOD TEACHERS

THERE'S A SCENE in the movie *Almost Famous* that, at least for my money, can tell you as much about good teaching as a term's worth of courses at any currently flourishing graduate school of education. William Miller, aspiring rock journalist, is talking on the phone to the old pro, Lester Bangs. William's working on a profile of a group called Stillwater (whose music doesn't run terribly deep), and some of the band members have been softening him up—making friends with him. Don't buy it, says Bangs. "They make you feel cool. And hey. I met you. You are not cool." William has to confess as much: "Even when I thought I was," he says, "I knew I wasn't." But then Lester Bangs opens up, too: "*We're* uncool," he proclaims. And though uncool people don't tend to get the girl, being uncool can help you develop a little spine. It's too easy out there for the handsome and the hip—their work almost never lasts. Then Bangs throws out his rock-Bogart clincher: "The only true currency in this bankrupt world is what we share with someone else when we're uncool."

Bangs is filling the role of teacher here, and he's a pretty

good one in large part because he's willing to be uncool and admit it. Why are good teachers strange, uncool, offbeat?

Because really good teaching is about not seeing the world the way that everyone else does. Teaching is about being what people are now prone to call counterintuitive, but to the teacher means simply being honest. The historian sees the election not through the latest news blast but in the context of presidential politics from Washington to the present. The biologist sees a natural world that's not calmly picturesque but a jostling, striving, evolving contest of creatures in quest of reproduction and survival. The literature professor won't accept the current run of standard, hip clichés but demands bursting metaphors and ironies of an insinuatingly serpentine sort. The philosopher wants an argument as escape-proof as an iron box: What currently passes for logic makes him want to grasp himself by the hair and yank himself out of his seat.

Good teachers perceive the world in alternative ways and they strive to get their students to test out these new, potentially enriching perspectives. Sometimes they do so in ways that are, to say the least, peculiar. The philosophy prof steps in through the window the first day of class and asks her students to write down the definition of the world *door*. The elementary school teacher sees that his kids can't figure out how the solar system works by looking at the astronomy book. So he takes them outside and designates each one as a planet or a major moon and gets them rotating *and* revolving around each other in the grassy field. (For his own safety—and perhaps for other reasons—he plays the part of the sun.) The high school teacher, struck by his kids' conformity, performs an experiment. He sends the hippest guy in the class off on an errand, and while he's gone draws pairs of lines on the board, some equal, some unequal. When

the hip kid comes back, he asks the class, who're in on the game, which lines are the same length, which are different, and, as they've been instructed, they answer the wrong way. They're surprised at how often the cool kid disobeys the evidence of his own eyes and goes along with the pack; a few hours later, at home, they're surprised at how good they were at fooling their friend, and how much pleasure they took in making him the butt of the experiment.

From the standard vantage point, these gambits can look like pointlessly offbeat things to do. But the good teacher knows that they can crack the shell of convention and help people look freshly at life. The good teacher is sometimes willing to be a little ridiculous: He wears red or green socks so a kid will always have an excuse to start a conversation with him; she bumbles with her purse to make her more maladroit kids feel at ease.

Good teachers know that now, in what's called the civilized world, the great enemy of knowledge isn't ignorance, though ignorance will do in a pinch. The great enemy of knowledge is knowingness. It's the feeling encouraged by TV and movies and the Internet that you're on top of things and in charge. You're hip and always know what's up. Good teachers are constantly fighting against knowingness by asking questions, creating difficulties, raising perplexities. And they're constantly dramatizing their own aversion to knowingness in the way they walk and talk and dress—in their willingness to go the Lester Bangs route.

Needless to say, teachers can get a lot out of unorthodox teaching, too. The person who turned the bunch of elementary school kids into a spinning solar system wasn't a freshly minted Master of Arts in Teaching. It was Ludwig Wittgenstein, the

most influential Western philosopher of the twentieth century. Wittgenstein spent time at Cambridge, arguing with Bertrand Russell and terrorizing undergraduates, but he also did stints as an elementary school teacher. He seems to have loved these gigs and to have been good at them, though he was prone to pull the ears of students slow to master their math facts. Wittgenstein probably found that by getting out of the conventional high-powered university he could let his thoughts loose, ponder things in a freer and less constrained way. After the elementary school teaching run, Wittgenstein went to work on what would become *Philosophical Investigations*, as original a piece of philosophy as the twentieth century produced. In it, he was not unwilling to get down to basics. The former grade school teacher wasn't afraid to pose elementary questions.

But a lot of teachers want to be with it. Unlike Lester (and Ludwig), many of them, maybe even most, want to be cool. How do you become a hip teacher? It's pretty easy, actually. You emulate your students. You do what they do, but with a little bit of adult élan. You like what they like: listen to their tunes, immerse in their technology. In this way, you can get popular fast, but you're also letting the students become *your* teachers.

The most common way to become a hip teacher now—there have been other ways; there will be more—is to go wild for computers. Students love computers; you get points for loving them more. At my school a prof whose energy and ingenuity I have to admire provides his students with handheld wireless input gizmos that have a dozen buttons on them. (I understand they look like TV remotes—not a good sign.) Every five or ten minutes, the prof stops teaching and checks with the kids to see if they're following along. Cool. Many other teachers have

turned their classes into light and laser shows. Around the corner, we can expect 3-D glasses.

In order to stay current and be hip, teachers have let students bring their computers into the classroom. There, behind the screens, they do many things, which may include taking class notes or looking up references the teacher makes. But then, too, they may not. Many current teachers are afraid to ban computers from their classrooms. It'll make them unpopular, unhip.

Anyone tempted by this mode of going about things, where the teacher and the student switch roles, should consider the philosophy of education put forward by a chaired senior colleague of Lester Bangs, someone who achieved yet greater distinction as an on-screen pedagogue and who provides one of the constant refrains of this book. "Whatever it is," Groucho Marx merrily sang in *Horse Feathers*, "I'm against it." If it's TV and cultural studies, I'm against it; if it's computers and the hype that surrounds the wireless classroom, I'm against it.

A good teacher is often a Groucho Marxist because the job is to provide alternatives to *whatever* is out there. It's to provide an alternative to convention and conformity. Convention fits some people, but not all. (Maybe not even most.) In fact, even the most conventionally minded people often relish putting aside their conformity for a while and exposing their hidden sides. And here the genius of Lester Bangs–style pedagogy really shines through. "The only true currency in this bankrupt world," he says, "is what we share with someone else *when* we're uncool." When. Uncoolness can be a state that anyone slides into, a state where we're more open, vulnerable, and susceptible to being surprised than at other times when we've got the cold deflective armor on. Teachers live for the moments when their students—and they themselves—cast off the breastplates and iron masks and open

up. And good teachers are always ready for those moments to happen.

"I'm glad you were home," William tells Bangs after they've had their rock heart-to-heart on the telephone.

"I'm always home," Bangs assures him. "I'm uncool."

