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Spring 1982

Season To Season (text and audio)

John D. Heyl
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Season to Season

The 1982 Century Club Address

Dr. John D. Heyl
Professor of History

I am pleased to share the honor with an earlier honoree — Bunyan Andrew — who hired me when he served as chair of the History Department. He was my first friend here, and he was the first I lost when he died in July 1970. Remembering these things and seeing Theresa here tonight, makes me think of long-term commitments. I would like to say something about this kind of commitment tonight.

It has often been said from this podium that there is something of a curse associated with this honor — to have an entire year to ponder what to share with one's colleagues, friends of the University, visitors — knowing that one “will never pass this way again,” as Jerry Israel put it in his concluding words last year. My experience as a teacher is that I need a certain period of time for a ripening process to take place as I try to develop a central idea for a lecture. A year is too long. The hour before the lecture is too short. I've tried both. The only humane thing (for the honoree at least) is to call everybody back together the next night for a kind of acceptance speech — more in the line of an Academy Award acceptance speech. And since nobody would actually come back the next night to hear the speech — except the most devoted friends of the honoree — the whole thing would come a lot closer to the “silly party” that award-winning writer John Irving urged for such occasions.

My original plan to avoid this curse was to put my speech together during the summer — last summer — when I had time to reflect. But I knew that such an approach would cheat me of something this opportunity

affords me. I knew that ten months later — that is, tonight — I would not feel it right to say the things I thought were right to say last June or July. Then I was sleeping late, working late into the morning hours, planning my pilgrimage to the Northwest Wagner Festival in Seattle, both working and playing with some new and surprising ideas and refining some others that had grown out of the previous year. Today, I'm tired. I'm at the end of the school year. That inexorable academic rhythm. I've got final exams to write and to grade, seniors — and colleagues — to say good-bye to. Time has passed. Four seasons have passed. I had found part of my theme.

I also confess that Alan Alda's film “Four Seasons,” which was widely shown last summer, also played into my thinking. This was a film about, among other things, vulnerability — not teen-age, pubertal first-date vulnerability — but something close to real, grown-up vulnerability: vulnerability to our families, to our friends, to the friends with whom we survive the seasons, about friendship that builds on the experience of the seasons. And I had found another part of my theme — the vulnerability of teaching that non-teachers cannot appreciate because they do not know it, and that teachers do not share with each other enough because they know it too well.

“Season to Season,” then, builds on these two themes. But most of all, tonight, I want to speak about commitment to the long run, the sustained commitment. To teaching, to scholarship, to this institution, to each other. To any of these things. To all of these things.



Because of their familiarity and obviously descriptive quality, excerpts from Vivaldi's “Four Seasons” — you've just heard part of the allegro to “Summer” — mark the transition from season to season in what follows. Here again I freely acknowledge the influence of Alda's film. I don't know how many of you know that Vivaldi wrote what he called an “explicatory sonnet” on each of the concerti that make up “The Four Seasons.” (I wouldn't have if Bedford Watkins hadn't pointed this out to me in a recent conversation. I thank him here for that knowledge and for our conversation.) Vivaldi lived in a time, unlike our own, when there wasn't embarrassment over writing such descriptive music. He obviously also lived in a time when there wasn't much embarrassment over writing

bad sonnets. So I won't be reading much from these sonnets tonight.

The conventional wisdom is that summer is the teacher's reward for the embarrassingly low monetary remuneration we receive as a class of professionals. In fact we are a kind of seasonal labor force. We are, most of us, nine months employees. We are fortunate, of course, that our so-called “working” season lasts longer than the tomato and lettuce pickers. But — perhaps a bit like the farmers' winter months — summer can be our most difficult season. And I don't mean here only that our economic base can get a little ragged. I mean that our progress as scholars, writers — as creators — is often measured from summer to summer.

Summer gives me the chance to be a passionate student again. I need that, I think, to be a committed teacher. In summer, I let great stacks of practical things pile up while I plunge into a new idea, a writing project I had not seen since last summer. Leafing through the file from the last summer is a bit like meeting an old friend again after a long absence. I instinctively ask: Is there still something there? What part of my relationship with this idea can I recover? What part is gone? What part is wrong? And what can I see differently because of the passing of the seasons since last time we met?

