

POLITICAL METAPHORS: TEACHING ON A COLD-WAR CAMPUS

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..Categories are not essential but conventional. They refer not to properties of the world but to properties of the world as it is given to us by our interpretive assumptions.¹

In March, 1956, William Edel, the President of Dickinson College suspended an economics instructor after he invoked the Fifth Amendment in testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee. What follows is not a narrative history, although the story of how Laurent LaVallee's dismissal changed the College merits a comprehensive record.² Instead, this paper considers the decade of political struggle between the faculty and administration over the LaVallee case as an occasion to explore thematic tensions at a moment when the College was in a cultural transition. Like all cases of academic McCarthyism, Dickinson's concerned issues of political discourse, educational politics and power, and the delicate distinction between the public and

¹ Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 271.

² See Charles Coleman Sellers, *Dickinson College: A History* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973). The Waidner-Spahr Library has extensive archival materials on the case and the history of the college. In addition I conducted interviews with thirty faculty and administrators, and corresponded with an additional thirty-two faculty, administrators and alumni. I am grateful to Jan Blodgett, Martha Slotten, George Hing, and especially Marie Ferré for their advice and assistance. Without the help of my two Dana Student Interns, Kelly Rowett and Joy Cline, the research for this article would have been impossible.



Warren Gates,
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private *persona* of the teacher.³ But coming at a particularly vulnerable time in the College's history—as it tried to sustain its insular, religious, and anti-professional traditions in the face of rapid and radical innovations in national education policy—the LaVallee case inspired a fierce struggle to define the meaning of professional behavior, the relationship of administration to faculty and students, and the shape of the curriculum.⁴

This project began, appropriately, as a collaborative effort between me and the students in my 1989 class in Practical Literary Criticism. We had been reading Terry Eagleton's essay on "The Rise of English," which posits that English literary studies emerged in the late Victorian period as part of a concerted effort within the university

³See Ellen Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) for an excellent and comprehensive discussion of academic McCarthyism.

⁴I am using a particular meaning of the term professional here. In "Professionalizing a Liberal Arts Faculty," Warren Gates argues that the number of "professional" faculty at Dickinson grew steadily in the years before the Second World War. Gates deems "professional" faculty to be those holding the terminal degree. (See Warren Gates, "Professionalizing a Liberal Arts Faculty, 1860-1945," paper presented to the Pennsylvania Historical Association, October 15, 1982.) But by national standards, the faculty at Dickinson remained provincial, since, until the AAUP censure, the College considered alumni status and being a Methodist to be strong job qualifications.

to create a uniform national identity.⁵ Mindful that we had a rich tradition of literary studies at the College, and an abundant archive, the class undertook a parallel project to explore the history of literary studies at Dickinson. The Cold War period was particularly fruitful to study, for reasons both philosophical and practical. Most importantly, the English Department was the epicenter of political opposition to President Edel's vision of the College. Faculty in the department served as officers in the local chapter of the American Association of University Professors, and they most clearly articulated their grievances in documentary form. The departmental practices of teaching and self-definition were more patent and expressive than those of other faculty in other disciplines. Moreover, many *emeriti* faculty—from the English Department and beyond—were willing to be interviewed. Over the summers of 1989 and 1990, Dana student interns Kelly Rowett and Joy Cline and I interviewed as many faculty who worked at Dickinson during these years as we could find. I am grateful for the willingness of the men and women interviewed to go on the record with their views of these times.

While the political significance of the LaVallee controversy pertains to more than literary studies, my students and I found that our literary critical skills served us well in analyzing and understanding the meaning and rhetoric of this moment. We were alert to the uses of language in the interviews. From the outset, I was surprised to discover that political ideology was not a particularly useful measure of political “camps” during the controversy. Colleagues who sustained violent animosity towards one another for a generation nonetheless seemed joined in an unconscious interpretive consensus. Regardless of their political outlook or their position in the academic community, most people we interviewed treated the events they had lived through almost as a literary text. Despite the discomfort of reviving these memories, most people I approached were eager to recount and interpret the “meaning” of the Lavallee case. Carolyn Heilbrun has suggested why narratives have a redemptive quality for the storyteller:

What matters is that lives do not serve as models; only stories do that. And it is a hard thing to make up stories to live by. We can only retell and live by the stories we have read or heard. We live our lives through texts. They may be read, or chanted, or experienced electronically, or come to us, like the murmurings of our mothers, telling us what conventions demand. Whatever their form or medium, these stories have formed us all; they are what we must use to make new fictions, new narratives.⁶

⁵ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 15-47.

⁶ Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 37.



Joseph Schiffman,
Professor of English

A casual, seemingly inadvertent use of literary convention indeed infused the oral histories. The professors and administrators wrote themselves into the story. Using literary tropes to define agency and responsibility, they cast themselves as characters. If they felt detached from the action, they defined themselves as part of the audience, or merely a narrator. Not one, however powerfully placed in the institutional structure or committed to political activism, envisioned him or herself as an *author* of events. The most telling measure of political self-definition occurred in the metaphors and genres these people used to turn their experience to narrative, especially to place their actions in a context which would grant them coherent meaning. Thus I saw a tension between definitions of the college as a “family” or “community” and ambivalent readings of terms such as “professional” and “political.” Finally, the figuration of individual agency was shaped by the genre of the story: some narrators described it as a kind of allegory; others saw it as a tragedy.