TEACHING THE TRUTHS

STANDING IN FRONT of me is the World Spirit, the zeitgeist, the Rude Beast Slouching Towards Bethlehem, or at least he's a significant contender for the role. But the odd thing is that the Spirit, who is decked in thick glasses, weary heel-worn shoes, and an affectionately tended goatee, is refusing to act the part. Before *him* is a lot of the sort of detritus that ought to be swept into the dustbin of history—me, that is, and a handful of other humanities professors—and he has a right, it would seem, to scoff at us human irrelevancies once or twice, then flourish the broom. But that's not what he's doing. The Spirit of the Age talks a lot, almost uncontrollably, about his great love, computers, and he flies off occasionally into hyperlinked digressions, mentally double clicking on phrases from off-the-point sentences past, but by and large the Spirit seems a pretty nice guy.

We're here, we half a dozen or so professors, to learn how to "integrate computing into humanities instruction." In return for sitting through a few training sessions and promising to use technology in a course sometime, we each get temporary use of

a jazzy laptop computer. Integrating computing into humanities instruction: This is code, really, for transferring as much as possible of what we know and can do over to the computer. I'm learning how to set up websites full of information about the courses I'm teaching. At the website for my class on dystopias and utopias, Beyond *1984*, you should be able to access all the reading, the relevant articles, my notes for lectures and presentations, your classmates' essays. In the chat room I could set up, you'd talk on with your fellow dys- and utopic students. If I arrange things right, another university computer advocate has informed me, my workload will sink "exponentially."

"Exponentially." Hmmm. In fact, as I figure it, the workload will near the vanishing point. I'll only be needed to grade the papers. I won't be gone, per se; tenure will probably protect me, no matter how flagrantly irrelevant I become. No, I'm heading to the metaphorical dustbin, but my graduate students may be going there literally. We humanities professors are, it would seem, over, played out. The World Spirit doesn't need to gloat; he can just pass serenely through, like the whirlwind angel in Exodus, blowing the husks and shells into the desert and away.

The Exodus angel may be on to something. We humanities professors *have* been working to put ourselves beside the point. (Though maybe it's not too late . . .) So there's no reason why, if things continue in their current course, the cheerful logorrheic in front of me won't have his way.

One example: The teaching of writing has been all but transformed over the past decade. Many teachers once regarded writing as a way to unfold and even to discover an inner self. Writing was, to take a phrase from Keats, a form of "Soul-making." A flexible, potent individual style signified supple, developing

character. Now we know better. Writing, it turns out, is a technology. It's a way of transferring information from one site to another. Thus it needs to be clean, clear, fluent, but also rather anonymous, unclouded by excess metaphor or perplexing irony. One learns "communication," not self-excavation, self-making.

Now that the computer is at the center of every course, every area of inquiry is more and more defined by the resources of the computer. Computers are splendid research tools. Good: More and more the curriculum turns in the direction of research. We don't attempt to write as Dickens would, to experiment with thinking as he might, were he alive today. Rather, we research Dickens. We delve into his historical context, learn what the newspapers were gossiping about on the day installment one of *Bleak House* hit the stands. We shape our tools, as Marshall McLuhan famously said, and thereafter our tools shape us.

One can be fully grateful for the best blessings of technology. One can be receptive to many of the pleasures that come out of American popular culture. Yet one can still feel, as I do, that education needs to be about more than training and entertaining, about learning how to do a lucrative job and how to disperse the money that job creates. William Carlos Williams said that people die every day for want of what's to be found in "despised poems." Hyperbolical as the line may be, I think there's something to it. We need the study of history and literature and art, and as more than modes of diversion and more than testing grounds for practical skills.

But what is it precisely that the humanities offer? Pragmatically, what can they do?

The answers I'll offer are both old and new, both conservative and radical, geared to bring full comfort to neither left nor

right. And the answers begin where good taste demands that, as of now, one shouldn't tread.

I teach at the University of Virginia, and not far from me down Route 29, in Lynchburg, Virginia, is the church of Jerry Falwell. Falwell, it's well-known, taught the word of God, the literal, unarguable truth as it was revealed to him in the Bible, and as it must be understood by all heaven-bound Christians.

For some time, I thought that we at the University of Virginia had nothing consequential to do with the Reverend Falwell. Occasionally, I get a book through interlibrary loan from Falwell's Liberty University; sometimes the inside cover contains a warning to the pious suggesting that though this volume may be the property of the Liberty University library, its contents, insofar as they contradict the Bible (which means the Bible according to Falwell), are of no particular value.

It's said that when a certain caliph was on the verge of burning the great library at Alexandria, scholars fell on their knees in front of him and begged him to reconsider. "There are two kinds of books here," the caliph reputedly said. "There are those that contradict the Koran—they are blasphemous. And there are those that corroborate the Koran—they are superfluous." And then: "Burn the library." Given the possibilities that the caliph's behavior opened up, it's a good thing that Liberty has a library at all.

Thomas Jefferson, our founder, was a deist (maybe worse than that, the orthodox of Virginia used to whisper). The architecture of the university's central grounds, designed by Jefferson, is emphatically pre-Christian, based on Greek and Roman models. In fact the Rotunda, once the university's library, is designed in homage to the Roman Pantheon, a temple to the twelve chief pagan gods. As soon as they saw the university, local divines

became apoplectic. Where was the church? Unlike Princeton and Harvard, the university didn't have a Christian house of worship in its midst. From pulpits all over Virginia, ministers threatened the pagan enclave with ruin from above.

Jefferson—deist (maybe worse), scientist, revolutionary, seems to have believed that the best way to deal with religion was to banish it, formally, from the university, then go on to teach the useful arts of medicine, commerce, law, and the rest. The design of my university declares victory over what the radicals of the Enlightenment would have called superstition, and what most Americans currently call faith or spirituality. And we honor Jefferson now by, in effect, rendering unto Falwell that which is Falwell's.

In fact, humanists in general have entered into an implied bargain with Falwell & Company. They do the soul crafting. They administer the spiritual education. They address the hearts of the students—and in some measure of the nation at large. We preside over the minds. We shape intelligences; we train the faculties. In other words, we teachers cut an implicit deal with religion and its promulgators. They do their thing, we do ours. But isn't that the way it should be? Isn't religion private? Spirituality, after all, is everyone's personal affair. It shouldn't be at the core of college education; it should be passed over in silence. What professor would have the bad taste to puncture the walls of his students' privacy by asking them uncomfortable questions about ultimate values?

Well, me. But then, I got into the teaching business for the reason, I suspect, that many people did. I thought it was a high-stakes affair, a place where, for want of a better way to put it, souls are won and lost. I thought Socrates' line about summed it up: "This discussion," he said, referring to an exchange with

his students, "is not about any chance question, but about the way that one ought to lead one's life."

