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TEACHING IN THE TWILIGHT

"Lust and learning," Katherine once said. "That's really all there is, isn't it?"
–John Edward Williams, Stoner

If this morning had been a year ago, I wouldn't be sitting in my study watching a squirrel trying to leap onto the bird feeder. I'd be halfway into my morning class. Since it's early in the semester, we'd probably be studying Spanish Romanticism and reading the essay Mariano José de Larra wrote a few weeks before killing himself. I'm not in class this March morning because I taught for the last time in the fall. I'm on what is called, ominously, a terminal leave. Come July 1, I will be officially retired, fifty years after teaching my first Spanish class.

When I decided to embark on a career as a college professor, it never occurred to me that teaching would become the most meaningful part of my career. In graduate school and for years afterward, teaching was drudgery, dues-paying, a chore I had to get through to do my real job, which was writing scholarly books and articles. As a young professor, I thought about my classes as little as possible. If the class went well, I was pleasantly surprised. If it didn't, I shrugged it off and headed for the library. As I approached middle age, the rewards of scholarship began to pale before the thrill of spending hours every week talking about literature (and therefore life) with undergraduates.

October 23, 2021. For the last few weeks, I've been listening to Sinatra's recording of Johnny Mercer's "Empty Tables." Singing to empty tables: what I will be doing in a few weeks. Addressing a gallery of ghosts, as in the song. I became a teacher before I became a writer, a husband, a father. Marriages, moves, publications have come and gone. Through it all the constant has been teaching.

There's a special poignancy to teaching books you love for the last time. It's like saying goodbye to an old friend; even more, like leaving a place

you have been happy knowing that you will never return. During my last semester, this happened every day. I spent fourteen weeks saying goodbye. When I taught García Márquez's *El coronel no tiene quien le escriba*, I knew this was the last time I would read about the Colonel's fruitless waiting. The novella, like other books, is so much a part of my teaching life that reading it without students seems sad and pointless, like dancing without music. Sometimes, as I bade farewell to students in the final class of a semester, I would repeat a line by T. S. Eliot: "You are the music while the music lasts." I did not anticipate the meaning Eliot's line would acquire in retirement.

September 8, 2021. I've been teaching for half a century, and I still feel like a beginner. As if the next class I teach, which will be the last class I teach, will be the first class I teach. There may be tricks to teaching a foreign language or freshman composition, but there are no tricks to teaching a novel or a poem.

On the opening day of the semester, I used to feel like Julie McCoy, the cruise director on *The Love Boat*. All smiles, I greeted the students one by one as they walked in, some of them eager, others unsure. I introduced myself, made a joke or two about speaking too fast (I'm Cuban, you see), and then we were off, setting a course for adventure.

For this to happen, I had to lose my fear of students, of their dislike. Early on, when I mainly taught required classes, I assumed the students didn't want to be there (this was true) and that, as a result, they didn't want to be there *with me* (this was not). Little by little I realized that students wanted to like me. Who wants to spend fourteen weeks on a cruise with someone you don't like? After this lesson sunk in (even PhDs learn from experience), I was no longer on my guard during class. If I got the urge to be silly, I got silly. If I wanted to tell an off-color joke, I told it. If I didn't feel like teaching that day, I didn't, and we talked about whatever was in the air or on our minds. It could be last Saturday's football game or the tie I was wearing or why that boy in the front row had a UNC baseball cap (I was teaching at Duke at the time). I remember fondly classes like

these when I didn't teach, yet my students and I learned. Another lesson: A teacher is not in control of his teaching. Some of our best lessons are those we don't intend and didn't prepare. Julie McCoy makes for a better role model than Capt. Stubbing.

May 17, 2019. The Hispanic Cultures class didn't go well this semester. I'm not sure why. I can teach the identical course in successive semesters, or even two sections of the same course in the same semester, and one class turns out great, and the other doesn't. Sometimes in the middle of a semester I notice that one class is humming and the other one is sputtering. I don't know the reason or what to do about it. It also happens that a class that starts splendidly ends badly, or that a class for which my expectations were low suddenly shifts into high gear. Was it something I did? The year? The day? The weather? The outcome of the football or basketball season? I never know.