The LaVallee case became the *locus* for tensions between the faculty and administration which had been building since the Second World War, when new faculty with sophisticated professional expectations tested their powers. Newcomers established a local chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), challenged racial discrimination in the student fraternities, and sought an open exchange of information about salaries and less regulation of their personal lives, particularly their drinking habits.⁷

After LaVallee’s departure, both the opposition to President Edel and the political repercussions of fighting the administration intensified. Just months after the local chapter of AAUP summoned faculty support to reinstate LaVallee, its only untenured

⁷ See Sellers, 371-2; William Sloane papers, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College; Thelma Smith Miner, interview by Wendy Moffat, July 13, 1989.

officer was refused tenure and his contract terminated.⁸ Bertram Davis, a scholar of eighteenth-century English literature, had been at the forefront of LaVallee's defense. A colleague described Davis' position: "He volunteered [to be President of AAUP], so he was right out in the bull's eye."⁹ With four tenured faculty members, Davis attended the hearing before the Board of Trustees which cemented LaVallee's suspension, and gave birth to the fledgling Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure.¹⁰

When Davis was denied tenure, the issue of fairness and power became personal, "not just a matter of principle," according to several professors who supported the AAUP. William Sloane, the Chair of the English Department, and Davis' former teacher at Union College, wrote the President a series of scathing letters of protest. Sloane did his best to organize a campaign of support by well-respected "moderate" faculty members during the sleepy summer months when it was hardest to marshal effective political action. He made his position clearest in the form of an ultimatum, by threatening to resign as English Department Chair if President Edel would not reinstate Davis. Though the administration argued that Davis' AAUP activities were irrelevant to the decision not to renew his contract, many colleagues in both camps believed them to be the cause of his dismissal.¹¹ Those English professors sympathetic to Davis (and opposed to the administration) responded by distinguishing between their teaching duties and their administrative obligations. The end result was a tacit understanding among the tenured members of the department not to accept the Chair. In June, 1956, the appointment of Dean Frederick Ness as Acting Chair was an acknowledgment that the collective action had sustained an effect: in essence, the department had declared itself ungovernable.

After an interim year in which a personal friend and Navy subordinate of the President served as Chair, Edel moved to assert his authority over the department. At that time, and since, Dickinson has habitually hired faculty at entry level and promoted from within. In an unusual circumstance, the new Chair, Joe Schiffman, was brought in from another school at full rank. He arrived to a hostile scene. Shunned as a "scab" by some of his colleagues, he worked in a beleaguered world of nominal power and self-defined powerlessness. He set up his office in a building apart from all the other En-

⁸ Sloane papers; Bertram Davis papers, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College; Bertram Davis, interview by Wendy Moffat, July 15, 1990.

⁹ William Bowden, interview by Wendy Moffat, June 13, 1990.

¹⁰ Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure, Dickinson College, papers, 1956-58, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College.

¹¹ Davis himself believes this also. (Davis interview.)

glish faculty, and cultivated friends outside the department.¹²

The rift in the department widened as time went on. People who opposed one another in sympathies to the administration did not speak to one another. Men and women sought strategies for living in a state of prolonged and rancorous political tension. Several professors redefined their professional roles, seeking refuge in new responsibilities like student services, or devoting their energies to personal scholarship or their families.¹³ Some kept up frankly conspiratorial correspondence with colleagues who had moved to other academic positions. Some redefined the hierarchical role of professor, forging collegial ties with sympathetic students: the tone of these letters is indistinguishable from collegial correspondence, and attests to a yearning for intimate friendship. They openly address feelings of frustration, anger, and discouragement.¹⁴

The larger picture at the College mirrored the circumstance of the English department. For almost ten years after LaVallee's suspension the faculty was bitterly divided, amongst itself, and against the administration and trustees, over the meaning of what had happened. The case left no aspect of the College untouched. Charles Coleman Sellers charts the changes after Davis' contract was not renewed: the national AAUP (which Bertram Davis had joined as a professional staff member) censured the College from 1958 to 1962 for "serious breach of procedural due process" in the LaVallee hearing.¹⁵ The process of re-accreditation by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools was delayed because of the AAUP censure, particularly as it concerned the morale of the faculty at the College. In imposing censure, the AAUP Bulletin noted:

*The report ... makes it clear that faculty-administration relations were seriously impaired at the time of the [AAUP] committee's inquiry. The Association has direct evidence that many faculty members continue to be extremely unhappy over conditions at the College, and that a number of able and devoted members have left on this account.*¹⁶

¹² The English department is but the most conspicuous example of the power politics between the executive and the departmental authorities at the College. When the President appointed friends who had served with him in the Navy to faculty posts in the Mathematics Department, the Chair resigned from the College. (Heber Harper, interview by Wendy Moffat, July 28, 1989.)

¹³ William Wishmeyer, interview by Wendy Moffat, July 26, 1989; Francis Warlow, interview by Wendy Moffat, June 12, 1990; William Bowden interview.

¹⁴ Sloane papers.

¹⁵ Sellers, 385.

¹⁶ AAUP Bulletin 44 (Autumn 1958): 661.

Following a Middle States recommendation in 1960, the College revised its governance structure, putting far more power in the hands of the faculty, and regulating procedures for hiring, promotions, and salary increases.¹⁷ A shift in the administration accompanied these changes in governance: President Edel resigned in 1959, and, after a brief Malcolm presidency, Howard "Bud" Rubendall was appointed with an agenda committed to repairing the College's national professional reputation. From 1962 to 1964, the College deepened its self-inquiry by redefining the scope and purpose of the curriculum.

The plan for the new curriculum was more expansive and secular. Its rhetoric was no longer self-referential:

*The purpose of the academic study is to ascertain and implement those measures which . . . will enable Dickinson to keep abreast and where possible to overtake its peers among small, independent liberal arts colleges dedicated to academic excellence.*¹⁸

Thus, the College's identity was deliberately aligned with contemporary trends in pedagogy.¹⁹

In English studies, specifically, the methodological thrust moved from historical methods to formalism—a method which determines a literary text's meaning through "close reading" of formal elements, and abjures the placement of literature in historical or biographical context.²⁰ Though the turn toward ahistorical teaching methods during this time may be understood as part of a broad cultural movement in post-war American pedagogy, as well as the faculty's response to students who seemed to know and care less about the past than previous generations of students, it served in the department's case as a political and pedagogical compromise—to allow literary texts to be understood as "neutral" and "objective" forms.

In the years before the LaVallee case, professors who taught sequential literary sur-

¹⁷ Sellers, 392-396; Warren Gates, interview by Wendy Moffat, July 20, 1989; Bruce Andrews, interview by Wendy Moffat, July 13, 1989.

¹⁸ "Report of the Academic Study of Dickinson College," 1962-64, iii, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College.

¹⁹ For a comprehensive discussion of curriculum, see Frederick Rudolph, *Curriculum: A History of the American Undergraduate Course of Study* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1978) and Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

²⁰ *Dickinson College Catalogue*, 1955-65; Warlow interview, June 12, 1990; Joseph Schiffman, interviews by Wendy Moffat, July 7, 1989 and June 19, 1990; Bowden interview.



David Brubaker,
Professor of Drama

vey courses would collectively devise syllabi and examination questions for all of the classes. After 1958, the political fragmentation of the department was mirrored in its preferred pedagogical method, which stressed “close reading” and the almost hermetic separation of each course. While courses continued to be defined in the college catalogue by their historical period, their approach no longer emphasized trends or tendencies which bridged periods, so that the surveys became, in Gerald Graff’s description, “a curious compromise between history and criticism—a course in which students read texts New Critically in chronological order.”²¹ Instead, the description of the major emphasized that each course comprised “the best that is written” from the period—a phrase which reifies the New Critical concept that unity emerges from literary texts which embody “universal” and ahistorical humanistic qualities.²²

The pedagogical shift in the English department at first arose less by design than because of the practical breakdown in communication between colleagues. The new English department chair complained of not being allowed to visit his colleagues’ classes unless he was invited, and he was not.²³ Later, as the curriculum was rather belatedly modernized to reflect national pedagogical trends, the repudiation of historical continuity and cultural context became more programmatic. Not all professors were formalists, and none of the changes in approach was considered to be systematic or ideological. Nevertheless, at the moment when departmental political history was most painful to reflect upon, the department turned to ahistorical methods and the relative

²¹ Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature*, 171.

²² *Dickinson College Catalogue*, 1957-58. For a good discussion of the emergence of New Criticism, see Graff, *Professing Literature*, 162-179.

²³ Schiffman interview, June 19, 1990.

comfort of chilly silence between "colleagues." Veteran professors lamented the loss of informal discussions about students and curriculum which had earlier characterized the cozy, even intrusive relationship between professors and students.²⁴ The new English curriculum offered many more courses, reflecting an increase in the special interests of the faculty. Forged by the necessity of avoiding conflict more than the belief in common goals, the English curriculum in practice became "atomized," to use Gerald Graff's term.²⁵

On a grander stage, the public repercussions of the LaVallee case coerced the College into redefining its educational identity. The new rhetoric was an expropriation of the language and practices of the professional academy, and was perceived by supporters of the administration as a limitation of the College's freedom to define itself and act autonomously.²⁶ Not that autonomy always meant consistency; one professor described the College's protean self-description before the censure:

[President Edel] is the only person I've ever met who is a complete master of double-think.... In fact at one point we had two separate advertising brochures. One would say: "Dickinson College, your Church-Related School." The other one said: "Dickinson College: Your Independent Liberal Arts School."²⁷

Many people remark on the provincial quality of Dickinson before the 1962 reaccreditation with a mixture of nostalgia and contempt. One professor described Dickinson as a "narrow little sectarian school that had managed to avoid reality for a hundred years."²⁸ Faculty were subjected to what one professor labeled "sweatshop conditions."²⁹ Since they were paid only when term was in session, many moonlighted.³⁰ One tenured professor received a small sum for painting and recaulking the windows

²⁴ Francis Warlow, interview by Wendy Moffat, March 10, 1989; Schiffman interview, July 7, 1989.

²⁵ See Gerald Graff, "What Should We be Teaching — When There's No WE?" *Yale Journal of Criticism* 1 (1987): 189-210 and Gerald Graff, "Coherence Without Consensus," a talk delivered to the Annual Meeting of the Association of American College, Jan. 5, 1989.

²⁶ Henry Yeagley, interview by Wendy Moffat, July 10, 1990; Schiffman interview, July 7, 1989; Frederick Ness, interview by Wendy Moffat, July 21, 1990.

²⁷ Bowden interview.

²⁸ Wishmeyer interview.

²⁹ Warlow interviews, June 12, 1990; March 10, 1989.

³⁰ Gates interview; Schiffman interview, July 7, 1989.

on the President's house over the summer.³¹ Salaries were irregular, and some professors complained of preferential treatment for favorites of the administration.³² Charles Sellers writes that the "thrifty paternalism" of Dickinson had led to inequitable salary structures: "In one case a department chairman inadvertently learned that he had an instructor without doctorate receiving more than himself."³³

Moreover, hiring procedures were sometimes marked by nepotism. One professor recalls meeting the President at a garden party and discovering they had a mutual acquaintance in seminary; days later he was offered a job. He remarked that he got "the right job for the wrong reasons."³⁴ An administrator sympathetic to Edel noted that he "would do almost anything to get the right people in on the faculty and the administration . . . Dickinson was everything to him. . . . And that's something the faculty didn't realize. But . . . I had to get my oar in on this because he had made some promises to me when I came there that I found were not [possible to honor]."³⁵

But consensus was lacking on what constituted appropriate "professional" criteria for hiring job candidates. Some professors, who noted that the President had no background in academia, believed that he promoted cronyism. The appointment of several of Edel's naval colleagues to teaching positions stirred deep resentment in some of the faculty.³⁶ One professor recalls being asked just three questions at a professional meeting before he was offered a tenure-track job: "Are you a Communist? What is your religion? Do you drink alcohol?"³⁷

From this context, a deep division in definitions of professionalism and loyalty emerged. Both supporters and opponents of the administration applied the metaphor of "civil war" to describe the depth and bitterness of the conflict.³⁸ It is important to note the peculiar resonance of this metaphor at the College: the geographical location twenty-five miles from the site of the battle of Gettysburg, and its pattern of recruitment of Southern students from its earliest days, meant that the American Civil War

³¹ The professor was Ralph Schecter. (Schiffman interview, July 7, 1989.)

³² Sloane papers.

³³ Sellers, 381.

³⁴ Harper interview.

³⁵ Ness interview.

³⁶ Gates interview; Henry Young, interview by Wendy Moffat, July 19, 1989; Harper interview.

³⁷ Schiffman interview.

³⁸ Schiffman interview, July 7, 1989; Gates interview; Young interview.

literally divided Dickinson.³⁹

But there were important rhetorical distinctions between political opponents. Supporters of the administration (both those appointed "before the war" and those appointed by Edel) understood loyalty in the context of a small local hierarchy. They were acutely aware of the structures of power, and tended to honor rank and title as a matter of discipline. Mindful of the endemic financial crises which had for decades threatened at points to close the College, they saw criticism of the administration as a menace to the well-being of the institution. One professor sympathetic to Edel characterized the conflict over the LaVallee case as a "battle between people loyal to the college and those loyal to the principles of academic freedom."⁴⁰ Most of these people, faculty members and administrators, believed the opposition to be both spiteful and selfish. One described the members of AAUP as a "very small, very vocal minority," and spoke dismissively of them as "LaVallee's friends." This, though, was at a time when AAUP records from 1954-56 claim more than 80% faculty membership and when most of LaVallee's supporters remarked that they did not know him well, since he was reticent, and taught at the College for less than a year.⁴¹

People sympathetic to the administration tended to speak about Dickinson as a "family."⁴² They described the campus as a "homey," intimate place. The metaphor of the College as family also permeates archival materials: a headline in the College newspaper announces "New Faculty Join Dickinson Family."⁴³ Since many students came to the College on the recommendation of their ministers, and faculty hiring emphasized kinship with the school through alumni status, in one sense the metaphor of family is properly descriptive. Further, several of the faculty and administrators who had served together during the War had developed strong friendships which one pro-

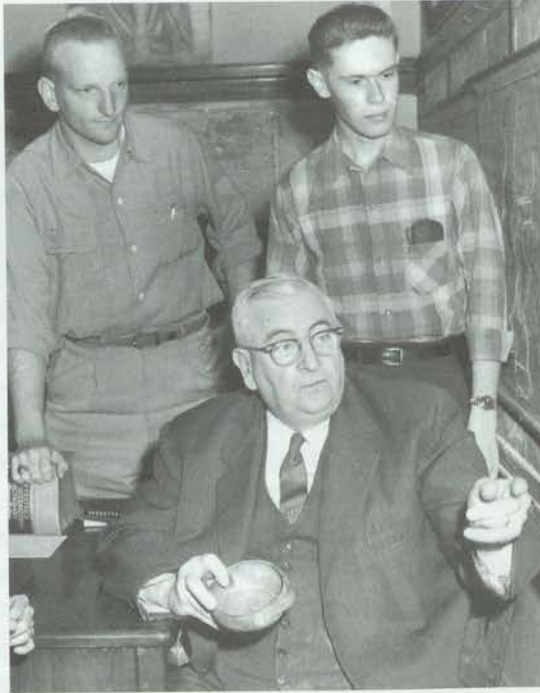
³⁹ In the 1840's, direct censorship of political debate at the College took place when the President barred the literary societies from considering the question of slavery, on the grounds that it would incite a riot among the townspeople ("An Introduction to the Evolution and History of the English Major at Dickinson College," group project of the Practical Literary Criticism class, Spring 1989).

⁴⁰ Schiffman interview, July 7, 1989.

⁴¹ Yeagley interview; Gates interview; Davis interview; Win Difford, interview by Wendy Moffat, August 10, 1989; AAUP, Dickinson College Chapter, minutes, 1956-58, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College.

⁴² Sloane file; Yeagley interview; William Vernon, interview by Wendy Moffat, July 14, 1989; Schiffman interview, July 7, 1989.

⁴³ *Dickinsonian*, October 4, 1957.



Herbert Wing, Jr.,
Professor of History
and Greek

fessor described as “brotherly.”⁴⁴ For these people, to speak of family was to evince a deep loyalty and commitment to the place and especially its leader.

But family also evokes very particular boundaries between kin and outsiders. Like Malinowski’s functionalist definition of family, the metaphor of Dickinson’s “family” assumes

*a bounded set of people who recognize one another... a definite physical space... [and] a particular set of emotions, family love. This concept of the family as an institution for nurturing young children is thought to be the primary function of families in modern industrial societies.*⁴⁵

In this patriarchal, hierarchical view of family, the President was figured as the

⁴⁴ Yeagley interview; Edward Finck papers, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College.

⁴⁵ Jane Collier, Michelle Z. Rosaldo, and Sylvia Yanagisako, “Is There a Family?: New Anthropological Views,” in *Rethinking the Family: Some Feminist Questions*, ed. Barrie Thorne with Marilyn Yalom (New York: Longman, 1982), 27.

father who knew best.⁴⁶ Professors who had come to Dickinson from elsewhere, or who served in the Armed Forces without internalizing military values, were most resistant to the paternalism of Edel's authority.

To label members of an academic community as part of a family is to blur the distinction between public and private: the business of the family is the whole welfare of its members. In this context, gossip becomes a powerful tool for social control. Some conservative professors justified their colleagues "leaving the family" on grounds which seemed, by today's standards, to be irrelevant to professional qualifications. These included personal behavior such as being divorced, irregular habits of dress ("he always looked rumpled: he didn't look the part"), personal behavior in church ("she kneeled in the pews, like an Episcopalian") and, especially for women, smoking or drinking.⁴⁷ The people who promoted "family" values at Dickinson expected that private lives would mirror public propriety. They strongly disapproved of open criticism of the administration. While critics described this attitude as "authoritarian," supporters emphasized its validation of "unity" and "peace."⁴⁸

In contrast, opponents of the administration referred to the College as a "community."⁴⁹ They used rhetoric honoring "tolerance and diversity," which was adopted as the College's official discourse following reaccreditation. "Community" is a more encompassing, heterodox term than "family," although no less rhetorically charged.⁵⁰ Significantly, the bonds of a community are self-defined rather than sanctioned by blood or law, a fact which affords individuals more latitude in placing themselves within the social hierarchy.

These professors were most likely to have come to Dickinson immediately after the

⁴⁶The authority of the president did not always manifest itself as unfriendly. One female faculty member described the President as protective (Lee Ann Wagner, interview by Wendy Moffat, July 20, 1990). Also see Michael J. Aquilina, *The Edel Years at Dickinson College* (Canonsburg, PA: Wise Eagle Publishing, 1990), 11-12. Most women remarked, however, that "unladylike" behavior (smoking and drinking) was chastised.

⁴⁷ David Brubaker, interview by Wendy Moffat, July 17, 1989; Schiffman interview, June 19, 1990; Thelma Smith Miner, interview by Wendy Moffat, August 10, 1989.

⁴⁸ Bowden interview; Gates interview; Schiffman interviews, June 19, 1990 and July 7, 1989.

⁴⁹ Gates interview; Andrews interview; "Report of the Academic Study," 1962-64.

⁵⁰Iris Marion Young cautions against a falsely romantic view of the term "community" in "The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference" in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), 300-323. She notes that a desire for community helps to reproduce homogeneity in a group. While Young is concerned above all with issues of community in feminism, her essay underscores the similarities between these metaphors of Dickinson's identity.

Second World War (rather than before it, or during the years when the College was under AAUP censure), to have terminal degrees, and to identify their loyalty laterally, to the profession as a whole, to colleagues at other colleges, and to “academic freedom.” Often they joined national professional organizations and met colleagues at other institutions regularly. They characterized the decision to teach at Dickinson disinterestedly, and thought seriously about taking a position elsewhere; fewer were Dickinson alumni, though many were from Pennsylvania.⁵¹

While President Rubendall affirmed the rehabilitative aspects of joining the national academic “community,” supporters of the old administration construed the national AAUP policies on academic freedom and tenure as “unionism.”⁵² Indeed, the patterns of collective action—sharing salary information, encouraging colleagues to vote for a slate of AAUP faculty members when All-College Committees were formed, and in the unique work slowdown of English faculty declining to accept appointment of a Chair, thus separating themselves from “management”—seem to be modelled on labor union strategies.⁵³ In conservative Carlisle, “union” was an especially pejorative word; in 1946 the equally conservative Trustees revised their references to a planned “student union” to read “student center” since “union” was too controversial a term.⁵⁴ Outside the college and its environs, the connotations were less incendiary. As Sellers indicates, “[t]he Middle States could scarcely be expected to concur wholeheartedly with the view that AAUP censure had been imposed by a ‘union’ plotting to usurp the power of the trustees, though hope lingered in some hearts that it might do so.”⁵⁵

Open criticism of the administration was labeled both “political” and “unprofessional” by these professors, because they viewed politics and professionalism as intractable opposites.⁵⁶ All of our interviews were marked by the rhetorical struggle for the high ground of disinterestedness and abstraction. Most of the witnesses shunned the suggestion that their motivations were emotional or personal, as if personal in-

⁵¹ Gates interview.

⁵² Yeagley interview; Vernon interview; Bowden interview; Finck papers.

⁵³ AAUP minutes, 1956-58.

⁵⁴ Sellers, 371.

⁵⁵ Sellers, 392.

⁵⁶ Yeagley interview.

volvement connoted allegiance to a base cause rather than an ideal.⁵⁷

Friends of the President clearly had much to gain by labeling the administration's opponents as self-interested. But even proponents of LaVallee seemed to believe that they gained authority by their separation from the man. To be sure, the Cold War encouraged a rhetoric of empiricism and detachment. Gerald Graff speculates on the shift as a reaction to previous rhetorical forms, namely that "the political situation of the 1930's, [had] generated theories of art so crudely propagandistic that they made the separation of art from politics seem an attractive or even a necessary position."⁵⁸

But the professors I interviewed seemed ruled by the more immediate motive of fear. Over and over they remarked on the stress of living in an authoritarian political climate; several stated flatly that they doubted that I—a younger scholar—could understand their experience. As Ellen Schrecker demonstrates, accused communists rarely discussed their political views in the classroom, a practice which ironically reinforced their reputation for secrecy and deception when their loyalty was called into question.⁵⁹ Even the suggestion of personal association with leftist colleagues was sometimes sufficient cause to lose a job or worse.

In a climate of suspicion, most professors I interviewed adopted a defensive separation of their "political" from their "professional" selves. They believed that it was possible to shield the classroom from ideology and that it was "safest"—for themselves and for their students—to do so. Several professors recounted pleading with members of the administration not to expel the editor of the student newspaper, who was openly critical of LaVallee's suspension.⁶⁰ One explained that he felt discussion of campus politics in the classroom was unethical, because it might replicate the administration's arbitrary abuse of power:

For me it was plain enough. I would never have attempted to use the classroom ... to do anything that would set the students against the administration or against administration policy.... I think I considered it unethical to use the students for our purposes.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986) has been helpful in refining my thinking about the relation between hierarchies which depend on "symbolic polarities of the exalted and the base" and the political rhetoric at Dickinson during the Cold War.

⁵⁸ Graff, *Professing Literature*, 146.

⁵⁹ Schrecker, 99-101.

⁶⁰ Davis interview; Bowden interview.

⁶¹ Davis interview.

Most professors resisted the premise of an interrelation between campus politics and pedagogical practice as “largely unsustainable,” as one put it.⁶² In part this belief came from a conviction that the classroom could and should be a place free from ideology and subjectivity. One opponent of the administration told me: “We thought the students’ education should not be weakened or colored by what was going on outside the classroom.”⁶³ If the contemporary understanding of the relation between politics and curriculum can be summarized in Gayatri Spivak’s formulation that “Ideology in action is what a group takes to be natural and self-evident,” these retired professors echoed Wimsatt’s language of detachment of the “true and objective way of criticism:”

*For all the objects of our manifold experience, for every unity, there is an action of the mind which cuts off roots, melts away context—or indeed we should never have objects or ideas or anything to talk about.*⁶⁴

Both liberals and conservatives believed in the separation of “ideology” in method from their personal “politics,” but they defined the word “political” in disparate ways which reflect the murky etymology of the word.⁶⁵ Liberals tended to define “the politics” as being concerned with the polity, part of the duties of being a citizen of a community, while conservatives used it as a pejorative, implying narrow partisanship, and self-interest. In general, Edel’s supporters described their mission as detached, “not political.” One professor imagined himself above the fray: “I wasn’t involved in it. I stood for peace.”⁶⁶ Another set to work to write “a completely objective history of the

⁶² Letter from William Wishmeyer to Wendy Moffat, July 20, 1989; a letter from William Bowden to Wendy Moffat, August 14, 1989 argues that “Politics had nothing to do with [classes].... I think the remarkable thing about the LaVallee years was the separation maintained by the English department and some others between politics and the classroom.”

⁶³ Bowden interview.

⁶⁴ Gayatri Spivak, “The Politics of Interpretation,” *Critical Inquiry* 9 (September 1982): 259-278; William Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), 12, 18.

⁶⁵ I am grateful to Leon Fitts and Philip Grier for illuminating conversations on the problems of translation of the following passage from Book I part 10 of Aristotle’s *Politics*: “Man is a political being.” Grier believes that the phrase “political being” can be understood in different ways if we ask “how big is the ‘polis,’ the community? In classical Greece, the polis was understood to mean the largest social unit; by Hellenistic times, the relevant ‘polis’ became the empire. Thus quite early the word came to have referents of different sizes and constituencies, and evolved its polysemous meaning.

⁶⁶ Schiffman interview, June 19, 1990.



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college at that time,” adding that he would “avoid discussing anything controversial.”⁶⁷ These people described their position as self-consciously adrift of the main stream of politics at the College. But they also seemed acutely aware of the perimeter of their safely detached position. One professor whom I interviewed asked me with genuine concern whether I had permission from the current President of the College to conduct this research.⁶⁸

James Kavenagh notes that “ideology is less tenacious as a ‘set of ideas’ than a system of representations, perceptions and images that precisely encourages men and women to ‘see’ their specific place in historically peculiar social formation as inevitable, natural, a necessary function of ‘the real.’”⁶⁹ Thus the meaning of any narrative is shaped by expectations of its genre, especially since genres like tragedy and allegory create distinct expectations about the agency of individual characters within the narrative to control or shape the action of the story. The genre these narrators choose for their oral histories serves as a gloss for their ideology.

Some liberal professors, quite few, tried to integrate their political views into their teaching. They approached the issue carefully, sometimes elliptically. One alumna

⁶⁷ Yeagley interview.

⁶⁸ Yeagley interview.

⁶⁹ James H. Kavenagh, “Ideology,” in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 310.

recalls an intense and captivating lecture on Milton's "Areopagitica" given in 1956 by William Sloane.⁷⁰ She understood the lecture to be an allegory "about McCarthyism and President Edel," though Sloane never made the parallel explicit, and she believed the message was lost on much of the class.

Maureen Quilligan has argued that allegory is an ethical form insofar as it places the burden of integration and interpretation on the audience: "The object of allegory is to promote self-consciousness in readers."⁷¹ The ambiguity, the doubleness, of allegory places what Quilligan calls "a burden of choice" on its readers and offers a protective fiction of detachment for its authors. Just as this was true in Spenser's time, when *The Fairie Queene* criticized the Elizabethan court from a (fairly) safe distance,⁷² it is also true today: a visiting scholar from Beijing recently told me that allegory is the favorite literary form among dissident feminist scholars who remain in China. One politically active alumnus described his fellow students as "sleepwalking" through the Cold War; but Sloane's allegory offered students the opportunity to awaken by using a literary form to integrate their "personal" experience in the classroom with the public world of campus politics.

Such examples are rare. Most often, faculty who were most opposed to the administration left. As one professor noted wryly, "They all found better jobs."⁷³ The personal cost of sustained resistance to the administration was immense. People asked me to turn off my tape recorder and made dark allusions to nervous breakdowns, suicide attempts, and the unspecified "ruin" of careers.

If seeing these events as an allegory allowed students and professors a kind of freedom, seeing them as a tragedy afforded a kind of protection. Many people likened the crisis at Dickinson to a "Greek tragedy."⁷⁴ But different political camps meant different things by ascribing this literary form. For conservative professors, tragedy referred to an Aristotelian convention marked by finality, inevitability, and elevated significance. Aristotle's insistence on the closure of tragedy seemed to be mirrored in the conservatives' confidence in their ability to seal off the significance of the past from the present when describing events. Several prefaced their stories by remarking that the events

⁷⁰ Jane Seller, interview by Wendy Moffat, July 14, 1989.

⁷¹ Maureen Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 254.

⁷² Quilligan, 277.

⁷³ Caroline Kennedy, interview by Wendy Moffat, July 31, 1989.

⁷⁴ I first noted this metaphor in interviews with Joseph Schiffman; subsequent review of transcripts reveals that many of the oral histories allude to qualities of Aristotelian tragedy when describing these events.

were “long ago” or “a dead matter.” One asked directly: “Why recall the ugly past?”⁷⁵ To be sure, the eventual “victory” of the forces who opposed the administration may make present recollection of those events more painful for this group; but by all accounts the cost—in lost jobs, nervous breakdowns, and political repercussions—was greater for the opponents. Rather, the ideology of tragedy encourages a sense of detachment from the past.

These professors associated the term tragedy with a determinate fatal progression of events which transcended individual agency. One complained that the transformation of the College’s identity “didn’t have to happen with such rancor. These changes [in curriculum and governance] would have happened anyway without all this bitterness.”⁷⁶ For these people, invoking the form of tragedy seems to excuse them from evaluating the operations of power.

Moreover, tragedy elevates the petty to a plane of high signification. Because “tragedy is an imitation of persons who are above the common level,” the banal becomes the pathetic, and the cruel merely the inevitable.⁷⁷ Several witnesses spoke of the President as if he were a tragic figure, suspended between a rigidly conservative Board of Trustees and radical young faculty, and helpless to act.⁷⁸ Such a view distorts the President’s real power, a recent study of the administrative response to McCarthyist controversies suggests. Lionel Lewis demonstrates a range of responses to “threats” of disloyal or Communist-associated faculty in case studies from many colleges.⁷⁹ Clearly, the sense that the President was obliged to act when LaVallee pled the Fifth Amendment was shaped by the conservative community standards at the College at that time. Accusations of communism were incendiary to a small, conservative Methodist institution. In this climate, as one professor noted, communism was figured as a metaphorical disease: the risks of leaving it to spread into the student body, of the President appearing to be complacent about the threat in the eyes of the Board of Trustees, were held to be vastly

⁷⁵ Schiffman interview, July 7, 1989.

⁷⁶ Schiffman interview, July 7, 1989.

⁷⁷ Aristotle, *Poetics*, in Jackson Bate, ed., *Criticism: The Major Texts* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 25. The selection concerning tragedy in the *Poetics* comprises pages 22-39.

⁷⁸ Warlow interview, June 12, 1990; Frederick Ness believed that the President was persuaded to “stand on principle” by a very conservative friend when he could have made a more politically pragmatic decision merely to not renew LaVallee’s contract. (Ness interview.) The invoking of the term “principle” here, and the statement of the President’s human flaw — “one of his weaknesses was that he really didn’t consult” — are characteristic of the use of the metaphor of tragedy in these oral histories.

⁷⁹ Lionel S. Lewis, *Cold War on Campus: A Study of the Politics of Organizational Control* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1988).



The Dickinson College Mace

greater than the risks of bad publicity in having a suspected communist on the faculty, or in offending any faculty member enamored of the abstract idea of academic freedom.⁸⁰

In contrast, opponents of the administration warned against thinking of tragedy as a kind of ennobling device. They punctured the high seriousness of the administration with ironic observations: “[Edel] wasn’t a tragic figure; he was a comic figure.”⁸¹ “Well, facade was very important to him.... He designed the college mace with a ribbon around it which had room for all he presidents up to [him] and no more room.... I suppose the handle could be extended.”⁸² Moreover, they emphasized the commonality between Dickinson and many other small colleges and the quotidian, even petty, aspects of the conflict: “This was not a unique situation.... I was on an [AAUP] evaluation team for a little college in Massachusetts not long after this, and very much the same thing hap-

⁸⁰ Thus the decision to suspend LaVallee was a purposeful and to some degree self-conscious act of hygiene on the part of the administration. Coming just weeks before the end of spring term, it caused logistical confusion and some hardship for colleagues to whom the students in LaVallee’s classes were precipitously reassigned (*York Gazette*, April 2, 1956). George Allan, interview by Wendy Moffat, June 19, 1989. Ellen Schrecker notes the use of the metaphor of communism as a disease in chapter four, “A Matter of Ethical Hygiene,” in *No Ivory Tower*. For a fascinating if unsystematic analysis of the use of metaphors of disease, see Susan Sontag, *AIDS and its Metaphors* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989).

⁸¹ Davis interview.

⁸² Bowden interview.

pened. There had been a paternalistic, authoritarian [administration] and the post-war group came along and [they] had a confrontation."⁸³ This professor noted, too, that the circumstances at Dickinson were inevitable only if we "consider[...] the rigid kind of man Edel was."⁸⁴

Ironically, those who supported the administration emphasized their impotence, while their opponents held out hope in the power of individual agency against great forces. Sloane wrote his colleagues to encourage the President to reinstate Davis: "I haven't much hope, but drops of water are said to wear away stone."⁸⁵

A project which looks for the tracings of ideology in past practices is asking for trouble. Much of what we need to know to write academic history is not documented. What happens in classrooms remains ephemeral. Oral history, while compensatory, can be spotty and self-serving. Stephen Crites remarks on the "illusion of causality" which is created by

*the essential pastness of any well-strung narrative [history].... The specious future of its successive episodes will appear as necessary as the past. The exigency of narrative form may also lead us to think the story of our lives unfolds by similar necessity.... The mythic imagination is the servant of narrative exigency.*⁸⁶

Nevertheless, the current debate concerning "historicity" and "authenticity" in the curriculum demands that we investigate the operations of power within the classroom and over time. The professors at Dickinson who opposed the administration during these years of crisis tried to apply the lessons of the political controversy to the operations of power. They risked to change the institution. Their experience proves that it is easier to bring the question of ideology into the classroom, and to integrate the professional and the private, in a climate of safety.

⁸³ Bowden interview.

⁸⁴ Bowden interview.

⁸⁵ William Sloane to Mary Taintor, July 4, 1956; Sloane papers.

⁸⁶ Stephen Crites, "Storytime: Recollecting the Past and Projecting the Future," in *Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct*, ed. T. R. Sarbin (New York: Praeger, 1986), 152-173.