"How do you imagine God?" If you're going to indulge in embarrassing behavior, if you're going to make your students "uncomfortable" (still often the worst thing for a student to be now), why not go all the way? This, or some variant, is the question that lately has been inaugurating my classes—not classes in religion but classes in Shakespeare, in Romantic poetry, in major nineteenth-century novels. That is, the embarrassing question begins courses of study with which—according to Jefferson, according to Falwell, according to the great majority of my colleagues in the humanities—such a query has nothing to do.

What kind of answers do I get? Quite marvelous ones, often. After the students who are disposed to walk out have, sometimes leaving an editorial sigh hanging in the air, and there's been time for reflection and some provisional writing, answers come. Here I can provide only a taste of them.

Some of the accounts are on the fluffy side. I've learned, or relearned, the view that God is love and only love; I've heard that God is nature, that God is light, that God is all the goodness in the universe. I hear tales about God's interventions into the lives of my students, interventions that save them from accidents and deliver them from sickness while others fall by the way. There's a whole set of accounts that are on the all-benevolent side—smiling, kindly, but more than a little underramified, insufficiently thought-out. If God is all things, or abides in all things, as I've heard it said, what is the source of evil? (By now it's clear to the students that bad taste is my métier—once this is understood, they can be quite indulgent.) A pause, then often an answer, sometimes not a bad one. The most memorable of the exponents of smiling faith was a woman named Susan

who called her blend of creamy benevolence—what else?—Susanism.

Some of the responses are anything but under-elaborated. These tend to come from orthodoxly religious students, many of whom are well trained, maybe overtrained, in the finer points of doctrine. I get some hard-core believers. But it would be difficult to call them Falwell's children, because they're often among the most thoughtful students in the class. They, unlike the proponents of the idea that God is light, period, are interested in major questions. They care about knowing the source of evil. They want to know what it means to live a good life. And though they're rammed with doctrine, they're not always creatures of dogma. There's often more than a little room for doubt. And even if their views are sometimes rock-wall solid, these students don't mind being tested. They're willing to put themselves into play because, given their interests, they don't mind that this "is not about any chance question, but about the way that one ought to lead one's life."

Religion is a good place to start a humanities course, even if what we're going on to do is read the novels of Henry James, in part because religion is likely to be the place where you can find what the philosopher (and anti-philosopher) Richard Rorty calls a person's "final vocabulary." A final vocabulary is the ultimate set of terms that we use in order to confer value on experience. It's where our principles lie. When someone talks about the Ten Commandments, or the Buddha's four noble truths, or the innate goodness of human beings in their natural state, or history being the history of class conflict, and does so with a passion, then in all likelihood the person has revealed the core of her being. She's touched on her ultimate terms of commitment, the point beyond which mere analysis cannot go. Rorty

puts it this way: "All human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. These are the words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt of our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes. They are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives."

Sometimes there's apparently no "there" there. That is, the students seem to have no ultimate vocabularies. The anti-philosophy of "whatever" is in place. But that can be a merely superficial condition. If you keep asking, values often do emerge. And when they don't, the students sometimes are willing to ask themselves why. Somehow they feel the pain of that void. They feel what Kundera, thinking of Nietzsche, called an unbearable lightness of being. Within that void, or against the solid wall of conviction, humanistic learning can fruitfully take place.

In Rorty's idiom, the word "final" is ironic. That is, a major step in educating oneself comes with the conviction that all of one's most dearly held beliefs should be open to change. One's final vocabulary is final only for now. Certain people, says Rorty, "are always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves." Rorty believes that such people are the exception, not the rule. I'm not so sure. I think that one can begin by assuming that any student who turns up in a humanities course is open to influence, open to change.

It's time, perhaps, for something like a thesis statement: The function of a liberal arts education, as I see it, is to rejuvenate, reaffirm, replenish, revise, overwhelm, replace, reorder, or maybe just slightly retouch the web of words that Rorty calls the final

vocabulary. A language, Wittgenstein thought, is a way of life. A new language, whether we learn it from a historian, a poet, a painter, or a composer of music, is potentially also a new way to live.

While I'm asking my questions about imagining God, what's going on in the classrooms of colleagues down the hall and across the country?

Often some very good things. (It's not all training, not all entertaining.) No matter what humanities teachers may profess in their published papers, in the classrooms matters are often much different. Professors of literature and history and philosophy and religious studies generally have something in common. They attempt to teach one essential power, and they often do so with marked success. That one thing is reading. They cultivate attentiveness to written works, careful consideration, thoughtful balancing, coaxing out of disparate meanings, responsiveness to the complexities of sense. They try—we try, for I'm of this party, too—to help students become more and more like what Henry James said every author should be, someone on whom nothing is lost. Attentiveness to words and, with the habits of concentration developed on words, an attentiveness to life—that is one aim of a humanities education.

But there are limits to close reading. It's said that the Harvard scholar Walter Jackson Bate used to do a Marx Brothers–style routine to dramatize them. "Close reading," he'd mutter, and push the book up near his nose. "Closer reading"—chuckling, digging his face down into the book. Then, finally, "very close reading," where nose and book kissed and not a word of print was legible. The point is that with a certain kind of exclusive

attention to the page, life disappears. The connection between word and world goes dark.

This is the fate of reading when we do not move beyond interpretation. It is possible, I fully believe, to read a book in such a way that we can bring forth an interpretation that the author would approve. We can, with careful study, with disciplined effort, concoct a vision of Wordsworth's Nature that the poet would find acceptable; we can imagine what Shelley meant by liberty. We can evoke uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts when those are a poet's Keatsian designs. Critics who do not believe that this is possible may forget how often in day-to-day life we're called upon to relay the story of a protracted illness, a divorce, a long-worked-for triumph as we've heard it recounted by another. Are poems so much more difficult to render?

But then comes the next step, the critical one. I've asked my students what they believe. I've asked them what the word at hand means. Now the final question: Is the work true? That's a question simple to phrase but hard to answer.

Does the work contain live options? Does it offer paths they might wish to take, modes of seeing and saying and doing that they can put into action in the world? How, to phrase the matter in slightly different terms, does the vision at hand, the author's vision, cohere with or combat (or elaborate, or reorder, or simply fail to touch—the possibilities are endless) your own vision of experience, your own final vocabulary?

Do you want to affirm Wordsworth's natural religion? It's not as far-fetched a question as it might sound at a moment when many consider ecological issues to be the ultimate issues on the world's horizon. Is it true what Wordsworth suggests in "Tintern Abbey" about the healing powers of Nature and

memory? Can they fight off depression? Not an empty question in an age when antidepressive drugs have become so sadly common. Is Milton's Satan the shape that evil now most often takes—flamboyant, grand, and self-regarding? Or is Blake's Satan—a supreme administrator, mild, bureaucratic, efficient, and congenial, an early exemplar of Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil"—a better emblem? Or, to strike to the center of the tensions that often exist between secular and religious writing, who is the better guide to life, the Jesus of the Gospels or the Prometheus of Percy Bysshe Shelley, who learned so much from Christ but rejected so much as well—in particular Jesus' life of committed celibacy?

