The imperiled heart of the core

A growing misunderstanding about what the core curriculum is—and what it isn’t—threatens the program’s eventual survival.

by John D. Rosenberg ’50
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Certain ordinary moments, haunting even as they pass, strike us with a sense of their transparent symbolism. Early last September, on an unusually crisp day for late summer in New York City, I was hauling a load of Humanities books from my apartment on Riverside Drive to my office in Philosophy Hall. It’s an uphill journey, as I become increasingly aware with the passing years. But my son Matthew helped push the loaded dolly as I guided its rather wobbly course. We passed the subway entrance on the corner of Broadway and 116th Street, and I thought of my mother, who, the year after the Armistice in 1918, emerged from the same subway station to attend her first classes at Barnard. I too had taken the same train from Brooklyn immediately after World War II and occupied a room in Hartley, just down the hall from the room my brother Martin had lived in as a freshman at the start of the war and to which he might have returned, had not the B-17 he navigated been blown to pieces over Germany.

We unloaded the books in my English department office, and I heard the dolly clattering down the corridor as Matt headed toward his freshman room in John Jay. I felt a pang of pleasure and of trepidation as I thought of what lay ahead for him, his classmates, and their successors. The distinctive, defining element of a Columbia College education—the Core—remains powerfully intact at this moment. But I fear for its future. In a few years, only the name but not the reality of Contemporary Civilization and Humanities may remain for your sons and daughters.

The Core will survive only if those who determine its future understand what it is—and is not. More than a cluster of related courses in general education, it is the source of the College’s unique intellectual culture, the essence of its distinction. It is not what it is commonly misconceived to be, a Great Books course in the “fundamentals of Western Civilization.” The readings in C.C. and Humanities do not espouse but interrogate “Western values”; indeed, in their variety and contentiousness, in their radical accounting of what it is to be—or not to be—human, they subvert even as they affirm the very concepts of value and of the self. Humanities is so keenly remembered by so many of its former students because in those stark encounters in small classes between teacher, text, and our emergent selves we caught early glimpses of the mind we later came to recognize as our own. The chosen vehicle for that encounter is certainly important Western works of literature, philosophy, and history. Important books, rather than great books, because from its very beginning the founders of Humanities rejected the notion of a fixed “canon” of masterpieces, thereby insuring lively debate over the syllabus ever since. Of the nearly 150 works that have appeared on and off the Humanities reading list since 1937, only five have never left it: the Iliad, the Oresteia, Oedipus the King, the Inferno, and King Lear.

Certain elements in the configuration of the Core have remained constant; others, in response to pressures from the larger culture, have undergone change. In the late 60’s and early 70’s, for example, the very idea of a common course with common readings was decried as authoritarian and anachronistic. During that most centrifugal moment in the modern history of the College, the faculty came close to abolishing C.C. and Humanities as required courses. “Relevance” was the slogan, as if books were mirrors of the moment and of ourselves, the greater the likeness, the greater the book. As Chairman of Humanities A at the time, I argued that if we shifted from all sections doing one thing to each section doing its own, relevant thing, the course would walk away from us. It very nearly did, but after several years the optional reading period dwindled to the last week of the course, a Solomonic solution that preserves commonality while affording limited choice.

If the issue for Humanities in the 70’s was relevance, the issue of the 80’s was gender. Women entered the classroom in 1983 and appeared on the syllabus in 1985. In retrospect, what is remarkable is that both dates are so belated. Both are associated in my mind with a bright day in 1989 when a brave young woman hung a long banner of women authors just above the frieze of males atop Butler Library. How many names, I thought, and how few I’ve read! The College I had known in the 40’s was, of course, all male, though two women (one was Susan Sontag) were on the staff in the early 50’s. But they were felt to be one of the Boys. Most males on the staff did not think of themselves as guilty of “sexism.” Neither the concept nor the word entered our heads until the word was coined in 1970.

The problem with prejudice of all kinds is that it is rarely recognized as such at the time, and it breeds further inequity and ill-will in the very course of its eradication. The quarrel within the staff over the inclusion of Mme. de Lafayette’s La Princesse de Clèves (1678) was more bitterly divisive than any in my long memory of the course. The objection to the inclusion of this historically significant novel was its unsuitability to a first-year Humanities class not made up of majors in the history of the French novel. But to oppose La Princesse, even
poem, I could be convinced that a social structure based on those notions was no longer conceivable.