Let me give you a concrete example. During the 1973-74 and 1974-75 academic years, my family and I lived in Champaign while Barbara completed her doctoral work. At the time I was very much interested in the theories of Thomas Kuhn, a historian and philosopher of science at Princeton. (I recall Larry Colter originally introduced me to Kuhn while we drank beer and talked on his porch one summer evening during my second year at Wesleyan. I also remember running out and buying the recently issued paperback edition of Kuhn's book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*,¹ and reading it straight through by a light rigged up in the attic of the duplex the Colters and the Heyls shared.) My interest in Kuhn continued from summer to summer until in Champaign I had the chance to pursue the curious way that Kuhn's ideas had veritably exploded beyond the philosophy of science into disciplines closer to my own — let's just say the social sciences broadly construed.

The specific problem for me came down to this. Kuhn had suggested that the physical sciences were characterized by dominant paradigms — basic ways of looking at the tasks of their disciplines — and that *scientific revolutions* took place when a community of scientists shifted their allegiance from one paradigm to another. The provocative idea here was, first, that scientists spent most of their time defending entrenched paradigms — basically a conservative enterprise — and, second, that progress in science came only when one paradigm displaced another. (And even then it was not clear that any progress had occurred since the competing paradigms were incommensurable!) Science, then, emerged from Kuhn's analysis looking very different from the incrementally

progressive enterprise that one finds both among scientists themselves and certainly in the popular mind.

The question I was now asking was: Why all the interest among social scientists in this interpretation of the physical sciences? Had Kuhn presented a framework about change, by now widely under attack within the philosophy of science, that offered insights into the structure of other disciplines, including the historical disciplines? My earlier interest in the development of professionalization in the social sciences was now energized by a theory that might explain the process I had only fumbled with a few years earlier. I was off and running. Quite literally. Those of you who have had contact with the University of Illinois know that its library system is highly decentralized. So I found myself running from the Physics library — where physicists passionately condemned Kuhn — on to the English library — where literary history was being rewritten in Kuhnian terms — then on to the History library, the Commerce and the Social Science libraries — pursuing Kuhn's trail through them all. I suppose I was engaging in what a fellow historian, Peter Stansky, calls "serious self-indulgence." It was one of those seasons when I got hold of an idea and, before I knew it, it got hold of me.

Historians generally work alone, and when one works alone it is always tempting to believe that your insight is just what the world has been waiting for. A summer of intellectual commitment like this gives me a sense of invulnerability. I hear myself saying: "This is great stuff!" I start shouting "hurrahs" in my study. I can already hear the publishers knocking on my door in frantic anticipation of the final manuscript. Listen to Bettina von Arnim recall Beethoven's descriptions of one of his summers of creativity: "Then from the focus of enthusiasm I must discharge melody in all directions; I pursue it, capture it again passionately; I see it flying away and disappearing in the mass of varied agitations; now I seize upon it again with renewed passion; I cannot tear myself from it; I am impelled with hurried modulations to multiply it, and, at length I conquer it: — behold, a symphony!"² My work ended up, hardly a symphony, but as a couple of articles sent in to two scholarly journals, at the end of the summer.



Vivaldi's sonnet to fall speaks of peasants revelling at the bountiful harvest. "The air is pleasant and moderate, and the season invites everyone to the agreeableness of a sweet sleep." There are parts of fall like this. Especially in the Midwest. Especially at Wesleyan. I, for one, continue to marvel at the bountiful harvest of bright and talented freshmen that arrive each fall. But for me fall brings both

the sense of a new beginning — a kind of academic spring — and the sense of the end of my autonomy, the end of that invulnerability. It is time to put the harness back on. The institution, the classroom — as much as I love it — the meetings, the little appointment book. Large, unruly ideas give way to small spaces of time. I do not say any of this with resentment. I chose this rhythm

for my life. (Nor do I think this experience is necessarily unique to the academic profession.) But this is part of my sense of the change of season.

