Encomium for George

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Of all the men I ever met, by far the toughest was Vince O’Leary, my mentor during my studies in criminal justice at the University at Albany but not far behind, and some might say it was a toss-up between them, was George Siefert my undergraduate advisor while I completed a baccalaureate in Greek and Latin at the Catholic University of America during the early Sixties.

These two men I met within five years of each other and, under certain circumstances, I might have been led to say that George was a warm-up for “Uncle Vince,” as I called him (and got others to do likewise), but such was not the case. And although their forms of imposed discipline and the way they lived were very different, George was the better teacher, indeed the best teacher I ever had, and Vince was number two—and these rankings have absolutely nothing to do with the toughness factor.

But it’s George I wish to say something about here not simply because I still think of him from time to time but also because recently I made a trip to Washington, DC which included a visit to the Greek and Latin Department at Catholic University. Part of the reason for my visit was to take a look at the department, see what it was like these days, and to inquire about George, maybe find out something new after all these years.

To get the lay of the land I emailed the chair of the department several times before the trip to say that I, along with my friend Josh, who studied Greek and Latin with George two years before me, were coming to town and would like to stop in, say hello, maybe sit in on a class—or was that being too bold?—and just generally ask a few questions. Was George’s spirit, and the spirit of all those teachers we had back then, still alive? We were biased; we thought that that era was the department’s Golden Age.

The chair said fine to everything so there we were in a Caesar translation class in one of the rooms we sat in more than forty years before when we waded through Augustine, Plato, and the *Eclogues*, *Georgics*, and *Aeneid* with George. They were his specialties and everybody who was a major had to take them.

Before going to the class Josh and I stopped in at the department to introduce ourselves, and the chair invited us to an afternoon reception in the department's library situated at the heart of the department's offices which were located at the top of the creaky wooden stairs on the third floor of McMahon Hall. This is where the antiquated-looking Greek and Latin Department was located probably since Caesar took Gaul.

We went, and though the hospitality was formal in nature, Josh and I inquired of the chair, after the small group assembled had cleared out, about the department, what kinds of kids took Latin today--and then we brought up the old days. We asked whether he knew anything about George and his colleagues of the Fifties and Sixties—Marty McGuire, Billy Tongue, Barney Peebles, Tom Halton, Roy Deferrari, and that short Franciscan, Father Hermigild Dressler who taught ancient classical literature in translation. With him uppermost in my mind was that his dentures kept unhinging from the roof of his mouth and dropping down onto the bottoms so that periodically during class there'd be this tiny clack and then a sucking response as he tried to get the teeth back into place while explicating a fragment of Sappho.

But the main thing on my mind during our visit was not Dressler's dentures or the departmental reception but to get to the university archives and examine "the George Siefert papers," to excavate his remains, to get a better picture of the man. Josh and I had our stories but we wanted to find our more about him long after his death as a kind of tribute.

As soon as I told Josh what my plans were, he told me to count him in. George was his man too; I had heard him say many times that George was the best teacher he ever had too so the two of us more than forty years after leaving CU were heading back to our roots. I used to think maybe I was weird, bedeviled with some kind of obsession with George and the department, and Josh had his own feelings on the

subject too, but between the two of us, we had nearly 80 years of teaching experience so we took our mentors seriously even if at a distance.

George had first come to CU in 1936 and he stayed there until his retirement in August 1975 except for a three-year stint in the Army from 1942-1945. I don't know whether his number came up or he enlisted but there he was at 32, Mr. Greek and Latin, serving for a time as a clerk at Walter Reid Hospital in Bethesda, Maryland and then for fourteen months as the personal attendant of the General of the Armies John J. Pershing who was then in his 80s. This he alluded to several times when we were there but, as to who Pershing was, he might as well have been my long lost uncle. What I liked was that George worked with a general.

George might have stayed stateside because of his eyesight—he wore pretty thick glasses—or it might have been his academic record which I might mention, from academe's point of view, is a bit puzzling. He got his BA in 1930, his MA in '32, and his PhD in '48 (all from the University of Pennsylvania) and, though he spent two years at the American Academy in Rome from 1934 to 1936, he didn't get his doctorate for sixteen years after finishing the MA—and that's taking into account his three years in the Army. I am not sure what happened there.

And when I studied with him as an undergraduate from the Fall of 1961 to June 1963 George was still an assistant professor. I am sure of that because recently, as I was reading several dissertations from CU from that period, I saw people thanking him in their acknowledgment section as Assistant Professor George Siefert. And that was thirteen years after his degree!

What's also remarkable is that George made it only to the rank of Associate Professor after more than forty years of association with the university. Those who knew him as a friend can tell it a lot better than I but, when I was at CU, he used to say that he refused to write those silly articles that Classics scholars write. He used to say in so many words that so much of classical scholarship was a case of Horace's "*Parturiunt montes; nascetur ridiculus mus*" mountains going into labor and all that's born is a laughable little mouse. Hence his publication record is sparse.

I am sure he has more to his credit but the only article I know of is a monograph "Meter and Case in the Latin Elegiac Pentameter" which was published as a supplement to *Language*, the Journal of the Linguistic Society of America (1952). I don't know how important that journal was in the eyes of his peers but I think his middle-level professorial status after all those years is an alarming indictment of CU (a Roman Catholic institution) because George's teaching and service to wisdom was so beyond the pale, indeed put that of all the others in Greek and Latin to shame—and these others we loved! His teaching should have counted as a dozen articles and five full-length books. And to that teaching I will get to in a moment.

George died in October 1984 and, in the minds of some, should have been canonized the day he died but a goodly number of folks—though this is far from a poll—would have wished him consigned to a corner of heaven where he'd never be seen again. He had tormented them.

