

Wendy Deutelbaum and Carol de Saint Victor

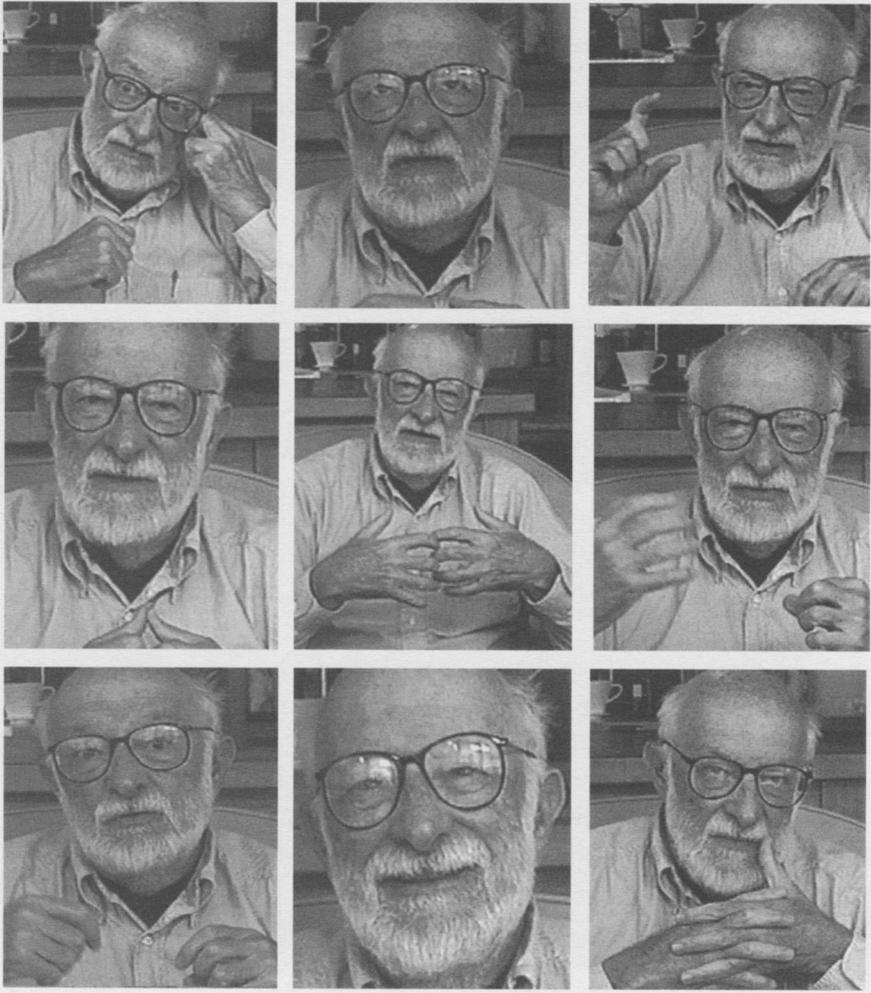
THE ART OF TEACHING: INTERVIEWS WITH THREE MASTERS

This century is about to retire, and so too a generation of teachers whose lives have followed a remarkable historical arc. They were born, if in this country, during the Depression; if in Europe, during the rise of Fascism. They were children during World War II, shaped their careers during the flourishing years of Formalism and New Criticism, found their intellectual and personal stride just in time for the late 60s and 70s, and weathered a professional sea-change as less pristine, less assuredly canonical ways of thinking than they were taught replaced or called into question Formalist methodology. Now they are retiring, or thinking about it.

If not this year or next, surely before the next century has drawn itself up to walking position, teachers who've walked this particular historical path will be gone. Except for their publications, there will be little trace left of their careers, except in the imaginatively unreliable memories of their most—and least—devoted students and colleagues.

What you are about to read are interviews with three teachers from this generation. We asked them to recall their early pedagogical memories, their most important mentors, the shape and development of their careers—all questions intended to define what the nature of the teacher's calling might be. We have included stills from the original videotapes in an effort to convey how integral the body appears to be in the performance of thought: the architectural structures Bob Scholes's hands create as he composes his graceful, simple sentences; Mira Merriman's balletic gestures as she imagines the historic and moral sweep of Western art; and Stavros Deligiorgis's intense, demanding gaze as he pushes internal happenings out toward his listeners.

Bob Scholes is currently Professor and Chair of the Department of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University; Mira Merriman, Professor Emerita of Art and Art History at Wichita State University; and Stavros Deligiorgis, Professor Emeritus of English and Comparative Literature at The University of Iowa.



Robert Scholes, Iowa City, Iowa, 1997
Video Stills by Wendy Deutelbaum

BOB SCHOLES

In Protocols of Teaching: Reconstructing the Discipline Called English, you speak of a “conversion experience” that occurred when you were at Yale. Could you tell us about that?

The word is in quotation marks because I’m not sure I believe in instantaneous conversion experiences, but that’s in reference to my going to see Arthur Miller’s play *Death of a Salesman*. I had been brought up by a salesman who pretty thoroughly indoctrinated me into that world and its views. My father expected me to join him in his business when I finished my career, which was one reason among many why I wasn’t a very serious student. And the fact is that even after seeing that play I did join my father for a year afterwards. But Miller’s play gave me a certain angle on the business world that gave me a lot of strength to leave it.

