

M. H. SINGLETON: THE TEACHER

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All who had the privilege of studying with Mack Hendricks Singleton must savor the memory of some particular experience in which he played a leading role. My own favorite occurred some years ago when I, no longer a student, returned to Madison on a nostalgic pilgrimage. Besides fulfilling my vows to visit the Library, the Department, and the Seminary of Medieval Spanish Studies, I wanted once more to gather the pearls of wisdom that fell so easily from the lips of "Big Mack" (the "Real Kentucky Colonel," as he was later to be known). It was one of the times when the man was confined to quarters, so that when I called to ask for an audience, I feared that my wish would not be granted. On the contrary: a golden chariot (alias, yellow cab) was dispatched to take me to and from my destination, and for two delightful hours my host kept my glass filled with costly wine while he quaffed his usual brew from his screw-top instant coffee jar. To my greater honor, the vacuum cleaner--usually collapsed in the middle of the floor (in desperation, it seemed)--had been removed from sight, and an extra mountain had been added to the maze of books that constituted the room's chief decor, leaving me a perch on which to light for the occasion. For me that was an enchanted evening. No matter that I was but a teacher from the provinces and that my hero resembled no one more than Santa Claus: we were transformed into princess and knight in shining armor.

There was always a kind of magic about Mr. Singleton. He could perform prodigious feats. Unlike other magicians, he even revealed some of his secrets. Once he told us how he charmed some German sympathizers in the employ of the American army during the War into believing that he was a bona fide German language instructor: "Elementary," he began. "Whenever they greeted me in the corridors, I listened very carefully for the last words they pronounced. Then I simply repeated these while walking quickly in the opposite direction."

With this quickness of mind, linguistic talent, and sense of humor, it is no surprise that he kept his university classes spellbound. It seemed to us that he was constantly pulling rabbits out of hats. Once he managed to convince us that, in order to appreciate the luminaries of a literary period, we had to taste the concoctions of lesser stars, no matter how bland and stale they might appear to be. Another time he showed us how, in research, a negative result can be turned--presto!--into an exciting find. (This occurred in a *Celestina* seminar when the self-proclaimed hapless researcher, who had set out to study color in the work, discovered that Rojas had created a world that was almost colorless.)

If Mr. Singleton's instructional methods were often unorthodox, the lessons he taught were nevertheless valuable and of broad application. Gentle humor trained the naive to outgrow "impertinent" questions about literature. Respect for his students' intelligence and the notion that they should learn to evaluate and sort out critical opinion prompted him to deluge them with bibliographies and excerpts from books and articles representing the widest possible theoretical range: each individual was

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responsible for organizing this material in a way that was coherent and personally meaningful. We learned to follow Mr. Singleton's example: to think for ourselves, and to have the courage of our convictions--but not to form these convictions too quickly.

This last lesson, in my case, came about through one of Mr. Singleton's most memorable bits of sorcery. I know now that he must have been trying to communicate to us his love of words, of the power and beauty of language. He wanted to show us that, as students and potential teachers of literature, we could not rely solely on imagination, that we must be knowledgeable, and that we must always hold words sacred. Curiously, since literature belongs to the realm of magic, it need never be so solemn that it excludes fun. All this we learned one day when Mr. Singleton announced in class that he would read to us two literary passages in English and then ask us to identify the one characteristic that differentiated them. Predictably, our first reaction focussed on content: text A dealt with summer; text B with winter. True, but ... We tried tone: A was warmer; B, colder. Closer ... It must be style, we thought: A was more elegant; B, more energetic. We asked to hear the passages again. Then, when we concentrated on the individual words (A, melodious: B, strong), we were finally on the right track. In the end, though, the Magician/Author had to spell out for us the secret behind his trick: the words in text A were exclusively Latin in origin; those in text B were all of Germanic derivation!

The English translator of *La Celestina* (and of many other Spanish works) taught us a reverence for language and literature. He gave us self-respect and taught us to laugh at ourselves. He was unfailingly kind and courteous. While he will be sorely missed by all who knew him, Mack Hendricks Singleton's grace and good humor will never be forgotten. His lifelong dedication to the humanities is our inspiration; like the Pied Piper, he bids us follow.

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