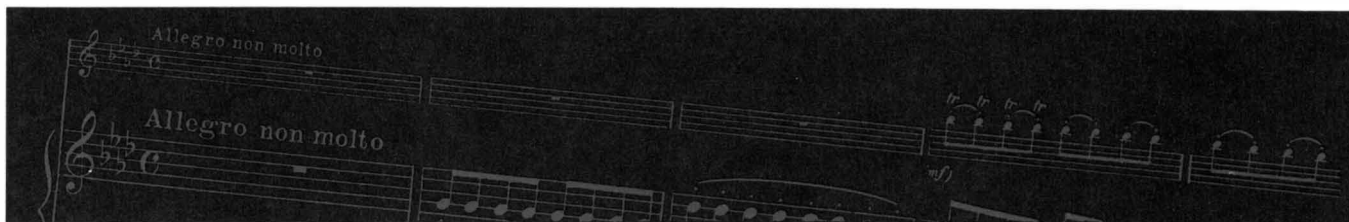
In the fall — late fall — after the harvest is in and the brilliant syllabi of September have turned into topics inadequately covered and a book that just didn't work and a student who just didn't work — this, by chance of course, is the season of *self-evaluation*. I know that each of us — whatever profession we may be in — deal with this process differently. After all, the original notion of the “professional” included a sense of freedom from such evaluation. The professional — the doctor, lawyer, minister, nurse, teacher — was more like a person sworn to a sacred oath to protect and serve those in his or her care. But the structure of our institutions have changed a great deal over the years. Issues of “accountability” and “productivity” — the latter a standard unheard of in the academic profession until the very recent era — have now become part of this process.

Whatever our individual ways of accommodating — or not accommodating — to this reality of self-evaluation, it is important, it seems to me, that we strengthen that part of the process that encourages us to think in the *long-term*. There is a time for risk — as Jerry said last year. And there is a time to recover what has been risked and lost. And there is a time to consolidate what one has patiently built over the years. I think of the painstaking work by Paul Bushnell and Bob Bray on the annotations to the

Greenman Diary — puzzle after puzzle to be solved; I think of Mike Young's commitment to write the *definitive* biography of John Coke; and I think of the years committed to Bedford Watkins' *Poetae Patriae Amantes*, which he shared with us in this room six years ago; I recall too, the years of research, the very real risks — even dangers — finally the building of an enduring friendship that went into Barbara's book; and the many, many drafts until Jim McGowan felt right about his poem “Fall”:

*You warmed me
more than the sun
wide in our way
that October day,
till my red cheeks burned
as you shivered and turned
and said you were cold
with the wind.*³

I think we ought to add to our self-evaluation form something like the following: “What sort of teacher-scholar would you like to become two years from now, five years from now?” Liv Ullmann was reaching for something like this, I think, when she wrote: “All the time I am trying to change myself. For I do know that there is much more than the things I have been near. I would like to be on the way toward this.”⁴ Let us share more where we are moving, as well as what we are doing.



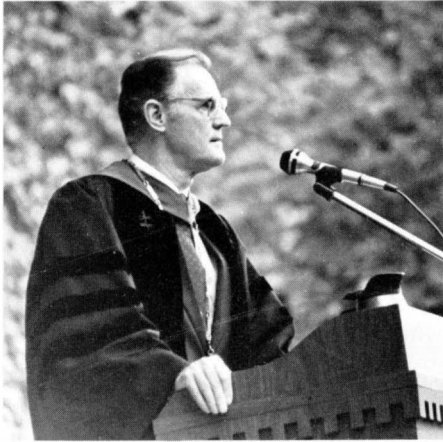
Winter in Illinois is the kind of experience that must have provoked Sam Levenson to remark: “If the pessimists aren't happy now, they never will be.” There are some lines in Vivaldi's sonnet to winter that ring all too true: “To tremble frozen in the icy snow: to be buffeted by the wild wind; to stamp one's frozen feet; to have excessive cold set one's teeth to chattering . . . to walk carefully on ice, going slowly in fear of falling . . .”⁵ This past winter was, of course, not the sort one would want to write a concerto to, much less a sonnet. Erma Bombeck told us in February: “This is the worst winter in the history of the earth. It has to be. Why else would my dryer be broken? It overheats in the summer and stops in the winter. That's Bombeck's Law.”

At Wesleyan we have a really quaint way of avoiding referring to winter. At Stanford University, at Hawaii Pacific College, at California State University in Los Angeles — where there is no winter — they have “Winter Quarter.” At Wesleyan, in an act of really silly optimism, we simply call it “Short Term.”

