

Prefatory Note

But lately arrived at UT Austin and the English Department (I arrived from Japan last January), and thus the newest calf in February's massacre, I have been hesitant to speak in the 346K slaughtergate. But the silence of the English Department faculty, for whom more than one of Chairman Sutherland's runners have professed to speak, is a form of oblivion I prefer not to accept.

The following essay has been going around begging for a home since early March but has found no door open. Though I didn't originally intend the UT English faculty as a primary audience, I did intend the essay to disassociate myself from that decomposing body, which has given me such short, brutal welcome. I have included the essay as a writing sample in the dozens of applications I have dispatched around the country since early March. Now, with the semester running out and no recourse, I have published it myself.

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The War on Literacy

"Literacy, Illiteracy, and Aliteracy in Texas" is the title of a speech which UT Austin's Professor James Kinneavy has been giving around the state during the last year. He makes a grim assessment of the health of literacy in Texas, concluding: "About half of the general population is marginally illiterate, with 21% being functionally illiterate." And: "The general populace, while it may be able to read in career areas and sports and hobby magazines and books, does not use its literacy capabilities when it comes to voting. It is effectively aliterate politically." Prof. Kinneavy is careful to add that the decline in literacy is not unique to Texas but nationwide. His warning is reflected by the National Commission on Excellence in Education which concluded two years ago that "our nation is at risk." He had earlier told the Commission that "the concept of a civilization declining in literacy is almost unparalleled in history. Yet we seem to be doing just that." Recent events at UT Austin turn our attention away from the nation and back to the local, where Prof. Kinneavy's words sound especially prophetic.

In mid-February, as if dissatisfied with the national spotlight which the illiteracy rate was shining on Texas, the English Department decided to sparkle by bringing its hitherto undeclared war on literacy into the open. The Department shelved English 346K, a junior-level writing course that was the one remaining writing course required of all students. At the same time it rid itself of some 50 lecturers who had been teaching the great part of the writing courses. To say that "the English Department" did something, however, is a misnomer. The English Department, in the sense of a democratically constituted faculty body, has not existed since the first of the academic year when Dean Robert King ruled its senate form of governance out of order. He placed all power of decision in the hands of the Chair, Prof. Sutherland, and the Executive Committee, heavily dominated by full professors, whose salary-increase recommendations are made by the Chair. In this ghostly and impotent condition, the English faculty has silently stood by and watched the systematic dismantling of its composition program, of which the shelving of 346K and the Saturday Night Massacre of the lecturers was only the latest phase. The English Department, I repeat, did nothing. The entire faculty, apart from a clique around the Chair, learned of the development only when it was announced in the campus newspaper. Soon afterwards, on February 15, a letter from Prof. Sutherland stated that 346K "had been postponed." The evasive passive construction of that locution was not penetrated until the Faculty Senate meeting of March 4, when a Chair spokesman said that Gerhard Fonken, Vice President for Academic Affairs, made the decision at the urgent request of Prof. Sutherland.

The smoke created by the burning of the writing requirement ascended in the campus newspaper for three, perhaps four weeks. On February 20th officers of the local chapter of the Texas Association of College Teachers met with the lecturers and their handful of supporters. Among the possible strategies suggested by members of the group were: to protest the violation of faculty right to determine curriculum; to protest Prof. Sutherland's arrogation of power in dismissing the lecturers without due administrative process; to protest that shelving 346K contravened the mandate of the Vick Committee, the University community, and the Centennial Commission to promote undergraduate literacy; and to demand investigation of the interlocking set of administrative-review committees chaired by Prof. Sutherland and Dean King. The meeting, however, proved oddly decorous, and the resolutions which in fact passed were calculated to give no offense. At the Faculty Senate meeting March 4th, the Senate members rejected the strategic motions made by Prof. James Sledd; and Prof. Kinneavy's bleak account of the administration's refusal to administer the writing program was greeted by Sutherland's dogs, who barked loudly that the matter was a family squabble within the English Department and unworthy of senatorial concern. Since then a sick silence has fallen on the 346K slaughtergate, a silence thickened when the present writer received a letter from Representative Wilhelmina Delco saying that the matter did not concern the legislature. The gutting of the composition program is now the fait accompli the administrative gang had all along counted on. To challenge the entrenched faction is like invading China, Prof. Maxine Hairston told a national convention of writing

teachers March 21st. "When the smoke clears, nothing is changed, and the mandarins are untouched."

Though the lecturers could be taken to task for the submissive silence with which most of them have accepted their fate, the greater, more culpable silence is the silence of those who doze on the downy bed of tenure--a bed which seems, even to those who lie in it, so much more than they deserve that it occasionally troubles their sleep. I ignore the silence of those in tenure-track positions but not yet tenured who, as one of them said to me, fear dismissal should their names be associated with the "radicalism" of moving to restore democratic process in the Department. But how do we understand the silence of those who already have tenure, a state of grace intended to guarantee them freedom of speech? Why is it, if we except on the one side the Chair's mouthpieces and, on the other, Professors Kinneavy, Sledd, and Frost, whose commitment to composition is manifest--why is it that only two tenured faculty members, Professors Wevill and Megaw, have allowed their names to appear in print to question 346K-gate?

In their intentions the silent regular faculty may be benevolent, though hardly wise. Their silence is not dumb; it is a refusal to speak, and thus a silent condonation. It is the old academic humanist's distaste for politics lingering on in the new formalisms which provide chances for professional lucre. But the self-scrutiny of the English-teaching profession since the protests against the Vietnam War interrupted the slumber of the Modern Language Association in 1968 has surely taught us that, as one educator involved in that interruption puts it, "institutions don't exist in vacuums or in the pure atmosphere of their ideals. They are part of the social order and survive by helping to maintain it." This axiom is equally evident in the apolitical stances of academic formalisms and in UT's unseemly haste to help clone technocrats for the great corporations whose dominance is marked by paying "less than zero" taxes. These latter are even now lining up to fill the Austin-San Antonio "high-tech corridor."

