

CLA AND THE LANGUAGE TEACHER

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By DARWIN T. TURNER

Mythologists agree that in some ancient societies, before kings became sufficiently wise to appoint substitutes, kings were selected, feted lavishly throughout a year, then executed. Mythologists do not say whether these condemned men were required to give a speech at the time of execution. In our more civilized society, particularly in our learned associations, we have refined the process of execution by introducing the Iron Maiden euphemistically called a presidential speech. Yet, we who have been elected president cannot claim ignorance of our fates. Having seen our predecessors fall, we have chosen to snatch the rod which they dropped. So, having chosen, having embraced the Iron Maiden once, only to be resurrected, let me once more impale myself upon the spikes.

Nostalgia seems to permeate many of these speeches. Unlike the president of an educational institution, of a business, or of a government who, early in his tenure, sets forth his principles and the chart of his journey to the stars, the president of a learned association delivers his address not as a challenge but as a farewell, at a time when all of his sins—more often sins of

¹ President's address delivered at The College Language Association's Twenty-Fifth Annual Conference, Agricultural and Technical College of North Carolina, Greensboro, North Carolina, Thursday morning, April 22, 1965.

omission rather than commission—sit full-blown upon his conscience. What he might wish to offer as a challenge becomes, instead, an apology.

As a president of more than one association and as a department head, I stagger under quadrupled sins which I can relieve somewhat only by confessing them before you as the problems of the teacher of language and literature in the college in which enrollment is predominantly Negro.

In April of 1964, I described what I believed to be the status of humanities and of humanists. In the twelve months which have passed, changes have improved the state of the humanities materialistically if not otherwise. After considerable debate, the Federal government has allocated funds for the improvement of the teaching of English and of reading as well as other disciplines. This summer, institutes will be offered in most states. The amounts allocated do not approximate those given for improving the teaching of science, but a starving man does not reject a hot dog at a drive-in if he is not offered a steak at the Waldorf.

The NDEA funds are not the only source of federal assistance. There is considerable optimism that this Congress will establish a National Humanities Foundation which will support, among other projects, institutes for the training of the teachers of humanities.

Private foundations also are demonstrating concern for the benighted humanist. The Ford Foundation has underwritten many projects including the Co-operative Program in the Humanities of the University of North Carolina and Duke, a program which will be described later in this conference. The Carnegie Foundation also has supported many projects. Among the most recent are a summer institute for teachers of English in the predominantly Negro colleges and a compensatory program to improve Southern Negro high school seniors who plan to attend college. Instituted at six centers—Fisk, Texas Southern, Atlanta, Dillard, Webster College in St. Louis, and Howard, the latter program provides instruction in English and mathematics on Saturdays during the senior year and for eight weeks during the summer preceding entrance to college.

Colleges also are evidencing concern for the teachers of language and literature. Even without federal funds, colleges have

attempted to offer institute training to secondary and elementary school teachers. Texas Southern, A. and T., West Virginia State, and St. Augustine's are merely a few. Those of you who attended the conference last year heard descriptions of some of these. Some of the larger universities have devised sister compacts with Negro colleges. Institutions which have such relationships are Yale and Fisk, Michigan and Tuskegee, Dillard and Wayne State, Brown and Miles, and Wisconsin with Texas Southern, North Carolina College, and A. and T. A professor at Harvard spent part of last summer at Miles College, training teachers and students in English. Harvard, Princeton, and Dartmouth are providing pre-freshman summer training for graduates of Southern high schools.

In view of these advances, I should not complain; but I see many problems which remain unresolved.

First, we need to re-examine the curricula required for majors in literature and language. We need to approach at least a minimal level of uniformity. Stentorian voices, however, oppose the idea. When the NCTE Board of Directors raised the curtain to a neighboring issue—the definition of English, modest handmaidens of English decried the invasion of privacy. Attempting to identify the curricula common to English majors throughout America, Erwin Steinberg of Carnegie Tech, former director of Project English, has been able to discern only that the student will probably be exposed to certain types of courses—author courses, period courses, genre courses, and courses in language and writing. Why should it be so shocking to believe that every student who majors in English should have been exposed to certain specific knowledge? Should an English major be able to graduate without having studied a Shakespearean play in some advanced course in English? Should an English major be able to graduate without having heard the name of Herman Melville except by accident? These experiences seem minor to some teachers, incredible to others; yet they have occurred at reputable institutions.