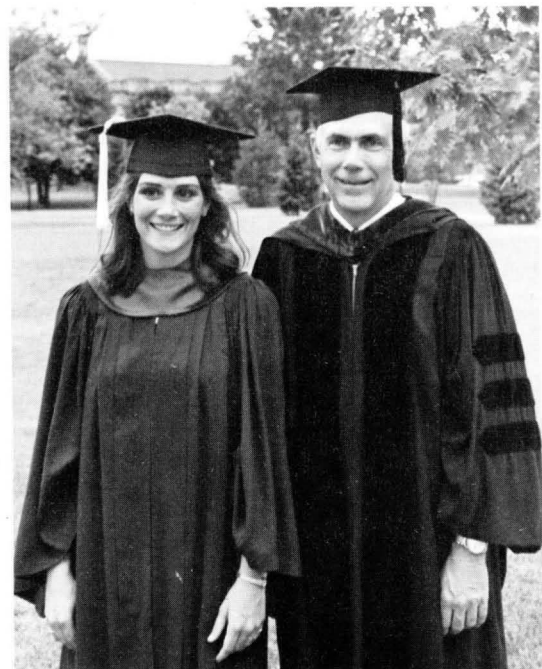
Threats of frozen feet and falling on the ice and broken dryers are not all. Winter makes the teacher-scholar

vulnerable in additional ways. Remember the manuscripts that were composed in a Beethoven-like passion during the summer past and sent into publishers with such confidence as fall began? Well, now it's rejection time. Some of what follows I take from my own file of rejection slips; others have been kindly offered to me by my colleagues. I thank them for their help. “To the Writer” — you know you're in trouble right away — “We thank you for sending your work to so-and-so. Unfortunately, due to the tremendous number of articles we receive each year, I cannot comment individually on them. Every manuscript, however, is read twice to insure fair and equal consideration.”⁶ Or: “The main problem is that your work just doesn't say anything of interest to the profession.” But one can really do without the political aroma that accompanies some of the technical criticisms: “You seem curiously chary about going very deeply into the question of your [subjects'] political [views]. From the almost incidental way that you mention that so-in-so is not a Marxist, one would hardly guess his role in supporting the Vietnam War as a member of the Johnson administration, or the subsequent difficulties he had in getting a job

Commencement and Baccalaureate '82



Showers failed to cloud the pride, excitement and solemnity of Commencement May 16. Seniors (above) wind their way across the campus, welcomed by President Eckley (top, left) as parents and friends (bottom left) watched. Below: Lynn Folse '82 with her father, Dr. J. Roland Folse of the Southern Illinois medical school faculty, the IWU Commencement speaker. On the facing page, more seniors, including David Resch (bottom left) receiving the Harold C. Hodge President's Club Award for Natural Science and Mathematics. Right: Dr. D. Paul Miller, who retires this year, carries the Mace.



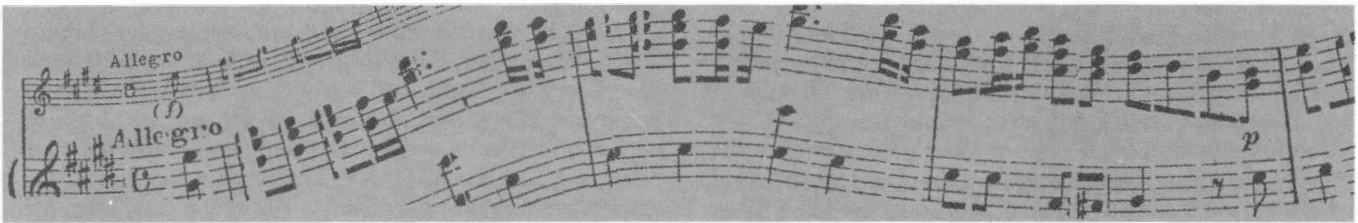
because of this.” And finally: “Such works will continue to be published by all University presses. Publishing them is what University presses are for. But the individual press, if it is prudent, will take care of its own in the years to come before it takes care of ‘foreigners.’ ”

Shaw once defined a critic as a person “who leaves no turn unstoned.” It is one thing when one experiences this kind of deflation in more or less private correspondence. But when it gets into print, then it is a bit tougher to take. I draw here on a sampling of reviewers’ comments from a wide range of disciplines, some about my colleagues’ work, some dished out by them regarding others. Sometimes the judgment is simply obscure enough to be disconcerting. “The book is worth reading, though I am not sure it is worth buying.” There are more blunt approaches: “It is questionable whether this book would be of any use to anyone other than the author.” In a similar vein, one mathematics reviewer wryly observed that “this book fills a much-needed gap in the literature.” One of our own colleagues received this charming encouragement at the end of a clearly partisan review: “It is to be hoped that the author’s future publications will do fuller justice to his thorough research.”