Teaching fosters contradictory impressions: the illusion that time does not pass (because the students are always the same age); the reality that time does pass (I look at myself in the mirror). By now I've taught three generations of Americans. In the beginning, I belonged to the same generation as my students; a couple of decades later I became part of their parents' generation; another twenty years went by like flashcards, and now I'm as old as their grandparents. I haven't noticed any substantial difference between the generations. True, they used to know things they don't know now. Years ago, I could mention names like Cervantes or Melville and assume that students in my Spanish American literature class had read, or at least heard of, *Don Quijote* or *Billy Budd*. Now I can't. I console myself by thinking this doesn't mean they know less than earlier generations. They just know different things, things of which I am totally ignorant.

A few years ago, a group of students and I gave each other an in-class cultural literacy quiz. We agreed beforehand that the subject of the quiz would be American culture. So, the students got together to create a questionnaire; my wife (Mary Anne) and I also got together (we've been together for a while actually) and did the same. We asked questions about George Gershwin and Doris Day and Mickey Mantle, and the

students asked about Taylor Swift (I got that one: my granddaughter was a fan), Beyoncé (a faint idea), memes (no idea). I have to admit the students outperformed me. I did have one shining moment, purely by accident. One of their questions: what is the most famous line in *Notting Hill*? As Cuban luck would have it, Mary Anne and I had seen the movie the evening before, and I remembered the bookstore scene when Julia Roberts says to Hugh Grant, "I'm just a girl, standing in front of a boy, asking him to love her."

October 4, 2018. I need to retire from teaching so I can begin my education.

As retirement approached, I found myself teaching with more urgency, stubborn urgency. I rushed headlong into each session. I wanted to tell my students all I knew, leave nothing unsaid or unasked. What's the use of knowing anything if you can't share it? I taught my sense of urgency too, this somewhat groundless fear that I may not get another chance to tell them. After discussing "Rhapsody for a Mule," by the Cuban poet José Lezama Lima, I woke up in the middle of the night with one thought: I'm the mule, stubborn and sterile. When you are leading students toward a destination, sometimes it takes every resource of your pedagogical GPS (in my case, GPF). With every wrong turn they make, you want to seize the steering wheel, but you have to let the class find its own way, no matter how circuitous the route. When the discussion strayed in those last years, I'd tell myself, *I don't have time for this* and then rush to tell the students where I wanted them to go. I should have remembered Auden: "Perhaps there is only one cardinal sin: impatience. Because of impatience we were driven out of Paradise, because of impatience we cannot return."

April 12, 2019. The best classes teach themselves. A student will say something, which prompts other students to speak, which prompts me to add my two cents' worth, and so on for a glorious hour. Twenty heads are better than one, even if the one head belongs to me.

Except for a year I spent as a TA in an English department, I have always taught in Spanish. Shortly after arriving at Columbia, I was asked to teach a course called "Literature Humanities," a survey that began with Homer and ended with Virginia Woolf. I'd been teaching in Spanish for almost thirty years, but I agreed to teach the class partly because it would force me to read books I'd never read before, partly because I thought it'd be interesting to teach in English. It was interesting, but I never tried it again. English was a foreign language. I found myself using words in class I'd never used in a class. I said "fate" and "sojourn" and "heroic quest." Each time, I engaged in a hesitant act of naming. I would think of something in Spanish and then search for the English vehicle, which always felt new and untested. It was exciting to teach the "Great Authors," but I have great authors of my own, and they write in Spanish.

The mother tongue, and only tongue, of my classes is Spanish. Functioning collectively in a foreign language, even if many students haven't mastered it, creates a sense of apartness that is important to me. Since my life outside the classroom unfolds in English, speaking Spanish for several hours a week nourishes my dodgy identity as a Cuban who has lived most of his life in the US. When I walk into a room full of Spanish words I want to utter and hear, it feels like a homecoming, a reprieve from exile. My classroom, my island.

Email from a student: "Miss you! I'm in sunny Cuba and you're not!!!"

According to Borges, philosophy is a branch of fantastic literature. Less clever but more likely: teaching is a subgenre of autobiography. It's not enough to teach what I know. I also teach who I am. Regardless of the subject, I teach my sensibility, my attitudes, my preferences, my way of thinking. If I do my job well, who I am and what I teach merge. I cannot read Austen's *Emma* without the ghostly presence of the professor with whom I read it as an undergraduate. I cannot edit a student's essay without the impression that the professors who edited mine are guiding my hand. Harold Bloom wrote somewhere that there

is no method except yourself. This is not generally true, but it is true of teaching. Years ago, on the last day of class, a student told me that he was taking with him a part of me. It's the most flattering compliment I have ever gotten.

