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# Mudrick Transcribed

CLASSES AND TALKS

Edited by Lance Kaplan

Introduction  
by  
James  
Raimes



Marvin Mudrick

**Mudrick  
Transcribed:  
Classes and Talks**



# Mudrick Transcribed: Classes and Talks

Marvin Mudrick

Edited by Lance Kaplan

With a new introduction by James Raimes  
and foreword by Alan Stephens



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# Life on the Page

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*James Raimes*

GOOD for Lance Kaplan. I think this every time I pick up this book. Kaplan asked Marvin Mudrick whether he could tape his classes and talks, and Mudrick said yes provided Kaplan didn't reveal when the taping was happening. The result is a book that makes me think of Samuel Johnson and Orson Welles.

I'll explain. This is how Mudrick, in *Books Are Not Life, But Then What Is?*, summed up one of his favorite books:

The only life ever lived is Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, because only Johnson *lived so fully in unpremeditated words* [my emphasis] and only Boswell, besides being so forward in provoking so many of them, had the genius, the love, the attentiveness, the perseverance, and the opportunity to gather so very many of them.

And in *My Lunches with Orson*, subtitled *Conversations Between Henry Jaglom and Orson Welles*, this is what Peter Biskind, the book's editor, says of Welles, who had known he was being tape-recorded but had stipulated that the recorder should be out of sight:

Because Jaglom was not interviewing Welles, but conversing with him, we have a Welles *unguarded and relaxed, with his hair down, unplugged, if you will* [my emphasis again], willing to let fly with all manner of politically incorrect opinions—sexist, racist, homophobic, vulgar (let's be kind, call it "Rabelaisian")—driven, perhaps, by the impish pleasure he took in baiting his liberal friend, offending his progressive susceptibilities, or just by native, irrepressible ebullience. The more perverse Welles's views, the more fiercely he argued them. His antic wit, stringent irony, and enormous intelligence shine through these conversations and animate every word, making it difficult not to love the man.

In *Mudrick Transcribed* we get a different Mudrick from the great reviewer, essayist, and critic who wrote in every issue of *The Hudson Review* for decades and collected his pieces in four books, two of which I got a huge kick out of publishing.

Here he isn't the writer, he's the unfiltered, unpremeditated, very engaged, very serious teacher, heavily disguised, like Welles, as an outrageous entertainer. Boswell did an amazing job remembering Johnson's conversation and then hurriedly writing it down as soon as possible after he had been part of it, but all Jaglom and Kaplan had to do was surreptitiously press the "play" button on their tape recorders to capture their heroes talking. Their heroes obliged, and we are the beneficiaries.

We don't get in these books the *intimate* Johnson or the *private* Welles or the *real* or *true* Mudrick. All three were showing off to a very small group of listeners, knowing the sort of thing their listeners wanted to hear, but at the same time all three were being spontaneous—they weren't editing what they said for the ages—so in each case we feel we are closer to the living person than when reading his writings.

It's what happens in the letters and diaries of great writers—who reveal more about themselves than in their crafted works because they *aren't* fashioning their thoughts for posterity. They are recording their lives, or, in the case of Johnson, Welles, and Mudrick, their lives are being recorded *as they are being lived*. We feel them living *today*, even if we may be reading them tens or hundreds of years later. They, like we, don't know what tomorrow will bring. Meanwhile, this is them, now.

Just as Van Gogh was as great a letter writer as he was a painter and Monet as great a gardener as he was a painter, Mudrick was as great a teacher as he was a reviewer and essayist. The evidence is here.

*Mudrick Transcribed* was privately printed and got almost no reviews, although it was noticed very generously by his fan James Wolcott and it received a notable mention in *The New Yorker* by the magazine's big-gun movie reviewer, Pauline Kael (whom Wolcott knew and admired). Kael was reviewing the Peter Weir movie *Dead Poets Society* in which Robin Williams plays John Keating, an iconoclastic teacher who, like Mudrick, is more respectful of his students than of the school's administration. "I saw the movie," Kael wrote,

right after reading the just-published *Mudrick Transcribed*, a collection of talks on literature by the late Marvin Mudrick, recorded by his students. I can't imagine a better book on how an inspired teacher's mind works; Mudrick's easy rhythms make you aware of how he arrives at the humor that shoots up, geyser after geyser. You know at once why his students would be swept along by his words—he's thinking on his feet, getting high on his thoughts. And that's what Robin Williams shows Keating doing. (*The New Yorker*, 26 June 1989)

As you read the book, you can feel yourself in the classroom with Marvin enjoying himself at his little desk at the front. It's the essence of what Mudrick the critic always wanted to find in books: life on the page.

I wish I had had him as a teacher, although I'm not sure I would have enjoyed the classes on fiction writing, with him reading all stories aloud and then commenting on them. Unless, of course, I had written a story he liked. He could be merciless, but this book shows him loving some of his students' stories. What an encouragement to hear

your tough-as-nails teacher say, after commenting in detail on your story, “Lovely story, lovely story. Beautiful, very delicately managed, it seems to me absolutely convincing from beginning to end.”

What always convinced him was “the sense of lives being lived.” “If a writer can do that, he or she has done the most important thing to be done with the writing of fiction,” he once said. Which I believe is right. In the same class, Mudrick gets into the difference between fiction and criticism, and again I think he’s right:

Essentially criticism is just talk. It’s talk about something, that’s all it is. If you want to ask me the difference between criticism and fiction, well, fiction tries to set up a kind of alternative to life. Fiction dramatizes. The only difference between fiction and criticism is that fiction dramatizes and criticism doesn’t. Criticism talks, fiction dramatizes. Fiction pretends that there’s a world. And then, of course, within the fiction criticism is occurring because people talk, they express opinion. Talk is criticism, fiction is drama. And that’s really all there is to it, and I don’t know any better way to define either.

He trusted the talents of his students, and he wanted them to trust themselves and not fall dutifully for any of the modish critical or theoretical stuff that they might encounter in other college literature classes. He founded the College of Creative Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, on principles that, as he explains several times in his books, were outright heretical. And in case anyone should think that such a place would doom its students, he explains, with percentages, how successful his students have been, both in the arts and the sciences.

What I have taken from this book can be summed up in some of the statements, like “criticism is just talk,” that boil his philosophy down to three or four words:

Art is statement, it is not ornament.

Art is Entertainment that Stays Entertainment.

Anything that Depresses you is *not Art!*

Literature Is Not Religion.

Those are very simple ideas, but they are decidedly radical. Together with something that he insists on again and again—namely, that he always aims to write outrageously, above all to entertain, to be a comic writer—those ideas lie behind what to me is the most interestingly radical idea in the whole book, just as it was in *Nobody Here But Us Chickens*: that Shakespeare isn’t a god, he’s a devil. In *Chickens* his objection was moral. Here it’s still moral but it’s broader, it’s stylistic:

I have it in for Shakespeare, and I take every opportunity to say nasty things about him. And one thing I think about Shakespeare is that his kind of writing is likely to arouse a false enthusiasm; that is, it uses techniques of literature which are vulgar. I think the excessive use of metaphor and imagery in literature is vulgar.

I think that Shakespeare encourages a tendency to show off, like the way people like to spout soliloquies. And they *are* wonderful mouth-filling

statements, I mean you can speak them and you don't have to think about what they mean at all. They are just words, and they are such marvelous, mouth-filling, creamy words.

"Art is statement," Mudrick tells his students. "It is not ornament. Ornament is incidental to art, and the less the better."

And when Shakespeare is going on about 'Vaunt couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts' and Milton is going on about

[*breathlessly*]

'Him the Almighty Power  
Hurl'd headlong flaming from th' ethereal sky,  
With hideous ruin and combustion, down  
To bottomless perdition; there to dwell  
In adamant chains and penal fire,  
Who durst defy th' Omnipotent to arms . . .'

that seems to me, in the highest and most majestic sense, bullshit. [*Laughter.*]  
Just bullshit. I mean, Milton is trying to get *away* with something! He is trying to pretend that poetry is as big as the universe. And it isn't. It just isn't.

