

Finding A Way With Words

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Was it inevitable? I don't know. Was it destiny? I hope so. All I know for certain is that at a crucial point in my life I became an English professor, and that I taught literature happily for more than forty years, never doubting that it was the right profession for me. If I ask myself what started me moving in that direction, what I remember most vividly are the pains of growing up, when I was as uncertain about my future as any adolescent, wondering what in the world I was going to do with my life. I entertained every imaginable possibility: Doctor? Lawyer? Engineer? Airline pilot? Too early for astronauts, or I would have wanted to be one.

There was only one occupation I ruled out from the start, and that was waiting on customers in my father's shoe store on the main street of Shawnee, Oklahoma. Like father, like son, was not for me. I learned the trade right away, because it was easy enough to sell shoes (the going price for dress shoes in those days was about \$20 a pair) but I could not see myself doing that the rest of my life. My father showed me how to step into his shoes, but he gave me the freedom to choose for myself, though I'm sure he secretly hoped I would settle down in my home town and take over his business when he retired. I was looking for something a little more demanding than running a shoe store. And so, while dreaming of all sorts of alluring ways to earn a living, I spent my summer vacations doing hard manual labor: loading boxcars, handling jackhammers, cleaning bricks--determined to get my muscles in shape to play high school football for the Shawnee Wolves.

I succeeded in that modest ambition, but it was no help in choosing my profession. I had to make a conscious choice, after years of tacking and weaving from one tempting opportunity to another, till the day came when it dawned on me that my true interest in life was not going to be competitive sports. I thought it was, for most of my high school years, when Friday night football games meant more to me than studying. My early years were more recreational than vocational: playing sports was my first priority. But they were not my passion. My passion, from childhood on, was reading, I learned to read even before I learned to play football, and eagerly devoured all kinds of books, with little taste but lots of enthusiasm. I gobbled up the Oz books, Winnie the Pooh, the Hardy Boys, and row upon row of comic books. My taste for real literature came slowly. The turning point was when I discovered Edgar Allan Poe. I was about twelve when I suddenly fell in love with a truly gifted writer. I wanted to read everything Poe had written. I saw that he had a style of his own, recognizable whether he was writing poetry, prose, prose poems, fantasies, horror stories, detective stories, even science fiction. He died too young, but he was a versatile and prolific writer, and he was my first literary passion. I was thrilled by the terrifying suspense of the condemned man in “The Pit and The Pendulum,” shocked by the grisly suffocation of the winelover in “The Cask of Amontillado,” intrigued by the gory mystery of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” saddened by the early deaths of “Annabelle Lee” and “Ulalume,,” The compelling rhythms and rhymes of Poe’s poetry captivated me when I was young; as I grew older, I learned to appreciate the more subtle rhythms and rhymes of greater poets, especially Shakespeare.

I remember how *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth* overwhelmed me when I was introduced to Shakespeare in a high school English class. His language was a revelation: he could make words seem luminous. Before I knew what was happening, I was hooked, and trying hard to find my

own way with words. I had discovered that literature in all its forms expressed the full range of human emotions, and I wanted to absorb all I could of what it contained. Dedicated English teachers in the public schools helped me along, urging me to read not just any books but the best books, to memorize the best poems, to read with a critical eye and take notes on what I was reading. Luckily, memorizing poetry for me was pure delight. By the time I entered high school, I could recite reams of poetry line by line. Rudyard Kipling was a favorite. I once recited “Gunga Din” to my Boy Scout troop, amazing them that something as silly as poetry could be so virile. I liked poetry more than prose because it was more quotable, and I soon learned that Romantic poets like Byron and Keats were particular favorites with the fairer sex. And so, through my own choice and the influence of a few inspiring teachers, I began to understand that literature offered the lifelong satisfaction I was seeking, which I would never be able to exhaust. Literature was now my passion, but it had not yet become my calling.