To understand what social order the English Department supports, we need only remind ourselves how facts like the following describe a single structure: that one-fourth of us have the benefit of four-fifths of the world's income; that this concentration of wealth is substantially linked to U.S. battleships chasing the American-controlled World Bank investments all over the globe; that the slaughter of the dispossessed continues in Central America and South Africa while Reagan pursues his Zoroastrian empire of evil; that in the U.S. 1% of the population controls 99% of the nation's wealth; that illiteracy among the nation's electorate has crept past 30%, with the greatest concentration in minorities and women; that in the state of Texas, which is the cutting edge of the increase in illiteracy, a sequence of governors has learned (from successful presidential campaigns) to exploit illiteracy and political aliteracy to win elections on the basis of 30-second tv spots; that UT's regents have steadily refused to divest the University of its holdings in South Africa; that UT's English Department, primarily responsible for producing a literate citizenship, has effectively dismantled its literacy program; and that in the English Department itself, a patriarchal mafia operates in open contempt of democratic process. This, I would maintain, is the social order to which all the silent souls in the English Department and the University lend their tacit support. On a clear day in the English Department you can see Cape Town and Johannesburg.

Prof. James Sledd's recent description of the social order at UT, which appeared in College English, deserves local airing. Prof. Sledd says that the University of Petromega (his pseudonym for UT) "has been decreed by the state's decision-makers to be a 'graduate research institution of international reputation.' Translated, the decree signifies the intention to use the University, not for the service of ordinary citizens (who need to be informed if they are to be free), but to provide knowledge and knowledgeable servants for government, business, industry, and the military--briefly, to maintain and increase the wealth and power of determined predators. Since governors appoint regents, regents appoint presidents, presidents appoint deans, deans appoint chairpersons, and chairpersons have an individual voice in the distribution of goodies, administration and faculty will do the Powers' will; and, in particular, a research-oriented faculty--that is, a faculty whose ambition is to be the brains of the great interlocking bureaucracies--will make research and publication essential to advancement in the Profession. Good teaching, especially the good teaching of freshmen and sophomores, is not an adequate demonstration of a teacher's merit."

Students in this order of things know where the rewards are, and in a society where school teachers are paid like peons and slaughtered like cattle, students see no value in the kind of literacy which English teachers offer. Prof. Sledd pursues, "the elders of Petromega have taught the great middle range of Anglos acquiescence, the acceptance of a way of life which for them is comfortable, the rejection of questioning and questioners. For the blacks

and hispanics, there is no great attraction in reading and writing as means to somewhat enhanced acceptability as underlings in the dominant Anglo culture--a culture still insistent on maintaining the social conditions which have bred and preserved illiteracy."

Apart from the evident advantages of maintaining illiteracy in the voting population, why should UT's mandarins feel threatened by the idea of a rhetoric program which, though put into effect for only one semester, was once held up as a model to other institutions across the country? The answer is: the deep ideological division within the English-teaching profession which is commonly expressed as literature vs. composition. The mandarins struggle to control the power constituted by critical discourse: the power of policing language; the power of policing writing; the power of certifying; the power of authority in relations between the guild and those who want entrance to it; and, finally, the power of relations between the literary-academic community and the ruling interests of society at large. Where literary academics are concerned, the threat of rhetoric is that, from its earliest formulation by Corax of Syracuse in 5th century Greece, it has been a political literary criticism, and it is thus the final theory of discourse, a meta-theory of literary theory or any other discourse. Rhetoric, as the principal liberal art, is not a formalism preoccupied with analyzing linguistic devices. It looks at performance--which is to say at aims which, embodied in language, have effects; it looks at responses to language and the material situations in which language functions. It sees writing not merely as a textual object, to provide aesthetic titillation or to be deconstructed according to the latest Paris fashion, but as a form of activity inseparable from the social relations between writers and readers, and largely unintelligible outside the web of social purposes and conditions in which it exists.

What is at issue then in UT's war on literacy are complex competing ideological strategies related to the role and destiny of English studies in modern industrial society. Ideology, in this connection, denotes the nexus between discourse and power. On the one hand are those who want to ingratiate themselves into positions of power by contracting to produce tomorrow's technocrats, garnished with a sterile sprig of literary humanism. On the other are those who would preserve rhetoric's traditional function as the critic of the discourses of power.

Those who work in the vineyard of cultural practices are prone to overestimate the centrality of their activities, and this tendency may exacerbate natural ambitions. We should distinguish among the laborers in the vineyard according to whether their definition of culture recognizes that the vast majority of men and women throughout history have been deprived of the chance of living by culture at all, and that the few who are fortunate enough to live by it now are able to do so because of the labor of those who do not. True culture must define itself by opposition to imperialism of the word or of the gunship. It must support social justice across ethnic and sexist lines. (Note the Anglo-male composition of the mandarin faction in the UT administration and English Department.) It must pay attention to the mass media which, while literary critics cultivate sensibility in a minority, devastate it in the majority and in a final gesture of self-apotheosis throw up a Reagan and place him in the Presidency. And it must open the literary canon (whose real definition is always "what we teach") to the voices of the oppressed, the growing body of work at home and from parts of the globe whose peoples we have dispossessed and exploited.

Let us have a criticism and a pedagogy that make an active, definite engagement with what a text proposes.

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