Right there, in those few minutes, he's made the case that Shakespeare and Milton were malign influences on subsequent writing. They wrote too beautifully or too elaborately or too artificially. Whether you agree with such an outrageous point of view or not, that, surely, is why Mudrick didn't write about poetry generally, except for Chaucer, who in his best poems was writing novels about people. Poetry was all wordplay, and when fiction or any other type of writing indulged in it, he was turned off. Of course, you could accuse Mudrick himself of wordplay, but I would answer that his was always in the service of accuracy or laughter or both.

Truth over poetry. Entertainment over art. Statement over ornament. Those principles certainly guide me whenever I open a book, whether it's a classic or a new best seller, in whatever genre, high or low. But as for principles generally—people over principles.

When I was sent *Mudrick Transcribed*, I learned that Marvin had died in 1986, five years after the publication of *Chickens* and two years after having been dismissed from the provostship of the college he had founded in 1967. (The chancellor of the University of California, Santa Barbara, Robert Huttenback, who had forced Marvin out, was himself forced to resign in 1986 when he faced charges of having embezzled from the university to renovate his home.)

I've read *Mudrick Transcribed* several times, smiling always as I hear his funny, cantankerous, ebullient, impatient, but always serious involvement with his students. But the first time I read the book was as soon as it arrived in the mail. I took it with me on a trip to Dallas, where I was attending an American Library Association conference. I started reading it at La Guardia Airport. The waiting area at the gate gradually filled up and became noisy with people bustling around me, but I was oblivious

to the hubbub and so engrossed that when I looked up however many minutes later, the waiting area was quiet and empty, the plane's door was closing, and the moveable bridge to the plane was being withdrawn. I've missed my stop on the subway several times reading novels, but this was the first and only time I've missed a plane reading a book. When I eventually arrived in Dallas and told colleagues what had delayed me, they couldn't believe that the culprit was a college professor they hadn't heard of, in a book of transcribed classes and talks to his students.

They didn't know what they had been missing. I had missed a plane, but for a good cause, and if I miss Marvin now, I know that I can always find him fully alive in the pages of this book.

James RAIMES



# Reading with Marvin Mudrick

---

*Alan Stephens*

MARVIN had a low opinion of poetry, once you get past Chaucer and a few of the later figures. Donne, I remember, he said he liked. And he had an especially low opinion of Romantic and Modernist poetry and what came after. He called it “wall-paper” for a while there. Poetry hadn’t been *about* enough, he felt, for a long time. I think probably his analysis included the fact that fiction came along and took over big territories of subject matter, and left the poets without occupation in a good many literary respects. Poetry wasn’t about enough, and yet didn’t know it. So it put on airs, it indulged in naive egotism, weak, ready-made sentiments, dumb stunts, silly judgments, tricky rhetoric . . . the whole list would be a long one.

There is lots of evidence for his position about poetry. I noticed, reading around in Hemingway’s letters the other day, that the young Hemingway agreed with him. Hemingway was not somebody whom Marvin cared a lot about. But Hemingway said that he’d found that he felt there’d always been good poetry, and with a little luck, we’d always have a little, but not a hell of a lot. And that’s maybe not a risky position to take.

It was three days after Marvin’s death that I came on campus for the first time, and the place looked to me, as it must have looked to lots of you, very small, stricken, listless. The phrase that jumped into my mind was, “A big force is gone.” Force is not, maybe, the right word, but a better one hadn’t come to me. But I meant a big force of intelligence, a big force of personality, a big force of character, a big force of imagination, a big force of passion and talent and bounding energy. All that was gone.

I propose a contest with the poetry lovers. I’ll take Marvin’s side. You cover a page with passages from your favorite twentieth-century poets, and let me pick a page full of passages from Marvin’s writings. Then we’ll see which can and cannot stand up to which. We’ll compare them for original wit, for rhythmic power, speed and compactness of expression, images, metaphors, for understanding, for imagination, for emotion. In short, we’ll compare them for art, and for scope (you know Shakespeare’s line: “Desiring this man’s art, and that man’s scope”) and for everything else.

You’re saying, “Why, you can’t compare that way,” and I say, “Sure you can; it’s all writing.”

I just want something to read. All I ask is to be smitten, as Robert Frost says.

I think where I’ll beat you is in this: The poets have their lines to work with, and they have their images, and their rhythms and other sound effects; but the trouble is, they have to write in sentences, too. And it is well, it’s really immensely advantageous,

for a sentence to be saying something; and a sentence by Marvin says a lot, a lot. So there's where I think you should put your money: on me.

Now I want to talk about my long friendship with him. When I came to UCSB, the College wasn't here but Marvin was. And I was a very green assistant professor from the sticks: hot-headed and overconfident, rigid with principle; the list there would be long, also, if I completed it. And in those days everybody shared an office. Nobody had an office to himself. And Hugh Kenner, who was the chairman at the time, put me in with Marvin. And I got direct warnings, and fearsome stories, from various people; and I even got a letter from a very distinguished professor from a university up north: "Watch yourself with Mudrick; he can tear you limb from limb."

Well, what we did was argue, after our acquaintance with one another was provisionally and perfectly pleasantly established. Wonderful arguments they were, and great fun. I had never encountered such a quick, strong, and resourceful intelligence. Marvin and Kenner were the two smartest people I had ever met. I hadn't even imagined people that smart. And I learned, as you have if you've been in Marvin's classes, that intelligence is infectious. It makes you smarter to be around it. (So is stupidity, unfortunately.)

Knowing Marvin helped me become not as smart as he was—but at least I had a chance to become as smart as I could be. Those contests, those arguments, were sometimes spectacular, and Marvin was like Dr. Johnson in the heat of the battle: he would sometimes stop arguing in order to arrive at the truth, and start arguing to win, and throw every argument that he could lay his hands on at me.

But what was exhilarating for me was that I never was afraid to blurt out any idea that jumped into my mind in the course of an argument. I knew always that Marvin would grasp it right away. When I tried this on other people, too often what happened was that my idea—I could see it—traveled in that person's mind over to the nearest cliché, getting digested there. Very irritating. Not with Marvin. And also you'd notice that he'd understood not only that idea but the great big area around it that you hadn't yet got around to looking into. With nearly all other academics, I've found, to argue is to quarrel; the herd instinct is very strong in our profession. Differences of opinion are taken very seriously. Not that Marvin and I didn't quarrel. But really it was that I quarreled with him, and then he would bring me back to my senses. So I learned lessons in conduct from Marvin.

I do remember once he got angry at me. His knee had been hurting him, and I suggested that he get a decent pair of running shoes, instead of wearing the seven-dollar sneakers that he had. They were a brilliant odd green color, and I think he had something like ten pairs of them. And he blasted me right out of the office, with one growl.

Even back then, when I first got here, I knew how to read. That's probably the thing I can do best. Anyway Marvin soon found out about this, and from then on, for over a quarter of a century, four times a year, right down to a few weeks ago, sometimes oftener if he was writing other things, I'd get a phone call from Marvin. I'd say, "Hello?" He'd say—it always went the same way—"Oh, hello Al. Al, I've finished a piece for *The Hudson*. Could you possibly look at it today?" And I would say, "Bring it right over," as often as I could. And never was there a delay of more than a day or so, I think.