The calling came in college, thanks first of all to the good offices of the US Navy. When I graduated from high school, the Second World War was almost over, but some kind of military service was still obligatory. To avoid the draft, I volunteered for the Navy V-5 program, hoping to learn how to fly planes from an aircraft carrier. That dream did not come true. Instead of sending me to flight school, the Navy sent me to college, first to North Texas Agricultural College in Arlington, then to Southern Methodist University in Dallas. It was only a delaying tactic, but to make it useful, the Navy required us to take courses in Math and Science. A few electives were allowed, so at SMU I signed up for a freshman course in English literature. My teacher was a spinster lady, Miss Sue Stimson, totally lacking in sex appeal but madly in love with poetry. When she assigned the class a critical essay on literature, I undertook to write an essay on the most difficult poem in our textbook, T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. A headnote in

our textbook said the poem was so obscure no two critics could agree on what it meant. I took that as a challenge, did some fledgling research, wrote my essay, and handed it in to the teacher. She handed it back with an A and a favorable comment. I think it was my audacity that impressed her; she probably did not understand the poem any better than I did. But Eliot became my new hero, eventually the subject of my doctoral dissertation. It was a step toward the goal of teaching Modern Poetry in college. That was a long way off, but while I was still wearing a Navy uniform, I was on my way to becoming an English professor.

Not that I disliked the science and math courses which the Navy required me to take; I even thought seriously for a time about working toward a career in chemical engineering or medicine. But they were never my passion. The books I chose to read, when I had the time, were literature, foreign languages, and philosophy, and though I stayed in the Navy V-5 Program long enough to fly solo in an open cockpit training plane over the Texas prairie, and went on to Iowa Pre-Flight, where I learned to identify constellations and read Morse Code, I opted out of the Navy and finished my degree at the University of Oklahoma, near my home town. Sports, by then, were merely a pleasant pastime; I had become a serious English major with a minor in Philosophy. The teachers I most admired at OU were an English professor whose specialty was Milton, and a Swiss philosophy professor who introduced me to the poems of Rilke in German. They lifted my sights to the higher realms of literature, and encouraged me to go to graduate school, to earn advanced degrees that would enable me to become a college professor one day.

A Methodist bishop my father knew recommended Vanderbilt for graduate school, and my literary career moved from possibility to certainty. My favorite English professor at Oklahoma had urged me not to stop with a Master's degree but to go all the way to the doctorate. He thought a college teaching career would be futile without a Ph. D., and his

advice proved invaluable. Pausing to teach for awhile with a Master's degree would have been a fatal mistake in my case—though it was not, I would learn, for my favorite professor at Vanderbilt, Donald Davidson. I knew about him already, because I had read his poetry before I went to Vanderbilt. He was one of the celebrated Fugitive poets, but insisted on being called *Mister* Davidson, not Doctor Davidson. The other Fugitive poets also shunned the Ph.D., the lack of which had not kept them from going on to prestigious positions at other universities-- John Crowe Ransom at Kenyon College, where he founded *The Kenyon Review*, Allen Tate at the University of the South, where he became Editor of *The Sewanee Review*, and Robert Penn Warren at LSU, where he was editing *The Southern Review*. The magazine they had published in the early 1920s, while they were still at Vanderbilt, was called *The Fugitive*. The name, along with the quality of their poetry, had brought them national recognition in the field of letters.

Mr. Davidson was not impressive; he was soft-spoken and somewhat aloof, but he was the star of the Vanderbilt English Department, the only Fugitive poet who had won fame there and stayed to the end of his career. When I enrolled as a graduate student in English, I was warned not to take his courses because he was known as a tough teacher, but I had been drawn to Vanderbilt because of the Fugitives, and I was not about to be put off by his fearsome reputation. I enrolled in all the courses he offered, the English Lyric, the Scottish ballad, the Modern Novel, and best of all, Modern Poetry. Knowing I would have to write a Master's thesis, and faced with the choice of an advisor, I boldly went to his office and asked him if he would direct it. Without committing himself, he asked me what I had in mind. I told him I thought *The Influence of Ezra Pound* would be a good subject. I was as naïve as when I wrote my earlier essay on *The Waste Land*, but this time my audacity was my downfall. Mr. Davidson flew into a rage at the very suggestion, ruled it out at once, and launched into a tirade *against* Ezra Pound's influence on