One can reject the injustices of the past without rejecting the flower of those sinful old civilizations—an obvious enough idea, but one that has grown increasingly rare in contemporary American universities. Dropping Homer from college courses because of his patriarchal assumptions would deprive students not only of the poetry, which flows in overwhelming waves, rendering the social view secondary, but of an experience they could not possibly get from a proper modern book—the heartrending impression of the sweetness of life and the misery of life intertwined. Most of the women students, when I asked them about the servant girls, seemed to understand that. They shrugged their shoulders and said something like, “That’s the way women were treated then. You can’t quarrel with history.” It was early in the year, perhaps too early to be questioning the syllabus. They were eager to read.

Despite my doubts about Taylor’s method, I could see that in the end he was right: A book like the Odyssey can never be simply appropriated by one social view or the other; it’s too complex, it bursts one’s little critique, which in any case is only everyone else’s little critique. Even as I was outraged by the slaughter of the suitors and the serving girls, I realized that criticism of the Odyssey on feminist and moral grounds was largely beside the point. In its own way, the poem spoke for women. When Odysseus arrives at the palace, Penelope examines the broad-shouldered but raggedly dressed stranger, engaging him in long conversations. Or are they really tests?

What an extraordinary woman she is—certainly no helpless weaver of her own insignificance but every bit Odysseus’s equal in will and possibly in duplicity too. Does she recognize her husband? Homer certainly doesn’t say so, but the scenes can be read—have been read by certain scholars—as implying she knew it was Odysseus all along. In this view, she refuses to acknowledge him. It seems possible: Imagine the strength of her resistance to intimacy during the twenty years of her abstinance. Earlier she had said that she would prefer the gods let her die rather than force her to “please the mind of an inferior husband.” An amazing remark: She will not please the mind of an inferior husband. There speaks the first woman of Western literature, who is also the first serious woman of Western literature.

Accepting intimacy with her own peerless husband is no easy affair. Even after he stands in beautiful kingly robes and announces himself and grows angry at her stubbornness, she delays, testing, probing, pretending that she has moved the bed he had long ago made for them, a bed built around an olive tree (the trunk was a bedpost) and therefore rooted to the earth. This bed, she says maliciously, this bed we will set up for the stranger outside the bed chamber. When Odysseus loses his temper—now his earth-rooted bed has been moved!—she knows the man before her can only be her husband.

When Odysseus and Penelope return to “their old ritual” in the bed rooted to the center of the earth, it is the final recognition. “Odysseus passes the bed test,” said Taylor, looking around at the students. “You’ve all got to pass the bed test.” He was getting flirtatiously intimate again. It was really an outrageous thing to say to 18-year-olds, but he was determined to be tough with them. His way out of formal-ism—least with first-year students—was to bring their reading back to the question of their own identity.

And as when the land appears welcome to men who are swimming, after Poseidon has smashed their strong-built ship on the open water, pounding it with the weight of wind and the heavy seas, and only a few escape the gray water landward by swimming, with a thick scurf of salt coated upon them, and gladly they set foot on the shore, escaping the evil; so welcome was her husband to her as she looked upon him, and she could not let him go from the embrace of her white arms. Now Dawn of the rosy fingers would have dawned on their weeping, had not the gray-eyed goddess Athene planned it otherwise. She held the long night back at the outward edge, she detained Dawn of the golden throne by the Ocean, and would not let her harness her fast-footed horses who bring the daylight to people: Lamps and Phaethon, the Dawn’s horses, who carry her. Then resourceful Odysseus spoke to his wife, saying: ‘Dear wife, we have not yet come to the limit of all our trials…’ (XXIII, 233-249)

Odysses, one of the meanings of whose name is “trouble,” will soon go off to complete his adventures. Summing up, Taylor looked around and spoke slowly.

“You can go back to the amniotic sea,” he said, “or you can make your surface shining and impenetrateable, so no one knows you. Look at you says, you think you can find unloyed happiness. Some of you are hermetically sealed; some of you are going to be terrified if you are found out. Look, I don’t know why you can’t just have joy. But if you’re going to be truly recognized, it has to involve trouble and pain. You can be Kalypsoed or Odysseued, buried or troubled.”

Some advice! Some advice to give the future leaders of the Western world, the hegemonic lawyers, the triumphalist accountants of the white imperium.