September 1, 2018. One night in the 1990s, I went to bed a Young Turk and woke up the next morning an Old Fart.

When you're lucky enough to have a good class, the students themselves become the subject. They are the music. You are teaching a course on the novel, and as the semester progresses, everyone becomes a character in a fiction of the class's making. Each student acquires a personality, a defining quirk: the one who always asks the off-the-wall question; the one who never likes any of the books; the one who always agrees with you; the one who never agrees with you. And then there's the one in the back row who never says anything, and her silence turns into a motive for eloquence. In the best classes, the students' interaction with one another and with you heightens intimacy, which does not depend on any knowledge of their lives outside of class. As far as you are concerned, their only lives are here, in this classroom, as your students; and for them your only life is here, in this classroom, as their professor.

April 30, 2017. I've stopped attending departmental meetings. No regrets. A departmental meeting is a gathering of highly educated people where everyone speaks, no one says what they mean, and they all understand one another.

For most of my career I've not only taught students how to read with alertness to nuances of phrasing, meaning, and intention, but I've also provided them with information about authors, aesthetic movements, historical contexts. This information was available in the library but where to look wasn't always obvious. I kept in mind a Latin phrase I learned in graduate school: *Intellectum tibi dabo.* I bring you news.

Post-Wikipedia, there was little point in providing information that the student can access with a couple of clicks of the mouse. Even if some students were too lazy or uninterested to click, I couldn't bring myself to repeat information so easily accessible elsewhere. And so, in the world according to Google, my teaching also changed, but not for the worse. Since I could no longer fall back on background to fill in the foreground, I had to work harder to generate enough ideas about a work to make the class satisfying.

Some years ago, I learned that it was helpful to begin every session by talking. Nothing long, just a few minutes (I don't lecture, though at times I preach). I'd recap the last class, tell them about something that occurred to me after that last class (hardly a semester went by that I didn't write *l'esprit de l'éscalier* on the board), and then preview what we'd be doing today. Since in my seminar classes participation contributed significantly to the final grade, it was tempting to let them make the first move, but even with eager, talkative students, the period went better if I first addressed the group to have them coalesce as a whole. On a typical day I would get to the classroom a few minutes early, chitchat with the early birds, and once everyone had arrived, launch into my warm-up. If the discussion went well, I didn't need to rely on my notes at all.

August 15, 2020. Putting together the syllabus for the Cuento class, I realize that when I began to teach this class many of the authors were still alive. Now most of them are dead.

Worried that I would run out of material, for many years I asked the students to read more pages than we could cover. Over the years, the amount of reading steadily decreased. One short story or poem, if properly gone into, generates enough food for thought and topics for discussion to fill a class session, sometimes more. Occasionally at the beginning of a semester, a dutiful student would come up to me to verify that all he had to read for the next Tuesday was a six-page story by Borges. I'd explain that the real assignment is twelve pages because he needs to read the story at least twice. Then I'd repeat my mantra: "Es mejor hacer más con menos que menos con más." "It's better to do

more with less than less with more." The line became a running joke. I'd be talking to a student in my office about her honors thesis, telling her that she has to narrow its scope, and she would say, "Sí, ya sé, más con menos." "Yes, I know, more with less."

November 30, 2017. My first cheating scandal. In response to requests from some students, I began allowing them to write their in-class exams on their laptops. I did it as much for me as for them. I didn't want to continue straining my eyes trying to decipher handwriting that resembles Mayan hieroglyphs. I warned them that they needed to disconnect from the internet while they were taking the exam and only reconnect to email me the exam before they left the classroom. The supremely obvious didn't occur to me: they did not have to use the internet to access their class notes. A couple of weeks later, chatting with a couple of the women (I want to write "girls") in the class, they hinted that some of their classmates had cheated on the first exam. The night before the second exam, I emailed the class to say that I thought the exam would be fairer for everybody if nobody was allowed to write the answers on the computer. W.'s grade dropped from a B to a C, a little surprising but not all that unusual. T.'s grade, however, dropped from an A+ to a B-.

