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CALVIN DANIEL YOST, JR.
"TEACHER, SCHOLAR, MENTOR, FRIEND"

Benjamin Franklin Fisher IV

University of Mississippi

Within the Ursinus College community, few other persons more genuinely merit an annual Alumni Award for "traits of intellect, character, humanitarian concern and community achievement"—as stated in the letter informing him of his receipt of that honor—than Norman E. McClure Professor of English Emeritus, Calvin D. Yost, Jr. After forty-three years of affiliation with and service to Ursinus, he holds an exceedingly high place in the affections of faculty, staff, and alumni. He holds that high place, moreover, with a great modesty and self-effacingness, characteristics that have made him the respected, admired person he is. Let me say at the outset of this screed that if I manage to embarrass Calvin as he reads through what I've written, 'twill be done with not an iota of shame on my part; rather, it will result from his having to recognize, at last, a good deal of the truth about himself. Years ago, I recall him remarking one afternoon in class, in regard to those famous lines by Burns about seeing ourselves as others see us, that most of us could not face such a view. Time's revenges have overtaken Calvin himself in this respect, and he will now have to take cognizance of another's opinion. He will, no doubt, rise to the occasion with vigor.

The name of Calvin Yost has been well-known at Ursinus College for the greater part of a century, if one recalls that the combined careers of father and son, each with the same name, span some seventy-five years. And to speak of Calvin D. Yost, Jr. without mentioning his father's role at the same institution—because of the strong bond of affection which existed between them—would be a great oversight. In 1910 the Reverend Calvin D. Yost ('91), ordained as a clergyman in the German Reformed Church, took up full-time academic duties at Ursinus. In that same year, one March day, Calvin, Jr., was born, on campus, no less. The Reverend C. D. Yost's children all number among the graduates of Ursinus College: Merrill ('15) having pursued a career, cut short by his early death, in Classical Studies; Ethelbert ('21), like his father, entering the ministry [and marrying Gladys M. Boorem ('15)]; Margaret ('24) teaching in nearby public schools; and Calvin ('30) receiving a Ph.D. in English at the University of Pennsylvania (1935) and continuing in service to his alma mater. Dr. Yost, Sr., became Professor of German, and he also worked diligently

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as Librarian of the college for many years. He was also the only person in the history of Ursinus to serve simultaneously as a full-time faculty member and a member of the Board of Directors. As a supply pastor he was also actively engaged in serving needy pulpits in the German Reformed Church (now the United Church of Christ) until the time of his death, in the 1940s.

The apparent digression above will be seen as less of a digression if we remember that the present Dr. Yost, like his father, rose to the rank of Professor, in English rather than in German, and retired, after a distinguished career, in June of 1978. That Calvin should be the first incumbent in the McClure Chair of English is altogether fitting, too, because of his warm friendship with the late president of the College, Professor Norman E. McClure, who was also his former English teacher. Dr. Yost also served as Librarian at Ursinus from 1958 until 1975, guiding the Myrin Library from planning stages through completion. So the careers of Calvin Yost, Sr. and Calvin Yost, Jr. are strikingly similar, and both men contributed significantly to the development of their college in ways that many never realize.

The present Calvin Yost's ventures into college teaching began at Ursinus, when he was hired, at the position of Instructor in English, in 1934. He rose rapidly through the ranks, becoming Assistant Professor in 1938, Associate Professor in 1941, and Professor in 1944. These were years when it was unusual for one so young to attain the senior ranks. Chairman of the English Department from 1946 through 1972, Calvin became McClure Professor in 1964. Ursinus has derived many other benefits from his talents and labors: He acted as Secretary to the Faculty from 1947 until 1969, was a member of the Library Committee (1946-1975), of the Academic Council (1947-1969), of the Committee of Admissions and Standing (1954-1969), and of the Forum Committee (1954-1969). He served, too, on these other committees: Student Publications, Corps Curriculum, Presidential Selection, and Evaluation of the College by Middle States Association. He was advisor to the *Weekly* (the campus newspaper), the *Lantern* (the Ursinus literary magazine), the Manuscript Club, the English Club, and the Religion on Campus Committee of the Christian Association. He was Secretary-Treasurer of the Alumni Association (1936-1942), edited the *Alumni Register* in 1948, and edited several of the college's catalogues. He authored the sketch, "Ursinus College," that appears in all bulletins for commencement and Founders' Day ceremonies. He also represented Ursinus on "University of the Air" with weekly poetry classes (1949-1952). His *History of Ursinus College: The First Hundred Years*, a labor of love and scholarship, was published in 1985. For nearly thirty

years he was employed by the Educational Testing Service for several types of English examinations. Also, for a good many years, he was a regular contributor of reviews to the *United States Quarterly Review*. That Dr. Yost has had an active career is not to be questioned, and such activity would stagger many another. Ursinus recognized his long years of service in conferring upon him the Litt. D. in 1973. More recently, he has ably assisted the substantialness of *UMSE* (consenting to serve on the original Advisory Board and evaluating manuscripts since 1979); thanks to him, we have maintained high quality in our publications, most notably in Victorian poetry and American literature.