Mr. Denby and his wife, the novelist Cathleen Schine, live on Manhattan’s Upper West Side with their two sons, Max, 10, and Thomas, 6.
though one advocated the inclusion of *Pride and Prejudice* or *Middlemarch*, marked one as sexist. *La Princesse* survived on the syllabus for a few years, then silently exited for the least contentious of reasons: the book made for dull Humanities classes.

Such academic infighting is of little interest in the larger world. But it raises an important issue for the readers of this magazine, and that is the integrity of the Core itself. The débâcle of the *Princesse* marked the first time in my memory that political pressure was brought directly to bear on curricular matters by those not teaching the course, who had little knowledge of, and perhaps less regard for, the nature of Humanities. Yet the course cannot function without an autonomous staff that makes its own curricular decisions and lives with them in the classroom. Books that are not freely debated and chosen by an informed, experienced, and independent staff, books that enter the classroom for even the best of political or ideological reasons—because a particular culture or historical period or genre or nationality or race or life style is underrepresented—such books almost always fare badly in the classroom because they are chosen for the wrong reasons.

Let me offer a neutral example. *Moby Dick* first entered the syllabus in the spring of 1973, for the good reason that our students had no opportunity to read a work by an American author. But the great whale sank from sight after a single semester and has not resurfaced since—not because *Moby Dick* is not a great book, but because not all great books make for great Humanities classes. When I recently asked my Humanities class if they would like to read Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* as our final, optional selection, I did so not because Morrison is a Woman or Black or American, or because she is a contemporary writer or her novel is about slavery; I did so because first and foremost she is a very great writer who explores on every page the proper subject of the course, our *humanitas*, our common and uncommon humanity.

No person of good will can doubt that the cultures and achievements of women, of African-Americans, of Native Americans, of Latin America and Africa and Islam and Asia, have been underrepresented and underappreciated in the curricula of American colleges. But the way to end such provinciality and ignorance is not, in the phrase of Morris Dickstein ’61, to apply the doctrine of affirmative action to cultural studies. This was the path taken by Stanford University in 1988 when it reconstituted its required courses in Western Civilization into a pluralistic smorgasbord of choices. The fault with such a program is not its laudable egalitarianism but its lamentable superficiality and incoherence.

The same societal and institutional pressures that compelled change at Stanford are powerfully operative at Columbia. It would be a pity if, in response to such pressures, supporters of the Core lapsed into a siege mentality and invoked expired pieties to defend their goals. The issue is not the preservation of “Western values” vs. the representation of “minorities,” elitism vs. egalitarianism. All good education is elitist, for it leads us to make valid distinctions, and egalitarian, for it exposes false ones. But the struggle as presently defined can only bloody both sides and leave the prize—the curriculum—in shambles.

The choice now before us is not between preserving the coherence and integrity of the Core, to the exclusion of other cultures, or radically restructuring it to acknowledge the proximity and importance of non-Western cultures. Herein lies the wisdom of the 1988 de Bary Commission’s recommendation that we retain the introductory C.C. and Humanities requirement, and then build outward to include required additional study of other cultures: the “Extended Core” that has since evolved into the “Cultures and Issues Requirement.” Those who currently decry the Eurocentrism of the Core are perhaps unaware that Columbia has been preeminent in developing undergraduate programs in non-Western cultures. In 1947–48, for example, Professors Moses Hadas and Herbert Deane ’42 inaugurated the first Oriental Humanities seminar in the United States: the brilliance of those evening classes under their tutelage, when we felt like young pioneers headed East, remains among the most dazzling of my College memories.

Given the renewed strength of the Core and the welcome call of President Rupp and Dean Marcus to refocus the University upon undergraduate education, these should be the best of times for the College, but they may prove to be the most perilous. The coincidence of two imperatives—educational and financial—has led to this recentering of interest on the College. For example, the neglect of undergraduate education in favor of faculty research could no longer be ignored. Nor could we ignore spiraling costs at a time of diminished federal and state support for higher education. Undergraduates ultimately bring to the University more money than they cost, while graduate students cost more than they bring. Not surprisingly, College enrollment has increased twenty percent in the past dozen years and it will continue to grow as the Graduate School continues to shrink. The issue, then, is not whether the College will further expand, but at what pace, and at what cost to its integrity and excellence.