Well, here he'd come, with two copies, one for him and one for me. We'd sit down, and read it. Those pages would be typed solidly, and with margins—narrow margins—and the type was small, so you'd get the most words possible on the page. And the paragraphs—really big, massive things, like Aztec masonry. And then squeezed in between, in that tiny but very clear writing—really it was printing—would be the revisions and additions. And when there was a problem, I was always amazed how unhesitatingly he went to work on it, and how deftly, how soon it was fixed, usually. Once in a while it would be tough, and then Marvin's tenacity would set in. And he might even have to leave our meeting without getting the thing fixed. But there'd be a phone call an hour later, and then another in a couple hours. And by the next day, he'd have it licked. He'd have it licked. But to watch the efficiency with which he moved, in clearing up the problems, was a great, great thing to see.

Often as not there weren't any problems, especially in the last five years or so. I'd just read it and tell him, "Its magnificent." Often as not, too, of course, as I read I'd be half-blinded with tears of laughter, because they were often so funny in places; at the same time, they were producing other very complicated emotions and reactions. An awful lot goes on at one time in Marvin's prose.

People *will* describe him as a demolition expert. One thing to say about this is that the demolitions are always instructive. The weaknesses in the writer under review—failures of responsibility, dishonesty of one kind or another—Marvin depicts clearly; and the harm done, he makes plain. And his readers, who are likely as not themselves writers, read along, and they think, "Please, God, not me next." This is really so. I remember my own experience with this (I was very ashamed of it) in graduate school, reading Pope—reading Pope on the literary life—and I'd think, "Jeez, this is awful good but I'm glad that he'll never be around to take a look at what I have to write."

I saw this spring, in a letter from the leading international authority on a major figure in English literature, who had just published the book which crowned his career, the statement, "I hope Marvin doesn't review it."

And these people of course forget the many celebrations of the works he loved, with their attractions all set out so brilliantly, and movingly.

I think I've also hit on another reason for Marvin's ogre reputation. You read into a piece by Marvin—and you know he never called them reviews, he never called them essays; it was always "a piece"—and very soon you sense the momentum gathering, and you find yourself after a bit, by way of a most delicately managed transition, right in the middle of a tumultuous crescendo, with rocketing metaphors, often made over from slang . . . voices, different voices (he was wonderful at mocking; suddenly you realize its not Marvin's voice you're hearing, but this fool author's, or some hypothetical character's); jokes—always *good* jokes—potent and original generalizations, coming out like bursts of light; those long, eventful parentheses . . . all of it carried forward on the rhythms of a very powerful, complicated emotion. And then you're brought around and down firmly to the brisk conclusion. And you can say to yourself, "What have I read? I've read a review, and a very good review. A very thorough, just, and startlingly vivid review."

But more than that, it will be a review with an essay on the subject. And that essay will be backed by fresh reading in all the relevant literature, massive reading, so that you're reading also an authoritative, scholarly assessment and set of reflections on the topic. But it's something more than that, too, because other essays, other scholarly essays, and other reviews don't read like this. And it does seem to me that what you're reading is those two forms plus another thing, to make what Marvin called a "piece," that he had developed on his own. A new art form, of which he was the sole inventor and practitioner. Hunting around in my mind for anything to compare it with, the closest thing I could come to, and I just came across it by chance, is Demosthenes, the Greek orator. Let me read you this description of what it was like to hear Demosthenes:

"The smoldering momentum and the solid crescendo of his speeches, the range of his tones, the second-nature quality of his devices [that's nice; his devices are second nature to him] make him a great artist, if any orator ever was. He mingles simplicity with complication, and the natural rhythms of speech with a vastly extended formal music." (I wonder how many readers of Marvin realize how marvelously managed the *rhythms* are, in his prose. I used to watch the minute attention he would give the placing of a syllable, the location of a word, and its sound. Everything in that prose was inspected with such alertness.) "Sir Richard Jebb praises Demosthenes's lighter gifts as if he were a Cambridge don in the late Victorian age . . . But Demosthenes is more formidable than that. Sir Kenneth Dover has shown the power of his deliberate tactics. Demosthenes at his most powerful is a compound of many talents and devices."

That, I think, is exactly right, of Marvin's writing. It's a compound of many talents and devices. All of them terrifying.

Marvin used virtually all the resources and devices to be found in literary art. And his work has, in its own fashion, all the fearful, and delightful powers, of an art. I say fearful, and I think this strange phenomenon of Marvin's writings made his fellow academics uncomfortable, or, really, afraid.

There's an old tradition of art hatred in our culture. It goes back to Plato; and Plato gave it its most formidable expression. And it comes right down into the present fads of literary criticism, which, I found the art critic Arthur C. Danto recently saying, "busies itself finding ways to keep art at a safe distance." The profession is swarming with people like that. The other day, I heard a lecture on the new kind of criticism. . . the lecturer declaring that "we have now proved that a work of art is subject to endless interpretations." And it just so happens that the Arthur Danto article that I had read had taken up that very notion. What he said about it was that "it is a way of not having to deal with what makes art threatening, and its experience important."

There's a phrase in *Paradise Lost*—I just remembered how Marvin detested Milton, threw a strong light all over Milton's work: very instructive!—anyway, there's a phrase in *Paradise Lost*; it comes in a speech by Satan: "Though terror be in love / And beauty . . ." and I think the same terror can be inspired by art, and that everybody experiences it dimly or otherwise, because the demands made, like those made by

love and beauty, are very severe on the timid little self, waiting hungrily in its own little twilight.

I think people feel fear the magnitude of the powers they encounter, when they read a piece by Marvin. You must summon up a lot, to respond adequately, to do it justice.

From the beginning, you would feel, as you read from essay to essay, quarter by quarter, that Marvin was developing this or that value; it would emerge and reappear in various essays. And you could see his mind working on that particular value. Over the years, I think (this is just an impression, I haven't reread his writings) there was a kind of gathering together of a set of values, ever more clearly defined, and reflected upon more and more, and these values are what come shining out, variously and so splendidly, especially in the work of, say, the last ten years. Here they are. They were set out by Marvin, in his characteristic straightforward way, in the preface to *Nobody Here But Us Chickens*. You must know this, but maybe you don't, and if you do you'll like to hear it again anyway. He says:

I write . . . from the angle (with the bias) of certain at least theoretical choices of my own: either over neither, both over either/or, live-and-let-live over stand-or-die, high spirits over low, energy over apathy, wit over dullness, jokes over homilies, good humor over jokes, good nature over bad, feeling over sentiment, truth over poetry, consciousness over explanations, tragedy over pathos, comedy over tragedy, entertainment over art [Amen!], private over public, generosity over meanness, charity over murder, love over charity, irreplaceable over interchangeable, divergence over concurrence, principle over interest, people over principle.

*Bravo. Bravo. Bravo.*

Alan STEPHENS

*Professor at UCSB and CCS*

Edited from a talk given in late 1986, College of Creative Studies, UCSB



*For my brother Howard*



# Mudrick Transcribed



## Preface

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THIS is a book of transcripts of classes and talks given by Marvin Mudrick, who taught literature at the University of California at Santa Barbara from 1949 until his death in 1986. The transcripts come from tape-recordings, which I've transcribed word for word, making no changes. Most of the transcripts, however, are incomplete. Often the taping started a few minutes into the class (or talk), was interrupted so the cassette could be flipped over, and ended well before the end of the meeting. Some tapes, like those of the class on the writing of narrative prose, are fragmentary—sometimes only forty-five minutes' worth of the two-hour-and-fifty-minute period was taped. The transcripts of the narrative prose class meetings are incomplete in another way as well: I've left out blocks of class time which contain student stories that were too long to print.

Generally, Mudrick wasn't aware that he was being recorded. When I asked him if I might tape his class, he said yes, only I shouldn't tell him when I had the tape recorder on. On certain occasions, though, when others were doing the taping, he did know he was being recorded: an interview and three talks were videotaped ("A Heretic in the University," "Teaching Is My Hobby," "Genius and Anti-Genius," "Am I Enjoying Myself Yet?"), and on three occasions he spoke directly into a microphone ("An Interview," "A Commencement Speech," "A Debate With Susan Sontag").