American poetry, which in his view had been poisonous. He said Pound had tried to infest American poetry with foreign models that robbed it of its national identity, leaving no room for the strongly regional character which the Fugitives had cultivated. His blistering critique of Pound left me speechless, and I expected him to dismiss me summarily, but he cooled down and didn't ask me to leave his office. Instead, he asked me what my second choice might be. With some trepidation, I suggested William Faulkner. That brought a smile to his face. Faulkner was a Southern writer whose work was much more to his taste. At that point I had read much, but not all, of Faulkner's fiction, enough to be passionate about it, and I could see it was a taste he shared. What impressed Mr. Davidson even more was that I had met Faulkner in person in his home town of Oxford, Mississippi, thanks to my uncle, a druggist in the town who was an old friend of Bill Faulkner. So when I asked Mr. Davidson somewhat hesitantly if I might do a Master's thesis on Faulkner, he warmed up immediately. He asked me with interest what was my favorite Faulkner novel, and I said *The Sound and the Fury*. I saw I had chosen the right title, because his manner softened. He said he would be glad to direct a critical study of one of Faulkner's best novels, if that was what I was proposing to do.

My conversation with Mr. Davidson took place early in 1950; later that year, Faulkner would be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature and catapulted to international fame. Until he won the Nobel Prize, Faulkner's work had been declared by many American reviewers and critics either degenerate or unreadable or both. I was ahead of my time, and under Mr. Davidson's watchful gaze I wrote a Master's thesis on *The Sound and the Fury*. When he signed it, he congratulated me for doing a "better than average" study. That was a giant step on my way to becoming an English professor, since it identified me as a disciple of Donald Davidson, the last of the Vanderbilt Fugitives. I might have rested on my laurels, but I remembered the advice

of my English professor at Oklahoma, and knew that an MA would not be enough to make me a college professor, even if it were signed by Donald Davidson. Mr. Davidson had a right to his opinions, because of his enviable reputation as a poet and critic, and as the editor of a standard textbook called *American Composition and Rhetoric*. Doctorates in English were unnecessary for him, but they were not unnecessary for me. Though I owed him a permanent debt as my mentor, I knew I could not continue my doctoral studies under his guidance.

I continued to admire him. He loved literature, and he taught it superbly. His influence remained with me the rest of my life. And so did a strong literary friendship that developed in graduate school. Soon after I enrolled at Vanderbilt, I met a slightly older graduate student from Atlanta named James Dickey, who was there, as I was, because of the Fugitives. When the two of us met, we hit it off at once. He liked poetry as much as I did, and he was farther along with it, because he was writing poetry as well as studying it. But unlike me, he avoided taking a class from Donald Davidson, because, he confided, he was afraid of falling too much under his influence. We read lots of poetry aloud to each other, found we had much the same tastes, and Jim, who was a few years older, introduced me to some new poets I hadn't read and came to admire, even eventually to teach. Robert Lowell, of the Boston Lowells, was one of them; he had gone South and studied under Allen Tate, and was just blossoming into fame. We read critics as well as poets, and had a special fondness for the criticism of Randall Jarrell, who had studied under John Crowe Ransom, and who, besides being a reputable poet himself, was a caustic critic of much that passed for modern poetry. We laughed at Jarrell's witty exposure of many current poets who tried to achieve originality simply by playing around with words. Jim Dickey astonished me by publishing his first poem in *The Sewanee Review* while we were in graduate school. It was called "Shark at the Window," and he was paid the princely sum of \$25 for it. It

was enough for him to invite me to celebrate with him at one of Nashville's best restaurants. Jim did stop with a Master's degree, and a few years after his graduation with an MA from Vanderbilt, the poetry of James Dickey was so well known that he was invited by *The New Yorker* magazine to receive a regular stipend for the privilege of being his first readers. Jim would eventually become Poet in Residence at the University of South Carolina, and went on publishing his poems in little magazines and books. He read his poetry at many American universities, Miami among them. Unfortunately, Jim tarnished his reputation by openly courting willing co-eds, and by reading his poetry under the obvious influence of alcohol, and though we remained friends to the end of his life, I had the sad duty of watching him sink slowly into the alcoholism that would eventually kill him. It didn't keep me, however, from assigning some of his poems in my courses.

