

CON

A keen sense of the obvious is an asset in university, of course, but so is a carefully cultivated sense of the ridiculous, because such a sense lends much added zest and gusto to one's university years.

One watches the venerable emeritus recite from memory, almost, a lecture that was new when the century was new; one observes that he turns the brown and mouldering leaves of his class notes, slowly, and with utmost care, lest one of his pages break; one quakes with inward merriment.

Or, on the other hand, one watches the terrified teaching assistant, whose voice is changing, as he clings white-knuckled to his lectern and delivers — *without once looking up* — a lecture which he had meant to be a series of lectures; because terror is infectious, however, his class is loathe to stem the tide of his words with question or comment, even though they understand little of what he is saying, the upshot being that the T.A. uses up his entire stock of Summer-gathered wisdom in about forty-seven minutes.

But he need not worry. Soon, unless he succumbs to various nervous disorders, he will learn teaching's chief rule: *Speak slowly*. By speaking slowly, by repeating himself, by various professional throat-clearings and calculated ditherings, he will easily spread his lectures over the entire year.

For example, there is Dr. X. Now, Dr. X has just spent all of Sunday evening and a large portion of Monday morning hanging ten, as it were, riding the beery surf of his own eloquence and wiping out only occasionally. But there is a giant difference between four a.m. and ten a.m. It is now ten a.m. and, crapulent almost beyond belief, hung-over to the point of cataonia, Dr. X must meet his class. Does he cancel? Hardly. Although he does not feel good, although, as Kingsley Amis has put it, Dr. X's mouth feels like some small creature of the night has used it for first a urinal and then a mausoleum, Dr. X does not cancel out. He does not cancel out, and the thought of doing so does not cross his mind. He is tough.

He is also wily, but not very. Instead of cancelling out he simply falls back on that oldest of stratagems, the pop quiz. This is of course just fine with his class, since they know the chances of these little quizzes' ever being marked, and so feel free to set down fifty minutes' worth of lunacy, scribbling away earnestly like crazed monks, darting furtive and tricky glances up at Dr. X as he sits massaging his temples. The humor reaches a high point when some of the more gifted students beg for more time, just a little more time, just a *little* more.

There is no need for either Dr. X or his students to worry; he or she can draw his pay, his or her students can collect their grades and eventually their

degrees, without either of them coming within hailing distance of a concept or a fact. Has Dr. X "initiated class discussion?" Very well, then, his class should and probably will counter with the simple expedient of asking "for clarification." Has Dr. X gone even further and segregated them of excruciatingly into little discussion grouplets? Well, there is nothing to stop these embarrassed students from speaking softly and groping their swift way back to sex and cars, solid conversational ground.

Several times a year Dr. X will be goaded into goading his T.A.(s) to invent, administer, and mark some big tests; the testees quite naturally temper the force of such a drastic move by using ingenious crib sheets or magnifying spectacles, or by getting a more knowledgeable friend to take the test for them — drastic measures call for drastic countermeasures.

(In large classes, this friendly custom of reciprocal test-taking is easy. Indeed, a well-organized fraternity can by this means graduate a nonexistent person — occasioning much hilarity at convocation. There is a Chimpanzee at Brown with a B.Sc.; Berkeley boasts a very large bullfrog laden with academic honors, among them the Master of Arts; U.B.C. once graduated, *magna cum laude*, a Doctor of Philosophy who failed fully to grasp the magnitude of his or her triumph because he or she also had the ill-fortune (if it was ill-fortune) to be a garden slug.)

Or these young people, old in chicane and with guile enough to rule an empire, being temporarily out of clever ploys, simply murder their grandmothers for the twelfth time that semester and use the extension occasioned by this tragedy to come up with some ruse having at least a colorable fiction of validity, or to simply sit tight and hope the whole unpleasant business will resolve itself. The whole unpleasant business usually does resolve itself. If worst comes to worst they can corner Dr. X in his or her office and, in the course of an all-out bid for mercy, make it abundantly clear that they are "troubled." Or, "deeply troubled." Never fails.

The point to this business is that, for the observer, with a keen or even moderately keen sense of the ridiculous, this more or less dismal charade is shot through with flashes of superb comedy. Where in all literature can we view such a rich and lasting gleam of lunacy as is daily lambent in the ordinary classroom in the ordinary university, wherein both student and teacher congratulate themselves at having once again escaped (having perhaps gingerly prodded their fearful subject matter with a wary forefinger) alive, unscathed, untouched?

Ambrose Fierce



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According to diplomats in Nairobi, Kenya, the bodies have caused major mechanical problems at the Own Falls Power Station, resulting in serious elec-

tricity shortages both in Uganda and Kenya. About 30 technicians, most of them Italians, have quit their jobs in recent weeks, disgusted over the number of bodies found floating in the river and the technical problems the bodies present.

The Nile and its source at Lake Victoria have been the favorite dumping grounds for the bodies of Amin's political enemies since Idi first came to power in 1971.



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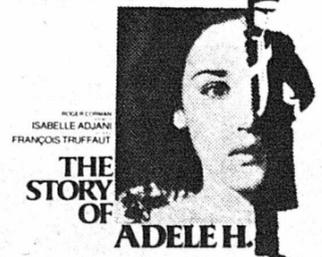
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— Pauline Kael, *The New Yorker*



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