Josh and I first met George in 1959 and 1961 respectively when we were members of the Roman Catholic religious order, the Brothers of the Christian Schools, and were attending Catholic University. Part of our job during what was known as "formation" was to get an education and that meant for the northeastern provinces getting a degree at Catholic University. My last undergraduate class with George was in May 1963 but strangely enough I was back with him two summers later when I was working toward an MA in Greek and Latin at Manhattan College in the Bronx. Manhattan had none of the courses I needed to finish so I headed down to CU to maybe get a course with George. I enrolled in his intermediary Sanskrit, thinking I might do well even though I never had Sanskrit before, but dropped the course after four or five classes—it was too much—and switched to 501 Greek Composition. I did not want to disappoint George but I had had a tough year teaching and put all pride away. That was my last contact with George in and outside the classroom; it was the last I heard of him until his death.

I know of other Greek and Latin majors, equally taken with George, who went to visit him in his later years when he was tottering. My friend Charlie Giglio, also a former Christian Brother, went with his wife Pat and took George shopping for groceries and helped him with his daily chores. Me, as you can see, I never forgot him but then I had to move on.

When Josh and I got to the university we made a bee-line for the archives, introduced ourselves to the staff, and inquired about George's papers. One of the staff remembered I had written and so was aware of what we were looking for. We signed the necessary sheets, were shown into the reading room and there poked around the materials sitting on shelves along the walls, eyeing the two people working intently while we waited for the boxes. In short order a cart rolled in pushed by one of the clerks who manned the stacks on which sat three or four cardboard storage boxes, the plain beige kind you see holding documents in office records retention rooms.

These were the first installment of the seven boxes that were George's material remains, the bones of his social being—and uncatalogued bones at that, which I had thought about even before going down, the uncatalogued part that is. It says on the university archives' website which person's papers are catalogued and which not, the catalogued ones accompanied by links to the contents of the boxes. And here again I was bothered by the human or personal value issue.

Lots of people will say outright that, archivally speaking, a person's worth can be assessed—on an archives website say—not only by the quality and quantity of his or her papers but also by how much attention the holding institution gives to those papers via cataloging and classification—and yes of course there's a correlation. It's interesting to find out from those who make such an assessment what criteria they apply. As might be expected the big boys are made more accessible—clam shell boxes, mylar protected sheets, master lists, et cetera, so if we were to follow that formula in assessing George's contribution to the university, to learning, we'd have to walk away believing that there was not much to the man—the greatest teacher I ever had.

Regardless, with great excitement Josh and I picked up the boxes and lifted them onto the large reading table. We lifted the lids with a certain reverence and peered in. Almost immediately I was disappointed; there in some of the boxes was a bunch of file folders it looked like from George's desk, as if someone had cleared out his digs and stuck their remains in boxes to get the job done after he died. Some of the files had the names of students on them (I looked to see if there was a file for me which

was an unreal fantasy) and others contained copies of outlines of different courses George taught over the years. In one of the boxes, containing a number of photos and several small loose items, there was a medal box that contained a pin with a small purple ribbon written on which was "National Convention Eta Sigma Phi, University of Penna May 2-3, 1930. That was the year George graduated from Penn. There were two smaller pins, one was from the John B. Stetson Junior High School in Philadelphia and the other a club pin from FHS dated 1927, which I'm sure stands for Frankford High School in Philadelphia, George's alma mater.

Missing from the lot, but which we know George received from various extant papers and announcements in the files, was the esteemed Benemerenti Medal that Pope Paul VI presented to him in 1965. This prestigious medal, whose ribbon sports the colors of the papacy, is given to folks who are thought to have made an outstanding contribution to the Roman Catholic church through military or civilian service. To be in the running for this honor—I do not know whether it is given any more—the recipient had to be nominated by the local bishop or the apostolic nuncio. I have no idea what George did to be recognized in the eyes of the people who awarded the medal. Had someone recalled his military service or had he helped the common good as a civilian afterwards?

Josh and I thumbed through each file quickly but with great interest and when one of us found something out of the ordinary we quickly called the other's attention to it, "Listen to this!" then we'd read a segment or two. My enthusiasm got the better of me once or twice and I had to remind myself we were in an archives reading room where two scholars were deep into heavy-looking tomes.

One of the more interesting items we found was a five-page report George had written in 1944 while with the Army Medical Corps at Walter Reid. His job then was to investigate why amputees back from the war were not taking part in the Army's "Reconditioning Program." Military higher-ups were greatly concerned over this, and George, in response to his assignment, offered an analysis that is structurally brilliant, a model for all governmental report writers. It shows great pathos for the men who lost a limb but also points to larger structural issues which accounted for the men's lack of enthusiasm for the program. I am sure the Army big wigs were not exactly enthusiastic about his take on things.

Among these documents there was a copy of George's discharge papers from the Army, his "Separation Qualification Record" which filled us in on where he was and what he did during his service years. There was a copy of the eulogy his friend and colleague, philosophy professor at the university, Father Robert Mohan, delivered at a memorial mass for George three days after his death (October 19th). The Mass was celebrated at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception on the university campus a stone's throw from McMahon Hall and the Greek and Latin Department. The following day George's funeral was held at the cathedral but I have no idea how many attended and who.

Father Mohan's appreciation is stunning; it tugs at the heart's strings providing those close to George and those who knew him from afar with a keen sense of who this man was, hinting at the warts he wore as well. Mohan had not only taught with George, he hiked with him, socialized with him, and on occasion went to church with him even in faraway places, and so presented a living picture of our teacher which was far more than we knew of him as undergraduates who, in places where there are thriving graduate programs, are a dime a dozen and mostly forgotten by professors. When Charlie Giglio and his wife visited George he was shocked to find out that George had not remembered him. Shocked, and he'll tell you so till this day.

While reading Mohan's eulogy I envied him for having had that contact with George over the years but only for a moment because then, as I still know, I could never have been George's friend, in part because I think he preferred to have no friends at all, intimate friends that is, and in part because of his intenseness. He never married.

Another document Josh and I reeled about—and I requested of the archives' staff a copy to be made right away—was a photo of George sitting in a parlor as part of a circle comprised of three Christian Brothers and one of the notable English professors at the University during the Sixties whose name escapes me now. All except George have cafeteria-type glasses in their hands which I'd say were probably lined with spirits; George is holding a Styrofoam cup most likely filled with coffee because sitting next to his right knee atop a small serving table is a beaker of coffee with the handle turned in George's direction.