Morning and midday classes are no match for those held in the late afternoon. One would think the opposite would be the case since, in the morning, both students and instructor are fresher. And it's true that morning classes tend to be upbeat, lively, fast moving. Words come more easily, brighter things occur to everyone. Yet my favorite time for teaching is dusk. Late afternoon classes tend to lack the energy of morning classes, but they compensate by being more thoughtful, meditative. In the blue hour, the hallways are no longer bustling with students. The creeping darkness promotes intimacy. For most students, this will be the last class of the day. They may be tired, but they're also relaxed. It doesn't matter if the class runs long because they have no other class to rush to. You have time to take your time, to linger over a word, to digress. If the day was made for working and the night was made for loving, the twilight was made for teaching.

Maugham, in *The Moon and Sixpence*: "An appeal to the emotions is little likely to be effectual before luncheon." This may be why I found morning classes less compelling. Literature is aesthetic, not anesthetic. It should stir you, get under your skin. Plato feared poetry because it fed and watered the passions. A literature teacher's job is to do what Plato feared. You want to make them think, but even more, you want to make them feel. In a literature class, hot is better than cold.

May 1, 2020. My memory isn't what it used to be, but I think I've gotten better as a teacher. Even my Spanish has improved with age. To judge from the evaluations, I'm still enthusiastic about what I teach (easy: I teach only what I like). Two years away from retirement, maybe I'm finally hitting my stride.

I have a friend who shadowboxes in his office to get himself ready for class, as if his students were adversaries in a match of intellectual fisticuffs. I listen to boleros. Ten or fifteen minutes before class, I look up on YouTube sentimental ballads about ill-fated love affairs. The Spanish poet Pedro Salinas, who knew a thing or two about pedagogy and romance, says in one of his poems, "Actos de amor, actos de conocimiento." "Acts of love, acts of knowledge." Every semester I latch onto one song that I play before the twenty-eight class meetings. Last semester, it was "Como yo te amé," a song by the Mexican composer Armando Manzanero, in which the singer tells a former lover that she will never know how much he loved her. I listened to the version with the lyrics on the screen because one of the choruses includes a quadruple rhyme that always gives me a kick. Last year, it was "Cómo es posible," a bolero composed by the Cuban composer Concha Valdés Miranda about the excesses of love. By the time I walk into the class, I'm wearing my heart on my sleeve. I'm ready to cry, to bleed, to spend myself. The title of a novel by Zoé Valdés pops into my head: *Te di la vida entera.* I gave you all I had.

Listening to boleros is part of an elaborate before-class routine, which involves not only reading over my notes and tearing out a sheet to take attendance but also acts of personal grooming: spritzing

cologne, gulping an energy drink, popping a couple of breath mints. I make sure that my bald spot is somewhat less visible and that my tie is neatly knotted. (I dress up for class. It's my way of signaling that the occasion is important to me.) And then there's the trip to the bathroom that bullfighting lingo terms "la meadita del torero," the matador's little pee. (It's not good to be gored with a full bladder.) Whatever else I may not be, I intend to remain a neat old man, like the one in Hemingway's story, who drinks without spilling.

December 1, 2021. After my second class yesterday, I said to myself: "You will never feel like this again." A week from now, when I will have taught my last class, I will grieve for all the students I'm no longer teaching and all the ones I won't be able to teach.

The career of a teacher is depressing because its fruits are invisible. You plant the seed, and rarely are you there to see it grow. Or maybe the indelible mark you thought you had made was as ephemeral as your scratchings on the blackboard. Sometimes students say that they will stay in touch. By the time they do, you've forgotten who they are.

As compensation, there are so many moments that could not happen anywhere but in a classroom. In my Latin-American Literature survey, a student who had arrived from Cuba a few years earlier once asked whether he could recite a poem by Neruda to the class. I said I'd put it up for a vote, and of course, the class said yes. I sat down and he came to the front of the room. He explained that he had recited this poem to his girlfriend in Cuba at a public function and that as he was coming to the end, he approached her to say the last line: "Porque te quiero, amor, a sangre y fuego." "Because I love you, love, through blood and fire." After that day, he never saw her again because he left Cuba soon after. I don't know what prompted Gleider to want to recite the sonnet to the class, and I'm not sure how much the other students understood since he was speaking mile-a-minute Spanish, but his affective response to literature is what I wish for every student. When Gleiber finished, his classmates gave him a loud round of applause. Though we still had time left, there was nothing to do but dismiss the class.