While still at Vanderbilt, I was awarded a Rotary Fellowship for advanced study in Scotland. That adventure proved to be another turning point, since it took me abroad for the first time, and propelled me onto the international literary scene. One thing I learned in Scotland was that American literature was widely read and highly admired throughout Europe. I learned it first from a young tutor assigned to guide my course of study at the University of Glasgow. Edwin Morgan, like Jim Dickey, was a few years older than me, and far better read in American literature than I was. In his twenties, he was already a recognized poet and translator of poetry, and later in life he would become the Poet Laureate of Scotland. He helped me add English and Scottish literature to what I knew of American literature, and to try my hand at translating German and French poetry as well. I earned no degree for a year of study in Scotland, but I acquired an international perspective on Modern Literature, and when I returned for a final year of residence at Vanderbilt, I made up my mind to do a combined study of three American

expatriate writers who in my view had internationalized American literature: Henry James, Ezra Pound, and T.S. Eliot. I had grown beyond Mr. Davidson's influence, and could deal objectively with literary internationalism. I was ready to face the trials by fire ahead of me on the way to a doctorate: first, an oral examination by a committee of professors, second, the writing of a dissertation, third, its acceptance by first and second readers, and finally, defending the thesis before the same committee of examiners.

The story of my career is less a story of destiny than of passion and will. First came the passion, then came the will. Taking the oral exam was like facing the Inquisition. I had friends who failed it, and had to take it over. You sat before a table of professional scholars who were entitled to ask you any question in the entire field of English and American literature, from Chaucer to Eliot. I can't remember all the questions I answered, but I do remember some I couldn't answer. I was ready to be asked about Shakespeare, from his sonnets to *The Tempest*, and about Milton, from *Paradise Lost* to *Samson Agonistes*, but when I was asked to discuss the early poems of Wordsworth, I could only draw a blank. That was not my only failure. After a couple of hours of cross-examination, I was excused from the room and told to wait outside for the verdict. I could hardly believe it when they told me I had passed.

Between surviving the oral exam and writing the dissertation, I had the good fortune to meet one of the authors I was writing about, thanks to another tour with the Navy during the Korean War, when I was assigned to a desk in the Pentagon. Meeting Faulkner had been stimulating but inconclusive, since he shied away from anything literary. His slight stature and high voice concealed a powerful intellect that was not susceptible to flattery. When I tried to ask him about *The Sound and Fury*, the subject of my Master's thesis, he let me know he did not care to discuss it. "I don't know much about books" he pretended, and went on to claim that "A

book's a book to me, and they're all too darned expensive." I did not find that helpful. But Ezra Pound was the opposite of Faulkner. He was a large man with a booming voice who enjoyed nothing so much as talking about his work. What I learned from Faulkner was the quiet force of his personality, but I learned a great deal about literature from Ezra Pound. When I asked him the obvious question of why he had become an expatriate, he was quick to answer. He had to leave America, he said, because it was too provincial. And when he left London a decade later, after revolutionizing English poetry with his Imagist experiments, he had to leave again because the English literary establishment was too insular. He wanted to internationalize himself further, moving first to Paris and then to Rapallo. In Italy, he would go too far, and it proved to be disastrous. He fell for Mussolini and Fascism, which were on the rise, and later made broadcasts over Rome Radio opposing American entry into the Second World War, when Italy was our enemy. It was not propaganda; it was sheer folly, and it landed him at St. Elizabeths where I met him. For twelve years, he was confined to a mental hospital, after a panel of psychiatrists had examined him and declared him unfit to stand trial. I did not argue with their opinion; I was there to listen to Pound. Not only did I learn much about literature from him, but I spent much of my career teaching and writing about him. Through it all, I never tired of reading him, because he was even more prolific and original than Poe. In fact, it was Ezra Pound, not Donald Davidson, who had become my chief mentor. So when at last I became a Professor of English, I was in debt to three very different American writers--Davidson, Faulkner, and Pound. They were present in my mind as long as I taught. I still have the same passion for what they wrote, but I have written more about Pound than the other two, for a good reason. "Great literature," he once declared, "is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree." Pound had defined most clearly what drove me towards finding a way with words: