

# The Last Word

Memories, insights, and reflections

## A+ For C- Owen

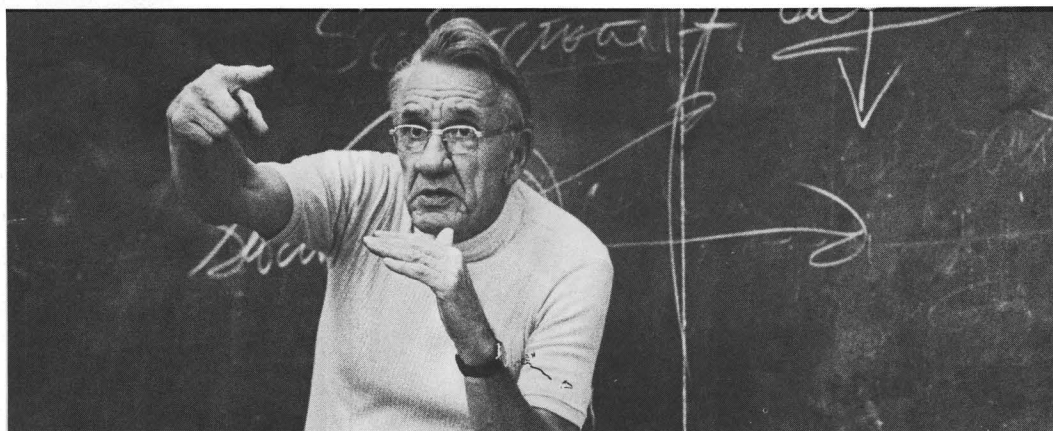
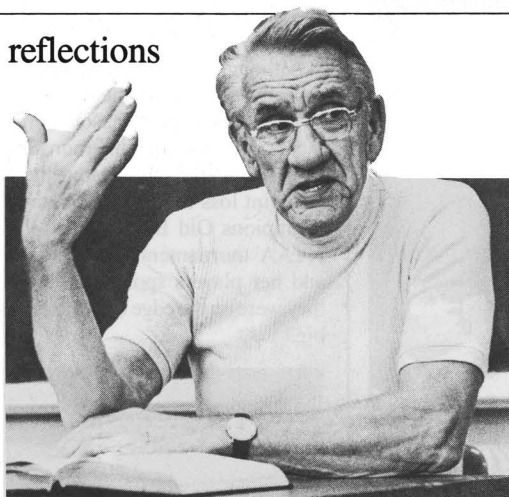
"There she stood. Patient and brave. Going right on. Ma Joad, the poor sonofabitch!," David Owen barked. We sat in the classroom a bit stunned, experiencing the social significance of Steinbeck's migrant workers.

It was the first time I'd heard a literary heroine proclaimed a "poor sonofabitch." But such salty rhetoric was part of the power of an Owen lecture and his ability to cut through literary cant and expose the basic truths in a writer's work. It was rumored that Owen had been a Naval officer, and we could believe it. He could dive deeper in a novel, stay down longer, and come up with more buried treasure than any professor I knew. And I had some extraordinary ones, including Mary H. Marshall, Donald A. Dike, Leonard Brown, Walter Sutton, and Arthur W. Hoffman.

The large lecture hall in the upper reaches of the Hall of Languages was always filled for his course on the modern American novel, despite the work load. We read a novel a week: *The Age of Innocence*; *Dodsworth*; *An American Tragedy*; *U.S.A.*; *Studs Lonigan*; *The Grapes of Wrath*; *Light in August*; *The Day of the Locust*; *Vein of Iron*; *A Farewell to Arms*; *Delta*

*David Owen, professor emeritus of English, taught at SU for 25 years. A specialist on the American novel, he joined the University in 1952 as an associate professor. Although he officially retired in 1977, he continues to teach. From 1977-78, he was an adjunct professor at SU; today he teaches at SU's continuing education center, University College, and for the Independent Study Degree Program.*

*Robert Phillips '60, '62 studied under David Owen more than 25 years ago. Phillips went on to become vice president for the advertising firm J. Walter Thompson and is currently with Benton & Bowles Inc. He is also a poet, fiction writer, critic, and editor of Letters of Delmore Schwartz.*



*David Owen, professor emeritus of English, has left a trail of insight and ambition.*

*Wedding*; *All the King's Men*, and more. The sheer amount of reading was a killer; the Farrell and Dos Passos trilogies alone totaled over 2,500 pages.

I recall one student asking, after one of Owen's fertile lectures—that no doubt explored levels of myth, allegory, parody, and political implication—"Professor Owen, how do you get so much out of a novel?" To that he replied, "I read it, over and over. Each time I read it, I find more in it." This was a valuable lesson for those of us who thought one reading constituted "reading" a book. While some other professors came to class bringing yellowed notes from the past, Owen brought only his copy of a novel and his immense excitement at having just reread it.

His American novel course was one of the most popular undergraduate English courses on campus, due partially to its attractive subject, but largely to David Owen's

brilliance as a lecturer. Unlike some professors who put their talent into teaching and their genius into publication, Owen gave his teaching everything he had.

His nickname, "C-Minus" Owen, was known all over campus and indicated the grade even a very good student was likely to receive at his hand. As an undergraduate, one was willing to take the risk. For a graduate student the risk was even higher.

Owen opened certain courses to both undergraduate and graduate students. But after grading each paper, he would go back and see which were written by graduate students. These he would automatically lower one grade. If a graduate student earned all A's on first grading, he'd never get a final grade higher than B. Since no one I knew ever got all A's from "C-Minus" Owen, a graduate student could get a C, which would not give him graduate credit for the course. An un-

fair penalty, perhaps, yet some still would not miss the experience.

I remained at SU for my master's degree and was lucky enough to receive a graduate teaching assistantship. I taught two sections of freshman English. Having no previous teaching experience, and certainly no style of my own, I unconsciously adopted the manner of David Owen. One spring day, with the Hall of Languages classroom door propped open for air, I stood before my class, one foot planted atop the desk chair, one arm waving dramatically overhead, making an Owenesque pronouncement. Out of the corner of my eye, to my chagrin, I saw David Owen standing by the open door, listening with an expression resembling fascination.

I never knew what David Owen thought of my poor impersonation. I hope he took it for what it was: homage and gratitude.

—Robert Phillips '60, '62