The conflicting claims of size and quality will be most fiercely contested in the costly, labor-intensive classrooms of the Core. Humanities A began with only twenty sections and a staff small enough to dine around the now legendary table at which Mark Van Doren and Irwin Edman ’16, Moses Hadas and Joseph Krutch, Lionel Trilling ’25 and Jacques Barzun ’27 talked about what books to teach and how best to teach them. We now have over fifty sections and it may be that we have already reached the numerical limit of a cohesive, autonomous staff. But there is a more fundamental

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issue than the limits of expandability of collegiality, and this issue goes to the very core of the Core. Here I speak for every experienced instructor I know: neither Humanities nor C.C. can possibly perform their unique functions in large sections (over 25 students) or in a lecture format, supplemented by individual section leaders. The more expert or engaging the lecturer, the more total the usurpation of the intent of the Core.

To understand this paradox is to understand why the Core works and why it is so prized by our alumni/aes. Let me explain with a parable. In the fall of 1954, Professor Moses Hadas, a world-renowned classicist and one of the very greatest of Columbia’s great teachers, announced to the incoming Humanities students that he would teach only half of the course, and that he chose the modern, spring semester because he was an expert in the literature of Greece and Rome. The role of the Humanities instructor is to make himself dispensable. (See the commentary by Bernard Einbord ’58 in the Columbia Daily Spectator, 11/4/93.)

We now live in an age which, in the anguish of its uncertainties, defies experts and has reduced liberal education to vocational training with a Ph.D. at the end. Not surprisingly, the attitudes toward learning of a Moses Hadas perhaps appear quaint or offensive. Professor Joan Ferrante, a distinguished medievalist who has never taught Humanities, persuasively espouses this point of view. “At a time when anti-intellectualism is rife, the idea of glorifying a course that, at best, we can teach incompetently, is offensive,” she said in Columbia College Today [Winter 1989].

If the aim of Humanities were the communication of a particular body of knowledge, Professor Ferrante would be right, and we who profess it would be irresponsible amateurs. The course, however, does not codify a body of knowledge but rather is an inquiry into the nature of knowing and of the self. The inquiry is conducted through rigorous scrutiny of a number of books. None of us is expert in all of them, though all of us are expert in at least one, and to all of them we bring the rigorous professional training, pre- or post-doctoral, of our particular humanistic discipline.

As the demands of graduate and professional schools more and more determine the content of undergraduate education, the counterweight of the Core becomes increasingly necessary. Elsewhere in his or her college career the Humanities student trains to become an engineer, a French teacher, a doctor, a computer scientist. Here the students’ profession is that of Humanist. In dialogue with text, teacher and classmates, they learn to pose questions that may never again arise in their college careers. Yet a certain habit of inquiry, a certain temper of mind, persists long after college, a kind of internalized Core that stands apart from the ordinary business of our later lives and is the special legacy of Columbia College.

Three irreducible elements have enabled Humanities to evolve and adapt while remaining itself. These are the rock on which the Core is founded, the substratum that has sustained decades of fruitful innovation. These irreducible elements are a common reading list and common final exam for all sections; small classes of first-year students, taught over the full year by a single instructor, in which dialogue displaces lectures; and a teaching staff that meets regularly and with full autonomy debates and determines the syllabus. Any one of these elements, if subverted, will render the other two ineffectual.

The syllabus of Humanities must not be entrusted to any constituency—administrative, political, or whatever—other than those who are actively engaged in its teaching and who know which constellation of books works best in the classroom. If the staff’s independence is eroded, its stake in the common enterprise will be diminished. Uninformed, outside pressures will warp the course beyond recognition, turning Humanities into a “themes” or “issues” course, thereby subordinating the heart of the matter—the books themselves—and stressing the mere handles by which we get hold of them—family, race, the environment, or whatever issue burns brightly at the moment.

The weekly staff lunches at the Heyman Humanities Center are the most authentically democratic and communal University occasions I know. Junior and senior faculty from a dozen different departments, preceptors teaching their first classes, speak a common, jargon-free language—one voice, one vote—about the books we teach in class. At year’s end, during the battle of the books, passions swirl about adding this work or dropping that and the course, phoenix-like, recreates itself out of the ashes of the expired syllabus.

At present, however, staff autonomy and small classes are under threat. A budget deficit of $6 million for the Arts and Sciences has just been announced and faculty hiring has been cut back to the bone. Faced with increased undergraduate enrollment, a subcommittee of the Arts and Sciences Executive Committee has suggested converting smaller classes into a lecture/discussion format. The same pressure upon scarce faculty resources evidently underlay an experiment last semester in Music Humanities, conducted under the watchful eye of the College administration. The object was to ascertain if the character of the Core could be maintained while greatly expanding class size (one section had over 60 students). Self-evidently, it cannot, as a petition signed by over 800 students in protest of the enlarged sections made emphatically clear. The wonder is not that the experiment was unsuccessful but that it was undertaken in the interest of upgrading undergraduate education. The irony is compounded by the timing of the experiment, for it immediately followed the May 1993 Report of the Committee on the Future of Columbia College, the first “major recommendation” of which calls for maintaining the integrity of the Core through the retention of small classes.