Yes, one might say, but those are Romantic writers, polemicists, authors with a program. How about other writers? How about, for instance, the famous poet of negative capability, who seems to affirm nothing, Shakespeare? The most accomplished academic scholars of Shakespeare generally concur: They cannot tell for certain what Shakespeare believed on *any* consequential issue.

But in fact Shakespeare has been the object for what may be the most formidable act of literary criticism yet performed. If Sigmund Freud drew on any author for his vision of human nature—right or wrong as that vision may be—it was Shakespeare. The Oedipal complex, to cite just one of Freud's Shakespearean extractions, ought just as well to be called the Hamlet complex. From Shakespeare, Freud might also have drawn his theories of sibling rivalry; of the tragic antipathy between civilization and the drives; of bisexuality; of patriarchal presumption; of male jealousy; of the intertwinings of love and authority; of humor as an assault on the superego—of a dozen matters more. In larger-scale terms, Freud's tragic sense—his

commitment to stoical renunciation as the best response to life's inevitable grief—finds considerable corroboration in the world of Shakespeare's plays. Shakespeare may not have affirmed any ideas directly; he is not, it's true, a polemicist in the way that Blake is. But Freud's contestable truths can be fairly extracted from Shakespeare, put on display, and offered to the judgment of the world. (Rather implicitly and quite brilliantly, Freud succeeds in befriending the spirit of Shakespeare's work in the way that I described in the chapter against readings.) Does Shakespeare/Freud work? Does their collaboration, if it is fair to call it that, illuminate experience, put one in a profitable relation to life? Does it help you live rightly and enjoy your being in the world?

But what does all of this have to do with religion? Why ask, on day one, the grating question about God?

Because in a fundamental sense Matthew Arnold's view on the relations between poetry and faith is, I believe, an accurate one. If religious faith wanes in the world—or in a given individual—then the next likely source of meaning may well be literature. The literature we have come to value, most especially the novel, is by and large anti-transcendental. It does not offer a vision of the world as existing under the guidance of a deity. It suggests, though often it does not assert, that we humans have to make our own way without the strains and the comforts of faith.

The teaching of literature I want to commend does not argue that always and for everyone a secular, imaginative vision must replace faith. Rather, this sort of teaching says that a most pressing spiritual and intellectual task of the moment is to create a dialogue between religious and secular approaches to life. Many of my students leave class with their religious convictions

deepened. They are more ardent and thoughtful believers than when they began. The aim is not conversion. It is the encounter between the transcendental and the worldly. The objective is to help the students place their ultimate narratives in the foreground and render them susceptible to influence.

Most professors of the humanities seem to have little interest in religion as a field of live options. Most of them, from what I can see, have had their crises of faith early in life and have adopted, almost as second nature, a secular view of experience. Others keep their religious commitment separate from their pedagogy and have been doing so for so long that they are hardly aware of it.

But what is old to the teacher is new to the student. The issue of belief matters greatly to the young, or at least it does in my experience. They want to know how to navigate life, what to be, what to do. Matters of faith or worldliness are of great import to our students, and by turning away from them, by continuing our treaty with Falwell where we tutor the mind and he takes the heart and spirit, we do them injustice.

Is it a form of therapy that I am endorsing here? Yes and no. Yes, in that this form of teaching, like Socrates', like Freud's, offers possibilities for change that are not only intellectual but emotional as well. When we're talking about ultimate values, feelings come into play; tensions similar to those met with in a Freudian therapeutic exchange can arise. But there is also a crucial difference. Patients come to psychoanalysis because they suffer from the past—their experience of various events prevents their living with a reasonable fullness in the present. The form of pedagogy I am describing, which is anything but new, assumes a certain ability to live within the present (that is to say, a certain

sanity) and so aims itself directly at the future. What *will* you be? What *will* you do?

There is a story about a psychoanalyst who, at the end of the first-day intake interview, asked his patients an unexpected question. "If you were cured, what would you do?" There would come forth a list. "I'd get married." "I'd travel." "I'd come back and study law." To which the therapist sometimes replied, "Well, then, why don't you simply go out and do those things?" At the moment when he posed the possibility, the therapist stopped being a therapist in the Freudian sense and became something rather different.

A scene of instruction can illustrate the kind of teaching I want to commend. One of my recent students, a young woman, professes herself to be an ardent Christian. She believes in doing unto others as you would have them do unto you, in turning the other cheek. She believes Jesus to be the most perfect being. But she reads *The Iliad* and, after a period of languor, she's galvanized by it. What sweeps her in is the vision of a life where triumph matters over everything. The warriors in the poem seek first place all the time. Envy is not a vice to them; it's entirely creditable. The young woman who, it comes out, wants to be a well-to-do corporate lawyer has no trouble seeing something of herself in the unapologetic ambitions of Homer's heroes.

But then, too, she wants to be a Christian. Jesus' originality lies in part in his attempt to supersede the ambition and self-vaunting of Homer's heroes—qualities still very much alive in the Roman empire into which Jesus was born. Which will it be, my student needs to ask herself, Jesus or Achilles? Of course, what she needs is some live synthesis of the two. And it is her

task to arrive at it. But without the encounter with Homer, and without our raising the simple and supposedly elementary question of identification—is there anything in you that is Achillean?—she might not have had access to her own divided state. This was an instance not only of reading and interpreting a book—we spent a long time coming to understand the heroic code and considering Homer's highly equivocal attitude toward it—but of allowing the book to interpret and read the reader. It was a moment, I would say, of genuine humanistic education.

The questions I want to ask may seem elementary compared to the sophisticated queries that a theoretically charged Foucauldian may offer in class. But many of us—teachers and students both—do not know what we think about major personal issues. And it is with them that we need to begin. Being a beginner in humanistic inquiry is something to be treasured; sophistication too rapidly attained can be self-defeating. Thus that great violinist on hearing a young, technically brilliant prospective student: "I will never be able to teach him anything. He lacks inexperience." Or Emerson, in a lovely moment from his journals: "Don't let them eat their seed-corn; don't let them anticipate, ante-date, and be young men, before they have finished their boyhood."

What is the teacher's role in this? I think it begins with a realization of what literature and art, at least since the Romantic period, have offered to us. This is the view that there are simply too many sorts of human beings, too many idiosyncratic constitutions, for any simple map of human nature, or any single guide to the good life, to be adaptable for us all. This realization, which coincides with the foundations of widespread de-

mocracy as well as with the flourishing of novels, holds that there are multiple ways of apprehending experience and multiple modes of internal organization, or disorder. Accordingly, there are many, many different ways to lead a satisfying, socially constructive life. This, or something like it, is what Milan Kundera is getting at when he calls the characters—and by implication the narrating voices—encountered in fiction "experimental selves." There are multiple ways to go, and confining theories of the self, even those as admirably worked out as, say, Plato's or Kant's, cannot encompass the range of human difference.

The teacher, in other words, begins the secular dialogue with faith by offering the hypothesis that there is no human truth about the good life, but that there are many human truths, many viable paths. To set his students on them, he offers them multiple examples of what Arnold (in what is justifiably the most famous phrase about the objectives of literary education) called the best that has been known and thought. This multiplying of possibilities—a condition enhanced by the rapid diffusion of culture around the globe—makes literature, which is inevitably the effusion of an individual mind, the most likely starting place. I would even say it's the center of humanistic education. As literary works are multiple, so are the number of possibly usable human visions of experience.

Beginning with this hypothesis, the teacher's task is often one of inspired impersonation. Against her students' final vocabularies, against their various faiths, she, with a combination of disinterest and passion, hurls alternatives. Impersonation: The teacher's objective, in the approach I'm describing, is to offer an inspiring version of what is most vital in the author. She merges with the author, becomes the creator, and in doing so makes

the past available to the uses of the present. The teacher listens to criticisms, perhaps engenders some herself, but always finally is the author's advocate, his attorney for explication and defense.

Is *The Iliad* a book replete with vital possibilities, or is it a mere historical curiosity? Is it locked in the past, or a potent guide to the present and the future? A number of my students—men and women both—initially thought it was a period piece and nothing more. The way the poem treated women disgusted them. In *The Iliad*, they said, a woman has the status of a few bullocks or a bronze tripod or two. Some, like Helen, are beautiful, and that beauty is a sort of power, but it is a limited and debased one compared to what the men have.

The class was about ready to concur when one of the women students, usually quiet, spoke up. She said that the poem mattered to her because she could see things from Achilles' point of view. The passage that caught her attention first was the one where Achilles' father tells him that he must be the best in every undertaking. He must simply never take second place. "I'm an athlete, I swim," she said, "and that's how I was raised by my parents and my coaches. After a while, though, I had to stop living like that. It's too much."

"Have you ever wanted to go back to it?" someone asked, perhaps me.

"Yes," she said, "all the time. It makes life incredibly intense." And you could see, if you looked hard, that what had once been closed off and left behind began to open again. The life of full unbridled competition is not for everyone, and it will not be approved by all. But if it is your highest aspiration, the thing you most want, then whether you take the path or not, it is worth knowing about your attraction to it. Achilles' life is the life of *thymos*, and if you are, at whatever depths, an individual driven

by *thymos*—by the desire for glory and praise, despite the moral censors you've thrown up against that drive—you need to deal with the fact in one way or another. I know no better means to begin to do so than through Homer.

Every essay on education needs a villain. There has to be someone or something preventing the liberal arts from being the world-changing enterprise we all suspect that they can be. And I suppose so far I have supplied a few. There are the spirits of training and of entertaining, and there's the refusal on the part of professors, even the best intentioned, to engage with questions of belief—to hear, in other words, a famous line of Wallace Stevens's: "Say that final belief / Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose." But of course to be a humanist—and the questions that emanate from humanism are ultimately the ones that this essay endorses—one must declare war on what's been called the cultural left, who are supposedly busy condemning all of Western literature for not living up to their own high political standards.

And in one measure, I'm willing to do that. The kind of teaching I part company with, the kind that seems to me most destructive to the freedom of self-making, is the kind that simply applies a standing set of terms to every text that comes to hand. These forms of teaching are a little like bad translation. Every work, alas, is rewritten in the terms of Foucault, of feminism, of Marx, and that is the end of the story.

Surely there are plenty of good questions about gender to pose to *The Iliad*. But if we simply look for a way to apply the theory, apply the denunciation, and do no more, then the free space that helped one student see her own attraction to the athlete's life and helped another to see her divided mind, her pull

toward the goodness of the Gospels and the potency that Homer describes—that free space collapses.

And as I have suggested, the theorist almost never turns and interrogates the theoretical terms at hand. He never asks how well Foucault could work as a guide to life. (That is, does he tell a truth?) The theorist generally does not pause to wonder how one would live, if one could live, with the wild hatred of all authority that Foucault endorses. Could you really teach in an institution as authority-based as a university and preach the gospel according to Foucault? It seems to me highly unlikely. But for many theorists, the application of the terms is enough. Rather than sending one nineteenth-century novel after another grinding through the mills of Foucault, why not teach Foucault straight out, and see how much of his purported wisdom can really stand the test of experience? (For myself, I find it hard to think of Foucault without thinking of Emerson's marvelous line: "I hate the builders of dungeons in the air.")

And yet there is a good deal to learn from the cultural left. For, to put it bluntly, they are the ones who believe that books can change people. They don't stop at mere interpretation. They understand that what is at issue in a literary education is belief. In some measure, they've kept the spirit of Socrates alive.

The fall of the liberal arts—which seems to many to be impending—isn't so much about heroes and villains as it is about well-intentioned people forgetting to ask and answer the kinds of questions that got them interested in reading to begin with. Professors, when young, read books as if their lives depended on it; older now, they enjoin their students to read and think as though what chiefly depends on it is their careers.

The spirit of education I want to encourage is better enacted and expressed by Harold Bloom. "We all of us go home each

evening and at some moment in time, with whatever degree of overt consciousness, we go over all the signs that the day presented to us. In those signs we seek only what can aid the continuity of our own discourse, the survival of those ongoing qualities that will give what is vital in us even more life. This seeking is the Vichian and the Emersonian making of significance into meaning, by the single test of aiding our survival." This is what we do, or ought to do, with books: turn their signification into meaning, into possibility. So Emerson himself suggests when, asking what the purpose of books is, he says simply that they should contribute to the thing in life that matters most to him. Books should inspire.

And the test of a book, from this perspective, lies in its power to map or transform a life. The question we would ultimately ask of any work of art is this: Can you live it? It you cannot, it may still command considerable interest. The work may charm, it may divert. It may teach us something about the large world; it may convey or refine a remote point. But if it cannot help some of us to imagine a life, or unfold one already latent in us, then it is not a major work, and probably not worth the time of students who, at their period in life, are looking to respond to very pressing questions. They are on the verge of choosing careers, of marrying, of entering the public world. They are in dire need of maps—or of challenges to their existing sense of the terrain.

Popular culture, which is more and more taught at universities, generally cannot offer this. The objective of a good deal of rock music and film is to convey the pleasing illusion that people can live in the way that the singers and the actors comport themselves when they are on. Occasionally, I suppose, a performer comes through. Keith Richards seems to be, in life, the Keith

that he evokes when he's onstage. Most people probably don't have the guts or the constitution for it.

Yet what David Denby says about movie love still strikes me as true: "Movie love puts people in touch with their own instincts and pleasures. Movies can lead to self-reconciliation, and that is one reason why they have inspired an almost unlimited affection." Movies tap into the fantasy life, and insofar as fantasy is being washed over by the gray waves of the reality principle, we need it to be restored. We need a new, larger self-synthesis that pays heed to the more refractory desires, or fantasies. But those fantasies cannot generally be the blueprint for a life, not in the way that the vision of Henry James, say, can conceivably be.