It looks as if a fifth person is involved in the conviviality but who is outside the frame of the photo to the lower left, and to whom George was talking when the shutter was pressed. He and the Christian Brothers, two of whom I knew well, have big grins on their faces and the English professor facing George is sporting something between a *petit sourire* and a *sourire affecté* if I might be a little French for a minute.

In a situation like this I can see George performing for the group; under certain circumstances he loved jousting with words and being playful in a silly way. In my junior year as I was peeing in the men's room in McMahon Hall, George walked in, straddled up to a urinal nearby and in a deadbeat sort of way, said, "You know, Brother, in all areas of life people have many different statuses so that some are higher and more important than others and some are less, but here, not to worry, we're all pee-ers here." Caught off guard I laughed a moderate laugh but since have told that story dozens of different times.

All the years I was in the Order, and long before and after, the Christian Brothers who were Greek and Latin majors, as well as others who took one or two Latin courses, had great respect for George and he was equally fond of the Brothers because of their studiousness. Of all the religious orders that attended Catholic University at that time, the Christian Brothers—though we had our share of academic clunkers—was by far the best to study there scholastically and that George respected. And from my observations it appeared that those who went into Greek and Latin were among the best students the Brothers sent to study or certainly people who were willing to subject themselves to the rigor required to major in that field.

But here is the thing about George as it applied to me and Josh and the other Greek and Latin scholars when we entered the university—and all I can do from here on out is concentrate on my own experience—in the service called the Greek and Latin Department at the Catholic University of America during the Sixties George Siefert ran the boot camp; he was the drill instructor, the Master Sergeant which every incoming recruit lined up and counted off for the first semester of his or her junior year.

And training began with a 300-level class called Latin Reading List; this was the department's Paris Island. There were ways around it of course if you got cold feet but the drill dodger who thought he was being crafty paid double later on. I saw it happen. Nobody but nobody was going to emerge from basic without getting down and pumping a few hundred push-ups each week and this was true for even the *semper parati*.

The seventh point of Sergeant Michael Volkin's top ten in *The Ultimate Basic Training Guidebook* could have been written about basic with George: "Expect drama. The Drill Sergeants will make a big deal about everything. You need to be punctual, fast, efficient, etc. To add to this drama, you will be surrounded by scores of stressed recruits. Some of these recruits won't deal with the stress well. Observe how your fellow recruits deal with stress -- you don't want to push one of them over the edge by saying the wrong thing." And I might add that each and every day we observed how our instructor was dealing with his stress, not wanting to push him over the edge by counting off the wrong way.

I might also add that, though we were raw recruits at CU, the Brothers who took Greek and Latin were all prepped for George. We knew what to expect as opposed to the civilians who waltzed into maybe Plato unsuspecting. The Christian Brother juniors and seniors who were at the university before us told us what to expect, as the juniors and seniors before them had told them, and the juniors and seniors before them and maybe right back to 1936 when George first arrived. He was famous and in the eyes of some infamous; regardless we were told to expect, euphemistically speaking, creative tension at all times.

The book we used for basic was a salad of different Latin prose writers and poets. After a few words of introduction about the contents of the course—I do not remember a syllabus being given out—George told us that the first passage we would tackle was a selection from Cicero, his defense of the poet Archias that comes down to us in the famous *Pro Archia Poeta*. It was a case in which Archias was in jeopardy of being exiled and so retained Cicero to defend him. Instead of following conventionally-scripted legal procedures Cicero started telling the "cultivated audience and enlightened jury" that Rome needed Archias for its literary and cultural well-being; after all Archias had been an influence on his own life. And it appears

that the barrister's tack worked because Archias was acquitted and allowed to remain in the city; Cicero mentions seeing him years later.

Within a few minutes we were looking at a passage, which I can still recite from memory, from the sixth section of the *Pro Archias*, the first lines of which are "*Quaeres a nobis, Grati, cur tanto opere hoc homine delectemur. Quia suppeditat nobis ubi et animus ex hoc forensi strepitu reficiatur, et aures convicio defessae conquiescant*. . ." Roughly translated it says, "You will ask us, O Gratius, [the prosecutor] why we take such great delight in this man. It's because he supplies us with a place where our soul might be refreshed from the din of the marketplace and our ears, weary from its clamor, find some respite." Imagine, our very first day and we are introduced to the liberal arts as healer! With the translation we did not get very far so for homework we were told to translate these and several lines more and to pay especial attention to the ablative case "hoc homine."

I am not sure if you have ever studied Latin but, very briefly allow me to say that in the Latin language each noun has five basic cases reflecting their use for meaning. The "genitive," for example, reflects possession as in "the boy's" or "of the boy." The "accusative" is used for the direct object of a verb. In English we say "I hit the ball." In Latin "ball" would take the accusative.

Latin is also quirky in that certain verbs take, for example, the ablative case automatically, verbs having to do with enjoyment, use, and performance; they are followed by an ablative called "the ablative of means." And this "means" concept derives from the fact that (in the case of the verb to use), that "They are 'using' a pen" really means "They are benefiting themselves *by means of* the pen." Anyone who has taken a year of Latin in high school (a legit course) is well aware of the ablative case and its special use of means. Those coming into CU's basic training program were expected to be familiar with such uses. It was like knowing the alphabet or at any rate what letters went to make up certain words.

In the example of the few lines I gave from Cicero's *Pro Archias*—and I hope I am not being too esoteric here—in the case of "*hoc homine delectemur*," we would translate it to give it its ablative of means effect: "we receive delight by means of this man." Case closed, it was an ablative of means.

Yes, it was expected to be a piece of cake but I remember going to several Latin grammars to re-introduce myself, just to be safe, with the ablative of means and those deponent verbs that "took it" like *delector* and *utor* and *fruor*.

Before the next class the three Christian Brothers who were Latin majors and I conferred on what we had found in the grammars and mulled over the various possibilities. We wanted to be ready for the first full day's drill session with Sergeant George, maybe buck for an early promotion.

