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On Maya Angelou and Wake Forest University

John Meroney's article ("Maya Angelou's Inaugural Poem," December 1993) about my colleague here at Wake Forest University deserves serious attention. It reveals much about America's poet inaugurate, but, even more importantly, it probes into the bizarre reasons for the poem's popularity among the Clinton administration and its supporters in the world of education.

Angelou's poem is so lacking in poetic merit that one is forced to look elsewhere for reasons why it was received with such fulsome praise. To see why, one must look to the political pop culture that nourished it. If the poem was not plagiarized from Norton F. Tennille, Jr., it had to have grown from some similar plant flourishing in a new, Clintonesque soil. And, as Meroney notes, this is a soil quite different from the one that nourished John F. Kennedy and his choice of Robert Frost.

One thing stands out from Professor Angelou's convoluted exposition. It is that the past, even the immediate past, is ignoble and loathsome. One finds nothing in the way of old civil rights complaints about unjust schools or housing. The old standards no longer apply. They were put forth for profit, we are to understand, just as today's health care problems are said to result from profit-seeking by insurance and pharmaceutical companies. One can almost hear Karl Marx in the wings insisting that the real bogey is the capitalists and that what we need is an administration of things, not a politics of human beings. Or possibly one can hear Franklin Roosevelt with Adolf Berle insisting that the bogey is "corporate America."

A different picture of Angelou emerges from Wake Forest University's defense of its lifetime professor of American studies. She is known at Wake Forest as one who urges her students on to what her sponsor, President Thomas K. Hearn, Jr., has called "integrity." But in defending Angelou, Wake Forest is abandoning its rich church-sponsored tradition, not to mention the American tradition. Something new is meant by integrity as it is featured by Hearn.

Hearn rejects the idea of a universal

standard by which to measure any moral goal. One can demonstrate integrity in defense of any number of majority or minority standards, or even in defense of standards applicable to family life, business contracts, and other such lesser associations. Integrity is a firmness in defense of whatever standards, even non-human ones, are portrayed as requiring self-sacrifice. And from Angelou's numerous autobiographies, we learn that such standards may be associated with any number of seamy callings: her books proudly celebrate her life as a single mother and her careers as a prostitute, burlesque stripper, and madam. In the words of those who have thought more clearly about these matters, the "moral" quality—integrity—is a "triumph of the will," or even a "will to power."

Here at Wake Forest, the traditional morality brought by so many students from home is challenged not by traditional Socratic wisdom but by courses that eclipse traditional learning. Indocination in cultural relativism is disguised as study to improve "understanding" of "diversity." There are also new courses in women's studies, homosexual literature, ethics and leadership. These obscure the traditional standards of morality contained in philosophic and biblical sources. They teach contempt for tradition and for those "profit-making" sources that are said to have sponsored it. The administration encourages a vague sense that all tradition before Freud was oppressive. The university's orthodoxy, its political correctness, indoctrinates students and reduces its "liberal education" to little more than hysterical brainwashing.

What remains stable for President Clinton and his educator friends like Hearn and Angelou is their contempt for the past and their dedication to a formless future, a future engineered by a vague new technology and described innocuously as "reinventing." Such politics go in the same sad direction that education has gone at Wake Forest. It promises a future contemptuous of the equality of men before "the laws of nature and of nature's God" and ever more strident in defense of its utopian vision.

—David Broyles

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Recently, while looking through magazines at my local book superstore, I came across *Chronicles*. The first thing I no-



ticed was John Meroney's piece alleging plagiarism by Maya Angelou. As an English teacher, I have more than a passing interest in plagiarism. Also as a teacher, I give poor grades when students do not support their arguments. In a magazine of national culture, I'd expect at least something to support Meroney's assertion that "the concept, structure, and central images [of Angelou's and Ten-

nille's poems] are . . . quite similar."