If resistance to popular culture is the teacher's objective, as it often is now, other problems arise. For the simple fact is that analysis will always be in arrears to the production of diverting images. While critique lingers over this or that blockbuster film, it becomes old news, the stuff of yesterday's generation. Brilliant analyses of *Titanic* are still coming out from learned journals and, in class, confronting students who were too young to have seen the film when it came out.

The central question to pose about works of popular culture, it seems to me, is this: Can you live it? Could you build a life around its visions? Given the work at hand, different people will answer differently. Some people will say yes to Bob Dylan (I would), yes to Muddy Waters and the blues tradition he works in, yes to Robert Altman or Stanley Kubrick. But you'll find far fewer people, I think, who'll be able to say yes to the Rolling Stones or Britney Spears. This doesn't mean that the Stones, and, who knows, maybe even Britney, are without their value. Fantasy matters. But I think that teaching such work to

people who are looking for answers to primary questions may not be the best way to use their time.

Some humanities teachers, sometimes the best of them, feel that they're fighting in a lost if noble cause. They believe that the proliferation of electronic media will inevitably put them out of date. They see the time their students spend with TV and movies and on the Internet, and they feel that what they have to offer—words—must look shabby and old-fashioned by contrast. But this is not the case.

When human beings attempt to come to terms with who they are and who they wish to be, the most effective medium is verbal. Through words we represent ourselves to ourselves, we expand our awareness of the world, we step back, gain distance, on what it is we've said. And then we are in a position to change. Images, however exhilarating, do not generally function in this way. Words allow for a precision and nuance that images do not seem, for most people, to be able to provide. In a culture that changes at the velocity that ours does, the power of self-revision is centrally important. Self-aware self-revision is very difficult, if not impossible, outside of language.

Overall there is something to be learned from the analysis of popular culture. But we teachers can do better. We can strike to the central issues that confront the young, rather than working on the peripheries.

The other great apparent alternative to the self-creating approach I am describing goes under the name of multiculturalism. Know the other, says the multiculturalist. I could not agree more. A segment of the curriculum *should* be devoted to studying the literature and arts of cultures that are resolutely different from Western traditions. In them we may sometimes find truths that directly serve our present needs for revelation. We

may read them and say: "Yes, that's how it is." But books from far-flung cultures can also teach us how many different ways of being there are in the world. In fact, this is probably their likeliest gift.

My fear about the multicultural curriculum is that it may ask students to know others before they know themselves. If we learn only or chiefly of difference without taking the time to find, or make, the inner being, we risk being walking voids, readily taken up by, say, commercial interests, ever ready to use our college-won knowledge of others for the purposes of exploiting them. Asks David Rieff: "Are the multiculturalists truly unaware of how closely their treasured catchphrases—'cultural diversity,' 'difference,' 'the need to do away with boundaries'—resemble the stock phrases of the modern corporation: 'product diversification,' 'the global marketplace,' and the 'boundary-less company'?" Where the inner void was, where the unbearable lightness was, there the corporation may well open its franchise.

Most of our ideas about influence are negative. Freud speaks of the transference, the influx of past memories that distort an existing erotic or power relation. Bloom writes of influence anxiety. And so the thought of being remade by the poets can cause people certain qualms. And yet perhaps the process I am describing is often not so much a matter of remaking or conversion as it is of recognition. T.S. Eliot observed that one of the things that poetry does is to find words for feelings that have abided unnamed in the heart. Maybe, on a larger scale, the process I am describing is simply one in which the self recognizes its own larger yet unarticulated order as it is shadowed forth in the thoughts of another. And then, of course, there is work to do, the work of completing the vision. As Nietzsche said, "No

one can extract from things, books included, more than he already knows."

Proust, who is probably our preeminent theorist of a benevolent influence, observes that

> The mediocre usually imagine that to let ourselves be guided by the books we admire robs our faculty of judgment of part of its independence. "What can it matter to you what Ruskin feels: feel for yourself." Such a view rests on a psychological error which will be discounted by all who have accepted a spiritual discipline and feel thereby that their power of understanding and of feeling is infinitely enhanced and their critical sense never paralyzed . . . There is no better way of coming to be aware of what one feels oneself than by trying to recreate in oneself what a master has felt. In this profound effort it is our own thought itself that we bring out into the light together with his.

But the fact remains, as Proust elsewhere admits, that books can only put you on the edge of a spirited secular life. You must claim the rest, pass over the threshold for yourself.

Some will object to this vision of education. They will say that it is dangerous to talk about crucial matters in a classroom. A student's path may be radically changed by such discussion. The path may be blocked. It may become confused. But so may a life be ruined by not thinking. So may a life be ruined that never leaves the provinces of easy, unexamined faith in the transcendent. So may a life be wasted that gives to Falwell what he claims to be his and takes the slim remainder, worshipping diminutive Apollo with his toy computer, or small-time Dionysus with his Saturday nights. People can become distressed when

they imagine a world in which all of us, inspired by poets and other artists, create our own lives, with only community welfare and our privately perceived failures to rein us in. They fear chaos, they say. They fear disorder. But perhaps what they fear, most truly, is democracy.

UNDER THE SIGN OF SATAN: BLAKE IN THE CORPORATE UNIVERSITY

"I in my Selfhood am that Satan. I am that Evil One!"
WILLIAM BLAKE, *MILTON*

IMAGINE WAKING UP in a world gone wrong. You can feel it: Things are out of joint. The center's not quite holding and all the rest. Yet imagine that world as being more agreeable—more secure, more organized, more civilized (in a certain sense)—than any world you had ever imagined inhabiting. One has a wealthy sponsor. One is sheltered, valued. There is the matter of prestige. There is a firm sense of identity, at the very least. One can do one's work. Distractions are few, privileges many. Yet still there is little doubt: One lives in a world gone wrong.

William Blake found himself in such a position when he turned himself over to the protection of his prosperous, kindly friend William Hayley. Hayley rescued Blake and his wife Catherine from poverty (maybe from financial ruin) and from the neglect that had plagued the poet-painter's work. Hayley brought Blake out of the blighted, glorious London that he

loved and into the countryside. (Blake's attitude toward nature was complex, but overall unfavorable.) Haley gave Blake time, space, and money. He tried to make the poet into a success.

Blake's grand-sized visionary paintings didn't sell? No one wanted to buy his gorgeous, sometimes rather garishly illuminated books? Very well. Hayley wanted Blake to succeed. And Blake did not wish to be dependent on Hayley's charity forever. So Hayley put Blake to work painting miniatures, tiny portraits for broaches and necklaces. Blake, who loved to be expansive, was going to be compelled to do small things. But Hayley loved Blake—Blake knew it. He truly wanted this man of genius to prosper, gain recognition, stand on his feet and all the rest. In a sense, Blake never had a better friend than William Hayley.