You were not converted by that performance to be a teacher?

No, I was just converted out of thinking of myself as a possible businessman. There’s a story about my wanting to be a teacher which is also rather strange and perhaps interesting. As I said, I wasn’t a very serious student at Yale and I didn’t get a single grade of A in my four years there. I hung out, as it says in the ballad, with “evil companions.” One of my evil companions told me one day that while carousing I had mentioned to him that I wanted to be a teacher. I had never mentioned this to myself, that that was what I wanted, but *in vino veritas*, I took it seriously and began thinking about it a little bit.

The Korean War fortunately intervened in my life and enabled me to get out of my father’s business and gave me the GI Bill support to go to graduate school when I got out of the Navy. I thought I’d see if I could do it, see if there was a career there. By then I was married, had two little kids and thought, I’ve either got to do this thing in the four years of my GI Bill or turn into a pumpkin.

I had ideas about other things: I thought I might be a writer. I kept writing stories and sending them off and writing poems when I was in my first years of graduate school. And I thought if things didn’t work

out, I might try the foreign service or go to California and get into the wine business, my interest you see . . . There were all those possibilities and through a quirk, Cornell English Department had an emergency after I'd been there one semester. I was thrown into the breach—to teach freshman English—and discovered that I really liked it. It was at that point that I thought: this might really be a career.

But the idea of being a writer, that was a big attraction for you to the profession?

That was there from the beginning, though of course getting a D in a course named “Daily Themes” at Yale didn’t make me certain that I could be a writer. The problem with that course was that you had to write something absolutely every day of the week, six days a week, and I was getting in about two per week, supplemented by a truly dreadful short story at the end of the semester. The D was a sort of gift as far as I could tell.

In Protocols you also talk about the 60s and how you came to see your profession differently. What did you think you were doing as an English teacher before then?

I thought there was some magic in the great texts themselves and that it was sufficient to put students into their presence. Literature itself was that special thing which one didn’t need to justify; it was self-justifying. It was in the 60s when I found that the justification for professing literature wasn’t sufficient, and that teaching reading and writing was sufficient because people really needed those things.

Does that mean the history of English literature should no longer be considered the proper province of graduate studies?

I think history in a large sense is terrifically important and that our students really need to know how we got where we are. But the rather specialized part of English literary history—where this poet begat that poet who begat that poet—seems to me artificial and disconnected. I

also think we're Americans, our students are Americans, and we may need to give American literature and culture first priority and treat English as the foreign literature and culture that it is.

Would you say you get the same kind of pleasure teaching now that you used to?

I think so, though I don't think there is *one* pleasure that you could call the pleasure of teaching. I think there are rather different kinds. I think the great lecturer experiences a pleasure which is similar to that of the great actor. This is not my pleasure. I'm not a great lecturer. In fact, I don't think I'm a terribly good teacher. I think that I've had some terribly good students and that my real goal is to have the best possible students and have them learn the most they possibly can. So for me, the pleasure comes from the sense that the students are learning, that they're leaving the class with something they didn't have.

And isn't that a measure of how good a teacher you are?

I reject that . . . well, I think actually, yeah, when the students learn a lot, you *can* take satisfaction that you had something to do with it, especially something to do with framing the course, designing the course, setting up the readings so they add up to something more than the individual parts. That's one of the most satisfying and creative parts of teaching for me. I've talked to a lot of people about this and found that a lot of us, in the midst of one course, start mentally designing the next one because the one you're in is reality and there's always something wrong with reality. The course you're thinking about for the future is a fiction and everything will happen right while you're designing it in your head, before you actually have to make it work!

How would you describe the ideal teaching situation these days?

In courses where you're paying a lot of attention to student writing, there's a real justification for small classes. All my classes are classes in which serious attention is paid to student writing. Right now, I use

computers and computer software a lot to facilitate writing. I just taught a class in which students used a special conferencing software program to communicate with the whole group three times a week during the weeks when they weren't writing a formal paper. When they did write a formal paper, they attached it to an e-mail message to me that was due by Sunday afternoon and I had those read and responded to by Monday when the class met. That interaction is a big part of the teaching for me.

You say that part of your work is to be a coach. Part of being the coach is that the students love you enough to want to please you. So maybe there's something that happens that has to do with love?

I'm a little wary of the word love, but I think attraction, charm, these things enter into it. We're talking about some kind of emotional interchange, some transference the psychoanalysts would be talking about. We try to pretend that it's all scholarship and that these personal qualities don't have anything rightly to do with it, but the lecturer I remember at Yale who got applauded for his lectures when I was an undergraduate had tremendous personal charm and that was what was working.

What does a bad teacher do to damage students?

You can again make that coaching analogy. A lot of athleticism has to do with confidence. So does the ability to use language, whether in speaking or writing. Bad teachers make students lose confidence in what they're doing, make them think badly of themselves and inhibit them in ways that take all sorts of forms—inability to speak, read, or write as well as they should be able to. And bad teachers make students dislike learning.

To what extent did you feel encouraged in your childhood or by your family to become an intellectual, scholar, or teacher?

