
American Literature and the Academy

The
Roots,
Growth,
and
Maturity
of a
Profession



Kermit Vanderbilt

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FRONTISPICE: Commencement at the University of Pennsylvania, 1952.
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American Literature and the Academy

***TO MY MENTORS*, Living and Deceased,
Who Taught American Literature at the
University of Minnesota after World War II**

Illustrations

Frontispiece: Commencement at the University of Pennsylvania,
1952

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Introduction

The immediate impulse to write a book somewhat like the present one arose during the years of campus unrest when the country was engaged in the debacle in Vietnam. The subject would be the crisis in the humanities, with a special focus given to the impact of the war on my own profession, the teaching and scholarship of American literature. The role of the humanities in American social and industrial life, and in the education that prepares our young to participate in that life, had been argued, of course, over the previous hundred years. Into the 1950s and 1960s, we heard the fears expressed by the eloquent C. P. Snow and others over the schism between science and the humanities. Public support of study and research in the humanities lagged far behind endowments for the sciences. Then came the challenge of Russia's technological supremacy after they placed Sputnik into orbit, thus exacerbating the division between Snow's two cultures.

Even so, by 1965, the most serious trouble had not surfaced. Verbal scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test for freshmen entering the academy had not yet markedly declined. Professors of American literature, in fact, published in that year a collection of papers from the recent convention of the National Council of Teachers of English. The articles glowed with professional confidence in the successful and unmistakably high cultural errand of teaching American literature in the nation's classrooms. The essays were edited by Lewis Leary of Columbia, who declared in the preface that "literature when fully revealed is perhaps also the most seminal and important element in the educative process. It is language come alive, most persuasively, most suggestively." The decisive effect of literary appreciation on the growth of individual selfhood was too obvious to require argument or explanation: "Beyond its private charm as self-revealing or self-satisfying discovery, literature has always been recognized for its power in extending self, of drawing the reader out of himself, even of becoming catharsis to self."¹

Such paeans gave new meaning to the transcendent rewards enjoyed within the much-caricatured groves of academe. But there were also newer campus voices just beginning to be heard at Berkeley and elsewhere that intended to challenge the self-evident good and charm and power of the literary classics being

taught by a smug professoriate. Repercussions of our growing involvement in Vietnam soon erupted on the American streets and campuses to fuel the new dissidence. College students whose lives seemed variously threatened by the “military–industrial complex” angrily started to question not only the political grounds of our official morality, but also the substance and structure of American education, which had helped to produce the nation’s mainstream culture. The American academy, hallowed bastion of high culture and intellectual tradition, conservator of the wisdom and truth of the ages, began to tremble with the political rumblings of the young who, among other dissatisfactions, did not discover their liberal arts education to be especially liberal nor their humanities courses humane or (the new buzzword) relevant.

No less unsettling and novel were the reactions to the Vietnam crisis within the profession itself. In December 1968, at the convention in New York of the eighty-five-year-old Modern Language Association (MLA), the normally polite and conservatively orchestrated annual meeting of its thousands of professors turned into something closer to havoc and revolution. In the past, elderly members had arranged the program to hear each other and some of the favored young in the profession read papers on the transitive verb in Old High German or a new source for Longfellow’s “Hiawatha.” Or so the academic politics seemed to aspiring graduate students and untenured young professors who had gone to the convention to be interviewed for a job at what they termed the annual slave auction. But in 1968, just as their students were demanding contemporary relevance in the classrooms, these young instructors now voiced similar dissatisfaction with their own elders and the prevailing mode of operating at the official assembly of the profession. Tempers were heated by phrases on posters erected in the lobby of Hotel Americana over the objection of hotel guards:

WE DEMAND AN END TO AMERICA’S WAR ON VIETNAM
TO PROFESSIONAL IRRELEVANCE

JOIN US IN BUILDING A HUMANE PROFESSION IN A HUMANE NATION
A FREE UNIVERSITY IN A FREE SOCIETY

A few of the more insistent poster defenders were arrested when police arrived. At a stormy business meeting of the association on 29 December, insurgent members assembled a slim majority to pass four resolutions heavily charged with political commitments that (1) opposed governmental withholding of financial

support to disruptive students, (2) favored withdrawal of all foreign troops from Vietnam, (3) opposed the military draft and any cooperation with it, and (4) condemned political harassment of radical writers, including Eldridge Cleaver, LeRoi Jones, Octavio Paz, and Carlos Fuentes.² (The next year, the business meeting was taken up with further radical issues, including the rights of women in the profession.)