Great savings would of course be realized if the Core shifted to a lecture/discussion format. But such a shift would subvert the aims of the Core and destroy the instrument of its continuity—an autonomous staff. In Literature Humanities, for example, five skilled lecturers could replace fifty instructors, currently a mix of senior and junior faculty and of graduate students. Their combined salaries, including half the annual compensation for full professors, would be reduced to stipends for fifty graduate-student discussion leaders—great savings achieved at too great a cost.

The imposition of required weekly lectures would inevitably reduce the available hours for classroom dialogue, diminishing the high degree of intellectual community achieved over the year between instructor and students. Worse, the expert lecturer would, by definition, appear to render the classroom instructor inexpert, a section-leader of questionable credentials relegated to the peonage of under-
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Graduate classroom teaching—an ironic consequence of the University’s attempt to improve undergraduate education. College alumni have long enjoyed pointing out to their Harvard counterparts that Columbia’s most junior students, unlike Harvard’s, can study in small classes with our most senior faculty. Those I know with any experience teaching the course would respectfully decline to serve as expert lecturers on Humanities (an oxymoron), knowing that the enterprise had already died and hoping that it would not suffer too protracted and public a decay. All that would remain would be five shining but inaccessible stars, a demoralized Director, and an ill-paid staff of graduate-assistants who had never known the culture of the course and had little motive, and less knowledge or authority, to perpetuate it. The description of Literature Humanities in the current College Bulletin is plaintively pertinent here: in small classes of “approximately twenty.”

Students learn that passionate critical disagreements need not lead either to confusion or dogmatism, but, ideally, may sharpen the awareness of their own values and enhance their ability to appreciate other points of view.

How can it be that the first fruits of the new Administration’s sincere dedication to the strengthening of undergraduate education at Columbia may result in the crippling of the Core? The answer, I believe, lies in a commonly held misconception of its purpose. That misconception surfaces in Dean Marcus’s answer to a reporter’s question, “What, then, is the essence of the Core, the part not subject to change?” To which the Dean replied, “The essence of the Core is the idea that all Columbia College students have a common experience in the foundations of Western Civilization.” [The Federalist Paper, 9/21/93]. Now if that were indeed the essence of the Core, it should be taught in large lecture halls—the size is immaterial—by gifted lecturers expert in Western Civilization. But the Core, especially Humanities, is not a course in Western Civilization. It is a course in thinking, feeling, arguing, reading, writing, doubting, and believing. Its medium is certain “important books” by Western authors that best provoke these activities in dialogue with an instructor and other students in small classes.

I know of no one on the faculty who has served his department, College, or University with more distinction than Dean Marcus, who is also Vice President of Arts and Sciences. No one is more strategically situated to shape the future of the Core. Out of our common concern for that future, I draw his attention to a phrase in the recent Report of the Committee on the Future of Columbia College. The authors contrast the distribution curricula of our peer institutions with the small classes of the Core, which they describe as “an oasis of order and purpose.” Perhaps that is why our students prize it so highly and defend it so fiercely. Perhaps that is why our alumni, after the books and instructors may have faded, remain so loyal to the Core.

Young men dream dreams; old men have visions. As I try to glimpse the Columbia College of the next century, I see two divergent paths—one bright, one in eclipse. Which of the two we follow in part depends on regional and national issues beyond our control. But we have a good measure of choice. We may, by displacing our priorities, lapse into mediocrity; or we may strengthen our curriculum, including the Core, and upgrade our facilities to match the excellence of the students and faculty we now attract.

I am struck in closing by how much of my own life and the life of the Core have run in tandem. Humanities was not ten years old when I took it as a teenager. My own teachers, many of them still young, had freshly founded the course, and now, within a few years of retirement, I perhaps have had the longest continuing association with Humanities of anyone now teaching it. May the course and I not be coterminous.
He taught us how to read Homer

An appreciation of the late Howard Porter, who left his mark on a generation of Lit Hum students.

by Jeremy G. Epstein ’67

Editor’s Note: Professor Emeritus of Greek and Latin Howard N. Porter, who died a year ago in March, was a vital member of the College faculty from 1956 until his retirement in 1978, Chairman of the classics department from 1968 to 1971, Professor Porter also chaired Literature Humanities (then called Humanities A) and taught in the Colloquium on Important Books.