2

No one liked it when Hulk Hogan came to town. At least no one I know did. Hulk came to Charlottesville to perform with his wrestling troupe at the John Paul Jones Arena at the University of Virginia. We had imagined, my faculty friends and I, that the arena would be the site for UVA basketball games and maybe a graduation ceremony or two on rainy days. But not long after the grand opening of the arena, we heard about Hulk and his crew, and we heard of a performance by something called monster trucks. The climax, I understood, came when a particularly monstrous monster truck, with tires taller than two or three men, rode over the tops of a line of parked vehicles, crushing them into metal pulp.

When the subject of Hulk Hogan and the monster trucks arose, my faculty buddies and I *looked* at each other in exasper-

ated ways and blew out exasperated columns of air as if to scatter the wrestlers and the steroidal trucks like so many leaves. But we did not *say* all that much. No, not much at all.

The University of Virginia, like virtually all universities, is a corporation. It requires revenues. It needs to generate funds. There is an operating budget and expenses must be met, among them the expenses of maintaining me in the English department, and my friends in music and architecture and religious studies.

That universities are becoming more corporate in orientation and aim is news to no one at all. We—like every other school that aspires to a certain status, a certain measure of success—have added layer upon layer of administrators. We have brought on no end of fund-raisers. More than that, many of the deans once charged with overseeing academic affairs are now also out seeking money from donors. A story that appeared not terribly long ago in the *New York Times* tells us that over the past two decades, colleges and universities in America have doubled their full-time support staff. Enrollment has increased only 40 percent; full-time instructors rose by only 50 percent, and many of those new instructors are non–tenure track. The article goes on to say that "the growth in support staff included some jobs that did not exist 20 years ago, like environmental sustainability officers and a broad array of information technology workers. The support staff category includes many different jobs, like residential-life staff, admissions and recruitment officers, fund-raisers, loan counselors and all the back-office staff positions responsible for complying with the new regulations and reporting requirements college faces."

With these changes, a new institutional culture is coming into being. Universities now teem with people who must do what

people who work in corporations do: be responsive to their superiors, direct their underlings, romance their BlackBerries, subordinate their identities, refrain from making mistakes, keep a gimlet eye always on the bottom line. Organization men and women have come and they are doing what they can—for an administrator must administer something—to influence the shape of the university. Are they having a shaping influence on the students? Often they do not have to, for many of our students—not all, but many—are already organization men and women. Though "organization man" is not the name in favor now; the current term of art is "leader."

How does a young person begin to qualify to become what is now called a leader? The essayist William Deresiewicz talks about the endless series of hoops that students have to jump through now if they hope to get into the right colleges. "Courses, standardized tests, extra-curriculars in school, extra-curriculars outside school. Test prep courses, admissions coaches, private tutors." What you get at the end, he says, are "kids who have been trained to be excellent hoop jumpers." They are, as one member of the generation observes, "excellent sheep."

All colleges and universities want leaders. They want to recruit them from high school. They want to cultivate them once they've arrived. Colleges are determined to graduate leaders and to send them into the world to become prosperous and grateful alumni. But who is a leader? A leader is someone who is drawn to organizations. He learns their usages. He internalizes their rules. He merges his identity with that of the organization. He always says "we." He starts at the bottom, a leader in training. Then he progresses, always by gradual steps, as close to the top as his powers will allow. He begins "mentoring" other leaders. In his assent, he is assiduous to get along with people. He blends in

like a white moth on a whitewashed picked fence. Everyone likes him. He gives no offense and where possible he takes none. He questions the presiding powers but in the manner of a minor angel, inquiring into the ways of his more opulently fledged brethren.

3

In "London," perhaps his best-known poem, Blake takes on the role of the biblical prophet—Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah—and rambles through the great city. What he sees stuns him. He is sick to articulate rage about it. The human aspirations to kindliness, community, and gentleness have been drowned in hypocrisy. The little chimney sweep's cry "every black'ning church appalls." The sweeps, orphaned, sold into something tantamount to slavery, get no succor from the church. Their cries blacken an already black, hulking monolith. The soldier's sigh "runs in blood down palace walls." Wars far away—in America, among other places—have sent soldiers off to risk their lives, not for noble ends but to suppress liberty and open up new markets for British merchants.

But perhaps worst of all in Blake's London is the state of love. (Blake greatly values heterosexual love—is in love with it.) The wandering prophet, edging toward rage, about to go over to Rintrah, as Blake liked to put it, hears "how the youthful harlot's curse / Blasts the newborn infant's tear / And blights with plagues the marriage hearse." Prostitution—sex for money—is to Blake one of the worst human depravities. The man of property, subject to an arranged marriage, flies to the prostitute. She gives him an escape from his loveless marriage; she gives him

some measure of intrigue and excitement. She also gives him syphilis, which ruins the marriage and infects his child and wife.

The church should engender a community of loving-kindness. The army should encourage bravery in just wars. Lovers should meet and love regardless of finances and social class. Sexual joy should be the culmination of real attraction of body and mind, whether sanctified by marriage or not. Prophets should not be compelled to rage blindly through the streets of London, witnesses to human despair. "I mark," says Blake, "in every face I meet / Marks of weakness, marks of woe." The prophet should offer wise and genial counsel and not be compelled to tremble with rage.

4

The engineering student sits in the fiction writer's office and asks questions about her craft. This fiction thing, this art thing, what is it about? What is it about *exactly*? He has read some novels. He plans to read many more. His grade-point average is high. His SAT scores are also impressive. A nearly perfect score on the verbals: He makes sure to mention this. He is—he knows—very smart.

But this fiction thing and poetry as well. How does one begin? (The fellow who wrote *Crying of Lot 49*—what was his name?—he was an engineering student, no?) There are, one hears, guide books, which give step-by-step instructions. Does the teacher advise trying one?

The teacher's way of writing fiction is to find an image, something that lodged in her mind for no reason that she can understand. She writes the image down. She describes it as well

as she can from a vantage point that is—maybe—not quite her own.

And then what? The student is truly interested.

She waits then to see what will happen from there.

And?

Sometimes something happens. Sometimes nothing.

This is writing? This is what you do?

Other people do it differently. But yes. I wait to see what will happen. She tells the students that if she lets her attention float with just the right amount of freedom, she'll eventually go somewhere she's fascinated by going.

Why don't you just start with what fascinates you?

I don't always know, the writer confesses. I don't always really know.