It is interesting that *the* difference Meroney notes is that where Angelou's poem has trees, Tennille's trees have ropes wrapped around them. I can understand Angelou not using ropes around trees in a poem expressing hope for a new presidency. It is certainly true, however, that trees with ropes around an *Outward Bound* setting can convey positive images. But perhaps this is the point. Two people express ideas differently. Not having seen both poems, I can only respond here to what Meroney wrote (or what you included of his piece), and there is precious little of substance about the poems.

If Meroney's purpose is to prove plagiarism, the reader needs to see at least some support for his bland assertion of similarity. Instead of an account of his and Tennille's unsuccessful search for a response from Maya Angelou, her agents, and her acquaintances, his argument would be better served by a discussion of the text of the poems (or at least the parts allegedly plagiarized).

The response Meroney received from

Angelou, Random House, et al., is the response a weak allegation of plagiarism deserves. As a lawyer, my response to someone who made a claim and then failed to prove it would be the same. Also, of what relevance is the size of Tennille's employer (which Meroney mentions twice)? Plenty of dopes work at large law firms.

—Arnold Schwartz
Media, PA

The Editors Reply:

Norton Tennille, Jr.'s résumé includes the following: J.D., *cum laude*, Harvard Law School (1968); Rhodes Scholarship, Balliol College, Oxford, B.A. (1965) and M.A. (1970) in politics, philosophy, and economics; M.A. in classical philology, Harvard University (1963); A.B. with highest honors in Latin, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (1961). He has written for *Fortune*, been a foreign correspondent for *Time*, and held national posts with *Outward Bound* and the American Bar Association.

CULTURAL REVOLUTIONS

ELVIS is everywhere. But where two or more fans are gathered, devoted to his memory, weird manifestations are possible.

Some years ago I bought a pair of black leather pants in an after-Christmas sale, even though the fit was suspect. I found one dry cleaner in Roanoke, Virginia, where the seamstress willingly altered leather. As I stood balancing on the stool with the small woman at my seams, I heard her mumble something through pins that sounded like it contained the word "Elvis." As everyone knows, this word, along with "Jesus" and "Coke," is one of the best known English words in the world.

"What did you say?" I asked, without taking a breath. I did not want to disturb the line of pins taking shape from my hips to my ankles. In fact, I was probably obliged to hold my breath to achieve the desired effect. The black pants had to look poured on or they would prove a bad investment.

"I said I do all of the Elvis Lady's pants."

"Who's that?"

"Kim Epperly. The Elvis Lady. I thought you'd know her, with the leather and all that."

Believing me ripe for the pilgrimage, the seamstress gave me directions to a local shrine called Miniature Graceland. Built by Kim and her husband, Don Epperly, who suffers from MS yet still manages to construct detailed models, the exhibit now includes Elvis's childhood home, his father's home, the church he attended as a child, Heartbreak Hotel and Restaurant, Presley's Automobile Museum, as well as the Roanoke Civic Center, and, of course, Graceland.

A trip around the Epperly's side yard, with Elvis singing in the background, begins at the Graceland model. Sometimes Elvis waves from the front steps, dressed in seasonal attire. On summer days, perhaps he wears a cleaned and pressed white coat over a fancy, ruffled shirt, blue slacks, and bow tie. But on my last visit, August 15, the 16th anniversary of his death, Elvis was not greeting the visitors, who brought can-

dles by which to see their way.

Up the sloping yard, inside the Civic Center, Elvis perpetually sings to an audience of decked-out Barbie dolls. A television screen inside the car museum has played cosmic static every time I've toured, yet each time I find myself gravitating toward the screen's light show. I peer into the rolling disturbance of "snow" where anything or anyone might materialize. Even though his face would only be a projection, an illusion of presence, isn't this what it's all about? Over the whole of the Epperly's creation, suspended on very noticeable wires, cruises Elvis's Lear jet. I know better, yet the jet creates an aura of anticipation.

You'll want to go there. Even former President Carter and Rosalynn have. No wonder. The Epperly's construction project somehow overlaps with the Carters' inspired work on behalf of Habitat for Humanity. Miniature Graceland reminds us not so much of Elvis as of the human capacity for devotion, of how that devotion can materialize intent. I am convinced that if even one family