While we in English have vacillated and have gloried in our pluralism, state departments of education often have seized the responsibility we have abandoned. With no concern for the personal privacy of the teaching humanist, they have listed courses which the student humanist must have completed if

he is to be certified to teach. We in the discipline have criticized the intrusion by educational specialists. We have derided their indifference to content. Now, in some states, we are being given the opportunity to determine curricula acceptable for certification. I trust that we will accept the responsibility now, if for no reason other than that we have become sufficiently materialistic to realize that if we are not accredited, we will lose students and that, if we lose students, we may be reading our Romanticists by real instead of imagined candlelight. But, if external pressures can cause us to agree upon a curriculum within a state, why can we not summon the self-discipline to agree upon a curriculum for a nation? I shall restrain my idealism and offer a more limited goal. Why can we not agree at least upon a minimum curriculum for language and literature majors in the seventy-odd colleges represented in the College Language Association?

Second, we in English need to re-examine the courses in composition. I sometimes wonder how students remain relatively unconfused as they struggle through the swampland of freshman composition. I suspect that they remain reasonably calm only because they see only what is taught in their individual classes. No matter how bizarre those classes may seem, the student is spared the bewilderment which might result if he observed different methods, different purposes, different standards in various classes or in diverse colleges. We who do look are confused.

If I were to ask the hypothetical English teacher what we are trying to teach the students in composition classes, I would probably be told, "To write." The dialogue might continue.

"What are we trying to teach them to write"?

"Composition."

"Why are we trying to teach them to write compositions"?

"Because they need to improve their writing."

"What writing do they need to improve"?

I shall relieve from further embarrassment my harrassed teacher who has already embarrassed himself by failing to respond in the complete sentences which he demands from his students. He certainly would not want to reply that he merely wants his students to improve their writing of compositions. Such an artificial product is as useless for the student as Eliza Doo-

little's conversation would have been if she had never grown beyond "The rain in Spain falls mainly in the plain." We Henry Higginses may glory when, after painful hours, we lift our Elizas to this cranny, but surely there is another, a higher foothold on the mountainous road from the swamp of composition assignments to the pinnacle of effective communication.

Have we demonstrated that significant correlation exists between the ability to earn an "A" on a freshman composition and the ability to earn a "C" on an essay examination (if such is still given) or on a report in Chemistry? Have we demonstrated that one who can earn an "A" on a freshman composition can write a persuasive letter to an editor or an interesting letter of application? Do we believe that a student who can earn an "A" can also express his arguments effectively in a school meeting or a business conference or a political rally? I will grant that all these experiences require the use of words, but is there not at least a difference of focus which must be considered? We are beginning to realize (I hope) that the ability to transfer learning is, for most students, a skill which must be learned. Do we, however, abdicate our responsibility by teaching students one skill without teaching the techniques for transferring it, or do we teach that skill in such a way that it cannot be transferred? In brief, we need to rethink the question of whether written composition should be the emphasis of the course in Freshman Composition, and to do this we must consider the reasons which motivate our composition assignments and the kinds which we require.

We also need to re-examine the materials of freshman composition. In *Themes, Theories, and Therapy*, Albert Kitzhaber lamented our failure to teach students to write effectively. In a 1962 article in *CCC*, S. I. Hayakawa contended that the primary purpose of Freshman Composition is to provide students with an opportunity to "mull over, digest, and encompass the transition from their hometown." Under the guidance of Hayakawa, the course would become a rewarding study of semantics, but it would differ markedly from the course taught by Kitzhaber and, I believe, would produce different results. Although I would wish to see a student profit from the courses of both, I am not worried about the students in Mr. Kitzhaber's class, or about those in Mr. Hayakawa's. I am worried about those

in the class of a less gifted instructor. Sincerely desiring to help the student, but bewildered by the many materials which can be included, he may succeed in teaching nothing effectively or, more probably, he will succeed in teaching nothing and ineffectively. He wears the costumes of an adviser, a priest, a father. He discourses on literature, philosophy, history, economics, sociology, and, sometimes, even language. To demand that all composition instructors follow a common course outline rigidly would be absurd—undesirable if it could be achieved. Because colleges have widely varying admission standards for students, it may be difficult even to devise a common outline to be used flexibly in all colleges. But is it not possible for CLA to guide a group of comparable colleges to specify minimum materials that should be in Freshman Composition and to suggest focus or emphasis?