Calvin Yost is remembered as a teacher *non pareil* of English language, composition, and literature, and it was in this capacity that he first attracted my attention, years ago, during Fall-Term registration. I supposed, seeing him enter the English Department office, that a particularly well-dressed *student* had run up the steps to assist faculty members with counseling and registering new students. What a jolt to discover that this agile, youthful man was none other than the department chairman himself. No such misconception occurred shortly afterward when the snowy-haired teacher of Shakespeare, then Professor Emeritus of English and President Emeritus of the College, Dr. McClure, appeared and walked, with stately step, into the office.

Although Dr. Yost's first book surveyed poetic trends in Cave's *Gentleman's Magazine*, an important British periodical during the eighteenth century, his teaching has ranged widely, through American to broader areas of World literature. Nor did many a semester of his eighty-six pass without his teaching at least one class in Freshman English. In these classes students went through their paces, generally to become far better writers than they had been when the term commenced. Instituting courses in Drama and the Novel, which years ago were among the largest in the college, Calvin soon took over American Literature, previously offered by Dr. McClure (who followed the pattern of teaching Shakespeare and American Literature established by his own renowned professor, Fred Lewis Pattee). The American Literature survey remained a customary Yost course until Calvin's retirement. Professor Yost believed that classes should read, and read they did; during the first semester of American Literature, in addition to a two-volume anthology, in which little was skipped, great extra assignments of Poe's and Hawthorne's short stories, plus *The Sketch Book*, *Walden*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby-Dick*, and a novel by Henry James expanded the students' horizons. During the second semester, one had to read all of the works by a twentieth-century writer as the

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groundwork for a term paper topic. Other Yost lit. classes included similar reading loads (and they were considered fun).

At this juncture, we move once again into realms of the eighteenth century. In a course in the non-fictional prose of that period, readings from neo-classic writers and their successors were the assignments, and Dr. Yost guided students through the pertinent biographies, styles, and theories. In particular, I can recall learning that Addison's paragraphs were customarily longer than Steele's, and that thus one could distinguish who wrote what in their collaborative writing. This course extended into another semester, during which nineteenth-century non-fiction prose artists, from Lamb through Stevenson, were the subjects discussed. Two more popular Yost classes were those in Romantic and Victorian poetry, which he taught for many years. Calvin ably charted students through the spacious, and often unpredictable, seas of nineteenth-century British verse, with a love and enthusiasm that has inspired many of us to continue in these areas as parts of our own teaching specialties. For many years his Seminar in Poetry for senior English majors afforded students a forum to think about and analyze poetic artistry and techniques—with opportunities, like those of George Eliot's Mrs. Poyser, to "have their say out" about such matters. The Yost devotion to British poetry also helped in a pinch during Dr. McClure's last illness, when Calvin gallantly undertook to captain a class through the waters of Renaissance non-dramatic verse. That this "captain" has continued energetic, even when off the "quarter-deck," has not been doubted in any mind.

Calvin's classroom manner was certain to engage a spectrum of students, not just those who majored in English. Believing that literature is created by human beings, Dr. Yost always offered abundant, delightful and significant biographical details about individual authors. He also imparted considerable information in regard to the more general milieu of an era or a particular school or movement of literary endeavor. Having frequently shocked students with information about some especially earthy point in Byron biography (in an age, of course, when college students were usually more timorous than they are at present), for example, he would proceed to "make you see" (in the sense intended by Conrad in the "preface" to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*) simply by his reading aloud of portions of the material. Tennyson, Keats, Swinburne (not a personal favorite with Calvin, but a poet to whom his attention has been repeatedly drawn because of a former student's persuasion toward that author), Dickinson, and Frost, to choose but a few examples, came alive by means of the soft-spoken, but compelling voice at the front of the classroom. Students came away with

impressions that Dr. Yost “had read everything”—and remembered everything. His classes were stimulated to go and do likewise, all for great enjoyment.

For many years, almost no student could go through Ursinus College without enrolling in at least one Yost course. For most of those years Calvin maintained a standard rostering of five classes each semester—with no graders and no true-or-false exams. The quantity of papers he evaluated is staggering to contemplate. Calvin’s enrollees evince long-time powers of recall when they come to recollecting his classes. At the 1977 Alumni-Day festivities, to cite an example, a person who had been in one of Calvin’s earliest classes quoted to him lines—which the professor quickly remembered were from Keats’s “The Eve of St. Agnes” and Masfield’s “Biography.” Not bad on either side, after several decades. Another telling analogy immediately suggests itself, one with Emerson’s “Man Thinking,” that thinker possessed of original vital intellect—precisely what the subject of this screed has always conveyed.

