



The Real Maya Angelou

Winston-Salem, North Carolina

Bill Clinton's choice of Hillary-pal Maya Angelou to write a poem to be read at his swearing-in is an ominous harbinger. If Clinton has any acquaintance with Angelou's literary and academic career, then the President has made it abundantly plain that he has no real interest in addressing our current crisis in higher education.

Angelou has gained attention as a columnist for *Playgirl*, a poet (*I Shall Not Be Moved, Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diie*), a screenwriter (*Georgia, Georgia*), and the author of not one but five autobiographies (including *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*). Her favorite subjects include life as a single mother, life in Berkeley, her own rape, and traveling to Ghana to "teach African dance and music" to the native Africans. She describes herself in interviews and books as a former madam, prostitute, burlesque stripper, and adviser to Malcolm X.

In 1982, Angelou, whose real name is Marguerite Johnson, was appointed "Professor for Life" by North Carolina's Wake Forest University. Angelou's name and photograph appear year after year—with the title "Distinguished Professor of American Studies"—in Wake Forest's admissions applications, its annual reports to trustees and alumni, and the alumni magazine—but she has no meaningful responsibilities at the university. She collects an annual salary well into the six figures, yet presently teaches no classes and has no on campus office. The office listed for her in the Wake Forest telephone directory is a storage closet in a building far from the main part of campus. Her phone number gives an electronic voice mail recording that announces only the extension number; calls to it are not returned.

The registrar's office says Angelou is

offering no courses at all this academic year, and isn't sure when she may be in the classroom again. Her personal secretary, who operates out of Angelou's mammoth colonial mansion in Winston-Salem, unapologetically stresses that the poet is "never on campus," and says she doesn't know whether Angelou will be teaching again in the future. (Imagine the luxury of receiving a salary of well over \$100,000 from an employer who doesn't care whether you show up for work and has no idea whether or not you will ever come back.)



In the rare years when Angelou has condescended to offer a course, her lectures have been infrequent and erratic. Angelou herself has said she teaches "whatever comes to mind." Her schedule is sometimes interrupted by appearances on such television programs as "The Arsenio Hall Show" and "The Today Show." And there is even some ambiguity about what Angelou is *supposed* to teach at Wake Forest, for classes with the "American Studies" name or division are non-existent.

Recently, Angelou told me of a class she has been developing for the past few years

called "The Philosophy of Liberation." The thesis of the course, she says, is that "most people do not want change—they want exchange. By that, I mean they just want what their adversary has. If a person wants freedom, he just wants that freedom to be able to put his foot on the neck of the person who gave him his freedom."

When I asked her about her salary in proportion to the time she spends in the classroom, she replied that those who raise such questions "don't understand the politics of a university." Angelou does: Wake Forest could hire four real professors with the money they're paying her! Students are not even permitted to select her courses. Pursuant to special authority granted by the Wake Forest administration, Angelou's classes are *by invitation only*. The registrar informs students that they must "audition" with Professor Angelou for the rare openings.

Three decades ago, President Kennedy, at his inaugural, treated America to the genius of Robert Frost, whose life was one gigantic poetic achievement after another. Where JFK offered us genius, Clinton gave us a phantom professor with a broom-closet office and an assumed name. More than that, he gave us a clear message that the White House has no interest in facing the problems that are destroying our universities.

Meanwhile, Thomas K. Hearn, Wake Forest's president, had arranged for a large-screen TV to be placed in the student center so Angelou's appearance at the ceremony could be seen on campus. One student remarked that, in fact, this was one of the rare times Angelou had ever been seen on campus at all.

—John Meroney

(Mr. Meroney is a senior at Wake Forest and editor of the Wake Forest Critic.)

Grits and Glitz

Historians will record that the 1993 Clinton inauguration actually began the year before in early November. Scarcely had the votes been counted when lobbyists, pitchmen, political groupies, and Democratic hopefuls began to flood Washington, D.C. Suddenly the capital's fashionable hotel lounges and watering holes were crammed with overweight, backslapping, pinkie-ringed redneck hustlers from Southern and border states and some of the more remote backwaters of the Midwest, all with something to buy from or sell to the incoming administration.