On my father's side—which was English and Irish—there was a lot of skepticism about school and teaching. My father was fond of quoting

Shaw: those who can, do, and those who can't, teach—that sort of thing. My mother's side was Italian—she had four sisters, all of whom were schoolteachers, two of whom earned PhDs in education—and they were always slipping my mother, who was the non-teacher in the gang, books for me to read as a kid. They were feeding me the things they knew that I would need. My mother was the one who said I had to take Latin in school, and I know it was her sisters who said, “Make him take Latin, it will do him good.” And it did do me good. I'm glad I suffered through those years of Latin with Miss Jenning.

To get back to something you said earlier about how good it makes you feel to get e-mail messages from former students, ones you haven't heard from in years. If you could e-mail teachers from your past, who would they be and what would you say to them?

Wow! It would be Miss Jenning, my Latin teacher. She's the one at the top of the list. And I would say, “Thank you, Miss Jenning, for clearly loving your material and clearly having the patience to deal with kids who didn't, and for insisting on a certain level of performance from everybody, not allowing people to get away with not doing their own work. Simply insisting.”

There was also a teacher of art history at Yale, a subject I never would have thought of taking, but word got out about this guy that he was a very good teacher. I never learned as much from any single course. I started with nothing and ended up with a respectable sense of the history of art and some feeling for the different modes of artistic production. I learned there was a pattern to stylistic changes; it wasn't just random differences; that history itself made sense.

Who do you think of as your audience in your writing?

When I'm writing academic books, I think I'm writing for English teachers pretty much, but I don't think of myself as writing for the professors at the great research universities. I think of a large body of people with a common interest in these matters. That includes teachers at the secondary school level, people with a big interest in literature.

I think there's a serious problem in the inability of many humanists to communicate with people who are not also professionals in the field. That problem, I think, was even more acute a decade ago when deconstruction was at its peak. Now some humanists are showing a real ability to make the move toward journalism, like Henry Louis Gates, who can write deconstructive prose with the best of them but also can write profiles for *The New Yorker* that are immensely readable. More of us need to be able to make those kinds of moves and maybe—I don't say that we *can* do it—but it would be nice if the kind of writing Gates is doing now would be given more prestige in academic circles and the more specialized, technical, heavily jargonized prose would be given a little less. But I don't know how one can get that done; you can't do it by fiat. I think you have to wait for standards to change a little bit. You perhaps need examples of success with a less jargonized language that will make it clear that it is possible to do. Some people are very gifted writers and seem to be able to do perfectly well without the heavy use of jargon. More of us need to emulate those people, it seems to me.

In Protocols, you refer to Ruskin's essay "Unto This Last," in which he talks about the five great professions that are necessary for a civilization—one being the profession of the priesthood. Though Ruskin doesn't mention the teacher, you suggest a close connection between the teacher and the priest. How do you see that?

Once you take the divine out of it, it is preaching in the same way. What interested me was that Ruskin was talking about what the preacher should *not* do, which is preach false doctrine. My feeling is that the place where teaching has something in common with preaching is there, on the negative side, you might say, in a reluctance to preach false doctrine, to pretend to knowledge that one doesn't have.

It seems to me we're suffering now from an excess of pretenses of all sorts in the profession of teaching, especially in my discipline, English or textuality. That we really are in serious need of more honesty, more directness, more clear examination of what we are doing and why. That's where that Ruskinian tone has an appropriate place. It's not that I think there is truth with a capital "T" that we should all be preaching. On the contrary, I think that we have a very legitimate position against

fundamentalism of all kinds; and for us, any fundamentalist position which doesn't admit of interpretation, which claims prior knowledge before examination is what we should be working against.

In a recent article in The New York Times Magazine, the author details how the typical English PhD student spends eight years in classes, is indebted by at least \$10,000 and has little promise of work. If that is an accurate representation of the current economic and social context for this calling, why encourage someone to do it?

I usually discourage them from doing it, except for the most gifted whom I think will make it through what is a bad time. There is another side to it, though. The alternatives aren't very good either. There are not a lot of jobs in any area or field right now that are really rewarding. The one thing about this job is that if you do make it and get the job, it's rewarding. For a lot of students, graduate school—with all of the problems which are perfectly real—seems more attractive than some of the jobs, maybe many of the jobs, that are open to them. They may get to work with undergraduates, work with material that they enjoy working with, get to interact with people who are interesting. The life of the graduate student has a lot of positives—they're not economic positives—but in other terms they are.

Now there are some graduate schools that really exploit their graduate students, make them teach too much, don't give them enough time to develop. There are others that provide very good teaching situations so that they really enjoy their teaching and their studying so that, for a time in life when it's difficult to know what to do, it's better than some alternatives. This is not a reason I would give anyone for doing it, but it's one reason why people do it.

What advice would you give to dispirited younger faculty who may experience academics as very difficult, unrewarding work?

Yeah, well I think the competitiveness of this phase of capitalism goes all the way down in the culture, into every area, and we're experiencing it in the academy. You would also experience it in a law firm, in business, in farming, in almost anything. We're in a phase of such in-

tense competitiveness and bottom-line accounting everywhere; the academy is bad in the same way that the other things are bad. Of course, if you can think of anything that would be even a little better, by all means, go and do it! There are students who are so gifted that you think they will be able to bend this dreadful system to their own will in some way; but it takes terrific gifts to do it.

If you weren't a teacher what would you like to be?

A beachcomber. That was my youthful ambition.

Do you have a favorite text to teach?

No.

A favorite text to read or re-read?

I like new ones.

What would you like a student to say about you?