A Yost exam was quite another experience for those being entertained by its contents—one that demanded plenty. Dr. Yost expected his classes to master not merely facts, but to know what to do with them. His exam questions aimed to discover what students knew, not what they didn’t. He allowed all sorts of creativity, so long as it was backed up by a thoughtful reading knowledge. In a word, this man demonstrated in living embodiment just what a true “Doctor of Humane Letters” is. So that no reader will suspect me of over-sentimentality, I place on record here something of a less lofty aspect about exams and other papers turned in to Dr. Yost. Back they would eventually come, with comments in the inevitable red pencil. But the handwriting betrayed no mastery of any of the time-honored penmanship methods taught while Calvin himself was pursuing a course through elementary grades (The present writer is only too willing to admit his own deficiencies on this score.). After much labor, one could finally realize that the instructor’s reading of student work was careful, thoughtful, and fair. Typically, the Yost sense of humor would crop up in these commentaries in red. In combination with the foregoing characteristics, students felt that their own studies had been worthwhile. Professor Yost had that inspiring method (so fine that we never thought of it *as* method) of persuading students to read more, to write effectively, and to conduct responsible research, because he whetted their appetites for reading and writing.

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The public professor and the personal human being merge within the personality of Calvin Yost in spheres other than those restricted to academe. Proud of his Pennsylvania Dutch heritage, he is a loyal, active member of the Pennsylvania German Society. He and his wife have engaged in genealogical pursuits, which led them to the boondocks of Schuylkill County, Pa., where one of Calvin's ancestors once operated a grain and flour mill, and where the remains of still others repose in the old cemetery at McKeansburg. The Yosts made significant contributions to a recently published history of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania. Calvin's interests have included the Philadelphia Literary Fellowship and Philobiblon, where he inevitably encountered another Pennsylvania Dutchman, "Cousin" George Allen, the well-known head of the Philadelphia firm of William H. Allen, whose shelves of books "Cousin" Calvin has often recommended to those in the process of building their personal libraries. Recalling the "humanitarian concern and community achievement" phraseology in the Alumni-Award letter, mentioned above, let us notice Calvin's accomplishments of some other "out-of-school" varieties. A true son of the German Reformed Church, he has supported his local church's activities faithfully, in such roles as choirister, teacher, and consistoryman. Although I can not recollect him chasing fire engines, as I can recollect others doing during my years in Collegeville, Calvin was a longtime member of the town's volunteer fire company. He is also proud of being a Past Master of the Warren Lodge of the Pennsylvania F. & A. M., and for many years he appeared as a featured speaker in Masonic gatherings there and elsewhere.

Remembering that bond between charity and domesticity, we should not ignore Calvin's home life; as a husband, father, grandfather, and friend Calvin Yost is hard to beat. Visitors to 33 6th Avenue are always cordially welcomed. To speak of Calvin without speaking also of Elizabeth Yost, his wife, is unthinkable. She has encouraged and assisted him, their family and friends as well, without stint. We must not forget that she, too, is a former Ursinus faculty member, having given her efforts to good evening-school teaching. Her hospitality is something else to bear in mind. Whether it be her entertaining dinner parties—even those at which she undid the rules of the college relevant to alcohol by serving her unsuspecting guests beef roasted in beer—or her adept supplying of refreshment to a late traveller passing through Collegeville, she is a gracious hostess. She has contributed mightily toward whatever might be worthwhile in this sketch. Like her husband, she is thoroughly attached to Ursinus College and its people.

Calvin and Elizabeth have added to the numbers of alumni, too, with daughters Betsy ('63) and Susan ('66) figuring among Ursinus honor students (Ellen cheated by heading for the University of Delaware). The Yost grandchildren have also become great favorites with their grandparents. Although Calvin is very much a family-oriented individual, he has perhaps realized another blessing in relation to the marriages of his children. Because they are no longer at home for long periods of time, he has long since ceased to fret about the woman-dominated household to which he had to return at the close of each college day—or so he used to inform his classes, many years ago.

To conclude, I must draw on the words of another to epitomize my own thoughts. In Charles E. Ward's *The Life of John Dryden* (1961), the dedication opens: "To Paull Franklin Baum, Teacher, scholar, mentor, friend." These tributes might also, and quite justly, be paid to Calvin Yost. Always willing and eager to learn, to teach, and, as well, to be a friend, he stands as a person well worth knowing.