We also need to re-examine our standards. At the recent meeting of CCCC, Richard Corbin, president of NCTE, urged English teachers to devise nationwide standards for the evaluating of composition. As one who has raised the same question in more intimate circles, I do not envy Mr. Corbin when the English teacher imitating Browning's Duchess, "[will] plainly set her wits to . . . [his] forsooth and make excuse." This will happen. To talk of uniformity throughout a department is to provoke dissension; to talk of uniformity throughout the nation is to preach Anti-Christ. The reason is not that writing is an art difficult to evaluate. Art may be, but most freshman compositions are not. The real reason, I fear, is that English teachers often do not know what good writing is. Editors of *PMLA* and *College English* deplore the writing submitted to them, and readers deplore some of the writing published by them. Having no basic criteria except our faith that a "good" teacher will recognize "good" writing, we agree only on extremes. We fail the illiterate papers; we reward with "A" the obviously excellent paper. In local situations, we are perhaps able to agree that a passing paper should have no more than a certain number of mechanical errors—although even this agreement is difficult to achieve and even more difficult to maintain. Only rarely can we approximate agreement within a region. If we are so divided in opinion that we cannot agree or if we are so fearful of being criticized that we dare not set

forth the bases for our judgment, how can we expect our students or the general public to respect our judgments? Cannot CLA explore the possibility of preparing a published statement of the criteria for evaluating composition at colleges represented in CLA? Such a publication would help the students and the high school teachers.

We need to re-examine the methods used in Freshman Composition. Many of us teach students who have been categorized as the culturally disadvantaged. Although scholars researching the field disagree about a single definition of the term, most agree that such students reveal limited verbal skills. Such students need individual attention in small classes more than do students attending the prestigious universities. Yet many of us teach in institutions in which class size in Freshman Composition ranges from thirty to thirty-five students. Some teachers attempt to instruct 150 students in composition each week.

One of the most effectively phrased criticisms of the situation was made by John Butler, of Middlebury College, in his summary report of the Institute for Teachers of English in the Predominantly Negro Colleges. He wrote,

The conditions are different from college to college, but *generally speaking* they are atrocious. They guarantee that first-rate education will not take place, except by accident for a particular student, or by the genius of an extraordinary teacher.

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The football team . . . has one coach tutoring every five players day after day for two hours in practice sessions. The English teacher tutors from 150 to more than 200 students in every two-day period in groups of thirty-five to fifty. This means that a football player has two hours a week of a coach's undivided attention, while a student of English has six or seven or eight minutes of his teacher's time. It is hard to see what kind of thinking can justify this imbalance.

It is not unusual to find a teacher in a predominantly Negro college who teaches composition to four sections of forty to fifty freshmen, and another subject to fifty upperclassmen. In a decent northern college, he would drop three of the composition sections, and would divide the other composition class into two sections, of eighteen to twenty-students each, reducing his number of students from 160-200 to thirty-six to forty. If he then also taught the upper-class course of fifty students, his teaching load would be considered

very heavy: ninety students. It might very well be the heaviest teaching load in the whole English Department, and his colleagues would ask him how he was able to manage it. His chairman would apologize to him, and everyone would recognize that he would not be able to teach as well as he should and could. There is no way to replace individual attention, and in a good college it is recognized that no one can teach composition to more than a total of forty or fifty students, and that as composition classes begin to number more than twenty students, the possibility of effective teaching is sharply reduced.

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In addition to the impossible requirements in terms of number of students (150-200 instead of fifty to seventy), number of different courses (five instead of two), and number of classroom hours per week (fifteen or eighteen or even twenty-one instead of nine or fewer), there are other requirements. Teachers in these colleges are asked to take on a number of time-consuming jobs (such as supervising the cheerleaders four or five hours a week from September to March) which an administrator in a good college would never dream of asking a teacher to do, and they are required to devote long hours generally to fruitless activities.

May I remind you that when Mr. Butler talks of limited size in good colleges, he is referring to colleges where the majority of the students would not be considered culturally disadvantaged.