Wow! Maybe that's what I'd like them to say about me. . . .

What do you enjoy least about teaching?

Department meetings.

You really like everything about teaching?

As long as you have the time to do it right and not so many students that you're short-changing them, there isn't any part of teaching that isn't pleasurable.

What will you miss about teaching if you do someday decide to give it up?

I'm not certain that I'll give it up, as long as I feel I would miss something.



Mira Pajes Merriman, Wichita, Kansas, 1997
Video Stills by Wendy Deutelbaum

MIRA MERRIMAN

Among the range of possibilities you've encountered in the profession, how would you define the kind of teacher you are?

First, I would say I am not what is now known as a Socratic teacher. I don't function as well in a seminar, partly because I am impatient to get to the material and to share my understanding of it with my students. I'm embarrassed to say this because I admire that kind of teaching a great deal, but my character doesn't permit me to be a teacher who's like a midwife, pulling out from her students their ideas and refining them right there in the classroom. I am instead a lecturer, and I am the master of the classroom.

I think I've been this way all my life. I joke about how even as a child, I bored my friends to death with everything I discovered and my need to immediately transmit what I had learned. People would roll their eyes, yawn, and say, "There goes Mira again." If I heard a piece of music and loved it, everyone had to listen to it. I had peasants of a tiny hamlet in Spain sitting on the floor with me listening to Bach because I wanted them to know Bach. That kind of impulse is something innate in me. There's no virtue in it—it's just something I do. And then I recognized that could be a way of earning a living: I could be a teacher.

How would you describe your purpose or overall aim in the classroom?

What I tell my students when I first meet them in a classroom—my freshmen on whom I lavish my best teaching—is that I'm a purveyor of pleasure. The pleasure I want to bring to the students is the opening of their senses and their intellect. That's the usefulness, I believe, of my teaching—to enrich their lives, as we say, lives that seem to me to be very impoverished.

In fact, I tell them, their eyes have heretofore been mostly used in a very utilitarian way, and my task is to make them use their eyes in ways they haven't been used before—to open them to a world of visual pleasure, which can be transferred from the world of art to the natural world because it requires the same kind of attention. Besides that, I tell them I want to distance them from their everyday lives where they feel

everything is natural—meaning, *that's the way things are*—and to shock them into attention and alienate them from these feelings and natural impulses so they can stand back and become critical. History is the best way to attain this end because you can show them not only the enterprise of the human race, which is best expressed in its art, but also that they share humanity with the first manifestations of human culture. They have the same feelings, they operate in the same ways.

At the same time, there is this tremendous variety which is expressed through style. This endless variety of making things for the eyes is an inexplicable activity actually, except for some reason it is very basic, an activity that speaks to us and gives us pleasure; teaches us how to see; and teaches us the fecundity of the human creature in being able to endlessly recreate the experiences we have had. My intent is to give them a link with the past because the past is essentially the formulating force that makes them what they are in culture.

How do you go about accomplishing that?

There are a lot of technical things that I do. I make them observe very closely, but you can't just observe in a vacuum. I teach them to observe historically and to understand that things are tied to the moment and to the whole culture in which these works are made.

One of the illusions people have who don't know about the making of art is that it's an activity that comes out of a creative surge, a genius or passion. What is missed most of the time is how deliberate and how structured the choices that artists make are, and how one can read in the works of art the intellectual process that was taking place in the mind of the artist.

So what I am really doing with the students when they are looking at art is showing them that there is a goal and intention fulfilled in the work itself. Often this is a tradition that everyone knows and follows. When there are changes, they don't just happen: they are stimulated by events, by a new invention or new materials, a change in government or the ethos of the culture. What I am doing is giving *meaning* to these works, meaning in the visual, intellectual sense—because I believe there is a visual intelligence which is manifested in these works—and I am

giving them a sense of structure in *why* things happen and *how* they happen. I'm also showing them the larger, meta-historical movements which have something to do with the rhythms of humanity.

One of my ploys is always to try to find parallels between what is going on, for instance, in the Middle Ages, as they destroy a whole culture and mode of representing things in favor of abstractions, and the patterns of modern times which saw the same kind of destruction of a certain ideal of imitating nature in favor of abstraction.

There's a subtext here, too. I'm a political person. I'm aware of the dangers we're in. I'm aware of the tawdry religious movements that go on—the New Age nonsense of astrology and magic and Tarot cards. I know my students are immersed in a world in which they are all seeking some kind of meaning and some kind of magic and I'm trying—desperately I would say—to alert them to the dangers of where they are. This is a very dangerous moment, I believe, for our nation. One of my aims is to make them critical, so that they don't become dupes of the first charlatan who comes along and promises them things.

If you think art history doesn't haven't anything to do with this, I think you're wrong, because history itself is an endless story of human folly. Of human greatness—and its disinterested action for the sake of being, like the creator, creators themselves—and the destructiveness and misuse of art for vile reasons throughout history. I don't look at art as something detached, a manifestation of some kind of godly spiritual force. I believe that the world is filled with a certain number of makers who will make no matter what situation exists, and they will make for anyone who makes it possible for them to do so. So art often has very dirty feet; it's rooted in some very nasty things. It's not sacred, but it *is* a manifestation of our humanity. It's as simple as that.