That some of the most visible discontent within the MLA should have come in 1968 from the radical young in American literature was appropriate, as we shall discover in later chapters. And in the same regard, it was appropriately ironic that president-elect of the MLA for the following year, 1968–1969, was Henry Nash Smith, only the second American literature professor ever to hold that office. (Howard Mumford Jones, four years before, was the first.) A liberal-minded veteran of academic skirmishes, Smith turned out to be an ideal leader in a troubled time, and he did his best to mediate the demands of the various factions.

This talent was obvious in his valedictory address at Denver on 27 December 1969, when he remarked that “the intellectual and emotional disturbances that began with the ‘silent vigil’ in front of the lectern at the American Literature Section last year have made my term as president distinctly uncomfortable”; but perhaps the effect was also salutary, for “the militants have succeeded in waking us up.” Smith addressed their two principal charges. First, the MLA, in the view of the militants, was “dominated by an Establishment, a self-perpetuating elite composed of academic politicians from a small number of ‘prestige universities,’” while young professors and graduate students participated in the annual meetings mainly in “‘a corral and auction block.’” Second, the young insurgents complained that the parent organization sponsored a scholarship and a spirit of education “corrupt because they serve a corrupt society,” and the profession’s own journal, *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* (PMLA), was therefore inevitably stodgy, socially irrelevant, and unreadable even for scholars. Smith concluded on a note eloquently conciliatory both to the traditionalists and social activists. He affirmed that “language and literature are the principal medium for the preservation and transmission of values in our society. Our profession makes us custodians of this medium, and we are therefore compelled to deal with the most intense intellectual conflicts of the contemporary world.”³

Other professors of American literature in the MLA were similarly awakened to the new realities impinging on their previously

well-ordered professional lives. After the disruptive sessions of 1968, and the silent vigil in front of the lectern at the American Literature Section to which Smith alluded, Professor John Gerber (Iowa), chairman of the section, proposed to his Advisory Council that the program topic for the next year might well be the overarching and thoroughly relevant question: "What do we think we're doing in teaching American literature?" For many years, professors of *English* literature in the MLA and the academy's English departments had politely doubted the comparative worth of our seemingly poor little rough-hewn body of American literature, and this resistance united the earlier champions of American literature scholarship with an underdog's defiant will and purpose. But Professor Gerber's question carried overtones now of professional concern and doubt within his own ranks. (Recall Professor Leary's buoyant assurances only three years before.)

Shortly thereafter, I began to realize more clearly the direction and shape of the chapters that follow. One modest way of understanding some part of the continuing plight of the humanities was to gain an historical perspective on where we in American literature teaching and scholarship had been and where we have arrived. Howard Mumford Jones, Robert E. Spiller, and Richard Ruland had considered important theoretical questions in American literature studies, and Spiller had also written several essays in which he recalled important events in our literary history and scholarship. But no one had written a sustained account of the struggle in the American academy to study and teach and define our native literature, and, before that academic mission, the long campaign on behalf of our national literary independence. Both movements were impeded by an American sense of cultural inferiority to England. Tracing the background, birth, and growth of this profession, the historian might remind present-day colleagues that pioneering professors of American literature had faced earlier frustrations, doubts, and sacrifices in times scarcely less difficult than our own.

The book was stalled by the usual obligations and harassments of the professor's life. But the delay by no means rendered the subject less timely, for a new climate in the academy presently threatened the humanities after the Vietnam involvement had ended. During this interval, other studies created a broad setting and some of the contexts for my own story. Among the most stimulating was Richard Ohmann's *English in America: A Radical View of the Profession* (1976). Ohmann, who helped disturb

and partially reform the MLA establishment in 1968 and after, ranged among the larger political and social forces of reaction and capitalist accommodation implicit in the way the English language and literatures are taught and studied in the academy. (He edited the influential *College English* from 1966 to 1978.) He also argued that the bourgeois model governs professorial behavior all the way from local university departments to the competition and consolidation within the national MLA.

Realistically, Ohmann recognized, too, that by the mid-seventies, the spirit of alienation and rebellious activism that lately had fired the hopes of militants in the humanities had greatly slackened. The observation was easily verified here and there in the profession. Even during the final years of the war, new positions in literature faculties were disappearing. The maligned "auction block" at MLA meetings, where interviews had been plentiful, at any rate, in the late sixties, now went virtually out of business.⁴ Soon the war ended, and many college students happily became materialistic once more. San Diego State University still boasted a healthy total of fifteen hundred English majors as late as 1974. Within a year, the figure was reduced by one-half. A degree in literature was not a good vocational choice, but a few years before, students were not concerned about lucrative employment. Teaching and debating the humanizing values and revolutionary ideas in literature, demanded so recently by idealistic American youth, was itself fast becoming an "irrelevant" classroom activity. Each new floating population of students on campus was in narcissistic pursuit of practical diplomas leading to a brand of self-fulfillment more or less scorned by the Vietnam generation.