5

Satan weeps frequently. It is surprising, but it is true. In Blake's epic, *Milton,* Satan is a cultivated, thoughtful, highly sensitive specimen of what the eighteenth century liked to call a Man of Sensibility. He is not overwhelmingly intellectual. He appears to put feelings before thoughts. Nor is he the fiery, rather charismatic figure that Milton conjures up with a massive more-than-Achillean shield and a spear to which the tallest Norwegian pine tree is but a wand. Blake's Satan has no tail, no claws, no fangs, no cloven foot, not even an odor of pitch on arrival and departure. This Satan is urbanely kind. He is Hayley, the man who brought Blake out of London to Felpham, so Blake the genius might be saved. Of course there are the miniatures, which Blake does not wish to paint. "When Hayley finds out what you

cannot do / That is the very thing he'll set you to," Blake complains. There are also some tensions in sensibility: Hayley, who is Satan, is rather on the refined side. "Hayley on his toilette seeing the soap / Cries, 'Homer is very much improv'd by Pope.'" Hayley prefers Pope's refined translations of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* to Homer's actual unflinching vision. Being on the toilet close to his odorous humanity makes Hayley long for purity, long for Pope.

Hayley—and Satan, too—love poetry. They are drawn to poets; they find them mysterious, alluring, perhaps rather enviable. But then comes the question: Why should they, Satan and Hayley, not be poets as well? Already they have succeeded brilliantly at what they've set their hands to do. Hayley is good at business, better than good. As to Satan—here matters get more complicated. Satan has a cosmic role: He presides over time, clock time, ordering, duration. He is the lord of Chrons. All forms of regulation, consistency, and order fall under his power. He grinds time the way a farmer grinds wheat. No sand grain passes through the glass of time without Satan's awareness and approval. He propels the sun punctually through the houses of the zodiac. He measures the shadows on the moon's white face. He is God as a watchmaker, God as a supreme engineer.

But this is not enough for him. Satan also wants to be a poet. He is infatuated with Palamabron, the giant figure who wields the harrow. Palamabron breaks in order to create again; he engraves the soil; his work is sustenance to those who hunger in spirit as well as body. Palamabron concentrates all that Blake feels to be true about true artists. An idealization? Yes, maybe. But Blake deals in giant forms—grand, emblematic concentrations of force.

Finally Satan prevails upon Los, father of the eternals, to let him take Palamabron's harrow from his hands. What happens then? "Satan labour'd all day—it was a thousand years." Or at least it probably felt that way to Blake—the age of Pope and Dryden and Joshua Reynolds and Locke and Hobbes is a desert of tedium to Blake. It probably feels like a millennium. Engineers, people who wanted to understand art, draw blueprints, then get to work constructing things, were now the lords of light who lived where true thinkers and artists should have resided. A mess!

The mess has a double dimension, though. Palamabron's poetic attendants—Blake calls then gnomes—take over Satan's time-grinding mills. They get drunk as a tribe of monkeys and stumble around singing the songs of Palamabron. Minutes presumably last hours now; sometimes seconds probably expand into days; some days go blink and are gone. Another mess! The gnomes want to get back to the field, start engraving, start creating again—though getting drunk and messing with temporality is probably diverting to them for a little while.

Satan always wants to grasp the harrow—he wants to be lord high commissioner of everything and creator spirit, all at the same time. He wants to dominate time—as the bureaucrat of the minute—and also to live outside of time where real creation takes place. He wants to engineer odes.

Sometimes Blake loses all of his patience with Satan and wants to purge him out and away. Get thee behind me, and all of that. In *Milton* there is a culminating scene in which Blake, possessed by an apocalyptic fury, goes on about being washed clean in the blood of the lamb and purging away all of the nonhuman until "Generation is swallowed up in Regeneration,"

nature is swallowed up by true human culture. No more Satan then, no more crippling dualisms, just the bliss of ongoing creation, which Blake calls Eden.

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Yet at other times one feels that Blake rather likes Satan, much as he rather liked Hayley. "Corporeal friends are spiritual enemies," Blake famously said. Yes, perhaps. But perhaps only to the measure that artists, spiritual questers, allow them to be. Palamabron could presumably have told Los—the executive faculty of the mind, the spirit of the age, whatever he might be—to Take Off when he demanded the plough for Satan. Artists need Satan to run the world. There must be surgeons and airline pilots and directors of academic fund-raising. Satan is, after all, "Prince of the Starry Hosts / And of the Wheels of Heaven," and in this there is some honor—as long as Satan retains his place and stays off Palamabron's rightful turf.

Artists need a Satanic side sometimes, too. You've got to know how to butter your parsnips, Frost said. ("Provide! Provide!" He cries out to his old crone who was once a star of the silver screen and is now scouring the front steps "with pail and rag.") Satan often knows where the butter dish is stored.

It can be tempting for the artist to give up and to hand everything over to Satan. Or to be too compliant when Satan asks: Are there books with blueprints for how to write a poem? Of course there are, the weary and neglected writer replies. Good ones, too. She resolves that tonight maybe she'll have a peek.

The contemporary artist can be prone to forget what he stands for in a way that Blake never did. Or he can get weary,

as Blake surely did, of endorsing his ideals in a culture that cares little for them. Blake knew what he wanted: love that exalted lover and beloved; he knew that the measure of a society is the care, affection, and wisdom that it expends on children. Blake disliked war. He preferred what he called "mental fight." But he surely preferred just wars, like the American Revolution, which gladdened and amazed him, to unjust ones. He wanted poets to be prophets and call things as they saw them. He told us these things in "London." He seems to have meant them. He left his giant forms to remind us.

Hulk Hogan and those monster trucks are giant forms in their own ways. They are, I suppose, Satan's idea of poetry at its very worst: obvious, noisy, and lucrative. They're such gross caricatures that in time even Satan is probably made weary of them. He would dearly love it, I half believe, if Palamabron in his current form would take the harrow out of his hands and if he would tell Hulk, who seems as amiable as Hayley, that it is time to go home. But the contemporary Palamabron has experienced deconstruction and pragmatism and cultural studies and he knows how to see the world with what Nietzsche called a "perspectival seeing." He doubts his every reflex, Palamabron does. He cannot love what he loves. He cannot believe in eternal truth or everlasting beauty. So now he abides Satan, who in his heart probably does not want to be tolerated half so well.

For why did the administrators who are coming more and more to dominate the academic scene come to academia in the first place? Why didn't they stay in business where the salaries are higher, the perks cushier, and where everyone seems to receive weekly and free of charge a zippy new handheld wireless device? Maybe they came because they wanted to learn things—enduring things, humane things. They wanted to be

in a place where people talked about Plato and Blake and Shakespeare and Schopenhauer, rather than exclusively about Hulk Hogan and the bottom line. I sometimes think that there are more *potential* intellectual idealists among the administrators than among the faculty. But as long as we professors can't tell them exactly what's wrong with Hulk Hogan and the monster trucks, what are they supposed to do? As long as we can't say why Shakespeare is better than the next episode of *Jersey Shore*, how will they help us and help universities to be enduring centers of learning and of art?

If you don't cultivate (and discipline) Satan, he'll grow ever more powerful and ever more pragmatic. He'll come to represent worldly values and nothing else and his confidence in these values will grow and grow. So when Satan in his current guise finally tells Palamabron to fall down and worship him, what will—what can?—Palamabron do?

A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

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