Your teaching style is quite dramatic and performative. Visually, you and the projected slides occupy the only two points of light in an otherwise darkened amphitheater. You gesture, pirouette, joke, capture 300 years of history in precise and amusing anecdotes worthy of a late-night stand-up comic. When you looked at the footage of your class, you exclaimed, "What a ham!" Could you say something about teaching and performance, the ham-ster within?

Well frankly, it's not that I want to be a ham; it's my natural intensity in trying to make my students understand. I'm trying to make my understanding theirs, and I use any ploy that comes to mind to accomplish that. I will use examples, I will use slang, I will use gestures, I will use silences, I will whisper—whatever it takes to bring it to their level, just to drag them out of their apathy. That jolt requires a great deal of histrionics on my part.

What people were most influential in determining your intellectual life?

There is no starting with anyone else but my father, who considered me—unconsciously I'm sure—a vessel into which he believed he would pour everything he knew, all his enthusiasms. He was a physicist. I remember, maybe I was four years old, being introduced to the theory of relativity. Because he had no son—he was a Jewish father from Europe—he needed someone to whom to transfer his enthusiasm for life. He formed me to be an intellectual.

Very early, when I was eleven, I conceived a passion to be a painter. “You want to be a painter?” My father immediately bought me an easel and paints and books on how to paint the human body. Later, I was enrolled in the Museum of Modern Art School, which was very hot and very glitzy. But I only went to two sessions and then played hooky and went to movies because the only thing they were willing to teach me was how to express myself. They gave me finger-paints and said, “Express yourself!” I didn't know what that meant and I knew I didn't have anything to express at the age of eleven.

And after your father, the enthusiast?

In the course of my high school years I had a mentor, a young man that I met at the Art Students' League where I was taking classes. This young man tried to teach me about structure in art and was the first to awaken me to an understanding of what is going on when an artist is making choices. He also taught me that you don't paint nature; you paint or draw selections according to some kind of plan.

During that same period, there was another friend from the Art Stu-

dents' League who introduced me to the spiritual life. It was a period in which we all read Buddha and the Gospels and Simone Weil and Gurdjeff, the theosophist, and a whole range of things which answered in some way to a desperate sense of anxiety and despair. This was right after the Second World War. There was Korea again, and my whole young generation was on the verge of the kind of rebellion that actually occurred with Vietnam. The Holocaust Museum experience (even though I'd been in Europe, this was different from my own experience), the sense of the highest culture in Europe being reduced to that kind of barbarism—it all left me with despair, simply despair.

At what point did you choose to become an art historian?

Somewhat later, when I was still totally involved with becoming a painter, I dropped out of college in order to paint full-time. I went to Spain, in a sense to imitate Van Gogh. I went to the hot country, with red earth and olive trees. I stayed there for four and a half years trying to be a painter, at which point I discovered that I really didn't want to be one. I wanted to *think* about art.

What about important teachers you encountered after that?

Then I went to Columbia University where my mentor was Rudolf Wittkower, a man of enormous generosity, a great capacious mind, and a wonderful kind soul. It was his encouragement—in the very first seminar in which I participated and gave a paper—that did it. He had such faith in my mind, which I didn't have, because all those years I had thought in other ways and hadn't trained my mind to be scholarly.

He was also a man of great moral probity who insisted that our role in the world should never be greedy. He was a scholar of 17th century art at a time when everybody was collecting—this was a period when you could get cheap stuff and invest. If you were smart, you understood this was the next wave in the galleries. Nowadays, the market has become the great devil, but in those days only he knew how dangerous it was for a professional to become involved in attributing things, getting money for it, and being tempted to attribute things in ways your best

sense told you wasn't right. So that was a great example for me and also alienated me from the whole area of museums and galleries.

He was also a great model in the preparation of his lectures. In the forty years he taught, he never missed a class, except in his last year, just before he retired, when he got a terrible case of the flu. He missed one class and was devastated. On the days he taught, no one could see him because he was preparing like mad, even though he was an expert and could have taught off the top of his head. His lectures were beautiful and his articles were rational and clear.

The school was very Warburgian and Panofsky was teaching at NYU at that time. De Tolnay, the great Michelangelo scholar, was at Columbia. We had Donald Posner. The school was vibrant with talent from Europe, as a matter of fact, so I inherited the European tradition. Among the things I inherited was something I had to absolutely reject—the German-formulated language of formalism, which was somehow separated from the documents which would tell us what the artists were thinking when they were making these things.

There was also Meyer Shapiro, who was a sheer delight. I just enjoyed the kind of looking that he was able to describe to us and lead us to—his very close observation and attempt to make sense of everything in the work, beginning with the format, his missing nothing, not the smallest detail. All these things were very useful to me when I began teaching. But in the end, I really had to form my own program.

Whom do you see as your classroom audience—the artist/makers, the next generation of art historians, those not formally committed to art history?

In addressing the classroom, one is also addressing the unknown selected group that will respond to your field of knowledge with some kind of hunger and recognition. These are the few who will become the professionals. So part of the function of a teacher is to awaken those who are in some way genetically destined to be people of visual response or makers of visual things—the makers, too, need history because they need to see what is possible. So one of the teacher's roles is to continue the tradition—the action of the transmitters and makers—on the highest possible level.