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December 7, 2019. Culture Wars in my Cuba class. On Thursday I did a "Best" and "Worst," which prompted the feminist and antifeminist women to go after one another apropos of The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love. *The three young men in the class stayed out of it and I tried, lamely, to arbitrate while pretending to be neutral. The Latinas got into it too, about the oppression in Latin America. It got uncomfortable, at least for me. Good thing we only have one more class.*

Every semester, students break your heart. You love them and they leave you. Over and over, they leave you. How often does it happen that in the course of a couple of hours, you say goodbye to forty people? That's what happens at the end of every semester. A few of the students will take another class with you, but the vast majority vanishes into the campus or the world. You're tired, you're talked out, you want it to end, but you don't want to lose them. And yet you do.

On the last day of class, after I have distributed the final exam and taken care of any pending business, I say to my students: "A class is a marriage with an expiration date." I want them to feel bereft too. A week or two later, after final exams, I prowl the deserted campus looking for a familiar face. Acts of mourning are as central to teaching as they are to loving.

March 7, 2022. Throughout the years I have dreamed about teaching. Often they were not pleasant dreams. I would forget my notes, or get lost on the way to the class, or walk into an empty classroom. In the months since my retirement, I've been dreaming about teaching constantly. Last night, asleep at three o'clock in the morning, I was teaching my Hispanic Cultures course in an open-air amphitheater, something that of course I never did. In the middle of an explanation of what I called una palabra rara, *a jargony word,* intertextualidad, *someone not in the class, a fellow that in waking life I had known in graduate school, interrupted me to say that he didn't understand how the concept applied to works of art. I used an example from paintings that I liked to include in that course: the fallen warrior with arms outspread in Picasso's* Guernica *and the man*

about to be shot in Goya's Los fusilamientos del tres de mayo. *I was in my element, thoroughly enjoying myself. Then I woke up.*

I could not have predicted that teaching would occupy such a large part of my dream life in retirement. I'm glad it does. I hope it continues. Not every man is a teacher in his dreams, but I am.

In an in-person class (in Spanish they're called *presenciales*), the students coalesce even as they retain their own individuality. This collective identity is much harder to achieve in an online class because it's like Hollywood Squares. They occupy their little squares on my screen, and I'm Peter Marshall. When I'm staring at twenty faces in boxes, it's hard to tell what they will respond to. Since their audio is muted except when they speak, I can't tell whether my jokes got chuckles or groans. Instead of a fluid give-and-take, staccato interventions become the norm. The best classes enact Wilkie Collins's formula for fictional plots: you make them laugh, you make them cry, you make them wait. In a virtual class, most of what the students do is wait.

One thing did change for the better. My custom at Columbia was to have office hours after my classes, but rarely did anybody come to see me. Students had other things to do than sit with me in a fourth-floor walk-up office with the noise of sirens and car horns and jackhammers filtering in through the blinds. But after almost every Zoom class, I met with students, singly or in small groups. Confined because of the pandemic, they had more time and fewer ways to occupy it, even if some of them were Zooming from faraway places like Switzerland and Costa Rica. Released from my usual two-hour commute, I too had more time. Our online meetings had an informality unlike that of meetings in my office.

Chatting with students, I was at home in Chapel Hill, comfortable in my reading chair, occasionally sipping scotch, with the trees in the backyard visible through the windows. They were in their own home or apartment, with posters, paintings, ballet slippers, and whatever else was hanging on their walls. Even some of their parents, siblings, and pets got on the Zoom calls with me. I did not expect to get to know students better online than in person. What the classes lacked, the after-class conversations made up for.

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January 18, 2022. Today would have been the first day of classes. In graduate school and for years afterward, I used to think that I was the dumbest one in the room. Then I discovered that sometimes I was the smartest one in the room. It mattered. Now it doesn't matter, because I'm the only one in the room.

This morning I removed from my desktop the folders "My Classes," where I kept syllabi and exams, and "My Students," where I kept recommendations, some of them going back more than twenty years, and scans of annotated term papers. I don't know what I'm going to do with my class notes, however. They take up a large part of a closet in my daughter's old room. Throw them out, I suppose, but they trace my history as a teacher, as do the marginalia in the beat-up copies of books I began teaching as a graduate student, and which I don't think I'll ever discard. My class files, I realize, contain the only hand-written notes I've taken over the last decade or so. The few times I tried typing class notes, I wrote too much and in complete sentences.

Come to think of it, I also don't know what to do with my ties, my dress shirts, my jackets, my suits. The cologne I can probably still use.