Because the overload results from institutional policy, individual teachers or department chairmen often lack the authority to reduce the teaching load or limit the class size. More attention, however, might be given to a recommendation from a professional association. Although NCTE already sends to high schools a recommendation that the individual teacher's load in English be limited to 100 students per week, NCTE has difficulty making a comparable recommendation to colleges. It obviously would not want to send such a letter to institutions where experimental programs are in progress or where a carefully screened freshman class makes such caution unnecessary. It would not need to send such a recommendation to the universities where the condition is unknown. It would not want to single out the Negro colleges. Perhaps CLA can make such a recommendation more tactfully.

Third, we need to undertake more experiments and research in teaching language and literature to the culturally disadvantaged. Such students are a nation-wide concern of individuals

who, in some instances, have become alert to the problem only within the past few years. Yet we have taught these students, for a significant percentage of students in our smaller colleges and in our state-supported colleges are the disadvantaged. We are not taking the lead in research, and we are not gaining sufficient recognition for the research that has been completed. For instance, the efforts of Marianne Musgrave seem unknown nationally. The painstaking research of Juanita Williamson, Sansu Lin, Nick Ford and Waters Turpin perhaps may "waste their fragrance on the desert air." CLA should investigate means of collecting research conducted at our colleges, ways of disseminating this information, and ways of gaining regional and national recognition of the research.

Fourth, we need to consider ways to improve our faculty members and to improve their condition. A frequently voiced fear at the recent meeting of CCCC was that the improvement of high school teaching and the consequential improvement of the college freshmen may create within a few years classes too advanced for the average college teacher. I suspect that may be true especially in language, for some teachers of freshman composition have not been exposed to recent developments in structural linguistics and generative grammar. In a few years students trained by the current NDEA institute participants will enter college, possibly with knowledge and questions that may embarrass their freshman teachers. Can CLA devise a means of improving the training of these college teachers, perhaps through in-service courses?

Where are our scholars? "Buried under 100 freshman compositions," is the probable answer. Yet we will gain increased respect only as we produce publishing scholars. Our challenge is not "Publish or Perish" but "Publish and Grow." Perhaps our problem is economic. The promising scholar is crushed beneath a rolling stone of freshman compositions. The Sisyphus who pushes the stone aside and escapes is regarded as one who must be kept at all cost; and he is kept by the major financial lure the small-budget college can offer—a transfer from the classroom to the administrative desk, where he finds even less time and less incentive to publish. Rarely is it possible to have a situation in which the literary scholar knows time and freedom to publish and is rewarded for his achievement as a scholar.

Many research scholars are currently lost, dancing seaward to the golden notes of the federal piper and temporarily afflicted by *Institutitis* or *Grantitis* (I admit being in the company).

Where are our new teachers? Comparatively few Negroes are earning Ph. D.'s in English and in foreign languages. Those few often are lured to the more prestigious institutions.

I do not know how CLA can help with these last two conditions, except perhaps by reviving the discontinued placement service.

Fifth, we need to introduce harmony within our ranks. Although we rarely experience alienation comparable to that in some larger institutions in which linguists refuse to fraternize with English teachers or professors of the Renaissance snub professors of the Eighteenth Century, we exhibit our own ridiculous antagonisms. Former journalists serving as publicity directors feud with English teachers of journalism. Professors of speech and professors of English compete for majors. We are too small to suffer such compartmentalization.

As I confessed when I started, I have shared these problems with you because I feel that presidents of CLA, department heads, and individual teachers might do more to solve these problems. Some of these problems, of course, are inherent in our situation. Others can be solved only by financial assistance. I do not wish to talk about what individuals or department heads can do. Let me conclude, instead, by restating what I believe CLA can do: (1) attempt to devise a minimum curriculum for the language and literature major programs in schools represented in the association; (2) formulate and distribute to high schools agreed-upon standards of evaluating compositions; (3) restudy the materials and methods of Freshman Composition in the institutions represented; (4) send to member institutions recommendations concerning limitations of class size in the regular and remedial composition and language classes; (5) serve as a central agency to assist member institutions to share intellectual and physical resources; (6) collect research, disseminate the information, and study ways of gaining recognition for the research; (7) consider means of improving the in-service training of our teachers.

CLA no longer has a place as a miniature MLA or a regional NCTE. It survives not merely to provide a platform for young

scholars but also to consider the problems unique to the teaching of language and literature in our colleges. On this, the 25th meeting of the association, let us begin to try as an organization to combat the forces which separate our colleges from each other. Let us bind together the faculties of the institutions we represent, and let us use bonds stronger than the companionship at an annual meeting. Let us provide our share of the new resources for the teaching of language and literature.

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