To the others, who will never have another class in art history, it's simply a little prod, an opening—but I get students many years afterwards who say that I changed their lives because they began looking. And also, this may seem trivial to offer as a worthy thing for teachers, but in some ways the classroom is also therapy. I've had so many students tell me, "When I came to your class it was a very difficult time in my life—husband trouble, children trouble, my mother was dying—and this class was like a relief. It took me out of myself. It was real to me. I would come to class to get a sense of release from my anxiety, because I was using my eyes in ways I had never used them before."

Has writing been as meaningful for you as teaching? What is the role of scholarship in the life of the teacher?

Of course it is required to write in one's profession. And the fact is, anytime that I embarked on a writing project, its completion gave me incredible satisfaction. And I don't think in Art History so far I have written anything important. I'm a slow developer. I put together a very useful and well-received book on my 17th, 18th century artist—a project that required enormous organization because I was putting together a catalogue raisonné plus the text.

And I love that—I love sitting in archives and holding the documents. I loved the fact that I was able very quickly to read 17th century hand. I loved the fact that when I needed to I could read, just by scanning it very quickly, the medieval Latin when I wanted to know the canonization process that took place in the 14th century.

I don't think I'd be a good teacher if I hadn't had that contact with the material, with the past. It's that *passion* that I try to transmit to my students. "Some of you will have that passion, love the past, want to be in touch with it," I say. "It's inexplicable, it's not admirable, it's just a fact. It's like needing to make!"

Early on I liked research better than writing because writing was very hard for me—but eventually it became easier, I began to have more control, and there's great satisfaction in what I have written. But now, of course, I'm engaged in another kind of writing—memoir writing—and I find this so pleasurable I can hardly tear myself away. So I

think I'm a writer. I think that the process itself is strengthening. But above all, I'm a researcher.

So you wouldn't say, looking back, that it's the teaching that really captivated or sustained you?

I think it's both, it's symbiotic. While there may be a few teachers who never need to do scholarship, I would stick with the old tenure notion that we have to have evidence of scholarship. It may not eventuate in many books; some people only have one book in them. But if you haven't had the experience of putting knowledge together, of reassessing what has happened in a given sphere or subject, in knowing what everybody else has said about it—you really can't transmit with any assurance. You need to have *that* thickness of knowledge to be able to say *this* little bit with some sense of mastery.

How do you feel about leaving this work to which you've devoted most of your life?

As I look at myself at this moment, just one year from retirement, an interesting question is: What happened to me as a teacher in these thirty-seven or thirty-eight years? Indeed, a lot has happened, but I would say it's not in the *kind* of thing I do but in the *quality*. I've improved. I do it better. I have more experience and more information. I'm better organized, my mind is clearer. I know more and have a greater sympathy for the students.

Now I contemplate what it will be when I'm no longer teaching. I must say, it is a painful thought because I'm addicted to it—it's a rhythm of my life. So what am I going to do? Well, frankly, I don't know. I'm going to finish the memoir. I'm thinking about a Michelangelo book. I want to go to Chile and go on a freighter and take time and have an adventure, see how it is to be out of the womb of Wichita or my own children's houses. I want to do what I did at the beginning of my life. I have no plans. . . . I'm allowing myself to work day by day and let things happen as they happen. And since things have been this way—that one thing leads to another—I'm waiting for things to lead . . .

It's really not good to hang on: you're through with a portion of your life, it's a phase, and I think a clean cut leads you to other things. Otherwise you sort of dwindle away and are afraid. And I don't want to be afraid.



Stavros Deligiorgis, Iowa City, Iowa, 1997
Video Stills by Wendy Deutelbaum

STAVROS DELIGIORGIS

Perhaps you can begin by telling us about your educational background.

I did part of my first year of European high school in Bucharest, then finished high school and university at the University of Athens. I studied the humanities, literature and philosophy basically, with emphasis on English and American literature. Quite unexpectedly, a professor approached me and suggested that I apply to an American graduate program. I was accepted, to my surprise, on the basis of a Fulbright application to Yale. And lo and behold, my first teacher in English literature was Cleanth Brooks, who gave me my first taste of New Criticism with specific complications through writers such as Sir Walter Scott, Byron, Shelley, Keats, and Wordsworth. Later, I migrated to the University of California at Berkeley where English literary history and the Classics became components of my comparatist formation.

Let's go back for a moment to the earlier years in Romania. Where were you during World War II?

I was a person in hiding. Romania was an ally of Germany, and because Romanian Greeks were considered on the side of the British and the Americans, we moved around eastern and southeastern Romania, going from village to village pretending we were native Romanians. No one bothered to ask us to show any papers; if they had, we would probably have been deported to a concentration camp. My grandparents had come to Romania right before the First World War, believing it to be the land of opportunity. I was born there, as were my parents. We spoke Greek, and Romanian whenever we came in contact with people outside the family.

In '46, we went to Bucharest, where I completed one year of high school, and in '47 I left with my family for Greece. We returned to a Greece we had never seen, which meant nine long years of refugee camps. I completed my BA at the University of Athens, during which time my family and I lived in a room with sixty other people.

Throughout these difficult times, did your parents tell you stories to make you feel better?

My father did. While we were in Romania, he presented an idealized version of Greece—the alternative myth, so to speak—so I came to Greece at fifteen or sixteen thinking I was literally in the land of the gods. Even though it had been devastated during the Second World War—half of the population died of starvation, there were bombed-out buildings everywhere—it looked and felt and smelt so wonderful after war-devastated Romania. I had believed my father’s version of how wonderful it was to be Greek and how great the country was.