Hard on the heels of the slick-hick brigade came the bi-coastal limousine liberal set. Film stars, record and studio executives, media moguls and Wall Street operators, they all shared two things in common: conspicuous consumption and conspicuous uncton, their minks, diamonds, stretch limos, flaunted riches and appalling manners apparently rendered politically correct by their willingness to call for more middle-class sacrifice. Bringing up the rear came the special interest groups. At least this bunch was sincere; they had worked hard to elect Bill Clinton and he had bent over backwards to accommodate their desires. Agree with them or not, they *really* had something to celebrate.

But there is something sad and ridiculous about the milling mobs of shrill ultra-feminists, in-your-face gay militants, well-heeled homeless advocates, designer-attired environmentalists, and self-serving ethnic hucksters. As I mentioned to a lesbian on her way to an unofficial gay inaugural ball being held in—of all places—the National Press Club, “I’m an Armenian myself, but I don’t think I’d be particularly thrilled to spend an entire inaugural night in a ballroom crammed full of nothing but other Armenians.”

The administration that had boasted of fielding a cabinet that “looked like America” had produced an inaugural turnout that looked as if it had been recruited exclusively from Hollywood, Manhattan, Cambridge, and Dogpatch. The middle had dropped out of Bill

Clinton’s inaugural America. But then what should we have expected from a President who looks like a cross between the young W.C. Fields and a dissipated version of the Pillsbury Doughboy, and a Vice President so wooden he may be the first official in the history of the Republic to die in office of Dutch Elm Disease?

Minding my own business and heading for a stirrup cup in the Fairfax Bar at the Ritz Carlton—the Vice President’s boyhood home—I nearly collided with a dumpy little figure encased in a dark hood and cape. Emerging from the shadows under the hood was the unmistakable Streisand honker. Elsewhere in the lobby, Lauren Bacall was being rude to someone and Warren Beatty was doing his pathetic best to look intelligent while carrying on a political conversation.

Fortunately, the Dewar’s and soda flowed freely, the music was mellow, and, being on friendly terms with the beleaguered barmaids, I was given splendid service and soon was dreamily looking forward to four years of exuberant attack journalism. Between the pudgy First Pol, his contentious consort Hurricane Hillary, and the vice-presidential First Tree, there should be no end of fun.

Every twelve years or so, I reckoned, people need to be reminded of just how awful Democratic administrations can be, and Republicans need a sabbatical to shed deadwood, recharge their batteries, and draw a fresh bead on their old, eternal enemy, Big Brother. As the night of the living white trash turned to dawn, I edged past a carping middle-aged couple who had misplaced their stretch limo, spotted a familiar Pakistani cab driver—a fellow admirer of the late, great Mohammed Ali Jinnah—and reached home just as the sun was rising on the first day of Bill Clinton’s decline.

—Aram Bakshian, Jr.

(Mr. Bakshian is editor-in-chief of American Speaker.)

PILGRIM IN THE RUINS

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forms, including six tightly crafted novels and a sophisticated theory of language elaborated in two books of philosophical nonfiction and assorted posthumously published lectures—is that the contemporary, “postmodern” mishmash of residual Christian ethics and regnant scientific methodology leaves us without a coherent theory of man. There is no consensus to animate the culture and give meaning to life, certainly no consensus of the sort Percy uncovered at Saranac:

the belief that man was created in the image of God with an immortal soul, that he occupied a place in nature somewhere between the beasts and the angels, that he suffered an aboriginal catastrophe, the Fall, in consequence of which he lost his way and, unlike the beasts, became capable of sin and therefore became a pilgrim or seeker of his own salvation . . .

At about the time Percy was writing that spare description of his adopted worldview (1974), he was entering the worst spiritual crisis of his own pilgrimage, one that would culminate in the publication of his fourth novel, *Lancelot* (1977), a bitter yet faintly hopeful rant about the reality and presence of evil. Although never precisely autobiographical, Percy’s novels, as Tolson shows, “grew out of states of mind—psychological, moral, and spiritual predicaments—through which he himself had passed.” After *Lancelot*, he referred to himself obliquely as “an ex-suicide.”

Percy’s deeply conservative vision always got mixed reviews, and he usually had mixed feelings about the many critics who, as Caroline Gordon had said, “just don’t get it”—even if their obtuseness gave an ironically gratifying vindication of his theory about the “postmodern predicament.” Nonetheless, by the time he died, at his home in Covington on May 10, 1990 (of the “metastases from prostate carcinoma” that he blandly reported to Shelby Foote the previous year), Walker Percy knew that his life had been favored with great good luck. Except that by then he had every reason to call it by a different name: grace. □