In class we translated the passage again, were questioned about the nuances of certain words and their grammatical constructions, and then we got to the "hoc homine" question. George asked whether anyone found out anything interesting about what kind of ablative *hoc homine* was. One of us—I can't remember who—stuck his hand up and explained with authority that *hoc homine* was an ablative of means. George said: No, it is not. And we went around and around about why it was not and explored other kinds of ablatives, were asked which verbs took the ablative automatically and why. We also got into the development of verb forms such as how some verbs that were once active became passive verbs in form while retaining their active meaning as in the case of "I take delight in this man." Whew! We felt like we had run around the amphitheatre a half dozen times.

As the class drew to an end George gave us several more lines to translate and then added: Oh yes, and also be ready to tell me next class what kind of ablative *hoc homine* is.

The next few days my fellow students and I, individually and in collaboration, went back to the grammars, even dug up older ones, so that we felt we had looked at every conceivable grammar on the planet. We entered the next class armed with confidence, made our case and, as they say in the vernacular, got shot down. There was further discussion of the various ablatives and from there we went into several new directions but, when time was up, George said we hadn't gotten it, so in addition to preparing a few more lines, our assignment was to find out what kind of ablative *hoc homine* was!

Before the next class we conferred, got out the grammars again, then re-conferred; we were becoming certifiable. We felt like raw recruits in boot camp who had reached their limit or as novices of a Zen master who had given his charges a mind-splitting *koan* they could not break and were on the brink of brokenness.

My memory says this thing went on for two and maybe even three more classes when finally George asked in a dignified but slightly gloating way: You give up? Yes, Doctor Siefert, you can see we do; what kind of ablative is it? George said: It's an ablative of "unconscious means." Huh? Yes, an ablative of unconscious means because we are receiving delight by means of this man but he is not conscious he is doing so.

There was silence. The four of us sat there stunned but within, in Jekyl-Hyde fashion, we were turning into junkyard dogs but heavily leashed versions because this was only the first month of school and there on the other side of the desk was our DI. Here. There. I have introduced you to George.

Brother Michael, one of the four majors, who used to get pretty testy with George on a regular basis for the next two years, snapped back: There's no such thing in any of the grammar books; we looked at every conceivable one in existence. George said: Yes, that's probably true because I made it up. I invented this kind of ablative.

More silence. We felt like four of Caesar's soldiers at the end of a twenty-five mile forced march mumbling amongst ourselves: The general is nuts! We were in disbelief. Of course he talked more about his rationale and why the new construction might not have been included in the grammars and . . .

Yes this was our first encounter with George. How could I have started this little essay claiming that this man was the best teacher I ever had? Years later I thought about his madness. He had gotten us to go into every imaginable grammar in existence, he had gotten us to distinguish between and speak with some authority about every kind of ablative in existence, he had gotten us to look into the relationship between special verbs and the cases they take, he had gotten us to look at the genesis of deponent verbs so, yes, there we were, young minds, to the extent we

could, debating a teacher who was, shall I say, baiting us. Whatever his method in this case George had sparked a flint that one day would set, those of us who wished to be, on fire.

But the heat of this fire was far too hot for many and it was at this point, and similar points along the way, that people came to form vastly divergent opinions of George. Intellectually it was gratifying to pursue some matter to its logical conclusion but, if you were the student through whom the pursuit was being made, you might feel like a rabbit hounded by a dog bred to hunt the hare till death.

Josh McGrath, to whom I have dedicated this piece, has told me many times that he had gotten A's in all his classes but not with George. I have talked with him about this a number of times and my only conclusion is that George has put a kind of hex on Josh that grew out of Josh's failing self-confidence in George's presence. There was an intensity you grew under, put up with, or withdrew from for protection, and the path had necessarily little to do with your talent.

Go to the Catholic University website, hit the link for the Greek and Latin department and from there go to "Alumni" and you will find testimonials to, retroactive assessments of, different faculty over time. A number say what a great teacher George was but I believe that for more than a few, beneath their assessment lurked a fear he engendered—a fear I must say I never felt but could understand and appreciate. Indeed in our senior year I publicly challenged George about his behavior toward one of the Latin majors in a very direct way and he backed down, he modified his behavior.

If you look at the testimonials to George on the Greek and Latin website you will find CU graduate Rebecca Otterron, class of 1977, say she "majored in English and only took Latin because Dr. Siefert was so awe-inspiring!" Imagine the words "awe-inspiring" used for a teacher. That means that somebody was saying something big, being somebody new, was someone worth listening to and being with!

Susannah Malarkey, who got her BA in Latin in 1965, says, "George Siefert! I was inspired by his love of the language - particularly Virgil." Here we have "inspired" in addition to "awe-inspiring." And of course we see here another person

who had been mesmerized by his love of language. And there's me and Josh McGrath, Charlie Giglio, Jimmy Curwood, Mike Whelan and a host of other Christian Brothers who studied with George who have said the same thing and even more.

But then the story changes a bit. Msgr. Donald E. Horak, who graduated with a Masters in Greek and Latin in 1965, mentions "the *fear* of Dr. Siefert's classes" [my emphasis]. He might have been a hare. David G. Hunter, M.A. in Latin, class of '76, adds "George Siefert was capable of bringing grown men and women to tears in his Latin classes!" Tears? Grown men and women? How could this be?

No, Hunter's assessment is not an exaggeration, I saw the tears myself on a number of occasions particularly with students from the drama department. That department did a fair share of ancient Greek plays and the drama students used to say they took introductory Greek and even Plato "for pronunciation enhancement" which I never understood. Unwittingly they would wind up with George which in the enhancement scheme of things is comparable to someone trying to tone up his pecs by joining the military.

Many of these students had not the slightest facility with Greek; they would use English translations, which we called "trots," to get them through. They would literally memorize the English version of sections of Plato's *Apology* for example, and when called upon, start mouthing the words for the section they were called upon to translate. They seemed to have very good memories.

But often enough one or both of two things happened. George might ask the student about the case of a particular noun such as *daimon* or the tense of the verb "to beat the air" and the student would be lost. Then George'd go around the room randomly, calling upon student after student until he found someone who could clarify the matter at hand. He would go about the room reading students' names from IBM cards which teachers had for each person registered in the class. It'd be like: "Well, Brother Sean, can you tell us what the mood of the verb is?" If a no go, then it was off to Mister White. Often I was the last to be called upon and more often than not things would die down after that.

The drama students would get tripped up another way which, though humorous in its Abbot and Costello-like incongruity, was not humorous for long. George might ask a student to translate 41a in the *Apology*, the section where Socrates talks about what death might be like but the memorizer would get mixed up and start his or her rendition with 41d where Socrates addresses the jury about being optimistic about death. There was no fit between the two and the student would be outed. When this occurred there'd be a few seconds of silence, a deep silence especially by those of us who had had George before because we knew what was coming. It was as if we were nearing the end of Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture" and there waiting in the wings to do their thing were the canons. Boom! Boom! Boom! And then we would see a 20- or 22-year old man or woman tear up. I felt sorry for them but for the most part they knew what they were getting into. In George's Siefert's army there was no room for people who chose to be Judy Benjamins or Gomer Pyles. And "chose" is important because, if George saw you were asking intelligent questions about your ignorance, there'd be no "show" or it would be highly edited.

But sometimes when the sin had been so grievous, George simply shook his head and moved on, urging the errant memorizer to better prepare himself for the next time. To another he might gently chide, "Brother Aelred, you're running roughshod over the genders!" These were the genders of language whose wisdom and secrets he had vowed to honor and believed that, when you came to class, you took that vow as well.

Indeed anyone who had spent the least bit of time with George as a student, friend, or colleague quickly and acutely became aware of that man's undying love of language. First of all he was fluent into German and Italian, he could write Latin, German, and Italian, and he could read Latin, Greek, German, Italian, and French. Lots of times a lexicographical problem would arise and he would talk about how a word from Sanskrit or Greek showed up in Latin and how that evolved into Italian or French and in some odd way occasionally in German. But when it came to language qua language he contained within himself somewhat of a contradiction. On one level he was like the American poet, William Carlos Williams, always on the lookout for the most human way for human beings to say things, all falsifications outlawed from the outset, but then there were times when he would argue for the *correct* way of speaking and writing, and be adamant about upholding its standards.

During a discussion of the essentials of sentence structure he once asked the four majors what a sentence was. We responded with subject-predicate type of talk and the usual linguistic typology of subject-verb-object (SVO) where the agent comes first, the verb second, and the object third but he immediately shut this kind of talk down. He said, "Ok, if someone says to a friend who is having a party Saturday night, 'my brother is coming to town and I'd like to bring him along; do you mind?' and the friend responds, 'The more the merrier.' What part of your SVO typology is 'The more the merrier'? What part of speech is it?" So there we were for ten minutes talking about what part of speech "The more the merrier" might be and what that might tell us about what a sentence was. When all was said and re-said, he finally let us in on his secret, "A sentence," he said, "is anything that makes sense so 'the more the merrier' is a sentence." Let us leave it at that.

Then occasionally things would get out of hand; George'd become unnerved about the derivation of a Greek or Latin word or about its evolution into English and need a dictionary to prove or expand upon a point. He'd excuse himself, rush out of the room to his office nearby (206B McMahon), be back in a half a minute, dramatically huffing and puffing, carrying under his right arm *Webster's New International Dictionary, Second Edition* commonly, succinctly, and for some still reverently, known as *Webster's Second*.

Up to this point in my life I had never given much consideration to the dictionary as a tool, even less to their sizes and editions. Obviously I knew some were better than others but I used what was around and usually only for looking up hard-to-spell words like *meringue* or the first person singular present tense of *wrought*. Not only had George returned with the largest dictionary in the world at that time (600,000 entries) but also with an introduction to the ideological war between the lexographical "prescriptionists" and "descriptionists." Huh?

Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged (known as *Webster's Third*) had just come out (September 1961) and contained more than 450,000 entries, including over 50,000 new words many with new senses for existing words. It was in fact the most radical revision of the *Unabridged* to date and George

made his feelings known about that revision immediately, saying something to the effect that he would not be caught dead in the same town with a copy of the *Third*.

He said the *Third* was a compendium of free-for-all's, anything went. It had abandoned the *Second's* practice of taking a stance on what constituted "good" English; it had refused to defend "standard" practices. What seemed to gall George most was the wholesale deletion of the descriptive (but in fact prescriptive?) labels "colloquial," "correct," "incorrect," "proper," "improper," "erroneous," "humorous," "jocular," "poetic," and "contemptuous" that followed each entry. The bible's normative power had been bowdlerized.

And as thousands of other wordsmiths had done—and continue to do till this day but to a lesser degree—George took issue with the dictionary's treatment of *ain't*. Under 1c of *ain't* the best the editors could offer was "though disapproved by many and more common in less educated speech, used orally in most parts of the U.S. by many cultivated speakers esp. in the phrase *ain't I*." Jacques Barzun had laid his two cents down on the matter saying the *Third's* descriptive stance had made it "the longest political pamphlet ever put together by a party," done with "a dogma that far transcends the limits of lexicography." There was no doubt in which political party Barzun was enrolled in and George as well but for George it sometimes depended on the season.

More than once, after he had retrieved *The Second*, we spent the rest of the class examining the in's and out's of one word, its derivation, nuances, and evolution from antiquity through the Romance languages to modern-day English. On one occasion, when we encountered the word "barbarian," he asked us to define it. We talked about the Huns and Mongols descending upon Rome; they were the barbarians; we said barbarians were foreigners because they spoke in different languages and to Roman civilization this sounded like "bar bar."

Yes and no he said, and was off to his office for his multi-pound *vade mecum*. After spending the entire class examining the meaning and derivation of this word and its implications for how peoples perceived and treated each other (there was always the ethical component), he came forth with one of his pithy definitions: a barbarian is anyone who lives beyond the pale. "The pale?" How's that spelled?

What the hell is a "pale?" With these questions posed, the class was over and we thought, as usually happened with the end of class, we'd put the issue to bed but to our chagrin the expedition resulted in George assigning us a ten-page paper on the meaning of *barbarian*. And this, when he graded it, he had great "fun" with.

Having discovered George's penchant for going off on wild goose chases, some students, especially when they were unprepared for the translations of the day, tried to bait George "to get him going" so he would abandon the task at hand and they'd be off the hook, no cross examinations that day. Sometimes the pre-meditated tangent-baiting worked, which annoyed me because I felt cheated out of the class. Moreover the results of these ploys designed to deflect the master from his craft were different from those when the search arose from George himself because his quest was fueled by a fundamental honesty and passion. The two were never the same.

When it came to translating specific passages of Plato, Virgil, Horace, Cicero, and all the rest we ran into, I never for a minute believed that George did not take the words and ethical sentiments of these authors seriously or failed to seriously evaluate their meaning for his life. He was in love with the poetry of their language, the idiosyncratic ways each of them expressed himself.

He called attention to issues surrounding the sense of duty in the *Aeneid* in the context of the word *pietas*. We spoke at length of the meaning of Aeneas' famous declaration to his Carthaginian queen Dido, "*sum pius Aeneas" (1.378*) and how this shipwrecked sailor filled with desire for her was torn between a regal future and the destiny his gods assigned to him. I believed George put himself in the place of these ancient actors and felt what they felt, woman and man alike.

This was certainly the case when he taught one of his favorite courses The Confessions of Saint Augustine. In his pantheon of favorites I think this course took precedence over even the *Georgics*, *Aeneid*, *Apology*, and *Crito*. George suffered aloud with Augustine especially when the repentant saint went off by himself to bewail his sins in Chapter Twelve of Book Eight. I don't mean to be disrespectful to your time here but so cherished are these Latin lines to some classicists that I dare present them in full: *ego sub quadam fici arbore stravi me nescio quomodo, et dimisi habenas lacrimis, et proruperunt flumina oculorum meorum, acceptabile sacrificium*

tuum, et non quidem his verbis, sed in hac sententia multa dixi tibi: "et tu, domine, usquequo? usquequo, domine, irasceris in finem? ne memor fueris iniquitatum nostrarum antiquarum." sentiebam enim eis me teneri. iactabam voces miserabiles: quamdiu, quamdiu 'cras et cras'? quare non modo? quare non hac hora finis turpitudinis meae?

These are lines that describe Augustine's description of his Saul-like-falling-off-the-horse transformation. In translation Augustine says, "I flung myself down under a certain fig tree—I do not know how—and gave free rein to my tears whereupon streams gushed from my eyes as an acceptable sacrifice to you. And though not in these very words, but to this effect, I cried to you: "And you, O Lord, how long? How long, O Lord? Will you be angry forever? Oh, remember not against us our former iniquities." For I felt that I was still enthralled by them. I sent up these sorrowful cries: "How long, how long? Tomorrow and tomorrow? Why not now? Why not this very hour make an end to my uncleanness?"

As with certain lines of Virgil George read these lines himself and with such feeling that I got the sense he was hinting about a transformation of his own. Maybe he had done something in the Army he was sorry for and not just with drink or women. He seemed to be looking to be cleansed himself that very hour.

And when we read Seneca's Letter to his friend Lucilius about his impending old age, George, only in his early 40s, projected a sense of what Seneca might have felt like as an aging man. Seneca tells Lucilius that wherever he turns he sees signs of his own aging. When he had gone to his suburban house outside Rome he saw a dilapidated place: a house falling apart, trees without leaves. He took his caretaker to task for this supposed lapse but the caretaker said he had done all that was possible. In a chiding tone Seneca retorts that, if he had been in charge, he would have cultivated the trees, watered them, taken better care of the place generally.

Openly the philosopher begins to wonder that, if the stones of his house were falling down at will, what was in store for the stones of his being? Then he sees an old man walking around the place and queries the famous, "quis est iste . . . decrepitus?" "Who is this decrepit old thing?" Pointedly the man responds, "Don't

you recognize me? I am Felicio; you used to bring me little *sigillaria* presents; I am the son of your caretaker Philositus; I once way your little darling."

It is a poignant passage, Seneca coming to the realization that things would no longer be the same, and George played upon his wistful concern, his caretaker's defensive response when his work ethic was challenged, and Felicio's surprise that Seneca does not recognize a past that once had great meaning for him. I took out this letter today and read it from its beginning to end as if I saw it yesterday, my dictionary nearly untouched. That is not me; that is the mark of a great teacher, the stones of a legacy that time has not been able to budge.

In our Virgil classes with George, whether the *Georgics* or the *Aeneid*, he would often ask one of us to read several lines in Latin before we began to translate, not to see if we could read the Latin correctly—we were far far beyond that—but to see if we read what we read with feeling, whether we felt the Latin. More often than not we would get chided for our failure to read the meter correctly and then George would take over to read the lines—exquisitely. He had the quintessential *baso profondo* voice and read with such feeling, conviction, and tone that it sounded as if one of the Monks of Solesmes was gently intoning modes of Gregorian chant. The words flowed forth so roundly, so mellifluously. Anyone who had had George for any class never failed to call attention to the beauty his voice showered on the texts.

And the content of these texts, as I already said, George took deep to heart. Though a practicing, religious Christian he inhaled the humanism of the Greek and Roman writers like the air he breathed. Translations were not the results of math problems solved; they revealed the truths of the ancients who helped civilization along. I felt somewhat vindicated in my assessment of George in this regard when I found among the archival papers a Letter to the Editor of the *Washington Star* he wrote in June 1976. In it he took to task a certain Robertson Davies, a Canadian "journalist, editor and scholar" who had made some disparaging statements about the ethical standards of the Romans in the May 30th edition of the paper.

In an interview called "A Mythmaker in the Age of Superstition" Davies expressed empathy toward Christianity because of its unconditional embrace of compassion; he said it had helped move humankind a step forward but the Romans,

well . . . and here he stuck his foot in his mouth. He said the Christian "attempt to behave with decency toward other people was a notion which would have been absolutely incredible to the Romans."

I would have paid a month's rent to have been sitting next to George when he first read these lines. I am sure I would have seen the veins jut from the neck of this Benemerenti Medal recipient. Even though he fully embraced a Christian social ethic he saw this as in no way contradictory to the ideals and practices of Greek and Latin poets and philosophers. George would have muttered to himself about the gall of the untruth as he reached for pen and pad to make his apology.

In his letter he retorted that, "A book could be written in refutation of this astounding assertion" which, if George had been working class, might have sounded more like, "What! Is this guy a moron!" He asked Davies and the readers of the *Star* whether they were aware of the Latin derivations for words such as pity and mercy. And was it not Lucretius, in his discussion of the evolution of societies, who said that since the very beginning people lived with a sense that "it was right for all to pity the weak."

And what about Dido, he asked, when the ship-wrecked Aeneas comes to her, thronged by his battered crew. She welcomes them with gracious modesty aware of her own history, humbly sharing, "*non ignara mali miseris succurrere disco*" (I, 630) "Myself no stranger to misfortune, I am learning to befriend the unfortunate." Forever the discerning linguist George tells the *Star's* readers, see, Virgil uses *disco*, the present tense of the verb; even for a queen hastening to the aid of another it is a continuing learning process. Then he adds, "These words . . . I have seen engraved over the entrance to a modern hospital in Rome." Virgil's description of a deeply human ethic had made its way into the twentieth century as if by a genetically transmitted trait.

My mentor gave similar examples from Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, Pliny the Younger, Quintilian, Epictetus and then called attention to that oft-quoted line from Book II of Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, "*Deus est mortali juvare mortalem*" which translates "For a creature who is subject to death to come to the aid of another subject to the same death, this is God." What an extraordinarily liberating—and

practical—theology! George might as well have been drawing a parallel between Pliny and the Russian anarchist, Peter Kropotkin, who nearly twenty centuries later described the ways of mutual aid that drove not only his being but life itself.

Hence we have to take with a grain of salt the assessment of Frederick Pethick-Lawrence, the one-time owner of the left-wing newspaper *The Echo*, of his classical training at Eton. In his autobiography, *Fate Has Been Kind* (1943) Pethick-Lawrence recalls, "If we were doing a Greek play, for instance, we got through some 20 lines only in each lesson; and all the stress was placed on our knowing the cases of the nouns and tenses of the verbs. . . Even the literal meaning of the sentences generally escaped me, and of the tremendous human issues of the drama I never had the foggiest notion. I suspect that only a tiny minority of my class-mates would have a different tale to tell." If I had sat next to little Freddie at Eton I would have been one of those dissenters. Yes there was a tremendous emphasis on language and its mechanics at CU but George never forgot to call our attention to the soul of what we were reading, to be better human beings.

During the period I studied at Catholic University it was believed by those in charge of the academic curriculum that students might become better human beings, certainly better students, if they passed a comprehensive exam as a prerequisite to graduating. Each of the departments tailored the exam to its own needs but in most cases the exam lasted three hours and was taken in one shot. In the case of the Greek and Latin Department, which was considered by many students to have the most stringent set of academic requirements—there was room for only one elective in the last two years of school—this tailoring resulted in three days of exams, each of four hours duration. And there was only Latin and Ancient History on the test, an extensive Greek grammar exam was given at the beginning of the senior or end of junior year, graded and commented on by George in a one-on-one meeting.

For some "the comps" were a source of great consternation because, without securing a passing grade, one's personal graduation plans were off. Once they were completed and passed, the finals in one's major were pro forma; the year was essentially over.

For us Greek and Latin majors a "pass" meant we could relax; George no longer had a mentor's hold on our lives except, that is, for an outing that he arranged and conducted for all graduating Greek and Latin majors each year.

This special day began with a visit to the incredibly beautiful gardens and buildings at Dumbarton Oaks situated in residential Georgetown, the centerpiece of which was a Federal-style house which Mr. and Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss purchased in 1920. After making several additions to the house in the next two decades the Bliss family gave it all, the gardens, the houses, and their bibliographic collections to Harvard University (1940). The place was, and is, a DC landmark so it was fitting that we ended our DC education there.

After our visit to Dumbarton Oaks, our special Greek and Latin commencement day would end with dinner at George's house for a Roman meal *ab ovo usque ad mala* (from soup to nuts) which he delighted in preparing and sharing tidbits about as each course was served. I always saw this dinner as another indication of George's generosity and love for his charges. And he was so proud to show us the little house he owned off Rock Creek Park with the beautiful garden in back because, as a young teacher, he had lived there as a boarder.

Brother Michael, Brother William, Brother Sean, and myself, Brother Adrian, the Greek and Latin Department's class of '63 had all been informed about the venture by those who preceded us so we looked forward to it with great joy. It was a day out of the house and an opportunity to spend time with George in a less formal vein. It would be like a day spent with a loving uncle, sans tension.

When we met George at the gardens we were all wearing smiles; the sun was radiant in the beautifully landscaped gardens which were designed by the famed landscape architect Beatrix Jones Farrand. She started her magnificent designs in 1927 and continued with them for 20 years. For years my father had been a gardener for several doctors and affluent businessmen and as a boy I went along to his jobs to help cultivate but this was the first time I had seen in person such incredibly sculpted landscapes, steps and walks running from garden to garden, pools, and secluded spaces filled with shade; it was as if the gardens at the Chateau de Versailles which I

had seen in books instantaneously came to life. I know my three colleagues felt the same.

As we entered the garden's main gate we saw on the right an extraordinary specimen of a spreading Katsura tree (*Cercidephyllum japonica*) whose branches moved out from its trunk horizontally some only a few feet from the ground. George commented on this and on each of the outstanding specimens we came across. He loved trees; for him it was as if segments of the *Georgics* had come to life.