In Romania, before the War, my father ran a café he had received as dowry from my stepmother. When the War broke out, we began wandering through the countryside as foreigners in a country allied to Germany. My father didn’t know how to chop wood, work animals, plow fields, which made my stepmother very unhappy. She was very insecure and suffered from occasional bouts of depression. My father, on the other hand, was not affected in the least, even when bombs were falling all around. He always had an interesting story to tell and he was always reading. I don’t think he even finished fourth grade, but there were stale Russian newspapers he would hold before his face and gradually teach himself to read, and French magazines from before the First World War that he would stick his face into and slowly decipher through his knowledge of Romanian.

Was that the beginning of your interest in narrative?

Very late, probably in the late 50s, I discovered a paperback in the English language bookstore in Athens by Victor Frankl, who spoke about how he managed to survive the concentration camps by telling stories. There was also a sequel I found a little weaker—*Logotherapy*—that talked about how you heal and manage yourself by acts of speech. We had probably already been practicing that, though not with a great intent of surviving, I should say. Life in our own eyes did not appear to be very important, strangely, even though we were victimized. Somehow—I will be blunt—it wasn’t fashionable to think very highly of the

value of your own life. Nor were most people very protective of their cultural identities. Our politicians sounded as if they cared very much that we preserve our Hellenism, Romanism, or Slavicism—whatever it was we had in our veins—but we ourselves were not really possessive or very protective of our identity or ourselves. We probably should have been, but then, seeing the forms of militancy which became the trend in the 60s, I was not sure that I liked the alternative. I would say that a little more relaxation concerning our own precious existence on this earth would be a good thing to return to, but it's hard now; our innocence is lost.

When did you decide you wanted to devote your life to being a professor of literature?

I would say that this happened under the influence of a professor in philosophy at the University of Athens who had studied in Germany, a neo-Kantian whose idealism just resonated with me. He taught a class in the history of late Hellenistic philosophers and his first question was not, "Tell me all you know about Plotinus," but "How does this table fit, let's say, in the schema of the Enneads?" Somehow I began looking at the table and speaking in a way he liked very much. This is when I received my first reinforcement for my ability to make up stories. Or to make connections between disparate objects—tables and Plotinus' monadology. He appeared to me to be the most enthusiastic of all my teachers and he always improvised, never read off of notes, and in many ways I imitated him.

My attraction to teaching the language came from my teen years, while I was learning in those private institutions outside the official high school and came under the influence of a professor who had learned his English at Robert College in Constantinople. I found out later that he had come under the influence, of all people, of James Mason in the movies. He liked the tone of his voice, his frowns, his strutting on stage, on the teacher's stage. These two teachers were cases of attractive people who were literally lost, intoxicated with what they were doing. I did not set myself up, of course, to become equally crazy: I found out that you have to plan, you have to cram, you have to pay

attention to what's coming out of your mouth and your gaze. But quite often I think that they would smile—those professors and actors—if they saw me imitate them. Later, I found out that it was okay to clone. Both from the perspective of the New Testament, “Be thou an imitator of us who imitate Christ,” and from a Zen point of view: start with any premise and it will soon be so filled with your own personal substance that no one will be able to trace back how much a clone you are of those who served as your model.

So you filled the vessel of yourself with one personality after another, people who were themselves actors or performers. Is that how you imagine yourself as a teacher—a performer?

I did a lot of performance in the 70s and early 80s with colleagues here at The University of Iowa, especially in what used to be called multimedia. But there is an element in teaching that performance does not cover—what I would call “transport.” As I reflect back on the mask that I pull on—my mannerisms before class or my attitude in the office when students come in—I would say that what comes first is the ecstatic possibility, the ability to be detached, outside yourself, beside yourself. Performance will serve that end as the occasion arises. I also learned very early when not to yield to the ecstatic mode, the breathless mode, the open nostrils, you know, in the wind like a galloping horse. I learned to hold back because the occasion did not serve or call for that. But when I was faced with so many passive audiences, I felt I had an open invitation to go into ecstasies in front of them, to carry on and play and replay myself in any permutation I felt like.

To what end?

To single out kindred spirits. Eventually, the totally upset or shaken student would come to my office and say, “You know, for some reason I just feel like hitting you. But at the same time, you say such fantastic things that . . .” Then I would say, “Okay, sit down, I’ll share the gift. I’ll pass it on to you if you want it. How badly do you want it?”

How badly do you want what?

The ability to identify the ecstatic mode and to yield to it, to enjoy rather than fear it.

So you go into a classroom not really knowing where you're going?

Yes, yes. There is a book that came out in the 70s—I think by a George Leonard—which was called *Teaching and Ecstasy*. I loved the title because I recognized what I was doing. I sampled the chapters and found that his experiences or his relationship to texts were very different from mine. He felt there was a body of work out there to teach while I was not always sure I knew what was out there to be taught. But I did find confirmation that the classroom is an appropriate and proper place for ecstasy.

Is there anything that makes your Comparative Literature class distinct from a class in sociology or physics?

