College Dean Austin Quigley: Spontaneity, Literary Theory and the Core

BY COLIN MORRIS

T he show-stopping moment of this year’s Varsity Show was Columbia College Dean Austin Quigley’s surprise cameo role as himself. During the play, which celebrated its 110th season this year, Quigley formally announced that the University would not, in fact, be relocating to Connecticut, as was previously suggested in the play. “If there’s one thing we’ve learned,” he declared, “it’s that you can try to take the Columbia out of New York, but you can never take the New York out of Columbia!”

It’s fairly astonishing that between involvement in the planning and implementation of a new science course in the Core curriculum and publishing a book on literary theory, the dean found the time to play a role in the Varsity Show. Yet it’s the very nature of performance that the Varsity Show. Yet it’s the very nature of performance that underlies the interaction between the players and producers and the audience.

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The pedagogical approach to a constantly evolving project underlies the dean’s academic goals, influencing his view of the College and particularly its Core curriculum. Predictable outcomes were a cause for literary theory’s stark decline in popularity over the last 10 years, Quigley explains in his new book, Thematic Inquiry: Language, Linguistics, and Literature (Yale University Press, 2004). The book argues that one of the main faults of literary theory in the last three decades has been its reduction to a balkanized series of ideologies that precluded critical inquiry from finding any acts of unpredictable discoveries in the literature under review. The process of interpreting a text became a means by which theorists could simply promote their predetermined claims, effectively eliminating the capacity of the text to surprise or enlarge understanding.

“I came into the discipline when theory had begun to be viewed as the potential answer to all of our questions,” Quigley said. “And like many other global logics and comprehensive explanatory techniques, it rose and fell fairly rapidly. In many quarters theory became another mechanism for promoting ideological claims of various kinds. And theory, as a series of methodological mechanisms mechanically applied, lost its credibility because of that.”

To understand how literary theory arrived at this perilous position, Quigley draws parallels to the work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure who was seminal in creating such a structural theory of language that left unexplained many aspects of language.

This approach, said Quigley, has many detractors who “say that all the complex stuff dismissed as background noise or unimportant variation is significant because it registers the varying nature of linguistic order, which is, in fact, where significant aspects of agency, creativity and responsibility are located. And that’s a huge chunk of language to overlook. So linguistic theory ended up confronting the same challenge as literary theory, trying to figure out how theory can serve to illuminate what it cannot necessarily accommodate. Rules, we have to remember, can be played with as well as played by.”

Quigley’s answer to the shortcoming is to ask whether theory failed the literary profession or whether the profession failed theory by deploying it in impoverished ways. What is needed, he argues, is a direct link between the diverse theoretical voices, creating a pluralistic avenue with “illuminating access to the unexplored.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, Quigley’s pluralistic view is reflected in his notion of the College curriculum as well. “There is a direct link between the interests here in the book and how we conceive of the undergraduate curriculum. The Core curriculum, said Quigley, was never intended to be an ideological training ground, despite the word ‘Core,’ which implies not a common set of beliefs but rather a common educational experience that offers students the technical and practical knowledge they need to think outside as well as inside each framework. In Newman’s phrase, they end up possessed by, rather than in possession of their knowledge, and then they’re not inquiring into knowledge, they’re illustrating received beliefs,” he said.

Quigley stressed that the texts used in Core courses do not fit the caricature of a unified set of beliefs of dead white males who all agree with each other. “In fact, each writer earns a place in a tradition by having something new and different to say, and we keep a tradition alive by supplementing the questions and answers of the past with those of the present. In the Core’s small seminar format, for faculty and students alike, it is often not a matter of finding out what the right answers are to questions raised, but what is the right question to be raising,” he said. In such a situation it is helpful to have a collaborative taught course involving faculty from several disciplines, he said.

The pedagogical approach of using multiple frameworks of inquiry to arrive at new conclusions also has figured in the design of the new science course for the Core: Frontiers of Science. Collaborative and interdisciplinary inquiry has become increasingly important in the past few years, he said, citing the example of environmental and conservation studies, which require familiarity with many disciplines, such as climatology, oceanography, chemistry, astronomy, physics, economics and biology.

Keeping in mind the science faculty designed the new Core course to be taught by several faculty, members of which give several lectures on the research at the frontiers of a given field and then teach a lab section in which students actively engage in quantitative reasoning and collaborative experimental inquiry.

PHOTO BY EILEEN BARROSO

On May 20, the newly restored Hamilton Hall, home to Columbia College, was formally rededicated. Derek Witter, dean of Alumni Affairs and Development, spoke to some 200 faculty, students, donors, alumni and families about the history of the project. Hamilton, built in 1905 and designed by the renowned architectural firm of McKim, Mead and White, was restored by local architects R.M. Kliment and Frances Haljand. Among the many changes were the restoration of the two Tiffany stained glass windows and the addition of marble flooring and light fixtures in turn-of-the-century style. A 150-square-foot glass pavilion was added as a new entrance to the building’s admissions office.

President Lee C. Bollinger noted that the project made a powerful statement about the College’s progress and its centrality to the University. Dean Austin Quigley spoke on the history of the centerpiece of the College and its importance as a home to the Core curriculum.

Guests were then taken on a tour of the new admissions office and classrooms and viewed the Tiffany windows, which depict Virgil and Sophocles.

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Columbia Trustee Robert Kraft Wins Yet Another ‘Super Bowl’

At a luncheon on May 17, Robert K. Kraft, CC ’63, and Myra Kraft were honored with Columbia’s first-Owner of the New England Patriots, winners of two NFL Super Bowls in the past three years, Kraft recently completed a 12-year term as a Trustee of the University. Shown here, from left, are President Lee C. Bollinger, Robert and Myra Kraft, Columbia head football coach Bob Shoop and David J. Stern, chair of the Trustees and NBA commissioner.

PHOTO BY EILEEN BARROSO