We visited the Orangery, a small freestanding building that serves as a greenhouse during the winter months. Here having its way with the beams and walls was a creeping fig *(ficus pumila*) dating back to the 1860s. To the rear of this building was an outdoor seating area which is part of, and overlooks, the "Green Garden" that was once used for entertaining. This space is festooned with many exotic potted plants. I do not remember the exact course of our travels after this but we did visit the Beech Terrace, the Urn Terrace, and the Fountain Terrace and all the rest.

In addition to sharing the beauty of the gardens and buildings on this spectacular property, I'm sure one of the reasons George selected this site for our final excursion had to do with the many inscriptions that decorate the grounds. The majority of these reflect the humanist traditions that infused the lives of Robert and Mildred Bliss. There are dedications to individuals such as Farrand and Matthew Kearney as well as a number of maxims from literature that highlight the liberal arts ideals of the family.

For example, the initial words of the stone plaque to the right of the main entrance door (wall of the Garden Library) at thirty-second Street, reads "THOSE RESPONSIBLE FOR SCHOLARSHIP SHOULD REMEMBER THAT THE HUMANITIES CANNOT BE FOSTERED BY CONFUSING INSTRUCTION WITH EDUCATION." This brought me back to our very first day with George as we read in the *Pro Archia* Cicero's argument that the arts provided a place where the ears might be free from the docilizing din of the marketplace. The cornice of the frame surrounding the plaque reads "QUIESCIT—ANIMA—LIBRIS," or "The spirit finds rest in Books." How that has been true for me since I was nineteen.

In a stone bench on the hill overlooking the plantings in the Forsythia Garden, is chiseled from Canto XXVIII of Dante's *Purgatorio*, MA CON PIENA LETIZIA L'ORE PRIME CANTANDO RICEVIENO INTRA LE FOGLIE CHE TENEVAN BORDONE ALLE SUE RIME." When we arrived George read these words in his beautiful *baso profundo* Italian and translated it something like "but with full joy singing they [the little birds] received the early breezes among the leaves, which kept a burden to their rhymes."

When we arrived at the beautiful rose garden, flush with nearly a thousand rose bushes, we walked along slowly, admiring the colors and taking in the fragrances of the specimens already in bloom in Washington. When we came to the east side of the garden we espied upon a weather-worn stone bench that was built into a brick wall upon which is inscribed the Latin "*Quod severis metes*." This I later found out was the family motto of Mr. and Mrs. Bliss.

The five of us stood there admiring the bench, looking at the Latin, the four graduates trying to translate the simple phrase. We knew what was coming and in short order it did, "Well, Brothers, what does it say?" And there we continued to stand, pondering; we should have had it down immediately for it was a play on the words of Paul in his Letter to the Galatians, "*Quae enim seminaverit homo, haec et metet*." And these words I had read many times in Latin.

We stumbled a bit and George started to let the heat of the Washington sun get to him. I do not remember his words but they carried the message: you mean we just gave you a BA in Greek and Latin and you stand there like a band of silent crows! I got the sense that, if it had been in his power, he might have taken back our degrees on the spot, for a week or two at least to make a point. But I think at issue was that he thought he had failed, not done his job, because the words read, "As you sow, so also shall you reap." Was this his harvest!

We did get it of course and moved on and our mentor's brief, heightened excitement dissolved in the continuing displays of garden color.

That was the last time I saw George as an undergraduate. Two summers later when I took several courses at CU, as I mentioned, he remembered me but our

relationship was not the same. I had come to see that the worlds of full- and part-time students are two different worlds and that the relationships between professors and their mentored doctoral students are of a whole other order. I don't think you'll deem it odd if I say here that it crossed my mind far more than once that I should have studied for a doctorate with George, my imaginary committee tempered by the merciful tongue and wit of that other great CU classics teacher, Tom Halton. It was not to be; contemporary issues of justice claimed me.

Perhaps the greatness of a great man or woman is to be found not only in the deeds they do but in the ways those deeds carry over into the lives of others and enhance the goodness of the world for future generations. What can I say in my own case? What shall I say of George in me?

That I am a wordsmith? That I have loved language all my life since George, and have taken every opportunity possible to instill that love in others, and have evidence of its effects? Shall I say that I have always loved my students and given of myself to them wholly and oftentimes without pay and recognition? No not me, that is George in me.

I do know that from the very first day I had my own place, I had a copy of *Webster's Second* within reach and later, God forbid, *Webster's Third*. People are always commenting on its size. Who would want a dictionary that big when all the words any human being could ever speak or write can be found in a paperback abridgement? They do not see the George in me.

My wife, my children, my niece Mary Florence, now a Latin scholar in her own right, my sisters and brothers all take great pride in words; some of that comes from George in me. My family loves to play on words, we play word games. I have developed categories of "Wordsmith" that range from Level I to Level V and am sad to say that one young person in our family was demoted a level for failing to hone her lexicographical wits. I suppose that is George in me as well.

I still read Latin and Greek; my Loeb Classical Library bills continue to rise higher than I would like. I read in the original for fun, for my edification, and for meaning to see if there are other places and ways where *Deus est*. I am now

exploring Seneca's *De Clementia* for a presentation at a conference on justice in Rhode Island next year. George would be proud that I am still reminding the world, as he did Mr. Davies, that the ancient Greeks and Romans have helped move civilization ahead proportionately as well as Christianity has.

I will spare you the details but I have taught, officially, over the years kids ranging from Kindergarten to eighth-year PhD students; with them I have called attention to the words they use, hoping to kindle a love of language, to share the fire of George in me with them.

And when I briefly taught Latin in the City of Albany school system and the administrators and teachers made a fuss about calling me Doctor, I had no sense of what the kids made of the moniker until one morning, as I was entering the main entrance of the inner-city school, a fourth-grader sitting on the front stoop of the building saw me and shouted, "Hey, here come the Latin dude!"

Yes, me the Latin dude because George was the Latin, nay Greek and Latin, dude who resides in me. He was and remains for me—and I think I can say for lots who studied with him—that great doctor of insight, learning, passion, curiosity, devotion, and love who never failed to be there for his students, telling us in a hundred different ways that while on earth, despite our vast distinctions: we are all peers here.