I respect the literary and historical traditions. I know them and like them and study them. I need to explain that the reason I am teaching is not so much to engage in what one of our colleagues would call “fruitless erotics.” Let me explain it another way. I studied biofeedback in the 60s. Biofeedback can be measured and observed. It can be trained in a matter of minutes and can also be an entire lifestyle of meditation, oriental or western style. It's something very strange, but when certain stories are told, if we attached electrodes to the listeners, we would see them go into the range of brain activity frequency that is characteristic of biofeedback. When a story begins to be told, the listener immediately drops from the beta range—the twelve to fourteen cycles per second that are necessary to answer the phone, write a letter, cook, carry on a conversation, a frequency where there's very little room, let's say, for ecstasies—to the alpha range, between eight and ten cycles per second. These alpha waves are—I don't know what to call them—the waves of transport. People have even speculated whether friendships exist for the alphas to come into existence or whether the alphas exist in order to promote friendships. . . .

What's the adaptive advantage of having a lot of alpha-connected energy around?

I could speak from both sides of my mouth. One side loves to say: hooray for alphas, because they create more secure individuals. People less fearful, less defensive, less hostile. I have seen people become homicidal in their attitude of defending what is theirs. I have seen this, I have been present. The other side of my mouth acknowledges righteous defensiveness: "By the lips of the righteous are cities defended. The mouth of the believer makes rich, his words heal." I'm quoting the book of Proverbs, by the way. The New Testament is filled with the power of the tongue.

So which side of your mouth speaks most often in your classroom?

If something is worth touching on, even casually, even in passing, it is worth treating as something infinitely rich in generating responses on the conscious as well as the non-conscious level. And I tend to respect that because I think that is the level I'm beginning to recognize as where my students' spirit is. Not merely the mind, that cares very much for the eventual accommodation in society. Not just the body, concerned with how it will be fed and clothed and driven around and sheltered. But also that part which, at least in traditional societies, is identified as spirit.

Probably a better term would be the erotics of teaching, because if the erotic comes in, so too do the responsibilities to nurture, to shelter a little bit, to protect, to groom and to cultivate. Your relationship becomes serious: you don't merely have one-night, one-day or one-hour stands in our buildings of teaching. You enter into a friendship or a relationship with students who will be looking up to you. The Platonic model, at the very least, would work fine. As you talk to your students—as you find in *The Republic* or *The Symposium*—wings begin to grow on their backs. If you could look under their Gap or Arizona shirts, you'd see feathers. Yes, it's a comical idea, but why not work with that assumption, considering your students almost genetically predisposed, you might say, for that flight into the ecstatic.

How do you decide what texts you'll teach?

I tend to favor a text which carries the nuggets of a revelatory or epiphanic moment, probably on every page, so that if the student were to open the text anywhere at random, without me giving instructions, that student would be struck by how rewarding or enjoyable a particular passage may be. So I tend to favor not merely the well-crafted or well-written play, essay or novel, but one which might even be read enjoyably backwards. I imagine that a totally fortuitous exposure to any printed page would yield tremendous returns to the individual, especially if there were an element of randomness to it. For me, that's the open gate—the great invitation to explore—to show that students should not fear to read a novel backwards and just see what happens. Will lightning come from heaven and burn them? Will they realize something about Joyce or Barthes they never thought before? Will they discover that every other paragraph begins with an "S"? You know, these could be totally mechanical realizations, but the idea is to garble the text, like playing the tape backwards. Of course it will be incoherent, but writers have done that from the beginning of time: they take language, a simple statement, stand it on its head and see what emerges. And lo and behold, the line where they stop describes the day, encapsulates their life, or gives them instructions for the future. They use it like an oracle, in other words, or like their horoscope. In other words, the divinatory potential—not so much of language, but of every material creation—is there, so you can read the bark of trees, look at the flight of birds, stop the tape anywhere. Some people try this simply by cruising the channels on television, and they begin to see all sorts of uncanny coincidences. Fifteen channels, totally unrelated, not the same satellite, not even the same company. Amazing coincidences are there everywhere. We have so frequently—in our intense rationalism and preoccupation with accountability—edited out, abstracted, removed the universe of coincidence from our literary work, our work with texts, and our teaching.

This is your last semester of teaching after a long career at The University of Iowa. Do you see this as the end of a certain part of your life? Will you continue in some way to teach?

There's such an institution as the Greek café, a place that's relaxed and at the same time very formal. Basically, you're alone in public. And you will tend to attract a few individuals who will either be teaching you—even when they say nothing—or who will be learning from you, even though you say nothing. Pieces of paper will always be changing hands—chapters, reviews, clippings—as well as the sighs and little bits of gossip. But the primary beneficiary would be building up the spirit of the other person.

What would you like students to say about you as a teacher?

There is initial flattery, of course, when a student comes back and says, "You know, I really learned, I remember the moment you stood up and you did this or that, the moment you held the book upside down and then shook all the letters out of it." I'd love it, but just for a few seconds; this is probably inevitable with every human being. But if the student or recent friend would give me five minutes, I would very elaborately pretend that I never heard it and I would take off on something else and move on to the next chapter between the two of us. "He who sets his hands on the plow and looks back," it says in the New Testament, "is not worthy of the kingdom." I think this attitude was something I felt instinctively before it became conscious in me—not to want to dwell on past successes acknowledged by my betters, my equals, or my subordinates. But more recently I have found that, much better than being able to formalize or monumentalize what I've done with my career or the room I've been given to influence young people, much better would be to move on to the next thing, on to the next shtick.