

Offhand

PHYSICAL COURAGE is to courage what dentistry is to medicine: a specialty, by no means the whole thing. People wielding opinions should be courageous in their opinions. If they escape into physical prowess they are cowards. Gangsters, too, are courageous, but their morals are weak and their brains microscopic.

✓ ✓ ✓

WHENEVER army standards are applied to civilians we have that sinister admixture of servility and aggressiveness known as the Nazi, Fascist, or Soviet state: all the same dirt. It is right for a soldier to have only the opinions of those with more brass on their hats than he has. His courage should be physical, he should regard the enemy as a beast, try to be one himself, if he can. But as the soldier must obey, so must the whole army containing him obey in complete silence and discipline, to be known as an army and not as a dangerous band. People don't think with their feet or their biceps, any more than they box with their brains.

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IT IS NEVER the emergency that justifies the dictator, rather the other way round. Emergencies are short, like rape, lightning, or earthquakes. When they begin to last too long, they are deserved, and can only be stopped by saying no.

✓ ✓ ✓

IN A DICTATORSHIP, no one is responsible to his superiors for the work of those under him, but these to him for his idleness. As one gets closer to the top of the pyramid: greater window displays, less serious work. The dictator himself is rightly identified with the state of emergency: namely the danger that, by doing anything at all, he might expose his ignorance, his uselessness, his fear. Safely wrapped in the national flag, he shields himself from all constructive pistol shots.

✓ ✓ ✓

NOTES FOR a political dictionary: Yes: affirmative for No.

✓ ✓ ✓

NOTE THOSE holy causes that have unholy effects.

—NICCOLO TUCCI.



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WHAT IS ENGLISH?

By ARCHIBALD MacLEISH

I DO not put this question to be impertinent. I put it because I should like to know. I have been—officially at least—a teacher of English for the past twelve years and I have yet to hear myself defined. I will go further than that: I have yet to be told precisely what I'm doing.

The trouble in my case may be Harvard. Certainly the trouble at the beginning was Harvard. When I was notified in the early summer of 1949 that the President and Fellows of that University had approved my appointment to the Boylston Professorship of Rhetoric and Oratory I decided to drive down to Cambridge to find out what I was supposed to teach. It seemed like a good idea at the time: my last ten years or so had been in Washington and the years before that in journalism and my real profession throughout had been the writing of verse, not teaching. I say it seemed like a good idea. It didn't turn out that way.

My first call, logically, was at the Department of English since it was a Committee of the Department of English that had approached me—"approach" in the technical sense—the year before. It was an agreeable call but brief. Chairmen of Harvard departments, I was informed, do not tell their colleagues what to do: they merely circulate the memoranda. I was back on the wooden porch of Warren House in something under five minutes with the impression that Harvard would be an attractive place if one could get into it.

My second call was on the only member of the English Department I knew at all well, a displaced Yale man like myself. He listened, looked at the ceil-

ing, and replied that I could teach his course in Shakespeare if I wanted. I left with the impression, later verified, that he was not entirely enthusiastic about my presence in Cambridge.

There remained the Provost of the University, the President being in Washington in those months. (By "the President" I mean, of course, the President of Harvard.) The Provost, when I found his office, was engaged but, being desperate, I decided to sit him out and that fetched him. He popped out of his office, listened mildly while I stated my business, and popped back in again with the remark, delivered over his shoulder as the door closed, that when Harvard appointed a man to a full professorship, to say nothing of the Boylston Professorship, it expected him to *know* what he wanted to teach.

It was an enlightening afternoon. I had been told in three different ways that freedom to teach at Harvard is literally freedom—with all the penalties attached. But it was not an *instructive* afternoon. I know no more about my duties on the way back to the Franklin County Hills than I had known on the way down, and twelve years later I still know little more than I knew then. I have taught the advanced writing course which all Boylston Professors since Barrett Wendell have offered and I have invented and annually reinvented a course in the nature of poetry; but though I take, or sometimes take, a proprietary satisfaction in both of them I am not at all sure that either is the course I should have taught or would have taught had I known what "English" is. It is not always English that turns up in the novels and poems and plays of the advanced writing course, nor does the course in poetry confine

itself to poems in the English tongue. It can't very well since poetry recognizes no such limitation.

In those early days—my young days as a teacher of English when I was still in my late fifties—I used to assume that I was the only member of the profession who did not know what he was doing, but as time has passed I have begun to wonder. We have, at Harvard, an institution called the Visiting Committee, one to each department, which descends annually upon the appropriate classrooms to observe the progress of education. Our particular Visiting Committee in the Department of English ends its investigations, or always did when John Marquand was chairman, by offering a dinner to the permanent appointments. And the dinner always includes, or always included, a question which seems to stir the Departmental subconscious: Why are the graduates of Harvard University incapable of composing simple declarative sentences? Under ordinary circumstances a question such as this might be expected to serve as the gambit to a lively exchange involving, among other things, the truth of the fact asserted, but under the circumstances of our dinner, when the questioner is a distinguished alumnus who is also a member of the Committee to Visit the English Department, and when the effectiveness of the English Department in performing its duties is the subject of the Visitation, the innocent words take on a different aspect. They become charged with implications, the most challenging of which is the implication that if graduates of Harvard University are incapable of composing simple declarative sentences the Department of English is to blame. Which, in turn, implies that the teaching of