Because the College of Creative Studies at UCSB is mentioned often in the transcripts, I should give some information about it. Mudrick founded the College in 1967, and was its provost until 1984. The College enrolls approximately 130 students, each of whom works almost exclusively in one of seven disciplines: art, literature, music theory and composition, chemistry, physics, math, and biology. There is no general-education requirement; nor are there lectures or letter grades in the College. Students meet in small seminars and receive from zero to six units of credit, depending on how much work they do.

In the transcripts, bracketed statements in italics (such as *laughs*) usually refer to whoever is speaking, but the word *laughter* (also bracketed) means that at least several persons in the room are laughing. For example: "There is a sense in which a perfectly well-behaved person is always a nobody. [*Laughter.*] I can't think of whether I know of a really first-class genius who was perfectly well-behaved, I mean even in rather ordinary matters of social intercourse. I guess it's because ordinary people don't think of *anything* but making a good impression in company [*laughs*], I mean that's *all* that's on their minds." An ellipsis indicates not an omission but an uncompleted sentence or a pause. Ungrammatical sentences I have left unaltered.

The titles of three of the talks—“Teaching Is My Hobby,” “A Heretic in the University” and “Why in the World Else Would You Be a Lit Major?”—come from the transcripts. The other titles are titles Mudrick had thought of prior to giving the talk.

I should add that when I asked Mudrick if I might tape his classes, neither he nor I said anything about publishing transcripts of the tapes.

Bob Blaisdell and Shawn White proofread much of the book; they also listened to the tapes in order to check the accuracy of the transcription.

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L.K.

# “Why in the World Else Would You Be a Lit Major?”

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22 September 1982

*About 120 people were at this meeting for all students and faculty of the College of Creative Studies. Mudrick has just opened the meeting with an explanation of the grading system of the College.*

STUDENT: Could you tell me about the philosophy of why the school was created? I'm interested in the art program, but I don't know too much background on the school itself.

MUDRICK: Oh gee . . . [*Laughter.*] I'll say it as briefly as I can, I'm sure some of you are so sick of this. I've been a professor of English for a long time, and like most people who teach in the university I have certain ideas about what is not as good as it might be in the university, and I was given this crazy opportunity as a result of the most incredible concatenation of coincidences in the history of the world. [*Laughter.*] And my feeling (which may be more pertinent to the study of literature than to the study of other subjects—you'll just have to make up your own mind about it) but I have always felt, even from the time that I myself was an undergraduate, that in most subjects the first two years of the university are a waste of time and a disgrace to the academic profession. That essentially they either repeat work which you already did in high school, or they subject you to these massive lecture classes, introductory classes, from most of which the material would be much more readily available if you read a book, or even an article in the *Sunday Times*. The classes are very bad jokes, and their primary purpose by the way is revoltingly materialistic and mercenary and self-serving—that is, the intention is just to impress the legislature and layman with the student-faculty ratios that the University manages. I mean that's why you sit dozing in a class in Campbell Hall, nine hundred students—a class in reverse-mesmerisms. [*Laughter.*]

My first intention was to eliminate the first two years of university education, which essentially means a heavy concentration on the major—but which by the way, of course, is very much like the English universities. I don't know whether many of you know this, but in the English university it's assumed that you concentrate almost instantly on the subject that you're really interested in. And if you wonder about a “philosophy” behind that, my own feeling is that

unless you know something well, you don't know anything, and you will never learn anything because you don't know what it's like to know anything. I mean, to study things in a kind of supermarket lecture-class way is to learn nothing at all, to retain nothing, and to misunderstand whatever you've heard—if it had any value to begin with. Whereas if you learn how to know something, if you work hard in a particular area and seriously, you will learn what it is like to know. And once you know what it's like to know, you will never mistake partial knowledge or ignorance for knowledge. And *then* you're in a position to learn anything you want.

I've never been able to understand why the American university has fallen for what seems to me the worst possible notion of what constitutes higher education. And of course we're "getting back to it," as they say. That is, I think they're hotter and hotter for the general-education approach. They're really frantic, because they don't know what to do. I mean they're aware of declining test scores and general illiteracy and so on, and they want to do something, and their only notion is to introduce freshman courses in Western civilization. I don't believe in freshman courses in Western civilization. I'm not even sure that I believe in Western civilization. [*Laughter.*] Yes?

STUDENT: Do you think it positive or negative for freshmen, or people just entering the College, to take twenty or twenty-four units?

MUDRICK: Absolutely. Since many of you spend five hours at the UCEN [University Center] everyday complaining about your lack of time to do the reading for the courses that you take [*laughter*], it would seem to me that you could spend at least part of that time doing the reading. There is no substitute for work in a subject to find out about it. I teach for instance a reading course every quarter, and the course that I'm teaching this quarter is some kind of crazy, American-history literature, mixed-up subject. But what it consists of is a number of books—I mean that's the course, the course is the books! The course is not the "philosophy behind the books," or "What is it you expect to do this quarter?"—what I expect you to do this quarter is read the books! I don't know anything else to do. [*Laughter.*] You read the books, and you read a book a week. If you're a lit major, the reason you're a lit major is that you like to read and write. Why in the world else would you be a lit major? [*Laughter.*] And if you like to read, presumably you like to read big fat books. [*Laughter.*] When I was a kid, when I was seven years old, I could remember going to the library and looking with positive *lust* at big fat books [*laughter*] which would *last* me. I mean why would you want a book that wouldn't last you?

STUDENT: Is that why *The Old Man and The Sea* is not on the—

MUDRICK: That's one of the reasons I didn't like *The Old Man and The Sea*—it was too short. Yes?

STUDENT: How do the units work during the class [*inaudible*]?

MUDRICK: The units—it's a tricky system, and it's difficult, and we get in particular trouble with non-CCS students who've heard about all those snap courses in CCS, some of them taught by students and just-former students who are easily

intimidated into giving extra units if you threaten to kill them. [*Laughter.*] Theoretically, you can get anywhere from zero to six units for any class. Practically, I like to think that you're working for four units because that's the standard number of units for L&S [College of Letters and Science] courses, that's what constitutes a course. And I myself almost never give more than four units, and I think that it's a big mistake, generally, to give more than four units, and I think that students who ask for more than four units should probably automatically not be given them [*laughs*]*—*that it should be a surprise, like a present. I mean if a student turns in an enormous quantity of work, and doesn't say one word about units, then maybe you can slip 'im an extra unit. But if he asks for it, NO! [*Laughter.*] Under no circumstances. That doesn't sound very scientific. [*Laughter.*] Essentially it's a grading system by grudge. [*Laughter.*] Yes?

STUDENT: Okay, I'm undecided and I have all these classes in L&S. Can I sit in on the first—

MUDRICK: Oh yeah! That's really one of the purposes of the grading system. I love to have students come in for instance to my writing class just to sit in and talk—they don't have to turn in any stories. And if a student for instance attends regularly during the quarter and doesn't turn anything in, I'll give the student a unit anyway because I'm grateful for the presence and the contribution. That's one of the advantages of the system, that you don't have to take a full-fledged course.

There's something so *rigid* about the L&S notion. It really is practically like a carnival barker who's getting you into this side show, and once you've paid your fifty bucks, that's it, you can't get out. I just don't see that, I don't know why students shouldn't take *part* of a course. Suppose for instance I'm teaching a course in nineteenth-century English fiction, and let's say I'm doing three novelists—say I'm doing Jane Austen and Dickens and Trollope—and it turns out that you're interested in Jane Austen. So, if you're polite, you come to me and say, *I'm interested in Jane Austen. I really don't have time to do the others. Can I attend the first third of the course?* Of course you can. *What do I have to do to get a certain number of units?* And I talk about it, and so on. Then, maybe a third of the way through the course, you decide that you like it better than you thought and maybe you'll go on to Dickens—nothing to prevent you from doing that. I don't know why this shouldn't always be so. Now I do know that there are subjects—and they are represented in the College—which are more cumulative than literature.