How has this changing scene, with its rather bleak outlook for the profession in recent years, affected our American literature scholar-teachers? What seems a renewed assault on the integrity and usefulness of humanistic learning has generally reduced the morale of professors, old and young, in all literature fields at the time of this writing. Many of my older colleagues plan to retire early, and the younger ones all too frequently dream of retirement. This defection elicits sympathy, to be sure, but many professors have no one but themselves and their abdication from serious professionalism to blame for their sagging morale. In dread today lest they seem to America's youth stodgy and irrelevant by teaching their discipline with a conscious pride in its historical tradition, they have stampeded en masse, entire departments at a time, to satisfy the trends and tastes, the whims

and “evaluations” of the inexperienced young. Historian John Higham has reminded us that a profession is “among other things, a body of individuals with a particular skill, who by co-operative action establish and maintain their own standards of achievement instead of obeying some external authority.”⁵

Higham’s definition, however, has been mocked by American literature professors who have introduced into the curriculum trivial literature courses barren of professional “standards of achievement” through the foolish hope that such offerings will be popular and well received by “some external authority.” The result has usually been a loss of professional self-esteem with no compensating gain in popularity and respect for the humanities and American literature. The remedy for this current malady that I propose in the present book is a renewed appreciation of what has been achieved in the past when members of our profession enjoyed higher morale despite, or rather because of, their embattled campaign to build respect for America’s authors and create standards of excellence in the study and teaching of our own literature.



This biography of an academic profession, from its nineteenth-century gestation, to its birth pains in the early years of this century, to the mature achievements up to 1948, becomes as well a many-faceted chapter in American cultural history. The Contents point to a story that embraces our early nationalistic pride, anglophilia and anglophobia, literary–critical wars, the rise of literary histories, the origin of university departments, curriculum development, textbooks and anthologies, graduate study, co-operative scholarship, professional societies and politics, and more. Nor do we want to ignore those moments when American literature professors have brought their scholarly commitments to bear on social questions in the public arena during times of national emergency. In short, this book ranges over a broad spectrum of issues and personalities to interest an academic audience at large and, it may be, many a general reader. More personally, of course, these pages will speak to the audience of professors of American literature who readily admit their unfamiliarity with the people and historic controversies that have shaped the study of our American authors. An older generation of professors will nod in recognition at the names Knapp, Griswold, Duyckinck, Wendell, Trent, Van Doren, Foerster, Parrington, Spiller, and Matthiessen. But to one who entered the academy during the past

thirty years, many of these pioneers are merely names occasionally associated with a significant book or two from the dim past. In the pages to follow, the illuminating careers of these professors and other influential figures will be amply recounted, for the accumulated lives of the separate members quite obviously comprise the biography of a profession in all its necessary humanity.

The human dimension extends into the professional politics that permeate this history in the 1920s and after. This part of the story does not always flatter the illustrious participants. But it is inescapable if we are pursuing the larger and often painful truth about high-minded intellectuals whose democratic idealism may at times falter in practice. The family of American literature professors, from local departments to regional and national organizations, resembles other professions not only in the instances of wide mutual support among young and old, but also in the narrower competition, cronyism, and assumption of power that invade our human ranks. In the latter case, the militants of 1968 were neither the first nor the last to expose a self-perpetuating elite in the profession. An inexorable justice arrives, of course, when the elite grow into aging professors no longer self-perpetuating and feel the sting of being ignored on programs and having their work sharply rejected by younger editors and scholars among the rising generation who are, in their turn, vying with each other for the higher rungs of the academic ladder. All of these recurring varieties and completed cycles of Oedipal and sibling rivalry and antagonism surface in research on the history of a profession. I have tried to weigh them in the double perspective of remembered youth (the outsider) and acquired age (the insider).

In the case of private revelations discovered in extant correspondence or gained in interviews with some of the earlier survivors, I have tried to resist, as a biographer and historian, any inclination to expose lurid rivalry or gossipy antagonism merely for the sake of livelier reading. Similarly, as a critic I have avoided the occasional chance to make easy sport of some of these pioneers who struggled to interpret a growing corpus of national literature. T. S. Eliot has reminded us that we presume to know so much more than our forebears did—but they are also that which we know. The teachers, critics, and scholars we are about to meet have helped to create for Americans a sense of our literary history and, within that growing literary tradition (to echo Professor Leary at the beginning of this introduction), our awareness of a private and national selfhood.⁶ And for the profession of