When Jeremy Epstein, a former student of Professor Porter, offered this remembrance to Columbia College Today, he noted, “It is particularly appropriate to recall Porter’s impact on a generation of Columbia students, because by doing so we also celebrate the enduring value of the Humanities course.”

Howard Porter loved Columbia—this despite his having previously taught at Yale, where he had received all of his degrees. He was, in fact, a descendent of generations of Yale graduates, including Noah Porter, Yale’s president in the late 19th century. Professor Porter was typically self-deprecating about this ancestry: He observed that Noah Porter had set back the study of science at Yale for at least 100 years, and that as a consequence, his presidency was commemorated there only by a gate rather than by something more substantial.

Porter often remarked on the atmospheric differences between New Haven and Morningside Heights. He regarded Columbia as a place of enormous intellectual energy, where ideas mattered. This energy was mirrored in his own approach to teaching undergraduates. In class he could barely contain his enthusiasm for his subject, and that spirit was contagious. He never sat down and seldom stood still, and he spoke in a staccato style reminiscent of Alfred Jingle in The Pickwick Papers.

Porter taught at a time when Columbia’s classics department was dominated by two highly visible figures, Moses Hadas and Gilbert Hight. Ironically, many of those who, like me, were first drawn to Columbia by the reputations of Hadas and Hight, ended up valuing their experience with Porter above all else.

My case is probably typical. In the fall of my freshman year, the student Board of Managers sponsored a series of lectures on the books in Humanities course. Porter lectured on the Odyssey. After hearing him for an hour, I knew why I had come to Columbia. I approached him, told him that I was an aspiring classics major, and asked to be transferred into his Humanities section for the second semester. He arranged that transfer, and I thereafter took every course with him that I could manage: a course in Greek lyric poetry, and the Colloquium, which he taught in my junior year.

Both Hight and Hadas were senior to Porter and far better known, but like him, they were great scholars who could also write on large subjects for the general reader. I like to think that there was something in the structure of Columbia’s curriculum that contributed to their intellectual breadth. Classics were the backbone of the Humanities course. This meant they not only had to make themselves understood by their non-specialist students, but also were required to read and teach far beyond the confines of the Greek and Latin authors in the first semester in Humanities A. One of Hight’s greatest books, The Classical Tradition, a study of classical influences in Western literature through the 20th century, discusses virtually every work, classical and non-classical, read in Humanities A.

This sort of academic versatility is uncommon. During most of the 20th century, the study of classics on both sides of the Atlantic has suffered from a continuing tension between specialists and generalists. Many specialists could not see beyond their preoccupation with philological trivia; the sole focus of their efforts was textual criticism, which mainly involved authenticating the texts of ancient authors, not determining what those texts meant. The generalists, meanwhile, managed to grasp and teach the larger significance of their subject.

Gilbert Murray and A. E. Housman were perhaps the best examples of this polarity, in the early part of the century. Murray, who was Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford, wrote on a variety of subjects that appealed to both scholarly and popular audiences; his book on the Greek epic is still read. He was also active in various liberal causes in England, including the League of Nations. A. E. Housman, Kennedy Professor of Latin at Cambridge, represented specialization at its narrowest. His greatest work—to which he devoted almost 30 years—was an edition of Manilius, an obscure Latin poet who wrote a treatise on astronomy in verse that is now read by virtually no one. Housman’s years of devotion to a subject of such little consequence constituted more than a grim self-parody. Because of his position and extraordinary ability, he influenced a generation of classical scholars in England, who thought that textual criticism was all there was to the subject.

Columbia’s classics department never suffered from this tension. Its foremost members were both specialists and generalists, and Porter embodied these dual abilities as well as anyone in the department. He was an authority on Greek metrics and the poetry of Pindar, who wrote in a very difficult meter called dactylo-epitrite. Although Porter wrote little, his expertise was recognized internationally, and he was frequently consulted by fellow scholars, such as Geoffrey Kirk, Regius Professor of Greek at Cambridge. At the same time, Porter’s abilities as a generalist were evidenced by his chairmanship of Humanities A in the early 1960s and by his astonishing gift for communicating his enthusiasm and