I wanted to say one other thing in connection with my objection to the first two years of university education. I think that anybody who survives the first two years of literary study in most American universities—and I don't mean just UCSB, I mean Harvard, Yale, Stanford, whatever—really deserves a medal. And when a freshman comes into Creative Studies as a lit major, fresh out of high school, I expect him to take the most advanced—the *only* courses that are available in the College, all of which I think of as advanced classes. Because I've been teaching literature for thirty-five years now, and I don't know of any elementary way of teaching literature. I teach it the best I know how: I say as many

smart things as I can. [*Laughter.*] What in the world else could I do? How can you teach literature for kiddies? You can teach *kiddie lit*, which is another thing [*laughter*], BUT YOU CAN'T TEACH LITERATURE TO KIDDIES! Either they know what's going on or they don't know what's going on.

I'm perfectly willing to believe that there's a kind of borderline: on one side there is knowledge and on the other side there is profound and hopeless ignorance. And let's say you're of a certain age and you simply haven't had enough experience to make any sense out of this. And I am also aware that there are subjects—like music, for instance, which has a special language, the sciences, which have a special language—and yet, even when I think about those subjects, I think about how many people in those subjects have been producing miracles at the age of six or eight or twelve, or certainly nineteen. When I hear from the scientists, particularly, that I really don't understand any of this, that what they have to do is to go from  $a$  to  $a + b$ , and so on, right up the line, before they know anything at all, I'm very suspicious of that.

I want to say something now which I'm sure will offend, and I don't mean it to offend, but it's true, and it's something which can only be whispered about. Has it ever occurred to you that considering the enormous number of universities and colleges in the United States, and the extreme unlikelihood of extraordinary talent in all the arts and the sciences, how the entire profession essentially exists at a level of unproductive mediocrity? So the saddest thing that you have to understand about a university education is that most of your teachers are mediocre in their field. Now there's nothing wrong, really, with being mediocre; it's only if you try to cover up, try to pretend. One of the best teachers that the College has ever had (and who's coming back this fall, I'm very glad to say)<sup>a</sup>, he said once to me, and I absolutely believe it, he said: "The sign of a great teacher is to understand when a student is smarter than you are." And one of the hardest things for a mediocre person to acknowledge is that.

One of the reasons I love to teach the Writing of Narrative Prose class quarter after quarter (after many years of agony with it, but now I enjoy it) is that it's the place where I have to keep reminding myself that the students in the class do things that I couldn't do if I lived to be a thousand. I mean they write stories which are simply marvelous, some of the time. [*Laughter.*] Well, it's true, some of the time—if it were all of the time it would be a *real* miracle. [*Laughter.*] But it's interesting, it's fascinating. And moreover I can even pat myself on the back, telling myself . . . they don't know it, very often they don't know it, but they're producing stuff which is much better than what's being published. It's very interesting.

I think *the* human quality is intelligence. I really think that just about everybody has it. A lot of people get discouraged very early and they stop using it, and they begin responding by rote, or they don't respond at all. I really think of the

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<sup>a</sup>Max Weiss.

College as essentially an effort to take obstacles out of the way. It seems to me that that's the way you have to think about education if you're being serious about it.

In order to get away from this perhaps unfortunate philosophizing which, I remind you, I didn't introduce [*laughter*], another thing that has always bothered me about the College is that the students don't associate across the disciplines, that there is so seldom any acquaintanceship across the disciplines. I don't know why this is, except the very obvious reason that people get to know the students they take classes with, and so on. I think the students in the College are very interesting, I really do. I know I was teaching for nineteen years in universities before I started teaching in the College, and I have to say that by far the best students I have ever had, over and over again, have been the students in the College. But I have something else to say about that. I *don't* think of the College as an elite operation, and I *don't* think the students strike me as better because they are brighter than all of those students I had in the past. I think those students I had in the past had already been pretty well crushed by the system, or they were being simultaneously crushed by it at the time I was having the class. And I think there is a nice kind of resilience, bounciness, about the students in the College that's a great pleasure to work with, that's all. I don't *think* I'm deceiving myself, because I still do teach classes in the English Department, and I think there is a categorical difference.

Are there any other questions? Don't forget, this is the only time you have an opportunity to ask questions in this way. If anything occurs to you—this is another thing (I'll tell you a story and maybe this will induce some of you to ask questions). I will have students come to my office after a class, and they will say, *Just exactly what did you mean when you said so-and-so at the third minute of the class?* and so on. In the first place, I forgot it five minutes after I said it. In the second place, I am *enraged* that you wouldn't have raised the question in the class at the time when it happened. Why won't you give the other students the benefit of your curiosity and your inquisitiveness? I make one rule when I ask students to come see me in my office: You may talk about anything at all, except what goes on in my classes. [*Laughs.*] I am *not* interested in talking about literature. I talk about it in my classes, and I write about it, and that's enough for me. If you have any juicy gossip, or you want to find out about me, or you're complaining about your mother, come to my office. I'm available. But don't ask me questions about what I said. Yes?

STUDENT: As far as literature goes—

MUDRICK: And what I mean by that of course is, you have an opportunity to benefit the others if you ask a question now, instead of waiting after everybody goes and then coming up and asking me something. Yes?

STUDENT: As far as literature goes, are you saying that across the board or only what goes on in class? For instance, if I have a question about making a point in a paper, should I bring that up in the middle of class, about my personal paper?

MUDRICK: Absolutely, best place to do it, by far. I love to have students bring up questions about papers they want to write for the class. Best place to ask it, sure.

And I try to make that point clear. Why not? Why not? The students' questions in the office about your specialization are generally awful anyway, they're so leaden. *What do you think of Hemingway?* What do you mean, what do I—first thing I think about him is he's dead! [*Laughter.*] You really have to understand, literature is a *living activity*, and the classroom is a place which is set up to give you an opportunity to get into a conversation with somebody who knows something about it. But if you ask questions as if you're a reporter for *Time Magazine*, you're not going to get anything sensible out of anybody.

You really have to respect the situation. The situation in the office is essentially a casual and gossipy situation; it's not a literary situation. I don't have any final answers about literature; I'm sure you don't either. And I'm not interested in giving you stock-market quotations about whom you should admire and whom you shouldn't. I don't care whom you should admire; I want to know whom you *do* admire, I want to know what you *like*, I want to know what makes you keep *reading!* My own tastes and feelings about writers change every time I teach a course. Why would I expect you to have a certain set of notions which conforms to mine? I don't even know what mine are! If a student asks me about a book that I'm going to teach in the next quarter what I think about it, I DON'T KNOW! If I knew I wouldn't teach the course. Why would I teach the course? WHAT A TERRIBLE THING TO DO! I mean, I have a pretty good idea of my last reaction to it, maybe, but that's about all. And I certainly don't preclude different reactions. Yes?

STUDENT: I was just wondering—I can't remember from last week, but do you usually go to the coffee hour? No, you're—

MUDRICK: I will go anywhere you want me to go if you think it would be useful.

STUDENT: Well no, no—often it seems like you have to mull over what was talked about, I mean like you can't just sit there and respond to everything—

MUDRICK: Oh no no no—I know that. Then you can come to my office.

STUDENT: —at other times throughout the quarter—

MUDRICK: You know, I'll tell you—once again you forced me to say something which is unfortunate, and which I shouldn't say: The only people to whom I tell the complete truth are students. I lie to everybody else but I never lie to students. [*Laughter.*] Everything I say in the classroom is absolutely true. I have to lie to my wife, my children, my friends—because you can't get along with those people unless you lie to them! [*Laughter.*] And for me, I'm a very shy person, so something like a coffee hour . . . The primary invention of the devil, for instance, was the cocktail party. And I remember all the years that I used to go to these cocktail parties—and I have a special problem because I'm a teetotaler, and I suppose the only justification of a cocktail party is to get drunk very quickly. But I've never been able to figure any other use of—nothing ever gets said, you *always* get trapped with some *horror* [*laughter*] who will not let you go—something like that—and you begin to wonder why it is that you are punishing yourself. My feeling is that when people have something in their hands they are no longer human, somehow. If they got a cup of coffee or a cake or a doughnut or a

drink, something happens to them—maybe they’re afraid of spilling it. [*Laughter.*] And so I find it hard to talk to them.

STUDENT: All I’m suggesting is that it’s hard to just respond automatically to all the things—two weeks later something will—

MUDRICK: Then come to my office!

STUDENT: It’s good to meet at other times—

MUDRICK: Absolutely. Come and see me. [*End of first side of tape.*]

I wanted to say, by the way (because I myself was a little surprised by it), if there is anybody here who is interested in taking my writing class, The Writing of Narrative Prose, classes do begin tomorrow. And that happens to be a Thursday class, and we’ll be having our first meeting tomorrow. I think maybe I will take the opportunity to make a little pitch for this class of mine, because I am very fond of it, and I think it’s often misunderstood, and some people say bad things about it. And I want to try to justify it, in part because I love to have students *outside* the lit major take that class, and it’s very hard to coax them into it. They will ask questions like, But suppose I haven’t written any fiction at all? I regard that as a great advantage, by the way. I mean if you’ve never written fiction—if you’ve never written anything at *all*—that’s when I love to have you in the class. It’s true that your sensitivities are more exposed in a class like that than they are in most classes. I mean if you write a story, somehow it’s more you (or so you think) than if you write a critical paper, and your feelings are likely to be deeply hurt if somebody makes fun of it or if it’s criticized unfavorably. But it is astonishing what you can learn to turn out. *Learn* is the wrong word. I don’t mean that I can teach it; I can’t. I really think it’s a question of atmosphere, and getting out of your own way.

I love the class, it’s fascinating to me in a way in which almost no other class I’ve ever taught is fascinating, because things get done in that class that I almost wouldn’t believe could get done before they get done. It just seems to me very interesting. I think that if some of you—any of you—have any mild curiosity about writing, I really think that the way to start writing is to write fiction. I think it’s by far the most natural way (I don’t think man is the *rational* animal, I think man is the storyteller animal, and that too gets suppressed in you very early) and the class gives you an opportunity. I think it works for many people. So I would strongly recommend, especially for those of you not in literature but with some slight curiosity about writing, that you think about at least dropping in to that class the first meeting, which is tomorrow. I’d love to have you, and I’ll try very hard not to make cruel jokes the first meeting.

STUDENT: [*Makes an announcement.*]

MUDRICK: Is there a hand up back there? No? Well, this is your last chance—you won’t see me again for another year [*laughter*] (like the groundhog I go back in, that’s the end). I would like to see any of you who want to talk about the program, I really would. Some of you have a very wrong idea about this (that too I suppose is inevitable) some of you (oh—I can *really* establish ground rules) some

of you have a habit—I don't know what it compares to, but I will sometimes see people walking hurriedly by, and I can't tell whether they're exercising their peripheral vision or not. You know how you go past a door—you don't want somebody inside to know that you're passing the door, because what could be more shameful than to pass the door of a teacher who is already sitting with somebody? So what you do [*mimics the action (laughter)*—you'll be *damned* if you'll be caught, *pretending* to be interested in seeing this teacher, who is *vile* enough to have a student *sitting* there when you come by. [*Laughter.*] The other thing that some of you do (and this is much more irritating), you creep along the inside wall without coming into the doorway, and you put your ear up to hear whether anybody is in there. And if somebody is in there, you sit on the floor out in the hall right next to the door without being seen, so then you hear all this filth and gossip from the inside which goes on for the next hour and a half, and finally the person leaves.

Don't do either of those things with me, especially the latter. If you come to see me, and there are forty-two people in my office, appear in the doorway boldly, square your shoulders, and you just stand there, and I will say, "What do *you* want?" [*Laughter.*] And we'll work it out. Really, we will! Very often you save me from this terrible boring session that I've found myself involved in with these three jerks who've occupied the chairs and won't get out, and so I'm often very grateful for people who show up in the doorway—I can simply say I have to talk to this person. So you can be helpful. I do really like to talk to students, I love to talk to students. Yes?

STUDENT: So we don't rush by it accidentally, where is your office?

MUDRICK: South Hall 1718. Pat already told you, but I'll make very explicit when I'm there. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays—except occasionally on Fridays—I'm there always from eleven to three. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, when I teach in the afternoon, I'm there always from eleven to one. I don't go out to eat lunch—you will sometimes discover to your horror that you have to watch me masticate, but I try to get it over with as quickly as possible. I try to keep my mouth closed too (my wife is still telling me about that). And I'm really very glad to talk with you, I am. It's interesting to me. And I don't mean to—really, I mainly object to talking to literature students, so you mustn't get the wrong idea. [*Laughs.*] The thing about literature students is that they're pretending to regard you as a great authority, so you have to come up—I mean, if you start talking to me about something in physics, since I know absolutely nothing about it I don't mind listening to that. I wanted to make clear that I don't object to *all* academic subjects, only literature. [*Laughter.*] You can talk about any other academic subject—it's true, I mean it—or about anything else. And a lot of you get the wrong idea because sometimes you see people in there, but it's sometimes the same people over and over again. It gets to be very tiresome. We're all glad to be renewed.

As some of you may have suspected, if I have a fundamental philosophy it is this: We are put into this world to entertain each other. I have not been able

to discover any other purpose of existence. [*Laughter.*] I wish there were some other purpose, but I haven't found any yet. Unfortunately this sometimes doesn't work. People are so anxious to be hurt, to be injured, to have their feelings hurt, that instead of being entertained they're outraged, which is too bad. But all I'm trying to do is entertain you, really. This is a terrible kind of session, it's an impossible one. We only hold it once a year . . . I would like to loosen you up a little, partly to give you an idea of what is available in the College. One of the saddest things about the young is how conservative they are, how frightened to take a chance. You don't have to take chances—they're simply opportunities. And you should take them, because you'll never get them again. I mean, somebody once asked me what a university was, and I said that it's essentially a library surrounded by accidents. And I believe that, but I believe there are some good accidents, I mean you might run into interesting things in one or another of those accidents in college.

I really think the only enduring justification of a university is the library, because you can't get a great library anywhere else, and libraries are wonderful. And the library here, by the way, is marvelous. It's almost unbelievable for a university in this area, I mean out in the boondocks and relatively new—I mean it's a million and a half volumes. And I think I have yet to look for a book in literary studies that I haven't found in the library, unless it was published in the last six or eight months. It's a remarkable library, certainly in the humanities. And of course you will have the advantage of having graduate rights in it.

STUDENT: What's that mean?

MUDRICK: You embarrass me because I'm not sure. Can anybody say exactly what that—

STUDENT: You can check out a book for the quarter instead of just three weeks.

MUDRICK: Okay?

STUDENT: I was wondering if you were going to have office hours tomorrow.

MUDRICK: Yes—I'm going to have office hours after this meeting, but I will have office hours tomorrow. You remember I teach my class tomorrow so it'll only be from eleven to one tomorrow. But I'll be there. Generally speaking, by the way, and I think this is another thing that some of you do, I mean if you want to come see me. Some of you wait until you think the rush is over—say, you come about five minutes of three. And of course if you come at that time I wish you were dead, because by that time I'm ready to go home, I'm very tired. (I'm just tired sometimes from sitting around—in fact I get more tired from sitting around than from talking to people.) So, don't do that, don't do that. I mean unless there's absolutely no way otherwise—you've got a job, or you've got classes or something. If you're going to show up, actually the best times are the early times. When people come in at eleven or twelve then I love it, because I know I can get rid of them and maybe do some work in the afternoon. Yes?

STUDENT: [*Makes an announcement.*]

MUDRICK: All right? I'm trying to think if there's any other excuse for me to keep you.

All right, I guess not. Then would all the literature majors come up.

*From a class in*  
Eighteenth-Century English Prose

*The class met on Tuesdays from 1:00 to 3:30, for ten weeks, in the fall of 1984. Five class meetings were taped. Each recording begins shortly after the class has started, and ends about ninety minutes later. The books talked about in these transcripts are Boswell's Life of Johnson, Johnson's Lives of the Poets, Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, and Hume's Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding. About twenty-five students were present at each meeting.*

# Week One

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25 September 1984

MUDRICK: I think talk without the reading is bubbles, is of no importance, and reading without talk is pedantry. And so I try to set up the class in such a way that you will be really drowned in reading. For instance I expect you to read the entire *Life of Johnson* by Boswell by next Tuesday. That's about fourteen hundred pages in the edition that you have. Of course if you are really serious English majors you would have read it a long time ago anyway. You certainly would be familiar with a lot of the material.

I'm inclined to think myself that it's—you'll check me on this, because some of you have heard me say The Greatest This and The Greatest That, and you probably know that it's the latest superficial enthusiasm that I have—but I do think that it's the greatest work of nonfiction ever written. And I also am inclined to think that it's one of the two greatest books ever written. The only book that for me comes anywhere near it, and is greater than, for certain reasons, is Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*. But I don't have any doubt that it's the greatest book of nonfiction ever written. It's fascinating. And certainly the greatest nonfictional character in literature—I mean the character of Johnson. Also to some extent, and not even very secondarily, Boswell himself, who in some ways in his own writing is more fascinating than Johnson. But in the *Life of Johnson* no, he's not as fascinating as Johnson, because he very deliberately subordinates himself to Johnson. He is the vessel through which Johnson passes. And sometimes you're not aware of how extraordinarily efficient that vessel is.

One of the strangest facts of literary history is the attitude taken toward Boswell almost since the book was published, and certainly *before* the book was published—that's more excusable. That is, Boswell was regarded as a silly ass. And he *continued* to be regarded as a silly ass by many people after the *Life of Johnson* appeared, and has *continued* to be regarded as a silly ass up through four-fifths of the twentieth century by many people, most of whom should know better. He isn't; he's an extremely intelligent man. He's also a silly ass, but *that* I mean in some respects. But then most of us are, and most of us are not nearly as intelligent as Boswell is, and not nearly as gifted. Also we spend most of our lives *concealing* the fact that we are silly asses, whereas Boswell made a special effort

to reveal this quality in himself because he had certain advantages by it. That is, he was able to associate with people that he wouldn't otherwise have been able to associate with, and so on.

STUDENT: How can you get closer to important people?

MUDRICK: You can be extremely pushy, you can be presumptuous, you can get yourself invited to places where you don't ordinarily belong. You know how shy we all are, because we know what filth we are and that nobody in his right mind would talk to us. Boswell knew that, but it didn't stop him. [*Laughs.*] That's the difference. It's astonishing how many people you can get to see if you really want to. But if you've already decided that you're no damned good, and you *act* on that decision, then you're not going to see anybody. I mean, you'll be locked up in a closet somewhere and you'll never meet anybody.

And Boswell had no shame, absolutely no shame. And sometimes it puts him into situations in which he appears to be rather unpleasant. And certainly as the years went by and as he developed certain qualities . . . For instance some of you may wonder while you're reading—I was struck by it this time (I'm rereading it and taking my notes) by how many times the subject of drunkenness comes up. And you wonder because much of the time that Boswell was writing this, Johnson himself was a teetotaler. And Johnson is going on at great length about the effect of drunkenness and this, that, and the other thing. Well, the reason for that is, of course, that Boswell was a terrible drunk in the last fifteen years or so and he was fascinated by the topic—he kept bringing it up. And the anonymous people that Boswell always refers to as making a disgrace of themselves at some party or other—that's always Boswell. [*Laughter.*]

Johnson's very interesting on drinking. As a matter of fact there's a wonderful discussion between him and Joshua Reynolds about the social effects of drinking. For those of you who want a kind of model conversation . . . you've all participated in that conversation: Does alcohol, or does it not, help to make situations more sociable? Does it loosen up people? and so on. And Sir Joshua Reynolds takes up the positive side of the argument and Johnson takes up the negative side. And Reynolds does about as well as can be done with the positive side, only Johnson *demolishes* him [*laughs*], makes it clear that that argument is just full of holes, and that essentially the only way it works is if everybody's drunk and so nobody's saying anything intelligent but everybody thinks he is. That what liquor does is to diminish your intellectual powers. That's what it *does*, it's one of the things it *does*, whether you like it or not. It may make you extremely charming—especially to yourself [*laughter*—but it definitely diminishes your intellectual powers. And Johnson is wonderful. If I can find that . . . let's see if I can find it. . . . But of course I never can find these things on the spur of the moment, so that will be that. . . . No, I got it.

STUDENT: Excuse me, is that your handwriting?

MUDRICK: Yes, that's my handwriting.

STUDENT: [*Laughs.*] It's very small!

MUDRICK [*reading*]:

We discussed the question whether drinking improved conversation and benevolence. Sir Joshua maintained it did. JOHNSON. “No, Sir: before dinner men meet with great inequality of understanding; and those who are conscious of their inferiority, have the modesty not to talk. When they have drunk wine, every man feels himself happy, and loses that modesty, and grows impudent and vociferous: but he is not improved; he is only not sensible of his defects.” Sir Joshua said the Doctor was talking of the effects of excess in wine; but that a moderate glass enlivened the mind, by giving a proper circulation to the blood. “I am (said he,) in very good spirits when I get up in the morning. By dinnertime I am exhausted; wine puts me in the same state as when I got up; and I am sure that moderate drinking makes people talk better.” JOHNSON. “No, Sir; wine gives not light, gay, ideal hilarity; but tumultuous, noisy, clamorous merriment. I have heard none of those drunken,—nay, drunken is a coarse word,—none of those *vinous* flights.” SIR JOSHUA. “Because you have sat by, quite sober, and felt an envy of the happiness of those who were drinking.” JOHNSON. “Perhaps, contempt. [*Laughter.*]—And, Sir, it is not necessary to be drunk one’s self, to relish the wit of drunkenness. Do we not judge of the drunken wit of the dialogue between Iago and Cassio, the most excellent in its kind, when we are quite sober? Wit is wit, by whatever means it is produced; and, if good, will appear so at all times. I admit that the spirits are raised by drinking, as by the common participation of any pleasure: cock-fighting, or bear-baiting, will raise the spirits of a company, as drinking does, though surely they will not improve conversation. I also admit, that there are some sluggish men who are improved by drinking; as there are fruits which are not good till they are rotten. There are such men, but they are medlars. I indeed allow that there have been a very few men of talents who were improved by drinking; but I maintain that I am right as to the effects of drinking in general: and let it be considered, that there is no position, however false in its universality, which is not true of some particular man.” Sir William Forbes said, “Might not a man warmed with wine be like a bottle of beer, which is made brisker by being set before the fire?”—“Nay, (said Johnson, laughing,) I cannot answer that: that is too much for me.”