In John Williams's *Stoner* (1965), Stoner's English professor tells him that he is going to be a teacher. Are you sure? Stoner asks. And Sloane replies: yes, because you are in love. In me, as in Stoner, this love developed unexpectedly and gradually. For most of my career, I would not have said I loved literature. Even after I started to like to teach, I doubt I would've said I loved literature. I looked at my profession as writing about literature: love had nothing to do with it. It was only in middle age when nonliterary approaches had become fashionable in English departments, that I began to confess my love, as here in my petulant description of a Cuban literature course I taught in the late 1990s at Duke: "If you are interested in cultural studies, subaltern studies, global studies, feminist theory, queer theory, consumption theory, Marxism and post-Marxism, colonialism and post-colonialism, or the Cuban health-care system, this course is not for you. But if you like words, if you love literature, you may well enjoy and profit from this class."

I'm a minimalist, a small-picture teacher, someone not interested in the global but in the globular. The big picture I leave to my colleagues. One of Ernesto Sábato's characters says: "A mí me emocionan los detalles." "I am moved by details." That's how it is with me. I mean, how it was.

July 26, 2021. In my study, time has stood still. The same files, the same notebooks, the same books, the same furniture that I've had for years.

Students are always surprised when I explain to them the etymology of the word "company": *com panis*—in Spanish, *con pan*, with bread. The fundamental form of human fellowship is to break bread together. We don't do that unless someone brings food to class, which happens occasionally, but we do partake in the kind of sustenance that literature provides. If falling in love is the definitive small-group learning experience, sharing a poem is one of the fundamental forms of companionship.

Thanksgiving, 2021. I was remembering today the classes I taught at Duke the semester before I left. It was not a happy time, but teaching helped to get me through. Whatever else may be happening in your life, you enter the classroom, put your books or notes on the table, look around at the students, and launch into the day's topic. An hour and a half later, sitting in your office or walking back to the parking lot, your difficulties don't seem so overwhelming. You tell yourself: If I can still teach like that, it doesn't matter what else is going on. Even if nothing is going on and I have no need of cleansing, I yearn for the classroom. I'm more myself when I'm teaching than when I'm talking to colleagues, people with whom supposedly I have a lot more in common.

When I was a freshman at Miami-Dade Junior College, I took a survey of Spanish literature with a little old man with a crew cut named Dr. Funke, who made it clear to his students that teaching at a community college was beneath him. It was one of the dullest classes I have ever

taken. Then one afternoon Dr. Funke was reading a poem by Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, a Spanish romantic poet, about the loneliness of a corpse that remains in the funeral parlor after all the mourners have left. As he read the poem, Dr. Funke began to choke up. When he reached the last line, his voice cracked. By way of apology, he explained that he had a son who had passed away when he was our age and that this poem reminded him of his son. I learned three crucial things that day: Bécquer's poem is about the loneliness of the living, not the dead; literature gives expression to experiences—*vivencias* in Spanish—that would otherwise remain painfully nameless; and no matter how distant or diffident a professor may seem, students matter.

September 6, 2019. End of first week of classes. After I finish teaching for the week, it's always the same. Whether the classes went well or not so well, there is the satisfaction of having earned my keep for the week. I say to myself: "Okay, you did your job. Now you can relax." The relaxation doesn't last too long, since by the next morning I'm at my desk making notes on what I forgot to say or what I want to discuss the following week. But on Thursday afternoon, as I'm riding the train home, I feel the complacency of someone who accomplished his mission.

I imagine a teacher's Final Judgment: All of his former students get together and write a collective evaluation of a lifetime of classes. I'd settle instead for Purgatory with a few years off for good behavior (in Catholic terms: partial indulgences). I wrote my doctoral dissertation about Benjamín Jarnés, a little-known Spanish novelist whose first novel, published in 1925, was entitled *El profesor inútil*, "The Useless Professor." The title has stayed with me.

October 15, 2017. The eminent Hispanist Alban Forcione once complained to me that the writers he always taught no longer interested students. His consolation was that his classroom canon retained one viable item. "At least I still have the Quijote," *he said. I'm not worried that the authors I teach will no longer interest my students. I worry that* I *will become uninteresting. If I can sell them on me, everything works, even Góngora.*

If I can't sell the students on me, nothing works, not even Cervantes. And so I've begun to wonder about my shelf life. The irony is that I have much more to tell them now about literature and life than ever before.