Historians, as critics, are particularly sensitive to the use of language. Part of this stems from the feeling that among social scientists only historians have, as yet, re-

sisted either an oppressive gargon or floods of statistics. We can also be sticklers for detail. My current favorite in this genre is a review by at least an honorary member of our department on a recent book on the Holy Roman Empire. After dismantling the author’s inaccurate treatment of Vienna in the Middle Ages, the reviewer turns to “typographical” errors. “A few,” he says, “struck my fancy. Albert I was born in 1225; his father Rudolph, who was born in 1218, was certainly in a hurry to found the Habsburg dynasty. Gottfried von Strasbourg lived from 1170 to 2220. *Kirchenreformbestrebungen* becomes *Kitchenreformbestrebungen* . . . The blunt truth is that I have no reason to believe anything this book says. As a reference work, [it] is useless. I recommend that as a public service . . . [the] Press withdraw the book from sale immediately.

This is not funny. This is the scholar’s “real world”: the judgment of his or her peers. And it is just as real as the so-called “real worlds” of business, medicine or politics, worlds in which open, public judgment by one’s peers has not exactly been a notable feature in recent years. “Ivory towers” of isolation and arrogance and unaccountability among teachers and scholars there may be — I see little of this at Wesleyan — but “ivory towers” are not built on university campuses alone.



Predictably, Vivaldi’s sonnet to spring speaks of the greetings of birds and the streams that “run softly murmuring to the breathing of the gentle breezes.”⁷ Speaking of streams running softly reminds me of George Leonard’s cynical observation on teaching: “Teachers are overworked and underpaid. True. It is an exacting and exhausting business, this damming up the flood of human potentialities. What energy it takes to turn the torrent into a trickle, to train that trickle along well-marked channels!”⁸ Leonard was speaking of society’s conformist mandate he saw practiced in the classroom. This can happen not only because of “society’s” demands, as Leonard put it, but also because teachers let *themselves* get trained along “well-marked channels.”

As a teacher, I am a specialist in general education. I do have a conventional academic specialty — my specialties of the summer season — but as a teacher I specialize in the general. I suspect this is true of most of us at Wesleyan. You can’t be fulfilled at a small institution like this and think of yourself as a narrow specialist. This doesn’t mean that you can’t do specialized research here, but you have to assume that as a teacher you will be mainly a generalist teaching a wide range of subjects to a pretty

diverse student audience. It’s in the spring that I feel most the generalist and most the teacher.

For me, the practice of the generalist emphasizes the “connectedness of things,” as Mark Van Doren said some forty years ago. Ever since the invention of our History Department’s “Utopian Visions” course four years ago, spring, when this course is taught, has reinvigorated my sense of the possibilities of teaching. During this past semester we have had several sessions in which the four history faculty reacted together with our students on some of the masterworks in utopian and dystopian literature. These were memorable moments for me in which we, as teachers — with each other — argued about the tensions between freedom and authority, equality and exploitation, conformity and individuality. Not just in their historical context, but in our own lives as well.

We call this “general education.” Now that term has been battered about a good deal of late. The discussion, it seems to me, has focused on the form — or rather formlessness — of general education at most universities, and its function in the overall curriculum. A recent Carnegie study listed seven different — even conflicting — ideas of the purposes of general education.⁹ I am inclined

toward some kind of composite of three of these: Dewey's idea of general education as "an integrative experience underlying the unity of knowledge"; the notion of general education as preparation for effective citizenship; and John Stuart Mill's assumption that general education was the preparation for a worthy and satisfying private life. One nice thing about Wesleyan is that we don't care much what one calls it — and we accept different notions of how to practice it as teachers. I think we have the feeling that our "spare room" — as general education has been called — is crowded with interesting things and interested students. At least for me this kind of teaching widens the channel of my own learning and thus, I hope, the learning of my students. But I return to Van Doren: "The connectedness of things," he wrote, is what the educator contemplates to the limit of one's capacity . . . [I]f the educator does not aim at [this] vision no one else will, and the consequences are dire when no one does . . . The student[s] who can begin early in life to think of things as connected, even if they revise their view[s] with every succeeding year, have begun the life of learning."¹⁰

This insight alone, of course, does not always satisfy my students. I almost left out the one vulnerability of the teacher that is perhaps the most obvious. If the winter-reviewers of the summer manuscripts could be unsettling, the student reviewers can be cruel even when they try to be kind. They can also be wrong. I am learning to be more thick-skinned about this. But I doubt there is a teacher who doesn't open those envelopes of student course evaluations without some apprehension.