I observed, that wine did some people harm, by inflaming, confusing, and irritating their minds; but that the experience of mankind had declared in favour of moderate drinking. JOHNSON. “Sir, I do not say it is wrong to produce self-complacency by drinking; I only deny that it improves the mind. When I drank wine, I scorned to drink it when in company. I have drunk many a bottle by myself; in the first place,

because I had need of it to raise my spirits; in the second place, because I would have nobody to witness its effects upon me.”<sup>a</sup>

Well, that gives you an idea of—this is not a particularly inspired piece of Johnsonian argument, but it’s characteristic. It’s not as brilliant as Johnson often is, but it does show you how extraordinary he is in his ability to stick to a point. That is, he will not allow himself to be deflected by any—for instance, the way that he responds to Sir William Forbes’s comment: he knows that’s a joke, and he’s not going to play around with metaphors. That is, if you warm a bottle of beer before the fire it becomes brisker obviously, because anything bubbly confined in a space will get more bubbly if you heat it up (and eventually if you heat it up too much it’ll explode, too). So Johnson says, If you want to bring that up I simply won’t argue with you.

STUDENT [*walking towards the door*]: This is the wrong class.

MUDRICK: I should say, by the way, to forestall [*laughter*] any immediate flights, that I am going to knock off for about ten minutes, after about an hour (I mean, of meeting) to let those escape who want to escape, and then I’ll resume the class. I want you, in other words, to help me to conduct the rest of this class, even though we don’t have any immediate reading or common reading to base it on. Because as far as I’m concerned, that’s what this class is about.

I don’t think there is any alternative to reading. That is, reading gives you certain things that you cannot get in any other way. Johnson himself is as good an illustration of that as anybody who ever lived. Johnson’s wit is unimaginable without the range and depth of his reading (and his extraordinary memory too). And I know that most of you are very young and of course you live in the age of television, and so probably most of you don’t even know what the excitement of reading is, since you have this alternative from practically infancy.

I have to repeat my little song and dance about reading. I don’t know any alternative to very hard reading in order to know what reading is. The kind of reading that you do for most of your classes is absolutely ridiculous. I mean it’s trivial, it’s minimal, it’s conducted under false auspices—that is, you’re *not* reading scripture. Literature is not religion. The study of literature is not the study of religion. The significance of reading—I mean the *reason* you read is to be entertained. And there is a sense in which you always have to have excess before you can have sufficiency. So in order to know what reading is like, you in effect have to read to excess, you have to read overmuch, you have to be *driven*.

And once again, I can only depend on my own experience. Unlike most of you—all of you I guess—I grew up in the age before television (and even radio was just beginning), and so for me a great time was to go to the library after

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<sup>a</sup>James Boswell, *Life of Johnson* (Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 746-7, April 12, 1776. Hereafter, page numbers from the Oxford edition, as well as the date in any edition, will be noted in brackets. Also placed in brackets will be short comments that Mudrick makes while reading, and indications such as *laughter*.

school, and I went at least two or three times a week. And for me the most exciting thing in the world was a thick book with small print, because that meant I had something that would *last* me (instead of these beginning, I recently have finally figured out what the word *watershed* means, and the eighteenth century is the great watershed of human history. Everything that came before comes to an end in the eighteenth century, and everything that produces what we call modern occurs in the eighteenth century. I mean you think of things like the French Revolution, and that's of course extremely important. The so-called Enlightenment . . . Johnson is one of the great figures of the Enlightenment, and paradoxically he's particularly important in the Enlightenment because he consciously opposes it. Johnson is the great resistant force of the eighteenth century. That is, what he would like is for things to be as he fondly imagines they might have been at certain times in the Middle Ages (he never says that). But of course Johnson would have been burned at the stake within thirty seconds if he had lived in the Middle Ages, because he supports all the positions, but he supports them with such a sense of his own personal liberty—his right not to be bothered, his right to say what he pleases—that he is inconceivable earlier than the eighteenth century, he is just inconceivable. Nobody would have been able to get away with things the way Johnson did before the eighteenth century. So he is, almost against his will, one of the very greatest figures of the Enlightenment.

Certainly the two major literary figures of the European Enlightenment (for me anyway) are Voltaire and Johnson. And if you wonder (those of you who know anything about the eighteenth century) why I exclude Rousseau, I think that Rousseau himself is a kind of counterrevolutionary, and is not really . . . he is neither an enlightened man nor, except by historical accident, a figure of the Enlightenment. He's essentially a moral reactionary, an intellectual reactionary.

Okay, you see already (those of you who are paying attention) that the fact that you haven't even read encyclopedia articles is something of a disadvantage when people are talking. Because some of you have no idea who Rousseau is, except that he's a name; Voltaire is just a name; Johnson is just a name—all of these people are just names. And the function of a course like this, if it has any function at all, is to compel you to read so hard and so much that these names will begin to have substantiality for you; they'll begin to exist in space and time. And if you have no interest in that kind of experience, then you really shouldn't take this course.

I remember—once again I'll give a personal experience—I remember (this was in the late 'fifties—no, middle 'fifties) I had a number of enthusiastic students. It was just after *Spectrum*<sup>b</sup> had started, as a matter of fact, and some of the earliest people associated with *Spectrum* were very anxious to take extra courses. And we really worked rather hard in those days in the English department—I mean I taught four courses, including two freshman courses—and they wanted me to teach extra courses in authors like Dostoevsky and Tolstoy because such

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<sup>b</sup>A literary magazine based at UCSB which Mudrick and Hugh Kenner started in 1957.

courses weren't available. So I remember, for instance, teaching one semester a course in Tolstoy, another semester a course in Dostoevsky. And because I have a lousy memory and have to read what I'm teaching, shortly before I teach, and take detailed notes, I would prepare for the Dostoevsky course by starting to read the novel as soon as I came home from school, about three o'clock in the afternoon on the day before (because that was the only time—the classes met at my home one evening a week). And I read. And I read, and I read, and I broke for dinnertime, and then I read, and I read all night. And I usually was able to finish the novel by about six or seven A.M. I was in better shape in those days, so I could then get up and start my day.

I didn't feel it was any imposition, it was absolutely fascinating to me. *You* people would stay up all night getting drunk, or fucking some attractive member of the opposite sex, so why you should think that reading can be any less attractive necessarily, I don't see why. *Chacun à son goût*, as we say. [*Laughs.*] I can tell you that until you develop some such attraction for reading you aren't going to be anything like a serious student of literature. Unless reading begins to take you over in some such sense, then you might as well forget about literary studies. And you *really* ought to forget about teaching, because it will be the most miserable—I mean, some of the unhappiest people I ever knew are professors of English, who hate to read, hate books, hate intellectual activity . . . they really are virtually out of their minds with self-hatred. It's a waste of time.

So I don't think I'm putting you through anything loathsome, disgusting. As I say, I don't *expect* you to be able to do this really—very well, anyway. But I expect you to make an effort, and I start you with—I love the fact for instance that Boswell, using a relatively new word, said (while he was writing the book on Johnson—in fact even before he started) he said: This will be the most entertaining book in the world. And that, as far as I know, is the first really modern use of the word *entertain* in a good sense. And he was right. I think it's probably fair to say that it is the most entertaining book ever written. And Boswell knew it, and by the way his friends thought he was absolutely crazy, out of his mind. DO YOU MEAN TO SAY THAT YOU HAVE THE NERVE TO COMPARE THE BOOK THAT YOU'RE GOING TO WRITE ON DR. JOHNSON WITH MASON'S *LIFE OF GRAY*? (And all of you are very familiar with Mason's *Life of Gray*, aren't you? It's on every reading list . . . I mean, even the people in this English Department wouldn't dare put that on a reading list. In fact I think most of them have never heard of it. [*Laughs.*])

That's the sort of thing that Boswell had to face up to, because he was doing something absolutely unique. Not only unique—it's never been done again. In fact the only thing that I know like it, the only thing that's remotely like it in literature since—that is, the combination of circumstances and personalities that made it possible—are the books brought out by Craft and Stravinsky, that is, which record Stravinsky's conversation. Those are the only books I know of which are at all like Boswell's biography of Johnson. This is one of the greatest men who ever lived, being recorded—accurately, frequently, also being