Pedagogical fictions, movies featuring teachers or teaching, are fairly common: *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*; *Teacher's Pet*; *The King and I*; *My Fair Lady*; *To Sir, with Love*; *Stand and Deliver*; *Dead Poets Society*; *Mr. Holland's Opus*. My favorite, though less familiar, is *Educating Rita*, a British film with Michael Caine and Julie Walters. Caine plays Dr. Frank Ryan, a jaded, alcoholic, slovenly professor of literature. Rita is a hairdresser in her late twenties who wants to finish her education. Today we would label her a nontraditional student. She joins Caine's class, though he has as little regard for her abilities as he does for his own. Gradually Rita's passion for learning wins him over, though the movie doesn't end as one would expect. Caine and Rita don't fall in love, though the sexual tension between them is evident. Instead, Caine dismisses Rita, telling her that he has nothing more to teach her. Lesson: A teacher who does his job properly makes himself obsolete.

Email from a student: I must admit, you now hold a very important position in my life: my favorite Republican.

For most of my career, I did not use visual aids in my classes. Occasionally I'd show students the photograph of a writer but never resorted to the infamous slide carrousel and, later, the PowerPoint. I figured young people had enough visual clutter in their lives. For the duration of the class, language ruled. But some years ago, I caved. I realized today's students are more comfortable, and often more insightful, discussing what they see rather than what they read. I began to incorporate Spanish and Spanish American art into my literature classes. I'd put on the screen *Viva la Vida*. Parroting New York subway signs. I'd say: "See something, say something." After a few chuckles, the students would launch into an analysis of the painting. It often happened that they knew more about Frida Kahlo than I did. I was learning along with them. I never did acquire the specialized knowledge needed to teach

a graduate seminar in art history, but I learned enough to become an informed dilettante. I found that the pictorial and literary components of my classes enriched one another. Sometimes a picture was worth a thousand words; at other times, no picture could communicate as powerfully as a few lines in a poem by Neruda.

December 7, 2021. Anniversary of Pearl Harbor and the occasion of my own private catastrophe: my last day in a classroom. I gave out and discussed the topics for the final paper, the same prompt in both classes. I'm not sure how I feel. I feel numb. I feel drained. I feel disoriented. I'm proud that I've done this for as long as I have and relieved that the semester is over. But it's hard to believe that I won't talk to students again about Borges or Rulfo or Storni.

In graduate school I heard about a professor who would spend the class reading passages from the texts and exclaiming: *"¡Qué precioso! ¡Qué precioso!"* "How lovely! How lovely!" We dubbed this approach "The *Qué Precioso* School of Literature." Armed with the weaponry of semiotics, structuralism, and deconstruction, I disdained someone like him, whose essential critical gesture was to admire. It took me years to understand that the admirative stance, though not enough in itself, is crucial to the teaching of literature. It took me even longer not to be embarrassed to repeat in my own classes: *"¡Qué precioso! ¡Qué precioso!"*

Email from a student: "I know you've said before that Columbia isn't a community, but I think a lot of students have found a community in your classroom (and that's why we keep returning every semester). Thank you for all the etymologies!"

A writer and scholar, **Gustavo Pérez Firmat** is the David Feinson Professor Emeritus of Humanities at Columbia University, where he taught until his retirement in 2022. He is the author of several collections of poetry in Spanish and English, among them *Viejo Verde* (Main Street Rag, 2019), *Scar Tissue* (Bilingual Review Press, 2005), and *Bilingual Blues* (Bilingual Press, 1995). His books of literary and cultural criticism include *A Cuban in Mayberry* (University of Texas Press, 2014), *Life on the Hyphen* (University of Texas Press, 2012), *The Havana Habit* (Yale University Press, 2010), and *Tongue Ties* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). www.gustavoperezfirmat.com.

About his essay, "Teaching in the Twilight," Gustavo writes, "Those who can, teach. Those who can't any longer, write about it. After nearly fifty years in the classroom, I retired. Finding myself with no classes to prepare or papers to read or students to encourage or console, I did the next best thing: I went back to journal notes and student emails and began to reflect on the ups and downs of being a teacher (a term I much prefer to 'professor') of Latin American literature at a couple of distinguished (or so I'm told) American universities. The result is this essay, a reluctant valedictory to an occupation that I never expected would mean so much to me."