I thought I would read a few of these evaluations — not to show how bad I've been as a teacher but just to reveal what every teacher, I presume, experiences. Now these student evaluations are not from those first years of my teaching — which were also here at Wesleyan by the way. Those years when I was trying to write the last chapter of my doctoral dissertation with each lecture I gave. These are not from those years of innocence, presumption, the abrasive self-importance of the new Ph.D. No. These reactions are from the most recent years, as I have gracefully acquired the classroom wizardry that presumably earned me this award. And I quote: "I feel the instructor is patronizing in his reaction to the views of the students. He is steadfast in his beliefs and will at times totally ignore the personal feelings of the students. But I gained more than I expected from this course." Or: "All I can say is that I have no respect for you or your opinions. This is not pleasant for me to write because you can be a nice person out of class. I have heard you are a good teacher. But I think you neglected your responsibilities to us. We haven't worked with this material before. You have . . . But overall I learned a lot in this class. I'd take the class again — pass/fail." I could read others. And I do read them in the privacy of my office.

But it is never a private matter when one fails as a teacher — on a given day, in a given course, in a given year. And the crazy thing is that it doesn't get easier with

practice. I recall Jerry Stone, an earlier honoree, surprising a student reporter who interviewed him about his award, by saying: "Teaching doesn't get easier; it gets more difficult." I think he's right. It's a strange business we're in.

I said I wanted to speak about the long run, the sustained commitment. I take this occasion to note that six of us who came to Wesleyan in 1969 — my "class," so to speak — are still here. Schnaitter from Minnesota; Huseman from Indiana; McGowan from New Jersey; Arensbach from Atlanta; Hungerford from Northwestern; Heyl from St. Louis via Germany. I do feel a special sense of the long term with these colleagues. We have a lot of shared memories. Together we have made a difference here, over thirteen years of our lives and those of our families. None of us who came in 1969 knew what the long run would be. I share this evening with them.

So here is the acceptance speech that I would have given last year if my original suggestion had been put into effect. Like Academy Award acceptance speeches, it inevitably leaves out many people it should include. Forgive me for that. Thank you Jim, especially for "Fall" and "Quiet Poem." Thank you Kate, for the fantasy of Kate's saloon — to remind me to keep dreaming. Thank you, C.B., for opening the doors of the theatre to me. Our *Championship Season* was not to be, but here's to your next long run. Thank you, Jerry, for teaching with me. Thank you, Michael, for the *definitive* biography of John Coke. Thank you, Paul, for that advice long ago. Thank you, Larry, for Kuhn and for fighting for the Freshman Seminars. Thank you, Sammye, for sharing the toughest part of the Freshman Seminar with me; here's to your next long run, Dean Greer. Thank you, my friend, for teaching me about my seasons. Thank you, my love, for sharing *all* the seasons. And thank you all.

NOTES

¹University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1970.

²Quoted in Marc Pincherle, "Musical Creation," *Lectures on the History and Art of Music*, ed. Frederick Freedman (Da Capo Press: New York, 1968), p. 197.

³In *Each Other — Where We Are* (Pilot Rock Press: Bloomington, 1978), p. 5.

⁴*Changing* (Bantam: New York, 1979), p. 5.

⁵See Marc Pincherle, *Vivaldi: Genius of the Baroque*, trans. by Christopher Hatch (W. W. Norton: New York, 1957), p. 188.

⁶I hope the reader will understand that the material quoted in this and the paragraphs that follow will remain uncited.

⁷See Pincherle, *Vivaldi*, p. 187.

⁸*Education and Ecstasy* (Delacorte: New York, 1968), p. 1.

⁹See Ernest L. Boyer and Arthur Levine, *A Quest for Common Learning: The Aims of General Education* (Carnegie Foundation: Washington, D.C. 1981), p. 2.

¹⁰*Liberal Education* (Henry Holt: New York, 1943), p. 115.